

## Chapter III

### Women and the Making of Social Movements in Darjeeling Hills

*Sabetri Deviko santan hou hami. Jasari uslay deshko nimti laryo, tesari nai hami pani jatiko nimti larchou.* [We are the descendents of Sabetri Devi. The way she fought for the nation; we will fight for our Jati] --- Dina Chhetri (Gorkhaland activist, Darjeeling, 2016)

#### 3.1 Introduction

Contextualizing Darjeeling Hills in terms of women's movement reveals that there is no such movement that has erupted in the region which can be regarded as women's movement in true sense of the term. However, one can witness the emergence of women both as participants and leaders of the movement since the inception of the social movements in the region. There are many reasons for this. Most importantly it is necessary to understand the socio-historical context that gave rise to such movements. The movement that has been erupting in Darjeeling Hills is more gender integrative like tea plantation worker's movement, Nepali language movement and identity movement (Bhandari: 1996, Bhattacharyya: 1986, Bagchi 2009, Rai: 1992, Sarkar 2008, Rai: 2012). The problems and demands of the region have been different from the other parts of the country and so the social movements as well.

The present chapter argued that the participation of women in the contemporary movements in Darjeeling Hills has not come up in an abrupt manner but is the culmination of long historical realities. They were historically active in the various arenas of public domain and particularly in social movements in their own capacities. On the contrary women's voices were relatively silent but one can witness their emergence in the public-political domain which was considered as the male domain in the society. Their voices however, relatively remain unsung and unheard in the history of Darjeeling Hills. Thus, the following head briefly describes their participation in public-political arena of the Hill society and their emergence and contribution in the anti-colonial movement, trade union movement and constitutional recognition of Nepali language in India.

### **3.2 Women in the Making of Nationalist Movement in Darjeeling Hills**

The anti-imperial wave touched upon every segment of Indian society irrespective of class, caste, community, religion and sex. People from all walks of life from all over the country contributed a lot and participated in the nationalist endeavor. The most prominent leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Subash Chandra Bose encouraged women and children to be a part of nationalist movement. Women were very important contributors in non-cooperation, Quit India movement and other extremist activities in the freedom movement. The role of elite women in freedom struggle is well known. However, the contribution of the marginal women does not receive much attention in both academic and non-academic writings. It has been evident that although few in number the Gorkha women contributed in the freedom struggle both as the moderates and the extremists. Their participation in public political domain itself was a major challenge because they were not free from the bondage of indigenous patriarchy on the one hand and tremendously affected by the colonial patriarchy on the other.

It is necessary to understand the genesis of nationalist movement in Darjeeling before discussing their participation in nationalist movement. The early wave of nationalist movement hardly touched upon the lives of the hill society. The anti partition movement of 1905 also did not reach Darjeeling Hills but the same time witnessed the publication of Nepali newspaper called 'Gorkha Sathi' by the Nepalis living in Calcutta. Its objective was to spread nationalist awakening among the Nepalis but it was soon banned by the British in 1907. As a summer capital, Darjeeling was kept under the strict surveillance of the colonial government through various administrative mechanisms like provisions of Excluded and Partially Excluded areas. The British government and planters did not want the anti-colonial wave of the plains because it was a second home for them. Darjeeling provided huge sources of income for the planters from tea, cinchona, forest and others (Gurung 1989: 105).

The ideological basis of governmentality was the most important weapon through which the colonial government was able to maintain its hegemony in the whole country and the same has been applied to Darjeeling. They considered 'anglicized machine based

civilization’ of the west as superior to the ‘traditional indigenous civilization’ of the natives. The Christian missionaries with their civilizational mission were successful in converting a large number of people (Chatterjee 1989). They considered as their responsibility to civilize the east and various activities like opening of the schools, homes, churches, etc. were taken up by them. One can understand the western notion of superiority over the natives of Darjeeling as recorded by the British official and Gazetteers:

“Darjeeling has also been fortunate in having several officials, many tea planters, and a succession of missionaries who have devoted themselves to advancing not only the moral and spiritual but also the mental welfare of the people. Many have taught with their hands, more have shown by their example and active influence the uplifting power of a progressive civilization” (O’Malley 1907: 33-34).

### **3.2.1 Dal Bahadur Giri and the Awakening of Hill People**

In such condition Dal Bahadur Giri initiated to unite not only the tea garden laborer but the whole region against the colonial ruler in 1921. He was thrown out of the Sikkim durbar by the colonial agent on his denial of preparing a false certificate and taking bribe from the colonial agents (Chaudhuri 1988: 24).

He returned to his native place and established Darjeeling branch of the Indian National Congress in 1921 and actively contributed in the freedom movement of the country. He was inspired by a large number of people and admired by the nationalist leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Subash Chandra Bose and others. A large number of people followed him and took active participation in non-cooperation movement (Chaudhuri 1988: 24). The British official A.J. Dash in the ‘Darjeeling District Gazetteer’ recorded the non-cooperation movement of 1921-22 as:

“The district police have never had to deal with much serious political activity. The non co-operation movement of 1921-22 was the first occasion hillmen showed an interest in politics. It aroused excitement for a short time amongst tea garden labour and there was some boycott of foreign goods. There was a revival of interest in political agitation from 1931 to 1939 and in 1935 Lebung

was the scene of murderous attempt on the governor of Bengal, Sir John Anderson” (Dash 1947: 37)

### **3.2.2 Participation of Hill Women in Nationalist Movement**

In the successive years to come the path of Dal Bahadur was followed by a large number of men, women and children. Pioneer among the women leaders were Halen Lepcha (whose name was changed to Sabetri Devi by Gandhiji), Maya Devi Chhetry (who became the president of the congress branch of Kurseong sub-division of Darjeeling district in 1945 and member of Rajya Sabha from Darjeeling, 1952-62), Putali Devi Tamang (who established a night school and Harijan Samaj in Kurseong with Sarju Prasad Poddar to popularize the freedom movement) and among many others, however due to lack of proper documentation they remain as the unheard and unsung voices in the history of India (Bhandari 1996, Bhattacharyya 1986, Bagchi 2009).

Halen Lepcha from Kurseong in her early age went to Calcutta to learn the spinning of khadi in a school run by the granddaughter of Ishwar Chandra Vidhyasagar. She was born in Kurseong in 1902 and her family was migrated from Sikkim. She studied in Scout’s Mission School at Kurseong but she could not complete her schooling. It is said that she was deeply inspired by a speech of Bengali nationalist who came to Kurseong from Calcutta. This was her turning point and decided to give up her life for the freedom movement of the country. She was greatly inspired by the swadeshi and boycott movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi. In this phase of nationalist movement Gandhiji was inspiring and encouraging women to be a part of non-cooperation movement (1920-21) (Roy Sanyal 2010). However, his view on women participants/activists as self sacrificing as Sita and sacrificing mother has been countered by the feminist writers. On the other hand it was his contribution that encouraged large number of women to come out of their traditional boundaries for the cause of nationalist endeavor (Kumar 1993: 05).

Halen mastered over the art of weaving charka and popularization of khadi in Calcutta. She represented as the head of khadi and charka exhibition organized at Muzaffarpur in Bihar. It was her turning point in political career. She also spent some time in teaching weaving charka in Bihar and was accepted by the locals as a nationalist leader

in some parts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. During 1920s when Bihar was overtaken by the devastating flood, she took active participation in organizing relief operation and came in support of flood victims. This was greatly admired by Mahatma Gandhi. He met with Halen in the house of congress activist Serif Saudi and changed her name to Sabetri Debi. Since then she came to known as Sabetri Debi as because for Gandhiji Halen was alien name (Bhandari 1996, Rai: 1992, Roy Sanyal 2010).

As a nationalist and congress activist she widely worked with the people of Patna, Danapur, Bakipur and Muzaffarpur. During the non-cooperation movement she organized the working class of Jharia coal field and took out a procession of the thousands of coal workers. She participated in the Mammoth public meeting held in Calcutta and Ahmedabad session of All India National Congress. For a short time she stayed at Sewagram and Ananda Bhawan at Allahabad. She was greatly admired by the leaders like Kamala Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, Urmila Devi and others (Rai 1992, Roy Sanyal 2010).

The British government issued an arrest warrant in her name in Bihar due to her anti-British activities. She returned to her home town- Kurseong after hearing the news of her ailing mother. It was the time when non-cooperation movement was widely spreading in North Bengal and Siliguri was one of the main centers of freedom movement activities. The nationalist and congress activists like Siv Mangal Singh and his associates were selflessly working among the people of Siliguri, Terai and Dooars. Sabetri Devi joined hands with him in Siliguri. They were campaigning against foreign goods in the villages. On 29th January 1922, Sabetri Devi, E Ahmed and many Gorkha volunteers were arrested from Siliguri while leading a procession violating section 144. This incident has been reported in the famous newspaper- Amrita Bazaar Patrika on 31st January 1922. It was mentioned that “Sabetri Devi with the congress secretary and E. Ahmed and Gorkha volunteers has been arrested” (Roy Sanyal 2010). She was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment in Darjeeling jail for several months. After her release from the jail, she was kept under the house arrest and restricted to move beyond Kurseong municipality.

Though she was kept under the strict surveillance of the government she carried out her nationalist activities silently and secretly. She played the leading role of a secret informer when Netaji Subash Chandra Bose was interned at his ancestral house, Gidday

Pahar, Kurseong in the year 1939-40. It is said that she used to deliver secret letters to Netaji inside the bread supplied from her husband's bakery. According to the 'Directory of Indian Women Today',

'Sabetri Devi helped Netaji Subash Bose to escape from imprisonment in Kharsang and migrate to Germany through Kabul. Her areas of activities were Jharia coal field, Bankura, Danapur and Patna' (cited in, Roy sanyal 2010: 12).

After independence she contributed actively in the various political and non-political activities. Mostly she has been remembered as a social worker in Kurseong. She became the chairperson of the various associations in Kurseong like Sherpa Association, Nagar Congress, Anjuman Islamia and Lepcha Association. In the year 1950 the government of West Bengal awarded her with the title of "Tribal Headman of the District". She was felicitated with Tamra Patra and a freedom fighter pension on the eve of silver jubilee of the Indian independence. The Netaji Institute of Asian Studies converted the house of Sarat Chandra Bose into the Netaji museum in Kurseong. In the museum, life of Sabetri Devi is described as:

"Halen or Sabetri Devi was born sometimes in 1902-03 in a Lepcha family migrated from Sikkim and settled at Kurseong. She was sentenced to three months of rigorous imprisonment for participating in non-cooperation movement. On another occasion she was kept under house arrest within Kurseong municipality. Her area of political and social activities extended from Darjeeling to Bihar and U.P. She had the occasion to be acquainted with Mahatma Gandhi, Ali Brothers, C.R Das, Subash Chandra Bose and some other eminent national leaders. She was the first woman to become commissioner of Kurseong municipality in 1936. She passed away on 18th August at Darjeeling".

Putali Maya Tamang was another well known freedom fighter from this region. Though her area of activities concentrated only within the district of Darjeeling, she played dynamic roles igniting the tea garden masses for the nationalist endeavor. There is no extensive written document on her life and her involvement in freedom movement. Her life

story is preserved in a biography written by her husband Sarju Prasad Poddar entitled “Swantra Sangram Darjeeling Oue Ma” published by himself from Kurseong. M.P Rai in his book “Bir Jatiko Amar Kahani” contributed one chapter on the life history of Putali Maya Tamang [Poddar]. Suryamani Sharma also contributed one chapter on the life history of Putali Maya based on the book “Bir Jatiko Amar Kahani” and interview with her son Surendra Poddar. In this section her life history and her contribution in nationalist movement is based on these available literature and oral history method based on the field work. Apart from these the Netaji Institute of Asian Studies which is commonly known as Netaji Museum situated in Kurseong preserved the life of Putali Maya Tamang Poddar as:

“Putali Maya was born on 14th February 1920 at Kurseong. Putali Maya Devi Poddar was attracted towards freedom movement when she was a school student. In 1937 when a branch of All India Congress Committee was formed at Kurseong Putali Devi became its active member. At the instance of Sarju Prasad she formed Harijan Samaj in 1939 and started night school for Harijans. Same year she also formed Mahila Samaj. On 13th August 1942 while she was leading a procession of quit India movement, she was arrested and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for one and half years. Having been released from jail she was not allowed to enter her paternal house and Sarju married her and gave her shelter. She passed away on 1st December 1984.”

Putali Maya Devi Tamang was born on 14th February 1920 in Kurseong. She was the youngest out of four siblings of Madan Bahadur Tamang. Her father was a peon in Kurseong Sub-divisional office. Like Sabetri Debi she was also the student of Scout’s Mission School in Kurseong. According to her son Surendra Poddar, his mother came under the influence of Sarju Prasad Poddar in an early age. He was a congress activist from Bihar and came to Kurseong because the British government had issued an arrest warrant in his name.

It was well known fact that the sudden demise of Hill Gandhi- Dal Bahadur Giri in 1924 created a certain vacuum for few years in Darjeeling. However, the people like Janga Bir Sapkota, Gaga Tshering Dukpa, Puspa Kumar Ghishing, Agam Sing Giri, Ramchandra

Giri, Madan Subba, Siv Mangal Singh and others were working in their own capacities and able to keep alive the dream of Giri in the region. Sarju did not remain quietly in Kurseong. He along with the other congress activists started giving more organizational structure to nationalist activities and popularized khadi (Poddar 1993).

After the formation of the Kurseong branch of Congress, Putali Devi formally took congress membership and actively participated in the indoor activities. The major hurdles she faced from her own family members were in two ways. Firstly, since her father was a government employ he was threatened by the colonial agencies regarding her activities in congress. Her father did not like her to engage with such activities. Even she was offered the job of a nurse in Kurseong hospital. However, she did not care and kept on moving with her involvement with the congress. Secondly, the society of that particular time was more patriarchal than the present day. There were certain obstacles from the part of the society because outdoor activities of women were not accepted. Her family and relatives had objection on her involvement in outdoor activities and they wanted her to be confined within the four walls of domesticity. Nothing could stop her from the ignited minds of nationalism.

She established Harijan Samaj in Kurseong in the year 1938. She was greatly helped by the other members of the congress. The major objective of this Samaj was to create an alcohol free society. They used to motivate locals and Harijans regarding the ill effects of alcoholism in the society and family. Her noted contribution was the establishment of the night school in Harijan building. She educated people about the ill effects of alcoholism and taught them to read and write. In due time, she became very successful in her work. Though the motive behind the establishment of Harijan Samaj and night school was to draw social consciousness but its major objective was to motivate them for the national awakening. She also imparted the knowledge and trained women in charkha [spinning wheels] and woved khadi [hand woven cloth].

She also established Nari Kalyan Samiti apart from the Harijan Samaj and Night School around 1939. The aim of Nari Kalyan Samaj was to address all kind of socio-economic issues concerning women and to impart knowledge and training in charkha. She

frequently came across such incidents of wife battering in her neighborhood. The husbands used to drink and came home late at night and beat up their wives. So, she decided to form Nari Samiti to protect women from such domination of the male. The major purpose was to solve the problems faced by the women. Slowly, a large number of people began to associate with her. The women openly started promoting the nationalist movement keeping photographs of Gandhi. In addition, throughout the entire hill region of Kurseong, Darjeeling and Kalimpong, the congress committee began to hold a strong position. These activities caught the attention of British officials and she was warned to keep away from the movement (Barla 2016: 44).

8<sup>th</sup> August 1942 was a significant day in the history of India. It was on this day Mahatma Gandhi launched Quit India movement in Bombay. The top leaders of Indian National Congress including Mahatma Gandhi were arrested on 9<sup>th</sup> August. It spread like fire in the whole country. The congress activists organized a huge protest rally in support of Quit India movement on 12<sup>th</sup> August. Most of them were arrested and taken to Darjeeling jail. Putali Maya brought out a huge protest rally against the arrest of the congress activists and they were also arrested and taken to the same place by the British government. The congress supporters were released but the top and influential leaders like Putali Devi, Sarju Prasad and Janaklal Kurmi were given the imprisonment of one and half year. Sarju Prasad was shifted to Rajshahi jail. Putali Maya was released in 1944 from Darjeeling jail.

The life of Putali Maya was not easy because she was not fully welcomed by her own family. Her health was deteriorating because of her mal-treatment in the jail. Her family was threatened by the colonial agencies on her involvement in the movement. Sarju was also released in the same year. The congress activists of the district advised them to get married. Their wedding was opposed by many locals because they believed it was against their customs and traditions. Wedding took place at Gorkha Jana Pustakalaya [library]. However, a large number of locals attempted to stop the marriage ceremony. Her parents were also against and did not support their marriage. Since both of them were involved in freedom movement without any source of income, they had to face acute economic problem for their livelihood.

After marriage they faced acute economic problems due to lack of income. There were even days when they went without food and yet continued their activities on behalf of the freedom movement. After independence she was engaged in social work in Kurseong. She and her husband Sarju Prasad Poddar were awarded with the freedom fighter pension and tamra patra by the Government of India in due recognition of their contribution in the freedom movement in the year 1972 (Barla 2016, Poddar 1996).

Mayadevi Chhetry was one of the most influential and inspirational figures among the Nepalis in India. She has been remembered for her dynamic leadership qualities and contributions in the various fields in the socio-political arenas. At an early age, she had to get married with Dil Bahadur Chhetri who was a primary school teacher and a social activist in Kurseong. Influenced by her husband and Naina Bahadur Sinha she educated herself in reading and writing without going to school. Dil Bahadur whole heartedly supported and inspired Mayadevi to take participation in public domain. She voluntarily began to teach at Davies primary school. Davies school was established by the retired Railways and government employees. She started participating in social work along with her husband.

She was an active member of the Mahila Samiti. In Mahila Samiti, the women publicly 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. The main objective of this organization was to look after health and hygiene, education etc. The sick women were taken to the hospital along with their kids and families for a regular checkup and to provide them with necessary medicines etc. Besides this, the women were also given knowledge about the values of education and the importance of education for their children and getting them admitted to the school. They were also provided with the knowledge of rearing children, health and hygiene etc. The effort made by this organization led to the decrease in physical violence against women by their husbands to a very great extent. In 1935 Gorkha Dukh Niwarak Sammelan was formed in association with this Mahila Samiti (Giri 2010).

She was one of the active participants in the freedom struggle during the decade of 1940s. In Independent India, she was elected as the Member of Rajya Sabha for the two

constitutive years (1951-61) from West Bengal. In the parliament, she greatly contributed for the recognition of Nepali language and other related issues with the Nepalis in India (Giri 2010).

The Gorkhas in India not only participated in the Gandhian path of non-violence but they also actively participated as extremists in the nationalist movement. The extremists challenged the inefficiency of the non-violent methods of satyagrahis. The participation of Gorkhas in the Indian National Army (INA) under the leadership of Netaji Subash Chandra Bose has been well acknowledged in history. However, there was a small group of Gorkha women particularly in Kalimpong who joined Rani Jhansi Regiment-women's troop of INA. Sunkesari Chettri was one of its active leaders. She was also actively involved in the All India Gorkha League. There were the active members like Pema Doma, Prembadha Subba, Tiny Gurung, Shanka Gurung, Phoolmaya Dahal, and Pavitramala Moktan among many others who participated in the plans and programmes of Rani Jhansi Regiment. It is very difficult to get the descriptive account of their plans, programmes and activities due to lack of proper documentation. These women activists also participated in the boycott of foreign goods in the hill town of Kalimpong.

The feeling of nationalism touched upon the tea garden labourers of Dooars. Despite many difficulties, the people of Dooars contributed selflessly to the independence movement. Workers were subjugated by the owners and they were treated as slaves. Their interaction with the outside world was forbidden and was a punishable offence. The activities of the Congress were initiated much earlier; however it got momentum only after 1942 when Mahatma Gandhi launched the quit India movement. The working class leaders like Dutta Singh Sanyasi, Kuber Rai, Shanta Pradhan, Birkaji Pradhan, Gyan Bahadur Rasailey and others played an important role. Agam Maya Rai, Nina Maya, Shanta Rai and Gita Limbu were few among many invisible women leaders who united working class for freeing India from the hand of British. Many of them were arrested and imprisoned for initiating anti British activities among the tea garden workers in 1946. They were released by their party activists- Sunil Sarkar, Daven Sarkar, Diyush Kati Mukherjee and others; however the British official passed an order for expulsion on them from their respective tea

garden (Lama 2014: 99-112). After independence they returned to their garden and contributed in the trade union movement against the neo colonial form of subjugation.

The above discussion shows the active participation of Hill women of Darjeeling and its adjoining areas in the Indian independence movement. Darjeeling was kept under the strict surveillance of the government but natives of the region including women and children made noteworthy contributions both at the national and regional context. Though few in numbers these women freedom fighters of the region had the heterogeneity of their experiences in the context of their participation in nationalist discourse and the family support received by them.

### **3.3 Working Class (Plantation) Movement and the Participation of Women in Darjeeling Hills**

The year 1955 has often been considered as the landmark year in the history of social movements in the region. It was on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1955, thousands of members of the working class from different tea estates gathered at Margaret's Hope tea garden to protest against the colonial law and neo-colonial form of subjugation in the tea belt of North Bengal. The unarmed workers were subjected to indiscriminate firing by the government authorities where six people died which included one child and two women. Since then Margaret's Hope became synonymous with labour movement in the region. Although it failed to bring structural changes it taught a lesson that subaltern can speak and raise their voice. This movement was indeed a significant event because such protest was first of its kind participated by thousands of men, women and children. This movement largely impacted on the shaping of the contemporary identity politics and social movements in Darjeeling Hills.

It has been witnessed that the working class movement in mainstream India started quite early but not in Darjeeling. One of the most important reasons was that the planters did not want to lose out the huge profit from the branded tea of Darjeeling in the international market. Plantation economy in the forms of tea and cinchona plantations constituted the backbone of colonial and post-colonial Darjeeling. The British government and planters in Darjeeling Hills followed every possible way to protect Darjeeling from the

anti-colonial activities of the plains. However, in post independent India also such colonial legacy and laws continued in the tea belt of both Hills and plains. The plantation working class movement of 1955 which had its genesis in 1940s was against such laws which were continuing in the tea gardens even after eight years of Indian independence.

### **3.3.1 *Lal Tara* (Communist Party) and Women's Question in Darjeeling Hills**

Without going through the contribution of Ratanlal Brahmin the history of tea plantation movement would remain incomplete. Since his childhood he was greatly inspired by the community sentiment (*jatiya chetna*) and involved in the social activities for welfare of the people. The communist activist Sushil Chatterjee was sent to Darjeeling district for the extension of communist party in Darjeeling district. Though Brahmin was not aware of the ideology of communism, his ideas had great similarities with the communist ideologue Sushil Chatterjee. This led to the establishment of the Communist Party of India of Darjeeling district in 1943. In the same year another dominant political party of Darjeeling district the All India Gorkha League came into being under the aegis of Damber Singh Gurung.

The establishment of the Communist Party of India was most significant event in the history of Darjeeling in general and trade union movement in particular. Since the inception of the communist party in Darjeeling they started working for the rights of the working class. As a result of which *Lal Tara* (communist party) received huge support from the working class of different tea gardens. The CPI(M) had to face difficult situation in this respect because they were organizing the workers against exploitative age old institution of the colonial capitalist economy. The lives of the workers were very pathetic as they suffered from the hardship of life for their survival.

In the mean time Ratanlal Brahmin was declared as the CPI(M) candidate from labour constituency for the election going to be held in 1946. The labour constituency constituted of only twelve tea gardens. Those tea gardens were Pandam, Harsing, Baneberg, fubtshering, Pattabung, Soam, Singtham, Ringnith, Happy Valley, Stanthal, Sidrabung and Dali and rest of the gardens were excluded from the labour constituency. He

was gaining popularity as working class communist leader in one hand but he was facing troubling situations from the authorities and government on the other.

Ratanlal Brahmin received huge support from the tea garden labourers. Intellectually he was guided by the learned and dedicated comrades like Sushil Chatterjee, Ganeshlal Subba, Satyender Majumdar and many others. They came out with the eleven point agenda in the election. They were: (1) eradication of *hatta bahira* (2) increase of wage (3) maternity allowance (4) eradication of child labour of children below ten years (5) sports for labourers (6) schooling for children (7) nationalization of tea gardens (8) establishment of hospitals and free medicine (9) pensions for the retired persons (10) *baksis* (bonus) and leave during festivals (11) exemption of tax for animals and kitchen garden (Brahmin 1951).

It was for the first time in the history of Darjeeling issues concerning women was raised by the CPI(M). The British legislature passed various Acts like maternity benefits in 1919 but it was not formally incorporated in the tea gardens of Darjeeling-Dooars. By looking at the eleven points election agenda one can understand the social condition of the plantation workers not only in Darjeeling Hills but the conditions of workers was not better in Dooars-Terai also. The eleven point agenda was significant where the labour class was living in servitude and destitution. The eradication of *hatta-bahira* was the most important demand that they had raised. It was designed by the colonial agencies for the extraction of surplus value from the labour power. The workers were not allowed to speak against management and in case of any such activities and incidents from the part of the workers they were thrown out of the colony which was known as *hatta-bahira* (forceful eviction of workers from the garden). The Communist stalwart of Darjeeling, R.B Rai, in his book “1955 *Agi Ani Pachi*” (before and after 1955) mentioned the numerous incidents of labourers being thrown out of the plantation for the reason like wearing wrist watch and shoes and buying umbrellas etc.. Such incidents continued even after independence also (Rai 2005: 03).

Since the establishment of the plantation economy in the region the workers were under paid and wage discrimination was another major problem and issue in the garden. Even during the decades of 1940s the daily wage of the workers in Darjeeling Hills was

only 5 anna for marad (men), 4 anna for aurat (women) and 1 anna and 6 pie for chokralokera (child labour). The Royal Commission was formed by the British government for the well being of the workers as early as 1931 but it was not implemented in the tea belt of North Bengal. Apart from these, the British government legislature passed the Trade Union Act (1926), Fatal Accidents Act (1855), Employee's Compensation Act (1923) but these were not incorporated in the tea gardens.

The tea industry as a labour intensive industry constituted the large number of women labourers. Although the colonialist and planters considered themselves as superior and rational, they were very cruel to the plantation labourer particularly to women that they even did not allow the maternity leave to them. The women were threatened by the agents of the planters and their wages was cut off. The communists of the district were also concerned with the women's issues. Three most important issues that they had raised in the 1946 election was wage, maternity allowances and eradication of child labour. Such was the condition of the working class as described by a retired school teacher:

“My mother used to narrate her story of being labour in the tea garden in my childhood. During company government the condition was worse. Even now also it is not that good... The company used to give only one set of cloth. The way she used to describe it must be jeans. Workers were allotted one room thatched house made of up mud.... Later on roof was replaced by tin. All the members had to accommodate in the room. There was no separate kitchen even. Despite of working hard for the whole day she used to get lower wage than the male. They had to work bare footed without umbrella and raincoat and the gardens were full of leaches. The children were least encouraged to take education because of poverty but later on Christian missionaries encouraged them. There was no maternity leave. Even the pregnant women had to go for plucking early in the morning, otherwise their *hajira* (wage) was cut” (Rai: 2016).

Women and children were not only underpaid but they were also not promoted to any managerial posts by the authorities. The colonial managers officially employed young girls whom they called *chokri* in their bungalows as servants and there were many

instances of physical exploitation of the women. They have been the subject of discriminations and exploitations both in colonial and post colonial India. The workers were exploited and marginalized through multiple mechanisms. The colonial governmentality followed all possible ways to extract maximum profit from labour exploitation. The colonial legislature was much in favor of planters. They were not given shoes, umbrella, clothes and proper medicine even in the rainy season. The workers were not allowed to wear wrist watch, listen to radio and wear shoes and full pants because it symbolizes British culture. This was how they maintained distance between the ruler and the ruled (Pradhan 2005: 1-4).

The working class was deprived of basic human rights like maternity leave and allowance, casual leave and sick leave, festivals leaves and bonus among many others. In order to maintain low labour cost, no welfare benefits were introduced in the plantations, despite the fact that maternity leave legislation was passed in the colonial-era Bengal in 1939. Situation was very pathetic and tough in the plantation as stated by an old retired plantation woman who had seen both pre and post independence phase.

“I was born in a village near Balasan. Name of the village was Pachyang. Sardar brought my family to work because of labour shortage when I was eight years old. Along with my parents I had to work as a chokra. Children of my age were not allowed to go to the school rather encouraged to work as child labour. Gora Sahibs and company Sarkar even after independence used to rule in the name of discipline (*kara kanun*).

She further narrated how the labourer used to work bare footed with full of leaches during rainy season without barsati (umbrella). She sadly narrated how the hatta bahira was not restricted to the workers but also to the Bengali Doctor like Aviranjan Talapatra. She also narrated the compartmentalization of health during colonial days. She narrated the story of how Tuberculosis patients were treated and compartmentalized in the colonial hospitals. According to her, planters were responsible for such condition of the labourer because they had to work very hard but the quantity and quality of ration distributed by them was very low” (Dewan 2016).

### 3.3.2 Trade Union Movement and the Labour Politics

It is needless to mention that Ratanlal Brahmin and his communist activists immensely contributed to raise subaltern consciousness not only among the tea garden laborers but they equally focused on the other downtrodden section of the hill society. There was a slow and steady rise of working class consciousness among them along with nationalist movement in the region. The Gandhian activists of the region like Dal Bahadur Giri, Swami Sachitananda, Bhagat Bahadur Tamang, Halen Lepcha, Harish Chhetri, Gaga Tshering Lepcha, Sarju Prasad Poddar, Jangabir Sapkota, Putali Devi Tamang, Harish Chhetri and others actively worked with tea garden masses. Nevertheless, it received much success during the decades of 1940s under the communist leadership. They initiated to give collective voice to the marginal by establishing various organizations like Driver's Union, Rickshaw-man Union, Din Mazdoor Union, Chattra Federation, Milkmen's Union, Mahila Samity and Kisan Sabha in an around 1943 (Brahmin 1951: 08, Rai: 2005:05).

Brahmin was contesting in the election but there was no formal labour organization to bring the working class into one fold. However, it was evident that workers were fighting for their cause against the garden authorities in their own capacities and organizational power. By that time intellectuals and dedicated leaders like Bhadra Bahadur Hamal and Ganeshlala Subba also came forward for the labour cause. In order to give proper organizational structure to the working class movement the Darjeeling Zilla Chai Kaman Mazdoor Union was formed on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1945. Since its inception the communist party as whole was targeted by the owners with the help of government. They were restricted from entering into the garden of the constituency for campaign. Ratanlal was targeted by the police on false allegations. Eventually they received huge support from his constituency which resulted in its victory in 1946 election.

The attitude of the government did not change much even in the post independent India. On 26<sup>th</sup> March 1948 the CPI(M) was banned and declared illegal in some parts of the country. Ratanlal Brahmin, Ganeshlal Subba, Badrinarayan Pradhan, Ramashankar Prasad, Sushil Chatterjee and other activists were arrested.

The registration of Darjeeling Zilla Chai Mazdoor Union was also cancelled by the government which caused the major setback in the plantation movement for two years. Most of the arrested leaders were released from jail in 1950 and they continued with the same activities among the tea garden workers. Since registration of the Darjeeling Zilla Chai Mazdoor Union was cancelled they came up with another union called Chai Kaman Mazdoor Union in 1951 (Pradhan 2005: 1-4). R.B Rai (2004) gives detailed accounts of how tea garden labourer even in this dark period kept on fighting without any trade union or any organization. The major demands that were made by them in different tea gardens were eradication of hatta bahira, good quality and quantity of ration, construction of toilet and drinking water tap, tin roof house, electricity connection, four day leave in a month, primary schools and bonus, maternity allowances etc.

### **3.3.3 Women's Participation in Margaret's Hope Uprising of 1955**

Although the major uprising of the tea plantation working class took place in Margaret's Hope on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1955, it is deeply rooted in socio-economic and political exclusion and age old exploitation of the working class in the region. The trade union had its genesis in 1940s but in Margaret's Hope tea garden there was no trade union but soon after independence a Bengali doctor, Aviranjan Talapatra started organizing the people of tea garden with the help of Harilal Sardar, Mohan Singh and others. He was a doctor by profession and communist by ideology. However, they were soon hatta bahira by the garden authority along with some other activists.

Chai Kaman Mazdoor Union received huge support not only from the common people but also from Congress and Gorkha League. In due time many of the tea gardens in Darjeeling, Kurseong, Mirik and Kalimpong were able to extend the branches of Mazdoor Union. Workers were fighting for their rights and they were receiving new impetus from the Mazdoor union. In 1952 election, All India Gorkha League became victorious in all of the four legislative assembly seats. Its labour union, Darjeeling Chai Kaman Shramik Sangh was also working for the workers. The Indian legislature passed an act called Plantation Labour Act in 1951 but it was

not implemented till 1954. The neo-colonial form of subjugation continued in the tea gardens.

On 8<sup>th</sup> May 1955 they submitted 14 point demand to the government jointly by the Mazdoor union and Shramik Sangh. These demands were: (1) eradication of hatta bahira (2) three months wages equal bonus (4) equal wage for Darjeeling at par with Dooars (5) modification of standing committee report (6) salary increment of staff and others (Pradhan 2005: Rai: 2005). No response had come from the owners. As a result of which a meeting was organized jointly by CPI(M) and Gorkha League in the premises of Dukha Niwarakh Sammelan on 5<sup>th</sup> of June 1955 under the aegis of Nar Bahadur Gurung. In that meeting it was decided that if the authority would not take any action till 22<sup>nd</sup> then they threatened to launch an agitation. An action committee was formed under the leadership of Ratanlal Brahmin and Deo Prakash Rai of All India Gorkha League. The volunteers were raised almost in every tea garden. There were some steps taken by the authority but it was unsuccessful. As a result, the atrocities from the authority and government started increasing and a very strong movement was launched from the part of the workers. On 20<sup>th</sup> June most of leaders like Ratanlal Brahmin, Deo Prakash Rai, Bhadra Bahdur Hamal, Manoranjan Ray, Anandha Pathak and LB Lama were arrested.

Since the formation of the Communist Party of India and trade Union in Darjeeling a large number of men, women and children became its active supporters. Due to lack of organizational capacities they may not have taken the formal membership of the communist party. A large number of women joined *Mahila Samiti* of the CPI(M) and took active participation in its plan and programme which mainly centered on the cause of working class. As remembered by Kali Limbuni, the women activist of Margaret's Hope uprising:

“Since the formation of CPI(M) and its trade union people were demanding repeal of the hatta bahira, maternity benefits, wage, bonus etc. among many other minor but important demands. Since 1940s many women leaders came out in support of the trade union. They were very active at the village level. Chamalee Tamang (Singtam), Fistee Limbunee (Soam), Sangya Limbunee

(Liza Hills), Alen Kaminee (Ben Berg) and Meena Shanka (Ghumtee tea garden) were some of the names that I remembered who were very active in the plantation movement and formation of branches of trade union. I also joined my mother with the other members of the *Nari Sangathan* (women's wing of the trade union) in the protest demonstration against the management.”

Margaret's Hope was the centre and plantation workers were gathered from the different places to submit memorandum to the authority. Margaret's Hope uprising was joined by a large number of workers from the neighbouring tea gardens like Maharani, Singtam, Munda which would make Margaret's Hope the birthplace of organized labour movement in the tea landscape of Darjeeling. On 25<sup>th</sup> of June 1955 it took a violent turn as remembered Kali Dewan as the activist:

“That day was the most remarkable day in the history of trade union movement in Darjeeling. Our *julus* (procession) started from Dokan Dara. Since maharani tea garden was forcefully kept open by the management and we were leading the procession towards maharani to make hartal successful. We were stopped by the police on the way but our determination was so strong even Police had to fire tear gas on the protesters. There was the lathi charge by the police on the protesters. There was stone pelting from the protesters and we noticed sudden firing by the police. I saw Kali Limbu falling down from the tree like a flying bird. He was shot death by the police bullet. We all felt nervous and ran rampantly here and there. Later on we heard that thousands of people were injured. Six people died but at last we won the battle.”

The authority did everything possible to terrorize the protesters but they failed. The protest movement reached its climax on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1955. Thousands of working class gathered from different places at Margaret's Hope to place their 14 point demands. However, the police indiscriminately fired on the unarmed plantation workers and killed six of them. They were Amrita Maya Kamini (18 years), Mouli Sova Raini (23 years, pregnant lady), Kancha Sunuwar (22 years), Padam Bahadur Kami (25 years), Kale Limbu (14 years) and Jitman Tamang (45 years) (Sharma 2003: 140-144). Gupta Maya Rainee was one of the activists who was arrested and

taken to Kurseong jail. Due to lack of proper medicine and care she lost her two year old daughter (Rai 2004).

On 26<sup>th</sup> June, the administration of Darjeeling declared promulgation of section 144 under Cr. P.C but thousands of people came out in the street to pay last homage to the deceased souls. Only after that incident demand of the workers like minimum wage, maternity leave, casual leave sick leave etc. were sanctioned and hatta-bahira was abandoned. In independent India also working class in the entire tea garden of the region have remained under the neo-colonial form of subjugation. The contemporary plantation economy had to witness the various problems like frequent closing down of tea garden, malnutrition and other. One can see the gendering of work in plantation hierarchy because all the managerial post are occupied by men and in rare cases they are raised up to the post of *chaprasi* and *baidar*. The plantation movement of 1955 has been cherished by the people in Darjeeling Hills. Many of the workers like Mrs. Subba who participated in the movement still cherish the victory of the working class as:

“Do you know? Whatever the facilities that workers are getting today that was brought by us. There was no *sutkery bhatta* (maternity allowance). Ratanlal and few Bengali gentlemen were very active. They worked for organizing the laborer. My father sometime used to carry them in *doko* on his forehead. You know people from the plains cannot walk for long time in the Hills. My mother used to cook food for them. Even I used to participate in the rallies but without much understanding what it was all about. I was around 20 years old. There were many chokra-lokras and use to work in Kaman. It was a great victory of the workers” (Subba 2016).

The plantation movement of 1955 was one of the most important movements in the history of plantation working class movement. It was joined by thousands of women and children apart from men. Similar movement of the plantation workers continue even today for the basic rights like minimum wage and proper implementation of the Plantation Labour Act (PIL).

### **3.4 Nepali Language Movement and the Participation of Women in Darjeeling Hills**

Language is not only a medium of communication but it is a vehicle through which transmission of culture takes place from one generation to next. It is an inherited part of the community's culture and identity. It is being said that language is the pillar of a culture and culture is the pillar of a nation. For many communities in South Asia language politics appeared as the basis of social protest. It has often taken the shape of an emotional issue and something eternal to the community; that is why, the slogan, 'Vasa Amader Pran' (language is our life) has been pertinent among the Bengalis during the language movement in East Pakistan.

The language issue was not new in the context of India because India had to face the confrontation of several language problems in both pre and post independence periods. The official language problem, recognition of linguistic states and problem of the linguistic minorities were the major problems in both pre and post independent India. Language as the basis of community identity has been gaining its prominence in identity politics and regionalism in India. Similar instances and problems were encountered by the Nepalis/Gorkhas in India since first decades of the twentieth century.

Nepali language movement shares one of the important chapters in the history of social movement among the Nepalis/Gorkhas in India in general and Darjeeling in particular. The development of Nepali language and literature in the twentieth century Darjeeling immensely contributed in shaping Nepali/Gorkha identity in the country. The Nepali language has its own rich cultural heritage not only in Darjeeling but in the other parts of India where Nepalis constitute a majority. However, since independence, the Nepali speaking people had to face the confrontation of the linguistic problem both at the national and regional levels [Darjeeling Hills] which has often taken the shape of ethnic movement in the region. In the context of language Swatahsiddha Sarkar remarks as:

“On many occasions Gorkha ethnic conflict did project the recognition of Nepali language as a bond of contention. History suggests that Nepali language in Darjeeling Hills has appeared as the marker of ethnic identity, a vehicle for

expressing cultural distinctiveness, a source of national cohesion, and most importantly an instrument for building up a political community” (2013: 52).

Such movements are remarkable for the emergence of women in large numbers and their leadership qualities as already driven by their participation in the freedom struggle. Thus, in the present section, we will try to look into the historical background and development of Nepali language in India which largely contributed in the formation of Nepali/Gorkha identity which gave rise to the movement for the ‘politics of belonging’ among the Indian Nepalis. Secondly, it is necessary to analyze the emergence of women in literary activities because their participation in literary activities provided space for public political participation in the movement for the constitutional recognition of Nepali language. Thirdly, their participation in two language movements in India: (I) movement for the recognition of Nepali as an official language for Darjeeling Hills, (II) movement for the constitutional recognition of Nepali language under 8th schedule of the Indian constitution for 36 years.

### **3.4.1 Women and Vernacular Writings: A Silent Revolution**

It has been witnessed that development of Nepali language and literature in India has a long history. It is significant in shaping the ethnic identity of the Nepalis/Gorkhas in India. In the beginning there was no activity of the women because it was considered as the male domain. However, during the decades of 1940s large number of women appeared in the literary activities which have been discussed in the next section.

Participation of women in the context of Nepali language movement has its own historical significance in the region. Their contribution in social movements in pre and post-independent India too maintained a long history of its own. The society was patriarchal and public arenas were largely considered as the male domain but they were able to make their presence felt in the form of vernacular writing and other form of literary activities in their own capacities. It may be considered as the silent revolution among the women because without much formal education and as house wives they were writing against the patriarchal attitudes of the Nepali society. On the other hand they were also concerned about the well being of their society as a whole.

The first half of nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of important Nepali literary institutions like Gorkha Jan Pustakalaya (1919) and Nepali Sahitya Sammelan (1924) in Darjeeling Hills. It has been found that these institutions had done so much of activities in spreading Nepali literature but there was no record of single woman activist in its early decades. However, at the same time as early as 1926 a vernacular called ‘Gorkha Sansar Patrika’ brought out from Dehra Dune did make their presence felt. Bidhyadevi Naha in the volume published a poem ‘Chora Chori Kun Hunna’ and probably it was the first published literary work written by an Indian Nepali woman (Sundas 1993). In her poem she highlighted a kind of gender consciousness and urged for the equal education for the girl child without any discrimination in the society. The two more creative writings appeared in the same volume written by Phulmani Pradhan and Vidhya Devi Acharya (Sharma and Singh 2007: 70).

In the context of Darjeeling it was Rup Narayan Sinha inspired by the progressive call of ‘Khoji’ encouraged women to overcome the threshold of domesticity during 1940s. It was also the result of the growing intensity of women’s education in Darjeeling Hills. Many women writers emerged in this magazine published by Gorkha Dukha Niwarak Sammelan. The publication of a magazine called Siksha by Sunkeshi Pradhan in 1949 from Kalimpong influenced and encouraged a large number of women to take active participation in the literary activities in the entire region. Within a span of short time a large number of women appeared in the field of literary activities and many of them became the editors of esteemed magazines and journals published from the region like Bharti, Hamro Sanket, Purnima, Nava Prabhat, Diyalo and others. Chief among them were Deo Kumari Thapa, Amrita Chettri, Radhika Raya, Bishnumati Ghatraj, Man Kumari Chettri, Chandrakala Gurung, Radhika Raya, Mayawati Chettri, Prabhavati Raya and others. These activities have historical significance among the Nepali women as noted by Sharma and Singh 2007: 70:

“Stories and poem published at that time are examples of protest against conservative attitudes of society towards women. Since women writers were rare, professional writing was assumed to be male activity. So they found it difficult to imagine and therefore, depict women as activists. Consequently

they were conveniently passed off as ‘invisible’. This attitude has persisted right through the twentieth century and it expressed itself in the kind of disregard for and undermining of women writers”.

Another significant event at the same point of time in Darjeeling Hills which immensely provided space to women was the emergence of Hasta-Likhit Patrika (hand written magazine). It was started in the mid 1943 due to scarcity of papers and government restriction on printing and publication. The publication of hand written magazine reached even in the remote corners of entire Darjeeling Hills. Many schools in the Hills and premium literary institutions like Gorkha Jana Pustakalaya and Gorkha Dukha Niwarak Sangha (GDNS) organised art and exhibition programmes. Most of the literary persons participated in such activities. Forerunners among the women were Venu Kumari Singh, Shanta Khaling, Dev Kumari Thapa, Ganga Pakhrin, Laki Devi Sundas and Madhur Archana Sangboo. It was considered as an important event as noted by Sharma and Singh 2007: 71:

“These women had no professional experiences, the way we understand it today but they were handling the magazines quite professionally. This is the surprising bit that most of them had full time domestic identities and unknowingly they had entered into man’s domain. These were women who actually swam against the current and found their shores in the Hasta Likhit Patrika”.

The content of their writings shows that they were conscious of their identity both as Indian Gorkhas/Nepalis and as Nepali/Gorkha women. As women they were critical about the educational backwardness of Nepali women and drew attention to the urgency of women’s education in the region. It has been witnessed from their writings that they felt the need for social reforms in Nepali society. They had a great deal of concern for the creation of alcohol free society. Their writings revealed a great deal of concern about discrimination faced by the hill people in other parts of the country. They were also critical about the patriarchal attributes of the Nepali society. The content of their writings shows the level of women’s consciousness but for them education is important for the wellbeing of the whole family. Their involvements in such literary activities have important

significance in the contemporary Nepali literature, society and culture. Their participation in the literary activities in many ways transformed their participation in the Nepali language movement.

### **3.4.2 Participation of Women in Nepali Vasa Andolan (Language Movement)**

In post independent India two major significant events took place related to language policy which touched upon the Nepali sentiment at large. Firstly, the Indian constituent assembly recognized 14 languages as the major Indian Languages in the year 1951. Secondly, West Bengal government declared Bengali as the official language of the state including Darjeeling district in 1961. However, Nepali was neither recognized as the major Indian Language under the 8<sup>th</sup> schedule of the constitution nor as the official language of the Darjeeling district. Various organizations were formed for the recognition of Nepali as an official language for Darjeeling Hills and also for its inclusion under 8<sup>th</sup> schedule of the Indian constitution. In the following we will try to understand their participation in the language movement.

#### **3.4.2.1 Vasa Manyata Samiti and the Role of Women**

The situation of uncertainty around the language issue produced insecurity in the Nepali speaking region of West Bengal. Many termed it as linguistic imperialism. In such context, *Vasa Manyata Samiti* (Darjeeling District Hill People's Language Implementation Committee) was formed with a single agenda to launch a movement for the recognition of Nepali language as the official language of Darjeeling district. It was formed on 31<sup>st</sup> of March 1961. On the under-current a small conscious section of Darjeeling Hills was also uniting for the recognition of Nepali under 8th schedule of the Indian constitution. It has been evident from 4th volume of the 'Navapravath' its editor and acclaimed women writer Sanumati Rai from Kalimpong wrote in its editorial column as:

“..... Indian constitution also does not recognize Nepali language. In this context, no strong voice has been raised so far, this proved our nonchalance and defunctness (cited, Sotang 2017: 23).

The rationale behind the implementation of Bengali language as an official language in Darjeeling district was the census report of 1951 where Nepali speakers of the district constituted only 19 percent as stated by the government. It was reacted by the civil society of Darjeeling and its neighbouring areas because the 1941 census shows 59 percent Nepali speakers in the district. It was because the sub-groups of the Nepali community like Rai, Mangar, Gurung, Tamang, Newar, Sunwar and Thami were not enumerated as 'Nepali'. There were only five sub-groups like Kami, Damai, Sarki, Chhetri and Bahun were enumerated as Nepali speakers in the census report of 1951. The people were very depressed because the State Reorganization Commission (SRC) of 1953 laid down its principle stating that if 70 per cent or more of the total population of a district consists of a minority group then language of minority would be the official language of the district (Sarkar 2013, Subba 1992).

*Vasa Manyata Samiti* (Darjeeling District Hill People's Language Implementation Committee) was formed and led by the leading intellectuals of Darjeeling like Indra Bahadur Rai, Ganeshlal Subba and others. Various peaceful plans and programmes were organised in the name 'Vasa Sapatha' by the Vasa premis (lovers of the language). The MLAs from Darjeeling Hills constantly raised the issues of language in the West Bengal State Legislative Assembly.

At that juncture the women leaders like Mayadevi Chhetry, Laki Devi Sundas played a significant role for the recognition of Nepali language both at the national and regional levels. Maya Devi was the Member of Parliament to the Rajya Sabha from West Bengal. She organised a meeting of the congress district committee at Kalimpong and also wrote official and non-official letters to the higher authority. On 10th April 1961, many organizations of Darjeeling including Nepali Sahitya Sammelan placed a deputation to the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru who was on his visit to Darjeeling. As the Member of Parliament from Darjeeling and president of the district committee of congress, Maya Devi Chhetry led a twenty six member delegation of Darjeeling District Congress and submitted a deputation in support of the recognition of Nepali as the official language of Darjeeling (Sotang 2017: 31).

### Nepali Speakers in Darjeeling District in Various Censuses

Census Year	1941	1951	1961
Percentage of Nepali-speakers	67.07	19.98	59.09

Source: Information derived from Subba (1992) and Sarkar (2013).

### 1951 census of Darjeeling District

Sl. no.	Language	Population
1	Nepali	88,958
2	Rai	64,730
3	Tamang	49,780
4	Limboo	20,092
5	Mangar	19,374
6	Gurung	17,841
7	Newar	14,813
8	Sunwar	4,782
9	Thami	457
10	Total	2,80,8,27

Source, Suman Raj Timsina (*Nepali Community in India*), 1992, PP. 33

Maya Devi Chhetry actively participated and provided leadership in the freedom movement and several other movements in the region. Her love and concern for the Nepali language may be evident from the letter written by her to M.R. Datar, Ministry of Home Affairs on 9th of March 1956 regarding the recognition of Nepali language as one of the major Indian languages. She was very vocal in the parliament regarding the status of

Nepali language in India. She tried to justify importance of recognizing Nepali as an official language in West Bengal. She also disseminated the fact regarding the development and status of Nepali language in India in the Indian Parliament as:

“....Nepali has been recognised as a medium of instruction to matriculation standard and vernacular in the Calcutta University, Banaras and Allahabad Universities. The Gorkhas who are settled in India and who are born as Indian citizens are in millions and are scattered all over the country. Even during the British regime Nepali was a recognised Indian language. So, naturally it is quite an injustice to exclude from the list of Indian languages and considered as a foreign language” (Giri 2010: 102).

In the same year, Nepali was recognized as the official language of the hill region of Darjeeling district (WBA XXIV). The most important aspect of this movement was the participation of all political and civil society of Darjeeling. Most importantly people belonging to various political outfits came together for the common cause. In both Indian Parliament and State Legislative Assembly representatives of Darjeeling irrespective of their political affiliation heavily reacted on the language policy on the one hand and politics behind the 1951 census on the other. Though there were several contradictions and opposition from Bengal government, politicians and Scholars, finally Nepali was recognized as an official language of three subdivisions of Darjeeling Hills under the West Bengal Official Language Act, 1961. The census of 1961 also included all the groups within the Nepalis like Rai, Mangar, Gurung, Chhetri, Bahun, Kami, Damai, Sarki, Thami, Tamang and Thami as Nepali speakers. It was a great victory for the People of Darjeeling because the aspiration and hope of the people got recognised. It provided aspiration, hope and new impetus for the constitutional recognition of Nepali language as one of the major Indian language.

#### **3.4.2.2 Nepali Vasa Samiti and the Role of Women**

The demand for the constitutional recognition of Nepali language rose along the demand for the official language of the district from 1961. However, for the first time it were the editors of the Jargrath Gorkha of Dehradun, Anandsingh Thapa along with Birsingh

Bhandari and Narsing Rana who submitted a memorandum for the recognition of Nepali language as an Indian language to the then Prime Minister of India in 1956. It has been witnessed that no other language in India had to struggle for such a long time because after 36 years of struggle it got its recognition in 1992. The constant struggle of the Nepali literary institutions, non-Nepali literates, linguists, political parties and various institutions and associations has been praiseworthy (Rai 2012). At the ground reality of the language movement both Nepali and non-Nepali women played significant role and contributed in large measures. The most important and vibrant women leaders were Maya Devi Chhetry, Laki Devi Sundas, Sanumati Rai, Kamala sankrityayan, Dr. Maitreyee Bose and others (Niroula 2015).

The most important contribution was made by Dr. Maitreyee Bose, Congress MP from Darjeeling with the support of All India Gorkha League in 1967. Dr. Bose tried to bring a private member's bill in Parliament seeking the inclusion of Nepali in the 8th Schedule. She was asked whether Nepali had a grammar and a lexicon, proving beyond doubt that the questioners as well as the people at large were ignorant about Nepali and its merits as a national language. However, her private bill did not receive much attention. In this context her press release was published in the Amrita Bazar Patrika dated 14.09.68 as:

“As an elected representative of the district, I have tried hard to convince the honourable fellow members of the Lok Sabha of the earnest desire of Indian Nepali about recognition of their language by the constitution and government of India but unfortunately I have not succeeded so far..... I appealed to all friends who are interested in this question to take an active part and try their best for success of the bill already introduced by me in the Lok Sabha.”

Chitta Basu, Forward Block MP from West Bengal, was a dear champion of the cause in Parliament. Goaded by Dr Bose and others, and himself convinced of the genuineness of the demand, Basu introduced a private member's bill in the Rajya Sabha in 1969 for Nepali's inclusion in the Constitution. Unless supported by a majority, a private member's bill usually fails to be passed. Basu's bill too was lost in the maze and died a natural death when Parliament was dissolved in 1971. CPI (M) stalwart Ratanlal Brahmin, popular in Darjeeling as Maila Bajey, was elected to the Lok Sabha in the elections that

followed. In Parliament, whenever he stood to make a statement he used Nepali as he claimed he did not know any other tongue. The Speaker of the House allowed him to speak in Nepali. The text was translated and distributed to MPs the following day. This inspired Maila Bajey to restart the stalled language recognition initiative (Rai 2012: 04).

In order to fulfil the institutional or organizational base/support for the constitutional recognition of Nepali language, an organization called '*Nepali Vasa Samiti*' was formed on 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 1972 by Prem Kumar Alay, Bal Chhetri, Bhuwan Singh Chhetri and others in Darjeeling. Before its formation various literary journals and magazines were actively producing consciousness and need for the recognition of Nepali. This organization soon took the shape of a big organization having membership from Nepali living in the different states of India. Soon it was renamed as Akhil Bharitya Nepali Vasa Samiti.

### **3.4.2.3 Akhil Bharitya Nepali Vasa Samiti (ABNVS) and the Role of Women**

Laki Devi Sundas, one of the influential literary personalities and academician was actively involved in language movement. She actively participated and gave leadership to Nepali Vasa Samiti which was later renamed as '*Akhil Bharitya Nepali Vasa Samiti*' when it received whole hearted support of the Nepali community from other parts of the country. This organization organised a solidarity march from the different political and non-political organizations across Darjeeling on 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 1972. She tirelessly worked with the organization to seek solidarity from various civil societies of Darjeeling like *Marwari Samaj*, *Bengali Samaj*, *Hindi Vasi Samaj*, *Muslim Samaj* and others. The well known personalities of Darjeeling; Mr. Swar Aggrawal, Mr. Amal Banerjee, Mr. Sam Murti on behalf of their organisation supported the cause of Nepali language. Accordingly, Bhadra Bahadur Hamal (CPI), Jagat Chhetri (AIGL), Sangopal Lepcha (CPI(M)), Madan Thapa (Indian Congress) expressed their solidarity on behalf of their political parties. Indra Bahadur Rai on behalf of *Nepali Sahitya Parishad* organised a mass rally which expressed their support for the Nepali language on 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 1972. She herself represented as the member of Nepali Sahitya Sammelan (Sundas 1993, Dahal 2003). Laki Devi Sundas was one of members of a 32 memberd delegations of the ABNVS to meet the then Prime Minister of the country. After hearing the necessary requisitions to get recognition she

along with I.B Rai of Nepali Sahitya Parishad, Prem Kumar Alay of Nepali Vasa Samiti tirelessly worked to get recognition of Sahitya Academy, New Delhi.

The constitutional recognition of Sindhi in the year 1966, gave new hope to the Nepalis. The reason behind the constitutional recognition of Sindhi was to bring them into mainstream India because it was learned that the Sindhi community felt alienated in India after Sindh was included as the geographical territory of Pakistan. In the same line of arguments a new movement was launched by the Nepali under the banner of *Akhil Bharatiya Nepali Vasa Sangharsha Samiti*. A memorandum was sent to the prime minister. They argued along the same lines for the inclusion of Nepali in the 8th Schedule (Rai 2012: 04). The cause of the Nepali language was supported by the great Indian linguist Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee. Since the beginning of the Nepali language movement he recommended Nepali along with Sindhi and Konkani.

These were some of the initial activities of ABNVS in Darjeeling; but soon it received huge support from Nepalis living in the different parts of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Dooars, Delhi, Dehradun, Dharmasala and Sikkim and various programmes were organised in different parts of the country in support of constitutional recognition of Nepali language. 7<sup>th</sup> February 1984 was the most remarkable day in the history of Nepali language movement because for the first time on this day a long march (*padh yatra*) was organized at the national level. It started from Gorkha Sudhar Sabha, Dehradun to Delhi (Niroula 2015, Sotang 2016, Sundas 1993).

The long march in support of language was started with 36 people but it received huge support from the people and when it reached Delhi there were 150 members. They travelled total distance of 273 kilometers in 12 days. The long march was represented by the members of '*Akhil Bharatiya Nepali Vasa Samiti*' from the various parts of the country. The most notable women participants were 67 year old Vaidhnedhi Brahmin of Bijanbari, Chandramith Waiba, Puspa Yanzon, Sabitri Aley, Kumari Bishnu Gurung and many others (Niroula 2015, Sotang 2016).

### **3.4.2.4 Bharitya Nepali Rastrya Parishad (BNRP) and the Role of Women**

During the 1980s the Nepali language movement took a different shape because of the separate statehood movement led by the GNLFF. Since the beginning of the movement there was no opposition and confrontation on the issue of Nepali language. However, the GNLFF since its formation demanded for the inclusion of Gorkha Bhasha in the Indian constitution. According to its supremo Subash Ghising the nomenclature of the language should be Gorkha Bhasha which give distinct identity to the Nepali speaking Gorkhas in India. The movement also suffered a setback because of the violent movement during 1986 to 1988. The people of Darjeeling divided on the line of Nepali vs. Gorkha. The supporter of Gorkha bhasha also formed All India Gorkha Bhasha Samiti and demanded for the inclusion of the Gorkha Bhasha in the Indian constitution under the 8<sup>th</sup> schedule. On the other hand the Nepali intellectuals, literary laureates and others supported Nepali. In such situation of confrontation Nepali Rastrya Parishad was formed on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1990, under the guidance of Sri. Nar Bahadur Bhandari the then chief minister of Sikkim (Rai 2012).

The BNRP was a national level organization formed for the language cause and constituted by the large number of members at the national level. It was supported by the large number of women leaders. Mantita Pradhan and Shanti Chhetri were the Members of Legislative Assembly from Sikkim who were active since first day of its formation. Soon a committee was formed for the preparation of documents to be submitted to the ministers and MPs for the cause of Nepali language. In this committee Asarani Rai (Manipur), Shanti Pradhan (Jaigoan), Bimala Subba (Dooars), Puspa Pradhan and Manita Pradhan (Sikkim), Laki Devi Sundas (Darjeeling) took active participation. On 6<sup>th</sup> August 1992, Dil Kumar Bhandari, lok Sabha MP from Sikkim introduced a private bill in the parliament and finally it got its recognition on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1992.

The Nepali language movement had to struggle for a long period of time. Since its inception various organizations were formed for the cause of Nepali language. In its long journey different political and non-political parties and civil society and organizations have played significant roles. The movement for the constitutional recognition of Nepali language was actively participated by the large number of women. This movement took a

pan-Indian character among the Indian Nepalis and it received the participation of women from the different region of the country. Their participation was diverse in the language movement. They provided leadership in the shaping of the various organizations. Some of the important leaders were Laki Devi Sundas, Kamala Shankritayan, Chandramit Lopshng and many others. In Manipur Asharani Rai took the leading role. She was popularly known as '*Bhasha Sangrami*' due to her immense contribution in the Nepali language movement. Since the beginning she had been a part of various organizations and actively took part in various plans and programmes. She was remembered by the people of Darjeeling as 'Manipuri Dedi'. Gita Upadhyay was an assistant professor at Sivsagar Mahavidhyalaya. She took active participation in the language movement and was the president of Nepali Sahitya Parishad which had a great role to play in the movement.

There were many women who have contributed to the language movement by participating in the rallies and giving motivational speeches and writings in various popular newspapers and magazines. Khiroda Kharka of Darjeeling was one of them, Dew Kumari Siwakoti, Harin Shrestha (Kalimpong), Bimala Subba, Shanti Pradhan (jaigoan), Dr. Shanti Chettri, Gita Sharma, Manita Pradhan, Puspa Sharma (Sikkim), Bijaya Kumari Thapa, Kusum lata Gurung, Mamta Chhetri and Lal Maya Subba (Dehradun), Goma Sharma and Maina Thapa 'Asha' (Guwahati), Chandrakala Newar(Assam), Dr. Shanti Thapa (academic awardees writer), Jayamati Devi, Kamla Sharma, Hira Chettri, Munni Sapkota (Manipur). All of them were some way or the other related to Darjeeling because it was the epicenter of the Nepali language movement (Niroula 2015, Sotang 2016, Rai 2012).

Women's participation in Nepali language movement which often took the shape of politics of belonging has been very diverse. Since the inception of the Nepali language movement women have participated as leaders, participants, writers and active supporters both at the regional and national level.

### **3.5. Summing up**

The present chapter shows the participation of women of Darjeeling Hills in the different types of movements that have erupted in the region. The participation of women in movements in Darjeeling Hills has not come up in an abrupt manner but is the culmination

of long historical realities. Starting with the independence movement the women of Darjeeling Hills constituted an important part of every social movement. They experienced the heterogeneity of their experiences as movement participants in the region. Such activities of public domain challenged the conventional stereotypes of their society as they were facing colonial and plantation patriarchy on the one hand and indigenous patriarchy on the other.

Their participation and contribution in the making of the social movement in the region has been relatively overlooked by scholars and activists. Their contribution has always been put behind the curtain in both academic and non-academic endeavours. The present chapter touched upon several important issues in social movements with special emphasis on the participation and role of women. Since independence movement to the contemporary movements they constitute the most important actors in all the movements. Darjeeling was kept under the strict surveillance of the government but natives of the region including women and children made noteworthy contribution both at the national and regional levels. Though few in numbers these women freedom fighters of the region had the heterogeneity of their experiences in the context of their participation in nationalist discourse and the family support received by them.

Their contribution in the tea plantation trade union movement was equally important. The movement against the plantation started during 1940s but there were several stances of organised movement of the working class in smaller form since 1920s. Women in the tea gardens were actively involved in the movement under the banner of Mahila Samiti of CPI(M). If we see the history of trade union movement we find that women not only gave the leadership in the movement but also sacrificed their lives as evident from the Margaret's Hope uprising of 1955. These movements provided them opportunities to come out of their house in the public-political domain.

It has been evident that soon after independence the country was busy in settling down the regional issues like reorganization of state, official language, etc. Darjeeling was not free from such policies of the government. During this phase the issues became narrow i.e. from national to regional. Soon after independence the language movement started in Darjeeling both at the regional and national level. Firstly, for movement for the recognition

of Nepali as an official language of Darjeeling district. Secondly, for the recognition of Nepali as a national language under 8<sup>th</sup> schedule of the Indian constitution. Several organizations were formed where women played the most important role. Their role ranges from simple participants to the Member of Parliament, Members of Legislative Assembly and dignitaries of local and national level organizations for the language cause.

The above discussed issues are very important in order to understand the present context of social movement in Darjeeling Hills in general and the participation of women in particular. It has been evident that their participation in the freedom struggle of the country led to the growth of Indian nationalism among them. The issues raised in the present context of ethnic movement in Darjeeling Hills relates to nationalism, citizenship and language. Tea gardens have been the important segment of the hill society of Darjeeling and the contemporary movement in Darjeeling Hills raised issues related to tea in the region where women have actively participated at the various levels. Their participation in the contemporary movement will be discussed in the next chapter.

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