

## GORKHALAND MOVEMENT: ISSUES AND CONCERNS

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### **Abstract:**

The paper focuses on the struggle for the demand of Gorkhaland state out of West Bengal. The history of the Darjeeling region has been discussed where the agitation has been mainly confined. Supporters of the movement points out that, the region was never a part of West Bengal. The paper further examines the various concerned issues that the exponents of the movement has raised over the period of time to justify their demand.

Key Words: Darjeeling, Gorkhaland, Gorkhas, Nepali

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Gorkhaland is the name put forth for a new state that comprise the regions namely Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong. Gorkhaland supporters also demand the inclusion of 398 contiguous and non-contiguous mouzas of adjoining Terai and Dooars areas of Siliguri and Jalpaiguri in the proposed state. These regions have Gorkhas as its dominant community. As per census report 1901, Nepali community constituted 61 per cent of the total population of Darjeeling (Mukherjee, 1980). The settlement of Gorkhas in the region also induced a new cultural space in the region. So, the emergence of new culture, growing ethnic consciousness among the Gorkhas, and lesser manifestation of Bengalis in the Hills accentuated the demand for the separate state. Thus one finds that the migrants who in initial stage are in minority but with the passage of time expand in population and their quest for identity occurs. They often act as a catalyst who struggle for more favourable distribution of power and authority in the region.

Amongst all the regions, the focus of Gorkhaland demand has been mainly Darjeeling which is popularly known as 'Queen of Hills', a famous tourist paradise. All over the world, the region is also known for its tea production which fetches sizable foreign exchange for the country. Those demanding separate statehood claim that politically West Bengal is trying to forcefully keep Darjeeling within the political map of the state without amalgamating people of Gorkha community within the mainstream of state.

The prime agenda of the Gorkhaland movement is preservation and development of their language, culture and identity of Nepalese minority group in West Bengal. The champions of the movement are of the view that once the state of Gorkhaland is formed then the other Indians would not label Gorkhas as 'foreigner'. The individuality of the Gorkhas as Indians will be safeguarded. This movement in fact is an indication of growing sense of identity among a marginal group. The movement is vigorous and its supporters have no desire to separate from India but only from its parent state.

### **History of the Region**

Prior to 1780s, the region of Darjeeling was the part of Dominions of Chogyal of Sikkim. The region was captured by Nepal in 1780 and stayed with it till 1816. British defeated Gorkhas in Anglo-Gorkha war which took place in 1814 and thus seized Darjeeling region by the Treaty of

Saugauli in 1816. Later in 1817, East India Company bestowed it back to Chogyal of Sikkim by Treaty of Titalia. In 1835, Company took the territory back from Sikkim in the form of gift by the Deed of Grant for an annual amount of Rs 3000. Governor General preferred the region due to its cool weather as it would be beneficial for government servants.

The very first map of Darjeeling, however, came into reality only after the Anglo-Bhutanese war of 1864 (Treaty of Sinchula). The areas of Kalimpong and Dooars were later captured by British in 1865. The current map of Gorkhaland came into existence in 1866.

Before 1861 and from 1870-74, Darjeeling district was asserted as 'Non-Regulated Area' due to which ordinary and civil laws were executed in the district. As a result, tribals began to lose their land to outsiders which led Santhal Rebellis against plain men (Samanta 2000). In 1874, British government altered the term 'Non-Regulated Area' to 'scheduled District' and then to 'Backward Tacts' in 1919. In 1919, Government of India Act was made by which Legislative assembly was created but the region of Darjeeling was given no representation.

Before annexation of Darjeeling by the British, the population of Nepalis in the region was negligible but after its annexation in 1835 there was aberrant growth of Nepali population in the region due to migration from adjoining states. The prime cause behind this trend was increase in employment opportunities generated by Tea industry; advancement in the means of communication between Siliguri and Darjeeling; optimum utilization of forest wealth; and stimulation by British government to Nepalese who were agreed land free of cost to plough. All these factors created an upsurge in the Gorkha population.

British government also started employing the Nepali people in military forces especially during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. E. Drummend, the then Magistrate of Dinajpur, urged the Government of West Bengal to increase the Nepali Recruitment as 'they would be in every way be more efficient, courageous and trustworthy body of men than any to be had in the plains' (Gupta, 1999). Owing to the deep faith of British administration in Nepali soldiers the number of the Gorkha Battalions increased from five in 1862 to twenty in 1914.

In 1872, the first census of India was published which indicated the population of Darjeeling to be 94,712. WW Hunter wrote in his 'Statistical Account of Bengal' in 1876, "The Nepalis, who

form 34 per cent of the population of the district, are all immigrants from the state of Nepal. They are a pushing, thriving race....” (Gupta, 1999). With the increase in Gorkha population there also increased their urge to safeguard their common interests. In order to fulfill this objective they formed ‘Gorkha Samiti’ in 1906.

### Issues of Concern

Before considering the issues behind the demand, the main question is why the movement is confined mainly to Darjeeling district? The reasons include majority of Nepalese are residing in this area; disparity created between majority Bengalese and minority Nepalese by Britishers; and partial policies followed by the state of West Bengal towards Darjeeling district.

There were also several issues raised by the supporters in justification of Gorkhaland demand:

The *first* issue raised by the backers of Gorkhaland demand is regarding Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950 that does not make clear distinction between Indian Nepali and Nepali citizens. There is no second opinion that Indian Gorkhas share a common lineage with Nepali Gorkhas but it would not be judicious to confuse them with Nepali Gorkhas. Due to Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty, excluding right to vote, Gorkhas of Nepali origin have been endowed with all rights for instance, right to education, get job, purchase property, establish business, etc. Also, because of this treaty a myth has developed amongst Indians that the Indian Nepalis are also the citizens of Nepal. Such a misconception has given birth to the concept of ‘Double Homeland’ owing to which they face the identity crisis. Even the Sikkim Chief Minister, Pawan Chamling said that Nepali –speaking Indian citizens are being muddled with Nepalese citizens because of 1950 Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty. Ghising was also strongly against the treaty as according to him it made Nepalese refugees on Indian Soil (Sarkar 2014).

There is also need to bring out clarity between the terms ‘Nepalese’ and ‘Nepali’ in order to reduce the prevalent confusion. The term ‘Nepalese’ denotes the nationality of citizens of Nepal while ‘Nepali’ refers to the ethnic identity of Indian Nepali. Amar Singh Rai, a retired professor of political science said, "We are still treated as foreigners when we go to other parts of the country. They think we are from Nepal. We have to tell them we are Indian Nepalese. We keep on telling them we are born and raised in Darjeeling, our homeland." (Bhabani, 2013)

*Second* issue taken up by the agitators is the partiality done to them by the State Reorganization Commission in 1956 when Linguistic Reorganization of Indian territory was done. It is asserted that the Census of 1951 was manipulated by the Government of West Bengal in order to prevent the bifurcation of state. The Nepali speaking population was projected as minority thereby denying them state on the linguistic basis. The Nepali speaking population was shown only 17 per cent though, Census Officer, A Mitra, had clearly stated that the number of Nepali/Gorkhas was 66 per cent.

*Third* issue raised by Gorkhas is unfair treatment faced by them in the hands of the state governments. Almost all the states of North East India had witnessed political mobilization and hostility against the immigrants in one form or other ushering to cleansing of non-indigenous groups. In the beginning such hatred was not prevalent in fact Nepalis were greeted to the region as they fulfilled the labour requirements of the local people. However later the Anti-outsider politics came to forefront by the ‘Son of the Soil Agitation’ in Assam and this was followed by many subsequent native movements in the rest of North East regions. As a consequence of the agitation by All Assam Students Union against the large scale immigration of Nepalese from Nepal and Bangalese from Bangladesh, an accord was made between protestors and government that all foreigners who came and settled in state after 25 March 1971 would be displaced from the state (Kaushik, 2007). As a result in 1979, ‘Anti-foreigners’ movement was initiated in North Eastern states of India. In a single day about 17000 Gorkhas had to flee from Meghalya hills to Byrnihat town in Assam-Meghalya border (HK Pradhan and Vikas Pradhan, 2005). Furthermore in 1980, direct attacks were done on Nepalis in Manipur due to which they were compelled to relocate and shift to secure areas. The rebels and secessionist groups attacked villages, massacre residents and burned houses to pressurise other ethnic groups to vacate disputed territory (Nath, 2005). Although the Government of India elucidated its position on Nepalis in 1984 that those in possession of ‘Restricted Area Permit’ would not come in the definition of ‘illegal immigrants’ and stood protected (Mandal, 2009 ). Even after this, ethnic cleansing continued and Nepalis were displaced from Assam. Many expelled Nepalis took shelter in the state of West Bengal but here too the treatment given to Nepalis was unsympathetic in comparison with the favorable treatment bestowed upon the Bengalis.

*Fourth* matter taken by the supporters of Gorkhaland state is the issue of language. The Nepali language spoken in the region is amalgamation of various dialects used by the different castes and tribes that include Shekhpura, Limukura, Rajkura, etc. (Sarkar, 2014). As discussed earlier there was a sense of insecurity amongst Indian Nepalese as they were branded as foreigners. Their anxiety was further deepened when in 1956, B.G. Kher, chairman Language Commission, characterized Nepali as a foreign language (Chaklader, 2004). Under such circumstances, the Nepalese in India understood that they would be treated as Indians if their language gets recognition in the constitution of India in the Eighth Schedule. Also, a deep study of Articles 344(1) and 351 of Indian Constitutions reveals that for a language to be incorporated in the schedule of Indian Constitution, it should be rich enough to contribute to the richness of Hindi language. On this account, Nepali is qualified to be included in the Constitution as it is written in Devanagari script and is derived from Sauraseni Prakrit. Also, various other minor linguistic groups like Newari, Gurung, Limbu, Lepchas and others have accepted Nepali as their language and not Bengali. Supporters of Nepali language also say point out that Urdu and Sindhi are languages of Pakistan yet included in Indian Constitution then why not Nepali?

In 1956, Ananda Singh Thapa, editor of Jagat Gorkha, sent a memorandum to the Official Language Commission for its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule but the proposal was turned down by the Chairman of the Commission (Chaklader, 2004). This resulted in a strong agitation among Indian Nepalis and toughened their stand to carry out their demands. Under the leadership of All India Nepali Bhasa Samiti, meetings, processions, demonstrations and strikes were held. As a result, the state of West Bengal through West Bengal Official Language Act of 1961 made Nepali as the official language of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong where Nepalese were in majority. In 1977, the State Legislative Assembly passed a resolution that made parliament to amend Indian constitution in order to make Nepali as an official language. Further, the Census of India 1981, called the language Gorkhali/Nepali. The movement got further boost in June 1990 with the foundation of Bharatiya Nepali Rashtriya Parishad. This movement got support from the state assemblies of West Bengal, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh and Tripura which passed resolutions supporting the recognition of Nepali language in Indian constitution. Finally all efforts proved to be fruitful and Nepali language got included in the Eighth schedule along with Konkani and Manipuri in 1992 by 71<sup>st</sup> Constitutional Amendment.

The state government of West Bengal, however, has imposed Bengali as a compulsory official language all over the state including Darjeeling district. No doubt the state government has accepted Nepali as second official language of the state but still all the important official documents are published in Bengali language. In addition, at the educational level, excluding Calcutta University and North Bengal University, Nepali has not been adopted as a language at Graduation and Post graduation level.

The supporters of movement have also been demanding recognition of Nepali language as official language by the neighbouring states. Anjan Upadhyaya, convener of Akhil Bharatiya Nepali Bhasha Sangharsh Samiti (ABNBSS) said, “The state government’s refusal to recognize Nepali as Sikkim’s official language is responsible for our plight” (‘ABNBSS Blames Chamling Government for Plight of Indian Nepalese’, 2013). They feel that such an attitude of Sikkim government has further compounded the identity crisis.

*Fifth* issue that has further strengthened the demand for Gorkhaland state is that the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign affairs in Nepal has recommended that their country would stop its citizens from joining the foreign armies. It implies that if anything such happens then Indian Gorkha population will have to provide additional manpower to fill up the vacant positions. This further provides a strong case for Gorkhaland. This is so because regiments in Indian Army are often state centric like ‘JK Rifles Light Infantry’ represents the state of Jammu and Kashmir; ‘Punjab and Sikh Light Infantry Regiments’ of Punjab; ‘Jat Regiment’ of Haryana, etc. So if Indian Army gets Gorkha Regiments solely comprised of Indian Gorkhas with no Gorkha from Nepal, then there could be a state for Gorkhas in India. Thus this could tackle the issue of Gorkhaland state.

*Sixth* issue taken up the agitators is of economic deprivation of the region. Major economy of Darjeeling district is reliant on tea, timber and tourism. However, over the period of time, these industries have witnessed a downfall due to negligence on the part of state government. The number of tea gardens operating in the region have reduced as either they have become sick or uneconomic. As a consequence of this, large number of people working as a labour in the tea gardens has become unemployed. Similar is the case of timber industry. Darjeeling has been blessed with the asset of forest wealth but due to tough competition from other states and from

plains, the timber industry in the hills has witnessed a downfall. Also, due to West Bengal Forest Development Corporation established in 1974, the forests in Darjeeling were cleared without proper afforestation leading to imbalance in the ecology of the region (Kaushik, 2007). The third major industry of the area i.e. Tourism has also been affected due to the permit system. Also, the frequent bandhs, strikes and processions in the area have affected the inflow of tourist in the state.

*Seventh* history has shown that Gorkhas have been loyal to Indian state. They were associated with Indian freedom struggle. In 1921, All India Gorkha League was organized at Dehradun constituting retired soldiers for the cause of Indian nationalism. Major Dal Bahadur Thapa and Captain Durga Malla were hanged by Britishers for their participation in INA. The supporters of Gorkhaland blame the government for ignoring the contribution of Gorkhas in the Independence movement. Gorkhas had participated in Gandhi's Dandi March and were close associates of Gandhi and other national leaders. It has been sad that the names of freedom fighters like Jangbir Sapkota and Capt. Khadka have been found no where. Even in the book 'the Role of Honour' published by trust of INA from Kolkota talks about 'Major' as the highest rank given to Durga Malla, a Gorkha in INA (HK Pradhan and Vikas Pradhan, 2005).

*Eighth*, Gorkhaland supporters say that Darjeeling was historically never a part of West Bengal. GJM President Bimal Gurung in a Facebook post wrote:

*"Creation of Gorkhaland is not the partition of Bengal.....Darjeeling was not part of Bengal and was leased by the British from the kingdom of Sikkim in 1835. Kalimpong and Dooars were also annexed in 1865 from Bhutan."* He further says, *"Allegations of being foreigners used by those opposed to Gorkhaland only strengthens our statehood movement."* (Indian Express, 2013)

Lastly, the movement became stronger and more committed to its demand after central government's endorsement of Telangana state to be carved out of Andhra Pradesh. Subsequently, a number of pre-Gorkhaland groups formed an alliance called the Gorkhaland Joint Action Commission (GJAC) to jointly lead the movement.



Supporting its agitation, Gurung made a point that Gorkhaland movement cannot be wiped out by force and it is their constitutional right. He even made a call to the students to lend their support to the movement. Emphasising that the students of the hills and foothills “must play an active role in the formation of Gorkhaland,” Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) president Bimal Gurung said that “Mission Gorkhaland will be the name and task for all the students in the Hills and Doars.” (The Hindu, 2013)

Bimal Gurung welcomed the move of centre for creating Telangana but at the same time urged the centre to consider the demand for creation of Gorkhaland state too. Gurung commented on the social networking site Facebook, “I congratulate the union government for taking a step towards the creation of Telangana. In this context I would want the government to take a positive step for the creation of Gorkhaland. If Telangana is created then Gorkhaland has to be created” (Gupta, 2013).

After the coming up of Modi Government in power a new hope has emerged among the people in Darjeeling that their demand would not be left unheard. The BJP’s national manifesto in 2009 and 2014 had assured of “sympathetically examining” of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha’s (GJM) demand for Gorkhaland. In election campaign 2014 Modi had said, “Gorkha ka sapna, mera sapna hai (The dream of Gorkhaland is my dream)” with an optimism and in a bid to renew talks for a separate state of Gorkhaland, GJM delegation led by party chief Bimal Gurung met Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 19, 2015 and submitted a memorandum demanding formation of Gorkhaland (Express New Service, 2015).

To sum up, the demand for Gorkhaland state has been an old one and over the period of time it has become even more vigorous. The urge for safeguarding identity and language along with economic prosperity of the region has been the main agenda of demand. The demand needs attention and some solution as the agitation has deprived a lot of people of their lives and livelihood.

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