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**Women's participation in the freedom movement
of India: a case study of North Bengal**

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Abstract

Women's participation in India's freedom movement extended to agitation politics and was successfully structured through policy decisions at different phases, at least at the higher levels of the action. This study aims to highlight the participation of women of North Bengal in the various phases of the national movement of India, much of which was largely outside the structured construction. Economic and social conditions dominantly dictated the methods and means adopted by the North Bengal women towards their participation in the freedom struggle. They were generally victims of suppression and deprivation under the construct of the prevalent gender inequality and social exploitation. Yet, the changing political scenario in the country encouraged them, so long solely confined to domestic activities, to come out and participate in the nationalist struggle. Their participation in the Indian freedom struggle became a broadly overlooked chronicle, despite being a noteworthy segment of the Indian freedom movement. They were active beginning from, as early as the Swadeshi movement to the Quit India crusade. It is surprising and equally interesting that in North Bengal despite women's education being far from satisfactory and aristocracy that wielded authority and financial fluidity as a rare commodity, the women of the lower rungs of the society took an active part in the movement in large numbers. How these impoverished, totally rural-based women found the will, stamina, and inspiration to keep the flames of the independence movement burning is significant enough for a recall, re-write, and a re-read.

Keywords: *Women, North Bengal, Swadeshi, Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, Quit India Movement, Mahila Samiti.*

Introduction

Globally, women have a dubious relationship with history of being generally ignored and infrequently registered in the historical accounts and the problem is more pronounced in the Indian sub-continent than in most nations. A few female freedom fighters at the highest stratum of the movement have found paragraphs and pages in history but those at the lower levels who kept the campaign afloat

rarely found space even in the footnotes. There arose a steady and spontaneous necessity to record the contributions of these “lesser mortals”. History, in a sense, had to be rewritten. Historians in the last few decades have shifted their focus on the neglected segments of our society broadening its ambit of research and reporting allowing for the recent new impetus. This paper reveals the untold tale of the women of North Bengal who patiently, intelligently, and continuously marched forward acquiring self-reliance against the long-standing colonial bondage to fulfill their desire for freedom.

The present study will encompass the districts of the northern part of Bengal in the Union of India.¹ In the period of the study, the Rajshahi division also formed the part of Bengal but collecting resource materials faced severe restraints since two-thirds of the division is now in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, geographical position, economic and social conditions played a vital role in the way followed by the women in participating in the war of independence. Geographically North Bengal is situated in one corner of the state with lands conducive to agrarian activity. Demographically it was the homeland of various ethnic groups and a large immigrant population. Socially and economically, they were backward in comparison to the people from the southern parts of Bengal. Political and administrative features also present distinctiveness with Cooch Behar then a native state with political and economic patterns distinct from the other districts. Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling were non-regulated districts whereas Malda and Dinajpur were a part of the regulated administrative system of Bengal. Thus, the character and scale of the national movement in Chittagong, Midnapore, Dhaka, Barishal, and Calcutta were not to be found in North Bengal. It was sustained but erratically spaced and political consciousness, particularly of women growing slowly and maturing much later.

With the 19th-century renaissance, there was an expansion of education which led to the emancipation of women. Gradually they broke away from superstition and conservatism and entered into the national political arena. Participation of Indian women in the freedom struggle started mainly after the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885. The changing political situation in the country encouraged women to come out and participate in the independence movement. Though the renaissance of the 19th century mainly was Calcutta-centric, the light of education for the women of North Bengal had only just begun to penetrate in the area. However, when the women participated in the freedom movement it became the first occasion in North Bengal when ordinary women, so long solely confined to domestic activities, came forward to play an active role in the politics of the country. Anxious for the independence of their country, they became vocal about the injustice meted out by an alien government. They participated in various phases of the national movements beginning from Swadeshi to Quit India and some of them, influenced by revolutionary ideas, joined secret societies and participated in revolutionary activities.

Swadeshi Movement

After the Sepoy Mutiny, the British Government adopted the policy of "Divide and Rule" in order to make a differentiation among the Indians on the basis of caste, religion, custom, etc. On 16th October 1905 Bengal was divided into - a) Eastern Bengal and Assam b) Western Bengal along with Bihar and Orissa. The government's view was that Bengal was divided in order to ensure better administrations but in reality, it was a strong blow to the unity and nationalism of the people of Bengal. They rose in protest through Swadeshi which fostered nationalism on the basis of "self-reliance" or "*Atma shakti*" and at the same time adopted the policy of boycott or passive resistance. It also led to the way for a militant form of struggle when the younger generation was attracted to the movement.

In order to suppress the Swadeshi movement, the British Government imposed the Carlyle circular which urged the school and college authorities to dissuade the students from participating in political activities pertaining to the Swadeshi movement. Against this circular National Council of Education was established in Calcutta. In Northern Bengal, the movement advanced a step forward when in May 1907 a national school was established in Jalpaiguri (Bhattacharya 1986: 24). The aim of the national school was to impart education towards nationalistic ideals. The District Magistrate of Malda issued a circular in 1905 prohibiting students from taking part in political activities (Sengupta 1969: 61). Yet in Malda the *Jatiyo Shiksha Samiti* was established on June 6, 1907 (Bhattacharya 1986: 24). From its inception the Samiti had emphasized the importance of mass education, and as regards women's education Samiti's endeavour resulted in girls' schools at Kaligram and Dharampur. At Kaligram it started with 54 students in 1908 but soon the figure came down to 40 and when the third Annual Report was prepared there were only 12 girls left (ibid: 33). The school at Dharampur was established in 1912 with roll strength of only 8 (ibid: 27). Perhaps the general masses due to their conservative attitude did not appreciate the concept of female education or the women themselves were socially not in a position to make themselves available in taking part in the formal education system. Another nationalist Baldebananda Giri established 'Mahakali Pathshala' for girls in Malda in order to spread women's education. Though it is an unfortunate fact that the endeavour of the early nationalists to introduce female education did not succeed it did create awareness that there were people or organizations willing to educate women in remote areas which did not survive but they left an immense impact on the psychological mainspring of the national movement.

One woman who took an active part in Swadeshi Movement was Sudharani Chowdhurani who belonged to a zamindar family of Kaliachak (Shershahi) in Malda. In her house, Sudharani gave shelter to many revolutionaries and Congress workers. Once the Police Superintendent of Malda went to her house in search of some political workers but despite the high rank of the policeman she

did not permit him to enter her house. Uma Roy, another woman was connected with *Anusilan Samiti* (Self-Culture Association) from her college days (Ghosh 1398 BS: 14 & 35). The Samiti followed the teachings of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and was an armed anti-British organization in Bengal (Goldstone 2003: 183).

In Coochbehar Maharani Sunity Devi, wife of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan and daughter of the great reformer Keshab Chandra Sen, a highly enlightened lady played a very positive role in women's education in this native state. Due to her initiative first school for girls, Rati Babu's School, renamed Sunity Academy in 1888, was established in 1881 (Paul 2010: 639). She contributed funds in order to run *melas* and functions of "*Sakhi Samiti*" (Ghosh 1990: 401). This Samiti trained widows to become teachers so that they could spread education amongst women and also become self-reliant at the same time. In later days cottage industry was promoted and wares were sold in *melas*² which grew in size with the rise of the nationalist movement (Kumar 2006: 37). Princess Gayetri Devi wrote in her memoir that "we had our own spinning wheel and dutifully spun our cotton yarn without fully understanding what Gandhi had intended" (Devi & Rau. 1996: 204). Regardless of only a partial comprehension of Gandhiji's intention the memoir proves that even the women in the royal household were connected with the Swadeshi Movement.

In Jalpaiguri Subhasini Ghosh was the founder of the women's secret political association and organization of social workers. She took an active role in the Swadeshi Movement and was the first President of 'Congress *Mahila Samiti*' in Jalpaiguri (Roy Sanyal 2001: 465). It is claimed that among the Muslim women, the wife of Lutfur Rahaman, Bara Begam Saheba Rahimunnesa, played a very positive role. Around 1914 she was considered to be a pioneer among women in Muslim society. It is also claimed that she helped revolutionaries in various ways.

Non-Cooperation Movement

After the imposition of Rowlatt Act and Jalianwalla Bagh massacre in 1919, Mahatma Gandhi moved for Non-Cooperation with the British Government in 1920 and urged the Indians to repeal their cooperation to run the British administration by boycotting everything that belonged to the British and follow the nonviolent path to achieve Swaraj or self-rule. The movement spread to North Bengal and a notable feature of this movement was the participation of women in great numbers.

The wave of the Non-Cooperation movement had reached the district of Dinajpur, where the Congress leaders of Balurghat publicized the ideals of Swaraj throughout the subdivision. A spirit of resistance was aroused amongst the masses and Mahila Samiti and national school were established in Balurghat town (Sengupta 1965: 54). Under the leadership of Pramodasundori Debi, Subeshranjan Chattopadhyay, the Congress leader of Balurghat town, took the initiative to establish "Balurghat

Mahila Samiti” in 1920 (Dasgupta 1370 BS: 193). Inspired by her husband's ideology Prava Chattopadhyay, wife of Subeshranjan Chattopadhyay, joined in the national movement and traveled in the villages around Balurghat to promote patriotism among women (ibid).

From Kurseong, in Darjeeling district, one distinguished woman freedom fighter who played an active role in the Non-Cooperation Movement was Helen Lepcha, alias Helen *Didi*, alias Sabitri Devi. When the office of the Indian National Congress was opened in Darjeeling, many hill people joined the party, Helen Lepcha being one of them. Some Congress workers came from Calcutta and popularized the use of the spinning wheel and khadi and Helen Lepcha was so impressed that she immediately went to Calcutta to train herself to operate the spinning wheel. She excelled in her work and was sent to Bihar to propagate Gandhian ideology. Her exceptional work with the flood victims (1920) came to the notice of Mahatma Gandhi and she was invited to Sabarmati Ashram where Gandhi gave her the Indian name of Sabitri Devi (Barla 2015: 37). During the Non-Cooperation Movement a major demonstration was held in Calcutta and she took part in it by bringing about a thousand workers from the Jharia coal mines. An arrest warrant was issued against her and she went underground (Labar 2006: 400-401). When Helen Lepcha's mother became seriously ill, she shifted to Kurseong choosing the larger town of Siliguri as her base to continue her Non-Cooperation Movement calling for the boycott of foreign products and the use of swadeshi goods. In spite of the fact that the Government was brutally active in suppressing any agitation, she led a demonstration of a large number of volunteers violating section 144. She and some of her colleagues were immediately arrested. The news of her arrest reported in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* ran as follows: “Smt. Sabitri Debi with the Congress secretary E. Ahmed and 12 Gorkha volunteers have been arrested” (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*: 31st January 1922). She was sentenced to three months imprisonment in Darjeeling Sadar Jail and upon her release was put under house arrest for another three years.

The wave of Non-Cooperation also reached in Malda district where Sudharani Chowdhurani, an ardent nationalist helped the revolutionaries in various ways. Also to be noted in Malda was Tarubala Sen, the wife of Krishnagopal Sen of Bachamari, who participated in the Non-cooperation movement.

The background and stimulus to the growth of nationalist politics in Jalpaiguri were provided by the entry of Gandhi into the political life of the country and his message and style of functioning. Jalpaiguri came to be involved in the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat movement in the years 1921 and 1922. Towards the end of May 1921, Chittaranjan Das arrived at Jalpaiguri. A large crowd assembled at the railway station where the Congress leader was garlanded and received with traditional Indian custom. Basanti Devi, the wife of Chittaranjan Das, was received by the women of respectable families including those of the landed aristocracy. They donated cash and jewelry to the Swaraj fund which amounted to Rs.2000/. (Bhattacharya 1986: 53). A women's meeting was held in the Arya Natya

Samaj Hall where apart from women of the middle class even prostitutes attended in large numbers (Dasgupta 1992: 110). Notable among those women who were connected with the Non-Cooperation Movement were Kamala Pakrashi, wife Nalini Pakrashi, Shasimukhi Ganguly, and Suniti Neogi. From the year 1921, they spearheaded the idea of charka spinning and took an active role in various social activities. The wife of Abinash Roy at Chetmari suffered a great degree of persecution after her husband's imprisonment in 1922. Non-Cooperation movement became particularly noticeable in certain remote parts of Alipurduar subdivision. Under the leadership of Magha Dewan, men and women of Kumargram and other villages started a movement in support of non-payment of revenue and rent.

In spite of the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement, nationalist ideas remained in circulation among various sections of the population. In 1923 Chittaranjan Das once again visited Jalpaiguri and attended a meeting held by the local Congress leaders of North Bengal. The meeting was attended by not only women of middle-class families but by many Rajbanshi women from rural areas. When Gandhi Visited Jalpaiguri on 9 June 1925, lots of Rajbanshi men and women from far away parts of the districts came to have a *darshan* of Gandhi (Choudhury 1985: 14). During that time, near the Ukilpara crossing, there was a girls' school and a women association named '*Matri Mandir*'. It was founded by Bimala Roy, daughter of Madhusudan Roy, a Rajbanshi leader. Mahatma Gandhi visited *Matri Mandir* and gave his blessings to Bimala Roy (ibid). In 1924 poet Mukunda Das came to Siliguri to spread swadeshi ideas through theatre. A separate mat screen (*chik*) was arranged for the female audience. On hearing his song "*Bhenge felo reshmi churi, Bangonari, Bilaiti sari ar poro na*", the women broke their bangles, and also discarded foreign dresses (ibid: 55).

Civil Disobedience Movement

The Civil Disobedience movement was launched in 1930 under the leadership of Gandhi. His Dandi march from 12 March to 6 April and the breaking of the Salt Law provided the signal for countrywide Civil Disobedience. The wave of the movement was felt throughout Bengal in diverse forms and varying degrees. It is notable that young men and women took a leading part in shaping the course of the movement in Northern Bengal. In 1925 when he came to Dinajpur, there was a huge crowd at the railway station and the people generously contributed cash to the national movement while many women donated their jewelry drawing the attention of Gandhi to the patriotism of the people of Dinajpur (Das 2012: 36). Many women in the district participated in the Civil Disobedience movement, notable amongst them were Subhasini Mukherjee, Ashalata Chakraborty, Bhagabati Sen, Ashalata Kundu, Mohantabala Sengupta, Snehlata Ganguli, Jyotsna Kundu etc. (ibid: 35). In Balurghat the women workers of the "*Mahila Samiti*" boycotted foreign goods, took to charkha and plunged deep into the Civil Disobedience Movement (Bhattacharya 1986: 163). Prava Chatterjee and Bela Chatterjee

also contributed gave leadership to the Samiti. The women workers participated in the Dinajpur district political conference toward the end of March 1930 where decisions were taken to extend the propaganda work to the interior areas (The Amrita Bazar Patrika: 29th March 1930). We find that “the members of the Balurghat Mahila Samity have been out I the streets of Balurghat, preaching boycott of British goods. The other day the shopkeepers of the Balurghat bazaar gave away British goods to the ladies who set fire to them before a large crowd. This bonfire has evoked an enthusiasm towards the boycott of British goods, the like of which has never been witnessed since the heyday of the Non-cooperation movement” (The Amrita Bazar Patrika: 4th April 1930). The Mahila Samiti volunteers of Balurghat picketed in front of liquor shops and foreign cloth stores on *haat* days. During the period of Salt Satyagraha in 1930, Pramodasundori Debi hoisted the national flag on 6th April at Balurghat where more than 1,000 women took the pledge of freedom from bondage (Dasgupta 1370 BS: 194). On 11th April there was a large procession by the women at Balurghat town where Prava Debi in her bold speech invited women to violate salt law, and on 13th April under the leadership of Prava Chatterjee, 500 women volunteers of Balurghat violated salt law (ibid). Consequently, “as a result of the picketing of the local Mahila Samiti, there was absolutely no transaction either of foreign cloths or of liquor on the last Hat day” (The Amrita Bazar Patrika: 1st May 1930). The spirit and morale of the lady volunteers of Balurghat remained unaltered throughout the period. Picketing continued even after the proclamation of prohibitory orders. As days passed by and the movement gathered momentum, the authorities became harsh to the men and women participants. Prava Chatterjee and Bela Chatterjee were arrested and imprisoned in Berhampur Jail for 13 months (Dasgupta 1370 BS: 194). Undeterred, many of the women volunteers of Balurghat participated in the Independence Day procession of 26th January 1932. The police ordered the procession to disperse but the volunteers did not comply resulting in many of them including the women being arrested (Bhattacharya 1986: 180). Thus women of Balurghat etched their role in the history of the Civil Disobedience movement.

In Malda district, we find Surendra Bala Roy, daughter of the zamindar of Bhaluka deeply associated with the Civil Disobedience Movement. She was married to Dyotidhar Roy, who was a Congress leader at Patnitala police station in Dinajpur district and influenced by his husband's ideology she joined the national movement (Dasgupta 1370 BS: 205). She organized women workers under great hardship. During the time of the Civil Disobedience Movement under her leadership nearly two thousand women, most of whom were Santhals and Rajbanshis, went to the Congress office and raised the national flag. They were arrested and imprisoned in Dinajpur. After some time, they were released but Surendra Bala Roy was rearrested and sentenced to jail for one year. After her incarceration in the prisons of Dinajpur, Rangpur, and Berhampur prison she was released in 1933 (ibid). But even then, she continued her patriotic activities. She came back and settled in Malda where she established

a women's organization, namely "Congress *Mahila Sangha*", in association with another famous women worker of the district, Labanyalata Chanda, where women volunteers were taught spinning and weaving (ibid:206).

Jalpaiguri too was affected by the mass nationalist movement. Aruna Dasgupta, the then-renowned leader came to Jalpaiguri in 1927. She participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement and was imprisoned in 1930 in Calcutta. In 1930 Mahamaya Devi and Indumati Devi, sisters of Charuchandra Sanyal, participated in Civil Disobedience Movement and were imprisoned. Sailabala Gurung, was the first Nepali woman who violated the law in 1930 and was also convicted. Some women who participated in the terroristic activities were Mahendra Bala Debi, Bina Chowdhuri, Sarju Sarkar, Bani Bhowmik, Kusum Kumari Bhandari, etc., and their leader was Subhasini Ghosh. With the re-launching of the Civil Disobedience Movement in early January 1932, Jalpaiguri became more involved and 26 January was celebrated as Independence Day with the hoisting of the tri-colour flag. It was followed by a procession of women workers resulting in the arrest of Hariprava Sengupta, Sailabala Guha Thakurata, Sailabasisni Devi, and Nanibala Moulik. It is worthy of note that Nanibala was arrested with her 9-month-old child in her lap (Bhattacharya 1987: 292).

The Civil Disobedience Movement was not just concentrated in the town but also spread to the villages of Jalpaiguri. In the village of Bonapara, Rajbanshi women under the leadership of Swarnamayee Roy participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement (Choudhuri 1985: 21). In February 1939 Bengal Provincial Congress Committee held its Annual National Conference at Jalpaiguri where Suniti Neogi was the leader of the women's volunteers' organization. At this Conference, the leaders of Krishak Sabha spoke about agrarian problems and thus planted the seeds of left-wing politics. As a result, the District Committee of the Communist Party of India was formed on 6 February, 1939 (De July 1981: 65).

Many women were attracted by the activities of the Communist Party. Bibha Dutta, Kalyani Chanda, Kalpana Neogi, Lila Sen, Asha Roychowdhuri, Amiya Nandi - all of them propounded communist ideas not only in the towns but also in the villages. Maili Chhetri, a Nepali woman leader of Denguajhar Tea garden was also connected with communist activities (Roy Sanyal 2001: 468).

In Darjeeling, Sabitri Devi took part in the Salt Satyagraha leading to her being arrested. During 1939-40 when Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose was under arrest in the house at Giddhapahar (Kurseong), freedom fighters and revolutionaries of hill areas made contact with Subhas Chandra Bose through Sabitri Devi. She delivered locally baked bread every day to Netaji. Oftentimes the belly of the bread contained hidden news and secret messages (Rai 2014: 123). Netaji's escape plan was hatched in the house in Giddhapahar and the Afghani shirt and trousers that Netaji wore while entering Afghanistan were tailored there (Rai 1992: 226) and in every step Sabitri Devi had a role to play. Some people are

of view that Sabitri Devi had assisted Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose to escape from captivity in Kurseong and journey to Germany through Kabul (The Better India: 12 June 1921). After independence; she was awarded Tamrapatra by the Indian government.

Quit India Movement

In the series of protests led by Gandhi during the period of struggle for freedom in India, the Quit India Movement was the most popular and dominant mass protest. One of the prominent features of the movement was that women came out of the threshold of their four walls and began to protest against the oppression of foreign rule. The participation of women in the Quit India Movement was significant in several aspects. They were, at large, endowed with a new spirit on the call of Mahatma's "do or die". In the earlier phases of the nationalist movements, women mostly followed their male counterparts but after the declaration of the Quit India Movement, the majority of men in the lead were imprisoned creating a large vacuum. Despite the Movement being rendered "leaderless", women spontaneously came forward and sustained it till the very end. Though a large number of women in the Quit India Movement were from the upper strata of society, women of villages and peripheral areas of North Bengal also took an active part in the struggle against imperialist powers.

After the collapse of the Cripps Mission, on 8th August 1942 at the All India Congress Committee session in Bombay, Gandhi announced the 'Quit India' movement. Before that, in January 1939 Subhas Chandra Bose undertook an intensive tour of Northern Bengal districts. While addressing the people Bose emphasized the establishment of many more "Rural committees" and "*Mahila Samitis*" to carry on propaganda for the attainment of full Swaraj (The Amrita Bazar Patrika: 1st February 1939). Women leaders like Prava Chatterjee who had started their political career in the twenties founded the *Mahila Samiti* of Balurghat in the Dinajpur district and participated in the movement of 1942 and one of the active participants was Ahalya Soren, a tribal woman of Balurghat. Although the police arrested almost all the prominent workers of the Congress, the women activists of Balurghat were spared (Dasgupta 1370 BS: 195).

In Malda, Surendra Bala Roy was closely associated with the 1942 movement. She was a veteran freedom struggler who joined the freedom movement at Patnitala (Dinajpur district) in the early 30s and later settled down in Malda. Though physically she had become weak she still sacrificed everything for the liberation of her country and even sent her son to trip the railway lines during the movement. Her house in Malda became the center of nationalist activities and as all the male members were arrested, she controlled the trigger of the movement (ibid: 207). Tarubala Sen, is another revolutionary Malda woman who played an essential role in the movement. Uma Roy, though she did not directly participate in the movement, had a close connection with the Congress workers and always helped

them. There were several other women workers such as Alo Mandal, Girijasundari Devi, and Shailbala Roy who worked persistently for the cause of the movement (Bhattacharya 1986: 233).

In Jalpaiguri, a large number of girl students participated in the 1942 movement. A large procession was held on 9th August under the leadership of two women - Tara Banerjee and Uma Dasgupta. The slogan in the procession was “*Engrej Bharat Charo*”, “*British Sarkar dhongsho hok*”. Hira Prabha Sen and Sandhya Kar were imprisoned. In the Alipurduar subdivision Surabala Ganguly, Giribala Banerjee, Gyanada Baishnabi were the notable women who led the movement (Sanyal 8th March 1981: 5 & 7).

At Kumargram in Alipurduar Mahila Swadeshi Mela was organized to promote the vision of liberation from foreign bondage. Shailrani Das & Gitarani Das of Madarihat helped the revolutionaries to attack the Police station. In Falakata, Bakularani Das, Pusparani Basu, and many others joined in the movement. In Alipurduar, Ashoka Mukherjee, Kamala Mukherjee took on the risk of maintaining correspondence with the political prisoners at the Buxa Camp (IMPACT Journal: May 2021). There were also other women in Alipurduar subdivision such as Sharatkumari Mukhopadhyay, Sahshimukhi Gangopadhyay, Kana Majumdar who were also participants in the movement (Uttarbanga Sambad: 14th August 2022). Many Rajbanshi women also joined the movement with great courage willing to sacrifice their lives for the liberation of the motherland.

In Coochbehar we find a special feature of the Quit India movement. A large number of girl students participated in the movement which is a remarkable episode in the history of the students’ movement in North Bengal. Aparajita Goppi, a student of Sunity Academy gave a call to the girl students to assemble without official permission to celebrate Netaji’s birthday. An annoyed government stopped the state scholarship of the girls in that school. In protest, the girls’ students started the historical girl students’ strike (Ghosh & Sarkar 1990: 407). The role of Aparajita Goppi in the political history of North Bengal is deeply etched for she truly was a dedicated female politician.

In the Siliguri subdivision of the Darjeeling district, the Quit India movement took a wider shape. Many of the women workers of the Indian National Congress took part in picketing, *hartal*, processions, etc. On 9 September a public procession of one thousand people was staged under the leadership of two women - Sita Basu Roychowdhury and Kalidasi Sengupta. Police fired at the procession and five persons died, 34 people were arrested and 4 women were convicted (Roy Choudhury 1994: 39). Sabitri Sengupta was another notable lady of Siliguri who participated in the Quit India movement. A noteworthy aspect of the movement in the town was the contribution of women from middle-class families (IMPACT Journal: May 2021).

Putali Devi Tamang of Kurseong was fired with the spirit of nationalism right from her schooldays and when the Congress activist Suryaprasad Poddar, from Bihar, came to Kurseong (1934-35) to organize the youths. She approached him for membership in the Congress Party but he found her too young for politics and turned her away. She would not give up and in 1936 when a unit of the Congress Party was formed in Kurseong she was enrolled as a member despite being a student of class nine

only. Her father was threatened at the cost of his job as a government peon to reverse Putali's decision. At the same time, she was promised a job as a nursing staff should she leave politics. The government failed in both accounts. In 1913 she organized the Harijan Samaj and began night classes for the upliftment of the downtrodden. In the same year, she established a female's association, *Nari kalyan Samiti* where khadi was spun and youths were enlightened on nationalism (Barla 2015: 44). Under her influence women of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong started joining the national movement.

The day after the Quit India Movement was launched Mahatma Gandhi and scores of Congressmen were arrested. Protest rallies and demonstrations were launched all over India and Kurseong had its protest march on 12 August 1942, when Suryaprasad Poddar was taken into custody. The following day, Putali Devi and her colleagues staged another protest rally, and she and many of her friends were arrested. The prisoners were taken to Darjeeling. The government gave them the option of signing a bond to shun politics or face severe punishment. Suryaprasad Poddar and Putali Devi refused to comply and so were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment. After one and a half years she was released in January 1944 but found that the people at home were scared of police harassment and she found herself unwanted by the family. In March Suryaprasad was released and realizing the common ties between Suryaprasad and Putali Devi, as well as her forsaken condition, the Congress workers encouraged the two to be married. Consequently, she became Putali Devi Poddar. After Independence, she continued her social service activities among the women of the tea plantation in the hills. The Government of India awarded her with Tamrapatra and a freedom fighter's pension. But the greater reward came from the people she had struggled to emancipate. Right till her death, the people addressed her reverentially as "*Mataji*", a kind of reward very few people enjoy (Rai 1992: 123-127).

It is not difficult to conclude that the women of North Bengal played a very worthy role in the Quit India Movement. Though women mainly from middle-class families participated in the initial stage of the movement, in the later stages, women from all walks of life joined it. Unfortunately, the accounts of their dedication and sacrifice are generally overlooked by historians, and with that, a glorious chronicle of the women of North Bengal's contribution has almost disappeared from the memory of the people. Despite the indifference, suffice it to say that, the contribution of women of North Bengal in the freedom struggle of India is no less than that from any other part of India and it deserves much greater honour than what it has been bestowed with. It must be remembered that no matter how big or marvelous a machine may be, it is the small nuts and bolts and the tiny screws that make it whole and operational. In the context of the history of Bengal's contribution to Indian independence, the role of women of North Bengal constitutes those small nuts and bolts and the tiny screws that bind and give the final functional whole. In this fast-fading and overlooked piece of history, there is a begging necessity, an unfulfilled obligation, for future researchers and historians to replenish records and restore a rightful place to the gallant women of North Bengal.

Notes:

- ^{1.} The districts of North Bengal after independence comprise Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Dinajpur, and Malda.
- ^{2.} The Sakhi Samiti was commenced by Swarnakumari Devi, the fourth daughter of Debendranath Tagore to promote welfare of women.

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