

CHAPTER -4
RESPONSE OF THE HILL WOMEN TO THE POLITICAL AND
ECONOMIC PRESSURE ALONG WITH EDUCATIONAL CHANGES IN
THE COLONIAL SOCIETY AMIDST THE ECHOES OF NATIONALISM.
(1900- 1947)

4.1. RESPONSE OF THE HILL WOMEN TO THE POLITICAL CHANGES:

The mainstream Indian nationalism had practically no affect on Darjeeling hills till the dawn of the twentieth century. For the British these allured people were to be kept in isolation and excitement of and kind was to be put down firmly.¹ The hill people in turn were steadfast in their loyalty and devotion. Such an emotional attitude can be traced to a variety of factors namely Darjeeling serving as the Eastern Zone for the recruitment of the 'brave' Gurkhas and the migrant families.² Here the political consciousness was low due to the absence of a middle class leadership. Education had not reached the entire society. Yet in spite of all these drawbacks the lacuna created by the colonial rule due to the construct of the superior self to the inferior other was fragile and created a lot of discomfort. It led to a gradual search for a retrospective view of the Raj among a few men and women. They blazed a trail for the others to follow on the eve of Indian independence by responding to the various forces of colonialism, nationalism, racism and the struggle for equality during the penultimate phase of British colonialism in India. An analysis of the changing identity of the natives, women in particular can be examined under three headings – the political, economic and educational changes during the period 1900-47 that resulted in the indigenisation of the national construct of the hill women.

In this period of study it can be clearly seen that some of the natives were deceived by the colonial façade of special interest shown by the authorities towards Darjeeling. They had very cleverly demarcated the district from the rest of the Bengal Province by placing it under a separate system of administration. Darjeeling hill areas including Kurseong and later Kalimpong Police Circle belonged to the non- regulation scheme before 1861 and it was the Governor-General who possessed legislative powers for areas under it. The Council Act of 1861 blurred the distinction between regulated and non- regulated provinces when the Governor- General ceased to exercise such powers. In 1870

Darjeeling was placed under direct responsibility of the Governor-General and the District Magistrate was given the jurisdiction. All less advanced districts of different Indian provinces, Darjeeling being one of them was placed under this system and also brought under the purview of the Laws Local Extent Act known as Scheduled District Act. The Act of 1935 declared Darjeeling as 'partially excluded area' kept in isolation from other parts of British India by having separate administrative arrangements. The British worked hard for the general improvement of Darjeeling compared to other regulated districts of Bengal and thus the hill people were impressed by all these new measures, which actually had imperial interest. The special treatment meted out to Darjeeling induced the people to think that their ultimate security rested in separate administrative arrangements made for them under colonial rule. The Hill men's Association led by men like Mr. A. Tshering was in favour of this policy of exclusion from Bengal. While another group led by Mr. Prem Singh and supported by the Kalimpong Samiti, the Gorkhas of Darjeeling and People's Association of Darjeeling demanded the inclusion of the District in Bengal. This was the beginning of a political movement in Darjeeling in 1920.³

In this nascent political development the role of women of the hills was very limited as there existed gender disparity in terms of literacy in the hills. They refused to be dragged into the politics of the province or the Indian freedom struggle with which they had little or no concern at all. Even against such social disapproval it is interesting to note that there were a few women bold enough to join politics. This was due to the wind of changes coming in such as the growth of the press and population. The population of females was 17,6478 and the male population was 199891 in 1941.⁴ The District Gazetteer records the ratio between the female and the male population as being more or less constant. It was 92 females: 100 males in Darjeeling Sadar; 93 females:100 males in Kurseong and 91 females: 100 males in Kalimpong in 1941. Among them a small section of the hill people were dissatisfied with the growing negligence of the colonial authorities. They decided to join the Nationalist call for freedom. They were inspired by some of the Indian leaders like C. R. Das, Subash Chandra Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi who visited Darjeeling. For the hill women their involvement in politics challenged the Indian and colonial stereotypes that identified

respectable women with privacy and domesticity. The British had hoped that the purdah related values would inhibit women from breaking colonial orders, but the Indian women joined the mainstream nationalism. The phenomenal contribution of charismatic leaders that included Mahatma Gandhi and Subash Chandra Bose in stimulating and motivating women's mobilization in political activities was a great factor which cut across barriers of class, caste, province and gender. In the hills the early Congress leaders like Dal Bahadur Giri, Pratiman Lama, Anjam Giri, Man Bahadur Giri, Shiva Mangal Sharma, Jagdish Sharma, Surya Poddar and Gaga Tshering vowed to fight for freedom and faced lathi charge, imprisonment and litigation of property. They organized hunger strikes and other non-cooperation activities against the British.⁵ Hill women also featured among the leaders and organizers in spite of ostracism in abortive attempts to reform society and to help the Congress party. Pioneers amongst them included Helen Lepcha or Savitridevi Lepcha, Putlidevi Poddar and Mayadevi Chettri. Women's participation in this political movement was viewed with disapproval as it was a complete contrast to the loyal docile placement given to the hill women within the colonial framework. As a result majority of the conservative families completely disassociated themselves from such political activities. On the other hand in other parts of Bengal, women's participation in the Gandhian movement was looked upon as antithetical to social responsibility or the Sanskritization process by the socially conservative nationalist families.⁶ In fact the deployment of women of certain categories of the nationalist agitation seemed to have been a deliberate part of the Congress strategy to minimize the intensity of police brutalities upon the respectable '*bhadramahilas*'.

Foremost among the women leaders was Savitridevi Lepcha called 'Helen' for her sacrificing spirit by Gandhiji. She was born in 1903 and educated at Kurseong Scottish Mission School. In 1916 she joined the freedom struggle at an early age sacrificing her academic pursuits. 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. 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, Motilal Nehru amongst others. She went around giving speeches to awaken the local people to the call of freedom.⁷ Savitridevi was inspired by the nationalist discourse like the Bengali women who considered participation in politics as their religious duty. For nationalist leaders like Mahatma Gandhi emphasized the nationalist discourse of comparing the country to the Mother Goddess demanding sacrifice and the female participation as the release of shakti.

As a result when Mahatma Gandhi gave the call for nation wide Civil disobedience Savitridevi along with the others took part in the Gandhian movement in Darjeeling facing police atrocities and firing.⁸ She worked with the Congress leader in the hills like Dal Bahadur Giri, Anjam Giri, Man Bahadur Giri, Gaga Tshering and Pritam Singh Lama. For Savitridevi the Mahatma was a man of foresight and saw in women the great qualities of head and heart, patience endurance, 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. The British authorities alerted the local officers that any police action should be cautiously planned by getting in touch with the movement so as to contain the present assault and rioting. As the British were apprehensive of a serious danger they wanted to gag the situation.⁹ In view of such an official stand taken by the British, Savitridevi was arrested on the 30th of January 1922 in Siliguri in the house of Siva Mangal Subba. She spent her time in jail by carrying on political work along with the several duties of a prisoner. She was well informed about all political events in the district especially about the visit of Gandhiji to Darjeeling in 1925 and about his meeting with the great nationalist leader C.R. Das, helped to increase local participation in the Indian freedom movement. After Savitridevi's release from jail she worked fearlessly as an active member of the Congress party. In 1936, she became the first lady commissioner from Kurseong sub-division. In 1939 when Subash Chandra Bose was placed under house arrest at Giddhapahar it was Savitridevi who provided him with food and information.¹⁰ Her active role in the Congress party earned her the praise of hill leaders like the veteran Dambar Singh Gurung the founder of the Gorkha League. She worked without any selfish motive.¹¹

Similarly the visit of Gandhiji to Darjeeling served as a source of inspiration to Surya Prasad K.P.Poddar and his friends in 1925, in Kurseong. They became active in the anti-British movement. The Congress Party at Kurseong needed female members to hoodwink the police and carry secret messages. Surya's friend Harish introduced him to a fearless Tamang girl Putalidevi Lama, the daughter of Madan Lama. She joined the Congress in spite of the family disapproval and social criticism. Other ladies like Hira Pradhan and her niece Chandra Pradhan of Padma Lodge joined Putalidevi. Various social works were taken up to create social and political awareness among the people. A Harijan school was established in the Harijan barrack by Harish and Putalidevi. Night school was formed and they asked the people to give up drinking and bhajans were sung in this school.¹¹ Seven women members including Putalidevi opened up a *Mahila Sanstha, Kaliyan Samaj* for the social upliftment of women and the *Dhinhin Mazdoor Samaj* for the workers.¹²

On the 26th of January 1938 a Congress meeting was held presided by S.J.Mangal Singh Lama. The aims and objectives of the Congress were explained and it ended with the independence pledge.¹³ The entire country was engulfed by the freedom struggle with the Congress pressing for *Purna Swaraj*. With the call for Satyagraha the nationalist leaders like Jatin Das were jailed. In Kurseong the police arrested the Congress leaders including Surya Poddar. Putalidevi took up leadership and in 1938 the Congress spoke out against gambling and when a carnival was organized in a house that promoted gambling the Congress at Kurseong picketed the house.¹⁴ In 1939, when Subash Chandra Bose was kept under house arrest and allowed to come out only for an early morning walk Surya Poddar and his friends passed information to him. Subash Chandra Bose even gave the Congress members of the hills a letter of encouragement and a number of them attended the Ramgarh Congress meeting. Congress in Darjeeling hills opposed the War Fund which was collected by the British and distributed pamphlets criticizing it. Surja Poddar was arrested in a building at Burdawan Road belonging to Haiba Lama and taken to Siliguri. In 1942, the Quit India movement assumed an all India character. Congress leaders were arrested. In Darjeeling Putalidevi was put behind bars. When she was released in 1944, her family did not accept her. It was Surja Prasad Poddar who married her at the Gorkha Library.¹⁵

In Kalimpong David A. Babuni, the wife of Mr. Mohan David joined the Congress along with G.T.Sitling, Sapkota Bajay, Narbahadur Gurung, K.P Gurung and R.K.Sharma. From Kurseong the hills found a fearless leader in Smt. Maya Devi Chettri (born 1921) who was inspired by her husband Dal Bahadur Chettri to educate herself and join politics in spite of numerous family and economic obstacles. She joined the Gorkha League in 1943 and then the mainstream Congress in 1945. On May 12th 1947, during the 19th Conference against the partition of India, Maya Devi Chettri attended it along with Lampa Tshering, Taradevi, Kamal Sharma, M.N.Pradhan, Giv Namgal and D.B.Chettri. She urged the hill women to resist the colonial authorities and fight for freedom.¹⁶ The main Congress body urged the people of Darjeeling to resist the British and was hopeful about the role of the Congress in investigating the special problems of the hill people and seeking solutions for it in the future.¹⁷

By 1929, the hills were under control of the British and their reports mentioned of no mass movements. They however considered the activities of Mr Suraj Narayan Pradhan, Mrs Raj Kumari Pradhan, Swami Sachchiananda of the Arya Samaj as dangerous. The political move was closely watched together with the movement of strangers from Siliguri.¹⁸ While most of the hill people were not in favour of any political change and kept themselves aloof from the freedom struggle, which had reached its peak since the 'Quit India Movement' in 1942, nationwide, there was however concerns among them as to the future of the country once the Second World War was over. Those with good sense were already seeing the last days of the British Raj.¹⁹ Under the new environment the hill peoples' security needed to be ensured and the All India Nepali-Bhutia-Lepcha Association was created called NE-BU-LA. Its tricoloured flag with the Union Jack at the centre signified unity among the hill people and loyalty to the British Government.²⁰

In the uncertain period of 1943 the All India Gurkha League was born which was supported by a large number of men and women from the hills. The active members during its formation numbered 16 from Darjeeling, 19 from Kalimpong, one from Sukhia Pokhri and 18 from Kurseong all were male candidates²¹ as shown in the appendix

number IX. Its working soon had a great impact upon the women and the political development in the colonial and post-colonial period of the hills. Around 2,000 Gurkha men and women attended the inaugural meeting of the League on the 15th of May 1943, at the Rink Cinema Hall, Darjeeling that was presided over by Sardar Bahadur Hanjut Dewan Rai.²¹ The President proclaimed the loyalty of the Gurkhas towards the British and that they must demand their just and legitimate rights firmly and fearlessly. The next speaker Mr. D.S.Gurung said that the aim of the League was to unite the Gorkhas as one organic whole, to preserve their culture and tradition and to establish the political rights of Gurkhas in India and help the Allies in winning the war. Among the women participants a lady speaker Miss Tshering Lhamo spoke on the responsibility of the Gurkha mothers in the upliftment of the Gurkha nation.²² The hill people thus showed their loyalty to the British amidst all political disturbances in the country. The hill Gorkha women followed the developments closely and every political action in the country was discussed by them at social circles or at home. It was this feeling of ethnicity, a search for identity as Gurkhas that led to the gradual political awakening of the men and women in the hills. The resolution passed by the League in 1943, expressed its loyalty to the British once again but showed its insecurity regarding the future of the domiciled Gurkhas in India and this led to the placement of various demands by them in the coming years.²³ They made a demand for full autonomy and representation in their letters to Gandhiji and Jinnah.²⁴

By the year 1946 a clear change had emerged in the stand taken up by the League in supporting the Indian freedom struggle. This change was due to the gradual withdrawal of the British since the Second World War and the pressure of dominion status now becoming popular. The question of complete Indian independence loomed large and clear. So long the Gurkhas had loyally supported the British but now, they felt the need to assert their own identity in free India. As a result 5,000 Gurkha men and women attended a mass meeting on 19th April 1946 at Shillong travelling from various corners of the country including Darjeeling. By now the growing literacy among the hill women had made them conscious of the political changes taking place in India. At this juncture the League announced its recognition of the Indian National Congress and demanded immediate independence of the country from British rule, with the Indian Gurkhas to be

recognized as a minority community in India and disapproved the demand for Pakistan by the Muslim League.²⁵ Thus, political consciousness on constitutional lines was showed by the early Congress and the All India Gurkha League in the hills and both men and women now responded to their call.

The late 1940s was marked by the rise of another political party - the Communist Party of India, which found entry to the hills through the tea belts. A survey of the working class movement prior to the 1940s reveals the fact that the tea gardens workers were unorganized and backward. Women tea garden workers lacked political awareness and thus could not improve their situation through collective action. They bore the colonial burden with great stoicism. The undercurrents of seething dissent among the women workers remained a subverted discourse that was silent at first but eventually broke open in a violent form. They supported the men in organization of labour unions, mass agitation and hartals as the tea gardens became an important site for the interplay of the forces of colonialism versus nationalism with mass scale participation.

4.2. RESPONSE OF THE HILL WOMEN TO THE ECONOMIC CHANGES:

This brings us to the other aspect of our enquiry namely the economic changes in Darjeeling affecting women with special reference to the tea gardens that employed a major section of women workers. The available data of the colonial economy in the twentieth century shows the growth and expansion of the most important agro-industrial unit namely tea in the Darjeeling hills. It occupied a unique position as a major foreign exchange earner, as an enterprise providing employment to 71,070 labourers in 1939 which increased to 73,500 by 1942 in the entire district of which nearly half of the labour force were women in the hill areas.²⁶ Earlier to 1943 the working population consisted of 39% males, 43% females and 18% children. In 1943 the working population saw a decline in the male and increase in the women workers and thus the working population was now made up of 34% male, 49% female and 17% children of the total attendance. In the 142 tea gardens the output was 26,478,500 lbs of black tea and 12, 42,000 lbs green tea in 1942 which increased to 25,559,300 lbs and 2,572,500 respectively in 1943.²⁷

The British justified tea production in Darjeeling as a colony supplying the mother country with raw materials as a result of which there would be a strong tie of common interest and mutual advantages. They calmly assured the world that the tea production would increase the 'wealth and intelligence' of the natives. Here the colonial response can be characterized as one of guilt but they justified their action and went about their task of settling the family in units with low payment. It is only natural that such a colonial policy which placed the burden of production on the shoulders of the unsuspecting workers would in course of time evoke a response just as in the urban areas of Darjeeling.²⁸ Time and again the government confessed that serious trouble was to be expected from the tea gardens as the Planters' Association was an antiquated body with no progressive nature giving low pay over the years and it would be a rue to the government's short sightedness if that continued.²⁹ The Political Department would do well to advise the District authorities to bring to the notice of the planters the need of being more in touch with the labourers and to see that opportunities are not given to them to be willing tools at the hands of the numerous agents of Mr. Gandhi and his followers. As a result the District Commissioner Mr. S. W. Goods went on tours to Nagari and Sukhia to meet the garden sardars to enlist their cooperation. The planters were to be informed to check the tea workers as they were willing and ready materials if not suppressed in time. They took the help of one Nepalese pleader Mr. Hari Prasad Pradhan to form an Association among the tea coolies in order to contain the Gandhian movement but the meeting at the Town Hall, Darjeeling was interrupted by a fire brand from Kalimpong, the Congress leader Mr. Dal Bahadur who shouted "Gandhi ki jai." A hartal took place on the 3rd of May 1921 in the hills. The authorities regarded such incidents as detrimental to the prestige of the Raj. Moreover, it would lead to the formation of leaders among the natives who would openly defy the British authority.³⁰

Until 1929 the British considered the tea workers as '*ignorant and content people*' who could be easily worked up given the slightest pretext. The government decided that as soon as they heard of any mischievous propaganda they would at once begin a counter-propaganda. The authorities however agreed that it was not possible to do anything until they were aware as to what line the other side was likely to follow in the gardens.³¹

There was an uneasy calm in the tea belt which formed the backdrop for the participation of the women workers in political movements. They were still at the receiving end with the unequal payment.³² The basis of wage payments was the *haziri* system for which the unequal rates were as follows.

TABLE 4.1. DAILY WAGE PAID TO THE WORKERS IN THE TEA PLANTATIONS 1943.

Region Of plantation	WAGE PAID TO THE WORKERS		
	MEN	WOMEN	CHILDREN
HILLS	5 Annas	4 Annas	3 Annas
TERAI	4 Annas	3 Annas	1.5 Annas

(Source: Dash, A.J.; *ibid.* 1947, p. 119)

These basic rates had been prevalent for a long time and were really task rates. They were split up in some hill gardens so that a part was paid as bonus for attendance i.e. 5 days a week. In other gardens there was a sliding scale of bonus for upwards of 14 days attendance in the month. Cultivation or winter operations were paid in terms of piece rate system for sickling, pruning, hoeing and deep forking 5/6 hours on a *bigha*. Since 1939 this daily task was reduced. In the plucking season there were two modes of payment, the piece rate and the *bigha* or the task rate. Piece rates were 6 pies per seer of leaf plucked and the task rate was fixed that by doing it the workers got the basic wage. Tea workers and factory workers received Rs.9 and Rs.14 per month.³³

Work at the plantations began in the morning and a midday break for lunch was given after which it continued till evening. Women had to perform *thika* work or pruning of tea bushes and cleaning of tea leaves were carried out by the elderly and pregnant women. The afternoon shift had the advantage of topping up meagre wage but the women labourer had less time for her children or household chores. Women workers earned Rs. 10-5-8 (anna 5 and paise 8) per month in 1929 while the men in the fields or factories earned Rs 9 / Rs12 per month.³⁴ While the women were most vulnerable to the market slumps in the tea industry and sardar arbitrary powers they were in a better situation than in Assam. Dearness allowances were paid in almost every garden at rates that were usually Rs. 2 to Rs 3 – Rs 8 per month for factory labourers and half an anna for children. The average monthly earning in five gardens were as follows-

TABLE 4.2. AVERAGE MONTHLY EARNINGS IN 5 SELECTED TEA GARDENS IN DARJEELING 1938 AND 1944

Tea Estate	1939									1944								
	Men			Women			Children			Men			Women			Children		
	Rup	Ann	Pais	Rup	Ann	Pais	Rup	Ann	Pais	Rup	Ann	Pais	Rup	Ann	Pais	Rup	Ann	Pais
A	8	5	1	6	1	0	4	5	0	10	9	5	7	6	1	5	4	4
B	8	2	1	6	8	0	3	4	0	9	12	0	8	2	1	4	1	0
C	8	1	5	6	9	3	3	5	9	13	6	1	11	8	0	6	8	0
D	8	7	0	6	12	0	2	12	10	13	8	0	10	2	1	5	1	0
E	8	13	9	6	7	6	3	5	9	8	12	0	6	14	7	3	13	

(Source: Report on an Enquiry into conditions of Labour in Plantations in India, Govt. of India, 1946.)

Of tea workers increased from 1939 to 1944 and was approximately Rs. 12 for men, Rs. 10 for women and Rs. 5 for children. The above table shows that such earnings in Darjeeling outstripped the wages, the average earnings of the labour increased from several decades even though there was no change in the wage rate for a particular job or in the volume of the work. While overtime earnings, incentive payments etc. raised tea plantation labourer's earnings above the wage rate absenteeism and short working depressed earnings to levels below the wage rate. In addition to granting dearness allowances all the gardens during the war period sold rice to the labourers at subsidized rates along with cheap cloth and gave cash in lieu and considerable expenses were often incurred by the gardens on the transactions as shown in the data given below in Table 4.3.³⁵

TABLE 4.3. RATION GIVEN TO THE VARIOUS GARDENS BY THE DARJEELING PLANTERS ASSOCIATION, 1946.

Category of worker	Rate	Rice or atta	Dal / mustard oil
Worker	Rs 8 per seer	3 seer, 8kg per week	Rs 6 to Rs 9 per Seer and Rs 50 to Rs 60 per maund
Dependants		2 seer, 10 kg "	
Children		1 seer, 5 kg '	

(Source - Labour Bureau Ministry of Labour Government of India. Report on an enquiry into the cost and standard of living of plantation workers in Assam and Bengal. S. R. Deshpande, Director, Labour Bureau. 1947. p. 44.)

TABLE 4.4. CONCESSIONS AVAILABLE TO THE TEA GARDEN WORKERS IN DARJEELING 1942-1950).

COMMODITY	CATEGORIES	QUANTITY	PRICE
RICE	MEN	6 SEER	RS. 8/- PER MAUND
RICE	WOMEN	4 SEER	
RICE	CHILDREN	3 SEER	

(SOURCE: Rege, D.V. Report on an Enquiry into conditions of Labour in Plantations in India, Govt. of India, 1946, p. 80.)

The tea industry was affected by both the World wars which caused serious depressions as there was a sharp rise in the value of the rupee that resulted in the increased cost in terms sterling and the over production of tea as compared to the world demand. This led to acute shortage of food grains which was rationed in the tea gardens and cash compensation of two pice per full *hazri* worked by an adult, and the management gave half that amount for a child worker. As the depression worsened by 1942 there was an increase in the cash allowance in form of a lump sum payment of Rs 3 for men, Rs 1/8 for women and children to meet the cost of cloth. Further cash subsistence allowance distinct from cloth allowance was given in 1943 by the end of which the cloth allowance had doubled. Rice was rationed with the weekly supply being 6 seers for men, 4seer for women and 3 seers for children in 1943. However further rationing of rice took place in 1944 and there was a reduction to 4 seer for an adult and 2 seer for a child with an increase in the cash allowance to 1 anna for adults and half the amount for a child per *hazri*.³⁶

Although cash compensation flowed, discontentment had set in amongst the workers in the hills of Darjeeling as rice became scarce. Moreover the exodus of the British planters to their country led to a feeling of insecurity and resulted in lax discipline in the gardens. The workers felt utilized and a feeling of class-consciousness emerged among them, which led to the establishment of the first union of the Dareeling Tea Garden Workers' Union by Sushil Chatterjee and Ratanlal Brahmin on 15th September 1945, which was affiliated to the Communist Party of India. By the late 1940s and 1950s the trade union played an important role in the worker's agitation in the tea gardens.³⁷ Women soon joined hands, which strengthened the movement as they faced greater problems compounded, as they happened to be women as compared to their male counterparts. The male dominated management deprived them of equal pay

for equal work. It was the Communist party that took up the women related issues like the demand for maternity benefits and equal payment. Such discussions among the members of the labour unions led to political consciousness amongst the women.

The more conscious counterparts from the plains gradually indoctrinated the political awakening of the hill women. They listened with curiosity to discussions related to their problems in secret meetings at Dhobi talau and other places in the tea belt.³⁸ Among the early women activist was Mailee Chettri from Danjuajhar tea estate who was an active member of the Darjeeling Tea Garden Workers' Union. She mobilized both men and women teas garden labourers playing a lead role in organizing demonstration and processions against the management in Darjeeling town.³⁹ In Darjeeling trouble began with the election of a Communist candidate to the Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1946, and it immediately organized the Tea Garden Labour Union's strike in 17 tea gardens demanding uniformity in wages for male and female workers. The Darjeeling Planters Association tried to negotiate by trying to secure greater uniformity that led to a short period of uneasy calm. However, trouble broke out at Dhajia Tea Estate as 11 workers belonging to the Communist Party were dismissed in April 1946 for fermenting trouble. During troubled period and strikes the women workers showed great strength and resilience. They were strongly behind the male workers preferring to work as informal workers in road building or at construction sites rather than compromise with the management.⁴⁰ This matter was settled only after independence.

The role of the women in the tea garden trade union movement at such a large scale shows a significant perspective. Women were consciously or unconsciously becoming aware of their powers in collective forum and by participating in strikes and processions. The common subdued worker was becoming more vocal and politically aware of the changes taking place around them. The Communist Party then put forth a number of demands, which included, adult suffrage for tea gardens numbering 150, nationalization of tea gardens, declaration of Nepali language as the official language of the hills.⁴¹ Unequal payment was still a matter to be resolved by the government even as late as 1947, which was discussed by the tea workers. The dearness allowance in Darjeeling

hills, Dooars and the Terai differed for the male workers, female labourers and the children as revealed by table number X in the appendix.

This enquiry brings us to the conclusion that the native women were part of the national discourse although the hill experience was different from the rest of Bengal. In spite of the lack of popular support we find that women like Savitridevi Lepcha; Maya Devi Chettri believed in the nationalist cause and struggled to carve a niche for themselves in the direct action struggle, organizational set-ups and the election process to the local bodies. It gradually generated a sense of confidence to lead their own struggle against the colonial policies and patriarchal domination. It symbolized a significant breakthrough by finally producing social sanction for their new role on the eve of the Indian independence. The main reason for this change in the societal attitude was due to the fact that most of the hill men now discovered that although they tried to identify themselves with the colonizers, they in reality enjoyed only an oblique relation to it. This led to a quest for an identity as the sons and daughters of the soil and not just the 'other'. The Congress and the All India Gurkha League took up the demand for the recognition of the Gurkha identity in 1947. By now the mass of the women workers in the tea gardens had joined in the agitation thereby changing the political scenario of the hills in their demand for equality and an ethnic identity. This feeling was buttressed further by the educational developments in Darjeeling as seen below.

4.3. RESPONSE OF THE HILL WOMEN TO EDUCATION:

4.3.1. COLONIAL EFFORTS TO PROVIDE EDUCATION FOR THE WOMEN OF DARJEELING HILLS (1900-1947).

Amidst political and social upheaval the British Government made a desperate attempt to win public support by piecemeal reforms and policies. Against this backdrop education progress was gradual in the country and in the hill regions of Darjeeling district. It was the Education Act of 1904 that highlighted the defects in the colonial educational system, which provided education to just 2.38% of boys and 2.07% of the girls in the country. There was a clamour for free and compulsory education and such pressure led to the passing of the Resolution of Educational Policy in 1913, which promised mass education. In 1917 the Sadler's Commission recommended improved

secondary education. By 1919 Education was made a direct responsibility of Indian ministers under the principle of diarchy in Provinces but they were unable to change anything, as the finance that was needed was a reserved subject under the British. The system of education in the period of Civil Disobedience Movement was without aim or directives as pointed out by the Hartog Committee of 1929. Diarchy was lifted in 1937 and the Government made plans to introduce free and compulsory education for boys and girls in the age groups of 5-14 years under the Wardha Scheme in 1937-38. The Second World War put a stop to the educational efforts and the post war period was too short to implement any changes in mass education.

In Bengal there was the problem of mass education and illiteracy. The Government passed the Act of 1919, which made free primary education for boys the responsibility of the Municipalities. In Darjeeling hills there were two primary schools looked after by the Darjeeling Municipality and one at Kurseong managed by the Kurseong Municipality. The Girls' primary school at Darjeeling had 123 students on its rolls and all these schools were under the Biss Scheme of primary education.⁴² Beside these the primary schools there was only one Zilla High School for the boys in Darjeeling established by the Government. The main task of promoting education in the hills with particular reference to the education of the girls was through (a) the active role played by the missionaries in the urban and rural regions for providing general education; (c) as well as the interest taken by the private individuals in promoting it.

The work of the Scottish Mission Church continued unabated. They maintained the schools opened in the last century, increased the number of primary schools and even upgraded some to middle and High school for girls like Girls' High School of Kalimpong and Nepali Girls' School of Darjeeling. Education for the hill women was still in a backward condition compared to men as the percentage of literacy in 1901 was 11.1% for the males and 1.3 % for the female out of the total population of literates which was 6.6% in the entire Darjeeling District.⁴³

The Women's Guild decided to promote female education by sending Miss Lily Waugh as the first lady teacher in 1900 to help the Girls' School at Kalimpong. From her report

we get an insight into the working of the school in 1901. The number on the roll of the Girls' School had steadily increased and by the end of the year there were thirty one girls. The attendance was not so regular however as one would desire, such excuses as bustee work, bazaar day etc. being sufficient to keep some of the girls from the school. Often sickness among the scholars kept the average attendance low e.g. it was only 23 in the year 1901.⁴⁴ For five years the Girls' High School was housed in a building below the Mcfarlane Memorial Church and then shifted to its new site which was formerly the Training Institute for teachers.⁴⁵ The school was spacious enough to accommodate more students and in 1911 there were 78 pupils, which increased to 100 by 1914. Miss Edith Smith aided Miss Lily Waugh and gradually the standard of education was considerably raised with a view of preparing more capable pupils as teachers for the village schools. "To name a few, Toko and Mimi helped regularly in the Kalimpong Girls' School, while Yangzome, Shoshi, Dhanlachi and Daubre taught in alternative weeks in the school and the 11th mile school."⁴⁶ Hostel facilities were also provided for the girls attending the Girls School and for those in the Industrial Unit at Lal Kothi in 1913. It was the foresight and vision of Miss Edith Smith who that led to the starting of the vernacular teachers training school in 1913 and 16 girls were enrolled in November 6th 1913.⁴⁷

The government provided grants-in-aid of Rs 600 for 1916-17 for the training of 11 pupils as teachers.⁴⁸ Furthermore, in 1937-38 the government gave an approval for the continuance of the annual grant of Rs. 7992 to the training schools for training of primary school teachers for a period of five years.⁴⁹ The general department of the school was separated from the parent body in 1924 and the Kalimpong Girls' School was upgraded to a High School, with Nepali being the medium of instruction. Students were prepared for the School Leaving Examination under the University of Calcutta. In 1926 the first batch that included a single candidate appeared for her matriculation examination. By 1944 there were 594 girls in its rolls and 5 in the training class of which 65 were boarders. The staff of trained women teachers included two graduates in Science one a European and the other a Nepali lady.⁵⁰ Women candidates were also passing their Intermediate Examination along with the male candidates of the Scottish Mission Union Institution of Kalimpong. The school register of 1938 recorded the names

of Miss Dorothy Sitling, Miss Matilda Sitling, Miss Chandrakala Thapa, Miss Amritadevi Chettri, Miss Chandramaya Kumari and Miss Padmavati Thapa.⁵¹

The other Scottish Mission School in Darjeeling the Nepali Girls' School saw increasing number of pupils in its rolls. In the year 1905 there were 34 pupils of whom four were boys, in 1906 of the 34 pupils admitted eight were boys and in 1918, 75 pupils were enrolled. School records reveal that a few of those who were admitted had attended primary bazaar schools or missionary primary school at the elementary level. But most of the girls were not exposed to any form of formal education prior to being admitted as they represented the first generation to receive education in their families.⁵² The school made excellent progress under Miss Corbett. The visiting inspector of schools noted, 'The Church Mission was to be truly congratulated for having such an able and devoted coadjutor. She has done wonders in the way of introducing the new system of education among the students under her charge; all those who are interested in the education of the hill children cannot be sufficiently thankful to Miss Corbett.' The number of students increased to 44 in 1940.⁵³ The school was upgraded to a High School in 1942 and on 31st March 1944 the total number of pupils in the school was 444 of whom 27 were boys, 331 were hill girls and the remainder were Indian Christians.⁵⁴ At the dawn of independence the number of pupils admitted also increased to 500.⁵⁵ Besides the Nepali Girls' School the Mission in 1914 also opened new schools for girls at Kagjhora, Bhutia Basti and Tindhari in Darjeeling.⁵⁶

It was the tireless efforts of the Church of Scotland to educate the women of Darjeeling that increased the level of literacy to 2.2% in the year 1931 compared to the male literacy rate of 17.5% in the same years.⁵⁷ The Mission looked after 5 Upper Primary and 124 Lower Primary schools and the total number of boys were 2420 and girls was 300 and the average attendance was 1880 students.⁵⁸ By the year 1946 the Guild Mission in the District of Darjeeling had 322 primary schools under its charge.⁵⁹ The government encouraged the Church of Scotland in the hills by giving grants-in-aid for the primary schools. As early as 1906 a grant of Rs 1500 was given for the construction of school buildings.⁶⁰ In 1913 the government helped to construct Upper Primary Schools at Sukhiapokhari.⁶¹ Regular grants were given by the Darjeeling Municipality of

Rs 200 a month and the Kurseong Municipality gave Rs 400 in 1914.⁶² Financial aid was given to primary schools at the Teesta Bazaar and Dalapchin for the same purpose thus acknowledging the role of the Mission in educating the poor and the backward children especially the girls of the hills.⁶³

There are reliable information regarding the number of primary schools for the boys and girls in on near the tea plantations. According to Kilgour, a member of the Church of Scotland, out of the 69 tea plantations in the hills, 18 tea gardens had schools in them, 17 had schools within a radius of one mile and 11 gardens had schools within a radius of two miles in 1906.⁶⁴ The government supported the schools in the gardens for the children of the workers by the grants- in- aid.⁶⁴ Official reports accounted for 85 tea gardens in which 16 already had schools in the year 1907-08. The remaining 32 gardens were served by schools in the adjacent garden and 3 reported as not having any children labourers hence they did not think it viable to open up schools. The government listed 34 gardens against which action would be taken. The tea estates of Marianbari, Moharganj, Patinbari, Dootoria and Tiger Hill did provide educational facilities to the children of the coolies. The managers of Simrimpani and Tongsong showed their willingness to finance such schemes. It was Singell, Dilaram and Sepoydhara tea estate at Kurseong that cited financial constraint in opening schools for the workers. On the whole educational opportunities for the children, in the tea belts and in particular the girl child, made very slow progress. A result which appears to be due to a great extent to a want of practical sympathy on the part of the tea management.⁶⁵ Table number XI (a) and XI ((b) will help us to visualize the situation of schools in the tea gardens and the government grant given to such schools. Table 4.5. below gives the list of mission schools in the tea gardens.

TABLE 4.5. LIST OF MISSION SCHOOLS IN TEA ESTATES FOR THE CHILDREN OF THE TEA GARDEN WORKERS 1910.

1. Mirik	3. Tukvar	5. Rishihat	7. Turzam
2. Tashok	4. Badamtam	6. Ging	8. Gielle. Teesta Valley
3. Rungli	6. Soom	9. Tukdah	

Source Extended Volume , Proceedings of the Hon. Lieutenant Governor of Bengal. August 1910. General Department. Education. No 24-28 File 1-E 1 No 360 T dated Darjeeling 30th June 1910. Report by the Deputy Commissioner to the Government.)

The number of schools increased from 1911 to 1917 as shown in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6. NUMBER OF TEA GARDEN SCHOOLS (1911-1917).

Year	No. of tea garden schools
1911-1912	53
1912-1913	57
1913-1914	63
1914-1915	66
1915-1916	66
1916-1917	69

Source: Proceedings of Lt. Governor of Bengal. General Proceedings Edn. File June 1918(extended volume) p. 144. [State Archives, Calcutta]

The government annual grant to the tea garden schools of Darjeeling was Rs. 1300 and a previously given grant of Rs 8352 per annum for teachers training. This grant was increased by Rs. 810 for teachers under training and Rs. 850 for school equipments in 1917.⁶⁶The total direct expenditure on the schools in the tea belts increased from Rs 5926 to Rs 8839 and the contribution from the Provincial revenue increase from Rs 3973 to Rs 5802.⁶⁷The government on its part proposed the deputation of a Deputy Inspector of Schools in Darjeeling for the collection of statistics for inducing garden managers to open schools in their estates.⁶⁸ In spite of all these efforts a decline was seen in the number of children going to school due to withdrawal of pupils by parents to make them whole-time labourers.⁶⁹ Another problem regarding these schools was the low salary of Rs 26- 8annas a month which did not attract many teachers.⁷⁰

Other than the Church of Scotland Mission, the Roman Catholic Mission reached out to the hill women in remote areas of Gorubathan, Gitgeong, Todey, Tanyang, Suruk, Pringtam and Kankiabong through church activities and primary schools run by the various missionaries. In the urban areas like Singamari in Darjeeling, St. Michael's School, a primary school was founded by Rev. Father McDonough. He was a Jesuit priest of St. Joseph's School Darjeeling and wanted to educate the children of those employed at North Point, children of tea workers, bearers, *chowkidars*, carpenters,

cooks, butlers, peons, *battiwallas* etc. The girls' section at first known as St. Teresa's Girls' School, Singamari was established in 1927 and both sections were later amalgamated. In 1937 the school had admitted 40 pupils of which 4 were boys and the rest were girls.⁷¹ The sisters of Loreto Convent, Darjeeling established St. Teresa's Girls' School in 1923 with only 13 natives as pupils; the number increased to 20 in 1938 and 38 in 1939 and 44 in 1943.⁷² In Kalimpong the Sisters of Cluny, belonging to St. Joseph's Convent established St. Philomena Girls' School for the local girls. Similarly St. Joseph's Girls' School, Kurseong started its mission of educating the native children in 1938 and this was upgraded to a High School in 1944. These schools emphasized on the use of the vernacular as the medium of instruction as this would be of practical value to the natives.⁷³

On the eve of Indian independence the level of literacy and the corresponding social awareness in the hills showed an increasing trend. This was possible due to the efforts of the missionaries. Girls were admitted by house visits and encouragement.⁷⁴ The main problem faced by the schools was the high number of school dropouts as most of the girls left school midway due to some reason or other like looking after the younger siblings, ill-health, death of parents, transfer to other schools, loss of interest in studies, early marriage, financial difficulties which tended to make them coolies or labourers and the failure of promotion at the end of the term made them discontinue study.⁷⁵ Yet despite all these problems literacy among the hill women was increasing with more people in the lower age group becoming literate and more persons in the upper age group retaining their literacy attainments.⁷⁶

Lastly mention must be made of the English schools solely meant for the British children and Eurasian children whose parents were Civil Servants or railway employees. There were Dow Hills Girls' School, St. Helen's School at Kurseong; Loreto Convent and Mount Hermon School at Darjeeling and St. Joseph's Convent, Kalimpong. Exclusively for Europeans, these schools were gradually opened in the twentieth century, to some wealthy native children and those belonging to aristocratic families of Lasha. Mount Hermon admitted Tibetan children of aristocratic families of Lasha as early as 1918.⁷⁷ Dowhills Girls' School gave admission to Indian students only in 1926.⁷⁸ In 1944 there

were 144 boarders; 50 day scholars at St. Joseph's Convent, Kalimpong and 25 of them were hill girls.⁷⁹ The curriculum of these schools which were beyond the reach of the general hill people included fine arts domestic science, Latin, Physical instruction and moral science to make the pupils efficient housewives, teachers or clerks.⁸⁰ With the Indian independence the question about the exclusiveness of these schools for the minority no longer applied and thus under the direction of the Indian constitution the schools were opened to the upper and middle class native girls without reservation.

4.3.2. SOCIAL EDUCATION:

Until independence of India nothing of any special significance took place with regard to social, vocational, technical, physical or aesthetic education of the natives of Darjeeling hills. Nevertheless certain efforts at social education although limited in nature had made its beginning for the women like the Kalimpong Industrial School under the Church of Scotland to which new departments were added. The Lace Department was started in 1905 under Miss Channer. The Central School had a staff consisting of a European lady teacher on a monthly salary of Rs 75, a European Assistant on Rs 35 a month, three native teachers to whom salaries of Rs 15, Rs 5 and Rs 2 were paid respectively. 35 pupils of the Mission Girl's Primary School attended the lace school for one and a half hours daily in addition to this there were 46 students who devoted their time to teach maths in the school. 69 ex-pupils of the school worked from their own homes. These women came to the school for a month or so each year to learn new designs. Each whole-time pupil lived in the hostel in a stipend of Rs 5 for the first month; this payment was reduced by 8 anna successively for 10 months. Of the 5 out-schools in the district a passed pupil received a salary of Rs 32 per annum plus 2 annas a month for each pupil imparted training. The attendance an average was about 8 pupils per school. Each school opened for 4½ hours daily of which 3 hours were given to the lace work, 1½ hour for reading, writing and arithmetic.⁸¹

The General Industries Department consisting of embroidery, knitting, crochet and tailoring had a European lady teacher on Rs 75, an honorary European lady, 2 teachers (native) on Rs 20, one part-timer for Rs 5 and a tracer of design for Rs 6. Stipends were given to pupils to encourage better learning. The government had aided the Industrial

school since March 1904 by granting Rs. 500.⁸² The weaving sector was further enlarged. The joint efforts of Miss E. Smith and Mrs Mackenzie did wonderful work helping the young women engaged in the Industrial school. 'For an hour and a half every morning, before beginning their work in the industrial School the women workers received in the Girls' School a Bible lesson and instruction in the ordinary branches of elementary education'. Since 1907 January about 65 girls and women passed from this school, many of them after learning on industry were later employed as teachers in the area outside the lace schools throughout the Eastern Himalayan Mission district.⁸³ The Lace School however did not function without its own problems. The net loss of receiving receipts and expenditure approximately was Rs 4000 a year, half of which was covered by the Government. For the year 1906-8 the total receiving expenditure amounted to Rs 5954, Rs 8059 and Rs 9852 respectively or in percentage of 71, 49, 48. It faced the difficulty in retaining the services of the workers who had already given their services to the institution but had hitherto worked without pay or with insufficient pay. The cost of opening up new branch schools in the hills was at the rate of Rs 20 to Rs100 a year. The teacher was either paid or worked without any payment. The central body had to send teachers for inspection and advice. As a result each affiliated branch added to the burden of the central School.

Great risk was also taken by this body regarding the marketing of the finished products.⁸⁴ The Director of the Scot Mission suggested that it would be advantageous to give scholarships to the girls who having been trained at Kalimpong was sent out to the affiliated schools and who would in course of time return to benefit further from the expertise given by the parent body. An estimate of Rs 720 a year and Rs 400 for travelling expenses was petitioned to the authorities.⁸⁵ In answer the government granted the renewal of Rs 2000 for a year plus a grant of Rs 1500 towards the expenses of the instructress for 1910. The number of pupils increased steadily from 1907-08, there were both regular type and the occasional worker type.⁸⁶

The statement of the Central Lace School during the period 1907-09 shown in Tables XII, XIII and XIV in the appendix clearly points out that there existed a wide gap in the payment of the British ladies and the native teachers who were considered novices.

Every local lace workers was given a sum of Rs 20, Rs 22, Rs 25 respectively. However special mention must be made of Mrs. Graham who contributed her earnings as Superintendent for the betterment of the Lace School.⁸⁷ For the hill women it supplemented the family income and by the year 1914 eight native pupils were employed by the lace school ⁸⁸ and the enrolment of boys and girls in 1931-32 was 415 and 371 in the year 1936-37.⁸⁹ The Industrial School received encouragement in the form of grant-in-aid. Government records show that the grant to the Kalimpong Lace School of Rs.2, 000 was renewed for another two years. ⁹⁰ A grant of Rs 500 was given in 1916.⁹¹ In 1924 the School was registered under the Companies Act and a capital of Rs 75,000 was raised and given back. ⁹²

The value of work done in 1915-16 was about Rs 7,000 of which Rs 6,716 worth of goods were sold and the rest added to the stock. The value of work in the 1915-16 was about Rs. 9,600 in the General Industries of which goods worth Rs. 8,600 was sold. The whole income of the year was Rs 9208 including government's grant of Rs 220 and the expenditure was Rs. 10,697. From the weaving department the income recorded was Rs 375 in the year 1915-16, the total receipt of that year was Rs 4,661 including a government grant of Rs. 834 and expenditure was Rs 5,139. Net profit in 1916-17 from the lace department was Rs 476, from the General Department of embroidery and tailoring was Rs 1,513 and weaving Rs 1090. There were 25 part time girls, 37 whole-time girl pupils and 91 ex-pupils operating from their homes who made these products.

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In 1925 the General Superintendent Mr. And Mrs, A .N. Olding were given a honorarium and had 350 trainers both male and female specializing in certain crafts. The Government helped to sell blankets, woollen knitted articles, woven cloth, woollen fabrics, bamboo products, baskets and mats produced by the school. Official records show 50 families engaged in production of Bhutia *chadar*. They bought the wool themselves without the help of the middlemen and after dyeing it sold it for Rs 2/6.⁹⁴ Thus social education in the form of cottage industries like carpet weaving, dyeing, knitting, painting, fabric painting was given a boost by the government. Hill women were also

encouraged by the authorities to manage dairy farming, poultry, piggery and farming of superior variety of vegetables and flowers and fruits to supplement the family income.

Another aspect of social education for women was their involvement in sericulture although at a very small scale before independence. The knowledge of sericulture was at first introduced in the Scottish Universities Mission Institute, Kalimpong and further encouraged by the government in 1917. Nurseries were established at Timpani, Kalimpong, Relli and Bijanbari. Free mulberry saplings were distributed among the villagers who became trainees of this new agro industry.⁹⁵ It must be pointed out the Buddhist Association of Darjeeling also established a technical school with a curriculum which included weaving, knitting. In 1909 there were 16 native women on its rolls and the number increased to 37 in 1912. The school got a grant of Rs 45 a month from the government and Rs 20 from subscription fees.⁹⁶ Social education also included the curriculum for the children of the Blind School established by Mary Scott at Kalimpong in 1940, which included the Braille system, music, cane work, knitting and other productive arts and crafts.⁹⁷ Like the blind the deaf and dumb children were looked after by the sisters of Cluny, Kalimpong being trained in housekeeping, nursing and crafts enabling them to earn a livelihood by working as ayahs.⁹⁸

Other forms of social education to create cultural awareness was the formation of the *Gorkha Dukh Nivarak Sammelan* founded in 1932 in Darjeeling, the Ramkrishna Vedanta Ashrama's library, the Kurseong Amateur Club, the *Arya Samaj* with its night classes to promote adult literacy and the Indian Christian Association to encourage religious instruction. In this way education both formal and informal was imparted to the natives of the hills and these new trends and ideas introduced new dimension to the social outlook of the people.

4.3.3. SOCIAL EDUCATION AND HEALTH MATTERS:

Our discussion on the social education of the natives will remain incomplete if we do not include women and health matters. In the hills although western medical science had put its stamp of superiority by 1900 through western style health measures, vaccination programme, establishment of hospitals, dispensaries and welfare centres; it was

accepted by only a section of the hill population and health awareness was yet to be developed among them. Official reports from North Bengal lamented about the unwillingness of the people to use hospitals and dispensaries especially in the tea gardens where the workers 'preferred to use their own indigenous medicines.' It would only be through education that the people would accept western medicine and make them realize that it was more scientific than the indigenous system and on the whole better.⁹⁹

Few plantations of Darjeeling hills maintained their own dispensaries and medical staff as trained people were difficult to get; moreover the cost factor was kept in mind by the management. The doctors worked in deadening isolation.¹⁰⁰ While the Cinchona Plantations had dispensaries with 10 beds at Mungpo and Kumai.¹⁰¹ It was very difficult for the women labourers to get medical help even at the beginning of the twentieth century. The welfare of the tea labourers especially women was not taken into consideration by the colonial authorities. They had to face a number of problems like the risk to the health of the working women and the little children they carried with them to work.¹⁰² Common diseases among them were dysentery during the rainy season, the absence of latrines resulting in hookworm infection, anaemia and venereal diseases. Official investigation prior 1946 reports that the main problem from the health standpoint on Darjeeling plantations was tuberculosis causing great concern. The high incidence of tuberculosis may be gathered from the figures obtained from one garden in Darjeeling that had 54 tuberculosis cases of which 20 were due to pulmonary tuberculosis. Similar figures were observed from the other gardens too.¹⁰³ Cooking and living in a single room hut that was ill ventilated and malnutrition caused tuberculosis.

Women workers in the tea belts had no maternity leave, the only benefits they enjoyed was a payment of Rs 2/8 before and Rs 9/8 after delivery and a bonus of Rs 5 if the child survived the first year.¹⁰⁴ Therefore our attention is drawn to the fact that the garden owners paid maternity benefits not for the sake of the women but for the regular cheap labour supply. In 1939 the Maternity Benefit Act was passed and the rate of payment was passed and the rate of payment was 8 annas per day for 6 weeks but proper protection for the women worker through legislation was not forthcoming. Local journals

in the pre-independence era tried to raise consciousness among the women workers about the Labour laws with particular emphasis on maternity benefits.¹⁰⁵ It was precisely the combination of low wages, and the ambiguous medical policy of the government that resulted in malnutrition therefore high rate of infant mortality as recorded by the government. The Government reports of the medical benefits given to the women labourers of Darjeeling tea gardens is given below in Table 4.7.

TABLE 4.7. SHOWING THE MEDICAL BENEFITS PROVIDED TO THE WOMEN TEA GARDEN WORKERS DURING 1942-1944.

	Year		
	1942	1943	1944
No. of tea workers in Darjeeling	19,141	-	-
Medical Benefit	13,960	19,750	18,422
Maternity Benefit	2,454	1,965	1,316
Sickness Benefit	4,330	7,028	7,242

Source: Sarkar, R.L. and Lama, M.P. Ibid 1986 pg. 174.

TABLE 4.8. INFANT MORTALITY RATE IN BENGAL

	Calcutta Areas	Rural towns	Province mines	Mills	Asansol	Tea Gardens Darjeeling	England Wales
Birth Rate	18.4	29.3	28.	16.9	26.7	40.2	-
Infant mortality	318	182	193	173	146	96	117

(Source: Royal Commission of Labour in India, Report vol. V Part I, pg 342, Govt. of India Report of the Age of Consent Committee, 1928-29. Calcutta 1929 p.. 333.)

The sad plight of female health and childbirth was a common feature not only in the tea-dominated areas but also through the Bengal Province. The most important Victorian response to this alarming situation was the foundation of The National Association For Supplying Medical Fund to the women of India commonly known as the Lady Dufferine Fund. Helping the weak colonial sisters was appealing to the liberal Victorian feminists for it gave them the scope to act independently without threatening the ideologies of either domesticity or the British Raj.¹⁰⁶ Lady Dufferin's Fund helped to establish maternity hospitals and baby clinics in Bengal.

In Darjeeling the Municipality undertook the task of looking after the two Maternity and Child Welfare Centres one at Darjeeling and the other at Ghum, and also the Victorian hospital where 30 beds were allocated for the native females. Training of nurses was also undertaken by the hospitals and welfare centers at Darjeeling. The gazetteer of

Darjeeling District reported that Lady Carmichael had for sometime noticed that district hospitals in Bengal, as a whole showed a lamentable want of proper nursing owing to the fact that they can barely afford to pay for European nurses and therefore get no other medical personnel. She decided to provide training of Indian nurses whose service would be available throughout Bengal at salaries which district hospitals would be able to afford. Their training started mainly at Darjeeling and was completed at Calcutta.¹⁰⁷ In this connection mention must be made of the Charteris hospital of the Church of Scotland which gave classes in general nursing, anaesthetics and midwifery to the native women and prepared them for the examination of the Bengal Nursing Council. Some successful candidates mentioned are Sita, Sushila Sarkar and Dhankumari. The Charteris Hospital had 13 native nurses in training to look after infant welfare centers at Kalimpong and ante-natal clinics providing milk, cod-liver oil to the undernourished and tuberculosis infected children and instructions in hygiene to parents.¹⁰⁸ Likewise the Governmental welfare centers and the rural health treatment units at Sukhiapokhari, Singla, Bijanbari, Lodhama, Takdah, Mirik, Sukna, Algarah, Gorubathan and Samsing gave the hill women an experience in nursing, midwifery and childcare.¹⁰⁹ After completing their training they could work in dispensaries or the tea garden areas. They visited the houses of the poor and advised the expectant mothers on matters of hygiene, delivery and gave free supply of milk and medicine.¹¹⁰ Satellite hill stations of Darjeeling like Kurseong and Kalimpong also had their own hospitals. The Kurseong hospital allocated 28 beds for the male patients and 13 patients for the female patients. Dispensaries at Pedong were looked after by a female nurse and had 7 beds for the native male and 7 for the hill women. Besides the government there were many other agencies and missions looking after public health in the hills. The Darjeeling Himalayan Railways looked after hospitals at Tindharia and outdoor dispensaries at Kurseong, Darjeeling and Siliguri. The Communication and Works Department had dispensaries at Kalijhora and Tista Bazar for the informal workers both male and female engaged in road construction. The Roman Catholic Mission maintained two dispensaries near Kalimpong town. The Charteris hospital at Kalimpong and Dispensaries at Nimbong, Today and Tangta worked for the poor.¹¹¹

The medical statement of the British government classified the hospitals in the hills in the category of class III or class IV only. The data in table number XV and XVI in the appendix highlights the income and expenditure in the various medical centres in the hills for the period 1939. The medical treatment was sought by 4,162 males, 1,534 females and 585 children in Darjeeling District in the year 1929. ¹¹²The figure increased to 8,200 males, 3,878 females as indoor patients and 120,274 males, 48,064 females as outdoor patients in the year 1939. Yet the number of patients in 1929-1939, remained low in the hills as indicated by the data in table number XVII in the appendix.

Although civic consciousness, ideas of health and sanitation gradually spread specially in urban centres with more and more people responding to vaccination drives between 1935-1943 the birth rate recorded by the Municipality showed a lowering from 12,819 in 1935 to 9,688 in 1943 and the death rate recorded an increase from 10,399 in 1935 to 11,253 in 1943. ¹¹³ This may be due to the fact that though awareness was generated it was not at a desired pace. Moreover, this consciousness was mostly restricted to the urban areas with the rural areas lagging behind. The Darjeeling Municipality lamented on the insufficient facilities for coping with infectious disease and reported deaths due to various diseases like gonococcal infection, syphilis, influenza, pneumonia, tuberculosis affecting the lungs and other forms of tuberculosis among the natives in 1941. ¹¹⁴The silent killer was T.B. of the lungs as the government officials recorded 452 affected cases in 1936 among the female population in Darjeeling District of which 64 died and in the year 1940, the number infected was 1079 of which 117 patients died. ¹¹⁵ The Municipality paid Rs 1000 to the Eden hospital meant for the hill people since 1915 and Rs 1500 to Victoria hospital which had to cater to a smaller number of British patients. ¹¹⁶ Till this time we still find the colonial discourse of the us and the other working in the health practices of the Raj in the hills. The health of the hill women was a matter of grave concern but the authorities did not regard it seriously. Maternity benefits was still denied to them and the medical facilities in the garden was not adequate.

4.4. PRIVATE EFFORTS AT PROVIDING EDUCATION AND RESPONSE OF THE HILL WOMEN (1900-1947):

There was an expansion of education in the twentieth century nurtured by the educational policies of the Government. It was formulated by the authorities, from time to time to fulfil the socio-economic and cultural urge of the Indians, on the one hand. On the other hand, the beginning of the national schools was a counter to the colonial claims of educating and emancipating the Indian women as has been argued before. Taking this backdrop, if we study the process of education in the hill during the period 1900-1947 we find a new trend here. For in addition to the contribution of the Government and foreign missionaries there was indigenous attempt to provide education in the hills for the development of society. These private initiatives were guided by factors like self-interest and also due to the political and educational policies of the government like transfer of the Department of Education to the control of Indian ministers in 1921. The educated Indian emphasized on private run schools, aided by government funds imparting traditional, national curriculum for girls that would make them better wives and mothers. The curriculum included domestic science, reading writing and fine arts. The All India Ladies Conference in 1910 founded the *Bharat Stree Mahamandal* for organizing private schools for *zenana* and national education.

It was precisely this idea of national education and the non admission of the native children to English schools in Darjeeling in the first decades of the twentieth century that led to the establishment of the first school founded by native effort, namely the Maharani Girls' High School. This school stands a mute witness to the missionary zeal of its sprightly architect and guide who less than a decade after the turn of the last century brought about revolutionary changes in the field of education in the then very British town of Darjeeling.¹¹⁷ It was established by Hemlata Debi daughter of the Sadharan Brahma leader Sibnath Sastri. She was inspired to establish a school in the hills when she found out that there was no standard schools for the children of the Indian clerks, postmasters and teachers. Hemlata faced serious problems in educating her three daughters in the English schools. However instead of being a 'nagging petitioner to the government complaining about lack of facilities she and her husband Dr. Sarkar took it upon themselves to create a national school for the native community

of Darjeeling.' Her friend Suniti Debi, the Maharani of Cooch Bihar, her sister Saucharau Debi the Maharani of Mayurbhanj who were seasonal sojourners to the hills joined hands. The Maharani of Burdawan also helped her to establish the school.

In the beginning of September 1908 the school was established in a house belonging to the Cooch Bihar estate near Capitol theatre. The number of students was just 7 including her children. Undaunted Hemlata Debi went on a house-to-house campaign coaxing the people of the hills to send their children to school. The rent for the school was Rs 150 and a year later the building at Oak Lodge was called Maharani Girl's School. Boys were admitted up till class around it. Boys were admitted up till class IV. Helmet Debi and the Maharani of Cooch Bihar also pulled strings in Calcutta to persuade influential socialites to send their children to school at Maharanis.¹¹⁸

The enrolment figure from 1908 to 1910 rose up to 77 pupils. By 1910 there was a high class Home School with 9 boarders and trained teachers. The daughters of native families like Smt. Reba Bose, Dr. S. Kazi, Smt. P. N. Tendupla and Smt. Passang Doma received education. The first matriculate of this school was Suniti Sarkar. Among the prominent student as of the school were Swapna Das and her two sisters, Kamala Sen, Anup Lal Goswami, Haran Chandra Bose, Jyoti Ghosal, Dr. Sailendra Nath Chatterjee (Kanti Babu), Madhuri Sarkar, Nivanani Bose, Rani Mahalanobis, Aditi Sen Roma Sarkar, Monorama Bose, Sabitri Mitra, Ila Hom, Tara Ghosh, and Meera Sanyal. The school offered a chance for the meeting of different cultures from the hills and the plains. The school was popular among Indians. It received support from the Maharani of Cooch Behar. Hon'ble Sir Bijoy Chand Mahatap, Maharajadhiraja of Burdwan and the donors were Excellencies Lord and Lady Carmichael, the Maharani of Mayurbhanjan, the Rani of Kakina, Sir S.P. Sinha and Hon'ble Mr. B.C. Mitra and Mr. P.N.Mukherjee.¹¹⁹ It used to get government grant-in-aid of Rs. 250 per mensem.¹²⁰The number of pupils steadily increased from 56 in 1911 to 40 in 1915.¹²¹

School education was free of cost; no uniform was enforced on the pupils. School started around ten thirty in the morning giving enough time for a ritual bath and puja at home by the students. They could come to class with un-plaited wet hair. All this was

done so that the orthodox families would not object to the schooling of their daughter. The aim and objectives of the school was to produce better wives and mothers and to help a widow earn a livelihood instead of facing a miserable life. The curriculum at Maharani Girls' School aimed at imparting 'traditional' and 'female' oriented education which included Bengali, mathematics, geography, Indian history, hygiene, everyday science, art and music, reading and writing from the epics, Hindu texts. Higher education was given to those children who did not marry at an early age. They learnt English, higher mathematics, world history, science, philosophy, Sanskrit, hygiene, nursing, needlework, cookery, domestic science, household management and child rearing.¹²² In short no girl could pass out of school unless she could 'cook a whole meal, make a complete set of garments, be qualified to manage a house and have some knowledge of sick-nursing'.¹²³

The school excelled over the years as is evident from letters written by government officials who commented. "It was a pioneer institution for girls' education in Darjeeling established through the effort and generosity of distinguished women who were highly respected for progressive ideas and who led the way for the spread of education among girls in the beginning of the century in a remote hill region of Bengal. I am happy to say that the school now fulfilled the founder's dream and many generations of students and girls as well as boys of tender age will remember this institution with affection and respect."¹²⁴ The government helped to encourage the educational efforts of the Maharani Girls' School by giving grants-in-aid for maintenance.¹²⁵ Special scholarship were also given by the government to outstanding students like Tenzing Wangdi and Miss Sangay Doma of Darjeeling in 1929.¹²⁶ The meritorious results in the school final examination showed the progress of the school among other hill schools.¹²⁷ Further grants were given in 1936 for extension of classes for the girls.¹²⁸

TABLE 4.8. THE MATRIC RESULTS OF 1932 AS PUBLISHED BY THE CALCUTTA UNIVERSITY.

Darjeeling Govt.	Kalimpong	Kalimpong Girl's	Maharani Girls' School.
High School	Scottish Univ.	High School	2- 1st class.
13- 1st class.	Mission	1-3rd class.	(Nanibala Hor and Jeremit
12 -2nd class.	4-1st class.		Sitting)
4-3rd class.	2-2nd class.		

Source- Part 1 B Educational Notice, Orders of the Vice-Chancellor and Syndicate of Calcutta University. June 9th 1932. Calcutta Gazette.

The establishment of the Maharani Girls' School was indeed a pioneering work of Hemlata Sarkar who was a harbinger of a new outlook towards education. It was an alternative to the colonial pattern of education for the native girls. It can be termed as a radical attempt by Hemlata who stood against any kind of domination or discrimination. It was a struggle against the racial and gender bias colonial pattern and it a private attempt to establish modern education based upon Indian traditions. Interestingly enough it was only an isolated attempt at the beginning catering to the Bengali middle class and aristocrats as the school could not break out of its elitist Brahmo mould. It therefore did not reach out immediately to the marginalised sections of the hill girls in the seams of society in a large way.

Nevertheless the trend towards such forms of education gradually picked up as the foundation of a Coaching Centre for the Indian children at Kurseong, known as Pusparani Roy Memorial, unaided by the government, later it developed into an English High School. Likewise, in 1923 the Young Men's Buddhist Association working for the upliftment of Buddhist culture established the Ghum School for girls. In 1931 the Sardeswari Girls School and in 1934 the Himachal Hindi Bhawan for boys and girls were established with government aid and had provisions for a night school for the local students.¹²⁹ The Arya Samaj established a primary school in 1934 and later schools like the Pranami Vidya Mandir Girls' school was established in 1944, Saraswati School at Mangpoo in 1946, Pokhriabong School in 1947 and the Griffith Memorial School at Takdah in 1947 along the same lines.

The Muslim community of Darjeeling had a charitable institution registered in 1909 called Anjuman-e-Islamia for improving the moral, intellectual and social conditions of the Muslims in the hills. It established madrasas for boys and girls attached to the Jumma and Chhota Masjid. In 1922 the number of boys and girls on the roll was 44 and 34 respectively.¹³⁰ Girls in the hill madrasa were taught by female teachers and the medium of instruction was Hindi. Arabic and Persian languages were compulsory as they were required to read the Islamic texts. It encouraged the education of the hill Muslim girls.

In conclusion it can be said that the early decades of the twentieth century in the hills like the rest of Bengal saw the rise of native effort to provide education, for fear of cultural alienation, in the wake of western female education. Through private native initiative of Hemlata Sarkar the founder of Maharani Girls School, a number of schools were established in the hills of Darjeeling that brought about a gradual change in the education opportunities for the hill women. Female schooling became a means of improving the material and social conditions of women without coming into conflict with the Indian orthodoxy.

In other words the phase of Indian Nationalism did not involve the total reshaping of the hill society, as the transition from one phase to another was a gradual change. Signpost of the new age was visible in the twilight zone between the two periods. Nothing spectacular happened at a large scale at first but the small changes were crucial to understanding the waning of the old and the dawning of a new period. The subtle changes in the role transformation of those women passing out from native schools showed bhadramila-like qualities of thrift, cleanliness, some knowledge of the outside world, together with the traditional role of a good mothers and house wives and hostess. The identity of the women was to be nurtured by the mixing of the old tradition with the modern ways. Although it was not a cataclysm as the elements of continuity and change among the hill women were not dichotomous but stood juxtaposed often overlapping at times on the eve of Indian independence in 1947. Yet the majority of the rural hill women, in areas not covered by the tea gardens, continued to enjoy their status in the homestead unaffected by any changes.

With regard to politics very few women leaders came to the forefront and those like Helendidi and Putalidevi Poddar from Kurseong or David Azemee Babuni from Kalimpong were nationalist activists or supporters rather than a liberated western educated woman. They identified themselves with the Indian mass and the nationalist cause but it should be remembered that Gandhian politics in Darjeeling was just a 'flash in the pan.' The British kept a check on the political movement in the towns. At the beginning the people were unable to identify their cause of exploitation. Only a few educated people realized that the natives just enjoyed a subordinate relation to the

master race. The optical illusion that the colonial society was innocuous and for the good of the people was accepted by the public and majority of the women were not in a position to judge for themselves. It was definitely the spread of education that created awareness and the first generation of women found their voice and they articulated the needs of the women. It was the tea belts that saw a definite change in the role of the hill women as a result of the labour union movements. They presented a different picture of themselves far removed from a soft, non-aggressive, compliant and dependent female as conjured by the colonist. The native voice demanded their economic rights and even wanted a part to play in shaping the destiny and progress of the hills.

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