



Dal Bahadur Giri – The First Gorkha Freedom Fighter from Darjeeling Hills

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Abstract

The freedom struggle of India was a long drawn out affair, spanning almost a century. In this struggle millions of souls gave their all under the leadership of great Mahatma Gandhi. The Gorkhas of Darjeeling too were ushered into this national uprising by a local leader Dal Bahadur Giri and filled their minds with patriotism; Giriji in his very short life was able to achieve what we normal mortal only dream of. Through this article we shall try to take a glimpse at his achievement and how a small district of Darjeeling was able to produce a leader who was held in high esteem by the national leaders of the Congress and fondly called him Pahari Gandhi.

Keywords:

Independence, Gorkha, Patriotism, Darjeeling, Congress.

Introduction

There is a belief pan India that the Gorkhas of Darjeeling, played second fiddle to the British regime in India and were not involved in the freedom struggle spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi. Any clarification on this matter is yet to come and muddled in the mire of modern Indian history the sacrifices of the many Gorkhas souls have not received the due respect they nationally deserve. The misunderstanding persists that the Gorkhas hardly did anything and their contribution was negligible and the current leadership have not been able to erase this misconception from the minds of the populace. Nothing can be further from the truth and this article shall try to put forward the correct perspective and leave the reader to judge the contributions of the Gorkhas

of Darjeeling as we delve into the sacrifice of Sri. Dal Bahadur Giri; one of the many brave souls who have etched their name in gold in the eyes of great national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Subash Chandra Bose. According to Nirmal Chandra Chaudhari “one who was destined to become the greatest exponent of Indian freedom struggle amongst the Indian Nepalese the life story of Dal Bahadur Giri is worth recounting just to become fully aware of our glorious freedom struggle and the part played by Shri Giri in it which was never really sought to be estimated correctly by us.”¹

Early Life

Born into a small family in the heart of Darjeeling town on 8th March 1887 at Chowk Bazaar,² Dal Bahadur Giri had a very simple beginning. His father Shiva Lal Giri was a constable of the then British police force in Darjeeling, who in due course of time became a sub inspector. His mother’s name was Smt. Narmada Devi who was a housewife and an accomplished lady. He was the second of three siblings the eldest being Agam Singh Giri and the youngest being Man Bahadur Giri. It has been recorded that his schooling began at the age of six at Darjeeling Government High School and he passed his Entrance Examination after ten years at the age of sixteen, thereafter he joined the school he had passed out from as a teacher. After about eight months working as a teacher he joined the Station Staff Hospital at Jalpahar as a clerk in 1903.³ He worked in the hospital with utmost diligence and sincerity, seeing this deputy commissioner Mr. C Bumps recommended and forwarded the Name of Mr. Giri to the post of deputy magistrate, but Mr. Giri failed a medical test due to a chest condition. Dal Bahadur Giri was not a person who was satisfied with his job, from his childhood he had a leaning towards politics, social awareness and social upliftment, and when the Gorkha Union Library opened in Darjeeling he joined it as the Chief Organiser. It is said that due to his persistence and hard work the library gained a lot of members and popularity, it was also a source of knowledge for his yearning mind as he began to study books on the revival of Indian culture.⁴

Early Inspiration

At the age of eighteen his impressionable political mind was stirred when on 16th October 1906, Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India divided Bengal into two parts to put a hold on the growing ascendancy of Bengalese in simmering freedom struggle and Indian politics. The news of the partition of Bengal was published in the Government Gazette on this day. In Darjeeling all the prominent leaders called a protest meeting at the Nripendra Hindu Public Hall. The prominent speakers at this meeting were Sister Nivedita and Desh Bandhu Chittaranjan Das. The seed of nationalism was sown in the young mind of Giri by speeches of these two leaders which inspired and stirred his national spirit and a burning sense of desire to lend a hand in the national struggle started to grow inside.⁵

Bitter Experience in Sikkim

In 1910 at the age of twenty-three Dal Bahadur Giri was married to Kumari Krishna Maya Chettri the daughter of Late Judhabir Chettri. In need of fresh pastures and the need to support his family Dal Bahadur Giri found a better job in Sikkim as Head Clerk under the Sikkim Raj Durbar. According to Ram Chandra Giri his close aide “As Mr. Giri was efficient and sincere he quickly became popular with the Maharaja and during this time as a close confidant of the Maharaja he accompanied the Maharaja to the Durbar in Delhi in 1911.”⁶ It thus becomes clear that his popularity was on the rise, which was not a good thing for him as many jealous officials began scheming behind his back; this job was his first bitter experience with the British and other people in lofty positions. Mr. Giri was a very honest man wherein words like bribery and favours did not find way into his vocabulary, in this Durbar was a conniving personality; an Anglo-Indian who had made it a habit of swindling money for his personal enjoyment. In doing so he tended to turn a blind eye to the running of affairs of the Kazis (landlords) who used to fleece the peasants and locals with taxes in connivance with the few British officials who were then present in Sikkim. Dal Bahadur Giri was offered bribes by the Kazis, it is said that one Kazi offered him Rs.1000 which was a considerable amount of money at that time but Mr. Giri threw it in the rubbish.⁷ On seeing that Mr. Giri could not be bought the other group began scheming to get him out of Sikkim. At this time seeing the oppression of these Kazis on the local natives Mr. Giri had become the voice of the voiceless and the oppressors were being pushed to the walls, but alas the Kazis has the ear of the Raja of Sikkim and they were able to convince the Raja that Mr. Giri was the rotten egg, Mr Giri was relieved of his duties and escorted out of Sikkim to Ramphu in 1916.⁸ He fought for his honour from all the concocted charges and was exonerated from all of the charges; the king on realising his folly and on finding the disloyalties committed against his by the Anglo- Indian reinstated Mr. Giri to his original post but despite repeated requests Mr. Giri did not return as he had made his point and his honour had been restored.

Contact with Congress

In the meantime India was going through turmoil, the fire of independence had been lit and a strong leadership was being provided by Mahatma Gandhi, still reeling from the unfair treatment from the British in Sikkim his hatred for them was deep within. After returning from Sikkim he got a job in Hillmens Tea and Trading Company, here he was the Assistant Secretary of Darjeeling Peoples Association, Kalimpong Branch. He saw the oppression under which the common people of the plantations were being subjected to by the British in the name of livelihood. After he saw firsthand the treatment being dealt out by the British he started to feel strong resentment towards the British Raj.⁹ At this time Pandit Shyam Sundar Chakraborty; a renowned leader of anti partition of Bengal was arrested under the Defence of India Act and kept in Kalimpong for four years, Dal Bahadur Giri came in close contact with him, it is said

that through Pandit S S Chakraborty Mr. Giri came into close contact with Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal, a prominent Congress leader of North Bengal who was Pandit S.S.Chakraborty's son in law. The two of them became good friends and thus came about a friendship that lasted for life, through Charu Chandra Sanyal, Dal Bahadur Giri came into the fold of the Congress.¹⁰

Meeting Gandhiji

Under the inspiration of Shyam Sundar Das and the bond with Charu Chandra Sanyal, Dal Bahadur Giri went to attend the All India Congress Committee session at Calcutta in 1917, presided by Mrs. Annie Besant, here he had the privilege to meet and interact with prominent leaders like Janiki Nath Ghosal and Desh Bandhu Chittaranjan. History reveals that none other from Darjeeling had attended the Congress session before Shri Dal Bahadur Giri (Dr. Ananda Gopal Ghosh in Himalayan Batra dated 22.12.85).¹¹ In 1918 Mr. Giri then attended the Congress Conference in Delhi, it was presided by Pandit Madan Mohan Malavya, in this conference he met many national leaders and was enlightened about the freedom movement, it is said that on the last day of the Conference he met Mahatma Gandhi and after that he was a changed man, whose motivation was freedom of India.¹² Thereafter it is said that he never missed any Congress Conference. According to Bijay Lal Chatterjee "From this Conference he was a changed man. Freedom of motherland became his sole aim! Within a short period of time he became famous among all the renowned leaders of the Congress and became known as Pahari Gandhi"¹³ In 1920 at the All India Congress Session in Nagpur under the president ship of Bejoy Raghob Acharya, he demonstrated Chakra and Taklu culture by the Gorkhali volunteers. Gandhiji was greatly impressed by Giri and held some private discussions which further motivated him.¹⁴

Opening of Congress Committee

After returning from Nagpur, Dal Bahadur Giri organised and held the first Darjeeling District Committee meeting in Kalimpong as Mr. Giri had now started residing in Kalimpong. After this meet the first unit of the Darjeeling District Congress committee was formed headquartered in Pedong a remote hamlet in Kalimpong. As he had brought all the papers like receipts, rules and letterheads of the All India Congress Party.¹⁵ people began to join the Congress party and became members of the party; in this all the members of Mr. Giri's family and others joined the non-cooperation movement whole heartedly. "The non-cooperation movement of 1921-22 was the first occasion in which hill men showed an interest in politics. It aroused excitement for a short time amongst tea garden labourers and there was some boycott of foreign goods."¹⁶ In the book "Social conflict and Political Unrest in North Bengal" Rajat Kanti Roy has written that under the leadership of Dal Bahadur Giri tea garden labourers held demonstration in front of the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Darjeeling with slogans 'Bandemataram', "Gandiji ki Jai". The movement was widespread". In this article "Agrarian unrest in North Bengal,"

Published in Historical Review, July-December, 1986 issue Dr. Malay Shankar Bhattacharya has, also, stated that “The political environment of the district was tense.....The authorities were appreciably perturbed over the affair and there were apprehension of its repetition.”¹⁷ According to Ranjana Giri “At a time when the district was an excluded area where the District Commissioner was like a dictator and had tremendous power that couldn’t be challenged by even the Governor or Provincial Assembly, he formed the District Congress Committee in Kalimpong in 1920. He was so well regarded in Congress circles that when all the top leaders were imprisoned, his name was proposed by Mr. C.R. Das to become the Congress President.”¹⁸

Opposing the British

In 1921, a public meeting was held in Rink Hall, by the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling Mr. S.W.Goode to mobilise the public against the non cooperation movement that had been gaining momentum all over the hills. Admission to the meeting was only through invitation cards, Giri had not been invited as had all the Congressmen and volunteers but he very badly wanted to go and hear British policy to curb the ongoing movement in the hills. He was fortunate that one of his friends Partiman Singh Lama, of Kurseong had been invited to the meeting and Giri managed to enter the hall with this card. As the meeting started Mr. Goode entered the hall and discarding all rules regarding public meetings, he went and sat on the chairman’s seat himself. Normally some other person calls upon the chairman to come and take the seat and the meeting commences, all the people present in the hall were dumbfound with this action of the Deputy Commissioner. Dal Bahadur Giri felt this was humiliating for all present at the meeting and stood up on his seat and began shouting and protesting against this discourteous and unseemly behaviour of the Deputy Commissioner. Some eminent people of Darjeeling and followers of the British tried to silence him and throw him out of the hall to get into the good books of the Deputy Commissioner but as these people came forward towards Giri a Sardar from some tea garden Bhagatbir Lama jumped on the chair and cautioned the people not to touch Giri. Also Known as Ashayogi Lama no one even dared to touch Giri.¹⁹ Suddenly the whole hall erupted with shouts of Dal Bahadur Giri Jindabad. The Deputy Commissioner had by this time secretly sneaked out from the backdoor. Another freedom fighter Jangbir Sapkota was also present in the hall; everyone present in the hall openly appreciated the self respect and courage shown by Giri.²⁰

First Arrest of Giri

After the humiliation of the Deputy Commissioner in Rink Hall it was evident that one day or the other Mr. Goode would take revenge on Giri. Dal Bahadur was well aware of this and the opportunity presented itself when Dal Bahadur Giri joined the Khilafat movement (which was also part of the Congress movement) and began to collect money for the Ali Brothers. Kazi Nazrul Islam, the great poet of Bengal wrote

in his journal “Dhum Ketu” dated 7th November 1922 that Dal Bahadur Giri was arrested by the British police on a charge of “fraudulent” collection. (Sangbadik Nazrul Prantosh Chatterjee, p.96) “Along with Dal Bahadur Giri police also arrested several other Nepali Congress workers of Darjeeling against which the people of Darjeeling observed one day hartal” (Himalayan Batra of 22.12.85).²¹ After his arrest on 27th January 1921 Giri was first put in Darjeeling jail, after some days he taken to the Central jail in Calcutta. On the day of his shifting to the Alipore Central jail, the people of Darjeeling had flocked the road from the jail to the railway station to take a glimpse of Giri and offer him garlands, as he was a special class prisoner he was released after a few months.

Events that led to the Second arrest of Giri

After his release from Alipore jail Dal Bahadur Giri again began his activities in the tea gardens of Darjeeling under the banner of the Congress. He started to preach the Gandhian philosophy among the poorest of Gorkhas labourers in these gardens. According to Ram Chandra Giri “The common people were willing to become members of the Congress at a nominal fee of four annas, after becoming members of the Congress people began coming forward to preach Congress ideals with their heart and souls.”²² Conditions in the tea plantations were getting bad. Giriji went and preached about Gandhiji and his Swaraj Movement and organized strikes. Planters became worried as the sardars and labourers began to join the Congress. Village Congress Committees were formed in almost all parts of the villages. Thousands of volunteers enrolled their names. They began to settle their petty quarrels by panchayats instead of running to the courts. There was great upheaval and the planters had to increase the wages of the workers.²³ This infuriated the Deputy Commissioner and he in turn passed an order to expel Dal Bahadur Giri from the district of Darjeeling. But Giri disobeyed this order and continued his Congress work in the hills. Dal Bahadur Giri organised a public meeting at Darjeeling in November of 1921 under the president ship of his elder brother Agam Singh Giri, the main objective of the meeting was to mount pressure on the British Raj to release Mahatma Gandhi, Muhammed Ali and Shaukat Ali who had been arrested by the police in Waltier, he was very vociferous in his attack against the British, he requested the common mass to break away from the shackles of the British Raj. With gay abandon he tore into the evils of the British Raj and passionately requested the people to join Gandhiji’s non cooperation movement. A case was registered against him, Dal Bahadur Giri was found guilty and for the second time in his life he was arrested. He was sent to Darjeeling jail, here also he did not sit idle he began to preach Gandhiji’s ideals and philosophy to the inmates, this again infuriated the Deputy Commissioner and Giri was sent to Alipore central jail, but this time as a third class prisoner.²⁴

Deplorable condition in Jail

It has been documented by Narendra Narayan Chakraborty who had been jailed in Alipore jail along with Shri Satin Sen of Barisal at the same time as Giri, in his article “Nazruler Sange Karagare”, published in Desh, 3 para, 1376 BS as follows:- “ Dal Bahadur was an illustrious person he was the single and supreme worker in Darjeeling district. At the time of non cooperation movement the Gorkhas and the hill men were strong supporters of the British regime, as such the British Government did not allow any person to preach spirit of independence amongst them. Therefore, they placed Dal Bahadur in Jail several times and classified him with thieves, dacoits, scoundrels only to teach him a lesson and forced Dal Bahadur to take their meals. Dal Bahadur did not eat fish, flesh or onion. Therefore, he used to eat only dry rice or bread with salt and that too very smilingly.”²⁵

“One day, while myself Satin Babu was walking within the jail compound in full dress we saw Shri Giri within third class prison barrack covered with iron rods. We were stunned to see him at such a place and forgot to speak. But Shri Giri extended his hands through iron rods and caught our arms with warm gesture. We were ashamed and after returning to our barrack narrated the whole story to other co-prisoners. But Satin Sen did not sit idle, he protested against the ill-treatment and informed the jail authorities that unless Shri Giri is placed special class within seven days he will give up all facilities of special class prison and take up ‘Kurta’ and ‘Jangiya’ of 3rd class, as well as food of that class. Naren Chakraborty, also, followed Shri Satin and continued as such for one month and four days. In order to save the situation Dal Bahadur Giri was transferred to Hoogly jail and Satin Sen, Naren Chakraborty to Berhampur jail.”²⁶ It is said that while in Hoogly jail he met other famed leaders of the national movement. Here they used to talk about the Swadeshi movement and they used to teach the other inmates about the national movement. He was a very vociferous man as used to fight with the jail authorities if any injustice was being done. Subash Chandra Bose and other national leaders came to know about Giri’s sincerity, devotion and affection towards the national movement and everyone started to look at him with honour. Shri C.R.Das also used to go to meet him with gifts of sweets and fruits as often as he could.²⁷

Events which led to Giri’s untimely death

It is well known that Dal Bahadur Giri suffered from a chest condition from an early age and the food, condition and torture that he had to face in jail accelerated the deterioration of his health. The British Raj knew that to silence the uprising in the hills Dal Bahadur Giri needed to be silenced, so in this zeal they did not give him the medical facilities that he required, they made sure that Giri could not recover after release. When he was in his death bed he was released from prison and sent back to his home in Kalimpong. On hearing of the serious illness of Shri Giri, Subash Chandre Bose, published an appeal in “Sarathi” a journal in 1923 in order to raise

funds for the treatment of Shri Giri and under orders of Desh Bandhu Chittaranjan, Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal remitted Rs. 1000/- (one thousand) from Swarajya Party Fund to Shri Giri. Neteji Subash Chandra Bose then sent his close aid Bijay Lal Chatterjee to Kalimpong along with the financial aid. When Mr. Chatterjee reached Kalimpong, Shri Giri was very ill and all was in vain as the 'Pahadi Gandhi' as he was affectionately known passed away on 9th November 1924 at the age of 36 years with full glory and honour.²⁸

On hearing the sad demise of Giri, Mahatma Gandji took it as a national loss²⁹ and wrote in "Young India" on 13th November 1924. The column as written by Gandhiji is reproduced below:

A National Loss

Many readers of Young India know Sjt. Dal Bahadur 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 advising me of the death of this comparatively unknown patriot. I tender my condolences to his family. He was a cultured Gurkha and was doing good work among the Gurkhas in the nearby Darjeeling. During 1921, in common with the thousands, he was also imprisoned for his non co-operation activities. He became seriously ill during his imprisonment. He was discharged only a few months ago. He leaves I understand a large family destitute of means of livelihood. An appeal was published on his behalf in the Bengali Press. I hope that the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee will find out all the facts about the late Dal Bahadur Giri's family and render such aid as may be necessary.

Young India, 13-11-1924

In the 39th Session of the Indian National Congress Held at Belgaon on 26th December 1924, Mahatma Gandhi himself moved a condolence resolution³⁰ from the Chair on the demise of Dal Bahadur Giri along with other freedom fighters and National Leaders. The resolution is reproduced below:

Speech on Condolence Resolution, Belgaon Congress

December 26, 1924

It was 4.05 p.m. when the president moved the first resolution. He said:

I shall now read the first resolution. After I read the resolution, you will kindly stand, it is incredibly simple; our condolences to those who are no longer with us.

This Congress records with sorrow the deaths of Bi- Amma, Sri Ashutosh Chowdhari, Sri Ashutosh Mukherji, Mr. Bhupendra Nath Basu, Dr. Subramania Ayyar, Mr. Dal Bahadur Giri, Mr Govind Venkatesh Lalg, Mr. Vamana Rao Moharir, Mr. T.V. Gopalswami Mudaliar, Mr. C.V.P.Shivan and Lala Kanya Lalji and also of Messers

Rutomjee Jeevanji Ghorkhodu and P.K.Naidu in South Africa and tenders its respectful sympathy to the bereaved families. Mahatma Gandhi was fully aware of the poor and helpless condition of the family members of Dal Bahadur Giri. A letter written to Maganlal by Gandhiji reproduced below clearly shows the deep sympathy and affection that Gandhiji had for Giri and his family.

After the death of Mr. Giri his family had no one to look after them, Giri had expressed his desire in a letter to Gandhiji that in case of his death his family should be moved to Sabarmati ashram in Ahmadabad. He had also written of this desire to his good friend Mr. Khadak Bahadur Bista to take them to Ahemadabad, should anything befall upon him. After his death Mr. Bista took the bereaved family to Sabarmati ashram and on the way on the request of Shri Chittaranjan Das, the president of Bengal Congress and an All India leader, Mr. Bista took the family to Shri Chittaranjan Das, house which was at Russa Road, here Shri C.R.Das paid the family his condolences and promised all the financial help that the family would need in the future.³¹ Mr. Giri's son writes in his letter "My father wrote a letter to Gandhiji expressing his desire and also told one of his good friends Khadak Bahadur Bista to help the family in moving to Ahemadabad. After my father's death, my mother and Matri Didi, Durga Didi, Mahavir Bhai, Satya Devi Didi and I went to Sabarmati Ashram; Gandhiji paid close attention and took special care of us. In the Ashram the rules and regulations prohibited eating onions, garlic, chillies, tea, coffee.

However Gandhiji informed all the residents that the Giri family should be permitted to eat freely. The family had given up a lot, come to a new country, left behind relatives and other ties which is why they deserved special considerations, said Gandhiji. Initially, the experience of moving to Ahemadabad was very traumatic. There were language barriers, cultural differences, differences in foods and eating habits, and most of all, no relatives and friends. Gradually we became comfortable in our new lifestyle. Most of all, Gandhiji took good care of our family. He personally visited us and provided us timely medicines when we were sick. He treated us as part of his own family, so we adapted in no time."³²

Conclusion

It is a matter of pride for all of the Gorkha people residing in India that they too have a glorious past when it comes to the freedom struggle of India. Gorkhas residing in India are for some unknown cause branded as outsiders, even though they hold Indian citizenship; Giriji was one of the many brave Gorkha souls who selflessly laid his life to the cause of India's freedom. He has written his name in golden words when it comes to India's freedom struggle and is a matter of pride for all the hill men that he

was stalwart among eminent personalities within the Congress and popularly known as Pahadi Gandhi. He is a leader who has done a lot in his short life and if he had lived longer he would surely have been one of the eminent leaders behind Gandhiji.³³ But alas! Now in his very birthplace he hardly finds any mention. Generation have forgotten his contribution for the freedom today that we so take for granted. His burial ground in Kalimpong is in a deplorable state. The leaders of today need to educate the common mass of his deeds as people are ignorant of his sacrifice.

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