

Development of Political Consciousness among the Adivasi Tea Garden Workers in Jalpaiguri District, North Bengal: A Survey-Based Study

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Abstract

Political consciousness, defined as the understanding of one's political rights and the ability to act within a democratic society, is unevenly distributed throughout India. The Adivasi tea garden workers of North Bengal vividly embodies this phenomenon. Decades of enclave-like plantation work, geographic isolation, and limited access to education have resulted in the political marginalization of this population. However, research that targets the political consciousness of Adivasi tea garden workers in the Jalpaiguri district is virtually non-existent. This study focuses on the Adivasi tea garden workers of the Jalpaiguri district. One hundred Adivasi tea garden workers were surveyed using multistage random sampling. This contributed to the study of the political consciousness of Adivasi tea garden workers, and the socio-economic determinants on which this consciousness is built. The study also surveyed voting patterns, and the influences of education, trade unions, and media on political consciousness. Respondents voting levels were high at 85%, and respondents had moderate political consciousness ($M = 3.72/5$). Political consciousness was positively correlated to the level of media and political party member contact, trade union membership, personal income, educational attainment, and the degree of political family discussions. Political consciousness was not correlated to personal income, education, media exposure, union membership, and contact with political parties.

Keywords: adivasi tea garden workers; political consciousness; political participation; tribal communities; jalpaiguri; north bengal

1. Introduction

The tea estates of North Bengal, spreading across Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, and Alipurduar, are amongst the first tea estates set up in India with funds from British colonial capital from the mid-1800s. The tea estates hired labor from the mass migration of Adivasi groups—Santhal, Oraon, Munda, and others— from the Chota Nagpur plateau, clearing them from indentures for labor on the tea estates. Many of them are tied up with the estates through long-term job-transfer practices that tie entire households to the estates for their shelter, income, and other

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essential services (Kalarivayil et al., 2024). Even now, the wages are very low and the educational infrastructure is extremely under-resourced. The laborers have very little contact with the outside world beyond the tea estates. They are physically limited, which makes them incapable of networking with other people, institutions and media, beyond the estates (Das, 2023; Kalarivayil et al., 2024).

Freire's (1970) definition of political consciousness involves the recognition of one's self and social position in relation to political structures and rights, as well the ability to actively participate in a democracy. According to Almond and Verba (1963) and Kikon (2017), it's through political consciousness that formally recognized rights in the constitution are transformed into actual rights claims and that collective grievances are transformed into political articulations. Political marginalization of the Adivasi tea garden workers continues in spite of the presence of universal suffrage and Constitutional provisions meant to protect Scheduled Tribes. This is due in part to the fact that in many tea garden-based constituencies, elected representatives do not originate from the majority community (or are not accountable to them), and that political knowledge is restricted due to the presence of isolation and limited educational opportunities. Existing studies in part focus on the socio-economic (Das, 2023; Kalarivayil et al., 2024), labor (Sarkar & Bhowmik, 1998), and political mobilization (Das & Hazarika, 2022; Kikon, 2017) leaving the lack of political consciousness in the Jalpaiguri district. The present study aims to provide a baseline on the political consciousness of the Adivasi tea garden workers.

2. Literature Review

Almond and Verba (1963) describe political consciousness as a combination of the cognitive and normative aspects of political behavior. This includes an awareness of political structures and rights coupled with a belief that one is able to exercise that awareness. Freire's (1970) idea of conscientização is similar in that it frames the process as a continuum from the passive-resigned acceptance of the status quo to an active and critical comprehension of reality. The process of social and political awakening is of particular relevance to the Adivasi communities in India, who have been historically marginalized. According to Jennings and Niemi (1974), the major sites of political socialization include the family, school, peers, and the mass media, with the family being the site of the earliest and the most long-lasting influences.

The North Bengal Adivasi populations are in the tea gardens in Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, and Darjeeling districts. They are descended from groups that migrated from the Chota Nagpur plateau due to the colonial period. Deb (2022) studies the Oraon, Munda and Santal tribes and notes their dependence on tea plantations, as do many in the area, and the Government of West Bengal (2012) publicly recognizes the need to expand state welfare schemes in tea garden areas. "Place precarity" from Kalarivayil et al. (2024) describes the lead isolation and control present in the tea gardens that extends to the tea workers' lives outside the gardens and keeps the tea workers in a precararius state. Also, Sarkar and Bhowmik (1998) call attention to the exclusion of women from trade union positions, due to their dominance of the plucking work force. Finally, Das and Hazarika (2022) present that the tea tribes politically organize in the domination of tea labor for political self-determination and land rights, as opposed to a broad political agenda, which is the organizing strategy of other groups.

Comparative studies of voting patterns have their advantages. Biswas et al. (2021, 2022) find high voter turnout in rural areas of West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh and show a connection between media and voting awareness, while Sardesai (2023) finds a connection at the national level between media and vote choice. Rai (2017) discusses the phenomenon of “silent feminisation” of political participation. This phenomenon describes how women’s political participation is becoming equal to that of men although women are politically visible to a lesser degree. Rout and Patnaik (2014) describe the difference between formal tribal representation and the empowerment of political voice, while a recent review describes governance and land rights as emerging themes (Rathakrishnan et al., 2025). Trade unions are the predominant vehicle for collective action in the plantation enclaves (Sarkar & Bhowmik, 1998; Kalarivayil et al., 2024), though the density of unions has not led to the equal level of political representation. Kikon (2017) describes how the tea tribe community has been politically marginalized despite its high level of organization and has been politically excluded from demands for recognition of tribal political rights.

3. Research Gap

Collectively, the literature contains an analysis of the identity politics and the socio-economic precarity of tea workers and separate analyses of tribal electoral behavior and general studies of tribal representation. There is little survey-based literature on the political consciousness of Adivasi tea workers as a distinct phenomenon of identity and labor precarity, and there is little literature on the socio-economic, social, and community factors that shape that political consciousness. Studies that focus on the Jalpaiguri district are particularly lacking in literature, as most research is on Assam or the broader Dooars region. This research intends to make this gap less pronounced and provide an analysis of the political consciousness of 100 Adivasi tea workers in the Jalpaiguri district.

4. Objectives of the Study

- i. To assess the level of political consciousness among Adivasi tea garden workers in Jalpaiguri district.
- ii. To examine the socio-economic factors influencing political consciousness.
- iii. To analyse the political participation and voting behaviour of Adivasi tea garden workers.
- iv. To identify the role of education, trade unions, and media in shaping political awareness.

5. Methodology

This study utilized a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. The study area comprised of selected tea gardens from different sizes and types of management as well as their distance to administrative centres. The study focused on adult Adivasi workers of the tea gardens, including permanent, casual, and agricultural laborers. One hundred respondents were selected using multi-stage random sampling and tea gardens were purposefully selected based on structural variation. Respondents from the selected tea gardens were randomly selected from

the worker lists who defined themselves as Adivasis and who were employed from the tea garden recently or at the time of the study. A standardized questionnaire as the primary tool of data collection was used, and it was designed to capture the demographic and political data as well as political thinking and engagement using the Likert scale.

The political thinking score was developed based on the eight Likert scale items and was considered a continuous variable, while a High/Low variable was developed based on the median score of the respondents' political thinking score. The remaining variables included age, gender, education, income, occupation, membership to trade unions, exposure to media, and contact with political parties. The demographic data and data related to political thinking and engagement were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Factors that determined political thinking were analyzed using Chi-square tests, Pearson and Spearman correlations and binary logistic regression. The results from the regression analysis were reported as regression coefficients with their associated standard errors, p-values and odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals.

6. Results

6.1 Demographic Profile

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 100)

Variable	Category	n (%)	Mean (SD)
Gender	Male	58 (58.0)	
	Female	42 (42.0)	
Age (years)	18–25 / 26–35 / 36–45	17 / 36 / 31	
	46–55 / Above 55	11 / 5	35.74 (10.29)
Education	No Formal / Primary / Secondary	10 / 27 / 29	
	Higher Sec. / Graduate+	22 / 12	
Income (₹/mo.)	<10,000 / 10,001–20,000	44 / 36	
	20,001–30,000 / >30,000	13 / 7	13,300 (9,107)
Family Size	1–3 / 4–6 / More than 6	33 / 61 / 6	4.13 (1.57)
Occupation	Permanent / Casual	38 / 31	
	Agri. Labour / Other	25 / 6	

The demographic details of the respondents are in Table 1. Most of the respondents were in the economically active age brackets of 26–35 (36.0%) and 36–45 (31.0%). The mean age was 35.7 (SD = 10.3) (Kalarivayil et al., 2024). Most (58.0%) of the respondents were male and 42.0% were female. Given the historical evidence that tea plucking has been mainly practiced by

women (Kalarivayil et al., 2024; Sarkar & Bhowmik, 1998), the number of males being greater than the number of females, likely, signifies the availability of gendered surveys in this context, rather than the actual gendered composition of the work force and may be related to the “silent feminization” and politically visible private sphere Rai (2017). Of the respondents, 66.0% had education at the secondary level and below, 12.0% were at the graduate level and above, and 80.0% earned below ₹20,000 (approximately ₹13,300), which are low and support the under-resourced tea garden schools and persistent wage constraints (Kalarivayil et al., 2024). 65.0% of respondents had more than ten years of employment in the plantation and garden labor sector. This demographic homogeneity and narrow bands of income, and education are of methodological importance in Section 5.3, especially in relation to political consciousness.

6.2 Political Awareness and Participation

Table 2

Political Awareness and Participation among Respondents (N = 100)

Indicator	n (Yes)	%	Mean (SD)
Awareness of Voting Rights	83	83.0	0.83 (0.38)
Knowledge of Panchayat	79	79.0	0.79 (0.41)
Awareness of MLA	64	64.0	0.64 (0.48)
Awareness of MP	58	58.0	0.58 (0.49)
Awareness of the Constitution	67	67.0	0.67 (0.47)
Fully Aware of Constitutional Rights	26	26.0	—
Voting Participation (last election)	85	85.0	0.85 (0.36)
Political Meeting Attendance	53	53.0	0.53 (0.50)
Trade Union Membership	58	58.0	0.58 (0.49)
Active Campaign Participation ^a	46	46.0	2.38 (0.98)
Community Meeting Attendance (≥ Sometimes)	81	81.0	2.13 (0.71)

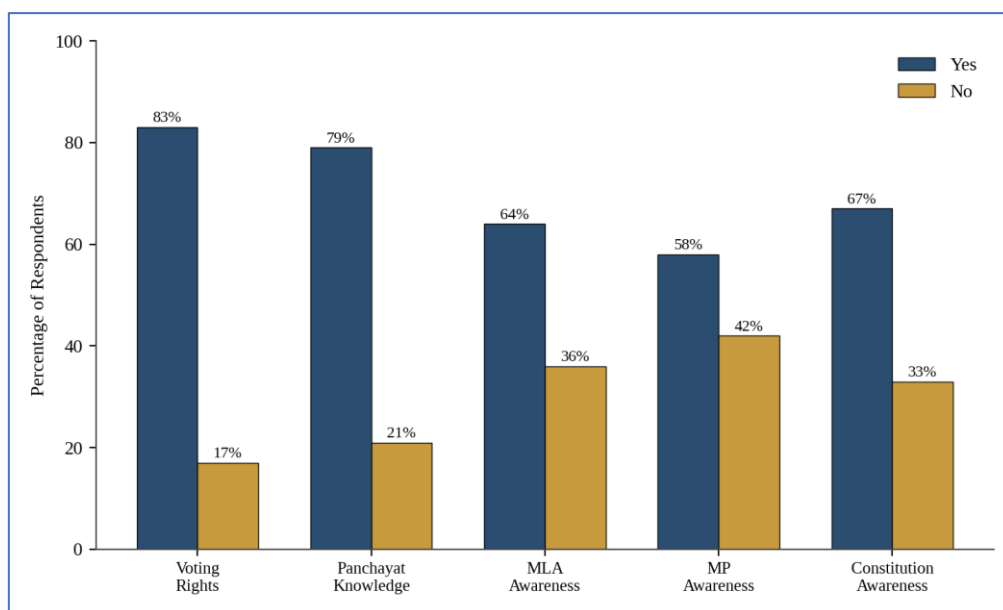
Table 2 shows that political awareness and participation are affected by distance and proximity. Awareness and participation are highest when involving acts and institutions that are local and/or close and are lower for more distant systems and/or higher forms of participation. Notably, awareness of voting rights and Panchayat was higher than that of Members of Legislative Assemblies and Members of Parliament as well as awareness of the Constitution. Only 26% of people surveyed showed awareness of their rights as per the Constitution (Figure 1). Panchayat elections are a frequent occurrence in the village. In contrast, MLAs and MPs operate at a distance from the tea garden. The isolation of the community limits opportunities to come in contact with higher levels of government (Kalarivayil et al., 2024). In this context,

the gap between the awareness of the Constitution, which was at 67%, and the awareness of rights, which was at 26%, is consistent with Kikon's (2017) view that tea tribe communities have experienced formal inclusion but not substantive recognition of their civic and political rights.

Participation formed a similar pattern to other areas (Figure 2). While voting was exceptionally high (85.0%), likely due to strong rural voter turnout in West Bengal (Biswas et al., 2021), attendance in political meetings and active campaigning (53.0% and 46.0% respectively) was considerably lower. Higher levels of participation often require people to tackle larger costs (Milbrath, 1965). Union membership and attendance at community meetings was higher and reflected citizens' higher levels of engagement (Putnam, 2000). However, this engagement has not historically manifested itself in proportional political outcomes for tea garden communities (Kikon, 2017). When participation was broken down by gender, voting participation showed a small gender gap, with women voting (83.3%) and men (86.2%), which was a small gap compared to the studies on women's participation, which suggest extreme political inactivity (Rai, 2017).

Figure 1

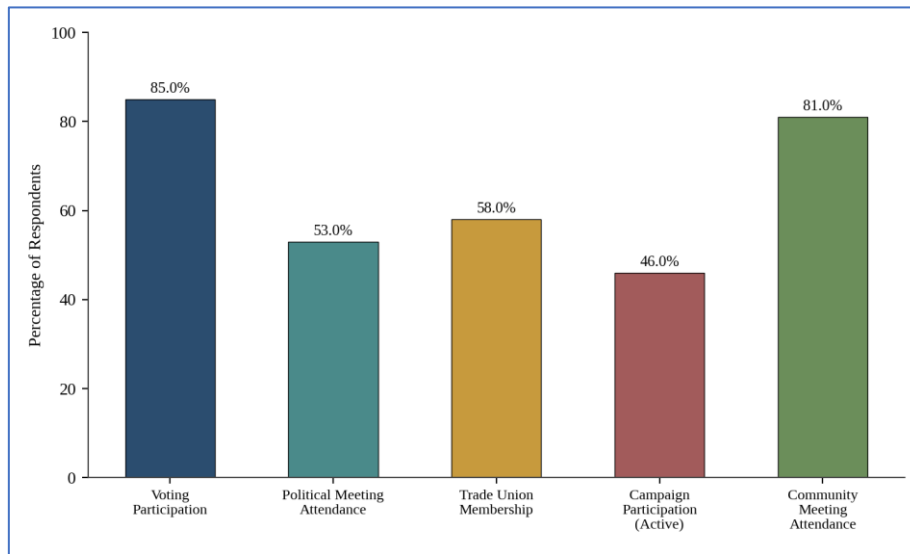
Political Awareness Indicators



Political consciousness diminishes as the sphere of governance shifts away from the area of respondents' experience. The voting rights awareness (83%) and the knowledge of Panchayats (79%) clearly fall in the first tier, which is locally as well as directly experienced. The remaining items (knowledge of the Constitution, MLA, and MP) appear in the next tier, and awareness of MPs (58%) represents the highest level of political consciousness on the national plane. The remaining levels of political consciousness can be explained in terms of the distance of local institutions from the physical and social isolation of the tea garden from state- and national-level representation.

Figure 2

Political Participation Indicators



Political participation shows a similar hierarchy. Nearly all individuals vote (85.0%) and attend community meetings (81.0%) when compared to union membership (58.0%). Likewise, attendance at political meetings (53.0%) and participation in active campaigning (46.0%) all show lower levels of political participation. Participation in political acts that are less costly and socially normal are shown to far exceed those acts that require a social cost.

6.3 Factors Affecting Political Consciousness

Table 3

Association between Selected Factors and Political Consciousness (Chi-Square and Logistic Regression)

Factor	χ^2	df	p	OR [95% CI]
Education	2.796	4	.593	0.98 [0.68, 1.40]
Income	1.617	3	.655	1.05 [0.67, 1.65]
Trade Union Membership	0.060	1	.807	1.27 [0.54, 2.97]
Media Exposure (News Frequency)	5.117	3	.163	1.27 [0.81, 2.00]
Political Party Contact	0.442	1	.506	0.68 [0.30, 1.53]

When looking at the factors impacting political consciousness, a composite score (average of eight Likert items, $M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.36$) was divided into High ($n = 55$) and Low ($n = 45$) categories at the sample median. Hypothesized factors of education, income, trade union membership, media exposure, and political party contact each had a reported packet of findings within Table 3: findings of separate Chi-square tests of the mentioned factors and findings of logistic regression in which all the factors were entered simultaneously. None of the separate Chi-square tests of association were statistically significant (all $p > .16$), and the logistic

regression model, with all factors, was also statistically non-significant, $\chi^2(5) = 2.18$, $p = .823$, McFadden pseudo- $R^2 = .016$. Lastly, the factors of the composite score and the eight belief items were scored in correlation. Here, seven were weak and of no significance (r between $-.11$ and $.09$, all $p > .29$), but there was a significant correlation with family political discussion, $r(98) = .284$, $p = .004$, the only stronger relationship of interest.

These findings demand a significant analysis. The most prevalent socio-economic resource model (Verba et al., 1978) suggests that education, income, and the connections to institutional resources positively predict civic participation. However, the evidence does not support any of these claims. Given that most of the participants have low levels of education and income (Section 5.1), the low variability in these predictors may limit the possible correlations that a more diverse sample could capture. Within this context, the family-discussion relationship is particularly interesting. Formal and media-based channels are limited by social isolation (Kalarivayil et al., 2024), so the family is the most proximate location of political socialisation and confirms classical political socialisation theory (Jennings & Niemi, 1974) at the empirical level. The negative, and non-significant, odds ratio for party contact ($OR = 0.68$) implies that outreach here is most likely to be unstructured party-client mobilisation rather than an effort to raise civic awareness among the participants.

7. Discussion

These findings confirm some aspects of the literature on tribal political participation in India, while also illustrating areas of contradiction. High voting turnout indicates the same pattern recognized by Biswas et al. (2021, 2022) with strong rural turnout in the West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh case studies. This indicates that voting has become a civic ritual and a routine practice even with socio-economic gaps (Sardesai, 2023). The decreasing awareness gradient aligns with the structural isolation approach proposed by Kalarivayil et al. (2024) and Kikon (2017) and with Deb's (2022) description of isolated tribal communities in Jalpaiguri. Discrepancies arise in findings of Biswas et al. (2021) where a study done in Kolkata showed that awareness increased quickly with formal education. In this case, awareness and education may have become uncoupled. In this context, frequent local elections may fulfil the civic education void that formal education has left (Almond and Verba, 1963).

More particularly, the null results connecting education, income, union membership, media exposure, and party contact to consciousness were particularly noteworthy given the socio-economic resource model (Verba et al., 1978). The results were probably due to the lack of variety in a population of a given structure, and created an opportunity to correct the idea that education provides the only way to build consciousness in this case. The thorough finding of family political discussions ties in with a number of strands in political socialisation theory (Jennings & Niemi, 1974) and poses a challenge to theories of the increasing role social media is playing in the political learning process. Despite social media being the most referenced information source (29.0%), and having no statistically considerable relation to consciousness, the findings suggest that family discussions are an active and participative way of dealing with politics that social media and passive media consumption will not provide. Milbrath's (1965) concepts of "spectator" and "gladiatorial" activities that appear on the participation ladder explains the low-cost and high-cost activities, respectively. Putnam's (2000) civic engagement

hypothesis is supported by high union membership and high attendance to community meetings, suggesting that widespread networking promotes civic engagement. The gap between high participation in procedural activities and the low level of awareness of substantive rights indicates the friction, which is at the core of the theory of democratic participation, of formal inclusion and the substantive citizenship that has been secured by marginalized communities (Das & Hazarika, 2022; Kikon, 2017).

8. Conclusion and Policy Implications

The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the socio-economic determinants of political consciousness of Adivasi tea garden workers, their patterns of political participation, and evaluate the influence of education, trade unions, and media on their political consciousness in the Jalpaiguri district. The political consciousness of the Adivasi tea garden workers was assessed as moderate to positive, as was their high turnout and voting participation. Respondents had strong awareness of rights, especially local political rights. Their participation was of the form of a voting ladder for political participation, with high attendance at voting, given that the participation at community and trade union meetings was high. Contrary to the dominant socio-economic resource theory, education, income, membership in a union, media exposure, and contacts were not related to political consciousness. Family political discussion was related to political consciousness, hence in this community, the family was the main focus for providing political socialization.

8.1 Policy Implications

- **Civic education programmes.** With the weak correlation between formal education and political consciousness, civic education should focus on the home and the community—family workshops and civic dialogues with trade unions—rather than the generic civic education within schools.
- **Political awareness campaigns.** Considering that a mere 26.0% reported being fully aware of their rights, while many were at least aware of the Constitution, campaigns that introduce employees to higher levels of government and to the remarkably important rights granted by the Constitution, are a fundamental requirement.
- **Strengthening tribal political participation.** The large discrepancy between voting participation (85.0%) and participation in meetings (53.0%) and campaigning (46.0%) shows there is potential for more involvement. Easing transport and movement barriers connected to garden isolation may help turn this potential into actual involvement.
- **Improved representation in local governance.** There is a need for more institutional mechanisms to recognize that Adivasi tea garden constituencies have more than nominal inclusive representation in Panchayati Raj and legislative representation.
- **Collaboration with civil society and labour unions.** Trade unions have 58.0% membership legitimacy, meaning that unions are a good candidate to partner with civic education, as long as proposed collaboration are complementary to family-based political socialization, rather than a replacement.

9. Limitations and Future Scope

This study uses a small sample size ($N = 100$), which limits statistical power, and uses a cross-sectional design, which makes it impossible to interpret the effects of family-discussion as reflecting household behavior. The measures are self-reported, and the research is limited to one district. Better studies on this topic may include large, varied samples and longitudinal studies that clarify causation, as well as qualitative studies to expand the study on family-discussion and comparative studies in other districts of North Bengal and Assam.

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