

## **CHAPTER – 4**

### **HILL WOMEN, THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT**

#### **4.1. Introduction**

The chapter attempts to comprehend the very complex nature of relationship between culture and identity on the one hand and public sphere and national movement on the other. Public sphere is the space where the participatory modern politics opens up between the every day lived world of shared particular experiences and attitudes, on the one side and the hierarchical, bureaucratic institutions of modern governance on the other. This narrow and fragile space constitutes the arena where subjects, as citizens, exercise their rational agencies by participating in informal discourses on matters of shared interests. Procedurally correct participation in a political public sphere requires a specific range of skills, insights and behaviours. (Habermas Jurgen 2011:23). Here we have picked and chosen some of the important incidents that took place in Darjeeling districts during the protest waves that was spreading like a wild fire all over India. We have also tried to capture the movements of madness of wide spread feelings intense waves of contention. The chapter is segmented into thirteen segments.

#### **4.2. The Reconstruction of the Involvement of Hill Women in Nationalist Movement**

In India the nationalist struggle against British colonial rule brought about the political mobilization of both men and women. The understanding of women's interaction with political life in India attempts to reconstruct the dominant interpretations on women's political involvement. The nationalist movement also served as an important vehicle for encouraging middle-class women to engage in activities and to adopt new role models. The women's representation constructed by the nationalist project enabled women to play a political role through the opened avenues in both the public and domestic domains. However, political past of women and their varied contribution to the struggle was not effective in undermining gender inequalities or improving their status in society. In this historical study the ideas are shaped primarily through oral narratives and vernacular literature. The interviews with Indian activists, as a non-western researcher, made us aware of the negotiable category 'Other'. An initial framework for the study of this historical period was provided by official and

unofficial sources. There are so few studies of role of women in the nationalist movement. The important works on the nationalist movement mostly failed to examine the significance of participation of women in the struggles. Hence, in the histories of India the analysis in this area so far has received insufficient attention both before and after 1975 when the need to study the role of women in history began to be acknowledged world-wide. The studies published between 1968 and 1988 have touched upon various aspects and dimensions of participation of women in the freedom movement. In general it is important to note that the information on women in the work of modern Indian historians writing in English prior to 1975 relates to the elite sections of women of society. The lives and conditions of the large majority of women or their response to changing historical forces have been consistently unexplored. There are records of only few women who were from the elite sections. But what about the mass of women from the other section of society i.e. middle class. We know very little about the lives, beliefs or social background of the mass of women who entered the movement in the different regions. Thus, in this area no work has been done except in the last few years. Most of the accounts of the role of women in the nationalist movement are descriptive not critical or analytical. They do not examine either the reasons or the implications of this spontaneous upsurge of political activity by women of all classes. The mass of women who entered the movement from the different region, very little is known about their lives, beliefs or their social background. But virtually no work has been done in this area except in the last few years. With the efforts of most historians the dominance of elite perspectives is best demonstrated to link participation of women in the nationalist struggles. The participation of large number of women from the peasantry, working class including prostitutes who took part in the various struggles directly and also the thousands of mothers and wives whose indirect support by shouldering family responsibilities when their men went to jail or got killed, has received so little attention from historians so far. For instance, there are some exceptions to the general pattern. Bipan Chandra (Chandra 1988) has discussed the women's movement, women's participation in peasant and trade union movements along with women's role in the freedom struggle. State sponsored directories of freedom fighters after Independence including women were compiled in Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Karnataka, Gujarat, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. The approach in these in general, was laudatory and enumerative rather than analytical. Where analysis was attempted and intended to be brief. However, some references to

women freedom fighters are scattered in miscellaneous sources all over India and in works on Gandhi.

Therefore, the existing research on women and Indian nationalism can be described as non comprehensive, cursory in nature, and generally a “history from above”. The proper reconstruction of this period of Indian history with a special focus on women’s political participation and the women’s movement which was a concomitant part of and yet separate from the national movement, is now essential for a reinterpretation of these movements which were entangled with one another. There are requirements of more local and regional studies to provide in depth data. For example, there required a better explanations for regional variations in the level and nature of women’s participation than the single factor of female literacy. The relevance of a study of role of women in the national movement cannot be over estimated for either the discipline of history or the study of women. But the question is where do we start and what are our sources? Therefore, one should note that there is a scarcity and unevenness of material in terms of region and time periods. Thus, recent works on the women’s movement and women’s political participation have used a multiplicity of published and unpublished archival records but we cannot say that such sources have been fully utilized. As we know Government documents form a major source of information, including secret police and intelligence reports, not all of which have been analyzed. The vital problem is many private collections are still not open to scholars. On top of that some sources of data are outside this country.

Beside, records of some political groups were destroyed by police action or otherwise through riots or careless maintenances. Some were ad hoc in nature or not systematic. We maintain that there is a need of adequate search for and use of even conventional sources still remains to be done systematically.

Hence, analysis of the records of women has already yielded valuable insights into the national movement. It may be noted that many journals in India and Britain of this period (1857-1947) also contain highly useful material, with predictably more information for some regions than others. Other rewarding sources such as the journals of women which were mouthpieces and forums in which debates on women’s issues were conducted, women’s autobiographies: collections of speeches and essays by women leaders (e.g. Besant, Naidu, Cousins); regional literature, reflecting variations in social perception and the response of specific societies and communities to the

movements; proceedings of local women's associations etc. in this massive effort would certainly need to be analyzed.

To some extent in some archives Oral histories and reminiscences of women in the national movement are available on tape. There is a need of much more to be done in this respect. Interviews with family members of women who participated in the national movement as well as women's movement and in local women's associations could form a valuable source of data.

On the other hand, if women who participated spontaneously in the struggles refuse to or find it painful to talk about that period now then what does that mean? Or when lower middle class women from small towns tell us that their mothers knew and encouraged or covered up their activities in revolutionary movements how should we interpret that fact?

In 1905 the partition of Bengal galvanized and transformed women's participation in the nationalist movement. The publication of pamphlets, public meetings held exclusively for women and new nationalist associations (in contrast to the elite associations) emerged during the swadeshi period. This period was marked by mass struggles, militancy, armed struggle and political agitations. In different parts of India women of different classes were involved in growing numbers in such activities, in both rural and urban areas. In 1907 the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam reported confidentially to the Governor General and the Secretary of State, that the youth of East Bengal absorbed hatred of the alien rulers who had "drained Golden Bengal of her wealth virtually with their mother's milk". Some British women made Indian nationalism their own cause and played important roles as 'helpers' as well as 'catalysts'. Among them were Annie Besant and Dorothy Jinarajadasa, both Theosophists, Margaret Cousins, an Irish feminist, and Sister Nivedita, the disciple of Swami Vivekananda.

#### **4.3. Participation of Women in the National Struggle**

The Swadeshi Movement had a most striking feature as the women took the pledge to use swadeshi goods. The impact of the socio – religious movements and institutions in awakening the women is noteworthy. Some of the women started participating in the politico – religious meetings. But it is also a fact that the women of Darjeeling like their counterparts in other provinces, also suffered from inertia and at

least in the initial stages the women did not take part in the struggle for freedom. Hence, such a state of affairs continued for a long period because neither woman showed much interest in public affairs themselves nor their families allowed them to take part in them. The women in Darjeeling were not educated and this was the reason behind which kept them confined to their domestic roles and had no inclination to come out and take part in public matters.

Never the less, though slowly, yet surely they also were carried away by the current of the national movement. The socio – religious and political movements started by men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanand and Mahatma Gandhi played a significant role in social and political awakening of the women of Darjeeling. However, this reform movement not only worked for the social upliftment of women but it also encouraged them to fight for the cause of India's freedom movement shoulder to shoulder with their men folk. Thus, there was a transformation in the minds of women cabined and confined in the rigidity of social customs and conventions prevalent in the society along with the attitude of men towards such a role of the women (In Indian society a girl child was or still is associated with an endless chain of troubles and difficulties for the parents since from the birth).

From the year 1930 to 1934 a most significant features was the participation of women in the nationalist movement on an unprecedented scale.

Hordes of women pouring out of their homes. Women of all classes and castes, high and low, gave their support to the national movement. The processions taken out by women, their untiring picketing of cloth and liquor shops, their persuasive appeals for swadeshi are even today marveled at (Rao 1994: 38)(Thapar Bjorkert 2006: 70).

Gandhiji strengthened his decision to launch the khadi movement which would offer to the masses of women an immediate and open channel for their participation in the national struggle. However, Gandhi used women's role in the khadi movement to convince men that women's participation as equals was essential if the Swadeshi or boycott movement was to succeed, an argument that he extended later to the winning of full freedom for India and nation-building. Gandhi asserted that women are starving not because there is no food in their village but because they have got no work for which they could get money and for such money they could get food. The women of India spun not merely for home demands but also for foreign lands. They spun not merely

coarse counts but the finest that the world has ever spun. No machine has yet reached the fineness of the yarn spun by our ancestors.

The year 1920s and 1930s represent a transition in views of Gandhi on women from the concept of women's rights to the far more dynamic one of their role. The energy of women would be unleashed for the nation-building process through an assertion of their productive and creative roles as equal partners, participants, leaders, conscience keepers, and beneficiaries. It was between 1921 and 1925 Gandhi had added India's political salvation as a goal for women in nation building. Thus, he realized that unless women of India work side by side with men, there is no salvation for India, salvation in more senses than one. He meant political salvation in the greater sense, and it means the economic salvation and spiritual salvation also.

#### **4.4. Role of the Family**

During the period it is important to emphasize that these political upheavals in many women's life was a trying period particularly for those who had so far led a life of seclusion within the domestic sphere. In public politics the emergence of these women was problematic and difficult. The dynamics within the household influenced the level of commitment and motivations of individual members. In India particularly the women are often a sum and product of diverse relationships within the family and kingship nexus. For few women it was difficult to adjust to political changes in the public sphere, but for those it was less difficult who were born or married into politically active households. The environment of the period was charged with anti-colonial propaganda and all the households knew about the political crisis. It was such an atmosphere that one could breathe the movement. However, one should note that there were differences between households which determined the ease of women's public participation. There were households on the one hand which forbids women any form of political activity. Some were usually anti-nationalist because one or more members of the households were British government employees. Others were indifferent politically and were uninterested in the developing politics around them. Therefore, on the other hand there were households which fully immersed in nationalist activities and encouraged positively the women's participation and individual family members.

Beside this, the women life had two parts, 'one spent in her pita grah (father's house) before marriage' and 'the other spent in her pati grah' (husband's house), after

marriage. (Upadhyay 1921: 99) (Thapar-Bjorkert 2006: 73). The initial awakening of political issues of unmarried women was in their parental home. The household in which the father was a member of a political party, he supported the activities of his daughter but not those of his wife. In the household where all the male members were supporters of the Congress Party but they did not encourage the political activities of women in the family.

However, one should note that the political involvement was often seen as a family matters rather than a purely individual political conviction.

During the period between the ages of twelve and sixteen years the women were married. After marriage they were moved on to live with their husbands' families and the new social environment is encounter by women. The case is similar to a freedom fighter Mayadevi Chettri who was only 13 years old when she was married. At court the marriageable age was 15 but her aunt asked her to say 15 at court. Phupu (aunt) being her only guardian Maya had to get married to a man named Dil Bahadur Chhetry who was twenty years older than her.

There were some women who had to move from the politically charged atmosphere of their parental homes to their husband's homes, where they had to stop all their previous activities. It was due to the fact that some women's husbands were British employees and did not encourage any affiliation with the nationalist movement. Beside this, there was other situation like though the women had limited opportunity to actively participate in the movement from their parental homes now after marriage had full opportunity as their husbands encouraged them to do so. The case resembles Putalimayadevi Poddar despite her father expressing displeasure regarding the movement; she continued her activities in the movement. Ultimately, she had to leave her house as her father was a government employee and her involvement was being seen as a financial burden to the family. Later, she was able to participate fully as she married a Congressman Saryu Prasad Poddar who fully supported her involvement.

There were also circumstances where the involvement in the movement leads many couples lost their government jobs. Some parents also threw their sons and daughters out of their house who were involved in the movement as they felt this would lead to financial burden to the family. These features were visible in almost all parts of the country.

#### **4.5. The domesticated Public Sphere**

The importance of family dynamics was well understood by the nationalist leaders in encouraging and inhabiting involvement of women in public activities. The dual stress on women fulfilling their duties as mothers within their homes as well as serving the nation was important because it enabled women to participate in the public sphere without dismantling the existing family structure and threatening the prevalent domestic ideology.

Gandhi tried to use the traditional qualities of women to extend their traditional roles into the political sphere. He stressed although the equal legal rights of women and men, arguing that women ‘must labor under no legal disability not suffered by man’ (Hingorani 1964: 61), he rejected the modern notions of roles of women and opposed modern machines, technology and new techniques of birth control. Thus, his views were opposed by some who considered it to be obstacles to progress of women in society. The magazine Kamala written by Bhuvneshwar Prasad stated that without birth control women would be tied to their homes and it would never be possible for them to be the productive members of society. Hence, the notions of Gandhi were seen as ‘patriarchal’ embodying the idea that women were ‘inferior’. His vision of establishing a ‘pastoral’ society and ‘drowning the new machines in the oceans’ were seen as ‘revivalist’ and utopian (Prasad 1940: 232-33).

The personal life of Gandhi was also ridden with contradictions. At the age of twelve he was married to Kasturba. In the household he advocated equality but continually referred to the intellectual differences between himself and his wife and also tried to restrain her public movements. However, when Gandhi was in prison she took over the leadership of the nationalist movement and appealed on his behalf despite her uneasy relationship with her husband.

On the other hand, there was a contradictory in the views of two great leaders Gandhi and Nehru. Gandhi emphasized on the moral and traditional qualities of women whereas, Nehru emphasized the economic content of women’s rights and obligations. Hence, the Nehru’s approach was based on more realistic and practical considerations. He took a critical view of the Indian society rather than moral exhortation. His speeches reiterated his faith that for women without economic freedom and mental freedom through education, other aspects of gender equality would prove superficial. He asserted that family responsibilities were much less important than the

economic independence of women. In a speech to women of the Prayag Mahila Vidyapith (printed in magazine Saraswati), Nehru stated:

If a woman is not economically independent and does not earn money herself, she will have to be dependent on husband or some other man. I realize that your Vidyapith stresses that women should be accomplished in housework and undertake the responsibilities of one's marriage. However, women should be given the highest education to enable them undertake other occupations (Shukla 1934: 229) (Thapar-Bjorkert 2006: 79-80).

Nehru with respect to his personal life wrote that the political participation of his wife and sisters gave him a special satisfaction and brought them closer together. He was impressed by his wife's organizational skills.

In a nutshell, to a limited extent both Gandhi and Nehru realized that women were compelled to re-adjust both mentally and physically to the demand of changing political environment, best illustrated in the experiences of women in the Nehru household, a household in which three generation of women participated in national political life during the independence struggle.

#### **4.6. Setting the Ball Rolling**

The elite women's participation was facilitated by three main features. First, the households they came from had already a tradition of political participation and had exposure to 'public politics'. Second, the women were encouraged and supported by their families to participate in the movement. Third, the social practices did not circumscribe their lives and family members did not frown upon their public participation.

It should be noted that from the elite household both men and women were also ridden with personal and political ambiguities on the issue of nationalist participation but we do not hear of that anxiety because setting the precedent meant embodying the notions of familial sacrifice in their own personal lives. The memoirs of Vijaylakshmi Pandit describes the conflict and tensions in her parental home when her brother Jawaharlal Nehru, her father Motilal Nehru and later she herself joined Gandhi. Swarup Rani Nehru, her mother found it difficult to adjust to the changed lifestyle and the constant infringement of their privacy:

This was a time of great domestic strain, and constant adjustments were asked for. Mother felt acutely miserable over all that was happening. How could she take sides (with husband or son) or understand this new ‘Mahatma’ whose business if anything, should have been to look after people’s morals instead of meddling in family matters (Pandit 1979: 69).

Though Swarup Rani and Vijaylakshmi Pandit shared the same household but they perceived the changes in their private lives differently. This perception differences is due to the generational difference between the two women. Swarup Rani was from an earlier generation and her horizon did not extend beyond the family and found it difficult to fully comprehend the changing political reality and new ideas. Whereas, Vijaylakshmi Pandit a woman from a younger generation the consequences of political developments on their personal lives were brought to the forefront. She refers in her personal memoirs her loss of satisfaction through domestic duty and accepts that without the consent of her husband she would not have participated. Thus, for Swarup Rani it was the changing political reality and for Vijaylakshmi Pandit it was the new domestic negotiations that were a challenge.

Therefore, the initiative was taken by the women of the Nehru family. Now the task for both male and female leaders was to mobilize the masses. The leaders realized that by creating, enlivening and projecting nationalist symbolism associated with the domestic sphere onto the public sphere would enable the women of middle class to transcend the boundaries.

The nationalist symbolism also enabled these women to step out the domestic sphere and participated in the Gandhian non-violent movement. Thus, the precedent was set by the women of the Nehru household for the ordinary middle class women.

#### **4.7. The Nationalist Symbols: Women’s Enhanced Role**

The different historical environment shapes the symbolic roles in different ways and consequently their centrality differs. In India the nationalist project as elsewhere (Serbia, Finland, South Africa) women are conceptualized as symbolic signifiers of the nation, imaging the nation as the ‘motherland’ and women as the ‘mother (bearer) of the nation’. Frequently the nations are referred to through the ‘iconography of familial and domestic space’. Hence, the motherland was projected as the body of the women

that was in danger of violation from ‘foreign’ males and her honour had to be protected through the sacrifice of ‘countless citizen warriors’.

However, in representing the swelling tide of Indian nationalism the ideology of motherhood was important and it was used as a symbol of an identity of Indians and constituted a domain which the colonized could claim as their own. Now the nationalist woman as the embodiment of the nation was the nurturer and bearer of future progeny and the defender of the motherland. Women without completely disassociating themselves from the domestic ideology entered the public sphere. The participation of women conceptualized in terms of the inter relationship between the private and public domains and they carried domestic values into the public sphere. The home was considered a representation of culture of the Indian nation and of that home women were the integral part of it. The primary duty of the women was to preserve the culture of her nation by upholding the tradition and values that constituted that culture. Partha Chatterjee stated that ‘the home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality’ (Chatterjee 1989: 243).

Women not only shoulder the responsibility of the ‘transfer of cultural and ideological traditions of ethnic and national groups’ they often, ‘constitute their actual symbolic configuration’ (Anthias and Yuval- Davis 1992: 189). The role model ‘mother’ identified with the ‘motherland’ or ‘Bharatmata’ (mother India) aligned the duties and responsibilities of the mother with the duties of a woman towards her nation. The ‘glorification of motherhood, despite its Hindu roots (became) less a cultural defense mechanism, than the articulation of a future political programme’ (Engels 1989: 431) (Thapar Bjorkert 2006: 87).

On the other hand, the metaphors and symbolism shifted from the nationalist women as the mother and nurturer of the nation to the defender of civilization and motherland and also to the sacrificial mother. The sons of those mothers who were executed by the British were venerated and exalted to the status of mother of the nation. These mothers were regarded as sacrificial as they have offered their sons to the nation. It should be noted that the role of mothers whose sons were killed has never been recognized.

However, the incidents in this context has been narrated which recapitulated the decisive role of mothers in the nationalist movement. On 25<sup>th</sup> October 1943, after the

formation of the Provisional Azad Hind Government under the supreme command of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose war was declared against the Allied Forces. The soldiers of different branches of the Indian National Army were deployed on the fronts. In the Intelligence Branch Durga Malla was posted. He along with some other fellow soldiers entered the hilly area of the then greater Assam across Burma border. He used to collect and send important information there regarding matters of strategic importance to the headquarters of Indian National Army in Rangoon despite the shortage of supplies, ammunitions and weapons and adverse geographical conditions. When Durga Malla on 27 March 1944 was on a mission to collect information of the enemy camps, he was captured by the soldiers of enemy side at Ukhru in Manipur near Kohima. He was arrested and was kept in the prison at Red Fort, New Delhi as a prisoner of war. On 15th August 1944, Veer Durga was taken to Delhi Central Jail from the Red Fort. On 25th August 1944 after ten days, he was sent to the gallows. Thus, the journey of Major Malla ended. His physical body is no more but he sacrificed himself after leading a meaningful life of only 31 years and became immortal. **See for Photo-16.**

In 1930 the Dandi March of Mahatma Gandhi to violate “salt rule” started generating patriotic sentiments in the heart of Durga Malla and motivated him to take part in the freedom struggle. He could see under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi the vision of the freedom of India. Durga Malla was only a student of ninth class at the time of the Satyagraha movement, but he was actively engaged in anti-British activities in his locality.

In the history of India’s freedom struggle the formation of the Indian National Army represented a milestone. Durga Malla played an important role in the formation of the Indian National Army. In 1942, he joined this Army with a patriotic zeal and also inspired his fellow men to join it. Durga Malla was given initially the responsibility to mobilize volunteers for the Indian National Army from different Gorkha battalions. Later, by virtue of his patriotic feelings and his sense of duty towards his country, he earned promotion to the rank of Major.

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However, one should take into account that the sacrifice of Durga Malla is worth mentioning but his mother Parwati Devi whose name has not been documented in any historical records, have projected a brave profile too. Throughout the country a wave of sympathy arose for the mother and she was referred to as the ‘sacrificial mother’ who sacrificed her sons for the nation.

Malla’s mother had never actively participated in formal politics but she gave an example that how ordinary middle class mothers too can sacrifice their sons in the political struggle. Beside, it also showed how some mothers understood their roles in relation to the nation. To the projection of women in the political struggle, women were not recognized through their family names but they were referred to as Ma which means mother.

#### **4.8. Women and Gandhi's ideology of Non-violence**

However, a precedent was set by the nationalist movement for achieving independence through non-violence. This led to the birth of a new philosophy ahimsa or non violence. The male and female leaders of the Congress Party adhered strongly to a non violent ideology. The leaders of the movement constructed an image of an ideal activist that was of women who in her political activities symbolized the virtues of non-violence. The ideology of Gandhi portrayed the struggle against a British as a moral battle in which the moral and spiritual strength of Indian women was supreme. A moral

stance was constructed by Gandhi which cut across class, communitarian and rural-urban differences to create an anti-imperialist front. Thus, the streets metaphorically were viewed by men and women as moral battlefields and consequently they were seen as an acceptable location for the activities of women. For the first time this ideology assisted women in stepping over the thresholds of their homes. Hence, the public participation of women also helped to dispel British stereotypes of their downtrodden and degenerate status.

Therefore, when women stepped out onto the streets they brought with them the values of the domestic sphere. In the public domain they were expected to adapt to changes without compromising their feminine qualities within the domestic sphere. In the public sphere their involvement stretched from the non-cooperation movement of 1920s to civil-disobedience movement of 1930s and to Quit India movement of 1940s. The women public participation was limited in 1920s. But during the next two decades constraints diminished. It is due to the fact that a precedent had already been set by the women primarily from the elite households who had participated in politics earlier in the century. It was in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the women were more politically aware and their households found it easier to accept them going outside their homes since many had already done so. For example, in 1930s movement the women who were not allowed to participate were not stopped by stepping out during the Quit India movement. The 1940s witnessed not only an increase in the number of women activists but the women were also seen in violent activities as compared to the 1930s.

Therefore, whatever be the nature of women's public participation it was framed through the two essential issues of segregation and respectability.

#### **4.9. Women and Social Space**

In the broader social context, most women from the middle class family purdah defined their lives. The women led the segregated lives even within their homes and most women did not appear before or have any social contact with any of the men in the family except their husband. Some women after marriage were secluded and confined to a room. The women were not allowed to show any part of their body or appear in front of other members of the joint household. Thus, for the women the primary constraint was to come out onto the streets without challenging the prevalent domestic customs and traditions. Segregation from the domestic sphere was carried over into the public domain. Thus, the public sphere were not seen by the women

participants as a space for completely flouting customs and traditions but as a space where rigid rules of society and the religion could be re-negotiated enabling the women to step outside their homes. For example, the women basically from the Hindu background kept their heads covered with their saris in the processions.

On the other hand, along with segregation the issue of respectability was also linked. Both male and female nationalist leaders projected the politics of street demonstrations in terms of its high morality and sacrifice. Only the right kind of respectable women were positively encouraged to participate (Forbes 1988: 69). The middle class women who came out in public also realized that there newly realized freedom had to be couched in an aura of respectability. As argued earlier a woman grew up in the protected environment of her father's house and later married into the protected environment of her husband's house. This respectability issue touched every middle class family. Thus, the women 'on the streets' had to be distinguished from the women 'of the streets. The latter primarily being women who had to come out of their homes to earn a living. The consequences of this were the women who entered and were seen in those spaces defined as public were open to suspicion. The women of the street were the working class women, low caste women and other inferior characters. Hence, the latter were seen still as a threat to the morality and respectability of the movement. In the latter category Prostitute were located. The Prostitute from Kanpur in UP during the civil disobedience movement were stopped from joining the movement and were said to be unfit to sit near other ladies by members of the District Congress Committee. Even Gandhi himself refused to accept the Prostitutes as Congress members unless they gave up their unworthy profession. Similarly, the 'fallen sisters' in Barisal, East Bengal wanted to participate in Congress activities were advised by Gandhi to choose alternative professions to facilitate their participation. However, there was an apparent uneasy relationship which the women from the privileged background shared with other women who were either prostitutes or from the untouchable caste.

Therefore, there was a necessity of drawing distinctions between the nationalist women and the other social groups such as Prostitutes and untouchables. It became an integral feature of defining national character and setting cultural boundaries. 'Nationalist ideology, that is beliefs about the nation- who we are, what we represent- becomes the basis and justification for national actions, that is to say, activities of state

and nation building, the fight for independence ... the exclusion or inclusion of various categories of members' (Nagel 1998: 248) (Thapar-Bjorkert 2006: 99).

#### **4.10. Women lead the Movement**

The male leaders realized that they would require the help of the women associates in continuing nationalist work once the men were arrested.

However, responding to the calls of local and national leaders, women of different communities and all walks of life came out to join the struggle, marches and demonstrations. They came forward at this time. The immediate factor which led to this participation was the arrest of all the national leaders along with few local leaders. The women were seen participating and taking charge of the movement in the absent of men leaders. This provided a fillip in the movement. The women by then became the active participants of the movement and started organizing meetings and processions.

Saryu Prasad Poddar, a freedom fighter from Kuseong asked Puttalimayadevi to stay invisible until the movement needs a great help in time of emergency. Gradually Puttalimaya who was too anxious to join the movement started working actively for the movement. While organizing meetings the women leaders like Sabitri Devi, Puttalimayadevi Poddar from the local areas of Kurseong also got arrested.

#### **4.11. The Swadeshi Movement**

The Swadeshi Movement had a most striking feature as the women took the pledge to use swadeshi goods. The impact of the socio – religious movements and institutions in awakening the women is noteworthy. Some of the women started participating in the politico – religious meetings. But it is also a fact that the women of Darjeeling like their counterparts in other province also suffered from inertia and at least in the initial stages the women did not take part in the struggle for freedom. Hence, such a state of affairs continued for a long period because neither woman showed much interest in public affairs themselves nor their families allowed them to take part in them. The women in Darjeeling were not educated and this was the reason behind which kept them confined to their domestic roles and had no inclination to come out and take part in public matters.

During the movement there was a necessity for the boycott of foreign cloths which became a symbol of all resistance. Gandhi asserted that for the mass mobilization the nationalist symbols had to relate to the private lives of people and

must touch their daily existence. In the household item cloth was an essential one and khadi could be spun on charkha (spinning wheel) within the domestic sphere. But its nationalist significance transcended the boundaries of the domestic sphere into the public sphere. Thus, in the public sphere men and women wore it as a mark of national pride and a symbol of the nationalist movement. A woman dressed in hand spun khadi cloth was seen more ‘charismatic’, ‘respectable’ and ‘patriotic’ than woman dressed ornately in fine silk.

However, it is noted that on certain occasions the volunteers proved to be so convincing that shopkeepers sought their help in removing the foreign cloth to the godowns. In conducting their foreign cloth picketing the volunteers used three tactics. First, they walked up and down in front of the cloth shops advocating the use of only swadeshi cloth. The volunteers apart from preventing the sale of foreign cloth they pursued those who did buy foreign cloth until they handed back their purchases or agreed to have their bales of foreign cloth sealed.

Since, at the end of each day the foreign clothes were burnt in public bonfires as ‘Holi’ the name of an Indian festival that celebrates the victory of good over evil. The good here was the Indian nation and the evil was the colonial ruler’s power. Thus, the boycott of foreign goods was to support the national cause as well as to symbolize the acts of pride in the indigenous industries. The burning of clothes publicly referred to as ‘Holi’ was also an instance of ‘propaganda by deed’ effectively used by the Congress for mobilization.

In Kurseong too the swadeshi movement spread like a wild fire. A Bengali man came to Kurseong from Calcutta to teach the value of Charkha to spread swadeshi value. This had a great impact on Sabitri Devi and she left for Calcutta in 1918 join a centre to learn the art of making thread with charkha (spinning wheel). She became so efficient within a short period that the Bengal Board of Charkha made her leader to take part in one khadi and charkha exhibition organized in Muzaffarpur, Bihar. Her expertise in the exhibition made her popular and she became familiar among the leaders of All India Congress Party. Later on, her dedicated service to the flood affected areas of Bihar in 1920 made her an all India leader. This all made Mahatma Gandhi to invite her to Sabarmati Ashram where she was renamed as Sabitri Devi instead Helen Lepcha which was her original name by Bapuji. It was said that Gandhiji felt a foreign touch in the name of Helen and made her swadeshi by pure Indian name. **See for Photo-17**

During the boycott of foreign goods at Siliguri and setting them to fire, Sabitri Devi with twelve others were arrested and were accused for three months laborious imprisonment in Darjeeling jail. The Amrita Bazaar Patrika in its issue dated 30<sup>th</sup> January 1922, wrote ‘Sabitri Devi with the Congress Secretary E. Ahmed and Gorkha volunteers have been arrested.

In 1935 Putalimayadevi Poddar formed the women organization in Kurseong to manufacture Khadi cloths and to spread patriotic feelings among the children. All these activities made her notorious to the British Government and she was called at police station where she received a warning to leave the movement. Slowly the common people started getting associated with the movement.

The British Administration responded these Satyagrahis on two levels. On one hand the British would dismiss picketing as a tamasha or spectacle and undermine the nationalist leanings of the volunteers by referring to them as professional agitators or extremists. In relation to the participation of women, the administration mentioned these women as less possessed of sober judgement and more and more led away by what they see in the papers. Yes it is true that of any political mass movement the people are carried away by national sentiment but it would be incorrect to suggest that women were thoughtless or irrational. In fact the women suggested themselves the ambiguities and contradictions they experienced. Some women did not have much interest in the movement but they conducted certain acts to express solidarity with women who were supporting the nationalist cause including the acts such as giving up their foreign cloths.

On the other hand, a political concern was expressed by the British which were reflected through a tightening of the ordinances. The Prevention of Intimidation Ordinance of 1930 was expanded to include ‘molestation’, ‘boycott’ and ‘unlawful instigation’, to deal with cloth and liquor shops picketers in several places of India. The administration alleged that through picketing the foreign clothes shops the Congress volunteers were out to make money by blackmail and terrorism.

There were women who gave up their ornaments and household valuables to the movement. Gandhi though had argued that wearing ornaments was a part of a male conspiracy to make women into ornaments but this idea was not reflected in women’s narratives. Rather for women giving up ornaments was related more to supporting the movement financially. During 1925-26 Mahatma Gandhi came to Darjeeling to meet

ailing C. R. Das. When Sabriti Devi met Gandhiji she dressed herself with gold ornaments. This act of her annoyed Gandhiji who asked her to live a simple life. Gandhi asked her to donate all her ornaments for the Swaraj Fund. Since then, she never wore any silver or gold ornaments in her life time. Even after independence she led a very simple life and never used any sort of luxury articles in her life.

#### **4.12. The Picketing of Liquor Shops**

Liquor was associated with both national and domestic economies. It was argued that for the British tax on liquor was a major source of revenue and if women could successfully stop the sale of liquor then they would improve the financial conditions of many households with male drinkers. Gandhi believed that ‘only those women who have drunkards as their husbands know what havoc the drink devil works in homes that once were orderly and peace-giving’ (Gandhi 1930: 121). Moreover, the opposition to the sale of liquor was a symbolic of the purity and respectability of the nationalist movement and Gandhi believed that women were best suited for this.

However, giving up liquor was linked with respect for the nation and for its women, the bearer of national respectability. The tactics of women while picketing the liquor shop was same as those of the foreign cloth shops. Thus, women would go in deputation to the owners of the liquor booths and ask them to give up this trade. They would also visit homes and persuade men to give up drinking.

In Kurseong the freedom fighter Putalimayadevi and Harish Chettri realized the problem of liquor consumption in the locality. The consumption of liquor was not only a matter of economy but it was destroying families too. The drunken husband usually abuses his wife and beats up children making life more miserable. Putalimaya and Harish too faced many such people. Even at times they warned those by making them handicap or getting them arrested. Thus, one should understand that the use of liquor by men in the family not only led to the suffering of women and children in the domestic sphere but it also badly affects the financial conditions of a houses which were already in a conditions of minimal survival economically.

Therefore, the issues of picketing liquor shops became so effective that those women who did not participated in the specific national campaigns like breaking the salt law or picketing foreign clothes shops now were seen in the processions against the liquor shops. A particular kind of procession was held which was a kind of traditional

forms of women's public appearances in festivals. This was politicized by the nationalist leaders. This procession was non other than Prabhat Pheri which was only taken out in the early hours of the morning where groups of women would leave their homes and walked to the temples. They would sing song of devotional which concentrated largely on the grievances of the people and the injustice perpetuated by the government and the police. Pheris was a non violent protest against the colonial rule and the purpose of it was to increase the awareness among the women towards their public surroundings. One of the most popular songs dealt with the theme of Gandhi's charkha and swadeshi (Times of India, 11 August 1930, p.4).

However, the traditional pheris would end at a temple and nationalist procession would end in a meeting. These meeting encouraged the women who attended it. Women leaders gave a provocative speech on issues concerning the political situation along with the social and economic lives of populace were also raised.

Hence, within the domestic sphere the concept of dharma was associated with women maintaining healthy households and offering support to their husbands. Women when stepped out onto the streets the domestic values of dharma were transformed into duty towards the nation and the expectation that women would uphold nationalist values.

At this point of time nearly all the leaders were arrested following British repression of the movement and all the nationalist activities were consolidated underground. In Kurseong a meeting was held on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1942 at the Municipal Park. It was under the auspicious of the Congress Socialist Party of India, with Putalimayadevi Tamangni Poddar, wife of Sarju Prasad Poddar, Secretary, Kurseong S.D.C.C, on the chair. About 150 persons attended. Speakers recalled the August 1942 disturbances and the efforts of the leaders to oust the British from India. They declared that they believed in revolution, and urged the people to unite and to be prepared for the imminent struggle for freedom. They criticized the Cabinet Mission, the interim Government and the Constituent Assembly as British Devices to retard the progress of India towards freedom. During the Quit India movement Sabitri Devi a Congress Satyagrahi worked quite closely with few Congress members. Since, the activities of these women were non-violent in nature, they operated the underground movement. On one occasion it was said that when Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose was house arrested in Kidde Pahar (hill) Sabitri Devi played an important role. She was assigned the task of

supplying bread to Netaji. Sabitri Devi played a clandestine role by supplying secret letters, information and even dresses for Netaji during his house arrest. M.P Rai in his book ‘Bir Jatiko Amar Kahani’ has mentioned that Sabitri Devi also helped Netaji to escape from his house at Kurseong and reach Europe through Kabul.

On 8<sup>th</sup> August 1942, in Bombay, there was a huge slogan of swaraj and on 9<sup>th</sup> August all the prominent leaders were arrested. On 12<sup>th</sup> August in Kurseong a huge Jan Sabha was organized and on that day Saryu Prasad was arrested. On 13<sup>th</sup> August Putalimaya who was then 22 years of age organized a huge procession in Kurseong along with Harish Chettri, Janaklal Kulmi etc. where all of them were arrested. This incident led to huge protest by the people who surrounded the police station with the demand of the release of their leaders or to arrest them too. The policemen were very much frightened by this act and from backdoor took all the arrested leaders to the Palikan Tourist Lodge through the garden and were sent to Darjeeling jail with the help of a vehicle. The British Government asked them to sign a letter which would prevent them from participating the movement but the leaders refused to do so and all the leaders were kept in jail with the criminals. Even in jail the leaders demanded for all the provisions that a Rajnaitik Kaidi (political prisoners) receives and went for a hunger strike. Finally their demand was accepted. During her stay in jail Putalimaya read Gita and did spinning every day. On January 1944, she was released from jail but her health deteriorated due to her long stay in jail.

#### **4.13. The Revolutionary Nationalist Women of India**

The women revolutionary in particular challenged the effectiveness of non-violence as an efficient strategy for political liberation. The young women undertook the revolutionary activities within and outside the domestic sphere. Unlike the experiences of the non-violent satyagrahis the women who took the revolutionary path were exposed to various degree of violence. There are several reason associated with women becoming revolutionaries. In the context of Bengal it is argued that if the Gandhian movement encouraged the mass participation of women in the freedom struggle then the revolutionary women too made an equal participants. The need for women revolutionary was felt when many young men of Bengal were imprisoned or seen as suspect after the Chittagong Armory Raids in April 1930 since with the reviving of the Bengal Criminal Amendment Law Act.

Beside this, the Gorkha soldiers too played a significant role in the freedom struggle. During the Second World War Gorkha soldiers resigned from their job and joined the Azaz Hind Fauz led by Subash Chandra Bose. While crossing Burma they all came to Dimapur (Nagaland). The British Government arrested many of them and given death sentence in Lal Quilla in Delhi. Therefore, in such a period of great sacrifice there is an incident of femininity trait of sacrifice and the sacrifice of their body for the nation. Since, sacrifice has always been a culturally approved behavior for women. The contribution of two great children Indreni and Sabitri Thapa of 7-8 years, their revolutionary activities in the freedom movement are worth mentioning.

After the formation of the Azad Hind Fauz under the supreme command of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose war was declared against the Allied Forces. When battle had reached Imphal, close to the border of Burma many adult lay injured in a hospital camp. Bose asked if there were any volunteers left help to block an oncoming tank. Two children who were 8 years olds Kumari Indreni Thapa and Sabitri stepped forward and said they would do whatever was necessary. These two children were strapped with bombs and camouflaged with leaves and lay in the path of the tank. This saved the rest of the people. Subash Chandra Bose had no words but tears were rolling down for the bravery of these young patriots. (Indian Gorkhas, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2015).

On 21<sup>st</sup> October 1943, Subash Chandra Bose assumed command and made a Provincial Government of Free India and formed a Cabinet. He recruited many people from the army and civilians and even had a contingent of women called the Rani Jhansi regiment. One of the important members of Jhasi Ki Rani Regiment in Kalimpong was a lady name Sunkesari Chettri. Since, her husband was a Secretary of Gorkha League, her entry into politics became a family legacy. During the period the women found it very challenging to enter the political scenario even if their husband was already a part of it. The society didn't allow women to join in any part of public front whether it is a social or a political one. Mrs. Chettri being a literate person was fully aware of the fact of injustice of British Administration. Every day she used to read local newspapers and pamphlet to update herself about the political events of the movement all over India.

There were many Gorkhas who joined the INA and the women joined the Rani Jhansi regiment. Among them was Mrs. Sunkesari Chettri (Chauhan) from Kalimpong. She was an active member of Jhasi Ki Rani Regimen led by Subash Chandra Bose. Along with this Regiment she was also a member of Gorkha League. There were many

other women who also joined the Regiment from Kalimpong. They were Phoolmaya Dahal generally known by the name German, Pavitramala Moktan, Pema Doma, Prembadha Subba, Tiny Gurung, Shanka Gurung etc. Among them Prembadha Subba's father Randhir Subba was also a member of Gorkha League. In 1939-1940 when the Boycott Movement was carried out all over India. The necessity for the same was felt in the hill areas too. The boycott of foreign cloths became a symbol of all resistance. According to Gandhi the mass mobilization of the nationalist symbols had to relate to the private lives of people and must touch their daily existence. This gave a huge opportunity to the women to come forward in Public from their domestic threshold. **See for Photo 11-12.**

In Kalimpong it was the local people who selected her as a leader for the movement. As she was an educated and courageous lady, she agreed and joined INA. She now decided to participate in the movement with more vigor. The news of successful picketing of the stores all over India greatly influenced Mrs. Chettri. She felt that we Indians are not slave anymore and it's time now to put an end to this. This is our land so why do we stay under the rule of others. The sons of the soil now have to prove themselves. The people should understand the value of education. This is the reason why we are facing such problems and might be facing in near future. She emphasized on education for all the section of society. Beside, she also decided to dramatize the effective and important role of women. She felt women by nature are more fitted for the delicate non-violent picketing of foreign cloth shops than men. Picketing was more a matter of moral persuasion and conversion than coercion. Beside, women also have a sense of morality. The use of charkha and khadi which were powerful symbolic domestic items do not need any little or formal education for these women. As the period was marked by illiteracy and the majority of women participants from the district were uneducated. On one occasion of the Swadeshi Movement she along with other members burnt the foreign cloths in the Mela Ground, Kalimpong. While on the procession and parade a huge protest was raised against the administration and the slogan of "Bande Mataram" was sung by the women of the Regiment when Subash Chandra Bose came to Kurseong she met him and hearing his speech encouraged her to work more actively for the movement. She also participated in many parades and procession of Jhasi Ki Rani Regiment. Thus, such historic movement helped these women to make a contribution for the motherland.

#### 4.14. Conclusion

The contribution of the past women leaders in Politics and Society is outstanding and is truly something to treasure. Such devotions and sincerity of woman are examples set during the period when the society was backward and education was absent, although women being mostly uneducated had the abilities to form leadership and bring dynamic changes in the society at large. They lack access to education and their lack of literacy, vocational skills and exposure did constrains the ability of many women but there were still few extraordinary women who exceeded all the possibilities to create a new world view of women's power and excellence in both Politics and Society. Thus, in such society the challenges faced by the women were too difficult and it was not an easy task as they had to listen to people's taunts and allegations. Yet the women showed great courage and tolerated it by continuing their political role.

However, no single factor in the nationalist movement can be delineated which can explain the mass participation of middle class women. The conservative norms affected both the elite women and the ordinary middle class with either no education or very little education. Since, the elite women had the support of their male leaders from their own households making their entry in public much easier than those of the ordinary middle class women. The nationalist leaders like Gandhi and Nehru with their political charismatic quality further facilitated this process. Thus, the elite women shared the same social norms as middle class women but they needed a stronger political platform through which they could motivate themselves as well as other middle class women. However, this was provided through two channels, first the incorporation of domestic articles like salt and cloth into the political discourse. The ordinary middle class women as could relate to these items of daily use. Second, the nationalist symbolism associated with women as nurturers and defenders of civilization elevated the existing roles of women in both public and domestic domains, facilitated by the wider favorable nationalist atmosphere of segregation and respectability. Thus, the latter was more important both for the elite as well as the middle class women. Therefore, the women once negotiated the diffused public private boundaries; they had the choice of adopting the different political ideologies of either non-violent Gandhism or revolutionary strategies which often used violence as a means of achieving political aims.

## HILL HEROINES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON SOCIAL REFORMS IN THE HILLS

One of the marginalized regions in India, important only as a resort for the British, the elites sending their kids to school in the hills, a picture of perfect harmony with the existing regime's masters. But there existed another side to the story that was interestingly never a part of the official discourse of future India in the narratives of the mainstream historians, the stories of the people of Darjeeling who participated in the nationalist movement of India. Political awareness in the people also generated social change in the form of countering and challenging the existing social structures as well as changes in the interpersonal relations within the domestic sphere, changes in the form of resistance and empowerment of women. Following narratives present a glimpse of the nature of impact and the subsequent changes.

### 4. (i) Puttalimaya Devi Poddar

The most important Nepali woman freedom fighter was Putalimayadevi Poddar. She was a Hindu middle class woman from Kurseong involved in the nationalist movement. In 1934-35, one unknown man was seen wearing Khaddar cloth in Kurseong. This inspired Harish Chettri and Putalimaya Devi in joining the freedom movement. The person was none other than Saryu Prasad Poddar who was a Congressman and had come from Bihar. She was too eager to meet Saryu Prasad Poddar because she wanted to join the movement. Putalimaya with the help of Harish Chettri finally met Saryu Prasad Poddar to whom she expressed her desire. Poddar was surprised to see a girl of 14-15 years of age who was so firm in her motives. But he insisted her to remain as back stage participants of the movement. So Poddar asked her to stay invisible and not to be an active member which could help the movement in time of great need. The society in those days was very conservative towards women's involvement in the movement. Beside, to become a member of the Congress was too risky due to the strict administration of the British rule. The British Government declared that any person who was close associate of the Congress would be considered illegal. Since then, no Congress work or Congress Office was opened in Kurseong. Saryu Prasad, considering Putalimaya's age asked her to return back to school. While studying in school, Putalimaya always met the Congressmen and kept all the information about the Congress activities of the country. The members were in constant vigilance and were at any time in the risk of getting arrested due to their activities

against the administration. Thus, Saryu Prasad Poddar decided the youth members to perform social work rather than political and bring the local people closer to the Congress party. Hence, Harish Chettri came across Poddar and joined the Congress Party. **See for Photo-18**

Putalimaya's domestic life was also too challenging as her parents were against her involvement in the nationalist movement. She had to face many problems due to her activities. She was beaten by her mother and her father was completely against her decision of participating in the movement.

Initially she avoided confronting her father and tried to work her way around the familial constraints. She realized that all nationalist activities had to be undertaken clandestinely while maintaining a united domestic façade. For example, her mother was too sick and there were three younger sisters at home. Putalimaya was the eldest among the three siblings and all responsibility fell on her shoulder.

By the end of 1936, with the help of Pratiman Singh Lama, Harish Chettri and Savitri Devi the Congress Saka Karylai (Branch Office) finally started in Kurseong. During this period she was in class 9 and when the Congress Committee was established Putalimaya became the member of the Congress Party.

#### **4. (ii) The early life of Putalimayadevi Poddar: narrated by her son Surrendranath Poddar.**

The teacher entered the class room. Putalimaya was on the first row. In an angry tone teacher said 'there is a complaint against you'. 'Every night you were seen going to the Pathshala (school) and learning all nonsense things'. 'After that in the market you gather children and roam around singing songs?' Madam asked in a fuming voice. Putalimaya nodded and said yes I do. Madam warned her to stop these activities immediately or the lady inspector standing beside her will punish Putalimaya. Beside, if the situation arises then her parents will have to visit the school and her name will be taken out from the school register. The hideous act that her teacher was accusing her of was nothing but merely an act where every evening after school she used to gather few children in haat bazaar (market place) and roam around singing "bande mataram" and "kadam kadam milaye ja". This little act of hers created a huge problem to the school management and there was a chaos in the school. Thus she had no other choice than to leave the school. She came back to the class and collected her books, bags and other

belongings. Since her father was a government employee she knew that her father would never allow her to leave school, and if she leaves school she will not be allowed to stay at home either. Thus, in such fear and confusion she decided not to go home rather went to her aunt's place in Ambateh which was a small village. She told everything to her aunt. Her aunty insisted her to inform her father as well. But Puttalimaya refused to do so. When Puttalimaya did not returned home after eight days her father Madan Lama came to Ambateh. He knew everything as the Principal had told him about the incident. Being a government employee Madan Lama was very worried for his job as it might be at risk due to her. Since Puttalimaya used to take care of her family members, her father was compelled to come to take her back home. Puttalimaya's mother was very sick and there were three younger sisters at home. Puttalimaya was the eldest among the three siblings and everyday she used to clean, prepare meals for the family and do all the everyday household chores. She always had to make her younger sisters ready for school. Beside, she looked after her sick mother, giving her medicines etc. This was her routine work and after finishing it she could attend her school. While returning from school she had to buy vegetables and groceries. At night she again prepares dinner for the family. On Sunday she goes to dhobi Khola( river) to wash clothes due to the scarcity of water in the region. Merely fifteen years old Puttalimaya had huge responsibility to look after the whole family and their well being. Thus, Madan Lama had a very tough time managing the family in her absence. So, Madan Lama asked his sister to convince her to return home and he will not force her to go to school anymore. The very next day Puttalimaya immediately returned home and started with her everyday household chores. Her father never asked her to go to school again.

In 1937 Congress Committee was formed in Kurseong and Darjeeling. Saryu Prasad Poddar the most prominent member of Congress invited Puttalimaya Devi, Harish Chhetri, Kaluke Lama, Badame Ghising etc to join the committee as they were very much interested in doing so. But to become a member to the Congress was too risky due to the strict administration of the British rule. The members were in constant vigilance and at any time they might be arrested due to their activities against the administration. Thus, Saryu Prasad Poddar decided these youth members to perform social work rather than political and bring the local people closer to the Congress party.

However, Puttalimaya felt that there should be a women's association to help such backward and down trodden women. A women organization was formed for dealing with problems faced by women. The centre of the organization was Gorkha Library where every Sunday all the women gathered and discuss their problems with the members of the organization. All the efforts were made to solve their problems as much as they can. Hence, in this direction Puttalimaya was much supported by the women of the Padma Lodge (Hira Devi Pradhan and Chandra Pradhan). The main objective of this organization was health and hygiene, education etc. The women who were very sick were taken to the hospital. The members of the family and kids were also taken for regular checkup by providing them with necessary medicines. The women were even imparted the knowledge of the values of education and how important the education is for their children and necessity of getting the school admission for them. They were also provided the basic knowledge of rearing of children, health and hygiene etc. The effort made by this organization led to the decrease of physical violence against women by their husband to a very great extent. In 1935 Gorkha Dukh Niwarak Sammelan was organized in association with this women organization. But this women organization had to face many challenges. During these days the society was very backward and was very difficult to make people understand the value of women and their pride. Women were seen just as a material object and could be done any kind of torture. Men who ignored warning of the organization was taken to G.D.N.S and sometime beaten up. Thus this women organization became a great support system for the down trodden women of the society. Within a year the number of the member of organization became 150. The organization also took care of women who were not seen with respect in the society. These women were given education of moral values and moral character.

However, a night school was started for the Harijan people. A person named Bhola Raut who was a sweeper in the Municipal Corporation called as "Bhaiya" was very fond of Congress and Gandhiji. Thus, every evening he was seen with Saryu Prasad Poddar in his activities. It was almost one week Bhola Raut did not turn up and was not seen in any activities. Thus noticing this Poddar asked Puttalimaya to visit Bhola Raut who lived in Harijan barrack. Puttalimaya with few Congress members went to Harijan barrack. Bhola lived in the third floor. When they reached there they found out that Bhola was suffering from typhoid from almost 10 days. After the visit Puttalimaya started visualizing the place where Bhola lived, its surroundings and

conditions. There were dirt, dust all over the place. Even inside their house the condition was no different. Women and children too were very dirty and lacked hygiene. She was surprised to see that a person who has a responsibility for cleaning the entire town, himself was living in such a pathetic condition where there was no sign of cleanliness. So, she decided to work for the betterment of this community and improve their living conditions. Hence, every evening she started visiting Bhola Raut's place. The children of the barrack usually stood at the door of Bhola to see Puttalimaya. She noticed that the children of this barrack lacked discipline and knowledge. She saw the children's unwashed face, uncombed hair, dirty clothes etc. Hence, she decided to make a difference in their life. Everyday Puttalimaya brought chocolates for these children and in this way the children became fond of her. After two weeks Bhola recovered from his illness. Therefore, Puttalimaya along with few others decided to open a night school for the Harijan people. She asked Bhola Raut to help her in this mission because Bhola Raut was treated a leader in his community. Thus, a Harijan night school was started for one hour from 5:30pm to 6:30pm. In the beginning of the class all the students were asked to sing "raghupati raghav raja ram" In front of the picture of Gandhiji, each student were provided with a slate and books by the great lady named Heera Pradhan. Beside this, they also started a programme which would help the Harijan brothers to get rid of alcoholic problems. Generally they used to do bhajan and kirtan (religious songs). The mothers who were interested in education were also imparted education in this school. Thus this school was open to everyone irrespective of any age group. Every Saturday the student had NCC class where they were taught the basic education of their personal hygiene and to maintain the cleanliness of the surroundings they lived in. On Sunday there were classes for the men who had to clean their houses and the surroundings of the Harijan Barrack. The lectures were provided to these men for not consuming liquor, not to take money in interest and save money for their children's future. Thus, this night school became one of the most efficient tools for improving the living standard and generating awareness among the Harijan people.

Beside, she also realized that women too needed a platform through which they could participate equally with the men in the freedom movement of India. She was farsighted enough not to just restrict the fervor of patriotism among the adult men and women. Instead the women should be made the messengers of the message of patriotism to take back home and to inspire the minds of the children so that the entire community gets motivated and inspired by the feeling of nationalism. With this

objective in mind, in the same year she also formed the women organization that manufactured Khadi cloths and were taught to spread patriotic feelings among the children. Her activities made her notorious to the British Government and she received a warning in the Police Station to leave the movement. Both the Harijan Samaj and the women's organization became very strong among the common people. In Mahila samiti the women openly started preaching the nationalist movement by keeping the photograph of Gandhiji. In all the hill sub-divisions- Kurseong, Darjeeling and Kalimpong the Congress Samiti began to hold a strong position.

In February 1940 Poddar went to participate in the Congress Conference in Ramgarh and side by side went to Gogri Gandhi Ashram for training. Before leaving for the same the responsibility of the Congress felt on Puttalimaya Devi and others. Thus, Puttalimaya with others had to visit villages after villages in order to spread the objective of the Congress i.e. the aim of free India or Indian independence. They usually made a group of 5 and went to villages. In doing so they had to take shelter in one of the houses in the village. The motive behind this was to make people understand about Gandhiji, the Congress party and India's independence and the ill motive of the British government. Since, it was very difficult to stay at one place as the number of members were huge they usually made a group of 4 to 5 people. Within a period of 3 months they continued their procession from Sonada till Teesta resulting in huge amount of people participating in the Congress party. On May 1940 Poddar returned to Kurseong. But unfortunately he was boycotted from the district by the administration. This greatly affected the activities of the Congress to a great extent. No Sabha (meeting) was called during this period. In order to keep the activities of the Congress alive Puttalimaya, Harish Chhetri, Kalu Singh, etc continued the Harijan Pathsala, Savahara Din Mazdoor Sangh, Mahila Samity, Gariman Sangathan, Dhobi Sangathan etc. They continued their meeting through these associations. **See for Photo-19**

On 13 August 1940 Puttalimaya was arrested during a procession. However it is noteworthy that in all over India the only Gorkha lady to be arrested during the freedom struggle was Puttalimaya. She was imprisoned for four years. After her release from the jail in 1944 her father completely discarded her and she had to leave her house forever.

After Independence she dedicated her life for social work and was famously referred to as "mataji" in the society. Till her death she continued her work for the poor and down trodden people of the society.

In Kurseong there was one incident which was beautifully jotted down by the freedom fighter Saryu Prasad Poddar in his book ‘Swadhinta Sangram Darjeeling Aau Moh’. A lady named Puttalimayadevi and Harish Chettri were returning from night school in Chowkbazaar suddenly they heard noises coming from one house in the locality. It was a house of a person named Birkhe Kami, his wife was shouting and screaming very loudly. They lived in a small rented house in Chowkbazaar. Birkhe Kami worked in a metal shop and everyday while returning from work he used to get drunk and physically abuse his wife and children. His wife too was working as a maid in three houses to maintain their livelihood. Every night same fights used to take place in their house and the neighbors were fed up of all these chaos as it disturbed the whole locality. In case if any neighbor comes and console him, he used all slang words on them. Thus, hardly any body dared to interfere in their matter. Hearing these noises Puttalimaya and Harish entered his house. They asked Birkhe to stop abusing his wife but as usual Birkhe instead of listening to them started verbally abusing them. As there was no other option left, Puttalimaya and Harish took him outside and beat him up nicely. Harish also warned him that if he continued like this than he will get him arrested or will break his head and legs and get him admitted to the hospital. Then he told Birkhe’s wife that if he again continues the same act then she can come to them without any hesitation. The next day Birkhe’s wife Maiti came to Puttalimaya’s place and informed that he did not say anything and didn’t have liquor. Thus, one should understand that the use of liquor by men in the family not only led to the suffering of women and children in the domestic sphere but it also badly affects the financial condition of a house which were already in a conditions of minimal survival economically.

The year 1938 was the most important year for the Congress party of Kurseong. It was in the month of April when some strangers were seen at one place nearby Hillcart road announcing about the ‘carnival’ programme in the region. The Congress party through reliable sources came to know about the objective of the carnival. The carnival was nothing more but a mere programme of different types of gambling. The main objective of the carnival was nothing but to make money as much as possible through gambling (locally called Juwa). The carnival programme was published in the newspaper. However, the Congress party was against this carnival as they were aware that this would affect the financial conditions of the people of the region. Thus, Pratiman Singh Lama wrote a letter to the administration (F.A.Karim). He also wrote a

letter to the people who were organizing the carnival programme for its cancellation.  
**See for Photo-20**

It was on September 1938 before three weeks of Dasera the carnival programme was about to begin in Hill Cart, Kurseong. A huge posturing was made from Tindharia till Sonada for the carnival programme. Hence the Congress members of Kurseong went to meet the Mahakuma Sasak (SDO) Mr. F.A.Karim in against the carnival programme. The members of the Congress were Pratiman Singh Lama, Saryu Prasad Poddar, Puttalimaya Devi, Harish Chhetri, Mangal Singh Rumba etc. The main reason for the Congress against the carnival was that the community was not in good financial condition and this carnival would make their condition worse. The people had saved little money for Dushera and in such situation if this carnival takes place these people will be tempted to spend their little saving in the carnival. Thus, as a result it will worsen their financial condition and will make their life miserable due to lack of money to celebrate the festival.

But unfortunately Mr. Karim supported the programme of carnival. Many discussions were held between the Congress members and F.A.Karim but no solution could be drawn. The SDO however in a rude voice replied that we have already given them permission to organize the programme and there is no way to stop them. Thus, the Congress member made toil (group) and started procession against the carnival programme. They tried to make people realize that this programme was nothing but a mere anti social activity which would ruin their financial conditions. Attending this programme would be like going against one's homeland. Finally, Pratiman Singh Lama made a strong announcement by saying, "*thik cha garaunu hosh ham paani herchau carnival kasari huncha*"( ok let the carnival take place we will also see how can it start). On the other hand, even Mr. Karim said, "do whatever you can". But the Congress members had no other option than picketing. On the next day they organized a meeting among its members and social workers. Planning was made because still there was one week time left. Thus, a procession was organized to protest against the carnival programme. In the mean time rumours started to spread that there are possibilities of agitation and fights during the carnival programme. These rumours were spread by milkman who also supported the Congress in its mission. The most important members were Saryu Prasad Poddar, Puttalimaya, Pratiman Singh Lama, Harish Chhetri, P.B.Lama, Kale Singh etc. Thus, the most important role played in this

direction was by the women organization which was quite commendable. These women made groups of 5 each and started a procession from Tindharia to Sonada making people aware of the real motive behind the carnival programme. They went to every villages and tea gardens to make people aware of the programme and prevent them from attending it. P.B Lama and Harish Chhetri was the main in charge of picketing. In each place five members were alerted so that people could not attain the carnival. Some were given threatening. But none of the members were arrested due to the fact that the members of the party had clear motive not to ruin the economic life of the people who were already in a degraded conditions. The organizer of the carnival programme informed Mr. Karim. Knowing all this Mr. Karim came to the spot by jeep and was very angry. He had planned to arrest few Congress members. But when he saw a large number of Congress members on dharna he had no other option left but to leave the spot without arresting anyone.

Saryu Prasad Poddar with few others went to the Police Station. His vehicle stopped in front of Poddar and with angry voice he said, “yo kaam ramro bhayena (you didn’t do a good job). While returning back in his fuming tone he said, “all of you have not done this”, “tapai haaru leh prasann lai chunauti dinu hudai cha (you all are challenging the administration), yas ko pratifal ramro hudai nah” (consequences of this will not turn good). But Poddar answered, “haami leh tapai lai aanurodh gareko thiye (we had requested you), tapai le sunnu bhayena (but you didn’t listen), juwa roknu gair kanuni ho bhanne (if its unlawful to stop gambling), haamro viruddh action linu hosh(then u can take action against us), tara hami yo carnival hunu di daina (but we will not let this carnival to take place), paarinaam je sukkai hosh (whatever be the consequences). After three days when not a single person came to the programme it had to be closed immediately. Ultimately the carnival programme had to end. Thus, it was a huge success on the part of the Congress members and a clear defeat to the administration.

But this success did not continued for long as the second carnival was organized during the festival period (Dasera and Diwali) in the Mountibet ground. But within a week again a posturing was seen on the roadside of the carnival programme. This programme was definitely a huge one in comparison to the previous one. Saryu Prasad Poddar knew that the failure of the previous carnival was a huge insult to Mr. Karim thus in retaliation this second carnival was being organized in a massive scale. So in a

meeting Poddar said, “*ghaiteh baagh ajay alik ghaatak huncha bhanne, timi haaru leh nischai pani carnival lai safal banau nu ko laagi thulo yojna banaye ko hunu parcha, timi haaru le jasori paani carnival lai safal banau na prayas garne chau, yo hamro nimti thula chunauti ho*”, “*abo hami paani paachi haath na pani sakdai nau*”, “*yas karan leh aba carnival ko viruddh agi bhann da pani jordar prachar hunu parcha*”.(wounded tiger becomes more dangerous and to make carnival successful, you must have made a big plan which is a great challenge for us. Now we won't step back too and there should be a more powerful programme against the carnival than before).

The news about the carnival spread everywhere. Even it was published in the newspapers. On the other hand, the Congress members too were planning against the carnival programme. The Congress party was not given permission to organize Jan Sabha. Though they had only one month left in hand they were prepared to make the carnival a failure. They started making elaborate efforts to make the carnival an unsuccessful event. The women activists also played a huge role in this direction. Groups were formed with 10 people in each group and were sent to villages and tea gardens to make people aware of the carnival and not to attend it by any means. Everyday these groups went to two three villages doing procession against the carnival. The Congress party also requested the Gorkha Dukha Niwarak Sammelan and Gorkha Jan Pustakalaya members to join hands with them in this mission. The day of the carnival took place. Swami Sachidananda, Pratiman Singh Lama, Saryu Prasad Poddar, Mangal Singh Rumba, all the members of Mahila samaj, Harijan people gathered at the gate of carnival programme in Mountebet ground. On the other hand administration had posted one inspector and 15 to 20 policemen at the venue.

Finally the day of carnival took place. On the day of the programme Swami Sachidananda came to Kurseong from Darjeeling. All Congress members stood at the gate of the carnival programme and started their dharna against the programme. The women were also very active. Puttalimaya gathered all women from Mahila Samaj and women from Harijan community. However, in the first one hour of programme not a single person turned up. The people were rather interested in watching the fight between the administration and the Congress party instead of attaining the programme. The Congress members took Sachidanand with them to stop the programme. But there were security in the main gate where the programme was going on. The party members requested them to stop the programme and suddenly few drunken people came there.

They started to push and hit the Congress members. This time it seemed that even they (the carnival people) were prepared to face the Congress party. Swamiji was physically injured. But Swamiji, Pratiman Singh Lama and Saryu Prasad Poddar somehow controlled the situation. The main motive of the party was not to have any violent incident because it might have led them to imprisonment and the carnival programme would have successfully taken place without interference. Hence, the party members returned from the programme and went to market place to organize a Jan Sabha (mass meeting). When Pratiman Singh Lama was delivering his speech all of a sudden a man named Bhopal came in front of the crowd and threw torch light on Lama's face. Lama fell down on the floor but again stood up and continued his speech. The man Bhopal was arrested by the police. Finally, in Jan Sabha it was decided that from tomorrow in each gate of carnival four people would be provided for dharna (demonstration) and would request the people not to attain the programme. But on the other hand the administration too was alert as they wanted the carnival programme to be successful, so they also arranged few people who were prepared for violence. It was due to the fact that if any violence took place the Congress members could be easily arrested. But Poddar, Lama, Chhetri and others knew the motive of the administration. Hence, they were mentally prepared not to fall in any sort of violence. Since the situation was out of control Harish Chhetri in a very harsh voice told Poddar, "*tapai haaru dharna dinu hosh*" (you all continue with dharna), "*baaki moh maathi chhori dinu hosh*" (rest you leave it to me). To this Poddar replied, "*tara Harish bhai haami kunai prakaar ko ladai jhagra cha dianau, jhagra leh prasasan ko haath baliyo huncha*" (but brother Harish we don't want any violence because it will make the administration strong). Again Harish replied, "*daju niti ko kurah nah garnu*" (brother don't talk about rules), "*jhagra nah gaare ra pani jhagra ko dhamki tah dinu sakincha*" (though we will not engage into fight but can threaten them of violent consequence if they don't listen). Nevertheless, argument continued between Chhetri and Poddar. Ultimately Chhetri called few of his members from the market square and changed his clothes from usual kurta pyjama to khaki half pant and old green colour sweater which was his special dress. Chhetri said, "I know no hinsa (no violence). Thus, the day luckily went peacefully, but Poddar, Swamiji with few other members continued with their plan and stayed there till midnight. The following morning they arranged for picketing along with 8 to 10 members. Many assembled not for the carnival but to enjoy the situation. Among one group Puttalimaya was assigned in charge. Due to the situation that

prevailed on the previous day Poddar was quite tensed and warned all the members of his party not to indulge into any kind of violence. But when he reached the gate of the carnival he was surprised to see that there was not a single person guarding the gate like previous day. Later he came to know that the previous day Chhetri with his few men had beaten up the local goons and gave them warning not to inform the incidence to the police and if they do so they will have to face dire consequence. Therefore due to this not a single person was seen on the gate. Thus in this way the Congress was successful in making the carnival a failure for the second time as not a single person attended the carnival which continued for 9 days. Ultimately they were forced to end the carnival unsuccessfully.

Thus it was the effort of the Congress party that led to the failure of such huge carnival programme for the second time. Mr. Karim felt it very humiliating and took it as a matter of prestige. He wanted to teach Congress members a lesson but due to the fear of local population who were with the Congress members felt that if anything happens to these members the local people would go against the administration. Thus he had to remain silent and could not take any action.

#### **4. (iii) Maya Devi Chetry**

When Maya Devi was 11 years old she was taken to her aunt by her father Kul Bahadur. Her aunt lived in Giddapahar an outskirts of Kurseong between Siliguri in the plains and Darjeeling up in the hills. At that time Kurseong was densely forested and sparsely populated. The indigenous Lepchas called it ‘Kharsang’ as it was the land of the orchids. The forests were full of small sweet smelling white orchids. At that time Calcutta was the capital of British India and Darjeeling was a hill station which was considered to be a place to relax and recuperate from excessive heat. Here the major population consisted of Bhutias, Lepchas and Nepalese.

Maya Devi was short and fair like her mother and still wore the traditional guniu cholo (Nepali dress) and Nepali jewellery. She worked as a stone breaking labourer to make gravel for the contractors making roads. In this way she could make little money rather than taking charity from anybody.

Beside this, she cooked and cleaned and took lunch for her aunt as she was not used to such a hard life. Before, she lived a carefree child’s life at home. But here in

aunt's place she had to wake up at dark, collect firewood and water from the stream and roast corn for breakfast. She did all these in a dreamy haze most of the time.

There was a prevalent of child marriage in the region at that time. Maya at the age was only 13 years got married. But the marriageable age was 15 at court. Her aunt asked her to say 15 at court. Phupu was her only guardian. Maya got married to a man named Dil Bahadur Chhetry, a person twenty years older than her. They had a Hindu wedding. But Dil Bahadur was an upright and honest man. He started teaching Maya Devi at home.

#### **4. (iv) The Political Environment in Hills**

There were political stirrings and anti-colonial feelings among the people in the rest of India. The British made sure that the simple folk of the hills shouldn't get contaminated by making it an exclude area. This meant that there will be no representatives sent to the Legislative Council. Hence, there was no local voice in the political arena.

On 17<sup>th</sup> November 1921 when the Prince of Wales was to visit the country hartal was held all over the country. The streets were empty and the shops were closed. Even Darjeeling the peaceful hills caught the fever raging throughout the rest of the nation. Every where the black flags fluttered and western clothes were burned. Schools and colleges were also closed.

Mr. S.W.Goode, the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling District called a public meeting to warn the people of consequences if there was any trouble. Hundred of police were gathered in the area. The Congress workers were determined to initiate hartals against the visit of Prince of Wales to Kolkata. Dil Bahadur was very much inspired by Gandhi's philosophy and ultimately joined the Congress. He recalls that they were all so excited to go to jail in those days as it was an act of bravery and so they were all keen on being imprisoned. Some folk songs were prepared by them which they taught to students and volunteers and sent them singing throughout the towns. The elder folks were sent to the shops to ask them to close down. There were four volunteers with the captain who were sent to different areas.

The D.C and S.P. were furious and threatened the merchants to open their shops. The volunteers were arrested and were brought to the Chowk Bazar. Dil Bahadur with few others asked the shopkeepers to close their shops. With this

insolence the S.P was so furious that he ordered his men to beat him up. Dil Bahadur was bitten so badly that he became unconscious. He was imprisoned but ultimately released because of the scarcity of place in jail. He felt it was the saddest day of his life because he couldn't go to the 'Krishna Mandir' they gave the name for prison.

There were many Gorkha men who joined the INA and the women joined the Rani Jhansi regiment. Many of whom told Dil Bahadur and Maya Devi their war stories. Late Dilbir Singh who was also in I.N.A told Maya Devi about his and his friend's war stories and gave her his diary in the hope that she would write about them. Since, in the hills there was no press she sent her manuscript to Calcutta. When writing her book 'Swatantra Sangram' lost many pages of her manuscript during a Hindu-Muslims riot in Calcutta in 1946. During the freedom movement there are innumerable soldiers and civilians who fought and died but due to lack of record their names have gone all unsung.

Later, she wrote that being backward and mostly uneducated the Indian Nepalese didn't have many accounts of the sacrifices the people made for their country. These people were also tortured and hanged just like the others of the rest of the country for going against the regime. But Gorkhas name were synonymous with being loyalists to the British. It was the reason that in Calcutta and elsewhere they were pushed out of buses and trams and were also stoned, mistreated and were called traitors.

Maya sent a letter to Major General Shah Nawaz of the INA when he came to Calcutta:

I take the opportunity of welcoming you on behalf of the people of this Himalayan Hills, particularly the Gorkhas. Being myself a Gorkha woman, I hope I have every right to ventilate the grievances of our people who are backward in every step of their life, academically, financially and socially.

Dear Shah Nawaz Jee, I am reading lots of Articles about the I.N.A, but I see very little about the parts played by the Gorkhas in this Army. I had an opportunity to meet several Gorkha I.N.A Officers from whom I learnt that not only thousands of our Brave men volunteered and fought in I.N.A for freedom of India, but also there were several women in the Rani of Jhansi too. None could give me even an approximate figure of such brave men and women of who I am so proud. Of course some thing was given in the Press about Maj. Puran Singh. I was told that many Brave Gorkhas were

court martialled and some were even hanged, but it was not brought in the public's notice.

The Gorkhas have equally suffered untold miseries, readily courted jail, were ousted from their homes and villages, for the Freedom Movement of India, but only because they have no press, everything remains under curtains on the other hand any news of their activities (particularly of Gorkha soldiers who obey their officers blindly but loyally) which they do in favour of the Govt. come in the papers in the Front page with block letters. It naturally poisons the minds of all sections of people of India, who see us as their enemies. Recently there were some disturbances at Calcutta and our people especially Civilian Gorkha women and children had to suffer for nothing. They were ousted from the Lorries, Buses, Trams etc, refused food supply and were even insulted. As a result the Gorkha of Darjeeling and other Hill areas wanted to take revenge from the innocent Non Hillmen of the Hills. But our national young men played an important part and saved the situation. They went to see all the leaders of the leading organizations of Calcutta. I thank Sree Sarat Chandra Bose and Rastrapati Azad whose appeals through Press saved our people of Calcutta and others in the Hills. Now Shah Nawaz Jee, I request you to be very kind to speak something every where throughout India where ever you go about the Gorkhas activities in I.N.A and create a good feeling among the Gorkhas and others of India. You are trying your best to bring unity and by your valuable speech I am sure the people of India will realize the Gorkhas are also their friends and can do every thing for Mother India. They recognized brave soldiers and these brave men will be an asset of the Free India. (Giri 2010: 27-28).

The democratic leaders of Nepal like Bisheshwar Prasad Koirala, Dharnidhar Sharma and D.B.Parihar came to Kurseong to address the public and show their support for democracy in India. But the members of Gorkha League held black flags and shouted that they should go back. They returned to Nepal with great insult and humiliation.

However, due to this uncalled behavior Maya Devi was deeply hurt. She felt that after all they were well respected leaders of Nepal and were honoured guests who were also fighting for their own democracy like India. She joined the Gorkha League thinking that it was an association of like minded people who wanted the upliftment of their people. But she resigned from the League after this incident and joined the

Congress. Already her husband was a long time member. Dil Bahadur believed that joining the Congress would have a better chance of getting their voices heard in the highest levels. Both Maya Devi and her husband played an important role in the freedom Movement and also in other movement related during the period.

Nehru's famous words, 'at the stroke of the midnight hour when the world sleeps India shall awake to light and freedom'. After a long struggle of more than a century of British rule, India finally gained independent at the midnight on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947. But it was a bitter sweet as people wake up to a new dawn but at a terrible price i.e. division of nation.

However, there was a mass confusion as Punjab in the west and Bengal in the east was divided. On the Independence Day at the borders both Indian and Pakistani flags were hoisted as the people didn't know which side of the border they belong to. For some Muslims who had fought for Pakistan were feared and worried of uprooting themselves from their familiar surroundings and going to live in another country. The same fear was also with the Hindus as they found themselves a minority in the new Pakistan.

In the villages and the streets of Punjab there were terrible atrocities. On the 17<sup>th</sup> August the British forces were quickly evacuated.

Before Independence the situation was already grave. Due to the limited Army and the Police force to patrol the streets, armed gangs cause havoc. The women were raped and the children were abducted. The villages were raided and burned. On the trains the passengers were massacred and torched the carriages. The horror stories of entire populations of villages being executed were spread over and the children watching as their parents were mutilated, raped and burnt. The situation was such that the men had turned into demons.

On the both side of the border there was mass migration. From September to November 1947, more than about 849,000 refugees had entered India on foot, 2.3 million crossed the borders by train, 32,000 arrived by plane and 133,000 arrived in Bombay by steamers from Sind. However, there were about 3 million refugees in the refugee camps by the end of 1947.

Meanwhile, there was rejoicing over the freedom of India in the hills of Darjeeling. In the District the whole day of programmes was organized.

In Kurseong at 4:30 am the first programme of the day started with ‘Prabhat Pheri’ where the local Congress organized the volunteers marched in the streets with Ramdhun and National songs.

Maya Devi being the Congress President at 8am brought down the Union Jack and raised the tri-colored flag of independent India. She saluted this symbol of the new born country with tears as she knew the ultimate sacrifices made by the gallant men and women for this day to happen. It was not only a day of celebration but of remembering these freedom fighters and of looking with a hope and confidence to the future and making the country a great one. It was a moment of emotional and solemn as the Cubs, Guides, Blue Birds and the general public that had gathered at the Chowk Bazar saluted the flag.

She laid the foundation stone of Gandhi Bhawan with Sankha Dhwani at 9 am and also held puja ceremony. Mr. S.K. Banerjee, the S.D.O. took the salute of the Police during a march past and at 10:30 am the Scouts and Guides held a rally at the Monteviot Grounds.

At the Eagles Craig pear saplings were planted and in the afternoon Charkha demonstrations were held at the Gorkha Library. Thus, the day concluded at 4 pm with the speech of D.B.Chettry and Maya Devi who spoke about the relevance and importance of the day and also work ahead for all citizens.

#### **4. (v) Formation of Women’s Association**

In 1941, Women’s Association (Mahila Mandali) was established in Kurseong. Maya Devi Chettri, a prominent Nepali Freedom Fighter for the first time participated in the outdoor activity as a Vice- President of the association. In the same year, Dil Bahadur Chettri opened “Hindukanya Pathshala” (Girl School) in “Pratham Gorkhajan Pustakalaya” (First Gorkha Library) in Kurseong. Maya Devi Chettri worked as a Principal but due to economic constraint the school had to be handed over to Kurseong Municipality.

The most remarkable event which occurred in the period was the establishment of Shri Ramkrishna Girls High School in Kurseong. Although Scottish missionaries undertook the construction of schools and welfare centres like Loreto Convent in 1847, St. Paul's School in 1864, but these were mainly for the British residents and the elites of Bengal and not for the common masses of the region. Therefore, the establishment of

Ramkrishna Girls High School in Kurseong could be considered as the first major move towards the social reform movement in the region regarding female education. Earlier the girl's education was limited up to the primary level. But, with the establishment of this school, it provided a breakthrough not only in the system of education for girls but a challenge towards the orthodox system of society where girl's education were treated with suspicion and non acceptable. The nine girl students of Shri Ramkrishna Girls High School, Kurseong were qualified to be President's guide with Maya Devi Chettri as an Assistant Commissioner for Giri Guides and others. They all participated in All India Rally of President's Scouts and Guides. These were remarkable events in the sense that it signaled the arrival of the times of change.

Establishment of schools and initiatives taken to open the doors of enlightenment to women was also signaling the dawning of a new era of light but there were some more shackles that had to be broken. **See for Photo-21**

From the very beginning Maya Devi was interested in social work beside political participation. She became a member of the Education Board of Kurseong Municipality in 1938 and Commissioner of same body. Later in 1948 she was Vice President of the Ladies Association of Kurseong and a member of T.B Association. In 1938 she went to Calcutta for three months for the Tuberculosis Home Visitors Training and in 1941 she got an appointment letter from the Chairman of Kurseong Municipality, A. B. Scott hiring her as the lady Health Visitor for Kurseong Municipality (Giri 2010: 13).

Maya Devi was also interested in guide and scouting from the very beginning. She also took a keen interest in the Guide Movement and became a District Commissioner of Guides. Since, 1935 she made numerous involvements in guide and scout and participated in many camps. Later, she was appointed as the State Commissioner of Bengal for many years. Due to unconditional contributions in this direction for such a long period the Akhil Bharatiya Guides and Scout Association awarded her service of merit badge.

Maya Devi was also active in Labour Movement and organized the Milkmen Union. She was also in the Tea Labour Union and became Vice-President of the Plantation Workers Union of North Bengal. In 1947, she was the Vice President of the Uttar Bangal Chiya Sramik Sangathan (North Bengal Tea Labour Association) and also the Vice-President of the Darjeeling Branch of the All India Women Conference. Thus,

knowing the poor condition of the labours in Darjeeling, Doars and Jalpaiguri areas she wrote a letter mentioning about the poor and deteriorating conditions of the tea workers to the labour minister Jagjivan Ram.

In 1947 she was also the Vice President of the Akhil Bharatiy Mahila Sammelan of Darjeeling Zilla (All India Association of Darjeeling District). In 1948 she was also elected as the Municipal Commissioner of Kurseong. Beside this she was elected as a member of Education department. She was also an accountant of T.B sanatorium of Kurseong. She was also the President of the Azad Pathsala for Muslim students and contributed more than 20 years of service in the development of this school. She was also a member of the Standing Committee for Defense, Health and Education. In 1953 a Bengali medium school named Parmatharai Urban Junior School was started in Kurseong. She was the member of this school committee for life and made great contribution towards its development. There was also a committee named Sandhani Mahila Samiti which was opened with the sole purpose of making women financially independent by learning sewing. This committee was a self help group for the women. Maya Devi was the President of this committee for 25 years. She was also interested in singing and thus brought a teacher at home to learn singing and she usually learned to sing bhajans (devotional songs). Thus she started Sangeet Kala Niketan in 1971 in Kurseong and became the President of this Niketan. This Sangeet Kala Niketan was under the Baat Khanda Vidyapeeth Lucknow. The Student of this Niketan was taught singing free of cost by the singers of Kurseong Radio Station. But this Niketan could not continue for long because of the transfer of singing teachers from Kurseong to other places. Hence the musical instruments left over were gifted to Sarda Sangeetalai Kurseong.

When she became the M.P (Member of Parliament) she started the Nepali Sammelan (Nepali Association) in Delhi. The main objective of this association was to bring the Nepali community residing in Delhi together and unite them. Thus, the responsibility of this Sammelan was also on her shoulder. In 1976, the chairperson of “Bengal Women Audi nation” requested her to organize such association at the Zilla level in Kurseong. For this purpose Maya Devi started the organization in Snowview Kurseong. The main objective of this organization was over all upliftment of women of rural areas regarding health, nutrition, infectious diseases, family planning, women

right and to protect themselves and others in case of emergency. Maya Devi got huge support from the masses in this direction and made the association a successful one.

In 1954 Bhawesanand Swami opened a Ramkrishna Vedaanth Ashram in Kurseong. Swamiji felt that there should be a proper school for girls. Thus, the Ashram gathered few girls and started teaching them. In 1957 when the number of students increased in large number the school was ultimately recognized as a Government school. The first teaching staff appointed in this school was Shanti Pradhan. This is regarded as one of the most ideal till today.

## References

All interviews were conducted between January 2011 and February 2014. All the respondents were middle class Hindu, Buddhist men and women.

9 <sup>th</sup> January, 2011	- Library (N.B.U).	
2 <sup>nd</sup> February, 2011	- Poddar Surendranath	- Kurseong, Hindu
5 <sup>th</sup> April, 2011	- Dr. Pradhan Kumar	- Siliguri, Hindu
11 <sup>th</sup> April, 2011	- National Library	- Kolkatta
13 <sup>th</sup> April, 2011	- Archives	- Esplalde-Kolkatta
10 <sup>th</sup> May, 2011	- Poddar Surendranath	- Kurseong, Hindu
20 <sup>th</sup> May, 2011	- Library	- N.B.U.
5 <sup>th</sup> June, 2011	- Gorkha library, Sharma Vinod Prasad	- Kurseong, Hindu
7 <sup>th</sup> July, 2011	- All India Radio, Allay Parash Chandra	- Kurseong, Hindu
4 <sup>th</sup> August, 2011	- Lama Ratnamani	- Kurseong, Buddhist
27 <sup>th</sup> February 2011	- Lama Ratnamani	- Kurseong, Buddhist
19 <sup>th</sup> August 2013	- Chettri Malati	- Medical,Siliguri, Hindu
10 <sup>th</sup> September 2011	- Sir Poddar Surendranath	- Kurseong, Hindu
10 <sup>th</sup> July 2012	- Pradhan Rajan (son of Chandra Devi Pradhan)	- Kurseong, Hindu
8 <sup>th</sup> February 2014	- Gautam Nanita	- Kalimpong, Hindu
8 <sup>th</sup> February 2014	- lama Pushpa	- Kalimpong, Buddhist
3 <sup>rd</sup> December 2014	- Chettri Shanta	- Siliguri, Hindu
1 <sup>st</sup> December 2014	- Subba Renu Leena	- Kalimpong, Hindu
1 <sup>st</sup> December 2014	- Sunkesari Chettri	- Kalimpong, Christian
28 <sup>th</sup> November 2014	- Chettri Prabha	- Kurseong, Hindu

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