

## Revisiting the Role of the Two Nepali Women in the Nepali Language Movement: Maya Devi Chhetry and Dil Kumari Bhandari

Dr. Sushma Rai

*Assistant Professor of History, Kalimpong College  
&*

Dr. Anira Phipon Lepcha

*Assistant Professor of History, Sikkim University*

**Abstract:** *It is undeniable that men have long held a position of power in society, especially in politics. Throughout history, women have continuously overcome obstacles to participate actively in politics worldwide. It is important to note that in this particular context, Nepali society, which is considered a minority in the country and is relatively behind in terms of its constitutional rights, was quite progressive. Their women actively participated in the movement and provided much-needed leadership, guiding the Nepali Bhasa Movement to success. This article will try to highlight the role of two great women, Maya Devi Chhetry and Dil Kumari Bhandari, who relentlessly fought for the cause of the recognition of the Nepali language as a part of the eighth schedule of the Indian constitution, which ultimately led to its success. The contributions of both women leaders will always be written in golden words, as one initiated the movement in Parliament and the other concluded it.*

**Keywords:** Maya Devi Chhetry, Dil Kumari Bhandari, Nepali Language Movement, Indian Identity, Eight Schedule

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato opined that a nation cannot dream of progress and prosperity if half of the precious talent is confined within the house's four walls. What is the position and role of the women in the society? This is the most pertinent question to be asked in order to judge any civilisation or society. Therefore, the issues related to women have become an area of great interest among researchers in the field of social sciences, as nearly half of the world's population consists of women. Their contribution towards different fields must be addressed. Unfortunately, their participation in various social, economic and political spheres has not been fully recognised.

In India, women's participation, particularly in politics since ancient times, has been subordinate and marginal. Even during the Early Vedic Period, when society was largely egalitarian, we hardly find their participation in the two most important political institutions, Sabha and Samiti. With time, their condition worsened, especially after the Muslim invasion.

However, some changes in women's status can be marked in economic, social and political arenas, especially after the nineteenth-century Renaissance, followed by the various social reform movements. As a result, several associations and organisations were formed in different parts of the country that reflected women's concerns. These organisations became the medium for expressing 'women's opinions' in days to come. Interestingly, one of the first organisations for women in India was begun by men. As a result, despite their invaluable work in educating women and providing them with their first experience with public work, they imposed limitations. Therefore, women began to define their interests, propose solutions, and take action only after they formed their own associations. Three major organisations, the Women's Indian Association (W.I.A.), the National Council of Women in India (N.C.W.I.) and the All-India Women's Conference (A.I.W.C.), emerged between 1917 and 1927.<sup>1</sup> Ever since the participation of women in the nation-building process has been incredible. Their participation has been noteworthy not only in the freedom struggle but also in the various movements where they played a vital role, and one such example was the Nepali Language Movement.

The Nepali language movement was one of the first united efforts of all the Nepali-speaking community of India to assert their identity as Indian citizens, which ultimately led to the rise of the feeling of nationalism through a linguistic path and ultimately resulted in an outburst in the form of the Nepali Language Movement or locally known as Nepali Bhasa Andolan. The movement was the outburst of the Nepali-speaking population of India who, despite being Indian citizens, were constantly subjected to the identity crisis as the Nepalese of Nepal origin and not the Nepali of Indian origin. Therefore, the Constitutional recognition of the Nepali language was felt as an urgent need of an hour for the entire Nepali-speaking population of the country.

The Nepali Language Movement, initially led by Anand Singh Thapa of Dehradun, which later spread out to Darjeeling and Sikkim with significant support from the Nepali-speaking populace of Assam, was undoubtedly a movement for the quest of 'Indianness' by the Indian Nepalis, as they were often branded either as foreigners (Nepal nationals) or Nepali diaspora.

It is believed that the 'Nepali' language got its name from the name of the country Nepal. The Nepali language was first officially recognized by the Government of Nepal as the country's national language as it was and is one of the most widely spoken languages there. The Nepali language and the Nepali community in India have been unfairly scrutinized and discriminated against for a long time. They have often been mistaken for foreign nationals, and their

language has been wrongly labelled as foreign. This unjust treatment had a significant impact on the Nepali community's integration and representation in India. However, time and again, many eminent scholars from India and abroad have tried to clear these doubts and point out that the Nepali language is as Indian as any other language spoken in India and has the right to be part of the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. According to historical evidence, the claim that Nepali is a foreign language has no historical basis. Many eminent historians and linguists believe that the Nepali language belongs to the Indo-Aryan family of languages. It is derived from the speech found in Rig Veda, which originated in India and later spread to the Himalayan range, including Nepal, and was fully developed there. The Nepali community in India shares a common culture and, more importantly, a common language with their neighbouring country, Nepal. Despite more than seventy-seven years of independence, the entire Nepali-speaking community in the country continues to face critical scrutiny. The demand for the recognition of their language by the Government of India was incredibly important and urgent. People from the Nepali-speaking community across the country came together to participate actively in this movement.

More than fifteen million Indian nationals speak Nepali as their mother tongue, which is the official language of Nepal, the state language of Sikkim, and the language of the majority of the population of Bhutan. In short, Nepali is the dominant language of the lower Himalayan and sub-Himalayan regions of India. Besides this, more than three million people who speak Nepali as their mother tongue are spread over Assam, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Dehradun, Lucknow, Simla, Dharamshala, Bakloh, Nahan (Himachal Pradesh) and the other regions of India. Thus, it is one of the common languages spoken by different groups of people spread across various parts of the country. This has given impetus to the sense of consciousness among the Nepali-speaking community in India. Moreover, with time, this feeling of Nepali consciousness evolved as the marker of linguistic identity and the binding force for Nepali language speakers worldwide.

The demand for the recognition of Nepali as the official language has been highlighted as early as the time of the Morley Minto Reform in 1909.<sup>2</sup> However, it was never considered imperative or urgent by the British. After the independence, particularly after the recommendation of the States Reorganization Commission (S.R.C., 1953) for the formation of the new states on a linguistic basis, was proved to be an eye opener to the entire Nepali-speaking population of India, which resulted in the demand for the recognition of the Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution along with the intensification of the statehood demand. Soon, when the State Reorganisation Act (henceforth S.R.A) was passed in 1956, the number of unilingual states was carved out by adjusting the boundaries of the various states in India. This was the primary drive for the language lovers of the various

linguistic communities to put their demands further. The Nepalis had constantly been subjected to an identity crisis because of the common culture, and the common language they spoke was the same as the national language of Nepal. Therefore, they were constantly subjected to identity crises and also had a dream of having a State for themselves so that they could also be identified as Indian nationals. Hence, they felt this was the opportunity they had been looking for. Thus, under the background of the linguistic reorganisation of the states, the Constitutional recognition of the Nepali language became the priority of the entire Nepali-speaking population of the country to achieve their final aim of having a State of their own.

The movement to recognise the Nepali language underwent various stages before reaching its final goal. The first phase started on 18th January 1956 when the first official letter to the then President of India, Rajendra Prasad, was sent by Anand Singh Thapa (editor of *Jagrat Gorkha* published from Dehradun) and his associates. It was the first official demand for the inclusion of the Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which officially started the Nepali Language Movement.<sup>3</sup> This was followed by forming different organisations and their branches throughout the country to popularise and further forward the demand in the country's apex body. In the next phase, the massive participation of the general public and various political parties was witnessed, strengthening the movement. Moreover, the final phase was when Sikkim took the lead under the leadership of the then Chief Minister of the State, Nar Bahadur Bhandari and his wife, the then-elected member of the Parliament, Mrs. Dil Kumari Bhandari.

The Constitution of India guarantees the right to preserve, cultivate and promote the language and culture of all its subjects equally without any distinction. Accordingly, the Nepalis desired to preserve their socio-cultural heritage, especially their language, as a mark of their Indian identity. It was not an easy task, but it was achieved after a long struggle in which many great personalities contributed a lot to the cause of the recognition of the Nepali language. Though the contribution of men, women, and even students played a role in this movement, this article will try to focus on the roles of Maya Devi Chhetry and Dil Kumari Bhandari, who persistently fought for the recognition of the Nepali language as a part of the eighth schedule of the Indian constitution.

### **Maya Devi Chhetry**

Maya Devi Chhetry was born in March 1921 in Kurseong. She was the first elected woman Member of the Parliament from the State of West Bengal at the first Rajya Sabha held after the independence. She held the office from 3rd April 1952 till 2nd April 1964, representing the Indian National Congress. As early as on 24th August 1956, she became the first lady from the Nepali community to raise the demand in the Parliament for recognition of the Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. While participating in the

parliamentary debate on the Nepali language in Rajya Sabha, she questioned the Government on as how the language which the British even recognised was kept out of the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. She even did not hesitate to criticize the Government for showing that the number of Nepalis in India at the time was not more than four lakhs twenty-one thousand six hundred eighty-eight and pointed out that the number was more than thirty-five lakh (3.5 million).<sup>4</sup> She even appealed to then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri to intervene in the conspiring decision of Congress Chief Minister of West Bengal Bidhan Chandra Rai. She urged them to enact and enforce a law that the Nepali Language should be made the Official Language of the District. As a result, finally, on 11th November 1961, The West Bengal Official Language Act 1961, also known as West Bengal Act XXIV of 1961, was passed.<sup>5</sup> According to this, the Bengali language was to be adopted for official purposes of the State of West Bengal. Most importantly, the Act provided that in the three hill subdivisions of the district of Darjeeling, namely, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong, the Nepali language and the Bengali language can be used for official purposes. Though the Bengali language was to be mainly used for the official purposes of the State of West Bengal as referred to in Article 345 of the Constitution of India<sup>6</sup>, it was still a great victory for the Nepali-speaking population of the State to be recognised as their mother tongue as one of the official languages and to be used for official purposes as par with the Bengali language within the State of West Bengal.

On 18th October 1970, even after her tenure was over as a Member of Rajya Sabha, Maya Devi Chhetry wrote a letter to the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, requesting to present a government bill in the Parliament to give the Nepali language a constitutional recognition in the National level. Not only that, she even wrote to the then Minister of State for Education, Bhakt Darshan, B.J.P Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, including Suniti Kumar Chatterjee and many other national level Ministers and intellectuals and asked for their help and support for the recognition of the Nepali language.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in 1972, when the second phase of the nationwide Nepali Language Movement was started under the leadership of Akhil Bharatiya Nepali Bhasa Samiti demanding recognition of the Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, Maya Devi Chhetry assured to give her full support and to render all possible help for the cause of the movement.<sup>8</sup>

After the Emergency, the shifting of the power in the hands of the Janata Party at the centre and Morarji Desai becoming a new Prime Minister in 1977 again brought fresh anticipation among the Nepalis. However, again, the plea of the Nepalis was bluntly rejected, with a serious allegation that Nepali was a foreign language. As a result, mass protests and rallies were organised, and the entire Nepali-speaking population stood against the ruling Government. During this time, Maya Devi Chhetry, a moderate thinker, was still in favour of holding talks with Morarji Desai once again when everyone else, especially

Bhasa Samiti, was against any further talk with the Government. Due to her disagreement with Bhasa Samiti, an organisation considered to be the voice of Nepali language enthusiasts, some went as far as labelling her as being part of an anti-language movement. Not only that, her house in Kurseong was also attacked by the outraged and provoked mob, including Radio Kurseong, and it was during this time that even Shiva Kumar Rai's house was sieged.<sup>9</sup> He even returned his Sahitya Akademi Award to protest the incident and pressure the central government.

Despite the unfortunate incidents and the protest against her, she wrote a letter to Morarji Desai highlighting and countering his ignorant statement on the very issue of the Nepali language. She even requested its recognition as soon as possible. However, again, the Prime minister's response was the same and replied that Nepali cannot be included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution as its origin was in Nepal, which is an independent country. He even questioned Maya Devi Chhetry that even in "Nepal, a large number of people speak Hindi, but will Nepal's Government consider the same status as the Hindi language in Nepal?"<sup>10</sup> But all these did not stop her from fighting for the cause of the Nepali language, and she continued her fight for the cause of the Nepali language. Despite the accusations from her community, she kept her fight alive. From being the first elected woman Member of the Parliament from the State of West Bengal to raising the demand for recognition of the Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in the Parliament, she has inspired all the women in the society.

### **Dil Kumari Bhandari**

Dil Kumari Bhandari is one of the pivotal persons who can be credited fully for taking the constitutional demand to include the Nepali language into the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution to its final stage. She was born on 14th May 1949 in Puttabong Darjeeling. She was the first woman from Sikkim to be elected as a member of the Parliament. She held the post twice from May 1985 to 27th November 1989 and from 20th June 1991 to 10th May 1996. On 28th March 1968, she married Nar Bahadur Bhandari, former Chief Minister of Sikkim.<sup>11</sup> It would not be wrong to say that the duo justly provided the thirty-six-year-old long pending demand of almost fifteen million Nepali population of India the much-needed thrust and the path through which it finally reached its goal.

Dil Kumari Bhandari not only took the matter of Nepali language to Lok Sabha but equally highlighted it to various political parties and tried her best to convince the leaders of all the opposition parties, too, with her immense knowledge of Nepali language and culture. She did not even hesitate to highlight the failure of the Nepali Language Movement due to the party politics in the hills. The controversy over the use of the term 'Nepali' or 'Gorkha' Bhasa or language not only created a huge confusion but, in the long run, proved to be a great hindrance towards the movement of its recognition. However, this did



not stop her from fighting for the cause of the Nepali language. On 10th April 1992, she even introduced a Private Member Bill, and this was considered the 'Diamond' in the path of the Nepali Language Movement.<sup>12</sup> The Bill was supposed to be discussed in the house on 7th August. However, on the same day, the Minister of State for Home Affairs, M.M. Jacob, made an announcement of moving the Government Bill for the recognition of the languages and therefore asked Dil Kumari Bhandari to withdraw her Private Member Bill. As a result of the assurance from M.M. Jacob, she withdrew her Bill and expressed her appreciation to him and the members of the house for assurance of the recognition of the Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.<sup>13</sup>

On 19th August 1992, when the Congress M.P. from Darjeeling Inderjit Khullar (who was fully supported by Gorkha National Liberation Front (G.N.L.F), the leading political party in the hills at that time) called the Nepali language a 'foreign language' she could not take it and requested Ghulam Nabi Azad to stop him and make an apology and not only that she even went near the table of the Speaker of the Parliament and sat on the floor and asked that if he does not withdraw his comment that Nepali is a foreign language, she warned the house to observe an indefinite hunger strike.<sup>14</sup> She even openly challenged Inderjit Khullar to show any work on the Gorkha language and literature. In order to show his support, Yaima Singh Yumnam, a Member of Parliament from Manipur, also joined her and sat on the floor near the table.<sup>15</sup> She even raised the question, 'If Nepali is a foreign language, then who am I?' Her constant effort towards the cause of the Nepali language and perseverance made it possible for the thirty-six-year-old pending demand to be finally recognized by the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution on 20th August 1992.

### **Conclusion:**

The contributions of Maya Devi Chhetry and Dil Kumari Bhandari will always be written in golden words. Maya Devi Chhetry initiated the movement and became the first woman from the Nepali community to raise the demand in the Parliament for the recognition of the Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. She did not hesitate to question and criticise the government for not incorporating the Nepali language into the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. On the other hand, Dil Kumari Bhandari gave the movement its final push. She not only took the matter of the Nepali language to Lok Sabha but also initiated a Private Member Bill, which was considered the turning point in the path of the Nepali Language Movement. From highlighting the failure of the Nepali Language Movement due to the party politics in the hills to pointing out the huge controversy over the use of the term 'Nepali' or 'Gorkha' Bhasa, she tried to convince the people to fight for the cause of the language unitedly. The decisive role played by both the women at the initial and the final phase of

the movement will be remembered forever in the history of the Nepali Language Movement. Thus, the movement for language recognition was not just to address the issues related to the development and economics of language but also to the politics of identity and recognition. It was a quest for an Indian identity, a collective endeavour and assertion to carve out and strengthen their identity as Indian. Apart from them, various people from all spheres of society unitedly fought for the cause of the language. It was due to their combined effort that on 20th August 1992, a long cherished dream of the Nepalis was fulfilled and with the passing of the Constitution Seventy-First Amendment Bill 1992 in the Lower House of the Parliament, Nepali was incorporated in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution along with Manipuri and Konkani and a long pending demand of the Nepalis got its final due.

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