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Political Participation of Women in Tea Garden Village A Study of Elected Women Representatives in two GPs of Kalchini Block

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Abstract:

The effective political participation is one of the real tools of women empowerment and selfhood. An attempt has been made in this paper to understand the level of political participation of the elected women representatives of the tea garden villages in the two Gram Panchayats of Kalchini block of Alipurduar district. It deals with different aspects governing their political participation focusing especially on the significant issues of socio-economic condition and the political cultural life of the people. This paper has also attempted to measure and evaluate their political participation and tried to find out the difficulties faced by them. The introduction of three tier Panchayat Raj System in compliance with the land mark 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 has resulted in an increasing trend in their participation in the local self-government, and a noticeable growth of self-confidence and a sense of independence amongst women, but in true sense there has not been appreciable growth in terms of effective political participation of women in this part of the country. Male domination, gender discrimination, lack of knowledge, awareness & experience, inferiority complex and lack of self-confidence are the prevailing conditions plaguing the women in the survey area. This paper suggests that a concerted effort must be made by all the stake holders to raise the socio-economic condition and level of awareness & self-confidence of the tea garden women.*

**A village constituting of people either workers or non-workers; or their descendants; or their extended families living on their ancestral land or residential homes; within or outside the tea plantation areas since the British Era with or without ownership right.*

Keywords: Political Participation, Empowerment, Selfhood, Tea Garden

1. Introduction

The Constitution of India recognizes the principles of social, economic and political justice to all its citizens and the equality of status and of opportunity, and assured dignity of the individual. The provision has been made in the chapter of Fundamental Rights (Part III, articles 12-35) to remove the inequalities which Indian women have suffered. Some guidelines have also been given in the Directive Principles of State Policy (Part-IV, Articles. 36-51) which are non-justifiable Article 51(e) (Fundamental Duties, Part IVA 42nd Amendment Act, 1976) and direct the state to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India and to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Basu, 2007). Despite the constitutional safeguards and legal frameworks, the traditional approach of the society continued in the country. During the course of time, it was felt necessary that socio-economic conditions of women needs to be enhanced through their political participation (Mehta, 2002). Subsequently, post-independence era witnessed implementation of series of development programs and welfare schemes in order to enhance the socio-economic status, the level of awareness and self-confidence of women in the Indian social system through Panchayati Raj System. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Acts, 1992 was therefore a landmark justice in the history of rural women as it paved the way for their maximum participation in democratic decentralization, planning and development activities (Buch, 2000). The tea garden women had therefore sufficient reason to smile despite being in the state of miseries. The introduction of Panchayati Raj System in 1998 in the tea garden villages have provided them the opportunity to participate in various activities especially in the decision making processes thereby enabling them to enhance knowledge, skills and self-confidence. With a decade of Panchayat experience, the tea women have come to believe that their participation has bestowed them with a sense of responsibility, greater respect in family and public life, and enhanced interest in welfare activities. This study was therefore undertaken to find out the level of ‘Political Participation of Women in Tea Garden Villages through Panchayat Raj System’ and the difficulties faced by them.

1.1. Back Ground

Historically, employment of women in tea plantations was sought by the planters in order to “contain the male labor force” and to “ensure a steady reproduction of ‘cheap’ labor” (Chatterjee, 2003). Since its inception, the tea plantations employed proportionately higher female workers than males. The data from the Labor Bureau (2012) reflects that 53.43 percent of women are employed in tea plantations. While the tea industry progressed by leaps and bounds, the socio-economic and human right conditions of the workers and their dependents remained intact. There were no initiatives made by any of the agencies, be it the Government, NGOs or the owners to

improve their socio-economic conditions. With no alternate means of livelihood, the economy of a house hold in the tea garden villages is described by many scholars as pathetic as it depends solely on the daily wage of an earning member of the house. As a result, tea garden women have always been at the receiving end, as a worker as well as a house wife. They have been undergoing exploitations and discriminations in the tea plantation for centuries. They even had to compromise with the wage discrimination until 1976. Since 2001, many of the tea gardens in the district have closed down or abandoned due to domestic over production and fall in international tea prices. The crisis has resulted in starvation deaths, suicides and subsequently induced large-scale migration. Consequently, the women, children and adolescent girls have become the most vulnerable groups in terms of socio-economic and the human right conditions. Absence of subsistence farming within the tea estates has further compounded their vulnerabilities. Rasaily (2014) have noted that the increasing pressure of earning in order to run the hearth is vested with the female member of household and thus the women have to take responsibility of both the physical and economic burden of a household. The prevailing condition of women in tea garden villages is characterized by the fact that they have become the victims of child marriage, have become widow at an early age or got deserted and separated by their husbands. This has been attributed to customary laws, elopement at the teenage, often resulting in early pregnancy and desertion of the young girl once her partner realizes the additional responsibility, and alcoholism among men resulting in an economic drain, poor health, domestic violence and early deaths. Besides, social and cultural backwardness, gender inequality, and patriarchal society have attributed to their socio-economic backwardness, exploitation and marginalization (Altekar, 1977). In a nut shell the women in the tea garden villages suffer from low level of education, poverty, poor health and other human rights related matters.

1.2. Main Objectives of the Study

1. To find out the present socio-economic and educational background of the elected women.
2. To assess the level of awareness of the elected women members of Gram Panchayat, their duties and responsibilities and perception about power and various development programmes.
3. To study the level of participation of elected women members in decision making.
4. To study the problems and difficulties faced by the elected women representatives.
5. To suggest suitable measures for the empowerment of women in tea garden villages.

1.3. Methodology

So far methodology is concerned this paper is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data has been collected by direct contact method. A pre-structured questionnaire had been administered by way of interview to the elected women representatives of two selected Gram Panchayats of Kalchini block in Alipurduar district. The selection of respondents was through random sampling. Out of 21 elected women representatives from the two Gram Panchayats 18 members were interviewed and information on their knowledge, experiences and views about their functions in the Gram Panchayats were collected. Besides interviews and discussions, observation of the functioning of the women representatives both in Gram Panchayat and their constituencies was made. This was done by personally visiting the offices and residences of the respective women members of Gram Panchayat. The schedule for elected women representatives had been regarded as the main tool in gathering their responses regarding various aspects covered by this study. During the course of survey, data was collected on the existing wage structure in the tea garden. Secondary data has been obtained from the magazines, newspaper, books, journals, thesis and other Government publications. The Panchayat office records have supplied information on the Gram Panchayat administration

1.3.1. Study Area

This study is based on two Gram Panchayats in Alipurduar district. The district is famous for tea industry since the middle of the nineteenth century. (News Feature, 2014) and it is bounded by the international border the independent state of Bhutan in the north, the state of Assam in the east, the district of Jalpaiguri in the west and the Cooch Behar district in the south. The district spreads around 3383 square kilometers and it is blessed with natural resources. It consists of 6 blocks and one Zilla Parishad. There are 70 tea gardens in the district and has only one town having Municipal status. It has a population of approximately 17 lakhs. (As per 2011 census) Kalchini block has a population of 2984588. The block consists of a female population of 143629 (48.12 percent) and male population of 154829 (51.88 percent). The block is one of the poorest in the state and it is predominantly inhabited by the tribal communities. With a house hold of 50231 and 26205 BPL (below poverty line) families, Kalchini block stands at the highest poverty level in the district. This paper is an attempt to highlight the status of political participation of women in local self-governments of this block.

2. Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Elected Women Representatives (EWRs)

A sample of 18 elected women members of two Gram Panchayats were selected and their respective profile has been drawn by analyzing factors such as age, caste, religion, marital status, type & size of family, educational standard, occupation and monthly income. Also the education level and the occupation of their husbands have been included to assess their economic status. Following determinants describe the characteristics of the respondents;

2.1. Age-wise Distribution of the EWRs

Age group of the EWRs		
Age Group	Number	Percentage
21-30	5	28
31-40	9	50
41-50	2	11
51-60	2	11
Total	18	

Table 1

The present age group of elected women members reveal that 50 percent of them belonged to the age group of 31-40, 28 per cent of them comprised of the age group of 21-30, and 11 percent of them constituted the age groups of 41-50 & 51-60 respectively. Overall 78 percent of them comprised of women below the age of 40 years. There seems to be higher tendency of women participating in politics between the age group of 31-40. The average age of elected women representatives in the Gram Panchayats has been calculated at 36 years which proves the growing trends in political participation by the younger women generations.

2.2. Caste-wise Classification of the EWRs

Caste of the EWRs		
Caste	Number	Percentage
Scheduled Tribe (ST)	16	89
Scheduled Caste (SC)	01	6
Other Backward Classes (OBC)	01	5
General	Nil	Nil
Total	18	

Table 2

The Kalchini and Chuapara Gram Panchayats comprise 23 and 18 constituencies respectively. Out of which, 21 elected representatives happen to be women members which stands at just over 50 percent. The data reveals that 89 percent of the members belonged to Scheduled Tribe communities, 6 percent belonged to Schedule Castes and 5 percent of them constitute other backward communities. The Panchayat Raj System, being a state subject makes it the prerogative of states where the quota for women is less than 50 percent to formulate their own rules and implement the provision once it is made part of the Constitution. Subsequently, the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 2012 has ensured 50 percent reservation for participation of women in Gram Panchayats. It has been instrumental in bringing the socially and economically backward groups to the main stream of politics.

2.3. Education-wise Classification of the EWRs

Education level of the EWRs		
Education level	Number	Percentage
< 5	3	17
5-10	9	50
11-12	6	33
Graduate	Nil	Nil
Total	18	

Table 3

The educational level of the elected women representatives indicates that 50 per cent of them are under-matric, 33 percent are up to higher secondary level and 17 percent are up to primary level. From the above data, it is clear that the overall educational status of female members is quite low in both the Gram Panchayats. It also suggests that the participation of respondents with below secondary education tends to be more in the village level.

2.4. Religion of the EWRs

Religions of the EWRs		
Religion	Number	Percentage
Hindu	11	61
Buddhist	7	39
Christians	Nil	Nil
Muslim	Nil	Nil
Total	18	

Table 4

The data reveals that the majority of women members are Hindus with 61 percent because of the population structure of the villages. The Buddhist members stand at 39 percent, whereas others do not have any representations.

2.5. Marital Status of the EWRs

Marital status of the EWRs		
Status	Number	Percent
Married	13	72
Un-Married	5	28
Widow	Nil	Nil
Separated	Nil	Nil
Total	18	

Table 5

72 percent of the elected women members are married and 28 percent of them are un-married. Apart from their family obligations and hardships, they are able to balance their role as members, Upa Pradhans, Pradhans. They are quite convinced with the fact that participation in grass root level democratic institution would guarantee political empowerment. It has also been confirmed that all the elected women members under study and, in the bracket of 31-40 age groups are married. This shows that marriage and motherhood are not the constraints for them.

2.6. Family Structure of the EWRs

Family Structure of the EWRs		
Structure	Number	Percent
Nuclear	7	39
Joint	11	61
Total	18	

Table 6

The data reveals that 61 percent of women member belongs to the joint families and 39 percent of them are from nuclear families. An overwhelming majority of the EWRs is from Joint family system. Thus this indicates that the concept of joint families is the encouraging factor where women can avail adequate time and support to participate in politics as their conventional responsibilities is being shared by the other members in the family. But at the same time the concept of nuclear family is also over taking the joint families in the tea garden village. This is attributed to the deteriorating socio-economic conditions.

2.7. Educational Qualification of Spouses of the EWRs

Education level of husbands of the EWRs		
Level	Number	Percent
5-10	10	55
11-12	3	17
Unknown*	5	28
Total	18	

Table 7

*5 respondents were unmarried

A large proportion of them, nearly 55 per cent are under matric and 17 percent of them are under higher secondary level. From the above data, it is clear that the overall educational status of spouse of the elected women members is quite low in both the Gram Panchayats.

2.8. Husband's occupation of the EWRs

Occupation of husbands of the EWRs		
Occupation	Number	Percent
Tea Garden Labour	5	28
Daily Wager	6	33
Self Employed	2	11
Unknown*	5	28
Total	18	

Table 8

*5 respondents were unmarried

About 33 percent of their spouse was daily wagger, 28 percent of them were workers of the tea garden and 11 percent of them were self-employed. It revealed that most of them were engaged in the unskilled works.

2.9. Occupation of the EWRs

Occupation of the EWRs		
Occupation	Number	Percent
Tea Garden Labourer	5	28
House Wife	8	44
Un- Employed	5	28
Total	18	

Table 9

About 44 percent of the EWRs were engaged in the household related non-economic activities, 28. per cent of them were workers of tea garden and another 28 per cent of them were unemployed or without any source of income. Most of the EWRs were occupationally unskilled labors.

2.10. Family Income of the EWRs

Family Income of the EWRs		
Income	Number	Percent
No income	6	36
Less than 16000	7	36
Between 26000-35000	5	28
Total	18	

Table 10

36 percent of the EWRs' family does not have any regular income, 36 percent of them has a regular annual family income of less than Rs.16000 per annum. In fact, 72 percent of them fall under the lowest income groups. This is due to the fact that a large number of them are either house wives who are engaged in non-economic activities or their spouses are un-employed or they are daily wage earners. The income of the daily wage earners depends fully on their skills and availability of work in the tea garden factories and the concerned villages. Normally, there is a scarcity of work and the incumbents hardly travel to distant places for work. The self-employment involves petty business like Bettle Pan Shops, Sale of country liquor, cattle rearing and mother dairy. Their economy depends on the worker's daily wage of the tea garden.

3. Political Participation of the Elected Women Representatives of Tea Garden Villages

3.1. Measurement and Evaluation

3.1.1. Awareness

"Increased awareness is one of the most valuable means of achieving gender equality and the women's empowerment (Beijing Declaration). Knowledge generates awareness, and awareness enhances self-confidence. The level of self-confidence creates sense of independence and capacity to resist discrimination. Thus, awareness can be assumed as the fundamental parameter to measure the effective political participation of women. In order to measure and evaluate the levels of awareness among the elected women representative a set of questions in the form of interview schedule was designed and the incumbents were assessed in the following determinants:

3.1.1.1. Sources of Inspiration in Joining Politics

The data reveals that 72 percent of the elected women members of tea garden villages were motivated by their political parties through their respective village leaders, 22 percent of them were encouraged by their spouses and 11 percent were encouraged by their family members. It is apparent that the Political parties' encouragement was the main factor responsible for their induction into Panchayats. Hence, it is concluded that political parties were significantly responsible for the women's joining into politics.

3.1.1.2. Number of Terms Elected to Panchayats

Only 17 percent of the elected members were found to have represented their wards for the second time while 83 percent of them were representing their wards for the first time. Thus overwhelming majority of the respondents was inexperienced and less aware.

3.1.1.3. Awareness of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992

Most of the women members were aware of the provision of reservation of seats for SC& ST, OBC and women in Gram Panchayats, but they were not aware that reservation of seats for women in Gram Panchayats was made as per the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. It is therefore established from the above facts that awareness levels of women in Gram Panchayats is at the lowest.

3.1.1.4. Awareness of Development Programmes

Most of them were aware of few common development schemes carried out by the Gram Panchayats but, they were not fully aware of the schemes and development programmes initiated by the Government because of lack of trainings and knowledge.

3.1.1.5. Trainings Received by the Elected Women Representatives

Training is required for better participation of women and increased awareness. As per the study, 22 percent of the elected women members had received some sort of training while 88 per cent of them did not get any training. It reveals that most of them had not received any training which is an indication that they have a lowest level of awareness.

3.1.1.6. Awareness of Duties, Power and Responsibilities in Panchayat

Majority of the women members expressed the necessity of trainings in order to be equipped with the knowledge of duties, power and responsibilities of the Panchayat. Only 16 percent of them acknowledged that they were moderately aware of their power, duties and responsibilities.

3.1.2. Participation

Reservation for women in Panchayats has provided them with the opportunities to participate in socio-economic and political activities. To assess the extent of political participation of women in the selected Gram Panchayats of the tea garden villages following essential determinants have been taken into consideration and analyzed.

3.1.2.1. Attending Panchayat Meetings

About 67 percent of the elected women representatives attended the meetings always while 33 percent of them attended the meetings sometimes. Some of the respondents remained absent from the meetings now and then. This shows that majority of them were very much enthusiastic about the meetings to understand and raise the various ward related problems.

3.1.2.2. Speaking in Panchayat Meetings

Nearly 67 percent elected women members were found to have sometimes spoken in Panchayat meetings, 17 percent of them reported felt shy to speak out and 6 percent of them reported they were not allowed to speak. Only 11 percent always spoke in the meetings. It was reported that mostly male members spoke in the meetings. From the study it is concluded that due to lack of awareness and low level of confidence they spoke less in the meetings.

3.1.2.3. Presenting Problems of Ward in Meetings

The data pertaining to the participation of respondents in the Panchayat proceedings revealed that 61 percent of the elected members presented their ward related issues sometimes while 6 percent felt they were not required to present their problems. 17 percent of them never presented their ward problems, 11 percent of them reported meetings were held in inconvenient times, and 6 percent reported meetings were not intimated. Hence, most of the EWRs played passive role in discussing village problems, interacting with people to identify the problems of their wards.

3.1.2.4. Active Participation in Gram Sanshad/ Gram Sabha Meetings

Overwhelming majority of the elected women members participated in Gram Sanshad and Gram Sabha meeting. Only 11 percent of them never participated in the meetings as their spouses acted as proxy.

3.1.2.5. Frequency of Visits of the EWRs to Their Wards

It was revealed that majority of the EWRs were not aware of their duties and responsibilities in Panchayats as they rarely visited their wards to interact with the people to identify their problems. It was reported that the ward members were not required to visit their wards because villagers themselves often visited their ward members with their problems.

3.1.2.6. Affiliation of the Respondents to Social Organization

It was revealed that 61 percent of the elected women members were associated with the Social organization like self-help groups and 39 percent of them were not associated with any of the social organizations. The participation of EWRs in various social organizations in the tea garden villages were very much discouraging and thus it can be concluded that the level of self-confidence and capacity of women in these areas is just in the beginning stage.

3.1.3. Decision Making

The ability to think and take independent decisions is the most important dimension in the process of women empowerment. Hence, to make their participation in politics effective involving them in the process of decision making is essential. This study tries to assess the level of decision-making of the EWRs in the Gram Panchayats in the following ways.

3.1.3.1. Participation of the EWRs in the Process of Decision-Making

Participation of elected members in the process of decision making is an important step towards effective political participation. Thus, the knowledge of rules, regulations, and procedures of the Panchayats, government acts and circulars, and various development schemes & programs of the Panchayats plays a critical role for the women to take proper decision at the Panchayat levels. The survey data revealed that 50 percent of the EWRs always participated in the decision making process while 44 percent of them were not involved in it. Only 6 percent of them got involved moderately. However, it is pertinent to mention here that the involvement of women members in the decision making process was only meant to meet the quorums or carry out the formalities. No individual views or opinion was taken into consideration in such meetings as clarified by the respondents. Thus it is concluded that most of the women members actually did not participate in the decision making process of the Panchayats.

3.1.3.2. Independent Handling of issues by the EWRs

The study revealed that nearly 61 per cent of the elected members were able to handle the issues collectively in Panchayats and their constituencies respectively. 39 percent of them reported inconveniency and not capable of handling the issues. They were fully dependent on their husbands, family members and party leaders. From the analysis, it is concluded that most of the respondents were not consciousness of their role in Panchayats and were therefore not able to handle issues independently.

3.1.3.3. Contribution Made by the EWRs to their ward

The study revealed that most of the elected members had been carrying out the development works slowly and gradually, and did not fully agree about their contribution towards the development of their constituencies. Overwhelming 94 percent of the respondents admitted that they had been quite successful in carrying out the construction & repair of culverts and drainage system in their wards, but have been lagging behind in the implementation of development schemes and programs in an extensive way. About 6 percent of them could not speak on their contribution. From the analysis it is concluded that the women members had gained knowledge and experience about the functions of the Panchayati Raj System, and their duties and responsibilities to some extent, and were expected to contribute towards the development of their wards in the long run.

3.1.3.4. Present position of the EWRs in Gram Panchayats

It is considered that the involvement of women in decision making roles is an important tool for their empowerment. Their positions in the Panchayats hierarchies and various decision making committees and bodies of the Gram Panchayats matter significantly to involve them in decision making as it gives them the adequate opportunity to fully exercise their duties and responsibilities. The study revealed that 11 percent of them enjoyed the position of Panchayat Pradhans while 28 percent of them enjoyed the position of members of standing committees. An overwhelming 66 percent of them were just the ordinary members in Gram Panchayats. This indicated that majority of them were not involved in the decision making processes.

3.1.4. Perception

3.1.4.1. Opinion of the EWRs to Continue In Politics

Overwhelming 72 percent of the respondents expressed their willingness to continue in politics while 22 percent of them expressed to discontinue and 6 percent of them could not say anything. Thus, a majority of the female members are interested in politics and few of them are not interested.

3.1.4.2. Level of Satisfaction of Power and Position in Gram Panchayats

From the study it was evident that 6 percent of women elected members expressed their opinion on power and position as excellent, 11 percent expressed as very good, 39 percent expressed as good and 44 percent of them expressed as satisfactory. Thus it is concluded that the majority of the respondents were quite unhappy about their power and position as it did not make any difference.

3.1.4.3. Enhancement of Status in the Society

About 83 per cent of the respondents were of the opinion that their election as Gram Panchayat member has enhanced their status in the society. As a result of their participation in the welfare services, these respondents have acquired a new status and respect in the society. Their status in the family has improved and has received social recognition from the community people. Even the status of

their families has been enhanced in their respective constituencies. Only 17 percent of the respondents acknowledged that it had made no difference. Thus it is concluded that election to Gram Panchayat has given improved status to women in public sphere.

3.1.4.4. Opinion about the Women's Political Reservation Bill

The level of awareness of EWRs on the women's political Reservation Bill is disappointing. However, when explained 83 percent of them were of the opinion that it is mandatorily required and 17 percent of them could not give their opinion. Hence, it is concluded that lack of awareness about the above prevails among the women representatives.

3.1.4.5. Perceived Level of Dominance by Male Members in the Meetings

About 67 percent of the respondents expressed the opinion that the male members dominated them to a great extent. They admitted that the male members had the tendency to dominate taking advantage of the lack of knowledge of women. Male members also interrupted and did not allow women members to speak. Both male members and male voters along with Panchayat officials created nuisance during the meetings. The EWRs also acknowledged that males were jealous and did not obey or cooperate with the female counterparts. Official staffs tried not to listen and disobey the order or task given by the women members. The non-cooperative attitude of the Panchayat officials creates a lot of problems in their proper discharge of duties. Only 22 percent of the respondents expressed that women were in no way dominated by males while 11 percent of them could not express anything. Thus the study reveals that women members are subject to domination in Panchayats by male members.

4. Problems Faced by the Elected Women Representatives in Gram Panchayats

The study revealed that about 17 percent of the EWRs did not face any problems in politics and 5 percent of them were tight-lipped. However, overwhelming 78 percent of them expressed difficulties as given below:

1. The EWRs were over burdened by the family works like domestic works, children responsibilities, professional and political lives.
2. They argued that gender discrimination, domination by the party hierarchy, conflict between ruling political and opposition parties, male dominant attitude, insecurity and risk to act independently, and the restrictions on their movements are the significant factors that determine their successful political careers.
3. The EWRs expressed the prevailing conditions as: (i) lack of knowledge, awareness and experience, inferiority complex and self-confidence have barred them to act actively; (ii) inability to complete developmental works within stipulated time, envious male members and voters, fear of public criticism discouraged them to carry out developmental works; (iii) inability to move out anywhere at any time due to domestic obligations restricted their mobility; Lack of knowledge of the Panchayat Acts and Government circulars have made them handicapped; and non-entertainment of their ward problems have made them non-functional.
4. They expressed delay in clearing the development work related bills and MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes). These issues bothered them a lot.
5. It was revealed that male members dominated every time in the meetings and the female members were kept in dark about the agenda of the meetings. The EWRs felt that the agenda of the meeting was deliberately not pointed out clearly and disallowed individual views of female members.
6. They expressed that the Panchayat officials and male members often objected and disobeyed the task /order given to them which posed a serious hindrance in the functioning of the Panchayati Raj System.
7. The bypass method is applied making them a mere puppet. Many development activities are carried out without prior knowledge and approval of concerned EWR.
8. The EWRs have to cross over difficult terrains and numerous bridgeless rivers to reach GP office. The movement is restricted during monsoon season due to rise in water level of the rivers. Thus the climatic condition accompanied by transportation problem is also an important factor that determines the problem of women in politics.

5. Recommendations

In the context of the above study, following suggestions have been made to enhance the socio-economic condition, knowledge, awareness, self-confidence and overall development of the women in tea garden villages.

1. Equal opportunities and freedom for women must be provided to participate in educational systems, social and cultural activities, and in seeking employment.
2. Alcoholism among men and women in the tea garden villages is a potential hazard. A mechanism needs to be devised to control the menace.
3. There is a need for regular orientation and training programmes that will help to increase the political and management skills of women in Panchayats.
4. Women members must be provided access to the basic rights such as literacy, legal and property rights etc.
5. Women members must be given adequate support by the Panchayat officials and the public.
6. Access to information, education and development of communication skills of women must be provided to build their capacity.
7. Participatory approaches need to be adopted to make the Panchayats truly democratic and strengthen good governance.

8. Gender sensitization programs must be organized in village level incorporating all the male members, Panchayat officials and the male voters to bring about change in mindsets and behavior.
9. Political awareness programmes should be conducted to make women understand their rights and the benefits.
10. Formation of SHGs and NGOs in every ward must be mobilized.
11. Government Acts, orders, circulars and guidelines should be made available in Gram Panchayat office in local vernaculars.
12. Reservation for women should be continued to ensure their empowerment through greater participation in political administration and decision making.
13. Gender discrimination must be minimized.
14. The elected representatives at the Panchayats level must be compensated with adequate monthly salary and emoluments.
15. Contribution by women members should be recognized and appreciated in public spheres.
16. They must be given a feeling and sense of confidence in terms of handling the ground level realities.
17. Male dependency syndrome in the society must be discouraged. This can be very helpful in giving feeling of independence in taking decision.

6. Conclusion

Tea garden women have made good use of the opportunities provided by the reservation policy and are taking their roles and responsibilities seriously in the Gram Panchayats. However, much needs to be done to empower them in the true sense. This study finds out that majority of them have entered into politics due to the mandatory provision of reservation and motivation from the political party and its leaders. When the awareness levels were compared with the socio-economic profile of the respondents, it was found that education, and economic status had a direct bearing on their awareness levels. When levels of participation were compared, low level of education, in-access to information, male domination, non-cooperative attitude of the panchayat officials, and economic status of the respondents, transportation problem and family structure seem to have played the most significant role affecting their participation. Majority of the EWRs were of the opinion that, apart from the above factors, dependency, lack of knowledge & experience, inferior complex and lack of training had made them in-effective in decision making processes, and thus have become a major limitation towards the path of their empowerment. Given the above facts, it can be concluded that although there has been a noticeable growth in knowledge, awareness and self-confidence, the tea garden women have still a long way to go to achieve the desired level of political participation.

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