Abstract

It is a well-known fact that drops and drops of water makes an ocean and this hold true to the thousands of unsung heroes whose sacrifices and determination paved the way for independence. We do not remember the drops but only the contribution of the big rivers, lakes, bays and seas. Among the multitude of brave souls that had given their all in the freedom movement from a gamut of tribes and communities many of them fails to find mention. One such brave soul was Helen Lepcha from the marginalised Lepcha community, said to be close to Mahatma Gandhi, the Nehru’s and Netaji, her immense role in the freedom struggle cannot be undermined. She was rechristened Sabitri Devi by Mahatma Gandhi at Sabarmati Ashram and she remained a true congress woman all her life religiously following the ideals of Gandhiji. In this study I shall try to unravel her interesting life history, her role in the freedom struggle and bring forward how a small community relatively in obscurity also lent its hand in the national uprising.

1. Introduction

Helen Lepcha alias Sabitri Devi was one of the most famous Freedom fighters from the hills of Darjeeling and Sikkim. Originally a resident of Kurseong town she traces her lineage to a small hamlet in the village of Sangmoo near Namchi in South Sikkim. She is the only woman freedom fighter born in the state of Sikkim and even though she spent most of her life in hills of Darjeeling; Sikkim has come forward to name her as the daughter of their soil. In the event of Major Durga Malla and Captain Ram Singh Thakuri taking precedence among the freedom fighters from Darjeeling hills, Smt. Sabitri Devi has been given due recognition in her birth state of Sikkim. Born into a Lepcha family of Achung Lepcha, she was the third daughter among seven. It is said she was born around 1902 and soon after her family moved from Sangmoo village to Kurseong. Even today stand the Chorten she paid maintenance for annually and the pear tree she fondly remembered from her childhood in her homestead [1].
2. Influence of Charkha and Khadi Movement

We do not know exactly why her family moved to Kurseong, but her father must have been encouraged to move because of the superior education standard of Kurseong at that time and enough employment opportunities in British occupied Kurseong as compared to princely state of Sikkim. She started receiving primary education at Scott’s Mission School; even though the financial condition of the family was good she dropped out of school in 1916. At around 1917-1918 Mahatma Gandhi had started the Charkha movement and it had gathered huge momentum, a certain Bengali gentleman had come to Kurseong to propagate Mahatma’s Charkha movement and young, impressionable Helen Lepcha was very inspired by the speech given by this gentleman.[2] This can be marked as a turning point in the life of Helen Lepcha. She took advantage of the fact that her elder sister was residing in Calcutta and went there in 1918[3] and enrolled in the Charkha school of the granddaughter of Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Here due to her dedication and youthful exuberance she very quickly excelled in the weaving of Charkha, impressed by her deft skills her instructors chose her to represent Calcutta in the National level Khadi and Charkha Exhibition in Muzzafarpur in Bihar.[4] This can be termed as the second turning point in her life.

3. Congress worker ‘Sabitri Devi and her work field’

At 1920 Bihar was inundated by wide spread floods and in the ensuing chaos and panic Helen Lepcha found her calling, she was totally immersed in voluntary work saving and giving relief to the poor people of the state. During this time Mahatma Gandhi came to visit the people affected by this natural calamity, he had heard many good words and deeds she had done among the downtrodden. Here Mahatma Gandhi summoned and met Helen Lepcha in the house of Safidat, an eminent Congress leader from the area. Mahatma Gandhi was very impressed by the work done by her and praised her a lot and invited Helen Devi to visit Sabarmati Ashram in the near future. She immediately took the invitation and proceeded to Sabarmati; as said by Helen lepcha herself, ‘during her visit to Sabarmati Ashram, Mahatma said that a sense of foreigner came from the name Helen and he rechristened her name to Sabitri Devi.[5] Henceforth she was known as Sabitri Devi in Bengal and Bihar. She was given the responsibility of looking after certain parts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh like Patna, Danapur, Bakipur, Muzzafarpur and Jharia coal fields. In these areas she was popular as a Congress leader. Thousands of people in these area looked up to her as their leader and the British could not ignore her and kept a stern look on her movements, her Anti- British stance and activities coupled with her popularity was a serious headache to the British hierarchy. A warrant was issued in her name and she was hounded by the police in order to escape capture she hardly stayed in the same place for long. British intelligence was always around her and all her activities were kept under strict vigilance, she was one of the most wanted local congress leader from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Once while she was leading a rally on horseback British soldiers opened fire on her but she escaped unhurt.[6] At around this period she attended the All India Congress meeting in Ahmedabad with Dr. Sarojini Naidu and came into close contact with most of the top leaders of the Congress, she built a good rapport with them and had a good working relationship with all of them. As her area of work was around UP and Bihar she was very much in contact with Allahabad which was the epicentre of all important decisions of the Congress, the house of Jawaharlal Nerhu “Anand Bhawan” in Allahabad was the place she frequented and national leaders like Motilal Nerhu, Jawaharlal Nerhu and Morarji Desai were very close to her. Here she also routinely met local Congress leaders like Lala Jagat Narayan, Shri Sashi Das, Sir Ambika Prasad and Ananda Mohan and worked closely with them, at this time she recalls that Indira Gandhi was just a small girl.[7]
**4. Her role in the Non-cooperation Movement**

In 1921 when the Non Co-operation movement was at its peak she took part in the huge rally at the famous Muhammed Ali Park at Calcutta alongside Gandhiji, Chitaranj Das, Maulana Abul Kalam Ajad, Smt. Urmila Devi and Smt. Swaroop Rani. On this day she had given leadership to a rally of thousands of labourers of Jharia coalfields by holding the national flag in her hand. Her role in the Non Co-Operation movement in 1921-22 cannot be ignored or undermined. At around this time her mother fell ill and she had to return to Kurseong, but she could not stay away from the rebellion that was going around. In Siliguri area the fire of non-Co-operation movement was gathering momentum and Sabitri Devi could not resist the lure of nationalism, so she gathered a few Gorkha volunteers and started a door to door campaign against foreign goods. Huge bonfires of goods were burnt in and around Siliguri, the local administration could not contain this nationalistic outpour under the leadership of Sabitri Devi, section 144 was imposed all around the area. But she and her supporter were unstoppable, one such day as she was going with a rally the police lathi charged. When the lathi charge was not effective the police opened fire, many of the volunteers retaliated by using stones. She was forced to give herself up and was then taken into custody along with her volunteers. It has been said that she was put under rigorous imprisonment and she had to grind corn in jail quite frequently. [8] Amrita Bazaar Patrika one of the famous circulated newspaper of the time states thus in its issue on 30th January 1922: “Sabitri Devi with the Congress Secretary and E. Ahmed and Gorkha Volunteers have been arrested”. [9] The government then opened an anti-government case against her and was jailed for three months in Darjeeling Sadar jail, later after she was released she was put in house arrest in her house and her movement was restricted to the Kurseong Municipality. Even this constraint in movement could not contain her and she kept the freedom movement alive in the hills.

**5. Close Relationship with Mahatma Gandhi**

She goes on to say that at around 1925 – 26 Mahatma Gandhi came to the Darjeeling hills to visit the ailing Chittaranjan Das. Sabitri Devi went to meet Gandhiji, and as any young woman she had put on gold and silver ornaments. Gandhiji on seeing her dressed up this way became very annoyed and told her to lead a simple life, he ordered her to donate all her ornaments to the Swaraj Fund, Sabitri Devi immediately took off her ornaments and obediently donated all her jewellery to the Swaraj Fund. Since then she never put a single ornament till she lived, she religiously followed the path shown by Gandhiji and led a very simple life devoid of all luxurious articles, dedicating her life to the freedom struggle. She was as example of a Congresswoman and we feel pride to call her as one of our own.

**6. Her involvement in the escape of Netaji from India**

In 1932 she was the first woman to be elected Commissioner of Kurseong Municipality. At around 1939-40 Netaji Subash Chandra Bose was kept under house arrest in his house situated at Giddhae Pahar in Kurseong. Sabitri Devi says that they used to keep correspondence by sending secret message inside the bread meant for Netaji from her husband Ishan Ahmed’s bakery. People say that the escape of Netaji to Europe was hatched in Kurseong and the Pathan dress, beard and moustache used by Netaji for disguise was made in Kurseong by her. In the end the role of Sabitri Devi in the escape of Netaji was immense. This is vouched by Mr R.P.Majhi a Congress worker and a student of Class nine when Netaji was under house arrest at Giddhae Pahar, he says that he and his friends used to play wheels all the way up to Kurseong and a certain Bengali gentleman used to send letters for posting from time to time, later on it was Helen aunty according to him who said that it was an
important job that he had carried out, the messages sent in the bread was responded by letters posted by Mr Majhi which aided in the escape of Netaji from India.[10] It is said by the relatives of Netaji, Madhuri Bose and Chanda Kumar Bose that file No 17 of Netaji states the important role played by Sabitri Devi in his escape from India.[11]

7. Sabitri Devi the Social Activist

Sabitri Devi was not just a politician but she was also an involved social activist. She was the chairperson of various associations in Kurseong like the Sherpa Association, Nagar Congress, Anjuman Islamia and the Lepcha association. She was also the Mandal of Kurseong area till late in her life. All these posts of power goes to point out that she was a lady with a strong personality, acceptable to all as a leader and secular by nature. She was a true leader who was not partial to any one community are gave leadership following the doctrine of the Congress. Published in Delhi in 1976 the “Directory of Indian Women Today” states in page 576 as follows: “Sabitri Devi; First Nepali Woman Freedom Fighter. B. 1903. Her original name was Helen, Gandhiji renamed her ‘Sabitri Devi’ when she went to Sabarmati Ashram on his invitation. Her area of activity was Jharia Coal Fields, Bankipur, Danapur, Patna etc. Used to lead large processions protesting against the British regime lived in Anand Bhavan also for some time. She was the first woman to be elected Municipal Commissioner of Kharsang Municipality. Helped Netaji Subash Chandra Bose escape from imprisonment in Kharsang and migrate to Germany through Kabul. Even at this advanced age, she is an active social and political worker, was awarded TAMRA PATRA in 1972. [12]

8. Recognition for her Work

On the event of the celebration of the Silver Jubilee celebration of Indian independence on 15th August 1972 the government of India honoured and awarded the contribution of Sabitri Devi with the Tamra Patra and a pension meant for freedom fighters. Mrs Indira Gandhi handed over these to Sabitri Devi, of whom she had fond memories from her childhood day in Anand Bhawan and known to her as Saili Didi. The Tribal Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal also honoured and recognised her contributions by conferring on her “Reward to Tribal Headman of the District”. The Governor of West Bengal handed this to her at the Shrubbery Park, Darjeeling on 1st June 1958.[13]

9. Conclusion

It is lamentable that a Lepcha woman who believed that the British was the main cause in the downfall of the Lepchas in Darjeeling hills and found vent to her anger by joining the Mahatma Gandhi led Congress to rebel against the British[N] does not find mention in any of the vernacular texts of the region. It is sad that even after her death not a single memorial, or some form of recognition has not been conferred on her by the local leadership. A very secular leader during her life who did not discriminate any community or religion, on whose death every religious group wanted to perform her last rites according to their beliefs has not found her due recognition in Darjeeling hills which she called home. It is at the behest of Bharatya Gorkha Parisangh (Sikkim Chapter) that some form of recognition is being accorded to her on Balidan Diwas on 25th August each year in Sikkim and her lineage too was traced by them.[14] a petition has been placed by this organisation to the state government of Sikkim that the Central park in Namchi be named after her and a statue be erected there after Mr. K.N. Rai (the MLA in which Sangmoo village falls) announced that her statue would be built in the region.[15] Regional leaders and people who can make a difference should make it a point that our pride in Indian freedom struggle should not fade into
oblivion. The sacrifices and tremendous service that one of our own has given to the nation should be recorded in golden words for future generations.

References

[14] Himalaya Darpan, August 7, 2010, p-1