
A Journey to Parliament: The Story of Maya Devi Chhetry, the First Gorkha Woman Parliamentarian

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Abstract: Maya Devi Chhetry was the first female Member of Parliament from Bengal to be elected to the first Rajya Sabha in post independent India. This paper reflects on the life and times of Maya Devi Chhetry from Kurseong, then an obscure town in West Bengal, who married at a tender age of thirteen and became a mother at an age of fifteen and how she made a foray into politics at a young age and her rise in the ranks of the Congress party and eventually representing her party in the first Rajya Sabha in 1952. She achieved all this even though the hill society was patriarchal and culturally, socially and politically backward at that time. This paper will be focused on the struggles faced by her being a woman in a society dominated by men, her involvement in the freedom movement, her contribution for the upliftment of the Gorkha society and her political achievements.

Keywords: Achievements, Congress Party, Politics, Society, Struggle, Woman etc.

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Introduction

Political participation is broadly referred to the process through which people participate in the political activities in the society and play a role in deciding the common goals needed for the society and the means to achieve these goals. The political activities include the process of voting, being a functionary of a political party or contesting an election. For the development of a nation there has to be an indiscriminate participation of its people irrespective of caste, gender and religion. One of the prerequisites for the empowerment of women is their participation in the political sphere. Women constitute almost half of the population of the world but their participation in politics can be seen to be minimum as they have many a times been neglected in the decision making process of the nation. The

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development and progress of a nation cannot be achieved without the active participation and contribution by women. Still they are being overlooked and offered very few political opportunities. Those who have made it to the higher echelons of politics have weathered many obstacles and barriers in their life and have left their mark in politics.

During the 19th century the society in India being a patriarchal one always referred to women as the weaker and segregated section of the society. Due to this stigma, women were mostly confined within the four walls of the household barring a few women who belonged to aristocratic and affluent families. The Swadeshi movement of 1905 which was organized to protest the partition of Bengal was the first major political event in which women participated in large numbers. The freedom struggle from British rule gave a new dimension to the role and status of women in India as a significant number of women participated in it. As more women began to take part in political activities their voices grew louder for implementation of the political rights of women. It was only during the first quarter of the 20th century that women like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Sarojini Naidu strongly advocated for voting rights for women.¹ This was granted by the then government of India but was subjected to property qualification.² So many women were left out of the voting process due to this condition. During this period, women's education, the new ideas and western thoughts along with the reform movements initiated by notable social reformers to uplift the social status of women brought about changes in the concept of women's role in society.

In post-independence India, though the Constitution of India has guaranteed equality, liberty and right to life to all its citizens, women have lagged behind men in almost all spheres of life. Although voting rights have been given to women, there has been only a token representation of women in Parliament and state legislative assemblies. Though, small in number, women who have been elected or nominated to Parliament have contributed tremendously to the development and progress of the nation and have left an indelible mark in Indian politics.

II

This paper emphasizes on the struggles that Maya Devi Chhetry had to overcome in her political journey and her entry into Parliament which was then dominated by men and the social and political conditions prevailing in Darjeeling hills during the first half of the 20th century. Though she hailed from an obscure place in West Bengal, she was the first woman from Bengal to be elected to the first Rajya Sabha in 1952, which in itself was a big

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achievement for the people of Darjeeling hills who were socially and politically backward than their counterparts from the rest of India.

A brief history of Darjeeling hills must be mentioned to understand the social and political conditions prevailing in Darjeeling hills in the first half of the 20th century. With the acquisition of Darjeeling hills by the East India Company from the Raja of Sikkim by a Deed of Grant in 1835, the wheels of modernization of Darjeeling hills set in.³ At that time Darjeeling hills was a dense forested tract. The British started constructing buildings for administrative purposes, a sanatorium, public schools, European style cottages, market places, recreation clubs, regimental barracks and roads. Though Darjeeling hills began to develop a modern outlook, its native could not enjoy the fruits of development and progress as they were mostly illiterate and were socially, economically, culturally and politically backward. Most of them began doing menial jobs for the British who they considered to be superior to them. With the commercialization of the tea industry in 1856⁴ many natives found employment as labourers in the various tea gardens. With regards to education, although the British has set up many schools in Darjeeling hills, most of the native population could not find access to these schools since these schools were mainly set up to impart education to the children of the employees of the European and Anglo – Indian communities who resided in Darjeeling hills.

As a consequence, a majority of the population remained illiterate. Later due to the efforts of Christian missionaries a few schools were established to cater to the educational needs of the local populace, though their main motive was to spread Christianity. As these schools were few in numbers, the majority of the hill population could not receive education and remained illiterate and backward. There was also very little progress in women education. So only a minor percentage of the populace of Darjeeling hills acquired education and became aware of the happenings in the world and the rest of India. During the first decade of the 20th century the people of Darjeeling hills, backed by a few educated natives, started calling for autonomy and a say in the governance of the hills for the progress and development of the communities residing in the hills. In 1917, the Hillmen's Association⁵ was formed and this association formally took the task of seeking autonomy on behalf of the people of Darjeeling hills by submitting a memorandum to the then government of Bengal. In the decades to follow, various other organizations also championed the issue of autonomy. It is to be noted here that these organizations did not have a woman representation since during this time the society of Darjeeling hills was a male dominated one. This is in stark contrast to

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the scenario in other parts of India where women were being made part of social and political organizations and many women associations had sprang up to voice the rights and safeguards of women. In 1934, the Hill People's Social Union (H.P.S.U) was founded by S.W.Ladenla⁶ which continued the issue of autonomy and advocated for the rights and social development of the people of Darjeeling hills. In 1943, the All India Gorkha League (A.I.G.L.) was formed which was the first umbrella organization for the political upliftment of the hill people.⁷

During the 19th century the people of Darjeeling hills were not much affected by the freedom movement and the changes brought about by the reform movements. It was only after the entry of Gandhiji in the freedom movement that people from the hills became aware of their political rights and the freedom movement. The non – cooperation movement of 1921 – 1922 was the first occasion in which the hill people showed an interest in the freedom movement. During this movement the hill people took part in large numbers irrespective of sex and creed. It was during this period that women began to come out of their household and participate actively in the freedom movement. One of the prominent people who worked closely with Gandhiji was Helen Lepcha⁽⁸⁾ from Kurseong who was later rechristened as Savitri Devi by Gandhiji. After this movement the hills witnessed a greater role of women in the political arena.

III

One of the women who has been part of politics in Darjeeling hills and has left a mark in the history of Darjeeling and Bengal for being the first women Parliamentarian from Bengal is Maya Devi Chhetry. She was not only involved in the later phase of the freedom movement but also served the people of Darjeeling hills as a Parliamentarian in independent India. Born in 1921, Maya Devi spent most of her childhood with her aunt who lived in Kurseong. Since women education was not given much importance at that time, she did not attend any formal school. At a tender age of thirteen, on insistence of her aunt she was married to Dil Bahadur Chhetry, a headmaster of a local primary school. At that time child marriage was quite common in the society. Her husband being a teacher realized the importance of education and why women should be educated for the betterment of society. Since she had never before attended any school and did not understand the value of education he encouraged her to study. He brought books and other study materials and started teaching her at home. At first it was very difficult for her to start reading and writing. As time passed she became proficient in the books that were taught in class 7. Being satisfied with her progress in studies, her

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husband encouraged her to teach at Davis Primary school of which he was the headmaster. Since this school was for boys he requested the Board of Education to include girls which was readily permitted and Maya Devi started teaching there voluntarily. While at school she came in contact with some teachers of Dow Hill School who were fond of her as she was a hardworking girl. The friendship between her and the teachers led to her teaching Nepali to Mrs. Stevens and in return was taught English by Mrs. Stevens. Another teacher, Mrs. Roy Chowdhury taught her Bengali. During her stint in Davis Primary School, Cubs and Guides were introduced in the school. On the recommendation of Mr. Prince of Victoria School she went to Calcutta for her training. In 1936, at an age of 15, she gave birth to her first child. Even after being a mother she continued with her studies. She joined St. Mary's College for a junior teachers' training course which she passed with first division and was awarded a certificate in 1937.⁽⁹⁾ After receiving her training she started teaching in the same school but this time as a salaried teacher.

As her husband was actively involved in social work and politics, she also started taking part in social and public activities. She joined a few organizations in Kurseong which were involved in social and public activities. She became a member of the Education Board of Kurseong Municipality, represented the Ladies' Association of Kurseong as its Vice – President and was also a member of the T.B.Association.¹⁰ She was one of the few women who actively took part in social and political causes in and around Kurseong at that time. In 1939 she went to Calcutta for the Tuberculosis Home Visitors' training and was awarded a certificate by the Tuberculosis Association of Bengal. In 1941 she became the Lady Health Visitor of Kurseong Municipality.¹¹ In the same year her husband founded the Hindu Kanya Pathshala which was located in the premises of Gorkha Janapustakalaya.¹² She began to serve in this school in the capacity of a headmistress. Due to the dearth of funds in running the school, the school was later taken over by Kurseong Municipality. In 1944 she passed her matriculation examination as a private candidate. As she had not received formal education and had received education in an informal way, she had come to realize the importance of education in one's life. Besides, serving as a headmistress of Hindu Kanya Pathshala she was also the President of Mokhtab School which catered to the Muslim community. As she took keen interest in Guides and Scouts, she served as the District Commissioner for Guides and was later appointed as the Assistant Commissioner of West Bengal for Guides. She was also involved in various labour movements in the hills. She organized the Milkmen Union and was Vice – President of the Plantation Workers' Union of North Bengal.¹³

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When the freedom movement was intensified by the Quit India movement launched by Gandhiji in 1942, many educated youths and persons from Darjeeling hills being inspired by the commitment and devotion of Gandhiji towards the Motherland readily joined the movement. During this period the educated lot realized that a strong organization which would work for the social and political upliftment of the Gorkhas should be formed. As the All India Gorkha League was formed with an objective to voice the concerns and safeguard the rights of all Gorkhas within India⁽¹⁴⁾, Maya Devi was greatly influenced by the outreach of the organization and became a member of All India Gorkha League. This was her first foray into the world of politics. Later due to some difference in opinion, she resigned from All India Gorkha League and joined the Congress in which her husband was already a life time member. She along with her husband began participating in the various activities taken by the Congress in the hills. Due to her sincere commitment towards the Congress, she was elected as the President of Kurseong Congress Committee in 1945. She as well continued to work for the unity and identity of the Nepali community. Her patriotism and dedication to free the country from foreign rule has been reflected in her book titled “Swatantra Sangram”.⁽¹⁵⁾ Ratna Mani Lama, Maya Devi’s daughter, in her book “Prerna ko Shrot Maya Devi” has written that she was fortunate to meet many officers from the I.N.A. who told her that there were many female soldiers besides male soldiers who fought for the cause of the motherland.¹⁶ Kumari Sabitri and Kumari Indrani Thapa, who were 7 or 8 years old, were both female soldiers of Bal Sena of the Azad Hind Fauz who sacrificed their lives when a tank crushed them while saving the lives of other sick and brave soldiers of their battalion.¹⁷

During the last years of the freedom movement when India was at the threshold of independence from British rule, the Muslim League wanted India to be divided into two nations. A Congress Session was held in Bengal in May 1947 to discuss the bifurcation of Bengal. This session was attended by many prominent persons from Darjeeling hills including Maya Devi. The representative of the hills supported the bifurcation of Bengal on the ground that the Gorkha ethnicity was different from the rest of Bengal and they had demanded a different administrative set – up for the district of Darjeeling since 1907. In this session Md. Ali Jinnah had demanded that Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri be included in Pakistan which was vehemently opposed by the representatives of the hill people as they wanted to remain within the Indian Union. On hearing that Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri might be included within Pakistan, Maya Devi and Gorkha League sent the following telegram to Pandit

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Jawaharlal Nehru, Lord Mountbatten, Vallabhbhai Patel and Dr. Rajendra Prasad: “Gorkha hill tribes and all non – Muslims are greatly perturbed by the report of inclusion of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts in Pakistan. Muslims in Darjeeling District are below 3 per cent. Gorkhas and others will never agree. We demand inclusion in the Indian Union and Hindu province”.¹⁸ Her dream of living in independent India came true as Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri was included within the Indian Union. During the celebration of India’s independence, she in her capacity as President of Kurseong Congress Committee brought down the Union Jack and hoisted the Indian flag for the first time in Kurseong.

Maya Devi Chhetri, besides being a successful politician was a social worker also. She along with her husband established the Mahila Mandali at Kurseong in 1941¹⁹ for the empowerment of women. In 1947 she was chosen as the Vice – President of Darjeeling District All India Women’s Conference.⁽²⁰⁾ In 1951, Maya Devi became the General Secretary of Darjeeling District Congress Committee.⁽²¹⁾ During the elections to the first Lok Sabha in 1952, she worked very hard to ensure the victory of Congress Party in the hills. Due to her sincerity and dedication towards the Congress she was called to Calcutta to contest the elections to the first Rajya Sabha. She was elected as a Member of Parliament of the Rajya Sabha by the members of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. She gained the distinction of being the first woman Member of Parliament of the Rajya Sabha from West Bengal which was a proud moment not only for her family but also for the entire people of Darjeeling hills.⁽²²⁾ At first she was apprehensive about the responsibilities bestowed upon her. During her initial days in Parliament, as she was a shy person, she was highly intimidated by the presence of Congress stalwarts such as Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and many more. As she came in contact with her fellow members she began to gain confidence. The Chairmanship of the first Rajya Sabha was bestowed upon Dr. S.Radhakrishnan and Shri S.V. Krishna Moorthy Rao. During the first budget discussion, Maya Devi was one of the two women from Congress who were given an opportunity to speak for five minutes.⁽²³⁾ In her short speech she addressed the issue of inclusion of the hill people in the Scheduled or Backward Class as the hill people were socially and economically backward. She suggested that as the Himalayan Railway Company had shifted to Assam, the bungalows left behind by the Company in Kurseong should be converted into a Cultural Centre. She also spoke about the closure of eleven tea gardens in North Bengal and requested for an Enquiry Committee to be set up to find solutions to this problem and also initiate schemes for the people who were

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unemployed due to the closure of the tea gardens. She also requested to reinstate the train service from Sealdah to Darjeeling which had been discontinued after independence.

In 1953 she had an opportunity to be a member of the Standing Committees for Defence, Health and Education. ⁽²⁴⁾ In 1954 she was entrusted by the Prime Minister to lead a delegation to Nepal to mend the souring relations between the two countries. At that time Nepal had a strong resentment towards India and the delegation was greeted with black flags. In spite of this Maya Devi made a sincere effort to win back the trust of Nepal. In her speech which was aired by Radio Nepal she was able to attract the attention of a large populace of Nepal. Upon her return to Delhi, she submitted a report to the Prime Minister mentioning the reasons which led to the anti – India propaganda in Nepal and how it could be rectified. During the discussion of the Bill for Military training for Citizens of India, she strongly advocated for the inclusion of women to undergo military training. She argued that as time changes, the role of women in society should also change. From 1954 to 1960, she was a member of the Executive Committee of Congress Party in Parliament. ²⁵ In 1956 she had proposed that Nepali language be included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution as Nepali language was already recognized as a medium of instruction up to the matriculation level in West Bengal and as a vernacular subject in Calcutta, Banaras and Allahabad universities. She also worked very hard to make Nepali the official language of Darjeeling hills. ²⁶ During the visit of Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru to Darjeeling in 1961, Maya Devi, in her capacity as General Secretary of Darjeeling District Congress Committee, led a delegation to meet the Prime Minister and submitted a memorandum relating to the language and border issues. Dr.B.C.Roy, the Chief Minister of Bengal was also present in this meeting. Nehruji along with Dr.B.C.Roy assured the delegates that Nepali language would be made the official language of Darjeeling hills. Later when the Bengal Language Bill was introduced in the Bengal Legislature Nepali was not included as one of the languages of the State. On hearing this she immediately contacted Nehru ji and Shastri ji who intervened in the matter and an amendment to the Bill was introduced in the Bengal Legislature to include Nepali as one of the languages of the State. ²⁷

In 1957 she represented the All India Gorkha Ex – Servicemen’s Welfare Association at the 7th General Assembly of the World Veterans Federation in West Berlin. The following year, she was re -elected to the Rajya Sabha for a second term. During this period she voiced her concerns regarding the unemployment of the hill people as most of the employment in the government sector in the hills were filled up by people from the plains. This had caused great

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hardship and frustration to the hill people who were seeking employment in neighbouring countries. As she was a member of the Information and Broadcasting of India, she made a relentless effort in setting up a radio station in Darjeeling hills. This was at first opposed as many felt that there was no use of a radio station in the hills. She persistently argued that since Darjeeling hills was a border area surrounded by other countries it was beneficial to have a radio station in that area. Shri Gopalan Reddy, the Minister for Information and Broadcasting was convinced by her and he readily gave orders to set up a radio station in Kurseong. The radio station was inaugurated in 1962 and was later made part of All India Radio which brought employment to the area.⁽²⁸⁾ In her last year as a Parliamentarian she was invited by the Democratic Women's Organisation to attend the International Women's Conference in Israel. After her retirement from Parliament she continued to work for the progress and upliftment of her people in Darjeeling hills. She was also instrumental in establishing a college in Kurseong. Right from her days as a Parliamentarian she had advocated for setting up of a college in Kurseong as most of the locals could not go to Darjeeling or Siliguri for higher education. By her effort, Kurseong College was established in 1967 and was affiliated to North Bengal University.²⁹ She became the Vice President of the Darjeeling District Zilla Parishad and was a member of the District School Board. She was also involved with various social organizations like the Mahila Samity and Girl Guides.

In 1956, Maya Devi, being a member of the first Rajya Sabha, was the first woman from the Nepali Community to raise her voice in Parliament for the inclusion of Nepali Language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. She showed great perseverance in urging the then Central government to enact a law declaring Nepali as the Official language of Darjeeling District. Due to her efforts, the West Bengal Language Act 1961 was passed according to which both the Nepali language and Bengali language was to be used for official purposes in the three hill sub – divisions of Darjeeling District. Even in 1972, when the Nepali Bhasa Andolan had started under the leadership of Akhil Bharatiya Nepali Bhasa Samiti for recognition of Nepali in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, she assured her full support for the movement.³⁰

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Conclusion

Maya Devi's journey from a shy, timid and illiterate girl from the remote area of Darjeeling hills to a confident, dedicated and educated woman who crossed many barriers of life to work for the betterment of the people of Darjeeling hills has been a big inspiration to the Gorkha woman in particular and people in general. In spite of her being encouraged and greatly helped by her husband she proved to be a woman of calibre. By her capability she became the Vice – Chairman of the Rajya Sabha during her second term in the Rajya Sabha which in itself speaks volumes of her calibre. Although she had many works and achievements to her credit, the present study reflects only a few achievements of her political career.

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