Political participation is one of the important ingredients of every political system, irrespective of their type and character. As a result, any study about any political system becomes meaningless without the proper analysis of the nature and extent of political participation among its members. Though in every polity political power is monopolised by the few, known variously as the ruling class or the ruling elite, they invariably try to involve the people in the affairs of the state and thereby to legitimise their political power. In fact, political participation has been regarded as a sign of political health and civic duty.

As a result of this importance of political participation, the social scientists have nurtured this concept very seriously. However, different social scientists have analysed and explained the concept variously from different points of view. But in spite of these differences it can be said that political participation implies a number of voluntary activities on behalf of the people which may influence even such items as the selection of rulers and various aspects of the formation of public policy.
Political participation implies 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 one country to another.

Theoretical orientation of political participation is necessitated in view of the fact that the main purpose of this study is to explore the nature and extent of political participation among the Santhals of Birbhum, a district in West Bengal.

Tribes constitute a very significant part of the Indian society in as far as they maintain a strong sociocultural 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. So, a theoretical analysis of the level of participation among the tribals is highly important for any exploration into the root cause of tribal isolation.

II

The Santhals constitute a major part of the population in West Bengal, and more particularly in the district of Birbhum. The Santhals of Birbhum played a great historical role in national liberation movement during the colonial period. Through different political movements, they exposed their revolutionary spirit in order to give vent to their discontent and dissatisfaction. The Santhals of Birbhum had played a great historic role in the Santhal Revolt of 1855. In this revolt they violently protested against the exploitative rule of indigenous Zamindars as well as the British colonial rulers. Inspite of the failure of this insurrection, it still maintains a powerful hold
over the Santhal imagination and political consciousness. Again, during the nationalist movement the Santhals of Birbhum also fought against the British imperialist rulers whom they considered as their chief enemy in their struggle for independence and emancipation from inhuman exploitation. In the post-independence days also the Santhals of Birbhum had to fight for their rights. In 1949 they spontaneously participated in the peasant movement through which they wanted to retrieve the agricultural land from the grip of landlords. They also should their revolutionary spirit during the Birbhum pleasant uprising of 1970-71. Beginning from the famous Santhal insurrection of 1855 up to the Naxalite movement in 1970-71, the Santhals of Birbhum have on many occasions shown their political maturity in organising peasant revolts against feudal and colonial exploitation. Though these movements, in which the Santhals heavily participated, were organised essentially for some basic economic demands, they had no doubt important political implications. While the 1855 insurrection was spontaneous and millenarian in character, the 1970-71 episode was undoubtedly tinged with political flavour. For it had as its primary objective the armed overthrow of the semi-feudal and semi-colonial state of India. Thus, like other oppressed sub-national groups, the Santhals also have on many occasions taken resort to politics to press their demands.
Since Independence both the Union and State governments have adopted extensive measures for the wider political participation among the Santhals of Birbhum. This was sought to be achieved through their social, educational and economic development. The Constitution of India has provided for protective discrimination in favour of the Scheduled Tribes in the form of reservation of seats and constituencies from the local self government to the national legislature.

The Government of India and, more particularly, the Government of West Bengal have sanctioned a lot of money for the educational development of the Santhals of Birbhum, because political participation is a matter of political knowledge and so the most important point in this context is the level of education of the people concerned. However, inspite of this the rate of literacy among the Santhals is very poor. In fact, the Santhals are fully unaware about the governmental measures for the spread of literacy.

Again, in the field of representation the picture is also very poor. Though the government has provided ample opportunities for wider political participation through the reservation of seats upto the village level, the rate
of Santhal participation is not satisfactory. They mostly went to avoid the (voting) politics and political activities mainly related to elections. They think that their participation can in no way change the existing political system but may threaten their traditional occupation. Practically the Santhal advisis of Birbhum derive higher mental satisfaction from their pre-occupation with their own community then from political involvement. Poor economic condition, lack of proper education, influence of superstitions, lack of proper information about the political world are some of the important factors for the political indifferences among the Santhals of Birbhum.

I V

The economic life of the Santhals of Birbhum is completely based upon agriculture though most of them have no agricultural land of their own. A large number of Santhals work as agricultural labourers in exchange of minimum wage. Again some Santhals also work as day labourers, particularly those who do not get jobs as agricultural labourers. The Santhals of Birbhum are engaged mainly in these two professions because (i) cultivation is a hereditary occupation of the Santhals and they very much like to engage themselves in this occupation and (ii) They do not have any opportunity to enter into any other occupation.
Cultivation, however, fails to meet the minimum requirements of the daily life of the Santhals. Their economic condition is extremely poor. In fact, acute poverty is the chief reason for the backwardness of the Santhals of Birbhum. Moreover, due to poverty they have simply no time to spend for political activities like campaigning for election, giving candidature, joining mass rallies etc.

However, the governmental and non-governmental organizations have come forward for the upliftment of the Santhals. The government of West Bengal has adopted comprehensive programmes for the upliftment of the adivasis. Different government and non-government organizations also have side by side adopted and implemented different types of projects for the purpose of betterment of the lot of the adivasis of Birbhum. Naturally one should expect that the Santhal community as a whole would desire benefits and would be able to improve their conditions to some extent.

But our survey has revealed that as many as 85% of the Santhals are yet to receive any kind of Governmental aid. They are not at all aware of the nature or mode of different types of government aid. They do not have any idea as to how much money have been allotted by the
Government in different heads. The Santhals could not give any clear idea about the different concessions or facilities extended by the government for their development. Therefore, the vast majority of these Santhals are still dipped in the darkness of their ignorance and have no idea whatsoever about the government and non-government projects adopted for their upliftment.

For the purpose of a better understanding of the nature of political participation among the Santhals of Birbhum an analysis of the relation between the Santhal community and the established political system, especially the electoral system through which they participate is very significant.

The survey results show that they responded very little to the diverse activities of the political system. Though the Santhals of Birbhum did actually caste their votes in different elections, mere voting is not enough for the measurement of political participation. Even though they voted they did not do that from their own judgement. At the time of election they were influenced by the leaders of different political parties in a number of ways. This influence played a great role in determining their choice of representatives to the Lok Sabha or the
Bithan Sabha. What is, however, more important is that it is their considered opinion that they would not gain anything by casting their votes in favour of this or that candidate. Moreover, their representation to the national and state legislatures is practically nil, only a little bit of representation is found in the local self government i.e. the Panchyat bodies. These features are undoubtedly not a good sign of tribal political participation. Though the Santhals of Birbhum are acquainted with the names and symbols of only two political parties, namely, the C.P.I(M), and the Congress(I), they have no slightest idea about the ideology, programme and principles of these political parties. They do not even show any interest about them. Hence one can certainly argue that, in general, they have an apathetic attitude towards the existing political system, even at the local level.

The present survey also reveals that due to the abject poverty the Santhals of Birbhum have mostly alienated themselves from the mainstream of the political system. Economic poverty is the chief obstacle to their effective political participation. At the same time, mass illiteracy also substantially denied the Santhal community opportunity for even minimum participation in the national and state body politic. They are also poorly informed about the political affairs of the country. This information
gap creates a distance between the Santhals of Birbhum and the Indian political system.

In conformity to their pacific nature, they traditionally maintain a safe distance from the bitter struggles for power among the political parties. But with India's independence from foreign colonial rule it was hoped that the tribal communities, which had so far suffered the ignominy of being the outcastes, would gradually get politicised and step by step would take active part in the democratic decision making process in the country. But, unfortunately, the tribal communities, in general, and the Santhals, in particular, had many reservations regarding the utility of political participation in any capacity. So, they not only showed indifferent attitude towards the political institutions and processes, but also expressed deep apathy towards everything political. It was in this context that the present survey was conducted to ascertain political apathy or otherwise among the Santhals of Birbhum. It is apparent that with the disappearance of the more oppressive alien political opponent the Santhals also have gradually shifted their attention from overt political activity to convert economic and cultural activities. The general assurance of security of their tribal identity as guaranteed by the new democratic regime might be one of the factors that may explain their tensionfree
indifferent approach to political institutions and processes. However, with the development of social and economic differentiations within the Santhal Community in the post-independence period, there has been loss of homogeneity in their approach to politics. That is to say, while some enlightened and economically developed sections took great interest in national, state or local politics, others thought it better to confine themselves within the conch-shell.

VI

On the basis of our survey we can present some important findings regarding the nature and extent of political participation among the Santhals of Birbhum.

In the first place, survey has proved that the political consciousness among the Santhals of Birbhum is essentially millenarian in character, which means that the Santhals of Birbhum have the collective orientation and a forward-looking future-oriented religious ideology. Their goals are totalistic, leadership messianic and the peasant response is sudden and cataclysmic. The Santhals of Birbhum reflected their political awareness through the Santhal insurrection of 1855. They spontaneously participated in the Santhal insurrection of 1855 and fought, on the one hand against the British rules and on the other hand, against the indigenous Zamindars, landlords and mahajans.
Though the glorious Santhal revolution of 1855 was a past incident, its memory has a powerful hold over the imagination of the present Santhal community. The same spontaneous revolutionary spirit was also noticed in the Naxalite movement of the '70s among the Santhals of Birbhum.

Secondly, our survey has proved that there is a positive correlation between the socio-economic conditions of the Santhals of Birbhum and their extent of political participation. In this sense, the more lower they are in the scale of socio-economic hierarchy, the more do they maintain indifferent attitude towards the political system. As the survey has shown, the Santhals living in extreme poverty prefer to isolate themselves from the mainstream of the political life of the country more than to take part in elections etc. Conversely, the more well-off and educated Santhals take keen interest in politics and actively intervene in the political process. Hence, effective political participation among the Santhals of Birbhum is definitely a function of their relative freedom from the anxieties of making their both ends meet. In other words, their alienation from political activities is due to their abject poverty and miserable economic condition.

Thirdly, working as farm labourers on a paltry wage
and having little opportunity of choosing alternative means of existence, most of the Santhals of Birbhum think that their active participation in the political process may threaten their traditional means of livelihood. This fear phychosis has to a great extent produced a distinct effect on their interest in politics. Besides, they do not also get any material satisfaction from political activities. Their traditional mooring is so great that even a supra-political body like the State does not appear to them as more significant then either the community or the family. In fact, the cultural and intellectual satisfactions derived from their community and family life have greater appeal to them than the appeal of an impersonal reified object as the state is. They feel that greater involvement in politics may alienate them from other members of their families. This would be an irreparable psychological loss to them. That is why they prefer to follow the traditional wisdom that the 'Cobbler must stick to his last.'

**Fourthly,** mass illiteracy and lack of formal education can also be invoked as explanatory variables for political apathy among the Santhals of Birbhum. Only those who have received formal education at least upto the tenth standard have shown some amount of political awareness and interest in political activities. For, formal education has not
only expanded their intellectual horizon but has also increased the possibility of communicating with the outside world. But unfortunately, as our survey shows, majority of the Santhal students leave the school at the primary stage because of dire economic necessity. Consequently, when they come of age they remain almost totally ignorant of the political institutions and processes in the country. That is how they are incapacitated from active intervention in politics.

Fifthly, the most pathetic part of the story is that the majority of the Santhals of Birbhum are of opinion that no change in the existing political system as whole can be brought about by their own participation in the election system. That is to say, their participation in the elections either as candidates or as voters or even as activists of any political party would in no way affect the powers that be or the vital governmental or administrative decisions. This sort of feeling reveals their lack of self-confidence in making a big dent in politics. Of course, this pessimism is actually almost the direct product of their poverty and illiteracy. However, the fact remains that they express total mistrust on the political and administrative machinery of the country which has, for years, done nothing concrete for the betterment of their conditions of life and culture.
Hence, on the perspective of the above-mentioned observations, it can be said that the important findings totally validate the hypotheses which we framed for the study of the nature and extent of political participation.

Thus, on the basis of our study we can classify the political culture of the Santhals of Birbhum as equivalent to the parochial subject political culture of the type mentioned by Almond and Verba in "The Civic Culture" (1963). For, though they do not have any cognition of the Indian political system as such, they have expressed at least affective orientations to the political system in the sense that they have a feeling of being alienated from the system. But the average Santhal is wholly involved in his family and partly in his community life, but he is least concerned with the national, State or local political institutions of the country. He is also at a loss to decide how to influence the political decision-making process. Consequently, his sense of self as a political force in the country is quite vague.

Given their political culture it is obvious that the Santhals would not have any participatory role in Indian politics. In fact, they are political apathetics. They consciously try to avoid their own politicisation. They lack not only proper opportunity to participate, but also
information about and interest in the political world. That is why the Santhals of Birbhum generally maintain apathetic attitude towards the entire political system. However, since they have not consciously taken the decision not to participate politically, their political apathy is not of the deliberate type. It is rather spontaneous in character.

So, mere constitutional provisions are not enough by which the Santhals of Birbhum can be encouraged to participate to a greater extent. It also requires proper planning and determination to take effective measures. First and foremost is the improvement of economic conditions of the Santhals of Birbhum. Because, poverty is their chief enemy for political participation. This alienated them totally from the state of political world. As a result, improvement of the conditions of life of the Santhals of Birbhum through rational economic planning is urgently necessary. Emphasis should be given upon the small and cottage industries and the industries should be controlled solely by the Santhals. By means of this the Santhals can get a chance to improve their economic condition.

Secondly, governmental aid and assistance regarding the upliftment of the Santhals of Birbhum should be properly implemented in favour of the Santhals, because
there is a great gap between the donor and the recipient. This gap should be reduced honestly and immediately. Though government has sanctioned a lost of money for the Santhals, the latter actually received little in practise. This gap creates another hindrance in the enhancement of political participation among them. Hence, some honest arrangement is required about the distribution and implementation of governmental aid programme to bring this to benefits/the real recipients.

Thirdly, the removal of illiteracy among the Santhals is another important task for the enhancement of political participation among them. Due to mass illiteracy they fail to understand, on the one hand, the utility of education and on the other hand, the state of political world surrounding them. Education enriches one's knowledge about the state of political world. But our survey reveals that governmental assistance regarding educational upliftment among the Santhals of Birbhum is not adequate. So, government should enhance more assistance for the educational upliftment among the Santhals of Birbhum. Until and unless the Santhals are made more conscious about the existing political system through the spread of formal and informal education it will not be possible for the state to increase their rate of participation.
Fourthly, the Santhals are still under the clutches of ex-Zamindars and landlords, the rich peasants, Jotedars and Mahajans. They are still being exploited by these feudal classes. They are also forced to remain under the bounded labour system. The Government should therefore take care about the abolition of the bounded labour system. Effective implementation of the land reforms is thus a *sine qua non* for emancipating the Santhals from feudal and semi-feudal exploitation. Security of tenure and land-ownership will also improve their economic condition. This, it is hoped, may increase their self-confidence as political actors. Otherwise it would be very difficult to integrate the Santhals with the mainstream of the national life.