

Role of Women in Gorkhaland Movement: Assessing the Issue of Power Sharing

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Abstract

Involvement of women in contemporary social movements in India has been remarkable. Their active participation has not only influenced the ground level demonstrations but has also been able to influence the decision making processes of the movements, thus in turn, affecting the whole decision making process in general. The erstwhile marginalized and excluded part of the society has found significant say in the general process of policy making, both as agent and target. This phenomenon has been able to draw the attention of not only the social science scholars, the political commentator and activist but it has also been able to move the mainstream media due to its mass participation in the movements. However, such participation of women in social movements has been met with several issues and has raised several questions. Of many issues of significance, the present paper focuses on and aims at exploring the various dynamics of women in social movements; of particular significance it seeks to analyze the nature of women's involvement in the current phase of Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling hill and makes an attempt to put light upon the issue of their involvement in the actual decision making process.

Keywords: Involvement, Social Movements, Resurgence, Participation, Decision making

1. Introduction

In modern democratic polities, the state is generally identified with the majority culture, while the others are categorized as minorities (Mahajan, 2002)².

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² Mahajan, Gurpreet, Identities and Rights: Aspects of Liberal Democracy in India (1998). New Delhi. Oxford University Press.

Such categorizations of the population of a nation have often resulted in a feeling of alienation among the people, particularly the minorities and the poor. The process of democratization and development as adopted by the state has become a matter of serious concern, as its policies and plans are seemingly enacted either in the interest of the majority or the minority. Indian democracy, on the face of it, is often considered as one of the best cases of the value of unity in diversity, a closer look into the nature of Indian society however tells a different story.

Indian democratic set up, ever since its existence has undergone a series of changes. Starting its journey on the democratic landscape since 1947, it has gone through numerous trends and challenges, the most significant one being the implementation of the New Economic Policy or also known as economic liberalization and the passing of 73th and 74th amendment Act during 1990's. However such changes in policies has not only brought positive development in the economic and political landscape of the country, but has also brought to fore the issues that either went unrepresented under the project of "nation building" or were submerged by repressive government policies and actions. Of many issues of significance that has claimed attention is the rise of socio-political movement in different parts of the country that subtly, but not always peacefully, challenged the Indian states. Although the various socio-political movements present a complex and diverse picture in terms of the methodologies, strategies and aims, most, if not all, possess one similarity- the participation of women in the movement.

Involvement of women in contemporary social movements in India has been a spectacular sight. Their active participation has not only influenced the ground level demonstrations but has also been able to influence the decision-making processes of the movements, thus in turn, affecting the entire decision making-process in general. The hitherto marginalized and excluded sections of the society have found significant say in the general process of policy making, both as an agent and target.

This phenomenon has drawn the attention not only of the social scientists, political commentators and activists but has also been able to engage the attention of the mainstream media. However, such participation of women in social movements has raised several issues and queries.

Of the many issues of significance, the present paper focuses on and aims at exploring the various dynamics of women in social movements; of particular significance the paper seeks to analyze the nature of women's engagement in the current phase of the Gorkhaland movement i.e. post 2007 in Darjeeling hills and makes an attempt to shed light upon the issue of their involvement in the actual decision-making process.

2. Role of Women in the Post 2007 Gorkhaland Movement and the Issue of Power Sharing

Gorkhaland movement in the state of West Bengal represents a political struggle and is said to have begun in pre-independent era more accurately in 1907. The demand of the movement is basically a separation of the region Darjeeling from the domain of Bengal during pre-independent and West Bengal after the independent. The movement for separation was in its peak during 1980's under the leadership of Gorkha Liberation Front (GNLF) which virtually lost its momentum with the establishment of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council in 1988. Generally, while there were few prominent women leaders in the past Gorkhaland movements, their role and participation in the movement were not influential, or rather, went unnoticed, rendering them virtually absent from any academic discourse on the issue. However, in the present context of the movements, post 2007, women's participation in the hill politics has been very much impressive.

The post 2007 period, in the history of Gorkhaland movement witnessed the rise of women power in Darjeeling hills. In October, 2007, Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha (GJMM) replaced Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) as the champion of Gorkhaland movement. Since then the political leadership of the hills under GJMM has launched numerous programs of actions demanding separate state of Gorkhaland. The birth of the new political party in the hills gave opportunity to the women to crave a space for themselves in the political arena that so long were dominated by men.

The ideological path manifestly subscribing to the Gandhian principle of *ahimsa* and non-violence that the newly formed party followed was seemingly the only reason for women to get engage themselves in the movement.³

³ Personal interview with Shanti Chettri, dated 22.10.13.

Along with the formation of the GJMM, the party President Mr. Bimal Gurung announced the formation of women's wing within the parent body that came to be known as Gorkha Jana Mukti Nari Morcha. Dhan Maya Tamang known to the locale as '*Bari*' was appointed as the first president of the Nari Morcha Darjeeling.⁴ However, to form women's wing was actually the initiative of the men leaders of the movement, who believed that the political grievances of the women could more sincerely reached the party by forming a women's wing.

While the women, - initially were ordained to play an important role in the subsequent movements, there has been a marked shift in the party's take on the role of the women as women came to be used as a "political tool".

Forming of women's wing, by the leadership of the movement has seemingly proved to be a politically prudent decision and a step forward towards the goal of achieving a separate state of Gorkhaland. The women's wing Gorkha Jana Mukti Nari Morcha, since its inception, has attracted largest number of Nepali/Gorkhey women till date. After six years of its formation, almost each household of Darjeeling hills has at least one woman as the member of Nari Morcha.⁵ The membership does not mean that everyone holds official position, as there are permanent and non-permanent members, who actively participate in the movement. Thus, when the role of the women in the Gorkhaland movement in post – 2007 phase is discussed, it is used to refer to the role of Gorkha Jana Mukti Nari Morcha.

In order to provide assistance to the parent body, the Nari Morcha have formulated series of of actions.

Among others, the main programs of Nari Morcha includes organizing *dharnas*⁶, *bhook hartal*,⁷ *gherao*,⁸ rally and picketing, including sending women's delegation to Delhi as part of the parent organization. Apart from political activities, women are equally involved in social works as well.

⁴ verbal interaction with the members of Nari Morcha, dated 22.10.13

⁵ Personal interview with Malati Chettri, dated 22.10.13, who is the vice president of town committee nari morcha. She said , ' we have been able to attract almost all women of Darjeeling in our struggle for statehood'.

⁶ A fast conducted at the door of an offender, especially a debtor, in India as a means of obtaining compliance with a demand for justice, such as payment of a debt.

⁷ Bhook hartal literally means hunger Strike

⁸ A form of collective action in India in which workers/people imprison their employers/leaders on the premises until their demands are met.

In the beginning, women manifestly lacked political experience, while the organization was characterized by internal fragmentation and conflict. Dhan Maya Tamang, occupied the office of Nari Morcha. It is alleged, at the behest of party supremo. However, very shortly, the body was dissolved, and in its place in December, 2008, a new body was created with Shanti Chettri as its president and Damanta Sharma and Malati Chettri as vice-presidents. Like in previous case, the new office-holders were also handpicked by the party supremo, instead of either holding an organizational election or building a consensus on who should lead the party. Here, we come across a lack of common consent of the member of Nari Morcha. Shanti Chettri, who is currently holding the post of *Sabashad*⁹ in recently formed Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA)- was asked and “appointed” by the supremo, Mr. Bimal Gurung to assume a position in the Nari Morcha Darjeeling Town Committee.

Rather than conducting elections, one-man monopoly was demonstrated, where the consent of the women were not even sought while choosing their leader and representatives.

Assigning organizational responsibility to Mrs. Shanti Chettri, however, proved to be fruitful for the entire movement. For it was under her leadership that Nari Morcha started gaining popularity all over Darjeeling hills and hereafter started the journey of the Nepali/Gorkhey women towards the achievement of goal and recognition of their contribution to the movement.

On December 18th, 2008, Nari Morcha was reconstituted, and from the 20th December onwards, the body actively started implementing their programs and keenly participated in the programs organized the parent body. For example, on December 20th, 2008, in protest against the incident that took place in various parts such as Kalchini, Dooars, Devidanga, a relay *ansan* was called by the parent body GJMM; at the call of the party “high command”, the Nari Morcha activists also joined the *ansan* actively from the 20th to 27th December, with 45 women as regular participants. On the 27th December, the last day of *ansan*, Nari Morcha organised a '*juloos*'¹⁰ in Darjeeling town and '*gheraowed*' Sadar police station.¹¹

⁹ Sabashad refer to the member of the Gorkha Territorial Administration(GTA). Altogether there are 45 Sabashads or members in GTA

¹⁰ Juloos refer to here as mass people's rally.

¹¹ Official document review, Gorkha Jana Mukti Nari Morcha Town Committee Darjeeling.

From January 25th, 2009 to February 22nd 2009, the GJMM leadership launched "Dooars Chalo Andolan", where women participated in large numbers. In fact, at the programme organised by the Nari Morcha at Nagarkata, the clash with some of the anti-Gorkhaland tribal outfits left many women injured. On 8th February, Nari Morcha organized a rally from Chowrasta to Sadar police station and observed "Black Flag Day". It was basically organized in response to the suppression of "Dooars Chalo Andolan". In the same month on 29th, Nari Morcha organized a rally from Gorkha Dukha Niwarak Sammelan (GDNS) to Kutchery in protest against the transfer of RTO office to the plains of Siliguri which they viewed as administrative tactics that would put more hardship to the locals of the region. These were some of the most high profile women demonstrations that brought them as the potential contributor to the resurgent Gorkhaland movement.¹²

Following these incidents, picketing, *dharnas*, *gheraos* and rally became regular features of Nari Morcha activism. Women, both old and young, from college goers to tea garden workers, started participating in the movement. The GJMM leadership displaying its faith on the people gave a call of indefinite strike "*anisshit kalin bandh*" from 13th July 2009.

At the call of GJMM leadership, not only the members of the Nari Morcha joined and participated in the movement but women in general were to be seen at the forefront to organize picketing of 12 hours daily.

In fact, the responsibility of who would lead the picketing and duration of picketing was arranged by the women of Nari Morcha.¹³

The year 2011 in the history of Gorkhaland movement was marked by numerous demonstrations, strikes and rallies. It was, in fact, the year when the movement reached its peak. The movement witnessed several tripartite meetings between the Government of India, State Government and GJMM. As before, women were at the forefront leading the movement at the call of GJMM leadership. *Dharnas* and demonstrations organized by the Nari Morcha became a regular feature, that, sometimes, lasted more than 12 hours at stretch.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

In what could be termed as one of first martyrs of the GJMM led Gorkhaland movement, two women activist of the Nari Morcha were killed in police firing at Sibchu, Dooars.¹⁴

From January 12th 2011 onwards, in response to the brutal action of state police force and the subsequent arrest of activists of GJMM, the leadership of the movement called for four days strike in Darjeeling hills. Women member of Nari Morcha actively joined the strike. The routine of 12 hours picketing from 6 am to 6 pm were prepared and duties were fixed and allotted to women members of every village. On 15th January, strike was called off for next two days, only to resume again from 18th till 24th January. One of the regular feature of strikes were rallies from the Railway Station to Chowk Bazaar of Darjeeling town, where Nari Morcha was entrusted with the responsibility to lead the movement that was participated by all the other frontal organisations of the Morcha, including *Vidyarthi* (Students') Morcha and *Yuva* (Youths') Morcha.¹⁵

One of the incidents that shook the entire Darjeeling hills, Terai and Dooars was "Sibchu Kanda" (Sibchu incident) where police lathicharge and firing led to the death of two women activists of Nari Morcha, which one of the leading national magazines Frontline described as "Sibchu Massacre". In order to secure justice for those assaulted and killed by the police action - , on 10th February, "Black Flag Day"- was organised under the leadership of Mrs. Asha Gurung.

On the 15th of the same month the leadership of the movement gave the call for self-detention (*jail bhara andolan*). The program continued till 22nd February, where the ratio of women was reportedly higher than that of men.¹⁶

On 26th February 2011, in their demand for separate statehood, the GJMM leadership organised a historic demonstration at Jantar Mantar (Delhi) - which demonstrated the will and determination of the Nepali women to carry forward their struggle for Gorkhaland even to natio's capital.

¹⁴ Bimla Rai and Neeta Khawas were killed by the police firing while they were demonstrating along with other men and women activists.

¹⁵ Official document review, Gorkha Jana Mukti Nari Morcha Town Committee Darjeeling.

¹⁶ Ibid

From 24th February to 13th March, a rally was organised by the GJMM, from Gandhi Smarak to Jantar Mantar (in Delhi), where the activists of Nari Morcha led relentless struggle to put across the demand of Gorkhaland. The basic objectives of the *dharna*, however, was to press the government to allow Mr. Bimal Gurung the right to lead the rally from Kumani village to Sunkosh in Dooars; demand for justice in Sibchu incident; and, the removal of Indo-Tibetan police force from hill subdivisions, including Terai and Dooars. The movement continued till 18th July 2011.¹⁷ On the day of 18th July 2011, an agreement was finally signed between the government of India and West Bengal on the one hand, and the representative of the GJMM on the other. The agreement led to the enactment of GTA Bill which has brought a new administrative setup in the form of Gorkha Territorial Administration with manifestly greater legislative and financial power over its precursor, Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC).¹⁸

Besides being involved in political movements, women members of Nari Morcha were equally involved in social activities. For example, on 26th May 2011, when the entire hills were ravaged by the "*Aila*" storm, the members of Nari Morcha reached out to the people in crisis and arranged for provisions of food and other basic needs. As a part of their effort to help the survivors of "*Aila*", they submitted a memorandum requesting the District Magistrate Office (Darjeeling) to scale up its relief and rescue operations.¹⁹

While the contribution of women in the earlier Gorkhaland movement was marked by their absence due to the violent nature of the movement, it was remarkable during the renewed Gorkhaland movement under the GJMM leadership.

Given the prominent role played by the women, under the aegis of Nari Morcha, the observers and commentators have reflected on the role of women. Some have been critical to extremes in their observation, including labeling the massive participation of the women as the "use of women" by the leadership to gain political mileage without resorting to any violent means.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid, (See also, Telegraph, 19.07.13)

¹⁹ Official document review, Gorkha Jana Mukti Nari Morcha Town Committee Darjeeling.

It should be noted, in this context, that contrary to the impression that the "use of women" generate as "using women" for personal purpose, it is used here to connote the idea where leadership chose the women to transfer and transmit confidential informations, money, resources, including arms and ammunitions as women are considered safe "agents" who are able to escape any suspicion in the eyes of the law keepers.

On the other hand, as women are portrayed as symbol of peace and nonviolence, engaging them to lead the movement would mean that the police and other state forces would not restore to violent means, especially during rallies and demonstrations.

The renewed wave of Gorkhaland movement in the late 2000s saw the rise of women activism on the political landscape of Darjeeling district, including in some pockets of Dooars and Terai region. Led by the GJMM, the party with its commitment to democratic, non-violent Gandhian ideology have attracted and influenced large numbers of women to join the movement for Gorkhaland. The overwhelming participation of the women in the renewed movement has become a matter of serious discussion. For, the women, who in the previous phase of the movement had remained conspicuously silent and invisible, started to demonstrate their majority and strength in organizing *bartals*, *dharnas*, *chakkajam*²⁰ and *gheraos*. Although a dominant force within the GJMM, women, including the Nari Morcha activists, however, continue to occupy lower rung in the overall political ladder of the GJMM. In this sense, women are far from assuming the leadership role that has, more or less, remained a male bastion. The lack of political experience amongst the Nepali/Gorkhey women is evident from the following observations that were collected during the course of the fieldwork:

- "We should blindly support the decision taken by President Bimal Gurung."²¹

²⁰ The term "chakkajam" is used to describe the deliberate creation of traffic jams as a form of political and social protest

²¹ Quoted in R. Chakraborty and N. Lepcha. Ethnic Movements and Women's Participation: A Critical Reflection on the Participation of Women within the Gorkhaland Movement (2012). in P. Nepal and A. S. Chakraborty, Eds. Politics of Culture, Identity and Protest in North-east India (pp. 213-256), New Delhi, Authors press.

- “We have no decision of our own” and “all the programs of Nari Morcha is formulated by parent body (GJMM) and we are directed to implement those programs on given days.”
- “I was picked up by the “honorable” president Mr. Bimal Gurung from among many women present in the meeting and asked to hold the position of the president of Nari Morcha Town Committee Darjeeling.”

The above statements were provided by some of the prominent women activists of Nari Morcha, who presently hold some important position, both within the party organization and the GTA. Among others, it reflects the continuing existence of unequal power relationship that is deeply rooted in the social and political structure of the society. Among many reasons the women respondents provided, three broad trends could be identified. First, the lack of leadership experience among women, paved the way for male leaders to manipulate and “use” the women. Second, the way “posts” within the party are distributed, which is often the one man decision as against democratic voting, demonstrate that the consent of even the women members are not considered while choosing their representatives.

Third, the Nari Morcha Town Committee as the most active and powerful branch of Nari Morcha, does not have its own independent plan of action; rather it is the parent body which formulates the programs and take decisions for the party as a whole, which is abidingly carried out by other frontal organizations, including the Nari Morcha.

3. Conclusion

The above discussion on the nature of women's involvement in the movement gives us the picture that in the current phase of the movement led by GJMM leadership, women gained the opportunity to demonstrate their strength by actively participating in the movement and contributing to it, immensely.

In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the present Gorkhaland movement is led by Nari Morcha as the movement has witnessed the participation of the women in every activities of the party. On the issue of the “power-sharing” in the movement, it is also to be noted that the leaders of the movement have realized and valued the role of women in the movements, not only in their capacity to mobilize against the government authorities, but more importantly, in their role as the agents to carry on party's propaganda and other activities.

However, it needs to be noted that, to the extent women's' participation in the movement were their own conscious decision, encouraged by the GJMM leadership to give political space to hitherto “unheard” and “unseen” section, women surely have made their mark in the new, resurgent movement of Gorkhaland. And in the process, it is worth to mention, today women who were relatively silent and invisible during earlier movement holds prominent political position though not much in number.

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