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Awakening of Rajbanshi women in North Bengal: Revisiting history

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Abstract

The study titled, “Awakening of Rajbanshi Women in North Bengal: Revisiting History” explores the participation of women in various movements in North Bengal with a special focus on their role in the most talked about movements of North Bengal, the Tebhaga Movement and the Naxalbari Movement. Did women participate in North Bengal’s long history of struggle in any way? In the social and political conditions of that time, could women participate in the political movement independently? The present paper attempts to answer all these questions. This study is mainly based on the extensive literature. The researchers attempted to integrate all the scattered information from various secondary sources. The researchers present women’s participation in movements in different periods of history and the challenges they faced in society. Studies revealed that although the rural women lacked political foresight, they were immensely courageous. Instead of fighting alone, they have organized women through union led by women leaders. They fought for their rights and their country in different movements. It is noted that the women’s leadership capacity was not being recognized, the glorious women’s history was not being written with due importance which seems to be a reflection of narrow patriarchal attitudes.

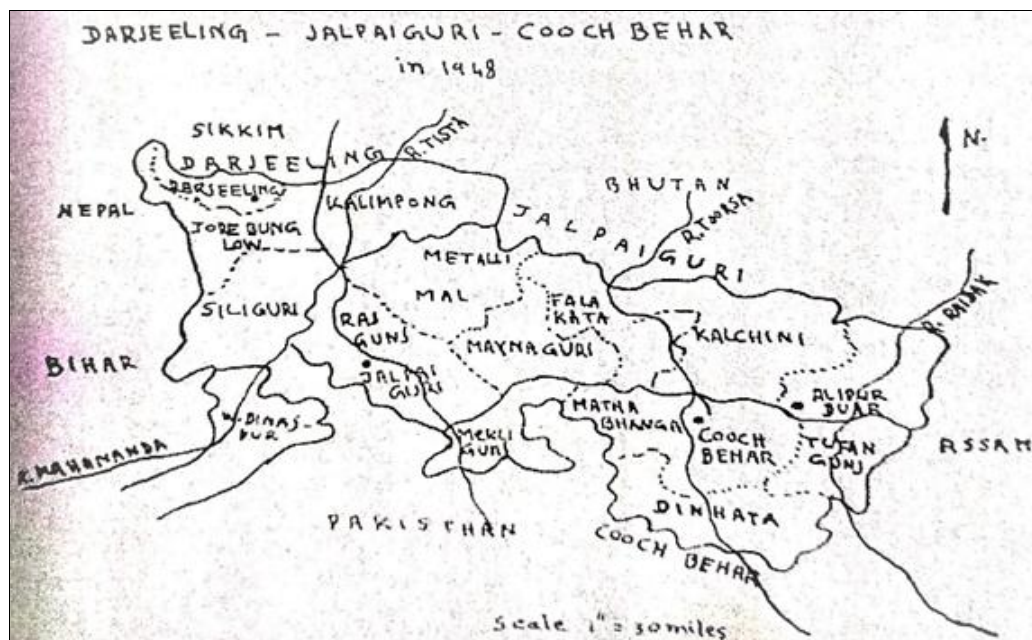
Keywords: North Bengal, Rajbanshi women, awakening, women’s movement political participation

1. Introduction

Women have been fighting for their distinct identity for ages. For a long, women have struggled for their positions against subordination and gender inequality. Indian women, for a long time, have been the inheritors of a very complex pattern of societal and cultural models. The 21st century also perceives women’s oppressive status and poor position in society. The genuine indicators of poor status and oppression are the purdah, women trafficking, female infanticide, child marriage, sexual violence, illiteracy, and forced marriages. It is because of their low status in education. Due to a lack of economic freedom, they could not, and still cannot speak for their rights. They remained mute agent because of financial dependence, physical weakness, and health issues. Ignorance of family and society towards women has left them behind (Naik, 2017)ⁱ. The situation is worse for the minority women. They became dependent on men. They were denied property, freedom, and independence (Sharma, 2017)ⁱⁱ. Women were taught to think of themselves as the property of their fathers or husbands. Women lost their property rights, educational rights, rights to give opinions, and rights to free mobility in society. In the mid of the 18th century, the great thinkers and social reformers of Bengal such as Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) and others thought to increase the status of women in the society. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), in his ‘Samya,’ said, “All human beings have equal rights. Women are also human beings and as such entitled to equal rights with men”. Consequently, with the hand of such great humans Sati Pratha Abolition Act (1829), The Caste Disability Removal Act (1850), The Hindu Widow’s Remarriage Act (1856), The Female Infanticide Prevention Act (1870), and The Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) were enacted. In the colonial period, we can see active participation of women in political organizations. Women led their status by their women-led organizations such as-Banga Mahila Samaj (year not found), Bharat Mahila Parishad (1904), Women’s Indian Association (1917), National Council of Women in India (1925), All India Women’s Conference (1927), etc.

They highlighted women's education, the abolition of social malpractices, Hindu law reform, and equal rights and opportunities for women. Women then participated in rallies, meetings, and other activities in the freedom movement. After independence, several acts were passed to change the status of women in society. These are The Hindu Marriage Act (1955), The Hindu Succession Act (1956), The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956), and The Hindu Minority and Grandship Act (1956). Efforts have been made to re-establish women's position in society but the patriarchal social system became the main barrier to its successful implementation. In the history of Cooch Behar, we can see the worst situations of the women. In the 1870s

women, slavery, polygamy, selling and mortgaging of women were issues that can be shown in history. Selling and buying of women and girl children, mistreatment of girls even by the fathers were some issues raised at that time in Cooch Behar. Women were recognized as the victims of domestic and societal violence. Consequently, women started movements. After enduring long oppression, women started the movement in an organized manner in North Bengal. The present study will delineate the history of participation in movements and leadership roles of women in North Bengal with special emphasis on the district of Cooch Behar. In the Figure 1 and Figure 2 we can understand the scenario of North Bengal.



Source: Mukhopadhyay, 1990

Fig 1: Places under North Bengal as Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar etc. (as written in the map)



Source: Mukhopadhyay *Op. cit.*

Fig 2: Map of old Cooch Behar under undivided Bengal

1.1 Significance of the study

This study wants to explore the history of Rajbanshi women and their roles in different movements. People have a misconception that women are incompetent and unable to handle their positions in administration and decision-making. These are the myths that have been going on for a long time. Even in the 21st century, the scenario is still the same. Many studies have been conducted on the issues and challenges they face during participation. But, the detailed account of Rajbanshi Women's role in different movements remained unexplored. Two movements are discussed here: the movement for their rights and their active participation in various socio-political issues. What was the status of the women in leadership in the past? Were they free to be involved in political activities? Was their struggle unhindered? So, we need to emphasize the political history of the specific caste of women from North Bengal to know their past situations in the then socio-political field.

1.2 Background of the study

If we look at the literature on women's history, we will find that the history of women's struggle has never been written seriously. Here too there is a clear impression of a patriarchal society. So, before 1862 there was no such history written regarding women's political activities in Cooch Behar. Primarily, society thought of women as a symbol of weakness. So, it is clear that due to societal inequalities, the status of females in every sphere of society has been undermined. Women themselves started to fight for their dignity. Women's movements in India are divided into three phases-(a) the movement from 1857 to 1947 (b) the movement from 1947 to 1975, and (c) the movement after 1975 (Kumar, 1993).ⁱⁱⁱ

In India, we cannot differentiate the feminist movement from the women's movement. The feminist movement includes women's rights movements. It deals with equal rights in accessing education, career development, political power, and societal liberation. The feminist movement in India started before independence. That generally dealt with the freedom movement and liberation from malpractices in society. 1902 to 1947 was a significant period for the women's movement. Here women's movement, the feminist movement and the freedom movement were merged. The movement against colonial rule marked the beginning of the awakening of the women's movements. In Bengal, several fighters came out in these periods such as Sarala Devi, Nanibala Dukaribala, Pritilata Waddedar, Bimal Pratibha Devi, Santisudha Ghosh, Rani Mitra Das Gupta, Manikuntala Sen, Renu Chakraborty. They were active but unsung freedom fighters of Bengal. They worked against women's oppression. However, they were not highlighted by the scholars. The women's histories were unwritten and elusive. Mahila Rashtriya Sangha in 1928 by Latika Ghosh, an Oxford-educated woman, All India Mahila Sammelan, and Mahila Atma Raksha Samities have stepped the milestones (Pruthi, 1998).^{iv}

The Tebhaga Movement in 1946-1947 showed a remarkable example of women's participation. Rural women fought together, irrespective of their castes, to achieve the demanded portions of the harvest. The poor rural women were oppressed mentally and physically by their families and the British. Women formed the Nari Bahini to get out of it. It became revolutionary when a large number of women raised questions about their oppressions. In the anti-colonial

movement of Bengal, we saw women as equal partners with males in political rallies. Women also struggled enough on various fronts to seek equal rights with their male colleagues. So, the colonial period was the first phase of the women's movement in Bengal. Several organizations such as Bharat Mahila Parishad (1904), Bharat Stri Mahamandal (1909), Women's Indian Association (1917), National Council of Women in India (1925), All India Women's Conference (1927), Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust, etc.

In the second phase, post-independent movements focused on gender equality, equal access to education, equal divisions of labor and equal participation of women in society. In the middle of 1960, the anti-price rise movement in Maharashtra and peasant movements in Kolkata, Mumbai, and Gujarat were some of the notable events. We can see the Naxalbari movement (1965-1975) in Naxalbari Thana Elaka of West Bengal. It was started with tea garden workers. It was spread over Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. First, it was started with the tea garden workers who rebelled against the state. It was also spread over the Khoribari, Phansidewa district of North Bengal. Here women fought shoulder-to-shoulder with their male counterparts. Here, no distinctions were shown in using the weapons and actions of the women. But female activists were not at the forefront. They were only for some technical works, transportation of papers, and transportation of information. In this phase (1947-1975), new issues were raised such as women's security and participation in decision-making.

The third phase of the movement was marked as the International Women's Decades (1975-1985). The central themes of these decades were equality, development, and peace (Mair, 1985).^v 1980 was also significant because women's organizations were established as a mushroom. But, general women issues such as women's oppression were still present. In 1990, issues of caste were raised. In the present phase, issues of marginalized sections such as – Dalit women and Muslim women were raised. Different scholars, such as Gopal Guru Sharmila Rege, marked the status of Dalit and said about this phase. Even the third phase also talked about non-normative societies as transgender and their stories of marginalization. In this period another significant movement was the Dalit movement. This movement fought against untouchability, the caste system, and economic exploitation. Several organizations were established during this time for Dalits. Consequently, the National Federation of Dalit Women was established in 1995. In September 2000, Dalit women's conference was organized in Tamil Nadu. It was named as Tamil Nadu Dalit Pengal Iyakkam. Before that in 1970, the Dalits of India launched the Panther Movement. Anti-untouchable movement, the Harijan movement, and the liberation movement. They all fought for the oppressed classes, especially women (Akrekar, 1995; Agnihotri & Majumder, 1995).^{vi vii}

In West Bengal, marginalized sections of the society were ignored. Dalit feminists were afraid of establishing their issues. They were oppressed by the upper caste people. In this third phase, feminism and the women's movement witnessed challenges regarding caste, class, religion, and communalism (Gull & Shafi, 2014).^{viii} So, all over India women from marginalized sections raised their voices. This study tried to focus on such issues in respect of North

Bengal, especially Cooch Behar. The study attempts to answer whether Rajbanshi women (marginalized sections of North Bengal) participated in the political movement and social construction of Cooch Behar.

1.3 Statement of the problem

There is a myth and misconception in society that women are unable to handle administrative issues. But, the history of North Bengal tells a different story which has not come to light in that way. So, they need special attention to reveal the cruel history of North Bengal. The present text unfolds the original history of women's participation in the history of various movements. Women are the savior of the society. History is the witness of such magnificent ladies who proved their leadership through active participation in different movements. Scheduled Caste and Minority women predominate in Cooch Behar and they are included as marginalized sections. This study tries to delineate the picture of the participation of such women who contributed a lot to the development of society.

1.4 Research questions of the study

The main Research questions are as follows

- What was the unrevealed history of Rajbanshi women regarding leadership and political participation?
- Did women make any contributions in building the society?

1.5 Objectives of the study

This research work has aimed to investigate the participation and leadership of women in the context of the district of Cooch Behar. The main objectives are as follows

- To study the unrevealed history of Rajbanshi women regarding leadership and political participation.
- To understand the contributions of the women in building the society.

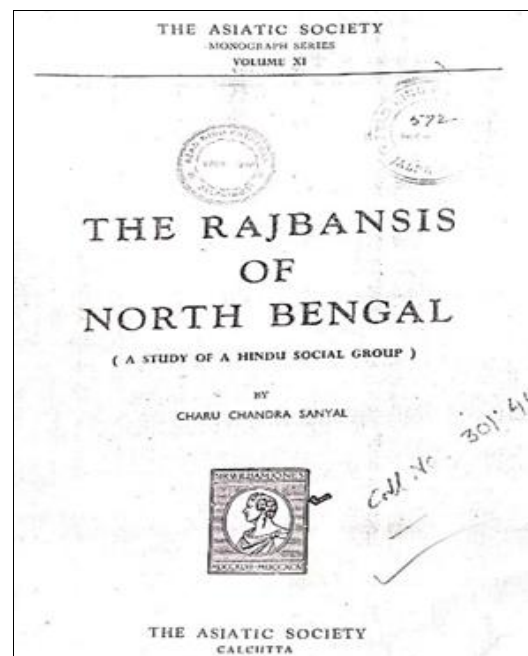
1.6 Operational Definition

1.6.1 Rajbanshi women

Scheduled caste women of Cooch Behar are majorly depicted as 'Rajbanshi women'. According to scholars, these Scheduled Caste people are a mixture of 'Indo-Mongoloid' and 'Poundro Kshatriya' groups. In a few places, 'Poundro Kshatriya' was named 'Rajbanshi Kshatriya' from 1881 to 1923. Again, they identify as the 'Koches'. Even in the writings of the great Panchanan Barma, he named them as the only 'Kshatriya', not as 'Rajbanshi'. In scholarly writings, Rajbanshi is the title of Assam, who mainly lived in the part of Nepal Terrain regions. In the 1901 census, 'Rajbanshi' and 'Koch' are depicted as the different communities. In the census of 1905, also 'Koch' and 'Rajbanshi' were depicted as a single community. This community uses their title as 'Singha', 'Roy', and 'Barman'. In 1515 Biswa Singha established the Koch rajbansha, inherited by the Koch-Mech-Kachari community. On the other side in the 10th century, the people who lived in Khambayat city came to north Bengal and were named Rajbanshi. After 1910, on 1st May, they called them separately 'Koch' and 'Rajbanshi'. So, it is better to use them as the women belong to the 'Scheduled Caste'. They are depicted as the Scheduled Caste in West Bengal and other Backward Tribe in Assam. They are found to be more dominant than the other caste of the Cooch-Behar district. In the various ethno-religious groups in

Koch-Bihar, there is also 'Bengali Muslim' women in the majority after the Scheduled Caste community. In the 3rd century, the 'Dalapati' of the Koch community converted himself to Muslim and was named the 'Ali Mech'. Even in 1949-1958 and later, Cooch-Behar was invaded by the Mughals and Nawabs of Bengal. That time Koch Bihar was named the 'Alamgir Nagar'. Even the Hindu community of Cooch Behar was refused decent status under the Hindu religion and they wisely adopted Islam in preference of 'Helol Hinduism'. Rests of the higher caste renamed them as the 'Rajbanshi' community. Even many Rajbanshi of Cooch Behar changed into Muslims, the minority sections of the society. They were normally among the marginalized sections of the community. They converted as Muslims from the 'Koch' and 'Rajbanshi', were called the 'Nashya Musalman' or 'Nashya Saikh'. But after the independence and getting the caste status, they have the status as 'Other Backward Classes' and 'General'. So, it is the second most dense community in Cooch Behar and due to its close connections with the 'Koch' and 'Rajbanshi' communities, the researcher is using 'Muslim Women' in this study.

In this study SC, ST and OBC women are included as Rajbanshi. Because, in many place women were not identified with their community. So, all women from disadvantaged sections are identified as Rajbanshi.



Source: Sanyal, 2002

Fig 3: Book on the Rajbansis (Rajbanshis) of the North Bengal

1.6.2 Awakening

Rising of Rajbanshi women through different movements and political participation.

2. Methodology

The study was based on secondary data. The data was collected from documentary sources like-books, periodicals, journals and other published materials.

2.1 Data analysis and interpretation

2.1.1 Status of leadership in Cooch Behar up to 1862

Dr. Nripendra Nath Pal (1884), in his book, Kooch Beharer Itihas, said before getting a specific status as a district,

Cooch Behar was a part of Kamrup district in Assam. In Kamrup there were four parts: Kampith, Ratnapith, Subarnapith, and Chumarpith. Cooch Behar is the part of Ratnapith. In history, the Cooch Behar kingdom was established by the King Biswa Singha. In 1675, on 12th August, the East India Company abolished the custom of Subedari. At that time in the kingdom of Cooch Behar, the king was the King Harendranarayan. But he was not an adult. So, the company decided to provide the power to the queen. However, society did not accept that a woman would run the state which reveals the attitude of the society toward women at that time. However, after 1811, we can see the queen Kamteswari Ai Devi, who was intelligent and powerful in her leadership activities. That time women's education was not so much highlighted. From 1847 to 1862, we can see only proposals on women's education. There was an organization named 'Hitoishini Sabha'. This organization had worked a lot for the establishment of women's education in Cooch Behar. But, common people did not even think seriously about women's education.

2.1.2. Women's leadership in Cooch Behar from 1862 to 1911

The great success of the women leaders in Cooch Behar marked this era. After the Shree Shreemati Maharani Kamteswari; Shree Shrimati Brindeswari, Nistarini Ai Devati ruled the kingdom with the king Nripendranarayan. In 1872, people at least thought about the scholarship for women. But, it applied to those who belonged to elite families. The time of King Nripendranarayan was a controversial name in the history of women's leadership. Suniti Devi, the daughter of great Keshab Chandra Sen, was married to King Nripendranarayan. It was the most highlighting because the king was only 15 and her queen was only 13. According to Act III of 1872, marriage was banned before the age of 16. The Royal family claimed to conduct marriage according to Hindu rituals. Suniti Devi, her mother and grandmother did not accept the proposal of marriage as per Hindu rituals. After the denial of the marriage due to the unacceptance of Brahmo marriage by the king, mother of Suniti Devi said to the mother of Nripendranarayan that-"I shall be sorry if my daughter does not marry your son and I shall take her away from Cooch Behar, but my daughter shall never marry any one according to the Hindu rights." It depicts the free decision-making rights of women, especially in the elite and the educated classes. Lastly, the marriage of Suniti Devi and Maharaja was held according to the Brahmo rituals. Consequently, this controversy pressurized Keshab Chandra Sen to build the Naba Bidhan Brahmo Samaj, in the year of 1880, 25th July. Suniti Devi was a great writer. She was famous for her writings such as 'Amrit Bindu (1st and 2nd part)', 'Kathakatar Gan', 'Jhorer Dola', 'Sahana' (1915), 'Sibnath' (1921), 'Sishu Keshab' (1922), 'Sangho Sonkho', 'Sati', etc. In English, the writings are 'The Rajput Princess', 'The Beautiful Moghul Princess', 'Nine Ideal Indian Women', 'The Autobiography of an Indian Princess', 'Prayers' etc. She had also established the girls' schools in the Cooch Behar. She had allotted female teachers for these schools. There were several organizations led by the elite Brahmo and Hindu women like 'Cooch Behar Sahitya Sabha', 'Sukatha' Publication house. 'Sukatha' was famous for writing on issues related to women's education. 'Stree Katha Sombondhe Koekti Katha' was one of the famous writings

of this publication house. At the time of Maharaja Nripendranarayan, A.B.N Seal College (Victoria College) and Suniti Academy were established. Suniti Devi was a great leader. She showed her leadership skills and intelligence in the Brahmo Movement. She contributed to the expansion of women education and in establishing the Bengali language. Some special qualities like eloquence nature, generosity, and civic sense existed in her. It was also noticeable that the king accepted the Brahmo religion only for his wife. Wives were not the dummies. Sucharu Devi, the sister of Suniti Devi was famous for her qualities in acting, Tablo, and writing skills in English and Bengali. In her several letters, she mentioned welfare activities for the common people such as the establishment of schools, road construction, lighting, and building the town named Bidhan Palli, etc. In 1887, Kameswari Devi, the queen of Maharaja Shibendranarayan, was the dual manager of Varanasi province. She was also famous for her welfare activities for the common people (proja). Nirupama Devi, daughter-in-law of Suniti Devi was also educated and had leadership qualities. 'Matri Math' for the widow was another welfare activity for women.

2.1.3 Women's participation in the freedom movement of North Bengal-(Pre-independence period from 1905 to 1947):

The year 1905 was the renaissance time for Cooch Behar. At that time 'North Bengal Group' was famous for their political activities. But, did women play any role there? Women's names were not mentioned in the 1920's Zilla Congress Samiti of Jalpaiguri, and the Non-Cooperation movement of Falakata. Though, in 1927, Nalaini Pakrashi, or Nalini Thakur was a popular woman leader. After that in Falakata, Madarihat, and Alipurduar freedom movements increased. Alipurduar Mohila Samitis, Nari Bahraini, and Stree Sangha in Alipurduar were established. Women started cooking strikes in the 1930's Ain Amany Andolan. In 1930 limited women organizations such as Mahila Samiti, Durviksha Nibarani Samiti etc. started functioning in North Bengal. Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi, Leela Roy, Malti Chowdhury, and Renuka Roy were a few names of renowned leaders. They led the young women of Bengal in the Non-Cooperation Movement. Women also suffered from police torture. But, still, they participated in rallies. As a protest, they observed Arandhan Divas (no cooking day). Women leaders like Saratkumari Mukherjee, Sashimukhi Ganguly, Hiranbala Aich, Shailabala Dashi, Bharati Mukherjee, Kana Mukherjee, Indulekha Mukherjee, Prabha Chanda, Madhabi Biswas, Aloka Mukherjee, Kana Majumder, Devi Oraon and other disadvantaged sections women participated from the north Bengal in Swadeshi Movement. Many girls have led from the front in the students' movements. Renu Nag (1925-1993), who participated in the freedom movement with her cousin Prafulla Guha, is mentioned in the book 'Swadhinata Sangramider Jibanalekha' (2014), published by Cooch Behar Smriti Raksha Committee. Bina Chatterjee, Rajlaxmi Guha, Prabhavati Devi, Kumdkamini Devi, Belarani Devi, Sarala Devi, and Usha Lata Sikdar fought for the Indian freedom movement. Uma Dasgupta, and Tara Banerjee are the names worth mentioning in the Sadar Alipurduar Congress Andolan. Gandhiji's movement affected a lot the participation of women. Women's participation in Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930-1932 placed a remarkable

status all over India. During the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930), men worked as colleagues with women. Even women were popular in politics. Bengal women showed special skills in militancy. There was no stigma to attending rallies, protecting weapons, or going to jail. That had a great impact on the social outlook (Jaiswal & Rao, 2019).^{ix} In 1930, women such as Hiraprabha Sen, Sailabala Ghosh, Mahamaya Devi, and Indumoti Devi ended their lives in Swadeshi Movement. In 1930 the great activist Srimoti Sailabala went to jail and sacrificed her life for the motherland. She also made an organization and united Nepali women for their rights. Woman leader Kiran Roy was a great leader, educationist, and famous social activist in North Bengal who participated in many movements in 1937. In 1942, Ashoka Mukherjee and Kamala Mukherjee from Alipurduar were marked as great warriors of the Buxa Prisoners. On the other side, in the Kumargram Surbala Ganguly, Gyanada Baishanabi; in Madarihat Sailarani Basu; in Falakata Gitarani Das, Bakulrani Bose, Pushparani Bose, Wife of Swadeshi Jatiya Barman, and Jogai Barman participated in 1942 movement. The revolt of 1942 was a great symbol of women's participation in the Quit India Movement. In the 1942's movement, women activists like Aruna Dasgupta, Subhasini Ghosh, Hira Prabha Sen, Suniti Niyogi, Nanibala Bhowmik, Sukumari Sen, Nibharani Bhowmik, and Rabala Devi joined the struggle. In 1942, Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti under the leadership of Kalyani Dasgupta, Kalpana Niyogi, and Anima Nani participated in street rallies of freedom movement against the British. Kalyani Dasgupta in her writing, *Tebhagai Zillar Meyera* and *Nari Siksha o Nari Andolon*, mentioned the name of Subhashini Ghosh, the mother of all secret organizations of women in the freedom movement. Begam Sahiba Rahimannesa was the important leader of the Muslim Women's Organization in the freedom movement. Women Security Samiti was formed in 1942 to ensure women's security which was later developed as Mahila Samiti in 1966. Perhaps, it was the first Uttarbanga Mahila Samabai Samiti. The participants of this Samabai Samiti were Leela Das and Ranoo Dey. There was an organization of the daughter-in-law of great Panchanan Barma named Hemlata Devi. She was also a warrior of the Kshatriya Movement. Sarala Devi, opened an emporium called Lakshmir Bhandar, for popularizing the swadeshi goods. A remarkable women's organization called Chatri Sangha was formed to impart political education to girls. Here women also learned athletics and swimming, and classes were organized for discussions on political awareness. The main influencers of this organization were Surama Mitra, Kamala Das Gupta, Bina, and Kalyani Devi (Pruthi, 1998).^x

Many movements occurred after independence, like the Berubari Movement, Gorkhaland Movement, Naxalbari Movement, and Kamtapur Movement, but, in the context of women's participation, only Adhiya, Tebhaga, and Naxalbari Movement are discussed in the next section where participation of women from disadvantaged sections was highlighted.

2.1.4 Tebhaga movement, Adhiya movement and the upliftment of backward women

Tebhaga was another vital chapter of the women's movement in the mid-forties. The main aim of this movement was to alter the division of the crops into Tebhaga-the three parts. Of these three, the sharecroppers

would keep two parts and one would be left for the landlords. The main slogans of this movement were 'Adhi nai tebhaga chai' or we want 2/3rd, not half, 'Langal jar jomi tar' or land to the tiller, 'Nij kholane dhan tolo', or stack paddy in your own courtyard, 'British dalal bharat charo' or agents of the British quit India, 'Hindustan Zindabad' etc. The rural women took this movement to another level. They fought together irrespective of their caste and religion. The reasons behind the massive participation of women are-1. They were already opposed by society 2. They were economically and physically exploited by the male jotedars 3. They came forward to feed their children and to feed their families. This movement was started in North Bengal and gradually spread throughout the rest of the province. The rural peasant women were the most oppressed sections of the society. So, in this movement, they showed their extra strength in leadership skills. This time women were organized through –The All India Mahila Sammelan, Bangiya Pradeshik Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti, and Communist Group Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti. The great leaders of this movement were Buimala Maji, Manikuntakla Sen, and Renu Chakraborty. Women formed their militant called 'Nari Bahani' where mainly the oppressed Rajbanshi women, Muslim women, and tribal women farmers participated. Muslim women used their 'Purdah' to hide the activists from the police. This was a good example where women played their political role (Anilak, 2020).^{xi} In North Bengal, the Jotedari system existed where the peasants had to give a share to Jotedar. Below zamindars, there were jotedars. Through the system of pattani, zamindars distributed the land to jotedars. In North Bengal, jotedars were directly related to the land. So, the farmers' fate was directly related to the land and jotedars. Normally farmers took a lease of the land for a limited period from jotedars. Their shares were equal. It was based on Adhiary Pratha. However, this system was not maintained by the jotedars (Sarkar, 2019).^{xii}

The role of women in the Tebhaga Movement was spread in Boda, Pochagarh, Deviganj, and Sundardighi localities. In his writing, 'Jalpaiguri Zilla Krishak Andolan', Bimal Dasgupta said that there was no such mass movement without the participation of women that we can see in the tea labour movement of Doors. In her writing, *Tebhaga Jelar Meyera*, Kalyani Dasgupta said that Rajbanshi women farmers were one of the most disadvantaged sections in North Bengal. In Tebhaga Movement also, we can see disadvantaged sections of women as Bimala Maji, a young widow-girl as a recruitment officer and leader. Other leaders and participants were Burima Purneswari Bomoin from Sundardighi, Sikha Nandi as 'Buri' from Pochagarh, Maharano Oraon, Tilaktarini Devi (Tilakrani Devi), several mothers and daughters of farmers in Raiganj participated. They helped to organize the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti and Krishak Samiti. Several women also lost their lives. A few names such as Chundia Oraon, Budhumani of Fulbari, Yamuna, Swarajnandini, Barada Sundari, Nogori (the wife of comrade Vidya), wife of Khogen Barman, wife of Pohalu, mothers of Yatra and Sukharu, Maharani Oraon, Kormi Uraoni, Budhuni Uraoni, Swarnamoyee Uraoni, and Etoyari Uraoni are worth mentioning (Saha, 2001).^{xiii} In Mangalbari also, young women sacrificed their lives. In 1947, on March 3rd, police brutally fired the Tebhaga Movement's activists where five people died, one of whom was a woman. The brutal firing was preplanned to smash the

spread of the peasant workers' rebellion (Sharma, 2016).^{xiv} The courage of Rajbanshi women set up an example for the other women. Punneswari Barman (Purneswari Bomonin) was a great leader who did not have any formal education. She did not have even the basic amenities for life like clothes, and a house. However, she showed excessive leadership qualities and a savior attitude. She saved other warriors such as Makri, Ujani, Vidya, and other comrades from the police torture. Ujani, Makadi, and Sabita pal in Tebhaga Movement as 'Jangi' were the symbols of leadership for other women in North Bengal. On March 1st and 4th April, lots of women lost their lives to police attacks, especially in Goyabari. Yamuna Oraoni was one of them. Despite the lack of food and education, they fought bravely. They fought with their 'Ramda', and 'Chamgain', and raised the slogan 'Jan debo tobu dhan dibona' or 'we will sacrifice our lives but never sacrifice our paddy palnts'.

Women along with men came forward to save their lives. This movement was associated with the tea labour Movement of Doors. The principles of the Communist Party also entered into the tea gardens of Doors like Tebhaga Movement. Here, Naihari Oraoni, Choton, Poko Oraoni, Maharani Oraoni, Chundia Uraon (sister of Chundia Uraon, Kormi Uraoni, Boodhni Uraoni, Swarnamoyee Uroni, and Etowari Uraoni the young leaders were also participated in Tebhaga and Doors tea labour Movement (Dasgupta, 2016).^{xv} Their motive was the same. They don't have political education, general degrees and proper amenities to fight. However, they showed their bravery, patriotism, intelligence, and civic sense in their activities. They were so brave that they snatched the rifle from the police at Domohoni and the police left the ground. Whatever the organizations, Sabha and Samitis, women leaders always thought about the welfare of society and their families.



Source: Saha, 2001

Fig 4: Rally of female farmers with male farmers in Tebhaga movement



Source: Saha Op. cit

Fig 5: Meeting of Farmers in Tebhaga movement with female farmers standing with their babies

2.1.5 Women participation in Naxalbari movement

The Naxalbari Movement was another movement where women showed leadership qualities, especially the women of oppressed classes. Naxalbari Movement was started in the Naxalbari, situated in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Even after the second phase of the Tebhaga Movement on the result of the 'Land Ceiling Act in 1953, there was no such improvement in the situation of farmers. So, in North Bengal, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and CPI (M) started camping on the welfare of the peasants and tea workers. They first introduced their political activities with the leadership of Charu Majumder with the peasant and tea workers activists. Women's role was the most memorable segment of this movement. Women participated even with their babies and led several marches or rallies. Women not only participated but also sacrificed their lives. Dhaneswari (Dhaleswari Devi) was the first martyred with her child in police firing. In the rural parts of the Bengal like, Naxalbari, Kharibari, and Phansidewa, we can see women fighting with their male counterparts equally. But, patriarchy was still present in this movement. Women's participation was restricted to recruiting, campaigning, forming squads, and nursing. None were given senior positions. There were just the dominating characteristics of male candidates and feminizing the role of women. The women were pushed into the periphery. However, still, women continued to fight bravely in the restricted conditions. That was more daring and diligent than men in several places. Ajitha was one of them (Anilak, 2020).^{xvi} She displayed her physical and mental strength, courage, willpower, sacrifice, and loyalty in her activities. So, in an adverse condition created by the patriarchal culture, it was difficult for the women fighters to find a glorious place in the movements. Therefore, the history of women's struggle was not systematically written so their contributions cannot be remembered from generation to generation.

3. Conclusion

It is clear from the above description that despite the social barriers, women were not afraid to participate in various political movements. Rather, their power is shown to be undermined in the male-dominated society. Women's contribution was not brought into the limelight. Women have innate leadership qualities that were not given adequate opportunities to manifest. The real picture needs to be brought to the public through research. Much published and unpublished information concerning women's contributions to society building needs to be systematically organized and documented. It will bring a change in the attitude of society towards women. Comprehensive research is required to reveal the untold history of women in Cooch Behar. In the contribution of the leaders related to the Tebhaga or Naxalbari movement, there is no mention of women anywhere, if any, it is shown to be minor which is very frustrating. The sacrifices of women should be acknowledged with great pride. The heroic role of women is believed to reduce gender inequality in society to a great extent.

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Jalpaiguri and Azad Hind library in Jalpaiguri.

5. Notes on article

in the article "awakening of Rajbanshi women in north Bengal: revisiting history", authors define Rajbanshi women as a specific ethnic group from the north Bengal and the history of women from different sections of the society as the women itself from disadvantaged sections of the society in India. Researchers also define the word awakening that means the rising of the women in social awareness, social roles, participation, autonomy through their struggle in political participation and Indian movements. The researchers review the prior studies and different books. Many books are not in a good condition to read and to mention. But these are the treasures of women's history of North Bengal. Researchers mention those literature to overcome the myths that women are bad in politics. The researcher designs a study: with methodology as qualitative, sampling, data collection and analysis. This study is mainly based on the extensive literature. The researchers attempted to integrate all the scattered information from various secondary sources. It is clear from the above description that despite the social barriers, women were not afraid to participate in various political movements. Rather, their power is shown to be undermined in the male-dominated society. Women's contribution was not brought into the limelight. Women have innate leadership qualities that were not given adequate opportunities to manifest. The real picture needs to be brought to the public through research. Much published and unpublished information concerning women's contributions to society building needs to be systematically organized and documented. It will bring a change in the attitude of society towards women. Comprehensive research is required to reveal the untold history of women in Cooch Behar. In the contribution of the leaders related to the Tebhaga or Naxalbari movement, there is no mention of women anywhere, if any, it is shown to be minor which is very frustrating. The sacrifices of women should be acknowledged with great pride. The heroic role of women is believed to reduce gender inequality in society to a great extent. The contribution may lie in focussing on a specific geographical and cultural context as in Cooch Behar district, Jalpaiguri etc. Before independence there were no such specific district. So, researchers use North Bengal as the geography. North Bengal is enriched with different ethnic groups especially the backward classes of India and one of the important kingdoms of India. The researchers make suggestions for the researchers to work more on this region to save all such books, periodicals and research on women's participation for their societal rights and to establish their strength. Women's leadership capacity was not being recognized; the glorious women's history was not being written with due importance which seems to be a reflection of narrow patriarchal attitudes. This writing can change the myths on women's power and capabilities.

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ⁱ Naik, 2017

ⁱⁱ Sharma, 2017

ⁱⁱⁱ Kumar, 1993

^{iv} Pruthi, 1998

^v Mair, 1985

^{vi} Akrekar, 1995

^{vii} Agnihotri & Majumder, 1995

^{viii} Gull & Shafi, 2014

^{ix} Jaiswal & Rao, 2019

^x Pruthi, 1998

^{xi} Anilak, 2020

^{xii} Sarkar, 2019

^{xiii} Saha, 2001

^{xiv} Sharma, 2016

^{xv} Dasgupta, 2016

^{xvi} Anilak, 2020