Political Leadership among the Tribes in Tripura: A Case Study of the Halam Community

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the pattern of political leadership is vital to understanding the political orientation and behaviour of society. This is more important in the case of the tribes, who are generally categorised as a weaker section of society. In the Tripura state of India, the Halam is one of the most backward Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities in terms of socio-economic status and education. They are basically found in the remote rural areas across Tripura. In this paper, an attempt is made to analyse the emerging pattern of political leadership among the Halam community in Tripura. It attempts to investigate the political awareness and participation of local political leaders, as well as the causes that motivate or deter their participation, if any. The paper also attempts to examine the perception and involvement of Halam political leaders in the development of local rural areas.

Keywords: Awareness, participation, leadership, development, and politics.

The Halam:

In terms of ethnology and language, the Halams belong to the Old Kuki groups (Census of India 1961). The earlier settlement of the Halam is arduous to comprehend, as there are no reliable records or references. Some theories have provided argumentation regarding the migratory route of the Halam tribes, but vary in their interpretations. The Halam tribes, in their traditional belief, traced their origin to a particular site commonly recalled as *'Khurpuitabum,'* which is literally 'a big cave.' Its location is assumed to be the southern parts of China, bordering India and Myanmar. The big cave narrative is almost cognate within the Chin-Mizo-Kuki groups, with minor variations in their interpretations. Apart from Halam, 'the Old Kuki tribes like Aimol, Anal, Chawthe, Chiru, Kolhen, Kom, Lamgang, Purum, Tikhup, and Vaiphei also assert that they are the descendants of a couple who came out of *Khurpui*, meaning a cave' (Lalthangliana 2001:37).

According to S.B.K. Dev Varman, 'the Kukis in Tripura call the Halams as Ranglong' (Dev Varman 1979:35). Shri. Varman further said, 'The Halams are said to have migrated from *'Khurpuitabum,'* a place in the hills just to the north of Manipur' (Dev Varman 1979:35). 'Those of the Kukis, who had submitted to the Tripura *Raja*, came to be known as Halam' (Roychoudhury 1998: 91). According to the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Act, 2022, the Halam community comprises ten sub-tribes. They are one of the most economically and educationally backward communities. They comprised approximately 4.9 per cent of the ST population in Tripura, scattered across the state.

Another interpretation suggests the term 'Halam' as the nomenclature derived from the Tripuri language. 'Ha' means 'earth' and 'Lam' means 'route'. They were believed to have migrated to the present Tripura state, since time immemorial, through the earth route. The title 'Halam' might have been accorded by the then Maharaja of Tripura after their contact with the King of Tripura. Nevertheless, the term 'Halam' and its derivation continue to be a matter of debate and argument. In the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act, 1976, Halam is placed at serial No. 6 in the list of Scheduled Tribes of Tripura.

The Halam Sub-Tribes:

The Halams are divided into several sub-tribes. There is controversy in the number of sub-tribes of the Halam community. They are generally known to be twelve sub-tribes, known as '*Baro Halam*.' As per the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order Amendment Act, 2022, the Halam is categorised into 10 (ten) sub-tribes. They are Bengshel (*Bongcher*), Dup (*Dap*), Kaipeng, Kalai (also *Koloi*), Karbong, Lengui (*Langkei*), Mussum (*Molsom*), Rupini, Sukuchep (*Sakachep*), and Thangachep (the correct spelling is put in brackets). The Kalai and Rupini do not fall under the Halam group. In fact, they are a small independent group of the Tripuri community. 'They had been classified as the Halam group during the 1901 census because their numbers were too small to be classified as an independent group' (http://www.tripura.org.in/halams.htm). At present, the two sub-tribes use and speak the Kokborok language within the community.

Leadership defined:

Leadership may be broadly defined as the relation between an individual and a group, built around some common interest and behaving in a manner directed or determined by him. Political scientists consider leadership as an act of exercising legitimate power because legitimate power is authority. As a sociological concept, leadership is the exercise of power or influence in social collectivities, such as groups, organisations, communities, or nations. Psychologists also consider leadership as an act of influencing others, either by an individual or by a few persons. Therefore, leadership may be defined as the activity of influencing people to cooperate towards some common goal. The leadership position occupied by a person, through active political participation, may be termed political leadership.

The Problem:

The role of leadership in a society has attracted keen intellectual interest and has been the focus of attention of many social scientists in the present century. In fact, leadership is one of the most widely discussed topics nowadays. 'People are captivated by the idea of leadership, and they seek more information on how to become effective leaders' (Northhouse 2019:1). Corporations want individuals who have leadership ability because they believe these individuals provide special assets to their organisations. Academies and institutions throughout the country are making progress in leadership studies. Leadership is a highly sought-after and highly valued commodity. Political Leadership, having no exception, becomes important because one of the significant objectives is to develop proper leadership that will be best suited for the overall development of the country.

'Leadership in politics is a universal trend, but the nature of emerging leadership lies at the root of democratic experiment, development prospects, and direction of changes. In the situation of challenges to democracy, development, and change, being more important, it is a moot question as to who becomes a leader and how he becomes or comes to terms with the traditional social structure with which he interacts and to improve upon through his leadership role' (Mishra 2000:4).

Mishra further argued that, 'due to the growing pluralist nature of society and the emergence of complex social organisations, the leadership phenomenon has acquired greater importance. It has permeated every aspect of our lives,' (Mishra 2000: 74). On all hands today, the cry is for more and better leadership. To find out the leadership patterns suitable for a changing environment requires a constant study of the problems. The study of leadership is the most in-demand in the field of social research. 'An understanding of leadership must have a high place on the agenda of social enquiry' (Mishra 1977:75).

In the context of rural areas, particularly in backward societies, the problem of leadership has gained more importance. The traditional leadership is also changing, and new patterns of leadership are emerging on the scene. There is a growing consciousness that the success or failure of developmental plans depends on the type of leadership available. All these factors raised the necessity of a new type of leadership that is democratic, young, selfless, based on merit and performance.

'Though so much emphasis has been laid on the village leadership, no proper leadership has emerged, and as such, people's participation has remained a dream' (Govt. of India Report 1967: 43-44). The local leadership can be aroused only if a representative and democratic institution is created. So, it is through Panchayati Raj that the whole fabrics of rural societies are intended to be brought about. The fulfilment of this objective requires creative leadership at the rural level, having linkages with political leadership at the higher level of the country.

'Thus, in Indian society, rural society in particular, urgently needs creative leadership to channel the energies of the rural peoples to help the stupendous task of national reconstruction, planning, and development' (Dutta 1989:1). Indeed, the quality of rural leadership determines the success or failure of India's rural development programs. It is, therefore, desirable to inquire what type of leadership is emerging in Indian society, whether it is democratic or not, what role leadership plays in fulfilling the objectives of the government, and how the leaders are linked up with leadership in the higher echelons of the political system of the country.

'It is natural, therefore, to accept that society would throw leaders who could act as a catalytic agent for social change. It is assumed that the villagers can do much for improving their lot if only they have leaders who can bring changes in their lives. In the absence of such leadership, nothing substantial can be achieved' (Mishra 2000:1).

Corresponding to the six basic values of human life, six broad types of leadership are generally experienced by human society. These are: theoretical, economic, aesthetic, social, religious, and political. But in this study, emphasis is given to the last one of the categories, i.e., Political Leadership.

In leadership studies, analysis of the social background of the leaders is of key importance. The social background of the leaders can give a meaningful insight into the genesis of the attitudes, opinions, and ultimate behaviour patterns of the leading participants of the political process. Similarly, the importance of awareness and participation in politics is. To understand a person's pattern of emerging as a political leader, it is necessary to study his/her awareness and participation in politics. Taking note of all these facts, the present study tries to analyse and examine the socio-economic background of the political leaders among the Halam community in Tripura and their level of political awareness and participation in politics. An attempt will also be made to understand their representative role in bringing developmental works and projects to their locality.

Review of Literature:

Many scholars have studied the emerging pattern of political leadership. Let us make a brief review of those studies and their findings.

In *'Emerging pattern of leadership in Panchayat Raj set up in Mysore state,'* K.S. Bhat points out the emergence of younger, educated, economically better off persons, mostly occupied in agriculture, having party membership and participation in community organisation as leaders. The ruling party also seems to be strengthening its position in the rural areas. He considers this emerging leadership to be an important pattern as the 'idea of Constructive Leadership in the public interest is gradually emerging' (Bhat 1967:121-144).[1]

K.D. Gangrade has also made a detailed study on '*Leadership in Rural India: An analysis of some trends,'* and studied the socio-economic backgrounds of both formal and informal leaders in the emergence of leadership. According to him, 'formal leadership emerged from the literati from the higher cast, mostly landless agriculturists and the age group of 20-29. But informal leadership, compared to formal leadership, emerged from the illiterates, from middle and lower castes, and belongs to the groups of owner cultivators from the older age group. In case of both types of leadership, it is male-dominated, having political affiliation, and not restricted to any religion,' (Gangrade 1978:165-178).

In the works of Yogendra Singh (1969), *'Changing Power Structure of Village Communities: A case study of six villages in Eastern U.P.,'* a thorough examination of the nature of the power structure, including the patterns of emergence of traditional leadership, has been conducted. According to him, in the emergence of panchayat leaders, the upper caste continues to hold power. However, increased competition for power has emerged from a section of lower castes and class groups on an organised basis. As a result, the village community is subdivided into factions, political groups, and cliques, and social tensions have mounted.

Avtar Singh (1973), in his study, *'Leadership Pattern and village structure: A study of six Indian villages,'* attempts to delineate the leadership pattern in the locality structure, based on two operational measures, namely position and behaviour.

Another study conducted by Iqbal Narain (1963), entitled *'Democratic Decentralisation: The Idea, the Image, and the Reality,'* says that the new leadership is power-oriented and not development-oriented. Sarpanch and Pradhans have become new monopolists, and there is a political consciousness without a civic consciousness among the leaders. Democratic Decentralisation is simply a plea for broad basing the power structure because, in reality, the power has not percolated beyond the pradhans and sarpanch.

H.S. Dhillon (1955), in his *'Leadership and Groups in a South Indian village,'* finds that the leadership is diffuse and the bases of leadership are of high social status of the family, high economic status, and individual traits like interest in village activities, spare time, advanced age, speaking ability, and hospitality.

A significant contribution was made by C.R. Bada (1977) in his studies on '*Emerging Pattern of Rural Leadership: A study in Gulbarge District.'* In this study, he analysed the socio-economic determinants for the emergence of leadership in the village Panchayat of Gulbarge District. The study highlights some important trends that emerging leaders are from a younger age group, with relatively higher educational attainment, and a better socio-economic group. The study also reveals that traditional factors such as caste and income continue to be significant determinants of leadership.

Besides, Pradipto Roy (1967) made a detailed study on *'Characteristic of Emergent Leaders,'* which provides some broad features that characterise the type of persons who are emerging as leaders in the Indian village. To him, the new leader in village India is a person of high economic status, with higher education, having contacts with extension agencies, from a large family, and having a somewhat secular orientation. Age and caste do not determine the emergence of rural leaders.

'Pattern of Emerging Leadership in Rural India,' by S.N. Mishra (1977), is also an in-depth understanding of the Daurali Gaon Panchayat of Bihar. Mishra attempted to understand the process of emergence of panchayat leaders, their characteristics, and their attitude to role responsibility, and to different values of life. The study underscores the unawareness of villagers about the importance of elections in their first panchayat elections held in 1960. In the next election, the people were conscious of their right, and leaders were elected through a contest. The contested candidate adopted both traditional and modern techniques of election campaigning. The success of a candidate depends on various elements like the philanthropic image of the candidate, the record of good work of the contesting candidate, personal familiarity of the candidate, and the influential family relations. The leadership in Darauli is traditional and based on caste, social, and economic status.

Again, a study was conducted by V.M. Sirsikar (1964) on *'Leadership Patterns in Rural Maharashtra.'* Here, he points out that there is a perceptible trend towards concentration of social, economic, and political power. The democratisation of power has not reached the weaker section of society. The rich peasantry, lawyers was agricultural background and a few businessmen have displayed greater power orientation in the case of the rural leaders.

Finally, K.D. Gangrade (1974) has also contributed an important piece of work on leadership structure and undertaken his study on *'Emerging Pattern of Leadership.'* In this work, he analysed the social hierarchy and its leadership pattern in villages of Delhi. The study has also revealed increasing village faction, renewed caste sentiments, and the practice of unfair means in the village administration. The leadership at the village level is influenced by caste system, age, kinship, territorial affinities, and economic status. It is more power-oriented than development-oriented. Besides the formal leaders, informal leadership is a strong force in village life.

Research gaps:

The overviews that are presented reflect that castes play an important role in understanding emerging leadership patterns. This may be acceptable in most of Indian society. But when the caste system is brought into tribal communities, especially the Halam community, it becomes baseless. The caste system is not found among the tribal community, and the Halam community is no exception.

Again, most of the studies mentioned above are conducted at the National level, state level, and district level. No research has been conducted on the emerging pattern of political leadership among the tribal communities. The present study tries to fill the lacuna in the literature. The study will be conducted on the Halam community in Tripura.

Thus, these research gaps have obviously encouraged the researcher to take the task of bridging the gaps, though not wholly, but at least partly. The researcher attempted to study in detail the emerging pattern of Political Leadership among the Halam community in Tripura.

Objectives:

The following are the broad objectives of this study:

1. To examine the socio-economic bases of the Political Leaders of the Halam community.

2. To examine the level of political awareness and participation of the emerging political leaders.

3. To examine their roles in bringing about development in their locality.

Significance of the Study:

In this study, a modest attempt is made not only to survey briefly the ancient tribal administrations among the Halam in Tripura, but also to sketch the present structures, functions, awareness, and participation in politics. Therefore, it may give a new dimension to the hitherto other studies on emerging leadership patterns in Indian literature. Reviewing the overall picture of the emerging patterns of political leadership among the Halam community in Tripura would throw light on its shortcomings and possible remedies.

The Sample:

The sample for the present study comprised seventy (70) respondents all over Tripura. It is conducted among the Halam political leaders from the entire District. Purposive sampling is used, and an attempt was made to include representatives from all major political parties in Tripura. The selection of respondents was based on the availability of leaders. But an attempt is made to interview the more well-known figures among the local leaders of the party. Deliberate efforts were made, as far as practicable, to select respondents keeping an eye to the different age-groups, sex-groups, educational levels, occupational levels, etc.

Methodology:

The study was conducted in the state of Tripura. The population of the Halam community found across Tripura, and an attempt is therefore made to include the districts – North Tripura, Dhalai, West Tripura, Gomati, Sepahijala, and South Tripura – as the unit of study area. An attempt is made to include all Halam community sub-tribes. Elected (formally contested and elected) and non-elected (formally contested but not elected) leaders were included in the sample. An interview was conducted covering seventy (70) respondents – twenty-four (24) non-elected (formally contested but not elected), and forty-six (46) elected (formally contested and elected) leaders. The respondents are interviewed with the help of a structured interview schedule. Again, as most of the political leaders among the Halam community are at the village level administration, the study is mostly concentrated within the grassroots level.

Sources of Data:

Data for the present study were collected mainly through primary and secondary sources. Primary data has been collected based on the Interview Schedule. Interview schedules are of two types used by the researcher to collect the information, and the researcher interviewed the leaders personally. Schedule I (one) was used to interview the elected leaders, and Schedule II (two) for non-elected leaders. In addition to the structured schedule, the researcher's informal interactions with the officials associated with the panchayat gave valuable information.

To supplement the facts obtained and to make meaningful interpretations of the data ascertained through the interview method, the researcher makes observations and spot verifications. The researcher also attended a few meetings of the panchayat and observed the actual behaviour of the Halam Panchayat Leaders.

Secondary sources were collected through books, journals, government publications, and census reports. Valuable data and information are collected from the library of the Tribal Research and Cultural Institute, Agartala.

Socio-economic bases of the political leaders:

An analysis of the variables, indicating the socio-economic background of the political leaders, has clearly established that the political leaders of the Halam community in Tripura predominantly emerged from upper socioeconomic backgrounds, were mostly Christian, male-dominated, mostly married, had primary-level education, were mainly cultivators, and had a low level of income.

The Halam leaders typically emerged from the upper age group, while the younger generations were given fewer opportunities. However, many young people are also emerging on the scene, and it is expected that soon they will come to the forefront. Most of the Halam leaders are Christian by religion, and the only other religion found among the Halam community is Hindu. The conversion is continuing, and it is obvious that in the near future the community as a whole will profess Christianity. Women are given fewer chances to participate in politics. It is found that most women are illiterate, and they have limited contact with events and situations outside the village. Those of the women leaders interviewed during the fieldwork are participating in politics at the request of a political party. The people had a notion that politics, whose activities are outside the family, should be played by males. The majority of them are cultivators, poor, needy, and busy earning their daily bread.

Thus, it can be inferred that traditional factors, which determined the emerging pattern of political leadership, like age, sex, and marital status, are still playing a significant role in determining political leadership among the Halam community. With the change of time, however, these determinants are losing their importance. But incomes, family backgrounds, and caste, which are also regarded as important factors in determining political leadership, especially in Indian local politics, have no impact on the emerging Halam political leaders. Halam leaders emerged from a cultivator's family having a low family income. Those families with having strong financial background are not interested in participating in politics. Besides, as far as caste is concerned, the Halam community has no caste distinction, and caste has nothing to do with determining the emerging Halam political leaders.

It is clear that there is a lack of consciousness among the Halam community, and that the success or failure of developmental plans depends on the type of leadership available. The people, by and large, do not understand the necessity of new kinds of leadership that are democratic, young, selfless, based on merit and performance.

Figure 01

Socio-economic bases of the Political Leaders

Sl. No	Socio-Economic Indicators	Halam Leaders		Total No.	%
01	**Sex**	Elected Leaders	Non-Elected Leaders		
	Male	34	20	54	77.1
	Female	12	04	16	28.5
02	**Age Group**				
	21-40	22	08	30	42.8
	41-60	21	14	35	50.0
	Above 61	03	02	05	7.1
03	**Religion**				
	Christianity	35	21	56	80.0
	Hinduism	11	03	14	20.0
04	**Qualification**				
	Illiterates	03	01	04	5.7
	Primary level	26	08	34	48.5
	Above Primary below HSLC	17	14	31	44.2
	Above HSLC	00	01	01	1.4
05	**Occupations**				
	Manual Labourer	07	01	08	11.4
	Farmers	27	16	43	61.4
	Business	03	05	08	11.4

| Sl. No	Socio-Economic Indicators	Halam Leaders		Total No.	%
	Others	07	04	11	15.6
06	**Family Income**				
	Rs. 3000-4000	09	06	15	21.4
	Rs. 4001-5000	18	10	27	38.5
	Rs. 5001 and above	19	08	27	39.5
07	**Area of land under Possession**				
	Landless	01	01	02	2.8
	Acre 1-10	24	09	33	47.1
	Acre 11-20	14	10	24	34.2
	Above Acre 21	07	04	11	15.7

Source: As per the data collected during field work

Political Awareness of the Halam leaders:

To understand and analyse the level of political awareness of the Halam elected leaders, questions were asked regarding the names of the local elected village committee members, local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), Member of Parliament (MP), Chief Minister (CM), term of office of locally elected bodies, etc. District-wise awareness of the Halam leaders shows that the Halam leaders in Southern Tripura are lacking. The Halams in the South, Gomati, and Sepahijala Districts are living in remote areas where there is a lack of proper access to the communication system. The following diagram indicates the political awareness of the elected leaders.

Figure 02

District-Wise Political Awareness of the Halam elected leaders in different districts
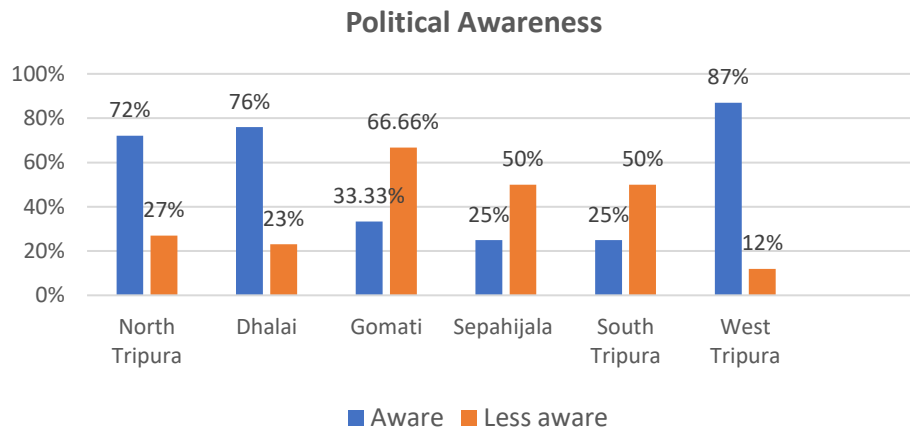
Source: Collected from field work

When political awareness in terms of sex is taken, it is clearly found that male leaders are more aware than their female counterparts. Females within the Halam community have a minimal connection to the outside world, primarily confined to their family and village. Though there is no such clear-cut division of family work between the male and female among the Halam family, women are mostly entrusted with family work and confined only within the village. These gave them less chance to be aware of politics. However, when the analysis of political awareness is made as a whole, it is found that the awareness index is much higher than the unaware leaders.

It is worth mentioning that Halam's political leaders lived in a village. So, to have political awareness is difficult, even if they wish so. They are more engaged in earning their livelihood, as most of them are poor and needy. During fieldwork, the researcher has witnessed that some of the Halam political leaders are not at all aware of the political events and happenings in their locality. When asked, they simply reply that they are not interested and they participated out of a request by a political party, friends, and relatives.

Political participation:

The study on the political participation of leaders indicates that Halam leaders in the West Tripura district were not active in political participation as compared to the Halam leaders in other districts. Halam in West Tripura is a microscopic community, as its population is comparatively very negligible. They are not interested in participating because their participation does not make a difference. The average trends of participation indicate their lack of genuine interest in active participation. The study also found that respondents having educational qualifications up to the primary level have seven times more chances to participate in politics than illiterate political leaders. Also, the respondents having the educational qualification above primary level but below HSLC have five times more chances of political participation than the illiterate respondents. It is also found that many leaders have changed their party affiliation. A large number of them joined politics due to personal choice, but some of them also joined due to a request by the party, relatives, and friends. The following figures indicate the political participation of the Halam elected leaders.

Figure 03

District-wise Political Participation of the Halam Elected Leaders
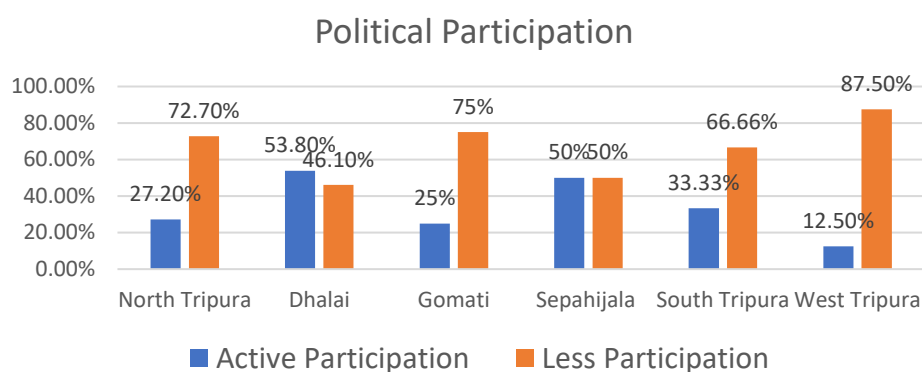
Source: Collected from field work

A separate question was asked to both the elected and non-elected political leaders. When asked whether they had contested any earlier election, it was found that many of them had contested earlier elections. Among those elected leaders who are not contesting earlier elections, the majority of them give reasons for not having had the opportunity to contest the election. When the reason for their failure in the election was asked, it was found that large numbers of them believed the unfair means played by the ruling party as one of the main reasons. Again, many of the non-elected leaders are also interested in contesting the election.

It was also found that there are various benefits obtained by the Halam political leaders through political participation. Many of them are said to have a close affinity with the higher political leaders and gain economic benefits. But many of them said to had no particular benefits. They are very active in party-related activities such as attending election meetings, election procession, and door-to-door canvassing, etc.

Halam leaders and development:

The Halam political leaders are aware of bringing developmental works to their locality. They work for the locality regardless of their poverty. Many of them have also approached the higher authorities (MPs, MLAs, etc.) for more funds, projects, and developmental works. Works and projects such as market complexes, rural road construction, rubber plantation projects, and electricity are implemented in local areas through their active initiative and contribution. But behind all these initiatives taken by the Halam leaders, there are problems of malfunctions and incomplete work in the village area. Most of the non-elected leaders complained about the elected leaders for all these problems.

Figure 04

Opinion regarding the priority needs of their locality
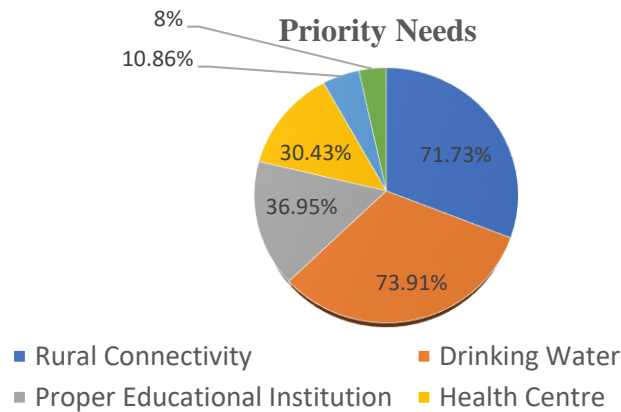
Source: Collected from field work

It is also found from the analysis that the majority of the Halam political leaders have visited their respective areas/wards, and regularly surveyed the local areas, except in the case of a few leaders, especially female leaders. They believed that the local political leaders were responsible for the incomplete works in the locality. Many of the leaders were not satisfied with the funds received from the government for the proper functioning of the local self-government. In addition, they feel that rural road connectivity, drinking water facilities, and good educational institutions are still the urgent needs of the Halam villages (Figure 04).

However, the tribe as a whole is progressing in Tripura, and the Halam community is no exception. Development becomes a matter of concern for each community, and the Halam community, though still the most backward, is also aware of this aspect. But the fact is, the majority of the Halam political leaders are illiterate and poor. They have a limited knowledge of how to approach higher authorities for more funding and developmental projects, which is necessary, especially in the case of Tripura. Moreover, in general, people are not interested in politics and activities related to political affairs. They believe that politics is the source of the malfunction of any governmental activity. Due to insignificant financial involvement at the grassroots level of administration, educated and affluent families hardly participate in politics.

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