MAPPING THE GEOGRAPHIES OF FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN THE GORKHALAND MOVEMENT

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Abstract: Patriarchy has produced a dichotomous discourse of society where the private is for women and the public for men. However, with the advent of globalisation and spatio-temporal transformation, societies have witnessed an increased participation of women in public domains. More women are now participating in various political movements and changing the political narratives. These women comprise both active and passive actors and are equally visible and invisible. Whatever the case may be, they have successfully created their own counter spaces against the dominant masculine spaces that have, for a very long time, dictated the repertoire of public affairs. Within the Gorkhaland movement, a struggle for identity, women, like men, are both victims and survivors. However, many of the historical narratives have underrepresented them. They are the backbone of the movement, especially post-2007, and have curated a unique counter-space for themselves through their lived experiences, contributing largely to the gendering of the movement's political subjectivities. The Gorkha women have challenged the traditional gendered norms of society through their participation in the movement. The feminist activism in the movement has given Gorkha women a unique identity, empowering them more than ever.

Index Terms: Gorkhaland, Counter spaces, political participation, patriarchy, Gorkha women, Nari Morcha.

I. Introduction

Social movements are recurring phenomena worldwide and have increasingly become a scholarly focus for many social scientists. The discourse analysis of such movements more often than not has a gendered undertone, much like the movement's repertoire. The socio-political participation of women, both active and passive, in such movements is not uncommon; nevertheless, they are predisposed to remain invisible or go unrecognised. The advent of globalisation and the emergence of the "global world" have triggered spatio-temporal transformations in societies, particularly in societal, financial, and political conditions. Under such circumstances, there has been an increase in women's active and passive political participation globally. Often, the conscious, stricken feminist academicians critique existing discourse narratives and assert women's underrepresentation in the public political domain and in discourse analysis, subsequently, to the gendered experience of 'space and place' deeply grounded in societal systems of power. The patriarchal 'discourses and spatialities' (O'Hara, 2020) are what have caused the exclusion of women from the mainframe discourses and systematic silencing of women. Social movements comprise a collective mobilisation of both genders, yet '…even in movements that purport to be gender-inclusive, the mobilisation, leadership patterns, strategies, ideologies, and even the outcomes of social movements are gendered' (Taylor, 1999, p. 9). The surge in feminist critique, pressure from various international organisations, and some affirmative actions have resulted in the mass mobilisation of women in public spaces to maintain *'equality-ness'*. However, such a quantitative

increase fails to bring about or make a meaningful, substantial transformation in the societal framework. The quantitative increase does not ensure *'equity- ness'*. Women, by virtue of their sex, experience time constraints and have less access to resources than their counterparts. Thus, the qualitative changes in women's roles and responsibilities in both the public and private domains are a prerequisite to ensure meaningful societal transformation and equity. Perhaps the absence of such change is the principal reason we see few women as leaders and fewer women participating in decision-making processes.

The century-old Gorkhaland movement has witnessed the vigorous participation of women. These women, like men, have been the victims and survivors of the peaks and valleys of the movement. Having said that, many historical narratives have sidelined women and their contributions to the struggle for identity. Currently rising literature on women's role in the Gorkhaland movement agrees and validates the use of women as 'pawns' or simply put 'political tools' by political factions, in action, as such their requirement. Nevertheless, it would be erroneous not to acknowledge that the movement has significantly fostered women's empowerment in the hills. In this paper, I have examined feminist activism in the Gorkhaland movement and how it intertwines with the rise of a new generation of women in the hills.

II.   Methodology

The uncovering of feminist activism in the Gorkhaland movement is achieved through careful analysis of the counter-spaces created by women in the hills through their differential forms of participation in the ethno-political struggle for the motherland. Quoting Sprague and Kobrynowicz, "the facts and abstraction are the outcome of the concerted activity of specific people in concrete circumstances" (Sprague & Kobrynowicz, 2006, p. 29). The feminist activism in the movement is studied and outlined using a gendered lens. Equally, the task of the feminist researcher is to "create space and opportunities to reveal lived realities of power inequalities and provide evidence that can be deployed in working towards addressing these ingrained inequalities" (Jenkins, Narayanswamy, & Sweetman, 2019, p. 414). Thus, in this research, I have employed a qualitative method, drawing on an ethnographic approach, to foreground subjectivities and avoid objectifying participants. Since the research has a feminist/gendered undertone, the study is analysed through a gendered lens, allowing participants to be in their natural settings within the comforts of their homes. One advantage of using an ethnographic approach in the study is that it allows the analytical description of people through the collection of authentic data and helps bring out the uneven lives and more uneven experiences, creating a mosaic of geography and history.

Gorkhaland movement is spread across a vast region comprising of Darjeeling district (here I have included Kalimpong as a part of the district before its division as a separate district in 2017), therefore the selection of the participants was from various areas of the districts namely Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong and Mirik as these areas exhibit a "substantially continuous but spatially non- continuous" (Falzon, 2009) character. A total of 25 Gorkha women were interviewed using a semi-structured open-ended interview method. The interviews were audio-recorded. The interview ranged from 25 minutes to an hour, depending on the women's descriptions. The interviews were conducted in their regional language, i.e., Nepali, and were then transcribed into English for analysis. However, some quotations and dialogues are presented in Nepali, along with their English translations. To maintain confidentiality, participants' names are not used; instead, pseudonyms are used.

III.   Gorkhaland movement and Gorkha Women

Most hill stations of India are the product of colonial imperialism with dual functionality of sanitary and strategic considerations. The history of Darjeeling, the rise of ethnic consciousness, and the struggle for identity in the hills are intricately intertwined with the histories of the then-Himalayan kingdoms of Sikkim (now a separate Indian state), Nepal, and Bhutan. Historically, Darjeeling was part of the kingdom of Sikkim. The frontiers and boundaries of the hill have been contested and altered throughout history. By the 1700s, several wars and conflicts occurred between the kingdoms of Bhutan and Sikkim, eventually leading to the capture of Sikkim's eastern territories, including the Kalimpong area of Darjeeling. Simultaneously, the unification of the Kingdom of Nepal was underway on the other side under the leadership of King Prithvi Narayan Shah. He became successful in unifying the central and eastern Himalayas under a single authority. By the 1780s, Nepal invaded Sikkim and successfully captured the whole of Sikkim lying west of the Tista

River, including the hills of Darjeeling (Moktan, 2004). The years 1814-1816 witnessed the Anglo-Nepalese War. On 4th March 1816, the Treaty of Segowlee (Sugauli) was signed between Nepal and the British Empire. Following the treaty, several territories of Nepal were ceded to the British Empire. This 4,000-square-mile area also included the lands acquired from Sikkim. In 1817, through the *Treaty of Titaliya*, the lost land was returned to Sikkim by the British Empire. Captain Lloyd, while visiting Sikkim, came across a stretch of land known as *'Dorje Liang'* from which the word Darjeeling originates. It was a heaven on earth, and its climate resonated with that of their lands. In 1835, through a 'Deed of grant', the land was acquired by the British Empire for the building of sanatoriums. In November 1965, Kalimpong was recaptured from Bhutan and added to Darjeeling.

The socio- political map of Darjeeling transformed during the colonial period. This hill region was a *'terra incognita'* (Pradhan, 2017). It was built in a Victorian style. The urban morphology of Darjeeling had a colonial print. The urbanisation of Darjeeling required the migration of labourers. The commercial plantation of tea in Darjeeling further facilitated the large-scale migration of Nepali-origin labourers.

"Chiya ko bot maa paisa falccha" (Golay, 2006)

"Money grows in tea plants".

The rise in ethnic consciousness, which eventually metamorphosed into the Gorkhaland movement, was the product of 'politics of culture' and 'politics of segregation' imposed by the British officials on the living inhabitants of the hill. The migration of the labourers gradually increased the population of the hills, which eventually outnumbered the indigenous population. These people living in the vicinity of the town were segregated from the upper reaches of the town, which were reserved for elites and British officials. Living together, people interacted, initiated cultural exchange, and slowly assimilated into a unique ethnic group bound by brotherhood and kinship. This unique space became more defined through the shared common language, Nepali. In fact, the language became the *lingua franca of the struggle for* identity. The rise in ethnic consciousness in the hills is more intrinsic to the 'politics of culture'. The Darjeeling people are a distinctive social group, different from the plains, yet placed under the same umbrella. The administrative laws governing the plains cannot be the same for both groups, owing to the distinctive nature of each group. Thus, the rising ethnic consciousness and ethnic polarisation fueled demands for separate administrative authority in the hills in both pre- and post-independence periods. It is, in fact, this historical and political matrix that we can observe the major frames of ethnic mobilisation, which, in turn, is detrimental to understanding the nature of women's participation (Chhetri N., 2021).

The first demand for a separate administrative authority was made in 1907 by the Hillmen's association, and later, various memoranda demanding the same were submitted in 1917, 1930, and 1934, respectively. In 1943, with the establishment of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), a demand for a separate state, called Gorkhasthan, was made. In the same year, the All India Gorkha League was formed, which demanded a separate state under the name *Uttara Khand Pradesh Sangh*. Before independence, the demands and the memorandum regarding the establishment of a separate administrative unit or a separate state were not heard by the concerned government. In 1950, the Indo-Nepal treaty was signed, further deteriorating the conditions of the Gorkha population in the hills. The treaty allowed the free movement of people between the two countries. They were free to reside and work in each other's countries. This made the Indian Nepalis the non-Bonafide citizens of India, further creating an identity crisis in one's own country. The 1980s became the epitome of the quest for a separate state under Subhas Ghising and his party, Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). Ghising demanded a separate state for Indian Gorkhas named *'Gorkhaland'* within the Indian union. The entire period from 1980 to the present, involving the demand for a separate state in the hills, is popularly known as the *'Gorkhaland movement'*. The frontal bloc of GNLF, Gorkha National Women Organization (GNWO), enabled women to politically participate in the Gorkhaland movement. The women were mainly seen participating in rallies, gheraos, dharnas, and social boycotts. It was, in fact, through GNWO that the political interests and enthusiasms of women were realised. However, it is also worth noting that women leaders participated in and contributed to the Indian freedom struggle. Some names include Helen Lepcha, Putalimaya Devi and Maya Devi Chhetri, who became the first member of the Rajya Sabha (Member of Parliament) from West Bengal in 1952. Ghising strongly opposed the Indo- Nepal Treaty (Article 7) and demanded its abrogation. On 27th July 1986, when demonstrations to boycott the treaty were held, the massacre

of several Gorkha people took place, including women and children. When paramilitary forces were deployed, and a crackdown on men happened, several girls and women left behind at home were assaulted, raped and became victims of the movement. They faced the severe blow of the movement. Following the event, the movement took a violent turn. Several died, and many got injured. This period is famously known as *'Chiyasi ko andolan'* (the agitation of 1986), the trauma of which is still not forgotten. The andolan took a more militant form with the creation of the Gorkha Liberation Organisation under Chhatre Subba. Women during this period played a major role. Their contribution expanded both in domestic and public arenas, and to ignore it would be to look at history with one eye closed. The long unrest came to an end with the establishment of a separate autonomous district council, the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), in 1988, which remained in the hills for almost two decades.

The twenty years of Ghising's rule and his militant, non-conventional methods in the hills led many people to refrain from politics. The situation worsened when he proposed to include DGHC in the sixth schedule of the Constitution. The majority of the public went against the decision. In 2007, when a common hill boy, Prasant Tamang, participated in Indian Idol, the hibernating solidarity of the people once again woke up and collectively supported Tamang. Bimal Gurung became the chief patron of Tamang and successfully made Tamang the winner of a national reality show. Swiftly, Bimal Gurung shifted the social cause into a political cause and advocated against Ghising and DGHC. He received massive public support and finally founded the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM) in 2007. Gurung has played a crucial role in bringing women back into the political frame. In 2007, a women's wing of the party, Gorkha Jan Mukti Nari Morcha (GJMNM), was formed, leading to mass mobilisation of women post-2007. Women through this wing rose to prominence as political actors and are often regarded as the backbone of the movement.

खोलाको माछा असला, नारी मोर्चालाइ न चलआ *(The fish in the river is good (Assala), don't incite Nari Morcha)*

The post-2007 period witnessed changing counter-spaces for women within the movement through the transformation of the movement's gender image. The Gorkhaland, or the homeland, was associated with mother; therefore, homeland became motherland, मातृभूमि, reverberated with the general public, garnering support, while the women and their role resonated with fierce Hindu goddesses such as Durga and Kali. The role of the women was not limited to rallies, gheraos and dharnas. Several women participated in hunger strikes, foot marches, awareness programs, social policing, and other activities. The participation of women in politics evolved over time. In 2011, when the new and revised autonomous district council, the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA), was formed, the majority of supporters supported the council. However, the council did not have adequate representation of women, despite their contributions. In 2013, several women were seen shaving their heads as a sign of mourning, breaking the cultural norms and challenging the traditional gender roles. However, after 2017, the last and longest shutdown the hills have witnessed, the participation of women in politics has decreased considerably, along with the demand for a separate state.

IV.   Engendering of Political Subjectivity

Public affairs always had a gendered structure owing to the historical stereotypical belief and association of *'women with peace and men with war'* (Aretxaga, 1999). The leadership qualities much needed in the public domain are heavily perceived to be a masculine trait, building a prerogative notion where 'men are considered bearers of culturally legitimate authority' (Doost & Sibly, 2020). The rise in feminist activism in public domains challenges the *status quo* of patriarchal discourse, whether explicit or implicit. Be it the pressure or the maintenance of 'woke culture' through quantitative reservation and proportional participation, the number of women has gradually increased in political dynamics.

Ford (as cited in K.C., 2025, p. 6)claims,

"Patriarchy leaves room for women to exercise considerable discretion and choice, but only within a framework in which men control power, resources and access to both"

So, is the quantitative reservation or proportional participation of women in the political structure simply a cosmetic change? Is the current mass mobilisation of women in political movements or a matter of fact in social movements just a façade to the status quo?

Perhaps, to a certain degree, Ford's claim can be understood through what Lefebvre, in his 'production of space', talks about

"To some degree, perhaps, these ideas are deformed or diverted in the process, but the net result is that a particular 'theoretical practice' produces a mental space which is apparently, but only apparently, extra-ideological" (Lefebvre, 1905, p. 6)

Thus, quantitative increase of women in the political structure is only a disguise or any other form of *guise*- a *'mental space'*, with a face value on a surface level. However, at a larger subsurface level, such changes are *'.... apparently, but only apparently, extra- ideological'*. The *'real spaces'* do not undergo real transformation as escape from core ideologies is next to impossible. Changes in the number of women do not necessarily facilitate "real power" for women owing to underlying patriarchal ideologies. Nevertheless, quantitative representation simply serves as an antidote to maintain the *status quo* with no real transformation in the political structure, reflecting unchallenged and unchanged core ideologies.

Having said that, do we simply ignore, disregard or give no meaning to the mass mobilisation of women in social movements? Do we not accept their participation in such a movement? Haven't they added value to the movements through whatever roles they have played?

The questions are several, and the answers are more complex.

Apparently, 'space' is not one- dimensional and static. It cannot be regarded as passive; it is always active and dynamic, and as Massey argues, spaces are created through social relations. Standpoint theorists or Marxist feminists might view women's political participation as constrained by patriarchal discourses and ideologies, contributing insignificantly to the transformation of the political structure. However, *"space not only to be read but also be constructed* (Lefebvre, 1905, p. 7). This mass participation of women, irrespective of their nature, should be analysed and interpreted through 'counter-spaces' constructed by women themselves through their activism and participation. This activism and participation empower. Empowerment itself does not pertain to a gain in 'ultimate power'. Unlike Marx, who views power as the ultimate source of domination and misery, restricting societal change, the overthrowing or seizing of such power brings societal transformation. Power and empowerment refer to Foucault's *agnostic notion of power* (Foucault, 1982). In his view, power is not monolithic but fluid, always contested and negotiated. It cannot be found in structures but is always produced through various social relations and interactions that continuously reshape the contours of power dynamics and discourses. In this context, the empowerment of women ought to be understood as their ability to redefine and reimagine their own spaces. This self-constructed counter space is a powerful tool to trigger transformation in their daily lives and to cause a ripple effect that brings societal change at large (changes in discourse).

In the struggle for Gorkhaland, women have always been the agents of play. Moreover, the various women's wings were formed, and mobilisation of women in the political struggle was a 'strategic essentialism' (Chhetri K. , 2020)in itself. Several literatures and research on the historical narratives of the Gorkhaland movement have emerged, but very few works have addressed the visibility of Gorkha women in the public domain. The mass mobilisation of women in the movement is commendable; however, their roles and responsibilities were mostly confined to the grassroots level, and only a few were/are able to ascend the political hierarchy. Massey, in her work, argues that "spaces are produced from the immensity of the global to the immensity of the tiny (Massey, p. 9). Considering this, I hold that the spaces created by dominant political actors cannot be regarded as universal. The 'minority- *ness* of influence' created by the marginalised groups like women functioning in the public domain, even at the grassroots level, cannot be ignored as they too significantly influence and reshape the political structure. This means spatiality is the product of *multiplicity and heterogeneity* (Massey). This trajectory makes space an open system produced by the multiplicity of social interactions. These social interactions are not solely between the dominant structures but a cumulative effect of interactions among various divergent groups, regardless of their sphere or scale of influence. Gorkha women have created their own counter-spaces, distinct from the predefined spaces within the political structure of the Gorkhaland movement. Unlike essentialism, these counter-spaces of Gorkha women are the relational products of continuous interactions and engagements of these women with other entities and identities, including *political subjectivities and political constituencies* (Massey).

V.   The counter spaces of Gorkha Women

Throughout the history of the Gorkhaland movement, the Gorkha women have been juxtaposed alongside the Gorkha men. Unlike the Gorkha men, the positionality of the Gorkha women within the political mainframe, or the recognition of their contributions, has not yet been fully realised. Post 2007, the hills have witnessed a large-scale mass mobilisation of Gorkha women. Their position, however, is paradoxical. On the one hand, active mobilisation in the movement's various upheavals (agitations) is paradoxically marginalised within political structures and historical narratives. Women are indispensable to the movement but remain invisible in history. The slow and limited ascent of women in the political hierarchy is due to societal norms that hinder the full expression of their potential. In other words, women's '*Juxtaposition yet to flower into interaction*' (Massey, p. 11).

As discussed earlier, space is not monolithic; it is not a unified *'one'*, rather, it is a continuum of multiplicities, heterogeneous interactions that exist in simultaneity. Thus, there lies a cosmos of spaces, unique to the interaction of the individual with the whole. Correspondingly, the constructed *l'espace* of women in the Gorkhaland movement, unlike men, is also unique in *"controlled openness"*. In the sections below, I will discuss how these Gorkha women have constructed their own spatium through their functioning and positionality within the grand *paysage* of the movement.

5.1 Matriarch of resistance

During the Gorkhaland movement, the dominant gender discourse was challenged. The women became significant actors in political resistance against the opposition and the government. By virtue of womanhood, they were the protected class, and they used this advantage for the safeguard of men. Whenever there were rallies organised, women were in the forefront. Even in Gheraos, Dharnas, demonstrations and other social boycott women were kept in the forefront. This strategic placement was intended to allow women to serve as a protective shield for the men standing behind or following them. Call it chivalry or an ethical principle beyond gender, there is a general social code, "Do not raise a hand on women", which was tactically used in the movement. Women walked with men to ensure their security.

नारीहरू अगी जानु पर्दछ

नारी अगी गयोभनी हात लगाउँदैन

(If women are at the forefront they will not put hand upon them)

The Gorkha women have also faced the ethical paradox of the aforementioned general social code of "Do not raise a hand on women". During the agitation of 1986 *(Chiyasi ko Andolan)*, it took a violent turn due to inter-party clashes and clashes with the ruling government. CRPFs (Central Reserve Police Forces) were deployed in the hills. The crackdown on men was a daily affair. Men were on the run or in hiding, leaving behind women, the elderly, and children. There were many incidents of rape, physical assault and manhandling done to the women by the CRPFs. Many women lost their lives during the entire discourse of the Gorkhaland movement.

"…..'कालिम्पोङको भूमिपुत्री हुँ'र मेरो भूमिको लागि केही गर्नु मेरो जिम्मेवारी पनि हो।"

(I am a daughter of Kalimpong, and it is my responsibility to do something for my land)

Irrespective of the repercussions, the Gorkha women took part in the movement. This is largely due to the political subjectivities, and as subjectivity is rooted in history, integrating both conscious and hidden episodes of the concerned history. Likewise, the shared collective history has awakened ethnic consciousness among men and women, enabling them to analyse the discourse and practices of their people and the movement with emotion and perception.

Ms Jastinta, during her interview, stated

".....When the agitation of 1986 broke out, and all hell broke loose, the paramilitary forces deployed by the state government conducted crackdowns to arrest men. Following this, the men had to flee, leaving behind women and children. When men were not there, women came forward, taking up the cause and providing men with emotional and moral support."

"माईती तिमी नडराऊ चेली तिम्रो साथ् छ"

(Brother, don't be afraid, your sister is with you)

The above statement and slogan were widely used by women during those episodes of the movement when the arrest of Gorkha men was on the rise. The slogan is a testimony to the peak of ethnic consciousness, expressed through the unwavering commitment of love and support to one's kin when they themselves were subjected to the social circumstances of the paramilitary forces.

Taking context from Raymond Williams' "structure of feelings" which he defines as "social experiences in solution", the Gorkha women's ideological choices to display discontentment, defiance and anticipation of better solutions and reactions were displayed through symbolic actions like hunger strike, demonstrations outside the SDO office and shaving of the heads. In fact, Lefebvre considers space as a medium through which relations are produced (Lefebvre, 1905). Thus, space is not just a backdrop for events to unfold but, importantly, a medium through which spatio-economic and political structures are expressed and negotiated.

Ms Bandana states that in 2007, she, along with others (15 females and 7 males), had observed a hunger strike in front of the SDO office in Kalimpong. She stayed the longest in the hunger strike. Nandita states that many women, due to observation of hunger strikes, had to face serious health issues and a few near-death experiences. These hunger strikes were the medium through which the feelings of alienation and dispossession (Aretxaga, 1999) were articulated in the movement. Micheal Foucault calls 'biopower' a tool meant for managing and controlling people by 'caring, limiting and even to the extent of terminating life' (Lazzarato, 2006). Hunger strikes are a ' willing self-sacrificial tool of expressing dissent in asymmetrical contexts' (Bufkin, 2024). This biopolitical technology (Bufkin, 2024) was employed to pressure the government to redirect the course of political rationality in the hills.

Women's hair on the head has been the emblem of attractiveness and humiliation. Women's hair has been both public (visible to everyone) and personal (biologically linked to the body) (Weitz, 2001). Historically, women's hair was forcibly cut or shaved as a symbol of humiliation or punishment. A notable example of such an act occurred in France during the post-World War II period, when women's hair was shaved in public as a punishment for being accused of espionage. However, now women have started using their hair as a social and political weapon or tool, a statement of resistance. For instance, post 2022, women have started to cut their hair as a symbol of protest against the law after the death of Mahia Amini, who was punished for not wearing a hijab. Similarly, many LGBTQ+ communities also use hair as a sign and symbol of resistance and power. In 2013, when Andhra Pradesh was bifurcated into two states, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, it jolted the Darjeeling hills, as their long-standing demand for Gorkhaland was still being rejected and neglected. Many rallies, demonstration and strikes took place. Eight Gorkha women shaved their heads to express their resistance and discontent with the government. The act itself is allegorically multivalent. As per Hindu tradition, when someone dies, as a sign of respect and bereavement, the eldest son or a male figure shaves their hair, which is known as *'Mundan'*. The Gorkha women and their shaving of the head *(Mundan)* was a breaking of the tradition historically confined only to men, to mourn 'the miscarriage of justice' by the government. It can also be reimagined as a symbol of women's resistance against the government's unjustifiable decisions. Ramayanti Rai states

"For women, the hair is considered an ornament, an asset. We have tonsured our hair today to send a message that we are ready to sacrifice everything for Gorkhaland"

5.2 Keepers of the hearth

Biological essentialism or biologism has profoundly affected men's and women's behaviour. It, along with social factors, has structured ideas about what is feminine and what is masculine. In other words, actions and behaviours are given significance based on femininity and masculinity; it is a conjecture based on biology and environment. Compassion, placate and reconciliatory traits are associated with women. These traits are accepted as motherly behaviour, and, accordingly, women are expected to exhibit them in social standards.

Politics has predominantly been a male-dominated space, and therefore, women's activism in politics is considered an extension of their domestic roles. Does this mean that women are the passive actors in politics? Is Women's participation in politics simply a maternal consciousness? Or a product of biologism?

Women participating in politics, at the international or local level, through their roles, have challenged the above notions and consider them reductive essentialism. In fact, considering women's roles and responsibilities in politics as an extension of the domestic roles is a deliberate disregarding of women's existential predicament, confining and defining them within the framework of patriarchal ideology. It is an utter dismissal of historical complexes that shape the social and political trajectories of all humans.

The Gorkha women have played a dual role in the Gorkhaland movement, both as matriarchs of resistance and keepers of the hearth. The agitation of 1986 witnessed the rise of individualistic women. When the crackdown began and when men were on the run, or in the absence of men, most women were left behind with their kids and families. Gender roles shifted pragmatically, with women running the household, managing the economy, and ensuring the safety and protection of elders and children. Anisha Rai, while narrating her story, mentions her mother and the monumental role she has played. When her father was shot dead in 1986, her mother did not get enough time to mourn for her father. She was more concerned about the safety of her children and mother- in -law and had greater distress and fearfulness for her brother- in -law since crackdowns by CRPFs and other paramilitary forces had already started. She somehow, through some connections, managed to send him to the neighbouring state of Sikkim. Anisha wonders, in pain, how her mother, in her mid-20s and without formal education, managed the household in her father's absence. She proudly claims

"मेरो आमाले, बाबा आमा दुवाईको भूमिका निभौनु भको छ"

(My mother has played both the role of a father and a mother"

In 2008, when आमरण अनशन (fast unto death/hunger strike) was observed, Bandana Yonzon of Kalimpong participated in the strike. In conversation with her, she mentions how after five days, her health started deteriorating. She used to tell her friends that if she died during the process, her husband might marry another woman, or her children would not get a mother's love and care and asked her friends to take care of her children and give mother's love in her absence. Her situation is a pure reflection of her devotion towards her homeland. She is a living proof that women can be both compassionate towards their children's situation in the near future and yet be devoted to their homeland by not breaking their fast.

Many women participating in the Gorkhaland movement were mothers. Their involvement in the movement required them to fulfil their motherly roles and that of the political actors. Bandana talks about how she used to wake up early in the morning at around 4:30, cook and dress her two daughters, send them to school, and after completing household work, attend party meetings. By the time she returned, she often found her daughters sitting in the veranda doing homework.

Most of the women I have interviewed also talk about extending their motherly sentiments to the well-being of society. In Darjeeling Hill, a complete shutdown (popularly known as strikes) is not uncommon. It had happened during the 1986 andolan, in 2013 and most recently in 2017 for more than 100 days. The most concerning aspect of these shutdowns is the management of resources and the maintenance of the family's physical and mental health. *"A father earns money, but a mother converts money into food"* is what Passang claims. According to these women, during those days, they used to collect 'musti dhan' (a handful of rice) from all families who could afford it and distribute it to those who needed it most. Similarly, Nandita ma'am also claims that during the shutdowns, children's education was severely hampered. She was deeply concerned

about this, as she was a teacher by profession. So, to keep the children in touch with their studies, she used to collect the children from her neighbourhood and teach them something or the other at her home.

Many women during the interview were asked whether, if women were at the top decision-making level, these shutdowns would happen or whether women would bring better means to stand up to the government. All women agreed with the statement. Directly quoting from Passang's interview

"कोक्रोको नानिले के भँचा?.. गोर्खाल्याण्ड" (What does a child in cradle say? ..Gorkhaland)

"कोक्रोको नानी अहिले १७/१८ वर्षा पुगी सकियो... खाई गोर्खाल्याण्ड ?" (the child in the cradle is already of 17/18 years…where is Gorkhaland?)"

These women claim that had it been women leaders making decisions for the hills, Gorkhaland might already have been a reality, as women are imbued with a maternal sense and sincerity and therefore do not take rash decisions. Equally, women understand society well from within; unlike men, they would accelerate society's development by addressing the social issues that have crippled the hills. Many women feel betrayed. They got involved in the movement wholeheartedly. Several of these women have pending legal cases, some with more than 5. They have lost not just trust but, more importantly, time and youth. Yet, when asked whether they will fight again for Gorkhaland, these women smile and say that if someone comes with a clearer vision, they are more than ready to fight for the homeland.

5.3 Cultural revivalist

The ethnic distinctiveness, the expression of ethnic passion at the community level, was maintained in the hills through the donning of traditional attire. It was not just a symbolism of collectiveness but a political action expressive of differences. A specific dress code may be indicative of ethnic distinctiveness or may appear as a significant diacritical sign to mark difference or even to reiterate a sense of belonging to a community.

The post-2007 Gorkhaland movement is particularly known to the public as the one in which the wearing of cultural attire was compulsory. Women became the trailblazers of this new tradition introduced by GJMM. Women at rallies, Gheraos, dharnas, and other social demonstrations were seen in their traditional attire, wearing Chaubandi Cholo, Dhaka saree, and fariya, while men wore *daura suruwal and Dhaka topi*. Women would be seen encouraging cultural performances in *Chowrastra* or in *Shruberry* Park in Darjeeling. They had taken up the task of rewarding those following the guidelines with flower garlands, while those who refused would be publicly smeared with black paint.

VI.   Summary & Conclusion

The ethnopolitical struggle for identity in the Darjeeling hills has affected and altered the lives of all people, irrespective of gender. Yet, the movement's historical narratives have paid little attention to the stories of Gorkha women and failed to bring them into the limelight. Feminist geography and research, along with it, are more focused on bringing silenced stories from different geographical settings to the surface. It has become a matter of conjecture between geography and feminism to understand the realities of women in the discipline. The lived realities of women are revealed through careful analysis of the production of counter-spaces for women within the framework of dominant male spaces.

The Gorkhaland movement is not exceptional in this. The Gorkha women have been carving out their own counter-spaces in the hills and, more importantly, in the political domain. Women like Putaliya Devi have actively participated in India's struggle for freedom, but they have not been successfully put into the mainstream historical narratives. Yes, politics has a hegemonic presence of men, making it more masculine in character and approach. Yet, though the stories of the Gorkha women, one can easily see how these women, like many others, are slowly but gradually bringing about a transformation in the political structure of the movement. The private- public dichotomy based on patriarchal ideology has been challenged by those women. The strategised participation of women and the genderised roles within the movement have produced a unique blend of political atmosphere along gender lines. This has further helped women transform themselves, freeing them from societal norms and refurbishing their status and positions.

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