

Tea belt voters 'split', close fight seen

OUR CORRESPONDENT

Siliguri: Leaders across party lines in the tea belt of Dooars and some pockets of North Dinajpur expect a tough contest in the rural elections, particularly in the two lower tiers of gram panchayats and panchayat samitis.

The reason: tea workers and their families have got divided along political lines. This is indicative of a change in the common trend of en bloc voting that has been witnessed in the tea belts so far, particularly in rural polls.

"Earlier, domination of tea trade unions in a tea estate was the key factor that would help political parties, mostly the Left and Congress, to win in seats. It was a general trend that voters would cast votes en bloc in favour of the candidate

fielded by the party that has the strongest trade union base in a tea garden," said a senior trade union leader.

However, during past two-three years, there has been a paradigm shift, opine the leaders.

Unlike those years when one or two parties used to control the tea belt with its trade union fronts, the tea population has started segregating among trade unions and political parties for past few years.

"This is why the BJP, despite not having a strong trade union base, managed to win the Madarhat Assembly seat in 2016. In a similar manner, Trinamul bagged a number of seats in the Dooars, even though, till date, the anti-Trinamul trade unions have a much stronger base in tea belt," the leader added.

Also, during the Left



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regime, the penetration of political parties in tea belts was much less.

"Almost all the issues of tea workers were handled by tea trade unions. Political leaders would visit the gardens only occasionally. How-

ever, after 2011, when Trinamul formed the government, there was a change in the approach as the chief minister herself took up workers' issues, resolved them and made new announcements," said Chandan Bhowmik, a senior

Trinamul leader based in Jalpaiguri.

Also, political workers and not trade union leaders started making forays in the tea belt.

"It is common for both BJP and Trinamul, unlike the Left

and Congress who have always used trade union leaders to consolidate votes in tea gardens. This led to the change in the decade-old trend of block voting," said a senior member of the tea planters' fraternity.

In such a situation, political leaders feel that there would be contest in most of the seats across Dooars and also in the tea belt of North Dinajpur.

"There might be some surprises as it would be wrong to interpret that candidate of the party that has the strongest trade union base will win in the seat. Workers might be supporters of a trade union but given the change in the trend, there is always a chance that they would vote candidate of another political party," added the observer.