



Women's Agency and Political Participation in Darjeeling

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Abstract

The demand for the separation of Darjeeling from Bengal goes back to 1907. The demand in the colonial period was not consistent and was limited to the submission of memorandums. During the colonial period, politics was elitist and the common people and women were not part of it. Even after the independence of India, women in Darjeeling did not take part in the movement for the creation of Gorkhaland. Their political participation was limited. It was only in the 1980s when the movement gained momentum that women started to participate. Since then women have been able to use their agency to empower themselves and create their own collective identity and participate in the movement. Post the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council and the emergence of Gorkha Janmukti Morcha women have created a political identity for themselves in the male-dominated political realm. Their shared experiences and beliefs have assisted them in breaking traditional barriers to play a new role of political subjects and transform society by being the agents of change in history. The aim of this paper is to bring to the forefront the contribution of women in the ongoing movement for the creation of Gorkhaland which has received minimal attention in the political discourse of the region and is based on autoethnography.

Keywords: Women, Agency, Gorkhaland, Collective identity, Collective action, Politics

Introduction

Women's empowerment has been discussed and debated as a means to end the social, political and economic dependence of women on men. However, the issue has blatantly brought to the center stage the desire of men to not discard their dominance and hegemony over women. The unwillingness of the Indian Parliament to pass the Women's Reservation Bill is testimony to this desire of men. However, such masculinity of the parliamentarians has been challenged by women in their own typical manner with the use of their social and political agency. Feminists have, globally, challenged the taken-for-grantedness of hegemonic masculinity. However, the feminist approach to understanding the lives and experiences of

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women has been criticized for homogenizing the different social locations like caste, class, race-ethnicity, religion nationality and many others they occupy (Bhatia, 2021, p. 57). However, the common denominator of all the feminist ontology and epistemology has been their concern for the emancipation and empowerment of women. Feminist activism and academic pursuit have encouraged millions of women to change their relationships and interactions with institutions and cultural practices. More importantly, women as agents and their agency were also brought into the mainstream by the feminists. Though it has been a difficult road to travel for women, political processes have assisted them to achieve a degree of empowerment and emancipation in the face of male dominance and monopoly.

In Darjeeling¹, the Gorkhaland movement has helped agents, both men and women to use their individual and collective action in pursuit of their goal thereby making them potential agents of their own history. Agency, therefore, can be understood as the consciousness people have about the possibility to change situations and policies through collective action (Gamson, 1995, p. 90). Agency can also be understood as control over resources, freedom to pursue opportunities and to make strategic life choices as agents of their own well-being (Mishra and Tripathi, 2011, p. 59). Women utilize their agency to empower themselves in a certain context (ibid, p. 58) and in Darjeeling they have used it in a space that had rendered them invisible and created their own field. The use of agency by women to empower themselves and transform their collective status has not happened directly but through political participation which was also facilitated by changes occurring in their economic status. This paper attempts to highlight the contribution of women in the ongoing Gorkhaland movement which has not found enough space in the literature on the Gorkhaland movement. Furthermore, this paper highlights the empowerment of women of Darjeeling through their participation in the political process and is based on observation of political activism and events and interviews with women of Darjeeling.

Methods

Social science in general and anthropology in particular have focused on studying events and people from the outsider's perspective giving no space and scope to include the researcher's personal experiences and insights. This approach had for years restricted the 'natives' to provide an insider's perspective on cultures, people and events. Whereas, autoethnography as a method "is an observational, participatory, and reflexive research method that uses writing about the self in contact with others to illuminate the many layers of human social, emotional, theoretical, political, and cultural praxis" (Poulos, 2021, p. 4-5). Furthermore, autoethnography as this method "acknowledges and values a researcher's

1 Darjeeling is used to represent the entire region of North Bengal predominantly inhabited by Gorkhas and demanding for Gorkhaland.

relationships with others..... Shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles.....and strives for social justice and to make life better. (Adams et al., 2015, p. 2 cited in Poulos, 2021, p. 4). Importantly, “autoethnography allows researchers to draw on their own experiences to understand a particular phenomenon or culture”. (Mendez, 2013, p. 280) This paper is based on autoethnography as the researcher can rely on, analyse and interpret the researcher's personal life experiences to reflect on the women's participation in the Gorkhaland movement and analyse it.

Findings and Discussions

Understanding Biography and History

Darjeeling became part of the British Empire when the Raja of Sikkim 'gifted' it in 1835. The British were interested in Darjeeling for two primary reasons first to establish a sanatorium and second to start a trade route to Tibet (Sundas, 2011, p. 43). Soon it was realised that the region was suitable and favourable for tea plantations. Soon from experimental exercise tea plantations had become a thriving industry. Tea plantations led to an influx of populations of varied ethnicity. Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha however were the dominant ethnic groups. From being practically uninhabited in 1835 (Rai and Sundas, 2015, p.26) Darjeeling experienced a gradual increase in population due to the employment opportunities provided by the tea plantations and the growth in communication due to the building of roads and railways (Sundas, 2011, p. 46). The population of Darjeeling today stands at 1847000 with a sex ratio of 970.

There was gradual but holistic development taking place and with time the political imagination and consciousness of the people also transformed. As a result of the political awareness, in 1907 The Hillsmen Association submitted a memorandum to separate Darjeeling from the administration of the Bengal Presidency to the then Viceroy of Bengal. Since then till now the separation of Darjeeling from Bengal has been the fulcrum on which the politics of Darjeeling rests. Colonial Darjeeling did not witness the participation of women in the political processes. This can safely be attributed to the fact that the movement was elitist in character and plebians and women were not exposed to politics but were rather focused on their economic vocation. Women were and are still considered to be good pluckers of tea leaves due to their nimble fingers. Therefore, they were recruited in the tea plantations. Apart from them being good pluckers of tea leaves, women, as labourers, were cheaper than their male counterparts. This discrepancy in wages among the male and female workers of the tea gardens persists till today.

Table 1: Trend in the Proportion of Tea Gardens and Work Force Participation in Darjeeling

Year	No. of tea estates	Total area in hectares under tea	Approximate yield in kgs	Average yield in kgs/hectare	Total no. of all kinds of tea works	Total no of working force	% of tea workers to total working force
1861	22	1317	19323	15	2534	-	-
1871	56	-	-	-	8000	94712 (in 1872)	8.45
1881	155	11489	2340719	204	-	155779	-
1891	177	18462	4948997	268	-	155207	-
1901	170	20948	6139720	293	40451	155235	26.06
1911	156	20853	6464079	310	39561	151604	26.09
1921	168	23897	6387117	267	48710	174167	27.97
1931	169	24777	9297204	375	63665	129070	43.33
1941	136	25585	11256182	440	69699	133306	52.28
1951	138	25345	13282995	524	69590	137541	50.60
1961	145	27709	18050271	651	59844	266105	22.49
1966	144	28121	17398000	619	-	-	-

Source: A. J. Dash, Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling, 1967, pp 100.

Because of their work and culture, many were not initiated into politics at that time. However, due to the charismatic leadership of Gandhi, some women were inducted into the freedom struggle. Helen Lepcha popularly known as 'Heleni Boju' (boju meaning old lady in Nepali) was known to all and inspired many. She was proactive in the coalfields of Bengal and erstwhile Bihar and led a rally of coalmine workers in Calcutta (now Kolkata). At home she went from door to door appraising the locals on the significance of boycotting foreign goods. Later when Netaji was under house arrest in Kurseong she with the help of the local Gorkha population helped him escape from the British. Though her leadership encouraged many individuals to enter politics, it was not until the Gorkhaland Movement of the 1980s that women en masse as a collective participated in the political process.

Women in Politics of Darjeeling

Politically women have volunteered to be as well as have been systematically marginalized. During the initial stage of the Gorkhaland movement, the participation of women was not very significant. However, their presence gradually became more visible when they realized the importance of Gorkhaland and secondly police atrocities against the men became more severe. Several women who had participated and are still participating in the movement for the creation of Gorkhaland reiterated that the issue of identity and statehood was the

primary aspiration that propelled them to fight the state machinery. Along with identity and statehood, the other motivating force was to challenge the hegemonic attitude of the state and the atrocities that the state apparatus inflicted on the young and killings of innocent people. The brutality of the state also brought into the mainstream movement those who were at the margins and sympathetic to the movement. The prevailing political conditions of Darjeeling provided women with the opportunity to “take it upon themselves to do more than evade or transcend the terms and conditions of their daily lives and behave as collective agents who can change them” (Gamson, 1995, p. 96). Women in the movement and the network of the women's organizations were soon able to “develop their own patterns of values, norms, and everyday behaviors” (Johnston and Klandermans, 1995, p 12).

Women from every walk of life were part of the Gorkhaland movement as they were aware that their participation would encourage more to participate and also be the medium to propagate the message that separation from Bengal was the goal and aspiration for all. Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF henceforth) who was spearheading the movement realized the importance of women in the movement and gave them space within the organizational structure. Gorkha National Women Organisation (GNWO) was created for the participation of women. It had its own independent structure with its sister organisations at the sub-divisional and going down to the ward-level. The tradition of women being on the political margins was broken and they were soon part of discussions and debates and stakeholders in the decision-making process. The Gorkhaland movement gave voice to the women and a certain degree of leadership role was also provided. The fact that humiliation, suppression and domination at the hands of the repressive state apparatus had become everyday lived experiences, GNWO mobilized women to challenge and confront the police and other agencies of the state. Women were gradually seen to appropriate the public space that was traditionally dominated by men. To appropriate the public spaces women were to decide, conceptualize and implement their programmes. The relationship that women had with one another based on shared narratives assisted them in establishing a political ideology and shared identity. The shared narratives helped them to mobilize its members and also “cement the underlying frames by which members understand the world” (Fine, 1995, p.134). However, due to the violent character of the movement in the 1980s, women were limited in their activities and activism as women irrespective of their political credentials were targeted by the repressive apparatus of the state. Women were at the forefront to challenge the hegemonic state instruments and agents by organizing rallies and marches and participating in the protest. Arrests were made and suppression of women was common which confirmed the fact that they were important enough to be a threat to authorities. The challenge posed by women who had overcome the patterned daily life routines to engage themselves in activities that challenged and also tried to make history gave a message that women as a category needed to be taken seriously (Gamson, 1995, 95).

On the 10th of July 1988 GNLF officially accepted the proposed Hill Council plan for Darjeeling by the State and the Central Governments. On 22nd August 1988, Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) an autonomous hill council was granted to Darjeeling by the West Bengal Government and the Indian Government under the West Bengal State Legislative Act. DGHC was to have a General Council with 42 members in total out of which 28 were elected and 14 were nominated by the state government. Out of the 28 elected members of the General Council, 3 were women. In the following election to the State Legislative Assembly, a woman was given to contest the election from Kurseong which she won defeating her rival from the Communist Party with a huge margin of votes. Women, it was felt, had moved out of the margins and entered the mainstream of Darjeeling and Gorkha politics.

The Agreement of DGHC however brought an end to the movement. The Agreement itself was not unfortunate but putting an end to the demand of Gorkhaland was. One of the clauses in the agreement said “it is the full and final settlement.” The centralized and hierarchical decision-making of the GNLF agreed upon DGHC in lieu of Gorkhaland thus putting an end to the aspiration of a separate state. The signing of the DGHC Accord in 1988 and the subsequent control of DGHC by GNLF for almost three decades, had the potential to transform and make everyone including women feel “that they themselves are objects of historical forces alien to themselves, that they themselves are without power” (Flacks, 1988, p.5 cited in Gamson, 1995, p. 95), if it was not for the rise of Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) in 2007.

Post-Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Politics

2007 gave another opportunity to fulfill the aspiration people of Darjeeling had; when Gorkha Janmukti Morcha came into existence. GJM came into existence to challenge the monopoly of GNLF. Riding on the issue of Gorkhaland GNLF had come to power and established itself as the undisputed choice of the people as their political representation. However, GNLF had become authoritarian and despotic and did not do anything for the demand. They had already signed the tripartite agreement in which they had agreed to never raise the demand of Gorkhaland. People had supported and elected them in the two elections to DGHC. However, they ultimately became a puppet in the hands of the state government and Subash Ghising, the undisputed leader of the Gorkhas not so long ago, became the caretaker of DGHC. Dissent and opposition against GNLF were crushed with brutality by their cadres. Their existence and policies became antithetical to the aspirations of the people. The young population of the region during the 2000s was exposed to different social realities and the outside world in a greater manner than before due to satellite television and other modern mediums of communication. They were aware of the dire conditions under which

Darjeeling was. DGHC had failed to improve the social, political and economic conditions of the region. The state Government of West Bengal also showed utter indifference to the employment issues in the hills of Darjeeling. The conditions of the hills is succinctly reflected below :

“The economy of Darjeeling hills is precariously poised. Due to the fall in the price of the tea, labor unrest and political instability, the tea industry is not as robust today as it was in the past. In the past 17 years, a number of tea gardens and estate have shut down; amongst the 60-odd tea gardens that are still open, around 20 are extremely vulnerable and could shut down in the next few years. Tourism once the life-blood of the local economy has continued to suffer due to inadequate infrastructural facilities, underinvestment in marketing and fierce competition from other tourist destination. No major heavy industries have set up in the Darjeeling in the past 17 years. But Siliguri continued its march towards becoming the new industrial hub of North Bengal. Gorkha population of Darjeeling continue to remain embedded in endemic poverty being either unemployed or doing menial, low-paying jobs. Educated Gorkha youths find it extremely hard to get well-paid jobs and a large percentage leaves the hills every year in search of employment” (Ganguly, 2005, p. 495-96).

Such an environment where there was poverty of opportunities forced the people and especially the youth to demand a change in the political dispensation. When the opportunity was presented in 2007 there was unanimous support for Bimal Gurung to challenge the despotic GNLF. Immediately, GNLF lost control and was dethroned and GJM soon resumed the Gorkhaland agitation.

Many adolescents and young women and men, who in the decades of 1980s and 1990s were socialized and grew up listening to varieties of narratives with reference to Gorkhaland got the opportunity to participate in the political process. Lama (2014, p 77) observes that the formation of Gorkha Janmukti Morcha in October 2007 as a political party, was an opportunity for women to appropriate space and location for themselves in a political structure that was dominated by men. The advocacy of Gandhian principle of non-violence by Bimal Gurung, further facilitated the entry of many women who had despised the violent character of the movement under GNLF and thus made it possible for women to overcome many barriers that restricted their political participation. However, there is not much difference in terms of the organisational structure of the two parties but one can see that women were more proactive in the organizational and decision-making process now. Similar to the GNWO there was a women's wing, Gorkha Janmukti Nari Morcha in GJM as well. The Central Committee, the apex decision-making body, of GJM had accommodated 29 women members. Because of the newfound confidence, the members of Gorkha Janmukti Nari Morcha have been negotiating with their organization to be called Gorkha Janmukti Nari Sakti (GJNS). Women want their organization to be called GJNS as they think the word Sakti is the most appropriate term to

describe their power and what they can do. This itself indicates that they are no longer passive actors. This is a reflection of how women have transcended their existential experiences and are no longer willing to be passive participants who can be manipulated. They desire to be active and act as agents of change. This has led to the development of a collective identity with a sustained effort at social change.

The movement has been instrumental in facilitating the awakening of the dormant agency women always had. Political institutions have always marginalized women and have forced women to play by the rules created by men (Bhatia, 2021, p 252-253) but women have played a very significant part in transforming GJM and its identity. Women have laid their lives and endured police brutalities and torture. They have been jailed without any reason or proof. The intensity with which women have participated in the Gorkhaland movement has compelled the dominant male politicians to acknowledge the role of women actors and accordingly (re)frame their agenda. The greater number of women participating in politics of the region suggests that the sense of agency that women carry but was lying dormant has been awakened. With time the participation of women has become more visible and in GJM they have played a very important role. Their participation in the Dooars Chalo Andolan, where members of the Nari Morcha were killed during police firing and their representation during the demonstration at Jantar Mantar in Delhi in 2011 are testimonies to the agency of women. Because of women participating in the movement along with the men, GJM was able to compel the State and the Central Governments to negotiate and solve the political crisis and demands of the Gorkha population. Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) was granted by the two governments in 2011 with the objective to establish an autonomous self-governing body to administer the region so that the socio-economic, infrastructural, educational, cultural and linguistic development of the region is expedited and the ethnic identity of Gorkhas established, thereby achieving all-round development of the people of the region.

GTA was in essence an upgradation of DGHC with more financial and other powers. The GTA would have a Sabha consisting of 50 members out of which 45 would be elected and 5 nominated by the Governor of West Bengal. While there were only 3 women members in DGHC there were 8 women members in the GTA Sabha, seven were elected and one member was nominated and a woman candidate was also elected to the West Bengal State Legislative assembly.

Women in Post- Gorkhaland Territorial Administration Politics

GTA was established to work for the holistic development of the region and its people. However, there was too much interference by the Government of West Bengal in the working

of GTA which was detrimental to its functioning. This affected the relationship between the two and when the government wanted to forcefully implement Bengali language in the schools as a compulsory language in the curriculum GJM, GTA Sabha Members and the public dissented and resisted. The government had acted in many ways to undermine the legitimacy of GTA which had led to anger and dissatisfaction among the political representatives as well as the public but in a latent form. However, when the Bengali language was imposed this latent anger and dissatisfaction was manifested in the form of protest rallies and marches. Soon the environment became volatile and violence erupted which led to 11 people being killed by the police.

Many strategies were used by the government to undermine the legitimacy of the GTA and especially they wanted to curb the influence GJM had in the region. Therefore, in 2016-17, when the movement got intense the state used all its force to impede upon the will of the people. Numerous false police cases were lodged against the leadership, including women. Many were charged with the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act. Such repressive practices of the state had an inverse impact on the people as more and more people joined the movement and openly challenged the state and its practices. As a result, the state became more violent in handling the situation. The state became more aggressive and was hunting for the leaders who believed that the state would not act according to the law of the land but rather kill them. As a consequence, most of the many leaders started to hide, creating a vacuum in the leadership hierarchy. This vacuum was filled in by the second rung of the leadership and especially women. The baton of leading the movement was passed to the women activists.

Women were not intimidated by the situation and engaged in picketing and taking out torchlight marches every evening. They appropriated the political as well as public spaces giving speeches to motivate each other and other activists. The socialization into the movement had embedded their 'conception of rights and citizenship to public debate and the political sphere, incorporating demands for equity and justice in the social and cultural dimensions that affect identities, existence, and ways of life' (Paoli and Telles, 1998, p 68). Women thus became the spokesperson of rights and justice in the altered political sphere. Women redefined and reconstituted the political vacuum in which they became the main representatives to negotiate and claim their demands with the authorities. Frequently they submitted memorandums to the state machinery in the process many were jailed and tortured. The movement had by then become pan India with Gorkha diaspora staging protests and rallies in different parts of the country. The protest and rallies in different parts of the country varied due to the diasporic population. Mumbai and southern parts of the country also witnessed protests and rallies by the Gorkha population. Though the state of Assam has the largest Gorkha population the protest and rallies there was not as intense as in Delhi. In

Delhi, which is home to a large diasporic Gorkha population as well as the centre of politics in the country, it became the centre of political activism.

Delhi being the capital of India, has always been in the political consciousness and imagination of the people. Due to which GJM had its unit in Delhi. Once the agitation in Darjeeling started gaining momentum GJM, Delhi unit also started to mobilise people in Delhi. Rallies and different programmes were initiated under their leadership in Delhi. Women were the main subjects as the male folks had also to attend their work. Soon the movement gathered momentum in Delhi and thousands would be present at the site of protest. Speeches, songs, poems and everything became symbols of protest and solidarity. All the migrants who had to leave Darjeeling in search of better opportunities found this the opportune time to articulate their grievances about the lack of opportunities and facilities in Darjeeling. The activities in Delhi were not targeted toward the state government alone but it was intended to send a message to the Central government as well. When there is a need to send a message to the government about the injustices and atrocities the common people are inflicted with “collective grievances represent the most widely shared and most facile explanation for collective action” (Johnston, 1995, p.243).

The movement in Delhi took a different turn as it progressed and it soon witnessed the emergence of three young women as leaders of the movement. They completely orchestrated the movement. In a space that was historically and traditionally dominated by men, these women were seen as the torchbearers of the movement. They were soon recognized as leaders of the movement far and wide. They not only opposed the atrocities and repression of the state but also made the mainstream political parties accountable. They were soon accepted by the political parties and were asked to join the Gorkhaland Movement Coordination Committee (GMCC), which comprised of members from all the political parties of Darjeeling to give a meaningful direction to the demand of Gorkhaland and the ongoing movement. However, everything came to an end when two leaders Anit Thapa and Benoy Tamang joined hands with the state government and with the help of the state apparatus acted against the people and their aspirations.

After becoming the part of the state mechanism they immediately acted upon bringing an end to the ongoing *bandh*. After a meeting in Kurseong they called off the *bandh* and more importantly took control of the party in the absence of Bimal Gurung. Benoy Tamang declared himself the President of the party and Anit Thapa, the General secretary. They also constituted the Central Committee of the party which included all the people who betrayed the movement along with them. In the process of appropriation of the party they declared all those who were on the run to be non-members of the party thenceforth. This was not taken lightly by Bimal Gurung and a case was filed at the Election Commission of India for the proprietorship of the party.

Women in Post-2017 Politics of Darjeeling

After the betrayal, it was difficult for anyone to again engage in any form of activism. With the help of threats and intimidation and the promise of material benefits, these leaders were able to garner support for themselves from a section of the activists and identify those who were still protesting. The prevailing conditions made it difficult for the leaders who were forced to leave the hills to negotiate with the state and start any meaningful dialogue. The absence of GJM leaders from the hills created a political void that many other political actors were willing to fill. In such a situation GJM and Bimal Gurung had to act immediately. Keeping in mind the forthcoming elections to the Lok Sabha in 2019 and the State Legislative Assembly in 2021, he made Delhi his base. He started calling meetings in Delhi and women members were invited. Every decision was made with the consent of Nari Morcha.

The women in Darjeeling were given the responsibility of appraising the people of all that was happening with Delhi. They went door to door to canvas and put up posters at different locations in a clandestine manner without drawing the attention of the administration and the rival groups. However, many were nabbed by the police and sent to jail for disturbing peace and harmony. Their work ultimately was reflected in the huge margin with which the candidate supported by GJM won the Lok Sabha election. After the 2019 general election, there was hope for GJM and its leadership to return. In every activity, women members' opinion was sought. Nari Morcha had become indispensable by then. There were many activities chalked out by GJM which had to be stopped due to the pandemic.

Pandemic and Women's Agency

COVID-19 was a never-before experience for all. It was a humanitarian and an existential crisis with millions of lives lost, jobs lost, and all kinds of hardships and difficulties being the norm in the everyday lives of people. To curb the spread of the virus lockdown was imposed in India like in many parts of the world. The lockdown led to economic agony among people and in Darjeeling lockdown doubled the economic distress people experienced. During the agitation, the hills were completely shut for more than 100 days and in an economy driven by tourism and the tea industry. The tourism sector and tea industry, which provide income to many in an informal way, were completely non-functional and people had no sources of income. The political landscape of Darjeeling was one of distrust, fear and dominance. In such a social setting, lack of infrastructural and institutional support all forms of social solidarity were absent. Anomie had prevailed in the region.

Economic suffering is not new to many and Bimal Gurung and GJM during their reign had always provided material and non-material support to the people. In the absence of GJM and its leadership people experienced many difficulties as the state-sponsored facilities were

inadequate. Under the leadership of Bimal Gurung, GJM decided to send relief material to those in need in the region under GTA jurisdiction. In a situation where the supporters and sympathizers of GJM had difficulties interacting with people, women came forward to distribute the relief material. They had to confront many hitches as they were constantly under police surveillance and often threatened by those who had joined hands with the state. Many of the commodities being perishable and the geography of the region also made this task challenging for all those engaged in the distribution. One woman said *“we had to be proactive in distributing the commodities we were receiving because most of the time there would be perishable products like vegetables. These commodities had to be distributed not only in motorable places but also in those which had to be reached on foot. The geographical space we had to cover as well as the fear that the police could act anytime against us for breaking the norms warranted us to act as energetically as possible”* (Quoted in Sundas, 2022, p. 171). Women were proactive in every possible way. When the lockdown was relaxed they made travel arrangements in consultation with various people and organizations of different places for those migrants who were returning.

The rival group was using the police force to stop the activities of the GJM. When the lockdown was withdrawn, the former collected funds in the name of the GTA Chairman for relief work. They collected funds to the tune of rupees three crores. However, this fund is not yet utilized and the women have accused the rival group of embezzlement of this fund in a situation where anything said against the rival group can be a safety hazard. Women have been vociferously *“demanding, protesting and submitting complaints to the authorities for the disbursing of the fund collected under the Chairman Fund”* (ibid, p.175) to the informal workers. When Bimal Gurung started a COVID-19 isolation center women were once again persuasively asking people to make use of the facility and not put others in danger. Some of them also took the responsibility of cooking food for the inpatients. In a situation where political processes and institutions have marginalized women, in Darjeeling, they were constantly exercising the freedom to chase opportunities and make strategic choices as agents. Women through their sustained political participation have demonstrated their agency.

Conclusion

Biology is not the determinant of the difference between men and women. (Chodorow, 1997, p. 70). The social world in which both men and women exist is constructed by men and this has facilitated them to dominate women in every sphere of social living. From the family to the economic to the political sub-system men have exercised and enjoyed a monopoly and accordingly, they have allocated a limited space to women. The limited space has been appropriated by heterogeneous women in a multifarious manner. The diversity of individuals

and experiences has also created impediments for women to construct a collective identity as a homogeneous entity for themselves. The collective identity has helped them to overcome all the traditional barriers a woman had to confront. When the goal and objective of a group have been one, a variety of individual women have acted in solidarity as a single unit. The political discourse of Darjeeling provided an opportunity to forge camaraderie and make efforts toward achieving the goal of Gorkhaland. Women participating in this movement would have not been possible without their agency and emancipation from traditional roles.

This research aimed at highlighting how “Moreover, for marginalized and oppressed groups, the construction of new and resistant identities is a key dimension of a wider political struggle to transform society” (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998, p 6). Gorkha women in Darjeeling had to use their ingenuity and agency to legitimize their participation in the traditionally male-dominated political structure, which did not facilitate the entry of women into the political processes and institutions. From being passive actors in the political discourse, women, on the basis of shared knowledge, beliefs and behaviours could interact with one another and become active subjects of the movement with collective identity (Fine, 1995, p.128). The collective identity of women's organisation fostered a sense of shared beliefs and values which would help them in understanding and recognize their strength and potential to act as agents of change. Being stakeholders in the political process empowered them to implement collective action for the realization of Gorkhaland. From being historically marginalized, women through their agency have come to occupy the center of the political discourse in Darjeeling. They are no longer at the margins of politics, from the margins they have moved on to become spokespersons of political parties and their belief in their agency has become so strong that they do not hesitate to criticize the policy of the party in a public meeting. Their participation in the Gorkhaland agitation and especially in the 2000s have transformed their status and identity from that of suppressed and dominated to that of emancipated and empowered in society.

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