



Cover Page



CHANGING PATTERNS OF VOTING BEHAVIOR AMONG THE WOMEN WORKERS IN TEA-PLANTATION OF NORTH BENGAL

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Abstract

Voting behavior denotes the patterns and determinants the effect how people or groups choose to cast their votes in elections or referendum. It includes the psychological, social economic and demographic aspect that influence voters' decision, such as party affiliation, candidate attractiveness, policy inclinations, social influences and contextual elements like the political climate or kind of election. Analyzing voting behavior entails examining the reasons behind voter support for specific candidates or parties and how these choices mirror overarching political beliefs and societal trends.

The voting habit of female constituents in North Bengal Tea plantation area has experienced considerable transformations from the post -independence era to till 2026 West Bengal Legislative assembly election. In this decades subsequent to independence, women engagement in electoral politics was markedly constrained due to low literacy rate, socioeconomic dependency, conservative societal standards a limited access to political information. Voting decisions were frequently swayed by familial influence, local elites, and established community networks. The spread of education, enhanced communication networks, rural development initiatives and the progressive empowerment of women via political and social movements have augmented their involvement in electoral processes. Throughout the extensive tenure of Left front governance (1977-2011), land reforms, rural decentralization, and the enhancement of Panchayati Raj system fostered increased political consciousness among women, particularly in the tea plantation region and rural districts of North Bengal including Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri and Alipurduyar district. The political transition of 2011 signified a new era in women s electoral behavior. welfare initiatives aimed at women, such as kanya Shree, Rupashree, swastha-sathi and Lakshmi-Vandar, elevated women's prominence as an autonomous voting demographic and facilitated a rise in female voters' participation. In North Bengal, female voters progressively evaluated political parties based on welfare provision, household economic circumstances, employment prospect, access to education and healthcare, infrastructure advancement, and social security. Simultaneously, regional factors including tea garden crisis, migration, ethnic and linguistic identities, border -related concerns and desire for regional development also impacted vote preferences. By the 2026 west Bengal legislative assembly election, women had become a significant electoral demographic in north Bengal. Their vote choices were influenced by welfare concerns, developmental goal, socio economic issues and perception of government, rather than merely by traditional allegiances or familial influences. Thus, women voters significantly influenced electoral results throughout North Bengal, illustrating a shift from political depended constituents in the early post -independence period to engage and autonomous participation in the democratic process.

This study reveals that voting conduct in tea plantation region is no longer uniform but instead exhibits fragmentation, driven by specific issues and welfare consideration. Enhanced media exposure, grassroots mobilization, and involvement in self- help organizations have bolstered political knowledge, particularly among female voters. As a result, current election behavior in the tea estates of North Bengal indicates a transition from union – driven collective voting to more individualized and development focused political decision -making.

Key words: Voting Behavior, Tea plantation workers, Tribal woman, Trade union, Electoral politics.

Introduction:

The political activity of plantation labor communities in eastern India provides a crucial perspective for comprehending the intersection of class, gender, ethnicity, and regional political transformation. This study investigates the voting behavior of the tea plantation women workers in Nor Bengal, who represent the predominant segment of the working force in the tea



Cover Page



estates of the Doars and Terai region of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri and Alipurduyar districts. Despite their significant numbers and pivotal role in plantation output, women workers have frequently been overlooked in analyses of political politics in this region.

Historically, electoral engagement in the tea plantation regions of North Bengal was profoundly influenced by labor union networks and leftist political agitation. For numerous decades, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) wielded considerable influences over plantation communities via robust organizational connection with labor union and workers collectives. Voting decision during this period were often influenced by collective class awareness, labor rights movements and union leadership guidance rather than solely individual preferences. Political loyalty was frequently ingrained in daily worker contacts by the institutional frameworks of union power.

Beginnings in the early 2000s, the political environment of North Bengal commenced a notable transition. The erosion of conventional left hegemony, the disintegration of union frameworks, the shutdown and turmoil of numerous tea plantation, and the rise of new political entities transformed the dynamics of political mobilization and voter affiliation.

From the first general elections after Independence to the contemporary political landscape of 2026, the voting behavior of women in west Bengal has undergone a remarkable transformation. During the 1950s and 1960s, women's participation in electoral politics was relatively limited due to literacy levels, economic dependence, patriarchal family structures, and restricted mobility. Voting decision were often influenced by male family members, and women were generally viewed as a passive electoral group. However, the gradual expansion of education, urbanization, land reforms, and political mobilization contributed to increasing political awareness among women. During the period of congress dominance and later the rise of the Left front in 1977, women became more visible participants in electoral politics. The Left Front in 1977, women become more visible participants in electoral politics. The left Front government emphasis on rural development, literacy campaigns and women's participants in local governance helped create conditions for greater political engagement. The introduction of reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institution further enhanced women's political consciousness and participation in grassroots democracy. Studies of electoral participation indicate that although female turnout lagged behind male turnout for several decades, the gap steadily narrowed over time. By the late twentieth century, women had emerged as an important electoral constituency whose preference could influence electoral outcomes.

The late 1990s and early 2000s were a pivotal movement. The economic turmoil in the tea sector, characterized by garden closures, inconsistent wage disbursements, and diminishing governmental assistance, undermined the traditional power of union. As dissatisfaction intensified among workers, particularly younger demographics and women experiencing more economic precariousness, electoral allegiances began to transform. The reduction of Left hegemony created opportunities for alternative political entities, such as the All India Trinamool congress and subsequently the Bhartiya Janta party, which aimed to engage plantation communities through welfare commitments, identity-centric appeals and direct engagement tactics.

The political significance of women voters became particularly evident after the political transition of 2011, when the Trinamool Congress (TMC) led by Mamta Bernerjee came to power. The new government introduced several women centric welfare programs such as Kanya Shree, Rupashree, Sabuj-Sathi, Swastha-sathi and later Lakshmi Bhandar. This scheme directly targeted women's education, health, financial security and social empowerment. As a result, women increasingly began to vote based on their own interests and policy preference rather than solely on family or community influences. Electoral data show that female voter turnout steadily increased eventually matching and surpassing male turnout in several elections. Since 2011, women have voted in greater numbers than men in many assembly and parliamentary elections, reflecting their growing political agency and awareness.

In the contemporary period, women's voting behavior in west Bengal is shaped by a combination of welfare benefits, economic aspirations, safety concern, identity politics and perceptions of governance. Rural women in particular, have become a decisive electoral force. Political parties now design election campaign specially targeting female voters because they recognize their capacity to determine electoral outcomes. While welfare programs remain influential, recent election



Cover Page



2 2 7 7 - 7 8 8 1



suggest that women are also evaluating issues such as employment opportunities, corruption, inflation, law and order, healthcare and social security. The 2026 Assembly election demonstrated that women voters are not a predominantly loyal constituency for any single party. Although women continued to participate at exceptionally high rates, many analysts observed shifts in support patterns influenced by concern regarding safety, economic opportunities, and competing welfare promises. Women’s turnout exceeded that of men, confirming their status as one of the most influential segments of the electorate in West Bengal.

Thus, the history of women’s voting behavior in west Bengal from 1950 to 2026 reflects a transition from political marginalization to active citizenship. Women have evaluated from being depended voters influenced by traditional social structures to becoming informed and independent political actors. Their electoral choices increasingly reflect a combination of welfare consideration, developmental aspirations, gender -specific concerns, and broader assessments of political performance. In contemporary West Bengal women voters are not merely participants in the democratic process they are among the most decisive agents shaping the state’s electoral and political future.

In this changing setting, voting behavior in tea plantations progressively shifted from mostly union- led collective action to increasingly fragmented and competing political affiliations. Although class identification and labor issues persist, modern voting participation illustrate a more-intricate interaction of welfare-politics, ethnic-identity, gender-related issues, migration, and desire for social mobility.

Comprehending this historical trajectory is crucial for evaluating contemporary voting behavior among tea plantation workers, especially women, whose political involvement demonstrates both continuity with previous collective mobilization and adaptation to new political contexts.

The historical context of evolving voting behavior in the tea plantation regions of North Bengal from 1950-to the present:

Since the 1950s, voting behavior in the tea plantation regions of North Bengal Has undergone several historical stages influenced by labor mobilization, party realignments, and subsequently, identity-based politics. In the initial post-independence era, plantation labors, predominantly Adivasi and tribal tribes introduced during the colonial period -endured inadequate wages, minimal social protection and exploitative working conditions. Trade unions evolved as the primary vehicle of political awareness. Organization like the West Bengal Cha Shramik Union organized workers about salary disputes, bonus requests and labor rights. These unions were strongly affiliated with leftist parties such as the Communist party of India and subsequently the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Consequently, voting behavior in tea garden constituencies during the 1950s and 1960s was predominantly class-oriented and union-led, with workers casting their votes collectively under robust organizational direction.

The establishment of the Left -Front government in West Bengal in 1977 further entrenched this tendency. Tea plantation regions in the Dooars, Terai, and certain areas of the Darjeeling district emerged as reliable bastions of the Left. Trade unions served as both worker representative and political middlemen between the state and plantation communities. The Left sustained a consistent electoral foundation via panchayat networks and local leadership frameworks. The voting during this period was notably predictable, marked by cohesive support for Left candidates. Nonetheless, despite political stability, structural issues endured -wage stagnation, garden closures, hunger, and insufficient diversification in work options. Overtime, these persistent economic adversities commenced to undermine unwavering commitment.

A significant development transpired from the 1990s onwards with the emergence of the Adivasi Vikas Parishad (AVP). In contrast to previous union -led movements that predominantly emphasized class and labor rights, the AVP prioritized ethnic identification, cultural acknowledgement, and constitutional rights of Adivasi communities in tea plantation. It requested scheduled Tribe designation for various tea garden communities, property and homestead rights, educational access, and socio-economic advancement. This signified a transition from class-oriented mobilization to identity-focused proclamation. The parishad exerted considerable influence in the Dooars and Terai regions, where Adivasis represent a



Cover Page



substantial segment of the tea work force. By emphasizing dignity, representation, and acknowledgement, the ABP diminished the monopolistic influence of Left-affiliated unions over plantation voters and fostered a novel political awareness grounded in ethnicity rather than ideology.

During the 2000s, economic hardship intensified as a result of frequent tea garden closures and the casualization of work. Younger generations, increasingly exposed to education, migration, and alternative livelihoods, have been less receptive to conventional union discourse. Political fragmentation intensified as unions became divided along partisan lines. The 2011 defeat of Left Front and the ascendance of the all India Trinamool Congress indicates increasing discontent. Thereafter, from 2014 forward, the Bhartiya Janata party in North Bengal significantly altered voting habits. The BJP adeptly harnessed Adivasi identity concerns while concurrently pledging salary adjustment and welfare provisions. Political parties progressively circumvented conventional unions and directly engaged tea garden communities via welfare programs, land rights movement, and focused outreach efforts.

In the modern era, voting behavior in tea plantation regions is influenced by a confluence of welfare politics, identity affirmation, generational shifts, and competitive party tactics. The emergence of the Adivasi Vikas Parishad was notably important as it shifted the political dialogue from worker solidarity to ethnic empowerment. Trade unions, once important vote brokers, have seen their influence wane in favor of identity-based organizations and party-driven welfare mobilizing. The historical progression from the 1950s to the present indicates a transition from unified, union-dominated class voting to disjointed, issue-and identity-based electoral behavior, rendering north Bengal's tea plantation belt one of the most politically volatile areas in West Bengal today.

Factors Influencing Alterations in voting Behavior within tea plantations among the women workers.

The alteration of voting behavior in the plantation regions of North Bengal cannot be ascribed to a singular source. It signifies a multifaceted interplay of economic restructuring, political realignments, diminishing union power, identity mobilization and gendered experiences. The subsequent elements have been notably significant:

Reduction of Trade Union Power

In the tea plantation region of the Dooars and Terai in northern west Bengal, the decade following 1990 had a significant drop in the dominance of trade unions previously controlled by those affiliated with the communist party of India (Marxist) under the Left front. Repeated garden closures, wage arrears and defaults on provident funds diminished workers faith, leading to a decline in union-based bloc voting and the rise of competitive populism, as parties proposed direct cash transfers, food security initiatives, and commitments to reopen. This atmosphere facilitated the swift growth of the All India Trinamool congress post 2011 and subsequently allowed for the more profound infiltration of the Bhartiya Janta Party, which used Adivasi identity, citizenship issues and national leadership allure. As a result, voting behavior transitioned from collective, union-oriented patterns within estates to more individualized and welfare centric decision making, with the tea garden voters increasingly evaluating parties based on immediate material advantages, identity acknowledgement, and perceived developmental outcomes rather than enduring organizational allegiance.

Economic Recession and Tea Plantation Shutdowns

Frequent shutdown of tea gardens, inconsistent pay cheque disbursements, deaths due to hunger, and increasing job insecurity have profoundly transformed workers political expectations. Economic adversity diminished confidence in conventional leftist labor politics and facilitated the emergence of alternative political entities offering quick relief, social programs, and financial support. Economic vulnerability emerged as a significant factor in altering party loyalty.

Ascendance of Novel political Entities

The reduction of Left hegemony post 2011 and the emergence of parties like the all India Trinamool congress and the Bhartiya Janata Party transformed political dynamics in plantation regions. The parties implemented novel mobilization



Cover Page



techniques, encompassing direct engagement, welfare distribution, and appeals to ethnic and communal identification. Heightened party competition diversified political options and split formerly reliable voting coalitions.

Welfare politics and Direct Benefit programs:

The proliferation of specialized welfare initiatives -such as housing programs, subsidized food distribution, health benefits and financial help for women-has impacted election conduct. In economically challenged plantation Ares, access to state welfare has emerged as a crucial electoral factor, frequently prompting voters to favor immediate material advantages above enduring ideological principles.

Mobilization based on identity:

Plantation labor communities predominantly consist of Adivasi and other marginalized ethnic groups. In recent years, identity politics-especially over scheduled tribe status regional autonomy requests and ethnic pride -has become increasingly significant. Political actors have progressively engaged voters based on ethnic and communal affiliations, undermining exclusively class-based political alignment.

Gendered Political Agency:

Women represent the predominant demographic among tea plantation labors, and their political agency has developed over time. Historically, women's electoral choices were frequently swayed by familial patriarchs or union authorities. Increased exposure to social programs aimed at women, self-help organizations, and grassroots political engagement has improved their individual decision-making abilities. Gender-specific issues- such as healthcare, domestic abuse, economic stability, and children's education-have significantly influenced electoral decisions.

Migration and Inter-Generational Transformation:

The out-migration of younger workers to urban regions and other states for employment has transformed the demographic and political landscape of plantation villages. Younger voters are generally less ideologically committed to conventional labor politics and receptive to developmental narratives, job prospects, and national political rhetoric.

Media penetration and political Discourse

The proliferation of television, mobile phones, and social media has diminished reliance on union channels for political information. Voters in plantations are increasingly exposed to wider political narratives at both state and national levels, leading to more personalized and informed electoral decisions.

Summery

The study of voting behavior in the tea plantation regions of North Bengal reveals a profound transformation in the nature of political mobilization and electoral participation. The findings demonstrate that the historical predominance of class-based politics, sustained through trade union networks and Left-oriented ideological commitments, has gradually given way to a more fragmented and competitive political environment. Structural changes within the tea industry, coupled with persistent socioeconomic vulnerabilities, have weakened traditional forms of labor-based political organization and altered the foundations of voter allegiance.

At the same time, the growing importance of ethnic identity, cultural recognition, and welfare-oriented political strategies has redefined the relationship between plantation communities and political parties. Electoral choices are increasingly shaped by a combination of economic insecurity, identity-based aspirations, and strategic political engagement rather than by class solidarity alone. The emergence of multiparty competition has further contributed to electoral volatility, creating a dynamic political landscape in which voter preferences are continuously negotiated and reconfigured.



Cover Page



The experience of North Bengal's tea plantation belt underscores the limitations of interpreting contemporary voting behavior solely through the lens of labor politics. Instead, it highlights the need for a multidimensional approach that considers the intersections of class, identity, welfare, and political competition. As such, the region offers an important case for understanding broader transformations in electoral behavior among economically marginalized and socially diverse populations in contemporary India.

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