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GORKHALAND MOVEMENT IN WEST BENGAL

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Introduction

IT is observed that regional and sectoral imbalances in planning often result in redistribution of population. Intra-national migrations take place hand in hand with the spread of education and industrialization (often labour-intensive) due to limited availability of skilled manpower in backward/peripheral areas. Within a decade or so ethnic stratification grows in which the local people occupy, more often than not, the bottom stratum. In certain such areas, even the unskilled jobs are occupied by the migrants.

The migrants are initially smaller in number and may even constitute the 'reference group' for the local people. But after some years a kind of reversal in their value-system from assimilation to the quest for identity occurs. This is made possible by the members of the newly-emerged middle class, who craftily use history (often oral), culture, language, religion, etc. as reinforcing forces to attain a more favourable redistribution of power and authority within a given territory.

One significant consequence of such development process is the rise of a strong and widespread belief that redistribution of power and authority is the most

important, if not *a priori*, condition for development. Thus, the relationship between an ethnic group holding power and authority and another without the same is usually strained. This strain stems from the sense of insecurity or threat which both the groups suffer from.

Brief History of Darjeeling

In the wake of the Gorkhaland movement, a serious controversy over the history of Darjeeling surfaced. The supporters of the movement claimed that Darjeeling was never a part of Bengal and, hence, separation from it is justified. On the other hand, the Government of West Bengal claimed that Darjeeling was never a part of Nepal and so such a demand is not legitimate. They differed not only on its political history but also on its ethnic and economic histories. Therefore, a brief recapitulation of the history of Darjeeling may be desirable here.

Historically, the present district of Darjeeling was a part of Sikkim. Its Kalimpong subdivision was wrested away from the hands of Sikkim by Bhutan in 1706 and remained with the latter till as late as 1864. The way its Sadar and Kurseong subdivisions became a part of British India in 1835 is not clear to historians (Pinn 1986). However, the Siliguri subdivision was annexed by the British in 1850 as a punitive measure for the harassment meted out to two British officials by a Sikkimese. Earlier, Nepal had ruled over this district, excluding its Kalimpong sub-division, for about 37 years, from 1780 till 1816, when the British 'restored' this land to Sikkim. But, following the Anglo-Bhutanese War of 1864, in 1865 Darjeeling became an integral part of Bengal though administratively it was not so till as late as 1947 (Dozey 1922, Dash 1947, 37).

With regard to the ethnic history of Darjeeling, the Nepalis or Gorkhas are often alleged to have immigrated from Nepal after mid-nineteenth century only. But historical evidence shows that it is not entirely correct. For instance, the Nepali Bahuns are known to have

emigrated from various places in India like Rajputana, Kannauj, Chittore, Bengal, Mithila, and Orissa during the rise of the Muslim power in India (Bista 1980, 2-4, Sharma 1982, 81-2). The Newars too have a strong Indian connection as they are drawn from the Abhiras, Kiratas, Lichhavis, and Karnatakas (Nepali 1965, 270). And the Mangars and Limbus are known to be among the oldest inhabitants of Sikkim (O'Malley 1907, 29; Namgyal and Drolma 1908, 42; Chemjong 1966, 70-1 Bagchi 1972, 57). It is true that there was large-scale immigration from Nepal after mid-nineteenth century but that should not blind one from appreciating these facts.

Economically, there is enough evidence to show that there has been considerable degeneration in vital sectors like agriculture, tea, trade, forest, and tourism. Being a hilly, terrain, agriculture of the conventional type holds limited scope. The production of and employment in tea have been falling sharply over the decades. Forest has hardly any existence after the clean-felling by the West Bengal Forest Development Corporation established in November 1974. Trade has virtually stopped after the Indo-Chinese War of 1962. As for tourism, it is the plainsmen who are found to have benefited more than the local people themselves (Subba 1987-88). On top of all this, there are reports of 'misspent and unspent funds and their diversion (*Satesman*, 25-5-88).

Thus, the economic situation in the Darjeeling hills had so worsened that it became vulnerable to any instigation of the youth. But, incidentally, 'development' (or a lack of it) did not feature prominently in the agenda of the Gorkhaland movement right from April 1980. The most important issue raised was 'identity'.

Evolution of the Gorkha Identity

But, in the first place, it should be noted that there is no unanimity on the origin of the word 'Gorkha'. G. Tucci, an authority on Nepal and Tibet, seems to believe that

this word originated from 'Goraksha', meaning 'protection of cow' (1977, 28). This seems quite plausible in view of the strong influence of the Goraksha or Gorakhnath sect of Hinduism in northern India during the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries. However, Harka Gurung, an eminent scholar of Nepal, considers the contention of Suryabikram Jnawali more plausible than this. According to Gurung, Jnawali traces its origin to the Khasa word 'Garkha' meaning 'revenue area' (Gurung 1992, 41). In either case, it is associated historically with the Khasas from northern India.

After the establishment of the Gorkha dynasty in 1559 by Drabya Shah, the word began to be referred to the inhabitants of the principality where the Gorkhas ruled. To quote Daniel Wright :

> The Gorkhas, or Gorkhali, so named from the former capital of their country, are the dominant race. They formerly occupied the district around the town of Gorkha, which is about forty miles west of Kathmandu. They are said to be of Rajput descent, and to have been driven out of Rajputana on the occasion of an invasion by Musulmans. They first settled near Palpa, having passed through the Kumaon hills, and gradually extended their dominion to Gorkha (1877, 25).

The Indo-Aryan character of the Gorkhas has remained more or less unchaged until the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814. After that war, special recommendations were made to recruit the Gorkhas of Mongoloid race by persons like General Octerlony and Brian Hodgson. Within a year, 4,650 Gorkhas were recruited in the British army but soon such recruitment was stopped. It was only after the notifications of 1885 and 1888 issued by the them Prime Minister of Nepal that large-scale recruitment of Nepalis began (Mansergh and Moon 1980, 85-8). By 1907, there was recruiting centre at Gorakhpur (Bihar)

for Mangars and Gurungs and another at Ghoom (Darjeeling) for recruiting Rais and Limbus (Hooker 1891, 94). In 1909, one more depot was established at Purnia (Bihar) for recruiting the Sunuwars (Morris 1933, 132).

As a result of all this, Morris has described the Gorkhas to be "decidedly Mongoloid" possessing 'high cheek bones and typical fold covering the inner angle of the eye' (1933, 38). This was the antithesis of the physical features associated with the Gorkhas prior to 1814.

The word 'Gorkha' was absolved of its racial meaning particularly after the emergence of the All India Gorkha League in 1943. From then onwards, the word 'Gorkha' or 'Gorkhali' began to be used not only for the Khas or Aryan Nepalis, as it was prior to 1814, but also for the Khasetar or Mongoloid Nepalis, as it was after 1814. Another word which was used as a synonym of 'Gorkha' was 'Nepali' though the appropriateness of one over the other has ever since became a subject of much debate.

It was first debated in early fifties between Ganeshlal Subba, a prominent leader of the undivided Communist Party of India and Ramkrishna Sharma, an All India Gorkha League leader. It was debated more vigorously after Subhas Ghisingh, the president of Gorkha National Liberation Front, denounced the word 'Nepali' in favour of 'Gorkha'. In both stages, the word 'Gorkha' was advocated in order to differentiate the Indian Nepalis from those of Nepal but the supporters of this word seem to have lost the battle already.

Chronology of Demands for Self-rule

The earliest demand for self-rule in Darjeeling is known to have been raised in 1907 by the "leaders of the Hill People" for a "separate administrative set-up". The Gorkha Officers Association established in 1906 must have been behind this demand but there is no definite information about it. In 1917, there was a similar demand for the "creation of a separate unit" outside Bengal by the "representatives of the Darjeeling District". This "unit"

was to comprise the district of Darjeeling and the Dooars area of Jalpaiguri district of Bengal. They had also suggested, alternatively, that a 'North-Eastern Frontier Province" consisting of Darjeeling, Dooars, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh be created (WG 1986, 51-3).

The demand for the exclusion of Darjeeling and Dooars from Bengal was raised once again in 1919 by the Hillmens' Association (WG 1986, 55). In March 1920, this Association mustered the support of the Darjeeling Planters' Association and the European Association for pressing this demand (Gurung 1971, 6-7). This Association reiterated the demand on 25 October 1930 in its memorandum to Sir Samuel Hoare.

In 1943, the All India Gorkha League was established but surprisingly its expressed objectives were as follows :

> to get Gorkhas recognized as a separate minority community;
> to get them represented in the provincial legislatures wherever they are settled;
> to get them represented in the interim governments; and
> to free all Gorkhas held as political prisoners by the British Government (Sharma 1986, 5-13).

It was only in 1949, after 6 years of its inception, that this League came up with the demand for creation of a separate provincial legislature called 'Uttarakhand' which might be formed of the following areas :

(a) Darjeeling district, Sikkim, Jalpaiguri, Dooars, and Cooch Behar; or
(b) Darjeeling district, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch Behar; or
(c) Darjeeling district and Sikkim; or
(d) Darjeeling district only (Subba 1949, 5-20).

About two years earlier, on 6 April 1947 to be precise,

the undivided Communist Party of India had submitted a memorandum to Jawaharlal Nehru, then Vice-President of the interim government and Liaquat Ali Khan, the then finance member of this government and the leader of the Muslim League demanding 'Gorkhasthan'—an independent nation comprising the present-day Nepal, Darjeeling district, and Sikkim (excluding its North district) for the Gorkhas (WG 1986, 32). This demand was later dropped and instead, in April 1954, a more realistic demand for 'regional autonomy' for the hill areas of Darjeeling was put forward. In 1957, this demand was endorsed by the Congress Party and the All India Gorkha League. In 1967, the left Front Government in West Bengal even passed a resolution in the State Assembly in support of this demand. Yet another resolution was passed on 23 September 1981 for creating a 'statutory autonomous authority' subject to the overall authority and control of the state government and legislature (WG 1986, 25). Ananda Pathak, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) Member of Parliament, even moved the Constitution (Amendment) Bill, 1985 on 9 August 1985 proposing as follows :

> Notwithstanding anything in this Constitution, Parliament may, by law, form within the State of West Bengal, an autonomous region comprising such areas, as may be specified, of the district of Darjeeling and neighbouring district where the Nepali speaking people are in majority and create for the administration of such region a District Council (WG 1986, 37).

Needless to mention that none of the above demands was fulfilled or paid much attention to. But the most important question here is not whether such demands were met or not but why such demands were raised at all. On the basis of the various memoranda and other writings supporting such demands, including the one for

a separate statehood called 'Gorkhaland' it appears that the salient reasons were the following :

(i) the Nepalis/Gorkhas had no political voice in West Bengal;
(ii) they felt the threat of cultural domination/ extinction in Bengal;
(iii) they believed that without a separate political identity of their own they would always be at the mercy of the majority community in the state; and
(iv) their economic, cultural, and literary development would not be obstructed if they had a state of their own.

The leaders in Darjeeling were evidently aware of all this from the very beginning of the present century. Thus they demanded some sort of separation from Bengal, seeking sometimes the help of the Lepcha-Bhotia and sometimes even the Rajbansis, Koches, and Bengalis of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts. They also tried multiparty alliance to achieve them. The only strategic weakness perhaps was the lack of violence and failure to mobilize the masses as much as Subhas Ghisingh could. Even Ghisingh was initially a non-starter but when he adopted the violent path to achieve a separate state called 'Gorkhaland' the media made a hero out of him.

Gorkhaland Movement

The demand for a separate state called 'Gorkhaland' was first made in April 1980 by the Pranta Parishad, a political organization formed by some ex-Congressmen of the district. It was after two months, in July 1980, that the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) was born. In the beginning, for almost six years of their inception, it was but the former organization which held the sway over the people. The contribution of the former organization to the political mobilization of the Nepalis/

Gorkhas of Darjeeling and Dooars through plays, meetings and powerful writings in its weekly called *Aba* is perhaps incomparable in the political history of Darjeeling. Whether it was town, village or tea-garden, it was Pranta Parishad everywhere; the GNLF was nowhere in sight as few took Subhas Ghisingh seriously.

By the end of 1985, the Pranta Parishad succeeded in convincing a large number of people that they needed a 'home' where their children could play about freely and no one could evict them. The eviction of Nepalis from various parts of northeast India in the last two decades or so had already done the primer's job but as the people's memory was about to fade even greater number of them were deported from Meghalaya during 1985-86. Such deported persons were repeatedly declared to be the citizens of Nepal by the press and other media but the people of Dooars and Darjeeling knew that the media were speaking only half truth. Thus it was not difficult to convince the people of this region that their future lay in carving out a state of their own or else they might one day be deported from West Bengal too.

The earliest eviction of the Nepalis in the North-East occurred in 1967, when about eight thousand of them were driven out of Mizoram (Lal 1968, 346). In 1978, about two hundred houses of Nepalis were set on fire in Nagaland. In 1979, tens of thousands of them were deported from Assam, and in 1980, about two thousand Nepalis had to flee Manipur (Sinha 1982, 91-92). Hence, it did not require much effort to tell the Nepalis that they really needed to have a state of their own from where no one could drive them out like stray cattle. It was not necessary to talk about lack of development (which could be easily countered by the state government) or anything else. Things were made much easier by the xenophobic violence in the North-East in the last two decades or so.

On the other hand, the rehearsal for such a movement was going on for the last eighty years or so. Despite the geopolitical importance of Darjeeling and its name as an

international tourist resort, the local people there were seldom known to be respectably placed in the occupational hierarchy: they were known as labourers, watchmen, or jawans only. Few Indian politicians could imagine that such people would ever be able to wage a war against the state or against the majority community in the state. Their appeals to be recognized as Indian citizens and be treated as such were always ignored. They shouted that so and so among them had sacrificed their lives for the freedom movement in India but their voice was lost in the wilderness of indifference, apathy, and mistrust.

In sum, the people of Darjeeling and Dooars were experiencing a sense of closing horizons. The youth in particular had grown impatient. The time was ripe for Subhas Ghisingh to induce militancy into the movement, which not only proved successful in itself but also in sidelining other leaders in favour or against the demand for a separate state. Thousands of youth turned militant overnight and against anyone who opposed the movement. Thus, violence broke out and multiplied between the GNLF on the one hand and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Central Research Police Force personnel, and the Gorkha Volunteer Corps on the other. The clashes between the GNLF and the CPI(M) were fratricidal and confined to the tea gardens of Kurseong and Sadar subdivisions; the clashes between the GNLF and the Gorkha Volunteer Corps were also fratricidal but confined to Kalimpong; the GNLF-CRPF clashes took place throughout the hill area of Darjeeling and Dooars. The police and homeguards were defunct then and the Border Security Force and army personnel, wherever deployed, did not meet with any resistance from the local militants except as a matter of accident. Further, the Gorkha Volunteer Corps was originally the police wing of the GNLF but later against the GNLF itself.

On all the violent incidents in the region, the worst

occurred on 25 May 1986 in Kurseong and on 27 July 1986 in Kalimpong. There were hundreds of reports and counter-reports on these two incidents and the matter was raised in the upper house of the Parliament too. The police excesses in both the incidents were too evident to be tempered with by the Calcutta-based media.

It was on 14 January 1987 that the first ever attempt at conciliation was made but that did not stop the violent activities in the Darjeeling hills. Substantial progress was reported to have been made towards conciliation at the tripartite meeting of the Centre, the State, and the GNLF held in January 1988 but till June 1988 there were raids, ambushes, killings, and arrests as usual. These, in fact, continued to occur sporadically till the final signing of the agreement at Calcutta on 22 August 1988.

There were some compulsions on the side of the GNLF (eroding public support, for instance) as well as the state government (pressure from the defence ministry) to arrive at an agreement on this issue. But in their belated hurry to reach at an agreement they overlooked certain issues, which might crop up again in future and jeopardize the agreement itself. Of such issues, the most important ones are the non-fulfilment of the statehood demand and the hoax of arms surrender. Thus, the movement may have been considered to have stopped but it is difficult to claim that it has ended as well.

From May 1986 till August 1988, the hills of Darjeeling and Dooars shook with the tremor of violence, destruction, and killing. The impact of this two and a half years long violent movement on the economy, education, cultural activities, ethnic relations, inter-state, and international relations has been significant. The role of the media, specially the news reports by Nepali and Bengali journalists, left a lot to be desired. Apart from the governmental pressures or the interests of the editors and publishers, ethnic loyalty grown over years of socialization could not be expected to vanish in a few years of training and practice in journalism.

The hiss after all that bang was the grant of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council on 22 August, 1988. The West Bengal Assembly formally and unanimously passed the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Bill, 1988 on 5 September 1988. Elections for constituting the Council with 28 elected and 14 nominated members were held on 13 December 1988 and the Council office was inaugurated on 17 January 1989.

A preliminary assessment of the functioning of this Council for the last four years or so reveals the following :

(a) the transfer of power from the state government to the council has not been completed as yet;
(b) the flow of financial assistance to the council has not been timely and smooth;
(c) the mode of administrative co-ordination between the council and the district administration has not been worked out properly;
(d) the council has failed to use the fund allotted to it properly and to account for it;
(e) the council has no financial autonomy nor adequate dicision-making power over the departments uder its control; and
(f) the council still lack manpower at the upper echelons of bureaucracy due to the refusal by some officers to be transferred.

The conclusion that boils down from the above observations is that the council has failed. Today, Ghisingh himself is not defensive about it. To many hillmen it is worse than the Zilla Parishad while others agree that it is not much different from the Hill Council of Darjeeling established in 1974 except that the word 'Gorkha' has been added to its nomenclature and its chief enjoys the status of a Cabinet Minister of West Bengal.

Conclusion

Like many other ethnic movements, the Gorkhaland movement was born out of neo-colonial system. The Gorkhas were for long kept politically voiceless, culturally insecure, and economically deprived. Even their history, cultural heritage, and demographic figures were misrepresented if not tempered with. Development awards were doled out to them sparingly, after confirming their loyalty.

The social composition of West Bengal what it is, the minority groups have a difficult time in making themselves heard in the corridors of power. It was this situation which brought about a large group of historically, racially, religiously, and culturally diverse groups under a common umbrella known as 'Nepali' or 'Gorkha' as the case may be. It was this solidarity which threatened the existence of the Lepcha and Bhotia in the region and proved to be an irritant to the majority community in the state.

Due mainly to missionaries, the spread of education was relatively wider in the Darjeeling hills than elsewhere in the state but jobs were scarce from the time of Independence itself. The educated youth found temporary employment in Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim, but by 1980s these countries had their own lot of educated persons. Thus the educated youth of Darjeeling and Dooars were facing severe unemployment, which was ideal for driving them into a violent movement that the Gorkhaland Movement finally came to be.

The Movement in a way illustrates the triangular relationship between state, government and ethnicity. Since development in India takes place along the lines the states choose or the majority community decides, the minority groups, which are often less skilled, less educated, and less 'competent' are often marginalized. The majority community not only rules over the minorities but also holds the legitimacy to do so as surrogate state. It also gets the media, science, arts, and literature to

protect the interests of certain ethnic group(s) and deprives certain other(s). In the process, it perpetuates ethnically imbalanced development process and, hence, perpetuates ethnicity.

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