

Women in Freedom Movement of India (A Case Study of North Bengal)**Supriya Biswas**

In the nineteenth century women education started to move forward which became very swift in the twentieth century. This incident in the long run proved to be a motive force of progressive attitude among the Bengali Women and it did a lot to involve them in contemporary politics and social reform movement. This factor gradually made them conscious about their rights and pushed them in various protest movements¹. When the people of India were some way or other concerned on the issues of *Swadeshi* movement, then the women society as a whole could not remain silent. On the one hand, they started demanding their rights and on the other, they began to respond actively to various political agitations². Bengali women (literate-illiterate) took part in the political activities having being inspired by the patriotic ideals. They showed their braveness both in the violent and non-violent struggles. From the beginning of the twentieth century women's participation in the politics increased and this is justified with the participation of women in the fifth Indian National Congress held in 1889. For example, namely Kadambini Ganguli, wife of Dwarakanath Ganguli and Swarna kumari Debi, wife of Janakinath Ghoshal who participated in this session of the Indian National Congress in Bombay. In 1901, two hundred women delegates were present in the Calcutta Congress session. In 1902, one thousand male and fifty female delegates were present in the National Congress session in Ahmedabad.³ In fact, women participated in the politics because of the growth of consciousness of nationalism among the educated women.

Another powerful female leader who emerged at this early point and demonstrated women's capacity to give leadership was Sarala Debi Chaudhurani (Ghoshal), daughter of Swarnakumari Debi. She took up the cause of *Swadeshi* through an independent sales centre. At a time when most women were wholly barred from political life she organized a physical, cultural campaign in Bengal, calling upon youth to organize themselves into squads for physical exercises. These efforts, aside from self-defence, aimed at defending women against the molestations of British soldiers in streets and railway stations⁴. In this regard, Bipin Chandra Pal wrote in the '*New India*' magazine that "As necessity is the mother of invention, Sarala Debi is the mother of *Pratapaditya* to meet the necessity of a Hero for Bengal"⁵.

It was the *Swadeshi* movement that seems to have inspired the Bengali women to take up the course of political agitation just in the beginning of the twentieth century. At the Benaras Congress session in 1905, women took the initiative in holding their own session for the first time. It is said that, over six hundred women from all parts of India assembled there and most of them were of Bengali origin. In those days, the whole of Bengal got agitated and excited. On 16 October, 1905, nearly five hundred women had gathered in Calcutta to watch the laying of the foundation stone of the new Federation Hall, to protest against partition. On that day, they celebrated as anti-partition day and the women of the whole of Bengal celebrated '*Arandhan*' (refusal to cook) and '*Rakhi Badhan*' (women tied coloured thread on

the wrist of men as a symbol of brotherhood and unity) as a symbol of protest with encouragement⁶.

In this respect, the women of North Bengal were not lagging behind. There are huge number of academic works about the contribution and role of Bengali women in the Indian freedom struggle. We may refer here, Kamala Dasgupta's *Swadhinata Sagrama Banglar Nari* and Maleka Begum's *Banglar Nari Andolon* which highlight the historic role of the Bengali women in the freedom movement. But in both these works, less attention is given to highlight and explore the role of the women of North Bengal in the freedom movement. It is necessary to mention here that, in the colonial Bengal or before Partition North Bengal were comprises many districts such as Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Bogura (Bogra), Pabna, Rangpur, Malda, Rajshahi, Cooch Behar, Tippera, Noakhali, and Bakharganj. So, this paper intends to represent the involvement and activities of the women of North Bengal directly or indirectly in different aspect of multi-dimensional movement during freedom struggle.

Coming to the North Bengal, it has been noticed that the district of Dinajpur happened to be the breeding ground of so many political events both in nationalist and revolutionary politics. The district of Dinajpur played a very vital role during the anti-Partition movement. Lord Curzon issued the order of partition of Bengal on 20 July 1905. The Bengalis described the measures as a grave national disaster. At first, anti- Partition movement started from Dinajpur district and Bager Hat of Khulna district. The historical fact is that, to follow Dinajpur, *sabha-samiti* were first organized in Calcutta against Partition and after that, it was spread to all over Bengal nay India. The wave of this movement drew huge response in the mind of Dinajpur people. A meeting was organized in Dinajpur town under the president ship of Maharaja Girijanath Roy on 21st July, 1905. In that meeting Lalmohan Ghosh, a *Swadeshi* leader of Bengal was the main speaker. Many nationalist leaders like Surendranath Banerjee visited the Dinajpur town in 1906 and delivered his speech against Bengal Partition. Bipin Chandra Pal came to Dinajpur for the second time in 1911. Durga Charan Sanyal created sensation in Bengal by assaulting two white people at Hili rail station in 1907. He did this when he was resisted by two *sahibs* from boarding into the compartment.⁷ Thus, Dinajpur people in no way lagged behind in the political process which was going on at that time. Probably, it may be convinced that the women were not indifferent from the political developments of the country. Like their male counterparts, they were also vocal about the injustice meted out by the alien government and became anxious for the independence of their mother land. They played an active and important role in the anti-colonial movement. In fact, freedom movement was the first occasion when the ordinary women of the country, so long confined to their activities at home, came forward to play an active role in the politics of the country.

After anti-Partition movement, many women of North Bengal took very important role in the Non-Cooperation movement of Mahatma Gandhiji. It is true that, under the leadership of Gandhiji, many women came forward to join and actively participate in the non- violent freedom struggle. This was due to the efforts of Mahatma Gandhiji who could assess the inner spirit and power of women. The participants in the non- violent Non-

Cooperation movement were mostly the housewives. In this respect, we may recall the name Prabhavati Chattopadhyay who was a congress leader of Dinajpur. She was inspired to take part in the nationalist activities by her husband. From this time onward she devoted her life to the Indian freedom struggle. Few days after the 1921 Non-Cooperation movement, she got involved herself in social reform activities and made extensive tours in the distant and remote villages of Dinajpur district for the purpose of strengthening and inspiring of women about the mass base of the Indian National Congress. By her inspiration Raj Laxmi Guha (one village women of Balurghat) gave company with her tours⁸.

During Non- Cooperation movement another most important event was the visit of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das to the town of Dinajpur in 1922 which was a great land-mark in the political development of the locality. Deshbandhu Chitta Ranjan Das was escorted by a great procession. People gave the slogan '*Bandemataram*', '*Mahatma Gandhiji ki Jay*', '*Deshbandhu Ki Jay*' and so on. Deshbandhu was accompanied by his wife Basanti Debi, sister Urmila Debi, daughter Kalyani Debi and Jyotirmoyee Debi. In that district conference of the National Congress Chitta Ranjan Das requested to donate the money to the Tilak Fund and both male and female donated their money and gold ornaments in a large scale. In 1924, Dinajpur District Congress Conference was held in the open ground of Dinajpur town. The "*Swadeshi Yatra Pala*" of Charan Kavi Mukanda Das was staged on this occasion which stirred the minds of the common people of Dinajpur. The women constituted a major portion of these people assembled. On the other hand, Sarojini Naidu came to Dinajpur in 1926. Her powerful oratorical speeches inspired all section of people specially the women of the region⁹. Thus, by and large, the district of Dinajpur came to occupy a vital position in Bengal politics during national movement.

After 1918, under the leadership of Gandhiji women were found in increasing number in political processions, in picketing programmes, in front of wine shops, in the burning of foreign cloths, in spinning *Charka* and so on. They did not fear to face *lathis*, tear gas and arrests. They even participated in revolutionary terrorist movement. Even in the trade union and peasant movements women were often found in the forefront. Perhaps for this reason Bipan Chandra stated that "More than any other factor, participation in the national movement contributed to the awakening of Indian women and their emancipation"¹⁰. It is fact that, in the Indian national movement women of North Bengal gradually took part more widely. After Non- Cooperation movement, the second largest national movement was Civil Disobedience movement which was led by Gandhiji. In 1930, Gandhi launched his world famous movement for breaking the British ban on the production and gathering of salt. The programme was implemented by Congress volunteers in the countryside too. Here again women's role was prominent. It goes to the credit of Gandhi whatever his bourgeois and patriarchal prejudices – that he consciously drew women into the movement, for he chose an inconspicuous detail from women's daily life, salt, as the centre-piece of anti-British mobilization¹¹. In this movement, we can see that, in a large scale women of North Bengal also played a significant role.

When Gandhiji had to start the Civil Disobedience movement on 12 March, 1930 with his famous Dandi March¹², it spread rapidly everywhere in the country in the form of *hartals*, demonstrations, boycott of foreign goods, tax-boycott and others. In this context, the '*Balurghat Mahila Samiti*' deserves special mention. It was established in 1920 under the initiative of Suresh Ranjan Chattopadhyay, husband of Prabhavati Debi and it was led by Promada Sundari Debi¹³. Thus, the establishment of a women organization in a *muffasil* town like Balurghat might have resulted from the changing social ideologies widening the social space for women at that point of time and it will not be illogical if we think that the women themselves practically were the main architect of changes. The *Mahila Samiti* of Balurghat took an active part under the leadership of Prabhavati Chattopadhyay, Bela Chatterjee and the wife of Gopal Chatterjee who was a local lawyer. Prabhavati Debi was one of the founder organizers of the *Mahila Samiti*¹⁴. In this respect, the volunteers of Congress took all preparations at Balurghat. The role of women of Balurghat in this protracted war of independence is highly noteworthy. The volunteers of *Balurghat Mahila Samiti* picketed in front of the wine shops and cloth stores in the *haats* (markets) which created great sensation in the locality. The women leaders of the *Samiti* extended their earnest co-operation in the programme of boycott of foreign goods, taking to *charka* and total participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement which pursued by the National Congress. The morale among the lady volunteers of Balurghat remained high throughout the period. Promoda Sundari Devi, President of *Balurghat Mahila Samiti* in a conference of Congress raised national flag on 6th April, 1930. On 11th April, women arranged a very large procession, went around the town and then gathered in front of Congress courtyard. In this *sabha*, Prabhavati Debi addressed women and asked them to join in the Salt *Satyagraha*. On 12th April, eight women volunteers picketed in front of wine shop and continued with their activities. On 13th April, Balurghat Congress Committee gave proposal to break the Salt Act and Suresh Ranjan Chattopadhyay invoked his wife at first to break the Salt law. On that day following Prabhavati Debi, near about 500 women broke the Salt law. This *sabha* created huge excitement in the mind of women of the subdivision¹⁵. In 1930, during the Civil Disobedience movement at Dinajpur, police arrested many women like Ashalata Chakraborty, Subhashini Mukherjee, Hemantabala Sengupta, Charubala, Bhagabati Sen, Snehalata Ganguli, Ashalata Kundu etc. and also leader Prabhavati Debi and Bela Debi, the organizers of the *Mahila Samiti*¹⁶. Police repression continued during the period.

The Congress members of Balurghat observed 26th January, 1932 as Independence Day. A large procession organized and attended by a number of women. The women who played a pivotal role in the programme of the Congress were Prabhavati Chatterjee, Bela Debi, Bimala Sundari Sen, Rajlakshmi Debi, Matangini Dasgupta, Jnanadasundari Debi, Bimalabala Sengupta and others. The police ordered the procession to disperse. As they denied, police arrested many of them. Houses of the Congress workers and leaders were searched. Sufferings of the women of the families concerned, knew no bound at the atrocities perpetrated by the police force of the Raj¹⁷. Surabala Sengupta, the leader of the '*Thakurgaon Mahila Samiti*' and Thakurgaon *Sadar* Congress Committee, Dinajpur participated in the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930 and 1932. She was also oppressed

by the British police and arrested many times¹⁸ like Ashalata Chakraborty, Charulata Roy, Manorama Chakraborty, Jyotsna Kundu and others.

On the other hand, Bimala Sundari Debi of Balurghat, Dinajpur deserves attention because she was a professional prostitute. Besides participating in the movement, she also inspired the *Satyagrahis* to fight for the country's freedom. In the third decades of the twentieth century when whole country was extremely agitated by Civil Disobedience movement, the *Satyagrahis* of Dinajpur district also organised anti-British movement by picketing, by organising *sabha-samiti*, *khadi* propaganda, selling restricted political books, celebration of memorable National Day, burning of foreign goods and boycott etc. The police tried to repress the movement and sent many *Satyagrahis* to jail. During this time, Bimala Sundari Debi became very concerned about the Civil Disobedience movement and her dedication is worth mentioning here. She is said to have taken initiative to nurse the injured *Satyagrahis* with her motherly affection and after curing send them again to fight for the cause of their motherland. But the colonial Government was informed about the activities of Bimala Sundari Debi. Though she was a prostitute, she joined in the Civil Disobedience movement openly and did not hesitate to participate in the procession of the *Satyagrahis* with the slogan of '*Bandemataram*'¹⁹. It is said that, she was once injured by the *lathi* charge of the police and became senseless on the spot.

Bimala Sundari was also an important woman revolutionary of Dinajpur district. At that time, when the officer of the Balurghat police station and their team used to come to Bimala Sundari at night for their physical needs, she used to collect secret future plan from them against revolutionary workers by acting good in front of them and then passed the advanced information to the revolutionary workers. Before this, under the leadership of Jiten Mukherjee and Tarapada Dhar of *Anushilan Samiti*, a *Swadeshi* decoity had taken place at Binnaguri of Dinajpur district. As a result, British police started searching the *Swadeshi* dacoits to catch them, but Bimala Sundari informed in advance all the police activities to the revolutionaries²⁰. In this way, they managed to escape from being arrested. It is true that, her activities helped the revolutionary workers to continue their programme in many ways.

So, the twentieth century was a period when women not only in Bengal but in the whole of India were standing at the cross-roads of a great change in their life. They were just on their mark to start a new journey to a new world beyond their daily domestic routine. The society as a whole was then in a stance. Educated personalities who could develop liberal thinking in themselves practically played a vital role in inspiring the wives, daughters, sisters and other female relations of their own family to take part in public life. The women participated in either of the two streams of India's freedom struggle either non-violent or revolutionary. Education made them aware of the exact condition of the country. The participants in the anti-Partition movement, Non-Cooperation movement or Civil Disobedience movement were mostly housewives. But there were also women in the history of revolutionary movement in Bengal who either took part in preparatory work or participated indirectly in revolutionary actions. Bengali women participated in preparatory work from the beginning of the revolutionary movement in Bengal till the end. In this

context, they helped in the formation of revolutionary organizations, propagated revolutionary ideas through literature, provided food and shelter to the absconding revolutionaries, often carried secret coded messages, hid and smuggled weapons and other explosives, provided financial assistance and so on. They were also engaged in manufacturing explosives bombs and finally did the organizational work, recruited and trained young women for revolutionary action. But their participation in direct revolutionary actions took place after 1930²¹.

Women started to take part in non-violent politics under the leadership of Gandhiji which ultimately made the way for the women to participate in revolutionary activities. North Bengal was a strong base of the revolutionaries from early days and obviously Dinajpur district was not an exception. In this regard, we may first mention the name of Bina Chatterjee of Balurghat, Dinajpur. She had close relation with revolutionary politics. Her father had close contact with Sachin Sanyal, the famous *Anushilan* leader of Benaras. Once, when she was living with her parents in Benaras, she undertook a great responsibility of carrying a secret letter from her father to a shelter of the revolutionaries in the city. But in the midway, she was arrested and put to imprisonment after trial. After that, she gave birth to her baby in Naini Jail. Such was the courage and patriotism of an ordinary housewife of a small town of Balurghat.

Saraju Banerjee, wife of the famous *Anushilan* leader Dr. Dhirendranath Banerjee of Dinajpur was another woman personality of revolutionary movement. She was very much inspired by the revolutionary ideals which seem to have inspired her to stand by the revolutionary youths by all possible means even to the extent of allowing the absconders to pass the night in her bed just to avoid the British police. She was so reserved that the boys when they left the shelter in the morning they always touched her feet with respect. Saraju Debi was deeply impressed by the restraint and sacrifice of the young boys for the cause of their mother land. Sometimes she concealed fire arms in her body too²². From these activities one may realise that she was a brave lady and her contribution to the mother land is a glaring example in the history of national movement.

Another notable revolutionary woman personality was Ashalata Chakraborty of Dinajpur town. Ashalata started her married life with material hopes and small desires but spirit of revolutionary patriotism was soon kindled in her heart by her brother-in-laws named Kuladaprasad Chakraborty and Satyabrata Chakraborty. Her husband Baradabhusan Chakraborty was a member of *Anushilan Samiti*. So, she began to take part in secret activities. She helped the *Anushilan Samiti* workers by hiding fire arms, providing food and shelter to the absconding boys. There was a great change in the political environment of the country. Ashalata could not remain aloof from the contemporary political activities. She used to give food and shelter to the absconders even beyond the knowledge of Baradabhusan and it is a notable point that Ashalata's link with revolutionary politics had started much earlier than that of Baradabhusan. Baradabhusan's connection with the Hili Mail Dacoity of 1933 was divulged by an approver of the case in his confessional statement²³. Baradabhusan was

eventually arrested but the police could not frame any charge and he was set free. But soon he was rearrested and detained without trial.

In spite of Ashalata's revolutionary works, she maintained her connection with the Congress. As Congress worker Ashalata had to remain in Hijli jail and she was released from the jail in 1932. After this, Ashalata engaged herself in organising the programmes of the Dinajpur District *Mahila* Congress along with Snehalata Ganguli, Ashalata Kundu, Kalidasi Guha, all her fellow captives in the Hijli jail. She joined to the *Bangiya Pradeshik Sammelan* of the Indian National Congress held at Jalpaiguri in 1939. Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose was the Chief Guest on this occasion. Ashalata shared the dais with Netaji, one of the leading exponents of India's freedom struggle ²⁴.

On the other hand, by 1934, the revolutionary movement in Bengal was at low ebb. Almost all its leaders and most workers were either dead or in confinement. At this stage, all freedom fighters joined in the nationalist movement. Finally, on 8th August 1942, Gandhiji launched the Quit India movement. But on 9th August, Gandhiji and all the prominent leaders were arrested. As a result, the Bengali women with their male counterparts took significant role for release of Gandhiji and their leaders. In this context, the contributions of the women of North Bengal were not less important.

In 1942 when the spark of mass movement was going on all over India, North Bengal was not aloof from it. Ashalata delivered her glaring speech on the ground of Saradeshwari Girls' School at Dinajpur town and inspired thousands of people to prepare for sacrifice. Prabhabati Chattopadhyay also took the leading role ²⁵. It is very clear that, in the national movement of all phases, the women of Dinajpur district took a significant role all the time.

Now we can look back at our discussion in the Bengal Partition and *Swadeshi* movement of other districts of North Bengal. During 1905-1908, the speed of *Swadeshi* movement against Bengal Partition was very high and gradually increased Bengali women's association in this movement. Inspired by the nationalism, they began to manufacture and use indigenous goods. They were inspired to spin *Charka*, cloth of cotton thread and also to use it. Women donated their ornaments in the national fund ²⁶. In fact, women took an active part to make the boycott movement successful in the *Swadeshi* era which in other way led to the emergence of *Swadeshi* consciousness. In this connection, we may recall about Ambuja Sundari Debi of Jalpaiguri district. In the *Swadeshi* era, she is said to have united the women of Jalpaiguri to boycott the foreign goods²⁷.

The active participation is also reflected, amongst others, in the fact that women started spinning and weaving their own clothes in replacement of British textiles – long before Gandhi designed the idea. They also responded massively to a call to observe a day of fasting and of refusal to cook. In rural Bengal, peasant women in scores of far-away villages were inspired not to light their oven that day. Thus, during the *Swadeshi* movement the women of Bengal undertook something like an anti-imperialist women's strike.

It is not an exaggeration to state that, the awakening of Bengali women started before an organized women's movement in the sub-continent arose. Manikuntala Sen, one of the leading figures of the era commented that: "Women found in the movement against the Partition that they are not just housewives, but soldiers too! They retrieved their courage. These women were the pioneers in the history of the women's movement in India".²⁸ In this connection, it is important to discuss the political activities of women of Jalpaiguri district. In Jalpaiguri, there were many women who sacrificed themselves for Gandhiji's Civil Disobedience movement of 1930-1932. They were Jnanada Vaishnabi, Sita Barmani, Subhashini Ghosh, Mahendrabala Debi, Bina Choudhuri, Saraju Sarkar, Bina Bhoumik, Hariprabha Sengupta, Aruna Dasgupta, Smt. Sandhya Kar, Shailabala Guhathakurata, Shailabasini Debi, Nanibala Bhoumik etc.²⁹ Not only that, many women also indirectly participated in the Civil Disobedience movement. In this regard, Shabnam Dasi of Jalpaiguri district was one of them. She inspired the people of Jalpaiguri district by her patriotic song in those days of bloodshed of 1932 Civil Disobedience movement. The song written by her was-

"Swadeshir gaan gam hamera shuno tomra-

Swadeshir gaan gam hamera.Haluya na hal boy,

.....nage bhoy, bilaiti jinish kinbo na keo ai

Echha hoy....." ³⁰. (We are singing patriotic song you listen- We are singing patriotic song. Farmer is not cultivating the land, to be afraid of, our intension is we will not buy any British goods.....)

Besides that, the women of Jalpaiguri district also took vital role in the Quit India movement of 1942. They were Pratibha Chakraborty, Reba Sanyal, Dipti Roy, Gita Guha, Umadas Gupta and so on.

On the other hand, though Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain of Rangpur was not directly involved with freedom movement but she propagated nationalism among the women through her writings. She was not interested in the contemporary politics, like Bengal Partition (1905), establishment of Muslim League (1906) and the like. But she bore hatred to foot licking of white *sahib* and those Indians who betrayed their own country. In her poem '*Nirupam Bir*', one may come across the reflection of *Swadeshi* thought of Begum Rokeya. History records the execution of Kanailal and this incident shocked Rokeya in such a way that she could not but compose a poem titled *Nirupam Bir*. This simply shows Rokeya's feeling and sympathy for the nationalist of Bengal ³¹. Rokeya's attention to patriotic agitation has again fairly been reflected in one of her short stories with the title '*Gnanphal*'. In this piece, Rokeya highlighted the design of the East-India Company and how gradually it was turned into a ruling party from a commercial organization. In this story revealed her thought against it and reflected her consciousness of country's liberation from the British domination³².

The above stories of women participation in the anti-colonial movement bring us to look at another sister district of North Bengal named Rajshahi. Incidentally, a few women of this district equally responded to the call of the nation and dedicated themselves along with other co-partners of North Bengal. In this respect, we may refer the name of Bishnupriya Devi (1908) who took part in the Non-Cooperation movement of Mahatma Gandhiji. Her husband Jatindra Narayan Bhattacharya was an active Congress worker. In 1921, during the Non Co-operation movement, Bishnupriya Devi being inspired by the oratory speech of famous Congress leader Sirajuddin Saheb of Sirajganj, took an oath for the rejection of foreign goods. After the death of her husband she devoted herself for *Swadeshi* activities which could be seen in the subsequent movements.

Though Bihsnupriya Debi indirectly participated in the Non-Cooperation movement, but in the Civil Disobedience movement she directly took part as an active worker. On 26th January, 1932 observed as an Independence Day and for this reason many women were prepared to go to jail. At that time Bishnupriya Debi went at Shradhanand Park in Calcutta with 25-26 *Satyahgrahi* and by raising national flag they dishonoured the Union Jack. From this place she was arrested and was given order six months rigorous imprisonment.

Bishnupriya Debi was also a woman revolutionary. In 1932, during her rigorous imprisonment in Hijli, Presidency and Baharampur jail, she became attached with Kalyani Das, Sulata Kar and others and took decision to join in the revolutionary group. After release, she joined in the *Jugantar* Party with Shobharani Dutta and according to the instruction of the latter she helped the revolutionary members in many ways, gave shelter and even by supplying arms to the revolutionaries.³³

Kumar-Janani Lahiri of Putia, Rajshahi was one of the important woman characters of the then anti-British movement. She was a *zamindar* housewife. She continued her association with rebels even after her two sons named Satyaranjan Lahiri and Jnananjan Lahiri were arrested. She arranged secret shelter for revolutionaries in her reliable tenants' house.³⁴ In fact, her house became a main centre of the secret activists of the freedom struggle.

In the nationalist movement hill peoples were not totally indifferent. During Non-Cooperation movement, Darjeeling hills were at the zenith of the movement and it was the first occasion in which the hill people showed an interest in the freedom movement. During this time, Helen Lepcha (Known as Savitri Devi), born in 1897 in Sikkim, was one of the most important women leader of Darjeeling hills. She went from door to door in Siliguri and Kurseong and pleaded with the people to boycott foreign goods and in many places foreign goods were burnt. The British Government got alarmed by her activities and ordered a ban on large gatherings in Siliguri. Helen Lepcha and her associates went against the order and organized a public meeting in Siliguri. As a result, she was arrested on 30th January, 1922 along with her husband E. Ahmed and others. She was imprisoned for 3 months³⁵. It may be said that, the sense of patriotism and love for the motherland and the desire to serve its cause was generated in the hill women as was seen in Helen Lepcha. At this hour, many nationalist

leaders of Calcutta use to keep contact with Darjeeling and Helen Lepcha was directly or indirectly influenced by them. Under this circumstance, she was well aware about the *Charka* emblem and gradually developed her feeling for the nation as propounded by Mahatma Gandhiji. She was greatly influenced and went for training on how to use *Charka* under the granddaughter of Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar³⁶. Later on, in 1939, when Subhas Chandra Bose was kept under house-arrest at Giddha Pahar at Kurseong, Helen Lepcha regularly communicated with him through letters.³⁷ It is said that, Subhas Chandra Bose while staying at Giddha Pahar made a plan to escape to Germany by the help of Helen Lepcha.

It is noticeable that, we have not yet any reference of Darjeeling hill peoples of 1930 movement. It may be a fact that, there was lack of leadership. But there are also instances of direct revolutionary activities in Darjeeling hills. For example, Ujjwala Majumdar (Rakshit Roy) of Dacca was arrested for making an attempt to assassinate the then Governor of Bengal, Sir John Anderson at Lebong race course in Darjeeling. Here one may recall the attempt to murder the Governor of Bengal by three boys and a girl. The girl was no other then Ujjwala who was only twenty years of her age. Her matriculation examination was just over and the result was yet to be published. Ujjwala told her family members that she was going to spend some days with one of her friends at Malabdia in Dacca. Actually, during this time she finalised the plan and along with Bhavani Bhattacharya, Rabi Banerjee and Manoranjan Banerjee came to Darjeeling to assassinate the Governor of Bengal³⁸. The plan was that Bhavani and Rabi would proceed straight from Joydebpoore (now in Bangladesh) to Darjeeling and stay at Lewis Jubilee Sanatorium. They would not, however, carry any weapon, for that Sanatorium was a popular summer resort of Bengalis as it might rouse the suspicion of the police informers. Manoranjan and Ujjwala would come to Calcutta from Dacca and after collecting ammunitions from Calcutta would go to Darjeeling posing as a fashionable young man and his well fashioned girl friend out on a pleasure trip. Ujjwala would take with her a harmonium inside which the arms would be concealed. Befitting such fashionable young people, Manoranjan and Ujjwala would stay at the more exclusive Snow View Hotel³⁹.

In Darjeeling the revolutionaries decided to aim at the Governor at the race course on the day of the Governor's Cup Race to be held on 8 May, 1934. On the morning of 8 May Ujjwala and Manoranjan met Rabindra and Bhabani at Sanatorium. They took all possible precautions; while Manoranjan cleaned the arms, Ujjwala warmed up the cartridges by burning papers. In the afternoon they went to race course and dressed in western attire. Bhabani and Rabindra first came out from their hotel with arms concealed in their clothes. Ujjwala and Manoranjan followed them later. Their duty was over when Bhabani and Rabindra took their seats in the general stand close to the Governor's stand. They left the race course immediately and came to Siliguri in a taxi to board the train to Calcutta to avoid possible arrest. At around 3.30 p.m. Bhabani fired the first shot at the Governor and was immediately followed by Rabi. But both the attempts, however, failed. The two boys were taken to Victoria Hospital in Darjeeling seriously wounded. Finally, in Calcutta, Ujjwala was

ultimately arrested and so also Manoranjan. After arresting Bhabani, Rabi, Manoranjan and Ujjwala, police became more active and arrested a large number of young men. However, Ujjwala did not have to undergo the whole period of imprisonment and was released in April 1939 under the general amnesty for political prisoners⁴⁰.

But in the Quit India movement, women of hills deserve special mention. Because, people started to join the Congress to fight against the oppression and suppression of the Britishers, the Congress party established a strong root in the hills of Darjeeling. At Kurseong, on 12th August, 1942, a public meeting was organized in which Swarju Prasad Poddar (Congress leader of Darjeeling hills) was arrested. Putali Maya Debi, a woman freedom fighter of Darjeeling hills, organized a protest rally at Kurseong on 13th August, 1942. Putali Maya Debi along with Harish Chettri, Janaklal Kurmi and other Congress workers were arrested because the rally was marching towards the town centre. All male leaders were taken to Darjeeling jail on 14th August and Putali Debi was sentenced to jail for 18 months⁴¹.

During freedom movement, the Bogura district may draw sufficient attention. Shashibala Debi (1886) of Bogura was an important women leader of 1930 Civil Disobedience movement. She actively took part in this Congress movement. During this period she did severe propaganda all over North Bengal. Even she used to give speech when she used to travel by train from one place to another place and people became stirred. She had the credit to attract the common people in conference by delivering her exiting speeches. In 1930, as a *Satyagrahi* she was arrested during her speech deliberation. But as a result of Gandhi- Irwin Pact, she was released from imprisonment before time and joined in the Karachi Congress. In 1932, again she participated in the Civil Disobedience movement. Her activities were not only limited within eight division of Rajshahi district, but also crossed the border of the district such as Faridpur, Cooch Behar, Midnapur, Khulna and so on and delivered her churning speeches for political consciousness among the common people. By such deliverances many women of North Bengal were moved to join the anti-colonial movement and went to jail. They did not bother about police oppression. From high level to common worker like Deshbandhu Chitta Ranjan Das, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Deshpriya Jatindra Mohan Sengupta, famous Congress worker Pratap Chandra Majumdar etc. called her as '*Barama*' (elder mother) and respected her. She was the very nerve centre of the women movement in all over North Bengal and was thus known as '*Congressi Burima*' (old mother of Congress) to all⁴².

Not only Hindu women took the leading role in Congress led movement but there were many Muslim women who preferred to respond to the call of this *Burima* (Sashibala Debi). Daulatnnesa Khatun (June, 1918) was one of such Muslim women leader of Bogura who took active role in the Civil Disobedience movement organized by some national leaders of Bogura. For the liberation of mother land she joined in the anti-imperialist movement. In the 1930 Civil Disobedience movement she joined the *sabha-samiti* and processions. As a result, Daulatnnesa got some extraordinary experience in many mass movements of the region and through the '*Gaibandha Mahila Samiti*' she became a popular leader to the people

of Bogura. Incidentally, this *Samiti* was involved in organizing *sabha*, procession, picketing, ignorance of 144 Regulation, *Khadi* propaganda and others. Many women of neighbouring villages participated in this movement. When Daulatnnesa delivered her emotional speech for country, both Hindus and Muslims attended to the *sabha* from several villages of Bamundanga, Suratkhali, Naldanga, Bijaydanga, Fulchhari, Kuptala, Tulsighat etc. After few days, her husband Dr. Hafijur Rahaman was also equally concerned about the anti-British movement and he mobilised people in many places outside Gaibandha and their house was confiscated by the police. Finally, Daulatnnesa Khatun and some of her associates were arrested from Fulchhari village and got imprisonment in Rajshahi, Presidency and Baharampur jail⁴³.

Women also organized anti-British movement in Pabna district. History has the records of some women personalities namely Kusumbala Ghosh, Rebarani Chanda, Saroj Nalini Dutta, Kumudini Ghosh, Hemaprabha Devi, Prabharani Debi, Bivarani Das etc who could not sit idle during the 1932 Civil Disobedience movement and got imprisonment⁴⁴.

The women of Malda district were not lagging behind in the national movement. Surendrabala Roy of this district was another important woman personality of Civil Disobedience movement. Her husband Dyutidhar Roy was an active Congress worker. All her family members participated in the 1932 Civil Disobedience movement and under the leadership of the couple this movement got a meaningful stand in Malda. At last, Surendrabala Roy is said to have been imprisoned for the offence done against the British⁴⁵. She was, however, released at the end and settled at the village of Valuka to pass the rest of her life. At that time, Surendrabala Roy realised the importance of political organization and this idea led her to form '*Congress Mahila Sangha*' along with the cooperation of Labanyalata Chanda of Malda. One important incident was that, the *Congress Mahila Sangha* of Surendrabala Roy welcomed Subhas Chandra Bose (till now he was not called as Netaji) along with women volunteers Bijaliprabha Debi, wife of Atul Kumar, Mahamaya Debi, wife of Mahadeb Kumar and others when he (January 1939) came at Nagharia school in Malda to attend the district peasant conference⁴⁶. Not only that, through this organization she engaged many women of Malda to look after the cause of rural development and their achievements can be proved by the establishment of one primary school side by side to divert attention to the *Khadi* cloths, spinning *Charka* as well as women consciousness for the cause of the nation.

Sudharani Choudhurani was one of the powerful women freedom fighter of Malda district. She was a *zamindar* house wife of Kaliachak police station, Malda. She indirectly participated in the movement. When police officer went to her house to search some absconding political workers, she did not allow them to enter into her house. She also gave shelter to many young revolutionaries and Congress workers and provided them food, cloth, and money and protected their arms⁴⁷.

From the above discussion it may be mentioned here that, the participation of women in the all spheres of social and political life, is a phenomenon that deserves special attention

and also particularly in North Bengal. The middle class Bengali women, from teenage girls down to the old ones, came forward to participate in the national movement. This was, at a time when in general, the girls and women in particular, were not allowed to go out and became victims of the circumstances.

In spite of all sort of barriers and backwardness there were many women figures who did not bother about the so called rules and regulations of the society and had the mind to give a timely response to the call of the nation. In reality, North Bengal was at that time even today is a backward region. But the participation of a large number of women in the freedom movement calls for a brilliant chapter in the history of our anti-colonial movement. There are sufficient examples where one can notice the spontaneity in the protest and voices in the women of North Bengal, who at a very critical juncture of the nation did not and could not prefer a life of a simple housewife or an ordinary woman. These women developed spirit and courage to win over every sought of crisis even at the risk of their life. In this way, the women of North Bengal proved their love and dedication for the cause of the nation.

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32. 'Gnanphal', Abdur Kadir (ed.), *Rokeya Rachanabali*, Dhaka, Bangla Academi, 1984, pp.164-171. She shows in her book '*Muktiphal*' that without the help of women, it is

impossible to bring freedom by the efforts of men alone. See 'Muktiphal', Abdur Kadir (ed.), *Rokeya Rachanabali*, Dhaka, Bangla Academy, 1984, pp.198-220; see also Kamala Dasgupta, *op.cit.* p. 271. In her book 'Aborodhbasini' raised the painful picture of secluded women of Bengal and Bihar and it inspired to blow the society's ill system. From this angle she is a revolutionist, though she did not directly joined in the freedom struggle, but during her whole life she tried to awakening patriotism among the women of backward society and it was not less valuable.

Though Begum Rokeya was not directly involved with politics, yet she was not totally separate from political activities. When Annie Besant and Bi-Amma, mother of Mohammad Ali and Saokat Ali came to Calcutta to join the National Congress session in 1917, many Muslim women were joined as volunteers. Begum Rokeya took very vital role in organising this volunteer team. During the *Swadeshi* and Khilafat movement, Rokeya and her *Anjumane-Khawatine Islam* gave service from back side to country and own society. See Anwar Hossain, *Swadhinata Sangrame Banglar Nari (1873-1947)*, (in Bengali), Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, May 2006, p.198.

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41. Pamphlet given by Putalimaya Debi's grandson published by *Gorkha Dukha Niwarak Sammelan*, Kurseong, Year and Date not mentioned; see also *Uttarbanger Swadhinata Sangramider Jibanalekhya*, vol. 1, *op.cit.* pp. 273-274.
42. Kamala Dasgupta, *op.cit.* pp. 108-109.
43. Kamala Dasgupta, *op.cit.* pp. 205-206; see also Anwar Hossain, *op.cit.* pp. 200-201. The associates of Daulatnnesa Khatun were Mahamaya Bhattacharya, Pratibha Sarkar, Dakshabala Das etc.
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