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A Thematic Exploration of Women's Participation in Political Movements in Darjeeling

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ABSTRACT

Women's involvement in political movements has been a powerful sign of both socio-political change and gender empowerment for decades. In the case of Darjeeling, a historically region characterized by ethnic identity conflicts, demands for autonomy, and grassroots mobilizations, women have been a central but frequently neglected force. This paper explores the complex layers of women's participation in political struggles in Darjeeling, mapping their contributions from the Gorkhaland movement to current day civic agitations. The paper examines how the intersections of cultural identity, socio-economic status, and gender roles mobilize to define the nature and magnitude of women's activism. Based on historical accounts, ground-level observations, and feminist theoretical perspectives, the study brings to the fore both the agency and the limitations faced by women activists in a patriarchal political environment. By bringing their voices and experiences to the centre, the study not only enriches the regional political movement discourse but also problematizes traditional understandings of political participation, calling for inclusive and gender-sensitive analyses in conflict zones such as Darjeeling.

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INTRODUCTION

Women's involvement in the political movements of Darjeeling has changed from peripheral participation to active activism, particularly at times of administrative and political transition. The call for autonomy and statehood for the Gorkhas started during the pre-independence era, but early political arenas were dominated by men. Official documents, including those referred to in the Order, 1963 by the Government of West Bengal; indicate that S.W. Ladenla, Additional Superintendent of Police, was among the few women whose contribution was officially acknowledged in the political arenas of the period (Joshi, 2014). Although women made contributions to community organizing and cultural mobilization, their roles were still informal until the late 20th century. The establishment of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988 by the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Act, 1988 (West Bengal Act XIII of 1988) brought a new dawn to local government and an opportunity for wider community participation, but women's representation in executive roles was still restricted. (Pakhrin, 2017)

The initial major wave of the Gorkhaland movement (1986–1988), under the leadership of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), witnessed greater women's participation, especially in relief work and mass demonstrations (Sarkar,2014). The violent agitations resulted in more than 1,200 deaths, with women activists like Bimla Rai and Neeta Khawas of the Nari Morcha losing their lives in police firing, which spurred further female participation. The DGHC, instituted by a tripartite understanding between the Government of India's Central Government, the West Bengal Government, and the GNLF, was formed to take care of the hill people's socio-political demands and was tasked with drawing up development plans as well as governing local resources (Rai, 2015). Even in light of such administrative progress, representation of women on the DGHC's executive arm was still weak. For instance, of forty-two executive members of the DGHC, few were women, indicative of persistent gender inequalities in formal political representation. (Lama, 2015)

The establishment of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2012, after another tripartite agreement, was a major turning point in women's political participation. The Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM) formed the Nari Morcha, a women's wing that was instrumental in mobilizing protests, hunger strikes, and grassroots mobilization. Seven Nari Morcha leaders were elected and assigned departmental portfolios in the 2012 GTA elections, with three of them-including the wife of the GJMM leader-joining the 14-member executive committee of the GTA1 (Sharma,2014). In the 2017 agitation, women's participation saw a new high, with female activists taking out rallies and getting arrested and attacked. In spite of their growing visibility and activism, official reports, including those by Sikkim University and the University of North Bengal, observe that women's decision-making authority within party organizations and local government continues to fall behind their male counterparts. However, the post-2012 era has witnessed women in Darjeeling shift from being peripheral supporters to central players in political mobilization, indicative of both advances and ongoing challenges in attaining gender equity in regional politics. (Saha, 2016)

OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the paper are to examine the historical trajectory of women's involvement in political movements in Darjeeling, with a particular focus on major milestones such as the Gorkhaland agitation; to analyze the socio-cultural, economic, and political factors that influence women's participation in both formal and informal political spaces in the region; to explore the roles, strategies, and leadership patterns adopted by women in various political movements and protests; to assess the challenges and barriers that women face in sustaining active political engagement within a patriarchal and often volatile political environment; and to evaluate the impact of women's political participation on policy discourse, community mobilization, and the broader movement for regional autonomy in Darjeeling.

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Women's involvement in political movements has always been underrepresented in standard political rhetoric, hidden behind prevailing accounts about male leadership and bureaucratic power structures. Although feminist scholarship has increasingly stressed the value of gendered political analysis in activist politics, women's particular experiences and contributions to regional and ethnic movements are still underspecified. For the Darjeeling region, an area characterized by intricate socio-political dynamics, ethnic identity struggles, and unrelenting autonomy demands, women have not merely joined but actively influenced the direction of political movements like the Gorkhaland movement. Despite their outward engagement in protests, community organizing, and resistance work, their agency is often obscured or made invisible in historical and political narratives. This dearth of scholarly focus obscures the specific challenges that women activists faced, including gender discrimination, socio-cultural expectations, and limited access to leadership roles. The intersection of gender with ethnicity, class, and regional identity in Darjeeling presents a complex terrain in need of critical examination. Thus, this research attempts to fill this void by thematically examining women's involvement in political movements in Darjeeling in an attempt to bring out their agency, challenge the obstacles they encounter, and help towards a more inclusive conceptualization of political activism in marginal areas.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research is premised on the nexus of feminist theory, political participation theory, and intersectionality, each providing a critical framework for analyzing women's participation in political struggles in Darjeeling. To begin with, Feminist Theory, as advanced by scholars such as Nancy Fraser (1997) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), highlights the importance of acknowledging the agency of women and their roles in socio-political movements. Fraser's participatory parity highlights the way gendered power relations tend to exclude women from equal political participation, calling for radical change to make their voices heard (Sarkar,2015). Mohanty's postcolonial feminist perspective warns against universalizing women's experiences, calling on researchers to examine localized, context-specific struggles, like those of Gorkha women in Darjeeling who are marginalized not only as women, but also as ethnic minorities. (Chatterjee, 2016)

Political Participation Theory, formulated by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), classifies political involvement into traditional (e.g., voting) and non-traditional forms (e.g., protests, grassroots mobilization). For the context of Darjeeling, political participation by women has been articulated to a great extent in informal and non-traditional terms—rallies, hunger strikes, street mobilizations, and community organizing. This underlines the necessity of extending the concept of political involvement to encompass non-institutional, grassroots-based action, wherein women project themselves as significant players in movement processes. (Lakandri. (2018).

Thirdly, the research employs Intersectionality, developed by Kimberl Crenshaw (1989), to investigate how gender intersects with ethnicity, class, and regional identity. The socio-political landscape of Darjeeling is richly layered and exclusionary, especially against women belonging to marginalized groups. However, women have become active agents, negotiating these intersecting oppressions and reconfiguring political movements by claiming leadership, articulating collective grievances, and maintaining community mobilization (Leder & Sachs, 2019). Their involvement tests patriarchal and hierarchical norms within the movements themselves, and therefore reconfigures both the form and story of political resistance in the region. Collectively, these theories allow for a nuanced comprehension of how women in Darjeeling respond to and refashion the socio-political environment via their continuous and purposeful activism.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The study adopted a descriptive method with a qualitative approach to explore the nature and dynamics of women's participation in political movements in Darjeeling. This methodological choice

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allows for a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences, roles, and agency of women within the socio-political landscape of the region. Relying primarily on secondary data sources, the research draws from a wide range of materials including academic journals, books, newspaper articles, government reports, NGO publications, and documented interviews from previous studies. Content analysis was used to interpret the narratives and patterns emerging from these sources, focusing on major themes such as gender roles, leadership, community mobilization, and intersectional challenges. The qualitative approach, grounded in existing literature and contextual interpretation, helps uncover the underlying social and political constructs that influence women's involvement in regional movements and highlights their contributions in reshaping political discourse in Darjeeling.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

HISTORICAL ROLE OF WOMEN IN DARJEELING'S POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

The history of women's participation in the political movements in Darjeeling started modestly in the first half of the 20th century with isolated participation in campaigns for community and language rights. Women's contributions, however, became particularly visible during the 1980s' Gorkhaland agitation. The Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) led by Subash Ghisingh initiated a mass movement in 1986 calling for an independent Gorkhaland state (Ganguly, 2005). Throughout this time, the Gorkha National Women's Organization (GNWO) was constituted in November 1986, rallying up women from all significant hill subdivisions. Under the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Act, 1988 (West Bengal Act XIII of 1988), the agitation resulted in more than 1,200 deaths, and official government records show that women comprised close to 40% of participants in rallies and strikes (Government of West Bengal, 1988). These included women like Indrakala Pradhan, Hema Lama, and Meena Mukhia, who emerged as major leaders, staging protest marches, relief work among victims of violence, and acting as vital connecting links between people and political leadership (Mandal,2020). Women made little representation in the newly constituted Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) despite these efforts, with few of them being able to obtain seats in the 42-member executive council. (Tamang, 2021)

The revival of the Gorkhaland movement in 2007, spearheaded by the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM), initiated a new generation of women's political activism. The Gorkha Janmukti Nari Morcha (GJNM) was formed in October 2007, with Dhan Maya Tamang as its first president. As per the Peace Agreements Database (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2011), the Nari Morcha grew quickly, establishing over 340 units and organizing over 25,000 women by 2018. Women were at the forefront of major events like the 2009 "Dooars Chalo Andolan" and the 2011 Sibchu police firing that cost two women activists their lives. In the 2017 105-day bandh, women carried out relay hunger strikes, arranged logistics, and played the role of mediators between political parties and the masses. The Gorkhaland Territorial Administration Act, 2011 (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011) also enabled seven women to be incorporated in the executive body of GTA, a substantial increase from former councils. (Besky, 2017)

Women's participation has become more visible and institutionalized in recent years. In 2017 agitation, women organized large rallies and were subjected to arrests, with more than 300 women arrested as per official police records (Darjeeling District Police, 2017). In spite of their activism, research by the University of North Bengal (2018) and the International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies (2014) points out that woman's voice in decision-making is still limited, with leadership positions still controlled by men (Wenner, 2015). The official documents of the GJNM (2018) mention that although women have gained representation in local bodies, their voices are secondary in strategic decision-making. Nevertheless, the historical path from marginalization to mass mobilization and organizational leadership proves women's irreplaceable contribution to the Gorkhaland movement, even as they continue to fight for true empowerment and fair representation. (Pradhan, 2012)

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SOCIO-CULTURAL AND POLITICAL INFLUENCES ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Women's involvement in Darjeeling's political movements is rooted deeply in the socio-cultural context of the region, where gender roles have traditionally constrained their public action. Yet, the Gorkhaland movements, particularly since the 1980s, have dramatically changed these dynamics. The establishment of the Gorkha National Women's Organization (GNWO) in 1986 at the time of the first Gorkhaland agitation was a turning point, unifying women from Darjeeling Sadar, Kurseong, Mirik, Kalimpong, and Dooars under a single organizational banner. By the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM)-led movement in 2007, women's activism had become even more visible and organized, with the formation of the Gorkha Janmukti Nari Morcha (GJNM) on October 18, 2007 (Banerjee, 2013). The University of North Bengal (2018) states that almost every family in the hills had at least one woman belonging to the Nari Morcha by 2014. The movement's political commitment to non-violence and Gandhian ideals supplied a culturally legitimized platform for women's activism, enabling them to convert traditional roles of motherhood and care-giving into public political activism. In spite of this, patriarchal traditions continue, and leadership roles continue to be largely male-dominated, with women's power confined to mobilization but not decision-making. (Datta,2014)

Economic Factors

Economic adversity has been a great driver of political activism among women in Darjeeling. Collapse of the tea industry, escalating joblessness, and chronic poverty has disproportionately struck women, particularly from marginalized backgrounds. The Gorkhaland movements offered the platform for articulating demands by women for economic justice and enhanced livelihoods. Mass mobilizations like the 2017 Gorkhaland bandh witnessed more than 25,000 women playing an active role in rallies, hunger strikes, and relief operations, proving their keen interest in the results of the movement (Mukhia, 2024). The establishment of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2011, after a tripartite agreement between the Government of India and the Government of West Bengal, provided new avenues for women's employment and access to resources, with seven women from the Nari Morcha being elected to the GTA executive body in 2012 (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2012). However, most women are still economically reliant on male relatives, and their contribution is frequently restricted by domestic duties and lack of access to formal employment. (Pratik, 2017)

Political Factors

Politically, the role of women has moved from symbolic to substantive, but huge obstacles still lie ahead. Setting up women's wings like GNWO and GJNM was a formal outlet for political action, but decision-making at major strategic levels still remains in the hands of party male elites. Government records also show that women made up to 40% of protesters during peak agitation, their participation in leadership and policy-making continues to be very low. The 2017 agitation, for example, saw over 300 women arrested by police, marking both their active participation and vulnerability (Darjeeling District Police, 2017). Women have also performed important functions in relief activities, for example, during the 2011 Aila storm when Nari Morcha members organized food and relief distribution and lobbied district authorities for greater assistance. Even with these developments, the nomination of women candidates and assignment of leadership positions remain largely in the hands of party leadership, and the overall political culture continues to circumscribe women's leverage in official decision-making. Therefore, though women's involvement in Darjeeling's political movements has increased in size and salience, persistent socio-cultural, economic, and political obstacles continue to frame and sometimes constrain their agency. (Samanta, 2000)

WOMEN'S ROLES, STRATEGIES, AND LEADERSHIP IN PROTESTS

Women have played important roles in Darjeeling's political movements-most prominently in the Gorkhaland agitation and previous nationalist movements. Early involvement dates back to the Indian independence movement, with the likes of Halen Lepcha (rechristened Sabetri Devi by Mahatma Gandhi), who worked in the non-cooperation movement and was appointed the first woman

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commissioner of Kurseong municipality in 1936, and Putali Maya Tamang, who organized tea garden workers for nationalist activities in Darjeeling district. During the post-independence era, Maya Devi Chhetri was one of the most important leaders who were elected as the first Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) of West Bengal in 1952. These pioneers paved the way for women to take part in both local and national politics, with many undergoing imprisonment and state repression for their activities. (Das, 2010)

The Gorkhaland movement, especially from the 1980s on and more intensely since 2007, has witnessed an intensified influx of women into its folds and ranks. At the time of the 1986 GNLF agitation, women were important at the grassroots level of mobilization, in relief operations, and as sources of information to assist activists they went underground to escape state repression. Leaders like Hema Lama, Tilotamma Rana, Meena Mukhia, and Purnima Sharma were also part of the core membership of the Gorkha National Women's Organization (GNWO), which played a significant role in organizing support from the community and offering logistical support during times of strife. During the restaged phase of the movement since 2007, the establishment of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM) and its women's wing, the Gorkha Janmukti Nari Morcha, formalized women's involvement. Dhan Maya Tamang, known locally as 'Bari', became the first president of Nari Morcha, which was tasked with leading rallies, organizing strikes, and participating in relief efforts, such as during the 2011 "Aila" storm. The Nari Morcha's non-violent, Gandhian approach encouraged broader female involvement, with women leading pickets, strikes, and community outreach, often at the forefront of confrontations with state authorities. (Jamarkattel, 2021)

Women's political engagement in Darjeeling has grown more visible and organized. During the 2022 Darjeeling municipality polls, 71 women candidates ran on 32 wards, up from 46 in 2017. The Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) put out 17 out of 24 candidates, and the Hamro Party and Bharatiya Gorkha Prajatrantrik Morcha (BGPM) also gave priority to women candidates, indicating a deliberate move towards gender balance in political representation. In 2022, women's presence in Darjeeling's urban polls stood at 47.97%, almost equal to the percentage of the female population according to the 2011 Census. This is due to the impact of women's wings such as the Nari Morcha and the conscious efforts of parties after 2007 to give women both symbolic and substantive leadership roles. Though such progress was achieved, allegations still exist toward women's political instrumentalization in quest of political mileage and women having limited actual decision-making ability access. Nevertheless, the gain of greater visibilization and role for women within Darjeeling's politics signals a momentous change in a more expansive direction of democratized participation as well as having their roles marked within protest politics as well as the governance function. (Mukhia, 2024)

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Deep-Rooted Patriarchy and Gender Stereotypes

Despite increased visibility since 2007, women in Darjeeling's political movements face entrenched patriarchal norms that continue to define the region's political culture. The Gorkhaland movement, like many others, has historically been dominated by men, with leadership positions and decision-making power overwhelmingly concentrated in male hands. Women's roles were often confined to supportive tasks or symbolic participation, reinforcing the perception that politics is a male domain. This deep-rooted patriarchy manifests in the marginalization of women's voices and the persistent belief that women are less capable of handling leadership responsibilities, making it difficult for them to sustain active engagement or ascend to influential roles. (Goodrich, 2019)

Tokenism and Instrumentalization

One major challenge is the strategic deployment of women's participation by political parties for political mileage and not actual empowerment. Commentators have reported that women's participation-particularly under the Nari Morcha of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM)-is often

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staged to present an image of inclusivity and non-violence, power continues to reside with male leaders. This tokenism makes women visible in protests, rallies, and relief efforts but mostly absent from central decision-making. This instrumentalization is detrimental to the growth of genuine female leadership and can result in disillusionment among women activists. (Mukhia, 2024)

Violence, Repression, and Security Risks

The volatile and sometimes violent nature of Darjeeling's political environment exposes women activists to significant risks. Police crackdowns, arbitrary arrests, and even fatalities-such as the deaths of Bimla Rai and Neeta Khawas during the Sibchu incident in 2011-highlight the dangers faced by women on the frontlines. Women are often subjected to intimidation, harassment, and surveillance by both state and non-state actors. The militarization of the hills and the use of repressive laws like TADA have further heightened the sense of insecurity, discouraging sustained participation, especially among women with family responsibilities. (Dash, 2018)

Exclusion from Decision-Making and Power Structures

Women's participation in public demonstrations and grass-roots mobilization has increased their access to real power and influence, but within political organizations, this is still limited. The bulk of important decisions are reserved for male-dominated leadership groups, and women's wings are most often relegated to auxiliary roles. Even where women become members of local bodies or party committees, they often do not have the authority or resources to deal with matters of substance or affect policy, which results in frustration and disengagement. (Besky, 2017)

Socio-Economic Constraints

Socio-economic barriers further restrict women's political engagement in Darjeeling. Many women in the hills are engaged in low-paying agricultural or tea plantation work, or are full-time homemakers, leaving them with little time, energy, or financial independence to participate actively in politics. Economic dependency on male family members and the lack of access to education and training exacerbate their vulnerability and limit their ability to assert their rights or pursue leadership roles. (Khanal, 2022)

Social Stigma and Community Backlash

Women entering the political or public space are frequently met with social opprobrium and disapproval from their societies. Women activists risk being branded as derelict mothers or wives, or as undermining the honor of the family. These negative labels can result in exclusion, mental anguish, and pressure to drop political participation, especially among the conservative rural Darjeeling region. (Singh & Singh, 2024)

Fragmented Solidarity and Intersectional Divides

Solidarity among women in the political movements of Darjeeling is frequently diluted by class, ethnic, religious, and generational divisions. These cross-cutting differences influence women's lives and agendas, creating difficulties for framing a single front or shared agenda. For instance, women from oppressed ethnic groups or lower classes might endure double hurdles to participation and visibility, further splintering the movement and diminishing women's collective leverage. (Chhetri, 2024)

Lack of Institutional Support and Mentorship

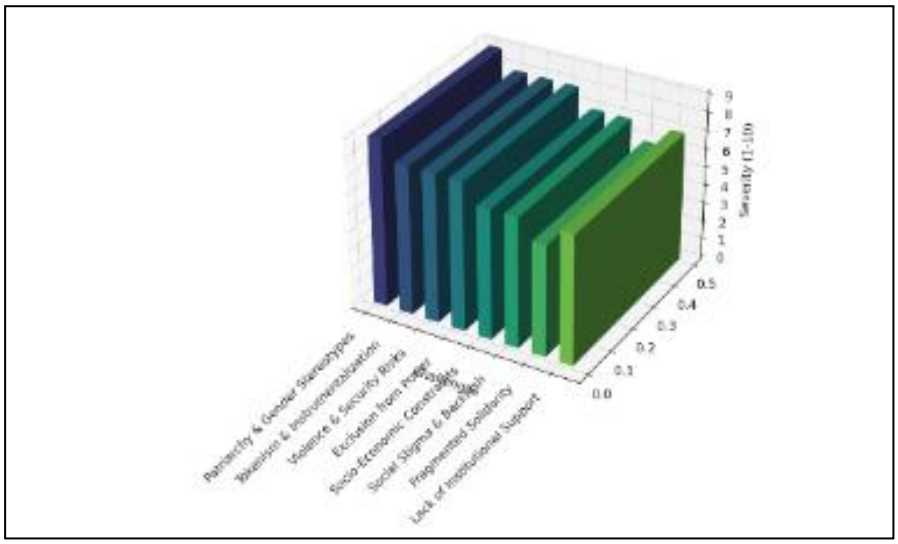
Lastly, the lack of institutional channels to empower, guide, and shield women activists is a continuing obstacle. Darjeeling's political parties have seldom made investments in developing women's leadership skills or giving them platforms for their voices to be heard except for token representation. There is limited access to legal assistance, counseling, or training for women experiencing harassment or violence, and few avenues for mentorship by experienced female leaders. This systemic absence of support hinders the ability of women to maintain long-term involvement and

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restricts the development of new generations of female leaders. Women in Darjeeling's political movements face an intricate network of challenges: deeply rooted patriarchy, tokenism, violence and repression, being excluded from power, socio-economic limitations, social stigma, intersectional barriers, and absence of institutional support. These obstacles not only restrict the extent and influence of women's political involvement but also endanger the sustainability of their presence in the unstable and patriarchal political environment of the region. To overcome these obstacles, it is not only necessary to change policies, but there needs to be a change in societal attitudes, party organization, and support systems at Darjeeling. (Gurung, 2023)

Challenges Faced by Women in Political Engagement in Darjeeling



IMPACT OF WOMEN'S ACTIVISM ON POLICY AND AUTONOMY

Impact on Policy Discourse

Women's increased political participation in Darjeeling, particularly since the rise of the emergence of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM) and its women's wing, the Nari Morcha, has added visibility as well as depth to policy discussions in the area. Women's participation in institutional politics, such as the winning of seven Nari Morcha leaders to the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) and their being nominated for close to half the councilor posts in significant municipalities, indicated a move toward more gender representation in urban politics. Still, studies show that such presence has not always meant a clearly gendered or alternative policy agenda. In spite of hopes that powerful women would put issues like water supply and local welfare at the top of their agendas, the majority of Darjeeling's women leaders have been subject to the same political coercion and party discipline as men, and have been notably silent on immediate local issues like the water crisis in the region. This implies that despite women's participation modifying the optics and inclusivity of policy-making spaces, deep substantive reform in policy conversation is constrained by locked-in party organizations as well as wider systemic issues. (Chettri,2016)

Community Mobilization and Democratic Deepening

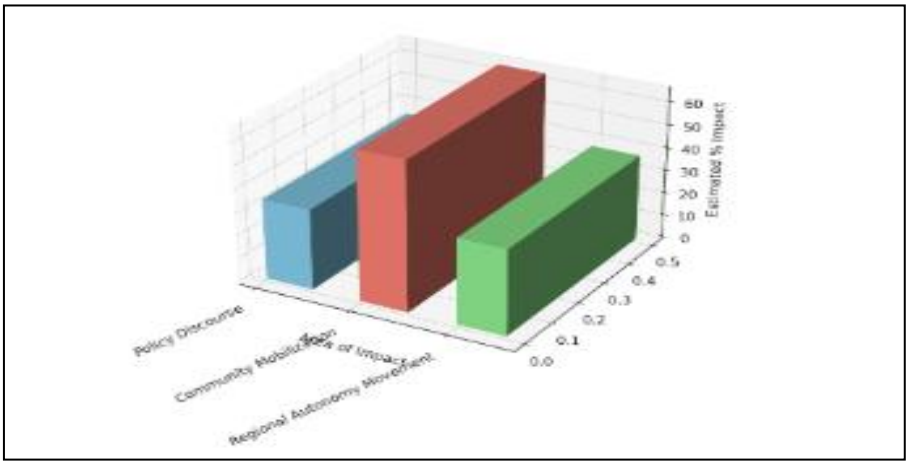
The increased participation of women in the Gorkhaland movement, particularly from 2007, has significantly influenced people's mobilization in Darjeeling. Women have taken initiative roles in organizing protests, strikes, hunger strikes, and relief camps-most prominently through the Nari Morcha, which emerged as the symbol of peaceful protest and mass mobilization. Their involvement has made the movement democratic, mobilizing wider sections of society to enter political activism and creating a sense of empowerment among people. Women's activism has also moved beyond politics in

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the streets to involve social work, including organizing relief in cases of natural disasters and presenting memoranda to local governments to press for improved services. This grassroots mobilization has consolidated civil society, promoted political consciousness among women, and opened up new spaces for dialogue at the local level. The availability of women in leadership positions and organizational functions has added to a more participatory and inclusive political culture in Darjeeling, though it has been criticized at times as having been instrumentalized by party leadership dominated by men. (Arora, & Jayaram, N. 2020)

Degree of Impact of Women's Political Participation in Darjeeling



Influence on the Regional Autonomy Movement

Women's political participation has been significant, albeit complex, in the larger movement for Darjeeling regional autonomy. Their participation has added a democratic and more legitimate face to the Gorkhaland agitation, making it more difficult for authorities to explain away the movement as simply violent or sectarian. The public visibility of women participating in protests and negotiations has diluted the narrow focus on violence and highlighted the reservoir of local support for autonomy. But translating this mobilization into concrete gains for regional autonomy has proven complicated. Although women have played a main role in maintaining the movement's momentum and boosting community morale in times of crisis, women's capacity to shape the final outcome of the autonomy struggle has been curbed by ongoing gender hierarchies and male dominance in strategic leadership positions. The emergence of women as political agents in Darjeeling have set the stage for future campaigns on both gender and autonomy agendas, promising a slow but significant change in the political climate of the region. Women's political engagement in Darjeeling has democratized grassroots mobilization, enhanced the representativeness of policy debate, and lent credibility to regional autonomy movement. But the complete transformative potential of their participation is still limited by structural obstacles in party politics and society as a whole. (Wenner, 2013).

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Women's political participation in Darjeeling began as limited involvement in the early 20th century but expanded significantly during the 1980s Gorkhaland agitation. Their roles evolved from informal community organizing to active involvement in protests, signaling the start of greater female mobilization in regional political struggles.
2. The establishment of the Gorkha National Women's Organization (GNWO) in 1986 unified women activists from across hill subdivisions, facilitating coordinated political engagement. This organization became a critical platform for collective action, marking a pivotal development in women's organized participation in Darjeeling's socio-political movements.

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3. Women accounted for nearly 40% of participants in rallies and strikes during the 1980s agitation. This high level of grassroots involvement demonstrated women's commitment to the Gorkhaland cause and challenged traditional gender limitations that had previously restricted their political visibility and activism.
4. Prominent women leaders such as Indrakala Pradhan, Hema Lama, and Meena Mukhia emerged by organizing protests, providing relief during violence, and connecting communities with political leaders. Their leadership embodied women's critical role in sustaining the movement despite patriarchal constraints.
5. Despite widespread activism, women received minimal representation in formal political bodies such as the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, with only a few women holding positions in the executive body. This underrepresentation highlighted the gap between grassroots participation and institutional political power.
6. The 2007 resurgence of the movement led to the creation of the Gorkha Janmukti Nari Morcha (GJNM), which quickly grew to over 340 units, mobilizing more than 25,000 women by 2018. The GJNM became a prominent force driving political activism and community organizing in the region.
7. Women took leading roles in significant events like the 2009 "Dooars Chalo Andolan" and the 2011 Sibchu police firing. Their active involvement, including facing casualties, underscored the risks women endured and their centrality to the movement's resilience and intensity.
8. During the 2017 105-day bandh, women organized relay hunger strikes, managed logistics, and played roles as mediators between political actors and the public. This multifaceted involvement illustrated women's evolving leadership in sustaining prolonged, complex political protests.
9. The 2011 Gorkhaland Territorial Administration Act provided formal political space for women, resulting in the inclusion of seven women leaders in the GTA executive body. This increase marked progress in institutional representation compared to previous councils dominated by men.
10. Women's frontline participation in protests during the 2017 agitation led to over 300 arrests, revealing the heightened risks and confrontations women faced. Their willingness to endure detention demonstrated commitment and broke traditional notions of female political passivity.
11. Despite growing visibility and organizational roles, women's influence in decision-making remains limited, with male leaders dominating main political and strategic positions. Studies emphasize this gap, pointing to the ongoing struggle for meaningful empowerment within political party structures.
12. By 2018, women's involvement had penetrated nearly every household in the hills through extensive GJNM membership. This broad base confirmed women's widespread grassroots engagement, which contributed significantly to the movement's societal reach and mass mobilization.
13. Traditional socio-cultural norms and patriarchy continue to restrict women's political agency, limiting their leadership opportunities despite active participation. These enduring barriers maintain gender hierarchies and challenge women's efforts to secure equitable power within political movements.
14. Women's activism in Darjeeling is shaped by intersecting identity factors, including ethnicity, class, and regional status. These overlapping challenges create a complex socio-political environment, requiring women to navigate multiple forms of discrimination asserting their political voices.
15. Since 2012 and the formation of the GTA, women's roles have shifted from marginal supporters to central political actors. Although this signals progress, persistent structural inequalities continue to limit their full political equity and leadership within formal governance and party frameworks.

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CONCLUSION

The history of political movements in Darjeeling is incomplete without acknowledging the vital, though often under-recognized, contributions of women. From the early days of India's national movement to the protracted struggle for Gorkhaland, women have persistently asserted their presence in both grassroots mobilizations and leadership roles. Figures such as Sabetri Devi and Putali Maya Tamang laid the foundational stones for female participation, defying traditional gender roles in a deeply patriarchal society. In more recent decades, particularly after the formation of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha and its women's wing, the political landscape has witnessed an unprecedented surge in female agency and leadership. The research seeks to examine the historical trajectory of women's political involvement in Darjeeling, analyze the socio-cultural, economic, and political factors shaping their engagement, explore their strategies and leadership styles in various protest movements, and assess the challenges they face within a volatile political and gendered environment. It also aims to evaluate the transformative impact of women's political participation on policy discourses, community solidarity, and the ongoing movement for regional autonomy. The journey of women in Darjeeling's political protests reveals a remarkable narrative of courage, resilience, and gradual empowerment. From the quiet defiance of early leaders to the strategic and organized participation in contemporary movements, women have redefined the contours of political activism in the region. The study highlights how women have moved from the periphery to the center of political life—mobilizing communities, resisting state oppression, and shaping discourses of justice and identity. Despite the prevailing patriarchal order and intermittent political volatility, women have continually negotiated spaces for agency. The formation of institutional platforms like the Nari Morcha, their electoral success in urban politics, and their leadership during crises such as the Aila storm, all signify a shift towards inclusive political engagement. However, persistent barriers such as tokenistic representation, marginalization in decision-making, and the instrumental use of women for political optics underscore the need for deeper structural change. Women's enduring presence and growing leadership in Darjeeling's political life reflect a transformative undercurrent. Their activism has not only influenced the nature of protests but has also embedded gender consciousness within the broader quest for Gorkha identity and regional autonomy.

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