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Women in Gorkhaland Movement: The Question of Empowerment

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Abstract:

Gorkhaland Movement has been a long political struggle of Indian Nepalis/ Gorkhas and is basically based on the demand of separation of Darjeeling hills from the domain of West Bengal. The movement was raised with same agenda from time to time by different political parties, but the most significant fact has been the subsequent rise of women participation in the movement. Women participation in the movement has brought profound positive and democratic effect on party politics, communities and civil society so far. Evidence shows that they have been a part of the movement from the time the issues has been raised. But their participation was in a minimal level, as the movement was exclusively male dominated. In the process, this movement witnessed ample participation of women from the hills, more specifically in late 2007, under a new political party Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM). However, in course of time, there has been a heightened political awareness among them and the resultant effort has been the outcome of women as political leaders and representatives in the hills. The basic aim of this paper is to bring in attention the nature of women participation and the role played by women in the movement which will led us to identify, its implication on political empowerment of women in the hills.

Keywords: Gorkhaland movement, women participation, representative, decision making, empowerment

1. Introduction

The demand for Gorkhaland is a protracted movement, which has been raised by Indian Nepalis to preserve their cultural, ethnic identity, which has been tangled around to prove their Indian nationality and citizenship. The process of immigration of people from Nepal to India during the colonial period has been a contentious issue, where lies the complexity of maintaining the ethnic identity of Indian Nepalis. The nomenclature “Nepalis” when used is immediately associated with Indian Nepalis as the people of Nepal in the minds of larger population which has labelled them as foreigner, alien and migrants. The identity used to refer Nepalis or Gorkha paved the way for consolidation of community in asserting their authentic identity through political mobilisation. Like several regional or autonomy movement which are founded on a sense of deprivation, marginalization and are basically economic in orientation the struggle of the Indian Nepalis relates to the similar issues as relegation of their citizenship and the legitimate right to be claimed as Indian by the people of India which can be fulfilled by forming the separate state of Gorkhas, the Gorkhaland. The demand for Gorkhaland has taken place in different phases.

The first phase of the demand for the separate state formation from the then Bengal on the grounds of ethnic differences can traced back in 1907, the pre independence period. With the continue efforts of different association and organisation under different political parties, the demand was not immediately realised rather it sowed the seeds of a cleavage between the Nepalis of the hill sub-divisions in Darjeeling and the inhabitants of Bengal in the plains.

The second phase of the movement was the most vigorous, vociferous and stabilized one spearheaded by Subash Ghising under the banner of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) which was formed in July 24, 1980. Ghising’s leadership was more successful in mobilizing the masses and raise the demand for the creation of a separate homeland for Nepalese in India. After indulging for two years (1986-88) in a violent separatist movement for Gorkhaland, Ghising halt the demand for Gorkhaland and agreed to the formation of an elected Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) an administrative body structure within West Bengal. The Constitution of Hill Council intended to ensure genuine territorial autonomy by giving the chance to control its social, economic, cultural and educational development. However, issues have been continued to rise regarding the immediate up gradation of DGHC into full- fledged State of Gorkhaland.

Ghising’s leadership has failed to qualify the test of time with the fact that no considerable changes have been reflected so far since the beginning of the new millennium even though the demand of Gorkhaland used to be reiterated with times (Sarkar, 2013:94). In an attempt to persuade both the internal and external political pressure Ghising sought recourse to a new brand of politics, the politics of bringing DGHC within the purview of Sixth Schedule. By then the third phase of the movement started with a different course with the formation of a new political outfit Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM) in 2007 under the leadership of Mr. Bimal Gurung rejecting

the proposal of Sixth Schedule and ousting Subash Ghising almost permanently from the hill politics, the movement so called *Antim Ladai* (Nepali word meaning a final battle).

Moreover, this time people arose with more vigour and vitality and the comeback heat was enormously witnessed in the hills. Eventually this movement has also slow its pace ending up with a tripartite agreement which was held between the Central Government, State Government and Gorkha Janmukti Morcha for the formation of an administrative arrangement, i.e. Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) in the hills. However, looking into the historic political development of Darjeeling till now, it has been designated with various administrative epithets and measures.

However, with all the above significance of study, this paper is an attempt to focus mainly on the political participation of women since 2007 undertaken by Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM) and will analyse whether this movement has led to political awareness and empowerment of women in the hills.

2. Participation of Women in the Movement

The demand for autonomy and state separation for Gorkhas/Indian Nepalis is said to have begun in pre independence period. Evidence shows that the movement was mainly dominated by men and participants were restricted only with the male members' of respective party organisation. Records show that S.W Ladenla, Additional Superintendent of Police in Darjeeling was the only women, whose participation was literally manifested in the political forum. She along with other elitist Nepalis formed the Hillmen's Association in Darjeeling demanding a separate administrative unit (Dasgupta, 1999:58). So far women have never been a part of the movement until the rise of second phase of the movement in 1980s.

During the second phase of the movement i.e. the rise of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), their Chief Executive Mr. Subash Ghising took the initiative of forming different frontal organisation within the party system to capitalise the situation in the hills from various dimensions. Along with the different political organisations, he was also successful in establishing the first women's political wing, Gorkha National Women's Organisation (GNWO) within the parent body. As stated, women's wings are internal sections that aim to strengthen women's representation and participation within the party and in the political process in general (Ballington, 2011:16). The formation of women's wing (GNWO) has been influential in mobilising the women in the movement.

This phase of the movement in the late 80s, has been recorded as the most vociferous and vibrant movement so far. Instead of the disturbing political environment, women participation began to be noticed even though in a marginal level. They gradually started to come to the fore by involving themselves in various political activities. They were part of every volatile bloody struggle and became victims of many incidences like inter party clashes, clash with army personnel and police forces. However, in spite of the participation of women in impressive scale, it was not so influential and could not be sustained rather remained unnoticed. The reason behind restricted level of women participation during that period was the violent mode of protest and principles which prevented women from involvement in totality. The other reason was the lack of media coverage which could not highlight the issues of the movement that impedes the awareness among women and in the hills.

Eventually, the renewed demand of Gorkhaland undertaken by GJMM witnessed massive participation of women as compared with the earlier participation in 1980s. Their massive participation reflects their impressive influence in spearheading the movement. However, in course of time, there has been a heightened political awareness among them and the resultant effort has been the outcome of women as political leaders and representatives in the hills. The ideology based on Gandhian principle, commitment to democratic, non-violent mode of struggle was the major factor contributing to women's involvement in the movement. The revival of the movement has led to the growth of women power by giving a liberal space for them by forming their own political women's wing Gorkha Janmukti Nari Morcha (GJNM) within the parent body. GJNM was not only successful in forming their own wings but also formulated a series of actions for assisting the parent body. Almost every member from each household became part of the organisation and directly or indirectly participated in the movement. Direct participation means a physical participation in political activities like campaigning, protest, rallies, strikes etc. Indirect participation can be non-physical giving financial support, advertising through social networks and media.

Women were the active participants in the political activities and demonstrations. Their mode of participation includes participation in rallies both (day and night), hunger strikes, ghereos, picketing etc. Some of the audacious action taken by Nari Morcha activists was their huge participation like delegation to Delhi, Dooars Chalo Andolan, and demonstration in Jantar Mantar in Delhi. With the efforts of the parent body and its own respective political wings the movement was spearheading with a great flow towards their goal until the incident of Sibshu Massacre¹ that took place in February 8th, 2011, shook the whole of Darjeeling hills. In response to the brutal action of state forces (CRPF) and lathi charge, two women activists Bimla Rai and Neeta Khawas of Nari Morcha was killed in a day firing that led to hue and cry in the hills. GJMM immediately called for a strike, where women actively joined and rallied not only in Darjeeling but also in Kalimpong, Kurseong, Mirik and in Dooars region as well. Most of the activists including women were charged, sentenced to prison, court arrested and left with some pending cases till now. Their enthusiastic way of involvement in such demonstration and protest was impressive. Nevertheless, given the opportunity, women cannot only participate as par with the men in political sphere but also have the will power to overcome the consequences and fight for their rights. It should be noted in this context that in the struggle of post 2007, women were given the responsibility to lead the movement by engaging them in every political activity.

¹ Sibshu Massacre is the incident that took place in Sibshu Dooars near Kumani Moore, where GJMM activists gathered near the premises for hunger strikes. There was a commotion when police lathi charge to disperse the activists which resulted in huge outrage.

3. Factors Reflecting Empowerment of Women

The word empowerment has been widely used in relation to women. The adopted model of empowerment equates with the enhanced participation of backward communities, of women and other marginal groups in social, economic and political spheres, a process to develop their capacity for participation in the decision making and to make free choices of life. The core elements of empowerment have been defined as agency (the ability to define one's goals and acted upon them) awareness of gendered power structures, self-esteem and self-confidence (Arunachalam, 2011:2). As such, one of the crucial indicators that connote empowerment is the ability to influence the socio- economic and political status in the society.

4. Socio- Economic Status of Women

Looking at the socio- economic status of women in Darjeeling, they are mostly engaged in agriculture as cultivators or labourers or are employed as housewives. There is little improvement in the economic status of women and that there is a reinforcement of traditional gender roles- indeed an increasing subordination of women (Sharma, 2014:3). However, the Gorkhaland movement under different political party has brought dynamic effect on the socio- economic status of women in the hills. Their participation in the movement has dismantled the shackles of traditional domination and could cross the boundaries of private domain. Their presence is totally manifested in the public sphere as well which has led to the relaxation of patriarchal domination in the society. The prominent effect of the movement was the socio-political consciousness and self-confidence of women in the hills.

Not only in the society but women are experiencing a respected position in the household as well. Their opinions and decisions are taken into consideration. Some of the respondent said, "*Their participation in the movement has been appreciated by everyone. Their husband and family respect them for what they do and doing whether it be political or social.* Women have come out of their homes and engage not only in the political activities but other social activities as well.

The considerable impact of the movement on the status of women is the availability of means and resources implemented by the administrative body structure, Gorkha Territorial Administration. Quite a number of women have got the opportunity to attain the resources as a result of their social relationship and networks with the political party cadres. As has been discussed by Bourdieu, in his concept of "Social Capital" as the aggregate of the actual or the potential resources which are linked to possessions of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationship of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Schultheis, 2009:2). In short, this social capital entails network ties, social interactions and induces people to trust upon one another that mobilize people to participate in the collective activity. However, in the case of Darjeeling hills, the networking and connections of women or the social capital possessed through their participation in the movement and party cadres has been proved instrumental in getting jobs for many in various sectors. As Putnam" (1993) stated that social capital generates a vicious cycle of attitude through social interactions which are favourable for political participation (Sum, 2005:36).

In case of rural areas, to certain extent women have been benefitted with the implementation of rural development programmes commenced by the regional administrative body (GTA) such as Mid-Day Meal, Self Help Groups (SHGs), Mahatma National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) a 100-day wage employment programme. Some of the respondent said that, "*We are illiterate and we do not have the calibre to work in government offices. But I appreciated the fact that, at least the implementation of rural programmes has been a survival tool and has economically benefitted us*". Although their economic gains are minimal, but there seems to be a little improvement in the economic status of women and are not wholly depended on their male counterparts.

5. Political Status of Women

Political status of women can be defined as the degree of equality and freedom enjoyed by women in shaping and sharing of political power and in the value given by the society to this role of women. One of the indicator that measure the political status of women is the political attitude such as awareness, commitment and involvement in political action and their impact in political process (Amer, 2013:1). Examining the political status of women, the participation and representation calculate the degree of political empowerment of women in the hills.

First of all, the genuine cause of the movement and the political situation in the hills itself is the loud call for massive women's participation in the movement. Not only women in the hills have been able to strengthen their political visibility as voters but their participation and the role in the movement has been very much impressive. Looking at the power sharing structures within the parent body and frontal organisation, it shows that numerically there were forty-two executive members under DGHC. Out of total, thirty-nine members were male and only three of them were female. On the other hand, GTA is an enlarged body with fifty executive members out of which forty-one are male members and remaining nine are females. It however demonstrates the fact that the number of women representative has increased as compared with the earlier records.

The formation of women's wing within the parent body has been successful in mobilising women where they discovered the opportunity of experiencing something beyond their role only as wives and mothers. Women's main role is largely deemed to be in the household but the massive participation in the movement has falsified the ideological stereotypes of women as being fragile for political subjects. The foremost measure for women public participation depends on the social space given by their family members and society. Women's participation in the movement has witness support not only from the party cadres but from their family members as well. Women who are interested have been allowed to freely participate in the movement. They have been equally treated. The political environment has changed, where women have the potential to defuse and transform the political culture, by making it more transparent, accountable and participative (Mohan et.al, 2011:12). It has been observed that women's participation in the movement reflects considerable changes regarding gender segregation in both public and private sphere. Women of all kinds from

different backgrounds and different experiences came to participate in the movement. Some women were actively encouraged by the families, some were drawn in by enthusiasm and some were compelled to take cognisance of the political situation.

On the one hand the recent movement (GJMM) has adopted the principles of democratic and nonviolent strategies, retained freedom of speech and expression which has allowed the women presence and active involvement in the movement. On the other hand, the media coverage in the hills has played an instrumental role in shaping people interest to participate in the movement. The portrayal of women in the media as the active political participants and leaders has greatly boosted their participation. Looking at the relationship between structure of media and politics in India, it (media) serves as a mere tool for politicians to further their interest rather being the platform of expression for the people. However, the role of media in the case of Gorkhaland Movement has been debatable and controversial regarding the fact that it failed to highlight and acknowledge the actual reality of the Gorkhas.

6. Question of Empowerment

One of the most important indicator that ensures women's empowerment is the decision making processes takes place in different areas of public life- economic, social and political field (Rai, 2005:4). Women have been given an ample space to participate in the movement and have been appointed as the representators and leaders of the movement. Maximum number of political programs and activities are taken care by the women's wing and the positive effect is that the leaders have realised the potential and capability of women through this movement. Henceforth the notable fact is that, they are not given equal shares of power holding within the parent body. One of the leaders of women's wing stated that, "*As far as decision making is concerned there is no such allocation of power given to women within the parent body*". All the important decisions are taken by the parent body especially the male members and women are directed only to implement the plans and programmes of the movement. So it would not be an exaggeration to say that it somehow reflects the continuing practices of unequal power relationship looking at the power sharing structures.

According to the respondents, "*the reason behind this is the lack of interest among the women to participate in the movement which reflects the absence of women in positions of power*". Some of the male respondents stated that, "*even if women have the capability and interest, their domestic role perils their participation in any public activity. The lack of unawareness about the political issues will result in lack of experience and exposure to handle the leadership position. The reason why leadership position is generally controlled by men is because the leader should have the quality of boldness and firmness which women lack in this point*".

The above statement reflects the volume of gender biases and prevalence of patriarchal domination. Even though woman tends to participate in the movement, to some extent the perception of society shapes the women relationship with politics that hinders their political participation. The disparities that have been set between the sexes has widened because of the manner in which their participation is perceived. Even though they have contributed immensely in the movement, the gender biasness still prevails when it comes to the question of attaining positions of power in political field. The lack of motivation and reluctance to take the position of responsibility, the challenge of balancing personal and public domain, the responsibilities towards the family, the perception of society somehow act as a barrier towards their maximum empowerment in spite of the fact that the women show lot of keenness and contributed a lot on the movement.

Maintaining equal political participation of women with their male counterpart is one of the major indicator for women's empowerment. The gender role is used as an ideological tool by patriarchy to place women within the private arena of home as mothers and wives and men in the public sphere. This is one of the vital factors that shape the level of women's political participation globally. However, in some cases this ideological divide is not reflective of the reality (Bari, 2005:5). Women have been equally participated in the movement with their male counterparts. The boundaries between public and private are often blurred in the daily lives of women. But the power sharing structure still substantiate the fact that political domain is primarily male dominated. But compared with the earlier structural formation of the party system, and women participation throughout the movement, gender discrimination has decreased over the years especially within the political party hierarchy. Moreover, the participation of women in movement has tried to contribute towards the achievement of substantive equality in the political field.

Apart from political participation of women, affirmative action and policies for women is the effective tool that enhances their level of empowerment. The administrative body has not implemented any policies for women's security and welfare to increase their capacity in overcoming and addressing their interest. Moreover, no specification regarding the policy of reservation for the women is there in the nine-page-long text of the accord itself (Sarkar, 2012:1). It is evident from the fact that women's concern for their empowerment are not taken into consideration. Politically they are projected simply as the followers and supporters of the movement.

Empowerment can be seen as the process which includes both individual conscientization (power within) as well as collective action which can lead to politicized power with others to bring about change (Rai, 2005:6). It is about raising voice for their rights, having mobility establishing public presence. The above discussion on the women's socio- economic and political status in the hills give us the picture that women has gained and develop the capacity of self-confidence enough to intrude in public sphere and gained internal strength to overcome the obstacles. However, it has not brought much improvement in the living standard but they have become aware of many governmental plans and programmes implemented for women's welfare which can be productive for them. Their participation in such programmes and employment sectors or labour force has increased their capability to challenge the economic afflictions which has brought a slight change in their life that has influenced their ability to control the private environment.

Although women can empower themselves by obtaining some control over different aspects of daily lives, empowerment also suggest the need to gain control over power structures and decision making (Rowlands, 2008:14). Women's contribution in the movement has led them to crave their own space in the political sphere acting as the activists, supporters and some as representator of the movement. However, it cannot be denied the fact that, although minimum level of women presence in political has brought a positive change in

gender relations and social status of women in the hills. But proposing the question of decision making and power relations, there is an unequal relationship with their male counterparts. The political status of women so far has been relegated by the structural and attitudinal barriers in the society. The most significant reason for less representation of women in positions of power is that, they are not put forward as candidates for such posts. They are imbibed as incompetent for public positioning.

However, with the above facts and discussion, there is still a long way to achieve the political empowerment of women in the hills. Some progress has been made particularly in terms of availability of resources, engagement in developmental activities, improved level of political participation but unfortunately it is also evident that political empowerment however defined is very slow among women in the hills. Political empowerment in the complete sense like taking part in decision making and power sharing still reflects the patriarchal influence. In spite of the progress made in some sectors, women are still largely invisible in key decision making position, which is regarded as the key indicator of political empowerment of women. There is a political visibility of women as voters and participants in the movement but the political status of women remains by and large low profiled and less required. In the context of power sharing structures and prominent role of women in the movement, education has played a considerable role. In case of Gorkhaland Movement, mostly educated women are appointed as leaders and representatives of the movement. The political role of less educated women are only limited as voters and supporters of the movement. Participation of women in the movement gave rise to some prominent political leaders in the movement but there is a visible trend of men leaders dominating the movement. It has failed to enhance the representation of women in political sphere. This shows that the notion of patriarchy is still pervasive and gender inequality is still prevalent in the hills.

Studies shows that though this movement has brought certain changes in the socio-economic and political status of women in the hills but there is still a wider gap in achieving gender equality and political empowerment of women in the hills. There is still the prevalence of gender discrimination in the hills that act as the barrier towards the process of empowerment. Much still needs to be done to increase women's representation in policy and decision making, to increase women power in all sectors that act as a guide towards the process of women empowerment. But most importantly, there should be a strong networking not only among the women but also with their male counterparts to improve and overcome the disparity. Moreover, there is a need to dismantle gender stereotypes, societal barriers and other obstacles that stand in the way of facilitating political empowerment of women in the hills.

7. Conclusion

Women's massive involvement in the movement illustrate that, participation in the movement has been all pervasive irrespective of caste and class and has spread among all the sectors. This movement has not only led to mass mobilization of women but it has further challenged the existing patriarchal domination. The liberating effect of the movement on women could be noticed as the traditional restriction for participation in the public sphere has been relaxed to a great extent. The family and husband were much more flexible in adjusting their time and the house management that would make possible the participation of women in the movement. Study shows that there has been a noticeable change in the perception and attitude regarding the women's political participation.

Though women have portrayed themselves as the real fighter and prominent leaders in the movement, some of them have been critical to extremes in their observation. Many people have labelled the massive participation of women as the "use of women" by the leadership to gain political mileage without resorting to any violent means (Lama, 2014:84). Women are participating in the movement just for exposure, personal interest and for one's own pomp and glory and are often stigmatized as immoral.

However, with all the above critical outlook, women still continue to fight and strongly made their presence felt despite of repressive measures adopted by the state government. One of the irrefutable fact is that women who are silent and invisible so far have been able to create their own space and mark in the history of Gorkhaland Movement and made to realise women as significant one. Their role and loyalty towards their female and male cadres has been valued by the leaders and realized that they could never achieve their goal without women's participation. To some extent this movement has given visibility to women in the hills as well as their contribution which has not been acknowledged so far.

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