



POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION AND FEMALE TEA WORKERS: A CASE STUDY OF ROSEKANDY TEA ESTATE, ASSAM

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Abstract

In India, women have been provided equal rights as with men and although women are taking part in the decision making process, but a doubt remains about their true participation. Situation is grimmer particularly in the tea plantation sector, where participation of women in political affairs is under question. In the Cachar district of Assam, the situation is more intricate and the female tea workers constitute a marginalized group in the politics of Cachar as well as Assam. In this backdrop, the study seeks to evaluate the nature of participation of female tea workers in political activities; and explore their involvement in political decision-making process. For the purpose of the study Rosekandy Tea Estate of Cachar district was selected as it is one of the best tea gardens in the district. The study was conducted with one hundred twenty (120) respondents; out of which eighty (80) were female tea workers and the rest were male workers of their family. The study revealed that their participation in political activities is limited only to casting votes and attending political meetings; they are apathetic towards contesting election at the grassroots level even though seats are reserved for them. None of them are members of any political party and social welfare groups. Even at the trade union level also their presence is minimal.

Keywords: Female Workers, Tea Garden, Marginalization and Decision Making.

Introduction

A democratic government, which is, a government of the people, by the people and for the people, for its successful working, should take to account the interests and opinions of different groups of people in determining its policies and taking decisions on issues which are binding on people's lives. It follows that, women who constitute half of the humanity, should actively participate in the political affairs and in the making of decisions that affect their lives and the community at large. Women's political, social and economic rights are an integral and inseparable part of human rights. Democracy needs women in order to be truly democratic, and women need democracy if they are to change the systems and laws that preclude them, and preclude societies as a whole, from attaining equality. It is through democratic representation that women's interests can be represented and their voices heard. In the similar note, CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) in its Convention Resolution, Article No. 7 stresses on the importance of women's representation in the political life. Women's participation in democratic process has been emphasized in numerous UN Statements and has been further endorsed in the 2011 General Assembly Resolution no. A/RES/66/130, which reaffirms that the active participation of women, on equal terms with men, at all levels of decision-making



is essential to the achievement of equality, sustainable development, peace and democracy but in spite of such universal resolve and enactments in the similar direction by many a country's National Legislature, the situation at world level remains elusive. In India, one of the ancient democracies in the world, women used to enjoy an equal status even in the ancient period but, with the passage of time situation deteriorated. Now, when India achieved independence, the Constitution conferred equal rights to all its citizens – men and women. Further, women were granted equal political status as with men by Article 326 of the Constitution, which provided for adult franchise to the citizens, who have attained a minimum age of 18 years and also through various Fundamental Rights as enshrined in Part III of the Indian Constitution. As a matter of fact, the members of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution had in their best of wisdom realized that the ideal of a true and participatory democracy would not be a reality without political equality between men and women. The Indian Parliament understood the need of granting greater representation to women in the decision making process at the grass-root level, and it enacted the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution, ensuring 33 per cent reservation of seats for the women in Panchayats and Municipalities and their Chairpersonship in those bodies. With one-third (now 50% in some states) reservation of seats at both urban and rural local bodies in India, women have started taking part in the decision making process, but a doubt remains about their true representation. One more point that deserves special mention here is that, only a few number of women from economically weaker sections of the society and the

marginalized class could rise up to the policy making level either in the Union or in the States in India. Situation is grimmer particularly in the tea plantation sector in India, where the representation of women in political affairs is very much under question. Tea Plantation in India had started in the State of Assam and it is the largest tea producing state in the country. The largest representation of female workers in the State is in tea plantation constituting 78.7% of the total female working force (Barman, 2004). Cachar is one of the tea producing districts in Assam, situated in the southern part of the state, where plantation of tea started during the colonial period, in around 1856. Around 52 percent of the total workers employed in the tea industry in Cachar are female; while they are only 47 per cent amongst the permanent workers engaged therein. The inequality and under-representation of women in politics is more vivid for the female workers engaged in tea plantation in the district of Cachar; in the last 68 years, there had been no elected representative from tea garden female workers of Cachar in the State Assembly, nor in the National Parliament; and they had only a few elected representatives to the Panchayats at various levels. Thus, over the years, they remain a marginalized group in the politics of Cachar as well as Assam. Not only in politics but they remain largely marginalized in social, economic and cultural field. It may be noted that, there are a number of studies which deal with the female tea garden workers. Some of these works include- Singh et.al (2006), Kaniampady (2003), Barman (2004), Kamruzzaman, et.al (2015), Goswami (2005) and so on. Most of the literature focused on the socio-economic structure and service conditions of the female workers employed in



tea plantations across various locations in India and Bangladesh. We could not find out much literature on studies undertaken on political participation of the female tea workers. However, in some of the socio-economic studies, observation and references were there about female workers' participation in political and trade union activities. But so far, no study has been done exclusively on the female tea workers of the Cachar district of Assam. In this backdrop, the present study can be considered to be a worthwhile attempt.

Methodology

For the purpose of study total 80 female workers were selected. These 80 workers were selected by applying the 'accidental sampling technique'. Besides, 40 male counterparts of the female workers or the male head of the respondent's family were also selected for the purpose of the study. The data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected from the respondents using an interview schedule. Secondary data was collected from books, journals, internet materials, theses (both published and unpublished), plantation related offices, etc.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

TABLE NO. 1

AGE-WISE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS		
Age (Years)	No. of Respondents	%
18 – 30	38	47.50
31 – 40	19	23.75
41 – 50	15	18.75
51 - 60	5	6.25
Above 60	3	3.75

From Table No. 1, it is evident that, 38 female respondents out of 80 in total belong to the age group of 18–30 years, i.e. 47.5%; were found

to be more interested in politics and political activities as compared to the respondents belonging to other age groups.

TABLE NO. 2

MEMBERSHIP IN TRADE UNIONS					
Membership			Opportunity to Express Opinion		
Whether Associated	No.	%	Extent of Expressing	No.	%
Yes	15	18.75	Never	9	60.00
			Rarely	4	26.67
			Sometimes	2	13.33
No	65	81.25			

The table shows that, 15 female (18.75%) respondents are associated with the trade unions through formal membership, whereas, 65 respondents accounting for 81.25% are not members of any trade union. Out of the 15 female-members of the union, 9 members (60%) said that, they are never asked to express their opinion regarding any of their problems in trade union forum. 4 female members of the union (26.67%) said they rarely get an opportunity, while 2 female members (13.33%) were of the view that, they sometimes get an opportunity.

TABLE NO. 3

Attitude of Garden Authority towards Political Participation		
Permission provided?	No of Respondents	%
Yes	80	100.00
No	0	0.00

The above table shows that, all the respondents answered in affirmative that the garden authorities allow them to participate. On the day of election, holiday is declared with full salary. This indicates that the garden authorities do not have any say in workers' political participation.



TABLE NO. 4

Membership of Political Party		
Whether Member	No. of Respondents	%
No	80	100.00
Yes	0	0.00

From the table it is apparent that none of the respondents are members of any political party. It was evident during the interview that lack of political consciousness, illiteracy, poor economic condition and also the traditional social system are mainly responsible for their non-association with any political party.

TABLE NO. 5

Contesting in G.P. / A.P. / Z.P. Election		
Election to	Respondents	%
Contested	2	2.50
Not Contested	78	97.50

An analysis of the data presented in the above table reveals that majority of the female workers i.e. 97.50% (78) have not ever contested for the post of either a G.P. or A.P. or Z.P. Member, whereas, 2 female workers (2.50%) have contested for some of the aforesaid posts.

Findings

The majority of the female respondents were youth belonging to the age group of 18 – 30 years and were more interested in politics and political activities in comparison with other age groups. Approximately 56.25% of female workers were illiterate and their socio-economic status was also awful. It was found that majority of the female workers (68.75%) were highly interested in politics and political activities. However, the interest of the majority of the female workers in politics is limited to the casting of votes and at best up to attending political meetings, processions and election rallies. From the usual local trend it may be

assumed that, such type of participation might be connected with monetary and other fringe benefits. The female workers (around 81.25%) were found to express very low interest in other political activities like contesting elections. Two common reasons for not contesting elections were - the poor financial condition of the respondents and their illiteracy. It has appeared in the present study that majority of the female respondents (75%) were encouraged and motivated either by their husbands or family members for their political participation. This finding has also been confirmed by the male respondents, and hence, both the family members and society in general bears a positive and affirmative attitude towards participation of female members in politics. The garden authority was also found to be favourable towards female workers' political participation. Majority of the female workers were not found to be active in trade union activities. Thus trade unions, as it appears, are male-dominated. The female members were also ignored in distribution of elective posts even at the garden level. But the researcher felt that apart from other factors, female workers are not in a position to take active part in trade union activities due to their socio-economic milieu. None of the female respondents were found to be a member of any political party.

Conclusion

Female workers constitute a strong vote bank but remain largely unrepresented in the politics of the state leave alone national politics. Being members of the Trade Unions they have no say to the decision making process of the union, which is dominated mainly by the men. They are ignored in the distribution of elective posts even at the garden level. It was evident



that illiteracy, financial instability, socio-economic backwardness and lack of awareness due to typical plantation environment are the main reasons behind their political backwardness. So, to overcome the loopholes, the following suggestions can be considered:

As regards improving the socio-economic status of the female workers engaged in tea plantation, the first and foremost step would be to revise their wage structure. The present wage structure of the plantation labourers is quite inadequate to keep pace with the rising costs of essential commodities. So increase in the wages of labourers and also providing them with other monetary benefits might be considered by the appropriate authorities. The female workers should be encouraged to take en-mass membership of the trade unions and must be provided with due opportunity to express their views and opinions in trade union forums. Illiteracy has been found to be a cause of low level of political awareness of the workers, proper educational facilities must be provided to them. To achieve this end, evening coaching classes may be started to introduce various educational programmes among the illiterates and the school drop-outs. This can be done with the help of garden authority or NGOs. There should be attempt on the part of the government agencies and voluntary organizations to introduce special training workshops to develop leadership qualities among the female workers, to enhance their active political involvement and to give them adequate knowledge about the political system, decision making process, and also about procedure of working of the government. There should be appropriate forums for discussion and dissemination of knowledge on women's issues. Opportunity must be provided to the

female workers to assert their voices in the decisions that affect their lives as well as of the nation as a whole. And most importantly, due consideration should be given to their opinions while arriving at decisions in the family or in the work place.

Political parties should make efforts towards involving female workers of this deprived section of the society within the fold of political parties through formal membership. Moreover, they should include female workers of tea gardens in each and every stage of the organizational hierarchy of the party and must encourage and provide party nomination to the female workers of tea garden to contest elections as party candidates.

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