

## Reconceptualising the contributions of Dal Bahadur Giri and Helen Lepcha -Two important figures of the Gorkha Community towards the Indian Freedom Struggle

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### Abstract

*One of the most significant and protracted series of historical events was the Indian Freedom Struggle. The contributions of numerous groups from diverse parts of the nation were crucial factors that ultimately led to India's independence from the turbulent 200-year rule of the British Empire. The Gorkha Community in India was crucial to the fight for freedom. Subaltern History aids us in comprehending history at the micro level in this way. The research paper aims to highlight the contributions of Dal Bahadur Giri (Gandhi of the Hills) and Helen Lepcha in this study article (Sabitri Devi).*

**Keywords:** Indian Freedom Struggle, Dal Bahadur Giri, Gorkha Community, Helen Lepcha.

### Introduction

The struggle for Indian independence lasted over a century. According to Bipin Chandra et al. (2016), it was a movement that inspired millions of people from all social groups and beliefs to take political action and brought a powerful colonial empire to its knees. Additionally, it is widely acknowledged that historiography is read widely on a macro level in some capacity. The contributions of our freedom fighters are honoured, and notable people's names are indelibly engraved in history. However, because we are viewing history from top to bottom, historiography at the micro-level appears to have come to a standstill. People who are on the margins and in the periphery are not understood. It appears that there is a clear disrespect for the contributions made by diverse populations in various parts of the nation. Their services were crucial to India's eventual independence from the turbulent British colonial rule. One of the causes of the aforementioned gap in the literature could be the scarcity of works on the freedom movement at the micro level. The endeavours of the Marxist historian Ranajit Guha in this regard provided researchers with a wealth of opportunities to focus on the micro-level and comprehend the contributions of distinct communities. The Gorkha Community is one such marginalised group.

### Subaltern History

The main proponent of Subaltern studies, Ranajit Guha, defined the subaltern to cover the lowest social strata of societies or individuals in order to establish a broader and more thorough grasp of historiography. According to him, "The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism". He goes on to say that this "blinkered historiography" cannot explain Indian Nationalism because it neglects "the contribution made by the people on their own, that is, independently of the elite to the making and development of this nationalism". (Bandyopadhyay, 2015: p. 188). Therefore, in his opinion, the term "subaltern" refers to anybody in India who is not a member of the "elite," which includes peasants, workers, poor landlords, factory workers, and to a lesser extent.

### What is the research about?

The research article aims to determine Helen Lepcha and Dal Bahadur Giri's contributions. It does a subaltern analysis of Gorkha's role in the freedom movement in Darjeeling Hills. It employs qualitative, descriptive, and historical research methodologies. The information is based on secondary sources including interviews, scholarly publications, and books authored by eminent local authors.

### Research Questions

1. What were Helen Lepcha, also known as Sabitri Devi, and Dal Bahadur Giri's contributions?
2. What part did the Gorkhas play in the struggle for Indian independence?

### Research Objectives

- 1 To engage in a study of the contributions of one of the marginalised communities in India - The Gorkhas
2. To examine the cases of two significant figures, Dal Bahadur Giri and Helen Lepcha.
3. To give the populace their own history and to add a fresh perspective to the literature of subaltern historiography.

### Literature Review

There is a tonne of material and study that has been done at the macro level. Peasants, Workers, and Freedom Struggle Jalpaiguri, 1945–1947 by Ranajit Das Gupta (1985), Quit India Movement in North Bengal by Kalikrishna Sutradhar (2021), History of the Freedom Movement in North Bengal by Sarkar et al. (2022), and Impact of Gandhian Movement on The Subaltern People of North Bengal – A Study by Ratna Roy Sanyal are among the existing works at the micro level that have been (2007).

But there isn't much literature about the Gorkhas. The few available are Fallen Cicada- Unwritten History of Darjeeling Hills (2008) and Gorkhas and Gorkhaland (2012), written by Dr. Barun Roy, where he traces the history of the Gorkhas and the emergence of Indian nationalism in the hills, respectively.

Dal Bahadur Giri's life and times were recounted by Dr. Shera Pandi Molommu in his piece Dal Bahadur Giri: The First Gorkha Freedom Fighter from the Darjeeling Hills (2018), which also highlighted his leadership accomplishments.

Dr. Gouri Dey has emphasised the contribution of Darjeeling women to the freedom movement in her article Savitri Devi Alias Helen Lepcha's Memoir as a Freedom Fighter from Eastern Himalayas-(Darjeeling).

### Rationale

The achievements of the Indian Gorkha Community and its leaders, who were admired by the national leaders of the Indian National Congress, particularly the great Mahatma Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose, must be rethought and evaluated.

The Gorkha people of India are not the only ones experiencing this difficulty. Many of these communities have had trouble finding a voice. Even now, these groups' accomplishments and history are unmatched. The fundamental goal of this research is to attempt to build the people's history in order to provide the people with their own history and to try to see the independent struggle through their eyes.

### The Resolute- Dal Bahadur Giri

The Gorkha community takes great pleasure in the name Dal Bahadur Giri. Due to his enormous contribution, he became known as Pahari Gandhi or Gandhi of the Hills. He was the mountaintop leader of the Non-Cooperation Movement and a key figure in the Indian Freedom Struggle.

Dal Bahadur Giri was born in Chowk Bazar, Darjeeling, on March 8, 1887. He was Mr. Shiva Lal Giri and Mrs. Narmada Devi's second child. His father worked for the Darjeeling Police Department as a Sub-Inspector. He had a modest upbringing and a straightforward beginning. Records show that Giri finished his studies in Darjeeling. He began his career as the Gorkha Union Library's chief organiser (Molommu, 2018). Giri came from a place where the local elites, who supported the British Government, were in charge. He had always been inclined toward the improvement of the common people.

The establishment of Anushilan Samiti in 1902 and Jugantar in 1905 marked the beginning of hushed nationalist activity in the Darjeeling Hills. Throughout the time, revolutionaries were active, including Shri Aurobindo Ghosh and Jatindranath Mukherjee. However, after Bengal was divided in 1905, nationalism migrated to the Darjeeling Hills. Leaders like Sister Nivedita and Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das held talks at the Nripendra Public Hall in Darjeeling as part of a series of protests. According to legend, young Dal Bahadur Giri felt a strong feeling of duty at that time.

Giri briefly held the position of "Head Clerk" at the Sikkim King's Royal Palace. However, his employment was terminated at the British Government's request due to disagreements that developed inside durbar's inner circle. He joined The Hill Men's Association in 1910 after returning to Darjeeling and assumed the position of Assistant Secretary of The Darjeeling People's Association of Kalimpong Branch. He met Shyam Sundar Chakravarty, who had been detained under the Defence of India Act of 1915, thanks to his advocacy and involvement in the association. Four years were spent keeping him in Kalimpong. He received frequent visits from Dal Bahadur Giri at the prison. Chakravarty allegedly counselled Giri to join the Indian National Congress in 1917. Later, he also had a close relationship with Dr. Chanu Sanyal, a prominent Congressman from North Bengal.

After attending The All India Congress Committee Session in 1917 in Calcutta with Chakravarty and Sanyal, Dal Bahadur Giri helped launch the national movement. He spoke with well-known figures like Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, Janiki Nath Ghosal, and Annie Besant. Giri was the first Gorkha leader to participate in an AICC session, and from 1919 to 1920, he also went to sessions held in Delhi, Bombay, and Nagpur. Roy (2008) claims that Giri met Mahatma Gandhi at a Congress session. Giri was impressed by Gandhian philosophy after meeting Gandhiji. Because of his intense interest in it, he was inspired to commit his life to serve the country.

Mahatma Gandhi formally proclaimed the Non-Cooperation Movement across the nation on September 4, 1920. Giri pleased Gandhiji, who gave him the task of organising the Non-Movement in Darjeeling Hills. Giri established the party office of the Darjeeling District Congress Committee at Pedong, close to Kalimpong, as the agitation started to gain speed. Following this development, a number of Gorkha leaders were enthralled and decided to become members of Congress. Helen Lepcha, Bhagatbir Lama, Putali Devi, and Jungbir Sapkota were a few notable names. Even Giri's family fully embraced the movement.

The Non-Cooperation Movement was the first such movement in which the inhabitants of the hills took part in significant numbers. The Gorkhas under Dal Bahadur Giri gained command in the Darjeeling Hills. He organised the workforce in the tea estates, cinchona plantations, timber, and tourism sectors. There were demonstrations, protest meetings, and rallies everywhere, including at offices like the Deputy Commissioner's. The demonstrators picketed businesses and imposed a ban on imports. Due to Darjeeling Hills' isolation from the rest of the country, the Himalayan Railway was also brought to a halt. Similar to this, phrases like "Bandemataram" and "Gandhiji ki Jai" spread among the inhabitants of the hills. (Roy, 2011) According to estimates, the public's resistance cost the British government and individual businesses a sizable amount of money. The British Government had not anticipated such a mobilisation in the Darjeeling Hills, therefore, the Non-Cooperation Movement was successful there.

Dal Bahadur Giri spent some time in jail as a result of his nationalist actions. He was detained twice, first going to Central Jail in Calcutta, then finally going to Berhampore Jail, which at the time was the biggest jail in Bengal. It was notorious for locking up leaders of the revolt. Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose was one of Dal Bahadur Giri's most noteworthy captives, according to Roy (2012). Due to his participation in the Swaraj Movement of Mahatma Gandhi and his revolutionary publications, Netaji had been detained. Even though there was a ten-year gap between the two stalwarts, Giri and Netaji got along well. When Netaji learned of Giri's tenacious leadership, he was enthralled by both him and the Gorkhas.

But by the start of 1923, his health had been negatively impacted by the appalling conditions in the prison. The authorities allegedly made many efforts to poison him, and it was said that he was tortured. Because of the worry of another riot, he was released. When Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose learned of his sickness, he took steps to secure financing for his medical care.

At the age of 36, the "Pahadi Gandhi" passed away on November 9th 19in all glory and honour. No one had ever before made an imprint on the hills as Dal Bahadur Giri did. He was given the moniker "Pahari Gandhi" for his continuous efforts to spread the Swaraj movement and the Gandhian philosophy. The Gorkhas adored and revered him, especially the underprivileged and destitute. The native activities in the

highlands ceased following Giri's passing. Other leaders emerged in the movement, including Helen Lepcha, Bhagatbir Lama, and Putali Devi. They continued to lead the liberation struggle in the Darjeeling Hills.

Young India's 13th November 1924 issue carried a letter from Mahatma Gandhi that said, "*Many readers of Young India know Sri. Dalbahadur Giri by name only. Some may not have even heard his name. Yet he was one of the bravest of national workers. As I am writing for Young India, I have a wire from Kalimpong with the news of the death of this comparatively unknown patriot. I tender my condolence to his family. He was a cultured Gorkha and was doing good works among the Gorkhas in the nearby Darjeeling. During 1921, in common with the thousands, he was also imprisoned for the non-cooperation activities. He became seriously ill during his imprisonment. He was discharged only a few months ago. He leaves behind, I understand, a large family destitute of means of livelihood.*" Leading figures like Chitranjan Das, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad sent their condolences to the family of the courageous Gorkha leader.

When Mahatma Gandhi arrived in Darjeeling on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1925, he visited Giri's family to pay tribute. He praised the work of Giri and referred to him as 'Pahari Bagh'. As there was no one to look after Giri's family, Gandhiji extended an invitation to Sabarmati Ashram to the deceased man's wife and his children. Gandhi took care of Giri's household. For many years, they lived in Sabarmati Ashram with Gandhiji and his family.

Today, Dal Bahadur Giri is revered as a hero. He dedicated his life to the cause of liberating India. In order to recognise his work, The Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council unveiled a statue of Dal Bahadur Giri on October 2, 2003, at Thana Dara in Kalimpong. The Pahari Gandhi was displayed at Gandhi Jayanti by the DGHC. When it comes to the freedom struggle, the Gorkhas are extremely proud. However, subsequent generations have forgotten his sacrifice and service.

### **The Enigmatic- Helen Lepcha**

The people of the Darjeeling Hills were instilled with a strong sense of resolve and a fighting spirit by Dal Bahadur Giri. It was also obvious that women in the Darjeeling Hills were actively involved in the fight for independence. Helen Lepcha, also known as Sabitri Devi, was one of Dal Bahadur Giri's most devoted followers.

On January 14, 1902, Helen Lepcha was born in the Sikkim village of Sangmu, which is close to Namchi. She was Mr. and Mrs. Achung Lepcha's third child. She was from a respectable Rong group, an indigenous Lepcha clan found in Sikkim and North Bengal, hence she had a modest upbringing. Records show that the family relocated to Kurseong in quest of employment as a result of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century industrialisation of Darjeeling Hills and its environs by the British Colonial Government, which resulted in a sizable working class and plenty of employment prospects.

Helen Lepcha was unable to complete her official education due to a variety of factors, including financial difficulties. She stopped attending school in 1916. But this marked the start of a pivotal period in her life. In support of the freedom fight, Mahatma Gandhi started to popularise the use of charka during that time. Gandhiji promoted the use of clothing manufactured from homespun yarn and discouraged the use of British-imported fabric as part of his Charka movement. The Charka movement had reached the Darjeeling Hills, and Helen Lepcha was suddenly filled with a sense of responsibility as a prominent Bengali leader was spreading the word about Gandhi's Charka movement. She then committed herself to advance the interests of her country. She departed for Calcutta in 1918 to visit her older sister who was living there. She started studying weaving with the help of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's granddaughter. Helen soon showed her skill in spinning the charka, and in the following months, she represented Calcutta at the Khadi and Charka Exhibition held in Muzaffarpur, Bihar (Sarda, 2021).

Many women were propelled by the Swadeshi Movement across India. Helen Lepcha was influenced by numerous well-known female leaders during this period, including Kasturubha Gandhi, Kamala Nehru, Sarala Devi, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Aruna Asaf Ali. Mahatma Gandhi first learned of her commitment to the cause in 1920, when she was serving and giving selflessly to the Bihar flood and famine victims. Helen's dedication attracted Gandhiji, who praised her and extended an invitation to the Sabarmati Ashram. The archives state that Mahatma Gandhi inspired Helen. It is reported that during her visit to the Sabarmati Ashram, Gandhiji thought her name didn't fit the movement's spirit and gave off the image of a foreigner. As a result, he changed the name of Helen Lepcha to Sabitri Devi.

Sabitri Devi, Helen's new name, joined the Indian National Congress and was given the additional task of leading the Congress Party. She took part in the Congress Labour Union's activities in Patna, Muzzafarpur, and Dhanbad among other locations in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Another pivotal year in her life was 1921 when the Non-Cooperation Movement was at its height and Sabitri Devi spearheaded a movement in the Jharia coal fields at Calcutta's famed Mohammed Ali Park. Prominent freedom fighters like Mahatma Gandhi, Chitranjan Das, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and many others were present. In addition to establishing her as a mass leader, this also moved her closer to notable leaders of the independence movement and led to the assignment of new duties. She and Sarojini Naidu both went to The All India Congress convention in Ahmedabad. But as her fame grew and she became more active, the British colonial authorities began to watch her, and records show that they made attempts to halt her actions. Sabitri Devi along with Dal Bahadur Giri and others became a significant leader as the Non-Cooperation Movement advanced to the Darjeeling Hills. She visited homes in various parts of Kurseong and Siliguri, going from one to the next. She issued a call for a boycott of imported items to all Gorkhas. Numerous Gorkhas participated in the boycott of foreign goods as a result of her efforts. She organised numerous demonstrations and set foreign items on fire. The Amrit Bazaar Patrika stated that Savitri Devi and a number of Congress workers had been taken into custody. However, Savitri Devi had established herself as a household name in the hills by the middle of the 1920s. Many referred to her as their sister and saw her as their leader. In the area, she became referred to as Helen Didi (sister).

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose spent a brief time at Kurseong between 1939 and 1940. After moving from Poona to Darjeeling Hills, the British administration placed him under house arrest at the home of his older brother, Sarat Chandra, in Giddha Pahar, Kurseong. He was granted the go-ahead to meet with the local authorities. Sabitri Devi was one such leader in whom Netaji had faith. Sabitri Devi reportedly played a crucial role in assisting Subhas Chandra Bose in escaping from his jail in Kurseong and traveling to Germany via Kabul, according to the Directory of Indian Women Today (1976). According to rumour, Savitri Devi used to write notes to Netaji that were concealed inside the bread that her husband Ishan Ahmbed's bakery sent. Rumor has it that Savitri Devi personally oversaw Netaji's house arrest-escape ruse, which included the Pathan attire, beard, and moustache. This hasn't been confirmed. However, his escape was eventually made possible by Sabitri Devi's efforts.

Sabitri Devi kept up her efforts in the fight for freedom. She advanced to become a well-known nationalist leader and actively took part in the Quit India and civil disobedience movements. Later in life, she devoted herself to helping others, and she also rose to become the first female commissioner of the Kurseong Municipality. On August 18, 1980, she passed away in Uttar Pradesh.

The Tamra Patra Freedom Fighter Award was given to Sabitri Devi by the Indian government on August 15, 1972. She is still revered as the "Daughter of the Soil" by the state of Sikkim today. The ancestral residence of the late freedom fighter was found in 2010 by The Bharatiya Gorkha Parisangh (BGP), an organisation with headquarters in Sikkim. They decided to erect a statue in honour of the freedom fighter after her passing.

## Conclusion

The Gorkhas in India have always looked to Dal Bahadur Giri and Helen Lepcha (Sabitri Devi) as models of bravery and resistance. Two outstanding individuals emerged from the hills during the struggle for



liberation. They both showed bravery in their deeds and fostered a sense of nationalism in the Darjeeling districts.

The struggles of these significant individuals are no longer recorded in history. Even now, these groups' accomplishments and history are unmatched. From the standpoint of subaltern studies, we have a collection of fascinating individuals at our disposal whose zeal and accomplishments have gone unrecognised in the larger context due to a lack of relevant literature. It is true that there is a dearth of knowledge among Indians, and as a result, most readers of history believe that the Gorkhas of Darjeeling played a little role and were excluded from the bigger picture.

The contributions and bravery of some marginalised communities and their leaders are somewhat underappreciated even from the subaltern perspective within the scope of micro-level historiography, despite the fact that subaltern historiography tries to highlight the roles played by these marginalised communities. It must be recognised that comprehending the role of these marginalised populations during India's battle for independence is essential.

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