

## **AN OVERVIEW OF INDIAN NEPALIS'S MOVEMENTS FOR AUTONOMY (1907-2017)**

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### **Abstract**

The paper is an attempt to understand the various facets of demands for recognition and autonomy of Indian Nepalis. The paper will discuss the various phases of statehood movements in Darjeeling hills. First, the pre-Independence phase and demands for regional autonomy. The second phase deals with the demand for a separate state called Gorkhaland under the leadership of Subash Ghising in 1980s. Third phase discusses the renewed demand for Gorkhaland under the leadership of Bimal Gurung in 2007. And the last phase deals with the upsurge that took place in summer of 2017 when the declaration by the state cabinet to make dominant Bengali language as a compulsory subject in school triggered the prolonged demand for statehood and recognition.

**Keywords-**autonomy, demands, movement, nepalis, recognition, statehood.

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Nepalis are the ethno-linguistic community in India residing in the states of West Bengal and Sikkim, however over the years, segments of these original settlements have moved onto the Indian hinterland but still the corps of Indian Nepalis continues to reside in the two states mentioned above. However, notwithstanding the continuous process of demographic shift, this paper would be keeping the Indian Nepali community in the Darjeeling hills as its centre of community. <sup>1</sup>

There are two types of Nepalis living in India, the first category is that of Nepalese nationals who come to India in search of livelihood, taking up ad hoc jobs and returning back to their homes in Nepal over the holidays or permanently after earning enough. The second group is the Indian Nepalis who are the bonafide citizens of India by birth and whose generation have been naturalised citizens of India. The interspersed existence of these two groups has prove to be a considerable impediment in provisioning of a Nationalistic identity for the Indian Nepalese and not being associated with the Nepalese of Nepal.

The lack of identification as naturalised and bonafide community in India, has caused Indian Nepalis to lose out on societal, political and economic rights to their balance of Indian brethren. However, due to growing consciousness among the community, the movement for establishing identity as an Indian citizen has got stirred up over the years. The movements galvanization has lead to demand for a separate state called 'Gorkhaland'.

## **1. Search for a Home within India**

### **1.1 Earlier (Pre-Independence) Demands for Regional Autonomy**

Voices for a separate administrative module for the hill tracts of Darjeeling can be traced back to the year 1907 when retired army and police officials pleaded for the creation of a separate administrative entity for Darjeeling outside Bengal but within the British Indian set up based on the strategic location and cultural distinctiveness. A memorandum was submitted to the government on behalf of the hill people, demanding a separate administrative unit. The hill people mentioned above comprise of Nepalese, Bhutias and Lepchas. Later in 1917 a group of

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elite Nepalis supported by some influential people formed the Hillmen's Association and submitted a memorandum for separation from West Bengal to the Chief Secretary of Bengal when Edwin Montague, the British Secretary of State, visited India in 1917. At a meeting in Kalimpong held in 1920, Parasmoni Pradhan and his supporters objected to the Hillmen's Association's plea for separation from Bengal which, they argued, would perpetuate the backwardness of the poor Nepalis. In 1943 the All India Gorkha League (AIGL) was formed under the leadership of Dambar Singh Gurung which demanded autonomy for Darjeeling.<sup>2</sup> The AIGL became the first party comprising of Gorkha people. They put forward the demand for the recognition of Gorkhas as a separate minority community; to get them represented in the provincial legislatures wherever they are settled; to get them represented in the interim government and free all Gorkhas held as political prisoners by the British Government. After six years of its formation, league came up with demand of separate provincial legislature called 'Uttarakhand' which might be formed of the following areas: Darjeeling district, Sikkim, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Doars; or Darjeeling District, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar; or Darjeeling District and Sikkim; or Darjeeling district only. The Communists also made their voice heard by propagating the demand for autonomy for Gorkhas. In 1947, the undivided Communist party demanded for an independent nation called 'Gorkhastan' which would comprise of present Nepal, Darjeeling district and Sikkim (excluding its northern district) for the Gorkhas. In 1954, this demand was dropped and more realist demand for regional autonomy for Darjeeling district was propagated.<sup>3</sup> However; these movements took a much serious turn with the advent of Subash Ghising in the politics of Darjeeling vis-à-vis the demand for the creation of a separate state under the Indian union.

The demand for the creation of a separate state was preceded by a demand to recognise Nepali as an official language in the Constitution of India. This demand was fulfilled, after overcoming a few major pitfalls, in the year 1992. The journey towards recognition of Nepali as an official language saw the population and language of Darjeeling hills being termed as 'foreigner' numerous times. Questioning the 'Indianness' of the people of Darjeeling hills had become a

trend among mainstream politicians and it had started with Vallabbhai Patel's note to Nehru in 1950 where he had written, "the people inhabiting this portion have no established loyalty or devotion to India." The other noticeable and prominent statement in this regard came from Prime Minister Moraji Desai in 1979 where he said that he would not recommend Nepali being accorded official recognition as he considered it to be a 'foreign language'. Another factor that increased the frustrations of the populace of Darjeeling was when Sikkim being granted the status of the 22<sup>nd</sup> state of the Indian Union in May 1975, during the premiership of Indira Gandhi. Darjeeling was much bigger than Sikkim both in terms of area and population. These factors made the environment conducive for the emergence of a leader who would lead the populace to their rightful demand, the creation of a separate 'Gorkhaland' under the Indian Union.<sup>4</sup> It was under these socio-political conditions that Subash Ghising arrived in the political scenario of Darjeeling hills. The first demand for a separate state of Nepali-speaking population of Darjeeling Hills was made on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1979.

### **1.2 Demand for a Separate State under the leadership of Subash Ghising**

The demand for a separate state within the federal polity of India has been a long history. But, the movements took a serious and organised form with the emergence of Subash Ghising as a leader of Gorkha National Liberation Front in the politics of Darjeeling hills.<sup>5</sup> Ghising almost overnight gained enormous support as he made the inhabitants of the hills aware of their deprivation and instill a sense of deep insecurity in them.<sup>6</sup> Ghising often conveyed people that CPI (M) government were the favouring plains and the Darjeeling hill was in the losing end. So people living in hills had enormous grievances against the left government in Bengal and hence this helped Ghising to become their leader who would lead them for the call of separate state.<sup>7</sup>

In 1980, Subash Ghising founded the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) and dedicated it to the cause of forming a separate state of Gorkhaland.<sup>8</sup> He instilled a sense of belief and made the 'utopian' Gorkhaland sound achievable. Ghising's modus operandi differed from the earlier

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demands made for autonomy in Darjeeling in that he did not rule out a violent movement for the purpose of separation from West Bengal. The Left Front government of West Bengal led by Jyoti Basu responded by trying to suppress the movement.<sup>9</sup> The Anti-Terrorist Act was also freely resorted by the Left Front government. Violence sponsored by the state further increased the resentment of the people of the hills. The disturbances caused by the demand for Gorkhaland and its forceful suppression by the state saw Darjeeling suffer in a major way on the economic front, especially the tea and tourism industry.<sup>10</sup>

In order to prove that their demand was constitutional and just GNLFF organised 72 hours *bandh* (*work stoppage*) from 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> may 1986. Moreover, the party launched a movement which discarded the movement of vehicles connecting Darjeeling hills with the plains of Siliguri. Ghising encouraged people in not paying their taxes and loans as sign of protest against the left front rule in Bengal.<sup>11</sup>

Subash Ghising argued that formation of separate state was necessary as it would prevent Indian Nepalis being recognised as foreigner or citizen of Nepal, furthermore, a separate state would bring make the community socially, culturally and economically developed.<sup>12</sup> Gorkhaland movement under the leadership of Subash Ghising made distinction between two sets of Nepalis in India. The post 1950 migrants to India were considered as Nepalese subjects and they consider these migrants as obstacle to their national identity.<sup>13</sup> In order to distinct Gorkhas who were citizen of India from citizens of Nepal, Gorkha National Liberation Front demanded the revocation of Article 7 of the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship.<sup>14</sup> The treaty having ten articles out of which Article VI and VII are of concern. These two articles gives out economic and social benefits to the citizens of one nation in the territory of other.

Subash Ghising who headed the movement suggested the use of word Gorkha to define Indian Nepalis, as the word Gorkha distinguishes them from Nepal. But they were disagreement among the intellectuals of Darjeeling and Sikkim, who disagreed from the stand taken by Ghising.<sup>15</sup> The word Gorkha is used as synonym of Nepal, but appropriateness of one over the other has ever since become a subject of much debate.

After a prolonged struggle for Gorkhaland under Mr. Ghising the demand for a separate state was not fulfilled, however a sub autonomous body called Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council was formed by the Central Government on the recommendation of the Government of west Bengal in collusion with the Gorkha National Liberation Front in Kolkata on August 22, 1988, with Subash Ghising as the Chairperson. The demand for statehood was dropped with signing of the agreement and all other insurgency activities were suspended. The Council consisted of forty two councillors out of which two third (28) are elected on the basis of adult suffrage from the territorial constituencies and one third (14) were nominated. The premise on which it was created lay in the fact that decentralisation of power would boost the developmental activities and meet the aspirations of the people of the region.<sup>16</sup>

Over the course of the 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the hope and believe that under DGHC future of Gorkha would be secure was shattered. The major reason for this was the internal fraction within the party which resulted in failure of running the council successfully.<sup>17</sup> The council blamed West Bengal for not allotting required fund and trying to undermine the role of DGHC. Subash Ghising, the president of GNLF and chairperson of DGHC threatened the government that they would restart the agitation, which was taken as mere pressure tactic to gain fund from the State. Ghising was accused of being corrupt and unsuccessful at running the council effectively by his opponents. These frustrations among the general people even led to an unsuccessful attempt on his life in 2001 that left him badly injured.<sup>18</sup>

DGHC provided both positive and negative aspects of experiment, on the one hand it helped to restore peace in the hills but during its functioning as a sub-autonomous body it failed on to provide the promised development. It was not given autonomy in practice and turned out to be more or less a subordinate office of the hill affair department of the West Bengal government.<sup>19</sup> And yet for the centre as well concerned state it has become cure-all model to contain demands of Bodos and others.”<sup>20</sup> Ladakh Autonomous Council and Bodo Autonomous Council were formed after Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council.

Ghising’s advocacy to bring Darjeeling Hills under Sixth Schedule of the constitution brought an end to his legacy.<sup>21</sup> Major resentment and opposition grew against Subash Ghising when he demanded for sixth schedule council as there was only a minority tribal population in the area. The sixth schedule bill did not fit into the demographic composition in the hills. Sixth schedule is meant for tribal dominated areas but tribal population in hills comprise only 35 per cent.<sup>22</sup> The other problem with sixth schedule was that it declared to be the full and final settlement of the Darjeeling hills areas and that no further demands in this regard would be entertained. However, there was reason why Ghising insisted on sixth schedule status, this would empower Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council with wider power in legislative, administrative and financial. The gamut of power as provided in sixth schedule was so overwhelming that Ghising found it appeal irresistible that he asked non tribal people to get enlisted under ST category.<sup>23</sup>

He also demanded the centre to provide ST status to all Nepali speaking population, threatening centre with an agitation if demand not fulfilled. And the conversion of Nepali speaking population to scheduled tribe would mean submission of Gorkha identity, for recognition of which they have been fighting for ages.<sup>24</sup> This view was subsequently shared by the Darjeeling intelligentsia, who threw lot against the proposal. By cleaving the community, people thought that New Delhi and Calcutta were hoping to cap for all demand for a separate state. The process

of inclusion of DGHC in the sixth schedule of the constitution to the Parliament was entrusted on chairman of parliament standing committee, Sushma Swaraj after state assembly passed the proposal, and later parliamentary committee advised against implementing the sixth schedule in Darjeeling.<sup>25</sup>

### **1.3 Renewed demand for a Separate State under the leadership of Bimal Gurung**

In less than six months, Ghising who was renowned for his political acumen and charisma, had been overthrown by a junior party colleague known more for his brawn than brains, Bimal Gurung, a former councillor of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council. He quite unexpectedly catapulted into the limelight due to his connection with Darjeeling boy Prashant Tamang in the Indian Idol, a reality show.<sup>26</sup> He sprung into action by making Prashant Tamang Fan club. Stoking Gorkha pride and the identity crisis issue, Gurung raised huge sums of money to finance a mass SMS campaign. Gurung got this chance to use this opportunity and mass support for a political upsurge as Prashant sang his way into the final stages of Indian Idol in 2007. After Prashant's victory, the Prashant Fan Club office became the party office of the newly formed Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM) and the president of the club, Bimal Gurung, donned the Party Chief's hat. And the common people of Darjeeling hills, who supported the singer to win, now supported the demand for Gorkhaland re-raised by GJMM. Darjeeling hills came alive with fresh demands for a separate state for the Gorkha people. Bizarrely, it was a television show, India's version of American Idol that lit the fire of Gorkhaland, almost after two decades. The demand with which Ghising's name had long been synonymous was subsequently taken up by Bimal Gurung now, even as it worked to prise Ghising from the scene.

GJMM began its electoral politics with an alliance with the BJP in 2009 general election and L.K Advani was the candidate for Darjeeling Parliamentary seats. GJMM ensured victory of BJP candidate and under the conditions that the national party should support the statehood cause inside and outside parliament.<sup>27</sup>



Bimal Gurung gave a new twist to the age old Gorkhaland movement. The source of inspiration of the party and its movement was Gandhian non-violence. While the leadership said to have been following Gandhian ideology, in ground level scenario seemed different. Party did not stand behind suppressing their opponent. Gurung's party was been accused of killing the leader of the opponent party All India Gorkha League, Madan Tamang. So the party's preaching and practice did not go hand in hand at times.<sup>28</sup> GJMM as a party refused to talk to the State government and requested tripartite talks with the Central government and State government. GJMM emphasised that their demand for Gorkhaland were not separatist and that it fell within the framework of the constitution.<sup>29</sup>

Cultural difference between people living in rest of West Bengal and Darjeeling were expressed during the Gorkhaland agitation under Bimal Gurung, where the party had directed people to wear ethnic Nepali attire, like *chaubandi cholo* (*ethnic attire for Women*), *daura suruwal* (*ethnic attire for men*) or *dhaka topis* (*traditional cap*), in Darjeeling. The leader of the movement refer to Darjeeling's historical status as an excluded and emphasise that it had never been an integral part of Bengal and the proposed area of Gorkhaland had never been possessed by any kings of the plains of Bengal and it was infact incorporated from Sikkim and Bhutan through various treaties. Dr. H.B Chettri, a politician from Kalimpong, argues that the government should recognise the fact that since the place is different, people should also be treated differently. It needs a different kind of administration and thereby he legitimates the demand for separation.<sup>30</sup>

The Gorkhaland movement headed by Subash Ghising was confined only till Darjeeling district. But the renewed movement of Gorkhaland under Bimal Gurung, includes not just Darjeeling hills, the proposed map of Gorkhaland also includes some parts of Terai, Dooars and Siliguri. The movement and its process were often criticised by their adversaries in the plains, namely Bharariya Bangla Bhasi Mahasabha, Jana Chetana, Bangla O Bangla Bhasha Banchao Committee.<sup>31</sup>

A crucial turning point in the history of West Bengal, Darjeeling and Gorkhaland movement came on 13th of May 2011 with the collapse of the 34-year-old communist regime and the emergence of the Trinamool Congress government. The day also saw a clear mandate for the push for Gorkhaland, with a record victory margin for the GJMM. The GJMM candidates Trilok Dewan, Harka Bahadur Chettri and Rohit Sharma, from Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong, respectively for the three constituencies of Darjeeling district, together secured the highest margin of votes ever recorded in the state. Indeed, the results even showed similar support in the plains, where Wilson Chompromary, an independent MLA from Kalchini backed by the GJMM, won handily.<sup>32</sup>

GJMM embarked on renewed agitation for the Gorkhaland. Indefinite shutdown, fasting and roadblocks became common phenomena. With the growing atrocities, the State and Centre government took initiatives for tripartite dialogue with the party leaders.<sup>33</sup> However, the revolt and agitation was settled with the creation of Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA), headed by Bimal Gurung. Establishment of GTA marked the beginning of new phase in the history of the Gorkhaland movement in the Darjeeling hills of West Bengal. Both the Centre and the State government hope that with the setting up of the Gorkha Territorial Administration the Darjeeling hills will now move into a period of peace and development. Violence and uncertainty had gripped the region since early 2008 when the GJMM wrested political control of the hills from Subash Ghising's GNLFF and renewed the call for a separate State of Gorkhaland.<sup>34</sup> GTA replaced DGHC, established in 1988 new autonomous body comprised 50 members, out of whom 45 would be directly elected and five will be nominated by the State government to represent the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, women and minority communities. The GTA had 59 departments under it, including education, agriculture, cottage and small scale industries, rural development and *Tauzi* (*deals with land records of the tea gardens*) as well as control of all unreserved forests in the region. The area that under the jurisdiction of the GTA

was same as that under the DGHC, that is, the three hill subdivisions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong, and 13 *mouzas* (*village in revenue*) in the Siliguri subdivision.<sup>35</sup>

At first glance, the proposed GTA appears to be more or less identical to the DGHC. Both were created out of situation of chaos with the purpose of bringing about peace and stability, though temporarily. The two bodies have no legislative powers although they have been recognised as autonomous entities, and both represent a compromise of sorts by the Gorkha leadership of its claimed goal of a separate Gorkhaland State. The difference between the two is that the GTA is more powerful and broad based than the DGHC. It has 50 members, of whom only five are nominated, whereas the DGHC had only 42 members, with 14 of them nominated by the State government. The GTA will have 59 departments under it, while the DGHC had only 19. The GTA will have power to create government jobs, which DGHC lacked. Although unlike the DGHC the GTA does not have any legislative powers, it has been empowered to make statutory rules in respect of various laws under the State. Also, the Panchayati raj under the GTA will be a three-tier, whereas under the DGHC it was a two-tier system.<sup>36</sup>

The West Bengal government was not in favour of dividing West Bengal for a separate state of the hills and the Dooars people. Mamta Banerjee, the Chief Minister of the state was firm on her decision that Darjeeling will never be separated from West Bengal. The West Bengal government has constantly battered the spirit of revolution through violence and at other times through diplomatic means.

#### **1.4 The recent upsurge**

The recent upsurge in Darjeeling hills reflects the aspiration of Nepalis people for sub-national autonomy and creation of a separate 'Gorkha' state. Sarah Besky in her work 'The Land in Gorkhaland' labels such movements as 'struggle for land' and struggle with land embedded in

senses of places and belonging.<sup>37</sup> The plea of all hill based political parties in Darjeeling is to have a 'Gorkhaland' controlled by region's Nepalis majority.

Unlike the previous struggles in Darjeeling hills, the recent struggle had a cultural dimension to the political demand of sub-autonomy. The recent struggle was intensive and endearing in the sense that it lasted for 104 days of strike in the region which holds a record in itself. The people of Darjeeling exhibited their solidarity in not only fighting collectively with the security forces but also staging protests against the human rights violation by the West Bengal Government. In the entire struggle, social media emerged as a significant tool in mobilising support from not only the neighbouring states like Sikkim but also from Gorkhas residing in different parts of the globe.

The prolonged agitation was triggered when West Bengal education minister Partha Chatterjee made a public remark on making Bengali as a compulsory subject from Class 1 to 10 across the state. This came as a severe blow to Nepalis majority residing in West Bengal as language is an important symbol of their Gorkha identity assertion and for that matter in making claims for a separate Gorkhaland. Amidst the massive public uproar, Mamata Banerjee rectified her cabinet minister's statement stating that Bengali will be an optional subject in the Gorkha-dominated Darjeeling hills.

The movement received a political mileage when GJMM, which heads the semi-autonomous GTA mobilised the public and its supporters attacked government establishments. Massive human rights violation and killings of civilians led the Government to deploy CRPF forces in the region. Intensification of the struggle reached to such a zenith point that Calcutta High Court had to call the strike as 'illegal and unconstitutional'. In spite of such judicial pronouncement the movement continued in full swing with some resorting to hunger strikes, attacking government establishments, holding rallies and staging protests at the national capital. Failure of West Bengal Government compelled the Central Government to intervene and act as peacemaker between West Bengal Government and GJMM.

However, there were differing opinions among hill- based political parties in respect of reconciling with the West Bengal Government. Thereafter, the movement took a political turn with hill- based political parties exhibiting their political interests in the current state of affairs. GJMM under the leadership of Bimal Gurung vehemently opposed the West Bengal Government and refused to reconcile with it. West Bengal on the other hand, served look out notice against Bimal Gurung for instigating violence in the Hills. His public property was seized and his party aides were also detained. GJM M assistant secretary, Binay Tamang taking advantage of the situation took charge of GJMM and reconciled with the West Bengal Government.

## 2. Conclusion

While studying about the Gorkhaland movement it is interesting to discuss whether the agitation is against State government and its political domination over the hills, or whether the assertion has much serious and deeper content. According to Subash Ghising Darjeeling is in better position in terms of economic development. He said, “Darjeeling is far better off in terms of development than most of the districts of West Bengal; our struggle is for land and identity.” Ghising kept affirm to his this stand during his rule in 1980s. However, Bimal Gurung, his successor had a different viewpoint; Gurung regards the movement to be against the West Bengal government’s political and socio-cultural hegemony over the people of the hills, who were different from Bengalis in terms of culture and character.<sup>38</sup> According to Romit Bagchi, “the Darjeeling tangle, in its deeper aspects seems to be more an assertion of ethnic identity rather than a revolt against the domination of Bengalis; the anti-Bengali paranoia is merely a manifestation of deeper pathos linked with carving from deep within the subjective realm of the Gorkha settlers for a land of their own.”<sup>39</sup>

Gorkhaland movement, agitation for a separate state of Gorkhas in Darjeeling hills, has been a century old demand. The movements have seen many leaders, from some demanding for a separate entity within British India to a separate state within India. The movement unfolded many pages, earlier demands were non violent and while agitation under Subash Ghising had seen extreme violence, hundreds of people lost their lives in 1980s. While the new phase of

Gorkhaland movement under Bimal Gurung, claims the movement to be non-violent and following the Gandhian ideology. However, the movement did not seem to be non-violent as the party have not held themselves behind in suppressing their adversaries.

However, the movement for a separate state in Darjeeling hills has always led to creation of autonomous Councils, Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council with Subash Ghising as a chairman, and than Gorkhaland Territorial Administration under Bimal Gurung. The separation of Darjeeling from West Bengal is not supported by any ruling party in the state, the Communist regime did not support the demand and similarly Trinamool Congress has also clearly indicated that Bengal won't be separated.

Moreover, the demand for Gorkhaland is different from other statehood demands which have now become states of Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and Uttaranchal. Gorkhaland movement is different from these statehood agitations as international connotation is linked with Gorkhaland tangle. Gorkhaland issue is not just an ethnic assertion by a group for self determination but the larger problem is their connection with the sovereign state of Nepal. The question of citizenship has remained a major concern for all Indian Nepalis population, and free flow of people across the border continues as a result of the Indo-Nepal Treaty jeopardising the citizenship and identity of Indian Nepalis <sup>40</sup>

The main cause of the Gorkhaland movement is to recognise Gorkhas as citizens of India and as well as development of Darjeeling. However with serious inflicting among the party members and between political parties the cause of the movement is often kept aside. The demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland is a century old demand and under the constitution of India and its achievement cannot be predicted, the movement has long way to go. But history of world has seen that homeland aspiration, once aroused in full, cannot be kept under wraps for long.

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