WOMEN AND THE ETHNIC CONFLICT OF GORKHALAND: CONTESTING HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

The political movement for the separate state of Gorkhaland in Darjeeling Hills is one of the oldest political movements for self-determination in the eastern Himalayan region. Most of us have grown up listening to stories of the agitation of 1986, popularly remembered as *Chyasi ko Andolan.* The conflict in the Hills can be broadly categorised as being cyclical in nature, which can be divided into three phases—1986, 2006 and 2017. Hence, Darjeeling does not fit into the category of the 'post-conflict' space, and peace in the region is still fragile. My interest in re-reading, exploring and making sense of the political conflict in Darjeeling Hills stemmed from my personal experience of the political agitation of 2017. As a research scholar interested in women and conflict, the 2017 political agitation which resulted in 105 days of *bandhs* exposed me to the different, complicated layers of the conflict and its impact on people in different ways. Reporting of the conflict in Darjeeling Hills in mainstream

media and academic writings has often failed to provide a nuanced and holistic understanding of the people, place and community.

Much of the mainstream academic, non-academic and political discourse has produced distorted and under-theorised accounts of the political crisis in Darjeeling Hills, failing to grasp the complicated socio-political and cultural history of the region. The political conflict in Darjeeling Hills is deeply embedded in questions of belonging and identities, complicated by the geopolitical and geographical location of the place with close historical ties with neighbouring Nepal and the state of Sikkim (Tamang and Hoinelhing 2018; Townsend and Middleton 2018). These inter-connections are either often missed or mis-represented, resulting in the categorisation of the political conflict as 'anti-national' or 'secessionist'. On the contrary, the sub-nationalist political movement in Darjeeling Hills emerges from the Nepali speaking community's political quest to be secure in their identity as Indians within demarcated territories of their homeland—Gorkhaland (Golay 2009).

This paper explores the 'humane' dimension of the conflict and the gradual militarisation of Darjeeling Hills, foregrounding the question of gender. Most of the prevalent academic discourse on the political movement in the Hills has been understood from the perspective of identity and movement. The absence of a discourse on conflict as being a central element of the political culture and more importantly its impact on women, their responses and engagement with the movement, conflict and militarisation forced me to ask questions such as: Why is there so little documentation and resources on the political conflict in Darjeeling Hills? Can the political movement be categorised as a conflict? Is peace in Darjeeling Hills comparable to other 'non-disturbed areas'? Where are the stories of women? Why despite being visible women are completely absent in these histories?

I explore the multiple complexities of the political movement in Darjeeling Hills that has resulted in the inevitable introduction of a theatre of conflict through the oral testimonies of women whose voices remain largely ignored and silenced in the annals of history.

It is my purpose to highlight the centrality of loss and trauma in the lives of the people of Darjeeling Hills as a direct impact of the conflict and militarisation which otherwise remains absent from the discourse on the ethno-nationalist movement in the region. I selected the lived experiences of two women in the semi-rural areas of Kalimpong and Darjeeling, both from an upper middle-class background, both having lost their respective spouses as an outcome of the political conflict. These two stories are crucial for two reasons. First, the two stories reflect the complexities of the conflict, the 'killing' of their partners by state agencies and the political stakeholders reflects the different axes of power operating within sub-nationalist movements. Second, the gradual introduction of a militarised political culture with the state and the political parties using militarised responses to silence voices.

These testimonies help in enriching the existing history of the political crisis which despite addressing questions of identity and movement have shied away from exploring questions of militarisation and conflict in the Hills. Further, the centrality of gender in the conflict in the Hills remains problematically marginalised and silenced. I question this silence and raise questions that need more deliberations and engagement to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of this history.

DILEMMAS OF RESEARCH

The 'factual' and 'reliable' nature of oral histories has been a much-contested subject. The scepticism about oral histories as a source of reliable information stems from the idea that oral 'histories may be inappropriate for the discipline' (Sangster 1994: 6). It is true that oral histories as a source of information are contested and complicated and pose ethical, moral and theoretical dilemmas at multiple levels. While scholars have acknowledged these challenges of relying on memories as a source of information, others such as Thompson (1999) have

also claimed that it is in this 'unreliability' and 'mistaken memories' that one finds information and understanding of how events have different meanings for people. As observed by Butalia (1998: 13), 'oral narratives cannot replace what we see as history, only that they can offer a different and extremely important perspective on history.' The oral narratives of the women I met before and during this research profoundly shaped my understanding of the history of the Darjeeling Hills and its community. I am indebted to the people I met in the last few years for opening their personal spaces to me not just enriching my knowledge as a research scholar but also personally. I built new friendships, new relations with most of them, who also hope that their stories will be delivered and will be heard, entrusting in me a sense of responsibility I want to do justice to.

These personal interactions have been enriching, troubling and difficult at times; a dilemma that continues to be at the heart of the debates on oral history. As has been rightly observed by Sheftel and Zembryzcki (2016), that fear lies at the heart of oral histories—fear that is professional (of not wanting to do a bad job) and political (of not wanting to fail oral history's potential as a craft that acts as a tool for highlighting marginalised voices and as a tool for social justice). It is in addressing and acknowledging these fears and challenges that over years oral histories as a rich source of information, built around certain evolving principles of ethics and guidelines, continue to remain extremely crucial and enriching sources. Oral histories contribute to existing knowledge through the experience of lived realities and perceptions and interpretations of events.

In contrast to the objectivists' criticism of emotions and experiences as being 'unscientific' research methodologies, Sangster says (1994: 23):

> locating experience, however difficult that project, however many dangers it encompasses, should remain one of our utopian goals. Otherwise, our feminist project of understanding and challenging inequality will always be one in which we gaze longingly through

> a distorted mirror, never able to make women whole again, but more important, never attempting to. Negating an understanding of experience as a "lived reality" for women carries with it the danger of marginalising and trivialising women's historical voices and their experiences (however varied) of oppression a trivialisation which practising oral historians have heard only too often.

The research methodology of feminist writing from different disciplinary backgrounds has often been challenged as being un-scientific and lacking objectivity. On the contrary, emerging from lived experiences and realities, feminist writings offer a more nuanced understanding and theorisation of 'objective, scientific' discourses, enriching these discourses and offering a more holistic picture of historical events and developments.

Acknowledging the dilemmas and challenges of using oral testimonies as a 'source' of research, my paper is an outcome of the oral testimonies of women who witnessed the political conflict and violence that engulfed Darjeeling Hills in 1986. Through these experiences of conflict and violence, it is my purpose to reproduce knowledge on the political violence that introduced a theatre of political conflict in the socio-political landscape of Darjeeling Hills. From the period of the political agitation in 1986 to the recent uprising in 2017, the Hill areas of Darjeeling have witnessed prolonged, cyclical and violent forms of conflict resulting in the loss of lives, increase in the number of people missing, properties destroyed, introduction of a militarised, political culture and rampant abuse of power. Due to the increased surveillance of the state and the internal factionalism, political activists and people remotely affiliated to opposition parties have been forced to either abscond, charged with several criminal cases or forced to either abscond or refrain from active political engagement for fear of being politically vindicated/bullied and ostracized. From an unapologetic commitment to the cause of creating a homeland and fighting for the *jaati*, a sense of weariness, exhaustion and destitution has crept into the psyche of the people disillusioned with 'party-politics'.[1]

Each family and every section of the 'ordinary masses' has stories to tell with rich sources of information on these developments where the personal remains closely tied to the collective. I believe that these stories provide insights into how people perceive, remember and continue to live with the consequences of these political developments. These stories provide a rich understanding of the past and the present, and offer deep insights into the complex layers of the political crisis in Darjeeling Hills. What would the history of Darjeeling be if the agitation of 1986 had not taken place? How has conflict permanently damaged the lives of families still surviving the aftermath of the conflict? What memories do these constant cyclical forms of conflict evoke in these families struggling to seek closure and healing from their earlier wounds? I believe that most families that have survived these conflicts and endured personal losses await the materialisation of the dream of a homeland. They are waiting for closure, for the wounds yet to heal. Will they ever be healed?

I am not sure I have all the answers to these questions. Neither do I believe that these questions are 'unscientific or unrealistic'. When I started my 'fieldwork' researching women and conflict taking Darjeeling as my case study I was prepared and well-versed in my theoretical understanding of conflict and its gendered dimensions. However, what I was not prepared for was the challenges that I would be confronted with when I went out into the 'field'. At times, I felt like a failure, often unable to comprehend these challenges, especially the emotional challenges of dealing with the trauma that was inherent in these stories. I was forced to question and struggle with my own dilemmas of navigating through these emotions to arrive at the 'objective, scientific' purpose of my research. I had to question my own methodologies and processes and whether they were 'correct' and was confronted by the question, 'Can emotions be part of research?'

I now believe that emotions are not separate from but crucial to the 'scientific objective of the research'. As stated by Cole (2020: 87), 'Contrary to the myth of the encumbered, non-emotional researcher,

a plethora of affective responses—both conscious and unconscious—enter our research frames.' I believe that I emerged a more conscious, ethical and responsible researcher after these interactions, most of which have now developed into beautiful, personal relationships. The feminist scholarship and its methodological framework along with writings on oral history have been crucial in the development of my research helping me engage with and negotiate the emotional challenges confronted by research scholars. These interactions have given shape and significantly contributed to my research, and I am greatly indebted to all my respondents who were more than willing to let me into their personal spaces and memories. Unlike research that emphasises on objectivity by looking at the research question from the outside, I felt more connected to this research as I was located in the 'inside'; being a political product of this conflict and having the privilege to write about it while also offering a space to be heard for me and the women I write about.

Nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas and famously known as the 'Queen of the Hills', Darjeeling Hills are often romanticised through tropes of tea, mountains and mysticism. The socio-cultural history of the people, place and communities therefore remains thoroughly misinterpreted, distorted and narrowly understood within these realms of mysticism and colonial romanticism. Stories of pain, loss, trauma and conflict rarely figure in these imageries, and when they do, the romanticising of pain and loss further contributes to such misrepresentations. Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* (2006) comes to mind, which won the coveted Man Booker Prize but failed miserably in bringing forth the trauma, pain and loss of the political turmoil that gripped Darjeeling Hills in the 1980s.

The stories of the *Chyasi ko Andolan* present far more traumatic, painful and realistic narratives of unimaginable hardships faced by the people of Darjeeling Hills, shattering the romanticised image of the Hills. These narratives are filled with stories of the 40–day *bandh*, of intense political violence, of witch-hunting of young men, of women

fearing for their safety and of a community waiting for peace and an end to the conflict. These narratives have been passed down through generations with the older generation easily slipping into conversations around the political conflict of 1986 during family and community gatherings. Despite people being weary of the political culture, *guff* (conversations) around 'party-politics' remain a defining feature of the lives of the people of the Hills. Story-telling remains a crucial source of knowledge keeping in the lives of the *pahadi* (Hill) people, and it is in these stories that one can find crucial information on the history, socio-cultural practices and political opinions and observations of the *pahadi* community.

Unlike the armed conflicts in the north-eastern region and in Kashmir, the political conflict in Darjeeling Hills has a different history—the most violent being the political agitation of 1986—with much of it being undocumented and remembered mostly through testimonies. These are the testimonies of those who survived, witnessed and experienced it in their different capacities and who offer illuminative insights on the political history of the place, highlighting the centrality of conflict as an integral part of these realities. These voices allow further explorations and insights into how people perceive, remember and interpret events bringing forth the silences, pain and humane dimensions of the conflict. Personal loss—as a direct outcome of the conflict and violence—is central to these narratives raising important questions about the futility of conflict and also bringing forth the complex power structures that operate within ethno-nationalist movements, raising critical questions about the 'just and fair' ideals of those in power. Scholars like Chettri (2018), Lacina (2018) and Wenner (2018) provide insights into this dimension of internal power structures. The sub-nationalist movement in Darjeeling Hills remains shrouded within such complex realities with a direct bearing on the lives of the people deeply embroiled in 'party-politics' as an inevitable part of their lived realities.

A LONE WOMAN'S FIGHT FOR JUSTICE: MOVING BEYOND WOMEN AS VICTIMS

The political agitation of 1986 initiated by Subhash Ghising and his party the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) introduced the political movement for the creation of a homeland—Gorkhaland—for Indian Nepalis. The sub-nationalist movement also had a political consequence of introducing conflict, militarisation and intense violence in the region. Armed with the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA), state personnel were empowered to randomly arrest and kill 'suspected' people. This was met with stiff resistance by GNLF cadres trained in guerrilla warfare and armed with weapons. Due to the violence, lives were lost, people went missing and others were forced to go into hiding to save their lives. These stories of 'missing people' remain undocumented and figures of those killed remain tragically under-reported. Official silence on these figures troubled me deeply pushing me to dwell further on the impact of a conflict on families affected in terms of the personal losses endured by them. Those who lost their lives during the conflict are often celebrated as martyrs and 27 July every year is celebrated as martyr's day commemorating the sacrifices of those lives to the cause.

On this date offerings are made in the form of speeches and tributes to the 'brave soldiers' who are forgotten for the rest of the days. How do these families cope with the reality of their personal losses justified as sacrifices for the cause? How do women cope with these losses where the personal is so deeply connected to the political? Women, and the impact of the political conflict on them, has barely been documented in Darjeeling Hills. Their stories remain untold, unheard and unappreciated despite women having borne the most disastrous outcomes of the conflict. The following narratives begin by exploring the impact of the conflict which is followed by an engagement with what it meant for the development of the women's movement. In charting out this trajectory, this paper locates the inter-connection

between the personal and the political reflected through the oral histories of women in the political conflict of Darjeeling Hills.

When I was in school—St. Joseph's Convent, Kalimpong—I was terrified of my Maths teacher Sharda Mukhia. She was strict, and Mathematics was not one of my favourite subjects, so I was always making excuses to stay away from Maths classes. Almost a decade later, I made an appointment to meet her that had nothing to do with my school memories. I wanted to speak to her about one of the most intimate, personal and difficult phases of her life. I was at her doorstep to talk to her about the death (murder, as she defined it and so did the available 'factual' documents) of her husband David Mukhia during the post-1986 agitation in Kalimpong. Sharda is now retired and lives in her wonderful home (the same place where her husband lost his life) with her son, his wife and grandchildren. Her three daughters are settled in different places—two in the United States and one in Sikkim. All four of them were witness to their father being shot down by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) on 25 February 1988.

On the morning of 25 February 1988, just like any other day, David Mukhia was at home with his family of four small children—three daughters aged 14, 12 and 9 respectively and a 6-year-old son. As part of their regular exercise, the CRPF platoons were out on the streets having embarked from three different directions on that day, one being the Relli Road area where the Mukhia's residence is located. Sharda recalled how Kalimpong was a hotbed of political violence and killings. 'The CRPF's flag marches and random rampages were a common sight in Kalimpong,' she said.[2] CRPF (also called *siyarpi* by the local people) was brought in to control the political agitation in Darjeeling Hills. '*CRPF ayo*' (CRPF has come) as an alert cry marked the presence of CRPF on their patrolling duty. At times, these raids resulted in rampant abductions, manhandling of women, destruction of private premises and killing of innocents. Fear of CRPF stands out strongly in these oral testimonies and the general psyche of the masses routinely subjected to armed violence by state institutions of the army and the police.

David Mukhia was on his front porch repairing the hen house. Hearing warning cries of CRPF's arrival he rushed inside the house and locked it from inside surrounded by his four young children. 'He feared for the girls' safety because CRPF had entered several houses and manhandled young girls.'[3]

Following insistent banging on the door and repeated calls of '*Bahar Ao'* by CRPF jawans, he came out raising his hands in the air, indicating that he was unarmed and defenceless. He then went out to open the door leaving the children inside with his arms up as a sign of being an innocent person with nothing to hide and to be afraid of. 'He was shot at point blank range in front of my children,' Sharda Mukhia says. After repeated firing he lost his life surrounded by his four children who witnessed the shooting that scarred their lives forever.

Along with David Mukhia, several other innocent lives were lost that day. A young student from Bhutan who had come to appear for his final board exams was killed on the same day. On 1 March 1988, a young nurse was raped and shot inside her house. Sharda Mukhia's letters to the different authorities identified seven people killed on that day by the CRPF;[4] later reported as 'the killing of militants by the armed personnel.' Sharda Mukhia's struggle was that of a lone woman fighting for justice by knocking on doors, questioning authorities and reporting in the leading newspapers in the hope of being given justice for this crime. She was forced to take up the responsibility of her family of four children, all of them witness to their father's murder. Forced to 'carry on' with their lives, all they could do was make the best of their situation, grieving for their loss and making ends meet. As a single mother of four, making ends meet was Sharda Mukhia's responsibility along with her quest for justice. Sharda Mukhia and her daughters' struggles, responsibilities and roles are in stark contrast to the images of women as victims in conflict where they are forced to take up new responsibilities and challenges.

Women emerge as survivors of conflicts having borne their direct outcomes and consequences. Despite her persistent struggle,

Sharda Mukhia was eventually forced to rest her case with the higher authorities denying the role of the CRPF in the 'killing' of her husband:

> This is with reference to your representations given to the Hon'ble Union Home Minister in March and June 1988. We profoundly regret the sad demise of your husband and the trauma it has caused to your family. The matter has been enquired into and evidence collected on the events of the day in and around. After careful examination of the available evidence, the enquiry has revealed that the CRPF were not involved in the shooting incident at your house involving your husband.
> *Source: Text of the letter of the Joint Secretary (Police), Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs. Dated 9 August, 1988.*

Official documents cleared the CRPF of the crime committed on her doorstep and her children being witness to the crime. Politically, her loss was grieved with due homage being paid to David Mukhia, who found a place in the long list of 'martyrs.' Symbolic homage is paid to these 'martyrs' annually on the 27th of July, wherein the community mourns the loss of these lives in the struggle for a homeland, while families continue to await closure and healing. Sharda Mukhia and her family hold a prominent place in society in Kalimpong town, coming from a respectable, upper middle-class background, often mistaken to be like any normal family. Beyond this normalcy lies the pain and loss of a family forever damaged by its personal loss deeply scarring memories and lives. All of her children suffered from post-traumatic stress disorders in different forms and life was not 'normal' for them. Her children still suffer from nightmares about the event. 'We managed, I think, the best we could,' she says softly with tears and pain in her eyes, 'Thirty-three years, and the tears are still fresh.' Her family was forced to 'move on' without any form of healing or support system to deal with the trauma. This was her story and the trauma of her children who were forced to witness such a horrific crime with no room for closure and justice with the state clearing the CRPF of its crime.

Writing about this experience was important for me because such stories are part of the collective memory of the history of conflict

and violence that defines the lives of people and communities in Darjeeling Hills. These stories highlight the multiple roles performed by women in times of conflict shedding light on the agential roles of women and their significant contributions that remain outside structured disciplines, discourses and narratives. In her narrative, I could see the different roles that both she and her daughters were forced to take up, rightly summarised by her as, 'I was forced to be the man of the family and my eldest daughter to become a mother to her siblings.' Her narrative reflected on the numerous cases and stories of rape and sexual abuse of young women by CRPF which remain undocumented. During my other interviews, many women and men emphasised sexual abuse of women by CRPF forces during their impromptu raids. An entire research can be conducted on the sexual abuse and crimes against women during the political violence of 1986 based on these oral testimonies.

Documenting women's voices offers significant insights into understanding the nuances of a conflict. Despite her loss, Sharda Mukhia stands committed to the cause of the separate homeland and believes that bringing forth these realities will offer deeper, 'humanitarian' insights into the conflict. Understood as martyrdom, these sacrifices are kept alive in the collective conscience, but the losses remain extremely personal and one's own to be acknowledged and addressed by conflict affected families surviving among communities during times of 'peace' and 'normalcy'. As I prepared to leave her house, deeply weighed by the emotional consequences of the conversation, I realised how every day of the last 33 years had defined and shaped the existence of this family which was yet to get closure and heal from the trauma of their loss.

WOMEN AS ACTIVISTS

Indrakala Pradhan, former school teacher at Turnbull High School in Darjeeling and wife of late Rudramani Pradhan, was as feisty and fiery

at 74 as I could imagine her to have been in her 40s, which is how old she was in 1986. Committed and actively involved in the agitation of 1986, she was also the first woman to be taken into custody under the provisions of TADA on 25 December 1986. She was held in custody for 31 days during which she was also part of a delegation which went to Delhi for talks on the burning question of statehood for Darjeeling.

Rudramani Pradhan was an active member of the Pranta Parishad, a socio-cultural organisation committed to promoting, preserving and improving Nepali culture among the hill people setting a precedent for the political activities of later organisations. Indrakala Pradhan was initially engaged as a hostess for the people visiting her home which later became a hub of key political developments. With the onset of the political agitation in 1986, her husband and father-in-law became actively engaged in the statehood movement and were committed to the cause of Indian Nepalis. 'My husband was a good man, and he greatly supported the political cause of fighting for the homeland,'[5] she recalled. Owing to their affluent financial position, Rudramani Pradhan played an important role in supporting and providing facilities for the numerous political rallies, meetings and events organised by GNLF.

Indrakala Pradhan's activism developed gradually through engagement in political rallies offering food to those joining the rallies. It was much later that she emerged at the forefront as a key activist in the political agitation of 1986. As Section 144 was imposed in Darjeeling on 23, 24 and 25 May, 1986, she recalled how a huge black gate was reconstructed in the heart of the upper town area to protest against the imposition of Section 144 bringing together men, women and the elderly from different parts of Darjeeling Hills. From this moment on, there was no turning back for the people of the Hills, she recollected, her passion for the cause reflected in her voice. Fuelled by a political commitment, she was soon actively engaged in organising rallies and conducting meetings, giving powerful speeches and gradually emerging as a key figure in the political agitation. Indrakala Pradhan played an instrumental role in the formation of the Gorkha National Women's Organisation (GNWO), the women's

wing of the party. GNWO was a crucial and formidable pillar of the political movement, its contributions conveniently marginalised and suppressed in the political history of Darjeeling Hills.

Along with her, Hema Lama, Tilotamma Rana, Meena Mukhia and Purnima Sharma were referred to as 'key men of the party' and were core members of the women's committee which played a pivotal role during the political agitation of 1986. GNWO was involved in strengthening grass-root support for the party and rallying people around the political cause. Women members were involved in providing care to those affected by the conflict by providing relief and other materials and aiding communities affected by CRPF's atrocities. Indrakala Pradhan recollected how women were key informants, delivering information and rations to men hiding in the forests. These multiple roles that women activists performed during the political conflict highlight their prominent presence as key figures in the political movement. Women like Indrakala Pradhan were arrested and taken into custody under TADA, leaving behind families and young children. Indrakala's recollection of hiding in forests to avoid being arrested by security forces and precarious journeys through forests and evading security personnel through disguises is reflective of the varied roles of women in conflict.

Indrakala Pradhan believes that it was her commitment to the political cause that gave her the courage to sail through these events, and in it she saw a sense of fulfilment and purpose as a 'Gorkhali woman'. Her political commitment to the cause resonated in her beliefs that, 'hopefully someday the dream of a homeland will be fulfilled.' 'I still offer prayers for this cause and mourn the lives lost for this,' she stated, observing how the sacrifices mean nothing as political parties are eventually guided by their vested interests. Her cynicism about political parties and politics is justified—'28 March, 1999 will always be etched in my memories as the black day of my life.'

It was on this date that her husband, Rudramani Pradhan, elected councillor of the Darjeeling Hill Council was murdered in broad daylight. 'It was a conspiracy and a political murder,' she says without

any hesitation. Subhash Ghising, though a popular and legendary political figure in historical narratives and political discourses on Gorkhaland, has also been accused of using undemocratic means to suppress dissent. The Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) that materialised out of a tripartite agreement between the Indian state, the state of West Bengal and GNLF was seen as a betrayal of the political movement resulting in factionalism within the party. C.K. Pradhan and Chattrey Subba emerged as vocal 'rebel' leaders in the later years, sceptical of Ghising's centralisation of power and 'selling' out of the political demand for statehood. While C.K. Pradhan was shot dead in broad daylight, Mr Subba was arrested under conspiracy charges of 'attempt to murder' of Mr Ghising. [6] Both were opposed to the DGHC, accusing Ghising of betraying the movement. Indrakala Pradhan was extremely cynical of Ghising's political leadership who she believed had chosen sectarian interests above the *jaati.* She insisted that her husband and her activism was not 'politics' because 'people do politics for power, money and fame', but 'we did it for the cause.' With the continued protraction of the political crisis, such factionalism and internal power rivalry continues to grow—resulting in further shrinking of democratic spaces—and people becoming more weary of the movement.

Indrakala Pradhan's story sheds crucial light on the political conflict and process of militarisation that was gradually introduced in the Hills. Random arrests and searches of her house by CRPF and police along with constant surveillance of their political activities eventually resulting in her arrest was an outcome of state repression of the movement through instruments such as TADA. Her varied roles started as the wife of a socio-political figure till she became an activist and a strategic persona performing multiple roles as a member of the women's wing. Indrakala Pradhan's story highlights how women are engaged in multiple roles in conflict zones. Their engagement in terms of providing shelter to party members, hosting political members in their homes, ensuring the safety of their children and the elderly and taking risks by acting as spies, messengers and carriers is

often forgotten in the post-conflict period; history eventually only remembers the sacrifices and valour of men.

LOST VOICES OF THE POLITICAL AGITATION OF 1986

Raat pare pachi darr lagthyo, raat naparos jasto laghtyo[7]

The fear of the dark and the CRPF coming out on the streets or entering houses conducting regular raids looking for 'suspected' party cadres is a common sentiment reflected in most memories of women recollecting the events of the agitation of 1986. It is in the women's stories who were forced to stay back to guard the houses. Their recollections resonate with comments on how violence was routinized as the 'norm' in the wake of the political conflict that gripped the Hills during that period. In narrating incidents of violence, one can trace painful memories of a collective loss suffered by the community as a direct outcome of conflict. Said Neelam Gurung, a housewife:

> Although they were our people, CPI (M) and GNLF members resorted to killing each other and fighting amongst themselves. In the end, it was our loss because all of them were our own people, but they did not understand and engaged in killing each other.

Inter-community violence was a direct outcome of the tension and conflict between the two key political stakeholders, GNLF and the cadres of the Communist Party of India, CPI(M). As reported in the *Week* (November, 1986):

> Two groups of Nepalis are arrayed against each other under the banners of CPI(M) and the GNLF… The CPI(M) till the other day the largest political party in the district with four MLAs and more than 3000 hard core members, has been reduced to a petty party. Its leaders live an insecure life without ever daring to move out of their party offices protected by CRPF jawans. And Subhash

> Ghising brags to newsmen that by the end of the year there will not be a single Marxist in Darjeeling.

With the CPI(M) led state government of West Bengal branding the political movement for Gorkhaland as being, 'divisive, anti-people, anti-state, anti-national', suspicions and tensions between cadres of different parties resulted in large-scale inter-community violence amongst members of the Nepali speaking community.

The culture of violence was routinely normalised in the everyday aspects of the lives of the people of Darjeeling Hills through rigorous militarisation of society and infightings during and in the post 1986 period. The regular presence of CRPF jawans patrolling the streets in different parts of Darjeeling Hills, routine arrests of ordinary people on the grounds of suspicion using TADA and routine killings are all reflective of the militarisation of the Hills during and after the political conflict of 1986. The repressive measures of the state during and after the political movement in 2006 and later in 2017 resulted in further strengthening a militarised political culture that resonated in the political practices of local political stakeholders. In resorting to the use of force and violence against each other as a means of silencing any form of dissent, political stakeholders were imitating the state's militarised response of silencing dissent through force. In doing so, a culture of silencing dissent was gradually strengthened in the organised political space of the Hills resulting in the drastic shrinking of the democratised space.

It is in the development of such a political culture that men and women were routinely forced to affirm their loyalty to the political stakeholders, blurring boundaries between loyalty to the Cause and the Party and speaking against the political regime is taken as a betrayal of the cause. Uma Pradhan's account is reflective of the dilemmas of the common people subject to such complex realities. During the initial years of the Gorkhaland agitation in 1986, Sonada, a small town close to Kurseong, was a hotbed of political activities, and she recollected

how as youth activists they were engaged in *khukuri juloos* every day, rallying and committed to the cause of the homeland. She recollected how they were hounded by the CPI(M) cadres for solidarity to the movement. Aided by the state and as an attempt to sabotage the growing popularity of GNLF, CPI(M) cadres resorted to 'kidnapping family members and holding them hostage.' 'Their condition to release these people was that we were to organise an anti-Ghising rally and condemn the political movement for Gorkhaland.' It was only after such a rally was organised that these people were released:

> I mean, who would want their husbands to be killed? I was at the forefront in organising and leading this anti-Gorkhaland rally. The consequence was that we ended up being ostracised for betraying the Cause. So, despite being fully committed to the Cause, we were forced to accept these conditions to save our own people. We were trapped from both sides, but we did what we needed to do and still remain strongly committed to the Cause.

These realities are reflective of the myriad layers of political conflicts and how people find ways to engage with it and negotiate with power within these spaces, political movements and the organised political space. Internal tensions and infightings only contribute to the worsening conditions of violence and suffering of the people, ideologically supporting the Cause while constantly being trapped within these multiple complex realities of political conflicts. The history of the political movement is rife with instances of intra-party conflicts which has strengthened the undemocratic practices of forcing people to flee from the Hills and routinely subjecting them to violence, threats and even murder. These forms of violence are deeply embedded in the psyche of the 'common, ordinary, powerless' masses forced to silently accept these realities while bearing with these consequences that continue to impact their everyday lives having lost so much over false promises and empty rhetoric.

GIVING CLOSURE

> 'I wonder what will happen to our stories, will our stories ever be heard?'—Sharda Mukhia

A common sense of weariness, disillusionment and exhaustion now prevails among the masses having borne the consequences of the political conflict and the prolonged period of shutdown in 2017. The suffering of the masses often glorified as sacrifices fail to capture the realities of the conflict where families and communities continue to mourn the loss of lives, bear with the injuries borne of conflict, reduced to mere tokenism by the political stakeholders in annually paying homage to the 'martyrs'. Families directly affected by conflict rarely get to heal or find closure, and this was evident in the personal spaces of Sharda Mukhia and Indrakala Pradhan's families where despite all the children being settled with good jobs and families, the memories of their losses, the trauma are still fresh in the 'normalcy' of their families. The tears streaming down Sharda Mukhia's face reminded me of how the family may have managed to 'move on' but getting closure was still far away. Indrakala Pradhan too told me of the many nights she wept for her personal loss, for the many lives who had become *shaheed* (martyrs) but held on to the hope that someday justice will prevail. Many more such families have lived through similar experiences of loss and pain as a direct outcome of the conflict.

Why did I choose to write about these stories? The fact that these were not just stories but lived experiences of people confronted with the everyday realities of their conflict and how these losses stayed on with them in their memories and in their everyday existence needed to be heard. The fact that these were not just stories, but the lived experiences of the people directly experiencing the violence of conflict with disastrous consequences in their deeply personal and private spaces stayed with me after I left the homes of the women I spoke to. In revisiting these deeply personal and painful memories of loss that continue to define their lives without any sense of closure or healing,

I believed that these voices, now silenced and forgotten, need to be heard, for it is in these personal losses that lie forgotten histories of conflict, violence and loss–– all central to the questions of identity and political movements in the Darjeeling Hills. Oral histories are powerful repositories of knowledge which serve to render visible voices silenced in history. In re-visiting the history of political conflict and violence in Darjeeling Hills through the memories of women who experienced and survived the political conflict of 1986 and after, it is my purpose to create a space for women's voices to be heard. It is my hope that in bringing forth these stories, they find spaces in our collective conscience. I also believe that bringing women's narratives to the fore opens up spaces to trace a genealogy of women's histories that remain silenced and marginalized from historical accounts about the political conflict in Darjeeling Hills. Creating such spaces offers healing, while tracing the genealogies of women's histories, which remain largely obscured.

RE-WRITING HISTORY: BRINGING IN THE WOMEN

When I first started doing research on the ethno-nationalist movement in Darjeeling Hills, I was driven by my interest in investigating the gendered dimension of the movement which remains marginalised in the discourses on the history of the political conflict in Darjeeling Hills. Bringing in a gender lens offers an insight into the larger picture which otherwise remains hidden or unexplored. As stated by Bushra (2017: 3), 'a gender-relational approach insists that gender analysis needs to address relationships within the "whole society".' In foregrounding questions of gender, my purpose is to re-produce knowledge on the existing questions of identity and belonging in Darjeeling Hills filling in the lacuna in existing knowledge about the region over questions of gender and women. Most of the writing on the North-East explores the inter-connection between gender and the ethno-nationalist

movement, redefining existing knowledge on the multifaceted aspects of ethno-nationalist movements, militarisation and conflicts (Aier 2017; Dolly Kikon , 2017; Kolas 2017; Phukon 2017). We have much to learn from this kind of knowledge production for we share similar histories of oppression, violence and conflict, hidden behind the façade of peace.

Gendering the political questions offers new perspectives on the socio-political and cultural history of the place which otherwise remains restricted to strictly defined boundaries and discourses. It opens the possibility of re-interpreting history and re-imagining questions of justice and equality. The insufficient research on women and their histories is also reflective of a patriarchal, political culture where women are treated as secondary to men and rendered invisible. Women's contributions and sacrifices are therefore either obscured or silenced from these narratives—strongly reflected in the oral testimonies; women's contributions were often defined as being 'supportive' and secondary to the primary roles performed by men. Both men and women agreed that women were crucial for the political movement but men's 'political' contributions were given much more importance compared to women's roles in the movement.

Uma Pradhan is now a member and president of the women's wing of the Bhartiya Gorkha Parisangh (Bhagop, a non-political organisation) and actively engaged in Bhagop's socio-cultural activities. Feisty and enthusiastic, she recollected how as young people they were actively engaged in the political agitation of 1986. She was strongly committed to the belief that 'women were empowered and without women, the idea of Gorkhaland was a distant dream.' She however reiterated that pursuing politics as a career was not easy for women due to their responsibilities at home. Similar sentiments were reflected in the interviews of former female activists of the political movement now engaged in 'socio-cultural' engagements of NGOs and 'non-political' bodies. It is a common practice where women's activism is often demarcated into the spaces of 'cultural and social' which are seen as 'decent' and 'respectable' in comparison to women in the

political spaces as political activists reflecting upon the moral sanctions attributed to politically active women. Further, it is generally assumed that women are incapable of 'doing politics' or 'lack interest' resulting in women themselves inculcating the idea of women as 'apolitical' beings (Phukon 2017). Socio-cultural inhibitions therefore and the internalisation of patriarchal norms acts as strong deterrents in women emerging as key political figures and decision-makers in the organised and public politic space reflected on by former female activists in their testimonies.

The belief that women could have done more and that women should be doing more was strongly felt by most of the women interviewed during the time of the 2017 agitation which witnessed huge participation by women, leading from the front. Women interviewed during this time asserted how they realised that their contributions were not acknowledged with women being used as shields in grass-root activism. A similar sentiment was expressed by Surekha Rai,[8] who said, 'Women were used as shields' not just during the political agitation of 1986 but later in 2006 and in 2017. She was quick in naming five or six female members who were prominently active and recognised faces of the women's movement but were now mostly confined to the 'socio-cultural' space. Both these activists of the Bhagop's women's wing agreed that women's activism was now largely restricted to the 'socio-cultural' space. But she also asserted that women were now more conscious of the developments centred around questions of gender equality, and it was in their consciousness that they deserved more. The women of Bhagop are actively engaged in promoting community welfare activities and promoting cultural awareness while strictly maintaining their image as a non-political group.

What came across during most of my interviews was how questions of *jaati* and the ethno-nationalist movement were strictly categorised as 'political' and everything else as secondary, with one former activist asserting that the time was not right to bring further divisions in the movement by raising questions of gender which could be addressed

once the Cause was achieved. The demarcation between the political and the non-political largely explains the silence and marginalisation of questions on gender in the organised political space, overwhelmingly dominated by the political question of statehood and the Gorkha identity. In treating questions of gender as separate from the larger issue of the Cause, the gendered dynamics therefore remain marginalised from both the organised political space and the narratives on the political history of the Hills. The practice of marginalising women has resulted in women believing that their stories do not matter with their losses, sacrifices and contributions often strictly defined as the personal, despite the personal being deeply enmeshed with the political. Both Sharda Mukhia and Indrakala Pradhan's personal losses were a direct outcome of the political developments in Darjeeling Hills. In both these cases, the political history of conflict and violence and the state response are reflected in the disruption of the 'personal' spaces in their respective families. The lives of the people living in conflict affected areas are deeply embedded in the political, and these lives are a direct outcome of political developments where the 'personal is political.'

Bringing in women's voices offers a deeper and nuanced understanding of the socio-political and cultural history of the place. Oral testimonies are crucial in documenting the different forms of violence experienced by the people in these places which largely remain obscured from the narratives on the place. Women have been at the forefront of the political movement and conflict as activists and homemakers, experiencing the impact of these developments. In their engagement with these developments, rich sources of information and knowledge can be found that can significantly contribute to making sense of history in a more nuanced and holistic manner. The genealogy of women's roles and responsibilities and their contributions and sacrifices remain largely missing from the collective memory history and discourses of the Darjeeling Hills. Few scholarly works have contributed to tracing the political participation of women in the ethno-nationalist political movement in Darjeeling Hills (Lama 2015;

Rai 2014). However, much remains to be done to bring forth the significant contributions made by women in different aspects of the political movement and after. It is with this purpose of re-writing history foregrounding questions of gender and locating women's memories as the 'source', that this paper seeks to fill in the gap in existing discourses on the socio-political history of Darjeeling Hills.

CONCLUSION

This paper documented women's stories of loss and survival during and after the conflict in the Darjeeling Hills during the political agitation of 1986 and later in 2017. Conflict remains an integral part of the people and the community that make up Darjeeling Hills torn by questions of belonging, reflected in the 'personal' and everyday spaces. The sub-nationalist political movement for the creation of a homeland met with stiff resistance by the state of Bengal and India and introduced conflict and violence to the Hills with severe repercussions for the people and community of these places. The indoctrination of violence as the norm is a reflection of the rigorous process of militarisation that has become normalised in the Darjeeling Hills. The practice, nature and form of militarisation varies in different conflict affected societies. While it is glaring in regions like the North East and Kashmir in the form of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), in smaller spaces like Darjeeling Hills, the co-optation of militarised practices by the state renders these places as conflicted zones, where peace remains fragile and temporary. The cyclical nature of conflict has resulted in peace being temporary with the possibility of the Hills erupting into violence at the slightest provocation, as was witnessed in the summer of 2017.

Being located in the Darjeeling Hills in 2017, I got to experience the political agitation that resulted in the Darjeeling Hills being shut down for a period of 105 days. I was witness to the conflict as it unfolded,

completely altering my understanding of conflicts. Unlike perceptions of conflicts as sites of raging battlefields, what is striking is how quickly peaceful forms of protests are converted into sites of violent conflicts. By the end of the 105 days, passion was gradually transformed to weariness as the numbers of people arrested, dying and injured continued to increase along with the growing economic scarcity. Further protraction only added to building up on internal infightings and political bickering amongst stakeholders whilst the people tried their best to hold on to the zeal and enthusiasm of the earlier days. The involvement of women in large numbers was overwhelming. Dutifully completing their daily chores to attend meetings, participate in gheraos and demonstrations, listening to political speeches, women literally formed the base of the movement and sustained it for the entire period. These contributions remain visibly marginalised and obscured, acknowledged only as tokenistic references to the 'supporting' role of the Women's groups.

My paper is an exploration of the silence around women's voices, their stories and experiences of these political conflicts and violence that remain deeply embedded in their memories. I was deeply troubled by this silence and having grown up hearing stories of the 1986 agitation from my mother who survived the ordeals of the agitation with two children, alone, it bothered me that these stories were outside the realm of history. My understanding of the political conflict stems mostly from the narratives I grew up listening to from elderly aunts, family friends and remotely known people in different gatherings.

This paper is a beginning in the direction of re-writing history from the perspective of the personal losses and trauma of those affected directly by violence to bring to the fore the nuances of conflict and violence in the Hills. The selection of these two stories was crucial for highlighting the different inter-connections and complexities of the conflict and bringing forth the myriad truths of the conflict affected region of the Darjeeling Hills. Many more such stories remain unheard, undocumented and continue to remain confined to the 'personal' spaces of kitchen conversations and community gatherings.

However, it is in these spaces that crucial sources of information continue to thrive and are kept alive through such conversations. This paper is not conclusive, but a beginning in the direction of creating a new repository of knowledge that is more nuanced, inclusive and democratised bringing in the voices of those marginalised and forgotten by history.

NOTES

1. Term used to connote the politics of the ethno-nationalist movement in Darjeeling Hills.
2. Sharda Mukhia in conversation with the author at her residence (2019).
3. Sharda Mukhia in conversation with the author at her residence (2019).
4. Sharda Mukhia in conversation with the author at her residence (2019).
5. Indrakala Pradhan in conversation with the author at her residence (2019).
6. https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/chattrey-sniffs-plot-to-choke-fight-for-state-ck-pradhan-and-i-believed-in-gorkhaland-we-both-paid-for-it/cid/836909
7. A homemaker in conversation with the author (2017). In English, this statement translates to 'I felt scared with the advent of the night/darkness. I would feel as if the night should not have arrived.'
8. Uma Pradhan and Surekha Rai in conversation with the author in their office, Ghoom Girls High School (2019).

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