



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

From The Margins To The Movement: Helen Lepcha's Role In The Freedom Struggle Of India

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Abstract: Studies on the National Movement which boasts of its huge mass participation fail to mention the contribution of the 'mass' belonging to the marginalised societies. It is a well-known fact that the struggle for independence saw the commitment of people belonging to various communities that also promoted the idea of unity in diversity. However, this diversity is rarely acknowledged. When Gandhi announced the non-cooperation on July 23rd, 1920, he made a special appeal to women to help the cause of Freedom. This movement initiated the entry of women into mainstream politics. The civil disobedience and Quit India movement witnessed large-scale participation of women from all over India, including Darjeeling. This work highlights the contribution of marginalised women from Darjeeling to the National Movement. The work is based on oral narrative, archival records, and secondary data.

Keywords: Women, Natives, Movement, Hill

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender studies in India have gained increasing attention in the last few years. A considerable body of work is dedicated to women's contribution to nation-building, nation's history etc. "If Non-Violence is the law of our being, the future is with women... who can make a more appreciative appeal to the heart than women? ..." ¹ These words of Gandhi exhibit the nature of the freedom struggle that was to permeate the entire Nation. However, the struggles and contributions of women from marginal society remain largely underrepresented on a national scale. No doubt, with the regional histories garnering more attention, we are getting to witness the participation and contribution of women in local movements and local developments. Nonetheless, there has been limited recognition of marginalized women's contribution and involvement in larger more expansive national causes. Their contributions are yet to be integrated into the broader narrative of National studies. Darjeeling is always represented by the pictures of lush green tea gardens and a group of agile, smiling women plucking the tea leaves. This picture represents a significant role played by the women of Darjeeling in supporting their families and the local economy. 'Looking at the constitution of public sphere in hills we can argue that despite the high literacy rate, women could not constitute what Fraser calls the 'counter public'. Despite these observations, we have to concur that, unlike the plains of India, the hill society was characterized by large-scale participation of women in activities outside their domestic sphere, predominantly due to the agrarian structure and plantation economy. This explains the fact that despite all odds, some women were able to reach leadership positions in the freedom struggle.' ²

Women of Bengal in the National Movement

The scope of National Movement studies has widened with the increasing interest in regional participation. "Regional history has thus become a corrective to the earlier tendency to generalize about the sub-continent from the perspective of the Ganges Valley. Due to the spread of nationalism in various states, it increased the interest in regional history. This interest has brought its perspective of the emergence of professional groups who participated in the national movement and at the same time sought for an identity from the past."³ Darjeeling, the area of our study currently lies in the Northern part of Bengal, making it imperative to understand the position of women in the various districts of Bengal and the role they play in the National Movement. These fierce women of Bengal would serve as inspiration to the women of Darjeeling. The Gandhian Movement took its own course in Bengal and empowered the women to take the lead in the National Movement. The national movement and the fight for women's right progressed together. The initial phases of women's participation against British rule were started by Devi Chaudhurani, a fierce dedicated woman who led the village women to fight against the unjust collection of revenue. Women like Queen Shiromani of Kangra led the Chuar Rebellion which basically abolished the British rule for two decades in the area starting from Chandrakona of Medinipur to Bakura, Dhalbhum, and Ghatshila.⁴ The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of educated women, aware of their rights and privileges. They sought to fight against gender discrimination and empower women. This growing awareness was paralleled with the National movement which entered a new phase with the arrival of Gandhi. Organisations like Sakhi samiti bore the dual task of empowering women and leading them in the National Movement. Swarna Kumari Devi and her daughter Hiranmayi Devi ensured notable work in this field. Women of Bengal "organised 'Nari Karma mandir', Mahila Karma Samaj, and the Ladies Organisation Board of the Bengal Provincial Congress to carry out the Non-cooperation Movement. The women actively participated in these organisations, they donated their ornaments, broke their foreign churis(bangles) and vowed that they would never wear these again."⁵ The women in the forefront of Non-cooperation movement in Bengal were Basanti Devi, wife of C.R.Das and her sister in law Urmila Devi who were also arrested several times. Razia Khatun Chaudhurani was one of the earliest Bengali Muslim Woman who actively participated in the Swadeshi movement and only wore saris made of Khadi. Bengal saw an increasing number of women ready to face imprisonment, lathi charge, and death for the sake of freedom.

When revolutionary nationalism swept over India, the women of Bengal took the lead. Not just in Calcutta, women from different parts of Bengal took to revolutionary actions. Matangini Hazra, a peasant widow of 72 years displayed exemplary courage. She led a massive crowd marching to capture the Tamluk (Tamralipta) Thana in the undivided Midnapur District. She was shot by the police and a few down dead, holding the flag of Freedom in her land. Adivasi women of Balurghat participated in the Quit India movement. In Coochbehar students of Sunity Academy took a positive role.⁶ These activities profoundly shaped the young women of Bengal. College going students started to join the revolutionary groups Jugantar. A particular incident reverberates the nerves of Bengali women of twentieth century. Mrs Shanti Ghosh and Mrs Suniti shot a magistrate of Comilla District dead on December 14th 1931. They were charged with life imprisonment. They broke the patriarchal shells to come to the streets and protest. This was largely seen during the civil disobedience movement. The women of Bengal, namely Ashalata Sen and Sarma Gupta organized the Satyagrahi Sevika Dal. This organisation actively participated in the civil disobedience movement and Salt law disobedience movement due which many of them were imprisoned.

The movement which was started by a handful of elite Bengali women transformed into an all-encompassing struggle for freedom. Quit India movement saw an increasing number of women come to the streets and get arrested. Notable among them were Aruna Asaf Ali, Kamala Das Gupta and Hemprabha Majumder. The constructive programme of Gandhi was another initiative to boost the morale of women. The use of charkha, wearing khadi, spinning the wheel to make khadi empowered women and made them an integral part of the National Movement. Gandhi was right when he said that the Swadeshi movement would collapse without the participation of women. Thus, women in Bengal were filled with the spirit of patriotism and Nationalism which was bound to make an impact on the women of Darjeeling

The unwavering spirit of Helen Lepcha

One of the earliest women from Darjeeling who participated in the National Movement was Helen Lepcha. She played a valuable role in advancing the cause of Freedom by helping the likes of Subash Chandra Bose, and Gandhi and mobilising the quiet misty Hills of Darjeeling for a greater cause of Freedom. However, she remains largely unknown beyond the marginalized hill communities. This highlights the challenge of recognizing such women and their contribution to the broader narratives of the history of Freedom Struggle. Helen Lepcha, a pioneer in the field of National Movement, was born in the year 1902 in Namchi Sikkim. Her father Mr. Aachung Lepcha was a prosperous man who later settled in Kharsang, (Kharsang is a Lepcha

word that translates to 'the land of white orchids' later anglicised as Kurseong) where Helen Lepcha grew up. Helen Lepcha received her education from the local Scotts Mission but later dropped out around the year 1916-1917 to join the National Movement.⁷ From the young age of 19 Helen was a trailblazer in leading the people of Darjeeling towards freedom from foreign rule. In the years 1917-1918, a Bengali man who was an ardent follower of Gandhi came to Darjeeling. He delivered a very powerful speech on Nationalism, Patriotism, and the benefits of using Charkha. Helen Lepcha was a part of his audience and was greatly inspired by this. This was the beginning of a long journey. She immediately started the use of Charkha and inspired others to do the same. She left Darjeeling to submerge herself in the land of brewing Nationalism Calcutta. She got herself admitted to the Charkha School started by the granddaughter of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and showed immense capacity in the spirit of charkha weaving. She was awarded the chance to present her charkha woven work in an All-India exhibition in Bihar. During the famine of 1920, in Bihar, she worked in a relief camp and she was praised by the Mahatma himself. The young Congress leader from the hills worked shoulder to shoulder with Rajendra Prasad, Jagjivan Ram etc. in Bihar. During this course, her selfless and undaunting spirit was praised by Gandhi and it was at this time Gandhi invited Helen Lepcha to the Sabarmati Ashram. In the words of Helen Lepcha herself, Gandhi renamed her Savitri Devi as the name 'Helen' held a foreign element to it. Henceforth she would be known as Savitri Didi throughout Bengal and Bihar. Soon she became associated with national leaders and great personalities like Sauhat, Muhammad Ali, C.R.Das, Abdul Kalam Maulana Azad, Urmila Devi, Swarupa Rai, Morajibhai Desai, and Motilal Nehru amongst others. She went around giving speeches to awaken the local people to the call of freedom.⁸ Savitri Devi was not bound to the hills alone. She was well known in areas outside Darjeeling. She was revered as a prominent congresswoman in places like Patna, Dana, Bakipur, Jharia koila khani, etc. In the year 1921, she participated in the huge non-operation mass gathering held in the Mohammad Ali Park. Here, she had the opportunity to listen to National leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, CR Das, Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad, Smt Urmila Devi, Smt Swaroop Rani, etc.⁹ Highly inspired by this event she went back to the district of Darjeeling and decided to launch the Swadeshi, Charkha, and Non-Co-operation movement. She is even said to have gathered volunteers and gone door to door asking people to boycott foreign goods and started weaving the charkha. The natives were greatly inspired by her work, she soon earned the name 'saili didi' in the Hills. Her moves were now closely monitored by the British Government and as she started to gain more prominence amongst the Nationalists a warrant was issued by the British Government to have her arrested. Despite the constant threat of the British Government, Savitri Devi continued her selfless work to achieve her goal of independence. She was a force to reckon with in the Hills and inspired many men and women who would later follow in her footsteps. Thus, it is important to note here that the mass participation in the freedom struggle in Darjeeling progressed alongside the broader national struggle in India. The region's smaller population should not diminish the significance of their contribution.

She led a procession shouting slogans against the British Raj which resulted in a lathi charge, and police firing. She along with E. Ahmed and 12 Gorkha volunteers were arrested on 30th January 1922 in Siliguri for boycott of foreign goods and burning them.¹⁰ The arrest of these leaders led to widespread protests in North Bengal. Savitri Devi was proven guilty, declared a traitor, and sentenced to three months of rigorous imprisonment. After her release from jail¹¹, Savitri Devi was kept under house arrest and she was barred from leaving Kurseong for a period of three years. She however continued her activities in secret. Savitri Devi did not quit and fought till the end for the independence of her beloved country.

The year 1925 was significant in Darjeeling because the beloved freedom fighter Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das fell seriously ill and left for his heavenly abode. He had previously come to Darjeeling on many occasions and was instrumental in spreading the ideas of Swadeshi and boycott among the Hill people. He greatly inspired Dal Bahadur Giri, Savitri Devi, and Narbir Lama who led the freedom struggle in Darjeeling. When he fell ill, he came to Darjeeling to recuperate. In the same year, CR Das wrote a letter to Gandhi asking him to visit Darjeeling while he was on a tour in Bengal. "...you are under my jurisdiction and I am the chairman of the reception committee...you have to visit Darjeeling."¹² Mahatma Gandhi arrived in Darjeeling on 4th June 1925. They met with several Congress workers and one of them was Savitri Devi. It was during this meeting that Gandhi got upset with Savitri Devi as she was decked up in gold ornaments and asked her to live a simple life. Savitri Devi after this significant meeting donated all her ornaments to the Tilak Swaraj Fund. Savitri Devi started working with other congress members and collected funds for the Tilak Swaraj funds. She is known to have led large procession in the Hills and became the first woman to be elected as the Municipal Commissioner of Kharsang Municipality.¹³

With the commencement of the year, 1930s Savitri Devi along with other Congress members participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement with full vigour. She recognised the value of mass movement and mobilised a huge number of people in the district of Darjeeling. For Savitri Devi the Mahatma was a man of

foresight and saw in women the great qualities of head and heart, patience endurance, and capacity to sacrifice and suffer. He perceived the dormant potentialities of women and awakened them to rise up to the occasion. He made an impact in the hill politics for the confidential files of the authorities noted that there was a great deal of excitement among a section of the hill men and women.¹⁴ Savitri Devi's role in helping Subhash Chandra Bose is commendable. The year 1939 marked the beginning of the House arrest of Subhash Chandra Bose, incidentally in Gidde Pahar Kharsang, home to Savitri Devi. It is said that Netaji, during his stay in Gidde Pahar wrote many important political letters and also wrote letters to his wife Emile. However, since he was under house arrest and under vigilant eyes of the British Government, he needed a trusted person to deliver his messages to the country and outside. It was here that Savitri Devi went beyond her means to make sure that Subash Chandra Bose remained connected with the freedom struggle. She used to wrap secret letters in the bread served to Netaji for breakfast. According to popular opinion the plan of Netaji's escape to Europe via Kabul was hatched in Gidde Pahar. The Pathani dress and other items necessary for Netaji's disguise were all organized in Kurseong.¹⁵ Savitri Devi might have played a vital role in Netaji's European escape. Due to the loss/unavailability of documents, this has not been proved yet but the local narratives and secondary sources suggest that 'saili didi' helped Netaji escape.¹⁶ Savitri Devi was one of the earliest women who broke barriers, showed immense courage, and bravely fought against colonial rule. Besides her dedication to the Nation's independence, she was also a social worker. She continued her work after her independence. She was elected as the Municipality Chairman twice. She was also a member of the Sherpa Association, District Congress, Anjuman Islamia, and Lepcha Association. She worked as a Mandal of the Kurseong Municipality till the end of her life. She is one of the many women who got recognition from the Government. It is a well-known fact that she was awarded a Tamra Patra and Swatantrata Senani Samman Patra on 15th August 1972, twenty-five years after Indian Independence. On June 1st, 1958 Savitri Devi was awarded the Tribal Headman of the District by the Government of West Bengal.¹⁷ She left for her heavenly abode on 18th August 1980.

Conclusion

The studies on National movement should be more inclusive of the contribution of women in general and marginal women in particular. The popular belief that the marginal people from the District of Darjeeling were mute spectators to the national movement should be reconsidered. Darjeeling like the rest of India witnessed the participation of women in their own capacities. The women belonging to various tribes and ethnicities came together and challenged the colonial rule. The women of Darjeeling are not merely smiling faces plucking tea leaves. They have shown considerable spirit in the face of nationalism. The study shows that women like Savitri Devi (belonging to the Lepcha tribe), and Putalimaya Devi Lama (belonging to the Tamang tribe) were able to come to positions of leadership and raise their voices against patriarchy and colonial rule. To be able to lead the national movement in a marginal society, and remain connected with leaders like Gandhi and Nehru at such young ages, while living in areas which was not easily accessible is truly commendable. These women reflect the capabilities and potential of hill women. The organisations like Mahila Samiti, Khadi community, Harijan school, Mahila Pathashala were all initiatives taken by such women during British rule. The narration of women's support to Gandhi in a small village like Kalej Valley Tea Estate suggests that similar events might have occurred in other areas of rural Darjeeling. It is crucial to record the sacrifices and contributions of these women living in remote hills, failing which, the study on national movement will remain incomplete.

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