

# Women's Untold Stories in Gorkhaland Movement (2007-2017)

DR. PRITI GHATANI

*Dept Of Political Science, Rani Birla Girls' College, Kolkata*

*Abstract— Demand for a separate state within the Indian Federal state has been a long on-going struggle in the hills of Darjeeling & Kalimpong district and also the Doars region of Jalpaiguri District. It was supported by the people from all the economic sections of the society irrespective of the gender. Under the leadership of Subash Ghising and Bimal Gurung people participated in the movement sacrificing their present for a better future. Women participation was not less than men though the mainstream historians, research scholar and the political parties of hills failed to record these as evidences. Women's participation in the politics of Bimal Gurung led struggle was highly witnessed in the streets of hills, from morning till night, supporting the demand for separate state and ready to sacrifice their lives. They participated in all the activities called by the political party, such as hunger strikes, general strikes, picketing, deputation to the administration, whenever the leadership demanded. Women from all sphere of life participated in the struggle but when it came power politics, gender bias was witnessed, which was deeply rooted in the patriarchal psyche of the Indian culture that women are not capable of power politics. Women in the demand for Gorkhaland were not given their dues for their selfless contribution due to gender biasness in the society.*

*Indexed Terms— Participation, Women, struggle, power politics, gender bias, patriarchy*

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on field work for my research, where I meet women from different spears of the society to assess 'Women in the demand for the separate state of Gorkhaland' in Darjeeling and Kalimpong District. A sample question was distributed and one hundred and forty-five women were ready to respond to the questionnaire, but eight women during survey narrated the oral history on the role of women in the GJMM (Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha) movement which the main stream historians and academician failed to record. Their participation though acknowledged verbally by Bimal Gurung and

other male leaders but not documented. So we thought it worthwhile to preserve their contribution as a case study of women, both leaders and cadres in my research. How women came to the movement? What did they do? What types of role are played by them? Is their contribution in the Movement recognized? What did they achieve through the Movement? What are they doing at present? Women from different castes, class, religion, economic, educational, backgrounds came forward to support the demand for a separate State. GJMNM, (Gorkha Jan Mukti Nari Morcha) the women's wing of GJMM (Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha) is a frontal organization since the party was founded in October 2007. Few women were not willing to disclose their names and addresses, so respecting their requests the names and address were changed, but prominent leaders were confident and wanted their narratives to be documented.

Lakpa Tshering Bhutia, was a member of GJMNM and a leader of a Nari Morcha in a village in Darjeeling. When asked about her experience and her participation in the movement for a separate State, she said that, women had actively participated in all the political activities organized by GJMM. They were always in the forefront, faced *lathis* and bullet, participated in processions, picketing and hunger strikes organized by the party. Women volunteers who went on for hunger strikes had to face many health-related problems, some later suffered from kidney problems and gynecological problems. It also affected their reproductive functions which resulted in divorce in a few cases. Bimal Gurung tried to help those women by providing medical assistance, they were sent to Chennai for medical treatment. They were ready to sacrifice their lives and their families for the cause of a separate state.

Evident that women had selflessly participated in the movement but when GTA was concluded and the movement temporarily came to an end, women had to

return to their daily lives. Though they fought alongside men for the cause of separate state, lack of unity among themselves and “political immaturity” became the biggest hurdle when it came to women getting equal seats in the GTA Sabha.

Neeta Tiruwa, was an active member of GJMNM, and because of her involvement in the movement she got selected as the party candidate for Municipality Councillor Election 2011 and won uncontested.

When asked about her experience and participation in the Movement for a Separate State, she narrated, ‘I had been inspired to see people struggling for life, voluntarily deciding to fast unto death or go on hunger strike which were all nonviolent activities for the cause a separate state.’

‘Not knowing much about the strategy of the Movement I got carried away to see activists in pain and tried to help them with medical care, and nursing them back to health’.

Later in 2011 when Municipality Elections was declared, she said that, ‘I was not interested in the post of a Municipality Councilor, but the people of my locality wanted me, I was new to politics, and didn’t know anything about it’. As a Councilor ‘while executing the development projects for my ward I always consulted the ward committee formed by the GJMM party. Being new in politics she faced difficulties, like the youth wing of the party sometimes went out of control, trying to supersede her while distributing contracts for projects like road repair, protection wall, sewage, drainage etc. ‘All the activities within the party and the office work of the Municipality were under the control of Bimal Gurung’.

Tiruwa, had won the Municipality elections uncontested. However, the fact highlighted by her was that Gurung had control over the municipality and its activities through the central committee of the party which consisted mostly of men.

Rinzila Doma Bhutia, when asked about her experience and participation in the movement for a separate state, she narrated how, with other women of the movement, she participated in the activities like,

picketing during strike, rally/procession, and deputation to the administration for their demands, *jail bhara andolan*, attending meetings by the party in different places in the district of Darjeeling.

She said, ‘I even contributed to providing the vehicle for attending meetings. Sometimes it was fun and at other times very tiring, traveling a long distance. Since morning to night, we were on roads during the strike, forgetting about the household and leaving our family behind. Days passed, and the movement came to an end with the signing of GTA. Then, I returned to my normal household life which I felt had been neglected due to my involvement in the movement.’ Women of Darjeeling hills to on the streets not for women’s rights’, but for a separate state.

Bhutia, like other women participated in different activities of the Morcha mentally, physically and financially. Days and nights were spent on the road with other women forgetting personal life and family. She sacrificed her present for better and bright tomorrow.

Mrinalini Subba, she was an active member of GJMNM, Nari Morcha branch committee, Kurseong proposed her name for the Municipality Councilor Election (2011) and she won the election uncontested. When asked about her experience and participation in the Movement for the separate State, she said, ‘I always had a desire to do something for the community which was facing an identity crisis for a long time. When the movement started by Subash Ghishing, I was too young to understand and participate in the movement, but when it started again in 2007 under Bimal Gurung, I, participated wholeheartedly, forgetting everything even family, and children. The only thing that was in my mind was how to achieve to the demand for a separate state’. GJMM party always showed respect to the women members, Nari Morcha was always in the forefront. But they never questioned the decision taken by the parent body. Women’s participation was in good numbers as a result of which every activity was a successful one’.

As an active member of the party she won the Municipality Elections uncontested, but her involvement in the movement was not merely for the

seat but was for the separate state. Women provided majority support to the party which was very essential, for the government.

Subba, always followed the order of the leaders, like other women. She was very categorical that her participation was not for any seat of power, but for the realization of a Gorkhaland.

Jolly Rai, when asked about her experience and participation in the movement for a separate State, she narrated, 'I got influenced by the demand for a separate state led by the GNLF Gorkha National Liberation Front). As a young girl, not mature enough to understand politics, I happily joined in the processions with elder women of the locality. But in the GJMM led movement, the pain of the people who were participating in the hunger strikes, made me decide not just to be a spectator anymore but to be a soldier of the movement, leading and motivating the women belonging to my locality.'

Rai, was simply a foot soldier who obeyed the order of the party leaders. She had joined the movement, not with a desire to enjoy an equal status with men in politics. Her role had primarily been influencing the masses and not to participate in the decision making within the party.

Bandana Yonzon, Co-Ordinator-General Secretary, Kalimpong GJMNM, when asked about her experience and participation in the movement she said: "My husband was a government employee in the Government of Sikkim, and during her stay in Sikkim I always felt the difference in the facilities enjoyed by the people of Sikkim and of Darjeeling District. While travelling towards the plains crossing the Teesta river, I was frequently asked if I was from Nepal, sometimes was even asked to show my passport, which made me feel humiliated, as I was being asked to prove my citizenship in my own country, where Gorkha soldiers had sacrificed their lives safeguarding the nation."

She narrated, "In 2007 Prashant Tamang gave an opportunity to all the Nepalis speaking people in India to get united, for their own identity. Subash Ghishing instead of supporting Prasant Tamang, criticized him but Bimal Gurung supported him and with this support he won the Indian Idol Contest in 2007. It was a major

turning point in the political sphere of the hills, a new party GJMM was formed as he could address the political identity crisis problems faced by the Nepalis, and movement for a separate state was led by Bimal Gurung (in 2007) in a nonviolent way".

Bandana, was the founding member of the Nari Morcha Kalimpong and a participant of the first hunger strike held in Feb 2008. 'I joined the movement for the achievement of separate state. When hunger strike was called for the first time, as a mark of protest, I had voluntarily participated with other women members, not even aware of what exactly it was. When I was asked to sign the bond then I realized how serious things were. I had gone rather casually to participate without knowing the significance.'

The hunger strike continued for seven days and seven nights, the condition of the volunteers was critical, ready to die for the community and people. Administration, police and the doctors asked them to withdraw hunger strike as their health condition was deteriorating day by day, but they refused as they had come by their own will and were even ready to sacrifice their lives for the cause. On the eighth day, the hunger strike was withdrawn by the party, all the volunteers were hospitalized, and after two to three days of observation and treatment they were ultimately discharged.

"I had to stay back for eight more days as several medical problems had arisen and my treatment continued for six months as I had developed kidney infection, I had to go to Vellore for further medical treatment. The Party tried to provide financial assistance for me, but I refused to take help. All the volunteers of the hunger strike are facing some health problems even till today", Bandana added.

Keeping in view her contribution to the party, when the movement temporarily settled with the GTA agreement 'I, was invited to be *Sabha Sadh* (people's representative in GTA), but I refused and expressed my desire to remain only member of the organization'. Yonzon, was a prominent activist of the party, she was the founding member of Nari Morcha, Kalimpong, and participated in the first hunger strike, a dynamic leader, a good orator, who could mobilize the masses through her speech, had faced lathi and had a number

of false charges booked against her, and she was even arrested. However, she had never wanted to reap benefits from her role in the activities of the party. Here is an example of selfless devotion to the party and the cause of a separate Gorkhaland.

Nanita Gautam, was an active member of the GJMNM. After the formation of GTA she resigned from the GJMNM and joined Trinamool Congress Mahaila Congress as the Hill president. However, as differences of opinion arose with the Minister, In-Charge Hills Affairs, Gautam Deb on certain issues she resigned again and decided to stay away from politics for some time. On a request made by Bimal Gurung she joined GJMNM for the second time.

She was the founder coordinator and president of GJMNM Kalimpong and core committee member of Nari Morcha. The first core committee member consists of seven members, Asha Gurung (Darjeeling), Nanita Gautam (Kalimpong), Jyoti Subba (Doors) Urmila Rumba (Darjeeling), Prava Chettri (Kurseong) Mala Subba (Mirik), Sikha Rai (Siliguri).

When asked about her experiences and participation in the Movement for a separate State, she narrated 'despite of holding a vital post in the organization my role was limited, to organizing meetings, distribution of portfolios, distribution of work load, report collection, door to door visit and motivating people to participate in processions and other activities of the party.' Nari Morcha was only a medium between the central committee and the sub-divisional committees. Their role was only implementation of the decision, following the order of the President of the party.

She claimed that women had participated mentally, physically and financially, women were always in the fore front of the processions. In fact, in any kind of activities women's presence was given a lot of importance. They turned up in good numbers, even in candlelight processions which was organized during night. Also, women with knowledge of medicine formed a medical group to give medical assistance to the activists of the movement. Her leadership was not only limited to the Nari Morcha but also to the parent body GJMM. When the first hunger strike began in February 2008, in Kalimpong, nine women voluntarily took the lead. Whereas, only one man had participated,

that too for a day. Nari Morcha members were Bandana, Yonzon, Devika Chettri. Kamal Rai, Daya Gazmer, Roshni Singh, Latika Sinha, Munna Pourel, Babita Chaurasia, Nanita Gautam, among men was Indra Tamang.

As an active member and a leader of the party GJMNM, she said: 'I could not give time to my family which affected the studies of my children. There was financial crisis as I had to travel all the time to different places to organize meetings, which sometimes created misunderstandings in the family, which almost took me to the verge of depression. After sacrificing everything and facing so many problems in life, when the GTA agreement was signed, I decided to step back from politics: since a settlement or agreement was not our goal. I, felt that the leaders of the party had got diverted from the demand for a separate state. I resigned from the post and joined the TMC where I, held the post of TMC Mahila Congress President for some time. I, thought, that if it is only development of the Hills and not Gorkhaland, then why not do it directly.' Through the TMC which runs the government 'I, was impressed by the strong organization of TMC which worked from grassroots to the higher level.' As an activist she was charged with many civil and criminal cases. She felt the TMC could help her fight these cases. However she was disappointed: when, 'I found the TMC practicing discrimination between the hills and the plains regarding policies of development, it hurt my sentiments and I decided to quit from the party.'

Gautam, an active member of GJMNM Kalimpong, had served the party with dedication and sacrifice. She had the capability to roar like a lioness, her speeches were very impressive and gave the motivation and encouragement to the public. Yet she did not play much of a role in the decision making of the party, which was entirely in the hands of Bimal Gurung.

However, as an activist, she was not looking for equality between men and women in political position. Her major aim was not to secure a position of political power but achieve Gorkhaland, and in its absence, bringing about development in the hills.

Sarita Rai, an active member of GJMNM. Since 2016 assembly she is the MLA of Kalimpong till date.

When asked about her experience and participation in the Movement for a separate State, she narrated that, 'initially I, was an active member of the teacher's organization, GSTO,(Gorkha Secondary teachers Organization) and became the central committee member of the party, got promoted as the Kalimpong sub division party President in 2008 for a period of three years.'

## II. AFTERMATH OF THE MOVEMENT

After the formation of GTA elections were held followed by M. P, M.LA, G.T.A, and Municipality Elections. All the candidates supported by the party won the election. People within the party and outside the party thought that it was only an interim set up like DGHC, but the members of the study forum believed it was a stepping stone towards a separate State. But the GTA could not get absolute power in its hands. According to the agreement fifty-two departments were to be transferred which eventually was not done, even the budget allotted was not transferred. This created tense relations between the party and West Bengal government. The leaders decided to give up GTA and start their demand for a separate State, and the date to burn the GTA agreement was finalized.

Unfortunately, in 2017 the policy of the government for imposition of Bengali language in all schools in West Bengal, became a sentimental issue to the people of Darjeeling, and helped the Movement to flare up. People from all sections came forward to support the demand for a separate State. When the demands were not fulfilled, the youth got frustrated and called for hunger strike, and the condition of those activists became very critical. After an appeal was made by the Home Minister, to withdraw the strike and hunger strike, only the hunger strike was withdrawn but not the general strike which continued for a hundred and five days .It was only in Kalimpong the leaders were on the road with the public, they never went underground. Speeches were delivered by the leaders to motivate the public, who were agitated, aggressive and frustrated with the policy of the government. When all the central committee leaders went underground there was sign of breakdown of the party The credit goes to the masses who rose to the occasion sacrificed their lives, twelve people becoming *shaheeds* (martyrs). Schools, colleges, offices, shops

were all shut down in the hills which affected lives of people of all class, age, religion, cast, ethnicity residing in the hills. Several meetings were organized by different political parties and by the West Bengal government as an initiative to establish peace and normalcy in the hills, but peace and normalcy in the hills will be established only after the demand for separate state is fulfilled. It was a people's movement, but due to leadership failure, the strike was called off without any fruitful result, but for a renewal agreement for GTA2 with a nominated person by the West Bengal Government.

Women's organization, was one of the most vital and powerful frontal organizations of the party. Women had joined the movement in masses, but those women were not capable of leading the party. Women who had the qualifications and experience preferred to stay away from politics. Only a handful of women who were qualified, capable and experienced had come forward. The Movement was in the hands of women, who could only shout slogans, participate in demonstration, *gheraoes*, and cooking. At times they also played the role of spy, messenger, delivery women, as they could move freely without being noticed by the intelligence and the police. Nevertheless, they gave the mass base to the movement which a few handful educated women could not do.

Sarita says: 'the domination of men in the politics of the hills continued in decision making. It is necessary for the party and leaders to realize that involvement of women in politics is necessary, party cadres both men and women need to be trained by the experienced resource people.'

She suggests: 'whenever a permanent solution is established in the hills, women should be given 50% reservation of seats, as they are sincere, dedicated courage's, selfless, hardworking, and at present they are also educated.'

## III. CONCLUSION

From the case study of women in the (2007-2017) Gorkhaland Movement, it is quite evident that women were involved in various activities, sacrificed their present for a better future at the cost, of their health,

family life, children and the most importantly their own selves. Women's selfless participation took the movement to the zenith of success. But when it came to power sharing women were not given a chance to prove their ability. Women had the ability to lead the movement from the front, had the selflessness and grit to sacrifice their personal interests for the greater interest of Gorkhaland and yet their presence was not seen much in the electoral or administrative politics of the region. Women should be made equal partners in the power share or else after the movement there is possibility of revolt by the women within the party for women right and equality.

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- [7] Nanita Gautam GJMM core committee and later TMC Mahila congress president
- [8] Sarita Rai, GJMM Kalimpong subdivision President and MLA Kalimpong.