POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS:

No discussion about the nature of any political system can be complete without an analysis of the nature of political participation among its people. For political participation is the most important ingredient of every political system. Inspite of the fact that in every polity political power is monopolised by the elites, it cannot be denied that the rulers invariably try to involve the people in the affairs of the state and thereby to legitimise their political power. Whatever may be the character of the political system, political participation of some sort is bound to occur in every political system; even in a modern dictatorial regime political participation has great importance. And traditional democratic theory generally regards participation by the individual in political activity as a virtue in its own right. In fact, participation has been seen as a civic duty, as well as a sign of political health.

The concept of political participation has been defined variously, Thus:

"Political participation is the involvement of groups and individuals at various levels in the political system. Involvement expresses itself in various kinds of overt or manifest political activities."
By political participation, Huntington and Nelson also mean:

"Simply as activity by private citizen designed to influence governmental decision-making".  

Thus, political participation refers to those legal activities of the people which affect the governmental decision-making and actions.

According to Huntington and Nelson,
"Knowledge about politics, interest in politics, feeling of political competence, and efficiency, perceptions of the relevance of political all these may often be closely related to political action, but at other times they are not. Their study and measurement also require techniques that differ significantly from those needed to study behaviour along".  

So, in their opinion subjective political attitudes are not equivalent to political participation. On the contrary, they are separate variables.

D. R. Mathews and J. W. Protho define political participation as

"all behaviour through which people directly express their political opinions".  


Hence,

"participation is the principal means by which consent is granted or withdrawn in a democracy and rulers are made accountable to the world". 5

But this does not mean that in every democracy, the rate of political participation is very high. In fact, there are great differences among diverse political systems in this regard. Thus while the rate of political participation in Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain is very high, in the U.S.A. this is relatively low. This reveals the complexity of the phenomenon which is greatly influenced by a number of variables.

So, it can be said that political participation denotes a number of voluntary activities which have significant influence upon the political system regarding issues like the selection of rulers and the formation of public policy. More precisely, those activities are

"(1) Voting at the polls, (2) Supporting pressure groups by being a member of them, (3) personally communicating directly with the legislators, (4) participating in political party activity and thus acquiring a claim on the legislators, and (5) engaging in habitual dissemination of political opinions through world of mass communications to other citizens". 6
But apart from these five modes of political participation in the democratic politics the ingredient of candidature for elections to representative bodies of various levels is also a very important mode of political participation. Particularly in a democratic polity, the individual has a greater chance to take part in politics, to influence the decision-making process and to take active part in the making of major decisions by participating in the election process. Thus, through this ingredient the individual can more directly relate himself with the political affairs of the state. As a candidate, the individual closely attaches himself with the political parties, public meetings etc. and thereby extends his political awareness. Even as an independent candidate having no formal connection with any political party the individual can influence the electorate, win elections, and become a member of the legislature. Since in every democratic polity, citizens have the right to participate in the election process, this is an effective way by which the individual can participate in the political system. Thus, the ingredient of candidature in the elections also widens the scope for political participation.

Thus, the individual participates in the political system in various ways, and their degree or extent of participation is not the same. That is why we find different forms of political participation in any given state.
Political scientists also classify different forms of political participation on the basis of different activities performed by the individuals. Lester Milbrath in his book, "Political participation" classified three forms of political participation on the basis of three categories of activities. These are "gladiatorial activities", "transitional activities", and "spectator activities". By the "Gladiators" he means a small number of people who are party activists in the sense that they highly engage themselves in a series of direct party activities. These include the function of holding party offices, attending party meetings, raising party funds etc. Again, some people attend party meetings as because they are supporters of sympathisers of the party. They are impartial but attentive listeners, and they also contribute to the party funds. At the same time, this group of people come in contact with the party personnel. These types of activities are known as "transitional activities", i.e. the second form of political participation as mentioned by L. Milbrath. 'Spectator activities' include the function of voting, discussing politics, convincing another person to cast the vote in a particular way, and wearing a sticker etc.

Strictly speaking, there are two basic types of political participation—active and passive. In every society participation needs some sort of time, energy and
resources. But it is very difficult for every one to find time and energy. Hence some people always come forward to participate actively in political affairs while others keep themselves at a safe distance from politics.

In terms of the degree or extent of participation Rush and Althoff have arranged political activities in a number of categories. At the top of the hierarchy there are some individuals who are holding political or administrative offices. The important difference between this group of individuals and others is that the former is directly related with the exercise of formal political power. Even this group of individuals also exercises actual power. Power may or may not reside in the hands of the office holders but they are important in the sense that they are formal repositories of power. Below this group of people, there are some who are aspirants of political or administrative offices. Rush and Althoff also point out that some people participate as members of various types of political or quasi-political organisations like political parties, interest groups, and pressure groups, which act as agents of political system. Through these organisations the people may participate in various types of political activities which include the defence or promotion of particular ideas, positions, situations etc. While some people participate very actively either in the political parties
or in the interest groups, some people participate in a rather passive way in both the organisations. Besides these political organisations, there are some 'quasi-political organizations' which include those interest groups whose functions are partly political. Below this category, there are some people who do not formally belong to any political or quasi-political organisation. They, however, participate in public meetings or demonstrations organised by the parties or pressure groups. This type of participation is by nature spontaneous, for these participants generally remain outside the organised political activity of any specifically political organisation.

Rush and Althoff mention another form of participation. Under this category people take part only in informal political discussions particularly at the time of election campaigns, or during grave political crises. Again there are some people who, despite being least interested about the informal political discussions, find at least some interest about political matters and keep themselves abreast of the political situation mainly through the mass media. In this way, they also form their own opinion about the course of events. Their activities are, however, limited up to this level. According to Rush and Althoff, the act of voting is the last form of participation.
H. Norman Nie and S. Verba, as well as Huntington and Nelson classify two forms of participation—professional participation and non-professional participation. A professional participant is one who is a party activist like a party candidate for elections and professional lobbyists. A professional participant also holds political and administrative offices and involves himself through a routine job regarding his act of political participation. A non-professional participant is one whose political activity is intermittent or part-time. He takes political activity as a secondary matter in relation to his other social roles. According to these authors, it is the second type of participation which is the most genuine form of political participation.

Again, regarding the purpose of participation it may further be classified as Instrumental and Expressive. Instrumental political participation is essentially directed to the achievement of concrete goals like securing poll victory for a party or the passage of a bill in the legislature or just a rise in one’s status or influence. Expressive political participation, on the other hand, does not aim at realisation of any concrete goal; it is concerned with some immediate satisfaction or a mere release of tensions. Some people enjoy their political right i.e. the right to vote, not because they have a great deal of interest about the result, but only because they simply
enjoy a feeling of satisfaction by exercising their political right. Actually, both the instrumental and expressive participations are intimately connected in practice. Because, most of the people participate with a view to the results to follow from participation as well as for the fulfilment of their personal satisfaction.

Thus, it is clear that the people participate in the political process for diverse reasons. But, before discussing the various explanations put forward for people's participation, we should first analyse why people do not participate. The people who are less inclined to participate in the political process are designated by a variety of terms, e.g. apathetic, cynical, alienated or anomie.

I I

Political apathy means "a type of political passivity, which provides support for the regime but enables the individual to avoid the politicisation of his whole being. As a defence mechanism, it seeks to preserve in one of the few possible some form of individual privacy and autonomy". 10

Again, according to Rush and Althofa, apathy may be defined as "a lack of interest in or lack of concern for persons, situations or phenomena in general". 11
From a sociological point of view, it may be applied to society in general or merely to certain aspects of society. Like many behaviour patterns it is often linked to a particular personality syndrome. So, those who are apathetic have no political interest at all, and these apathetic individuals lack the sense of political efficiency.

In a democratic political system, generally, we find two types of apathy. There are some people who do not participate due to lack of adequate information about the political world, and due to their political indifference and incapacity they have no opportunity to participate. But this type of political apathy is not deliberate and is usually found among the illiterate, ignorant, the inarticulate, the parochial and the isolated persons and to some extent among women of those societies where the society is heavily dominated by men. The second type of political apathy is deliberate. The people who come under this category refrain from political participation consciously and deliberately.

Morris Rosenberg has mentioned three reasons for political apathy. In the first place, some people think that their political activity may threaten other spheres of their lives. For example, one may believe that this political activity will alienate himself from his friends, or neighbours, or even the members of his family. Those
people also think that their occupational position may be threatened if they identify themselves too closely with a particular party. Therefore, when individuals come face to face with any controversial situation they opt not to take any side.

Secondly, some individuals regard political activity as futile. They have a sense that, as individuals, they have no capability at all by which they can influence the course of events. At the same time, they regard the end result of political activity as useless, they also think that there is a gulf of difference between political ideals and political reality which political activity is unable to bridge.

The third reason for political apathy is the absence of political stimuli. Political stimuli is the most important factor in encouraging political activity. Absence of this stimuli also creates apathetic attitude among the people, according to whom neither is the subject matter of politics highly interesting nor does political activity provide any material satisfaction at all. The people sharing this feeling rather derive higher psychological satisfaction and high rate of material benefit from their occupation with family, friends and neighbourhood.
The low level of political participation has two reasons – psychological and social. The mental make-up of an individual is such that he is more interested in his psychological and original biological needs than in the political involvement.

"Again, when high rates of economic development coupled with extensive egalitarian measures give an all-too-well look to a society and thus lessen the incidence of social conflict chances are that people will be less interested in politics and pay greater attention to the so-called ephemeral things of their individual and social life".  

Finally, some people do not participate because they have great faith upon the existing political system. These people are too satisfied with the working of the political system to take any interest in its functioning. They believe that the system will go on functioning very smoothly, no matter whether they participate in it or not. So, from this type of feeling political apathy may also result.

Besides, political apathy, social scientists also use the terms "cynicism", "alienation", and "anomie" when they explain non-participation. Cynicism means an attitude of distaste and disenchantment whereas anomie and alienation refer to a feeling of estrangement or divorce from society.
Political participation is no doubt, a very complex phenomenon. For its nature varies from one society to another. There are some important variables which need to be explained for properly analysing nature of this variation. The most important variables are of three types: (1) psychological, (2) social and (3) the political.

Thus, psychologically the individual may sometimes overcome his loneliness through political participation. "common political beliefs lay the ground-work for sharing equivalent emotions of anger, sympathy and distress; common activities create bonds of friendship. Politics may offer to the lonely man new opportunities for association with others the excuse may be politics, the need may be fear of isolation". 14

So, to avoid isolation men participate politically and through this they want to make friendship with others. This is not the only psychological reason. For man is a curious animal. And due to this curiosity he wants to understand the meaning of his environment. This is another significant psychological reason for one's political participation. Again, unconscious psychological elements also influence one's political participation. Sometime political participation provides relief from one's psychic
tension. This intra-psychic tension is mostly held at the unconscious level and is created either due to the conflict of one's impulses or due to a conflict between his impulses and his mental control mechanisms. Most probably the external reason of this conflict is familiar or social atmosphere. Political participation reduces this intra-psychic tension in two ways. Firstly, it disconnects the individual from the sphere of his inner conflict. Secondly, it also provides some meaningful channel through which the individual can express his anger and release his inner tensions. Again, political participation also provides new life style to the individuals by engaging the individual in his political activity. This new lifestyle helps the individuals to liberate himself from his psychic conflict. Robert Lane had mentioned that

"Andrew Bonar Law, the Ex Prime Minister of Great Britain had been suffering great pain from the death of his wife in 1909, but he released himself from this pain by means of political participation. This active political participation made him the leader of the conservative party and the Prime Minister of the country". 15

Again, man is a power seeking animal, almost always longing for power. If any individual holds power, he has a satisfaction that he is powerful. This longing for power
mostly operates at the unconscious level and this sentiment leads an individual to be politically engaged. Man is the slave of his own ego or self-esteem. Sometimes they fulfil this desire, i.e. ego feelings through political participation. But the extent of influence of the psychological variables greatly depends upon the social atmosphere. The proper social environment inspires or encourages the people by which they can involve themselves politically.

The social atmosphere or environment of an individual includes numerous elements each of which has a role in moulding the pattern of political participation in a country. Among these the most significant elements are education, income, sex, age, occupation, race and group influence, residence, religion and morality. Regarding the effectiveness and importance of these social variables various research works have been completed in different countries.

The general conclusion of these research works is that the rate of political participation is relatively higher among the educated male members of the society, members of the higher income and occupational groups, urban dwellers, members of voluntary associations, and settled residents. The importance of education in respect of participation needs hardly to be emphasised. Through education one can get more information and expand one's civic sense, self-confidence and articulate ness, political capability, interest and
responsibility. The educated person, again, has the capability by which he can transmit his political ideas and knowledge to the next generation. The level of education is closely related with the extent of political participation in some countries like Britain, Italy, the United States, France, Ireland, and Mexico, But G.M. Connelly and H.M. Field have found that despite the similar rate of educational attainment the extent or level of participation differs due to the differences in income.16 J.M. Foskett, on the other hand, has found that the rate of income being the same, levels of participation differ according to different levels of educational attainment.17

Occupation also is an important factor in affecting the degree of ones political participation. The individuals holding higher posts usually show greater interest in political participation. This category of people has a high rate of educational attainments and as a result their rate of political participation is also high. Moreover, individuals who work in complex and technical jobs are generally found to be more articulate than others and are also found to be conscious about the political world than others.

Further, there are some occupations which generally widen the scope of participation, but in occupations which give little scope for leisure and which breed much anxiety
in the sphere of jobs, the rate of political participation is generally low.

Again, high income group participate more frequently than low income groups. But that does not mean that income always and everywhere influence the degree of political participation.

"Cross-cultural and cross-state data do not at all support the view that national or state wealth and electoral participation are related in the same ways as individual's wealth and participation in the United States and throughout the world". 18

The nature of political participation is also, to some extent, dependent upon a person's status. Individuals with high status are more active in politics than the low status people. Individual's status is also affected by some other variables like sex and age. For example, in Great Britain, Italy, U.S.A., France, Germany, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, and Japan men participate more than women. 19

The permanent inhabitants of a particular community also have greater chances of participation than a newcomer in the community. Again, urban dwellers, due to their higher educational attainment and greater understanding of the political issues, participate more than the rural folk. 20
Religion and race also are two other categories which influence the extent of participation. Thus, the Catholic voters in the West participate more actively in the electoral politics than the Protestant ones, particularly on those issues which are closely connected with the legislation on birth control, or issues which are related with the affairs of educational institutions saturated with Catholic beliefs.

"In Germany where the Christian Democratic party attempts to be the spokesman of both catholicism and protestantism, whether catholics or protestants attend church affects their political participation considerably". 21

Again, the ethnic factor also is important in respect of political participation. If, in a society there are numerous ethnic groups conflicting with each other, then the rate of political participation will be high. 22

Practically, individual political participation is possible only through the group membership. The individual derives adequate knowledge about the existing political system through the voluntary associations which enhance the individual's political interests and activities. Through the group or association, the individual can manifest his own political interest. The individual develops his own ideas about the social and political environment
as a member of the group and only as a member of a group he discovers that he is a leader, a responsible citizen or a party activist, and this sentiment increases his sense of political efficacy. Hence, the nature of political participation in a political system also depends upon the functioning of voluntary organisations or groups.

Like social environment, political environment, too, is equally important for the study of political participation. If the political system is highly complex, political map of a country is very large and vague, governmental institutions are highly rigid, then people may try to alienate themselves from this complicated and critical political system. So, the nature and character of the political environment deeply influence the degree of political participation. Not only that, where the scope for open competition is very high and where competition follows established forms of procedure the people are expected to participate in greater numbers. Again, the efficiency and good performance of the government may also increase the individual's rate of participation. But this is not a universal phenomenon. It may also happen that because of the high efficiency of the government, people will begin to regard their involvement in political affairs as unnecessary and as a result they will gradually alienate themselves from all sorts of political activities.
Of all the constituent elements of political environment the most important is the party. The party is the most appropriate and significant channel through which the people can present their demands and wishes to the government. The parties help the people in participating politically by means of its various important functions. The parties continuously supply necessary information to the people about the political world. On the basis of this information the people acquire adequate knowledge about their own political system. The people become aware of the fundamental issues of national politics, the names of the contesting candidates in elections the method of searching their names in the voters' register, the name of their exact polling station etc. through the political parties. Hence, the parties help the citizens to be politically educated and this political education is undoubtedly a very crucial factor in determining the level and extent of people's political participation.

The role of political parties in this regard cannot be fully explained without analysing the effect of party campaigns which play a great role in respect of political participation. Under the impact of campaign people may attend a political meeting or listen to a political speech. In this connection it should be mentioned here that different types of campaigns have different kinds of
effect. Impersonal campaign, which is carried on chiefly through the mass media, is one type of campaign. Then there is personal or direct campaigns like face to face communication with the people, distribution of party literature, direct mailing etc. The impact of this type of direct campaign is much greater than the indirect ones.

However, the same political variables, too, may produce different results because it is circumscribed by the psychological and social variables. That is why it is the main function of the modern voting behaviour studies to identify these psychological and social variables, which deeply condition the political variables. But it is a very difficult task to establish a general theory of political participation through the voting behaviour studies because of the lack of uniformity in the operation of the variables. Yet, voting behaviour studies establish some important links.

"These links, no doubt, are extremely important since, by continuously verifying these links in different historical conditions, one may finally arrive at some fairly reliable general propositions and it is in the perspective of these propositions alone that one can make an attempt to make a theoretical analysis of the phenomenon of political participation."23
IV

Political participation, then, implied a number of voluntary activities on behalf of the people which may influence even such important items as the selection of rulers and various aspects of the formation of public policy. It follows that political participation is the involvement in numerous ways of individuals at various levels in a political system. But every member of the body politic does not participate equally. While some are very active, others are occasionally active, and a quite large number of them may be at the level of political inactivity. Factors like fear, indifference, prejudice, apathy, etc., may force a large number of people to abstain from political participation. The nature of participation also varies from one society to another as well as from country to another.

This short review of the existing literature on the concept of political participation is necessitated in view of the fact that our main objective is to explore the nature and extent of political participation among the santhals of Birbhum, a district in West Bengal. Generally known that the tribes, who constitute a very important part of the Indian Society, maintain a strong socio-cultural barrier around themselves in order to shield their peculiar socio-economic structure, belief system, institutional complex and separate identity. This they
have been able to maintain despite far-reaching changes in every aspect of national life. Question of national integration, therefore, has occupied the attention of political reformers and nation-builders. No political party or leader would deny the importance of tribal integration with the mainstream of national life. Hence a theoretical analysis of the level of participation among the tribals is a sine qua non for any exploration into the root cause of tribal isolation or apathy. But in order to understand the nature of present apathy it would be better if we peep into history, more particularly, the history of the santhal experience of modern representative institutions in independent India.
References:


15. Ibid, P-118, Foot note.


20. Ibid, P-130

