

Gorkhaland Redux

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The setting up of the Hill Council in Darjeeling and the more recent attempts at including it under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution to extend its autonomy have not met the popular aspirations of the Gorkhas. Yet the Gorkha homeland question is no longer as simple as about autonomy. Doubts remain about the representative claims of the Gorkha community over the entire Nepali population in the country.

The Darjeeling hills of West Bengal are astir once again resounding to the demands of a separate Gorkhaland. Twenty years after the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) was formed as a result of the Gorkhaland movement (1986-88), the prospect of a separate Gorkhaland state within the Indian union has once again been raised on the eve of the 15th Lok Sabha elections. Why has the demand been revived now? Is this a replay of the earlier movement albeit with a new leader and organisation? Why has the DGHC not been able to meet the aspiration of the Darjeeling Gorkhas?

The setting up of the Hill Council and the more recent attempts at including it under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution to extend its autonomy has not met the popular aspirations of the Gorkhas. While the formation of the Hill Council quelled the violent movement of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) led by Subhash Ghising in the hills, it could not establish the Gorkhas as the hegemonic group in the district. This is because the district of Darjeeling comprises three hill subdivisions and the *terai* region in the plains. Siliguri town is located in the plains. The demographic profile of the hills and plains are mirror opposites. Out of a total population of one million in the hills, 90% are Nepali speakers. On the other hand of about 8,00,000 in the plains, 3,00,000 are Nepali-speaking. In Siliguri town there are about 1,00,000 Nepali-speakers out of a total population of 8,50,000 (Devkota 2009: 28). The adverse demographic dynamics of the Gorkhas in the plains has been attributed to the refugee influx after Partition but augmented more recently by alleged illegal immigration from across the Bangladesh border. Population flows are intricately connected with perceptions of ethnic dominance. The ebb and flow of migration in the trans-Himalayan region has been a major motivator of the Gorkhaland movement.

Its initial phase (1986-88) under the leadership of Ghising was sparked off by the eviction of Nepali-speaking migrants from Assam in the early 1980s, as *bahiragatas* (foreigners) just like the Bengalis, during the Assam movement. This was followed by the driving out of 5,000 Nepali-speaking workers from the coal mines of the Jowai Hills in Meghalaya at the insistence of the Khasi Students Union (Ghosh 1986: 36; Patra 2007: 320; Chattopadhyay 2008: 191). The anxiety that this evoked at the time in the shadow of the Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1950 for the Indian-born Gorkhas was echoed in Ghising's statement to Inder Jit (1986),

Mr Ghising explained that their demand for a Gorkhaland is basically a question of their identity and a fight for justice and economic progress. "You have Bengalis, Biharis, Punjabis, Tamils, Marathis, etc. But who are we – Nepali-speaking people who have been living in Darjeeling and surrounding areas since the 12th century. We are only 'reciprocal Nepalis' thanks to the Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1950, I want abrogated."

The provision of reciprocal recognition in the Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1950 has blurred the distinction between Indian-born and Nepal-born Nepali-speakers. Consequently, the Gorkhas (Indian-born Nepalis) have been considered as foreigners. Even ex-Prime Minister Morarji Desai had called Nepali a foreign language and remarked "If you want Nepali, go to Nepal" (quoted in Inder Jit 1986). Anxieties of eviction looming large, prompted the Gorkhas to demand Gorkhaland as a sanctuary, imparting an Indian identity to them as distinct from the Nepalis. The spectre of alien-ness and eviction continues to haunt the Gorkhas even in the present.

These have been fuelled during the 1990s when Bhutan deported over a 1,00,000 of its Nepali residents as illegal migrants. Apparently, they were transported to Nepal across the Mechi river in Indian army vehicles. Cramped into several refugee camps in Nepal, these forgotten refugees are slowly beginning to make their way westwards to Europe and us for resettlement under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Yet as the BBC documentary film showed,¹ only about half the

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refugees have registered for resettlement in third countries. The other half do not want to relinquish their citizenship of Bhutan, for which they have documentary proof, and would like to return there eventually. But the government of Bhutan is resolute in not accepting them back as it is likely to disturb the cultural homogeneity of the small mountain state. On the other hand, Nepal is also unwilling to accept the Bhutan refugees as it is unable to cope with the additional pressure on the population. Clearly, the movement for a separate Gorkhaland is not unconnected with the accommodation of ethnic minorities in the trans-Himalayan region.

History

To distinguish Gorkha from Nepali it is necessary to delve into history, language formation and colonial classification. The hill area of Darjeeling excluding Kalimpong was transferred by the Raja of Sikkim as a gift to the British in 1835. Kalimpong and the terai areas known as the Duars were annexed from Bhutan in 1865 (Chattopadhyay 2008; Ghosh 1986: 38). Darjeeling district comprises the three hill subdivisions of Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong along with Siliguri town and the surrounding Duars area. The Gorkhas who primarily inhabited the hill districts had also been numerically preponderant in the Duars area till the early 1940s. It was the refugee influx after the creation of Pakistan which tipped the balance against the Gorkhas. Between 1941 and 1959 Siliguri town grew by 61.2%, while from 1951-61 Siliguri grew by 101.5% owing to the refugee inflow (Thulung 2008). This meant that other than in the hill subdivisions the Gorkhas had become a minority in the plains. The inclusion of Siliguri and the adjoining Duars area in the revamped demand of a separate Gorkhaland is an attempt to reclaim lost territory.

There are at least two other aspects to Gorkha ethnic identity. First the question of language. While the Gorkhas speak Nepali their linguistic pattern has a certain distinctiveness embedded in their language formation. The Nepali language used in Darjeeling has emerged out of an amalgamation of numerous separate *kura* (dialects) and is known as Khas Kura or Gorkhali or

Parbatiya. The different castes and tribes among the Nepalis had their distinct dialects like Sherpakura, Limbukura, Raikura, etc. As the different communities engaged in public social intercourse in the tea gardens and marketplaces, Khas Kura became the lingua franca in the hills. An amalgamation of the dialects in Khas Kura constituted a *jatiya bhasa* which unlike in Nepal was not the royal imposition of a court language, but grew out of the grass-roots interaction in everyday life. Thus even the other hill communities like the Lepchas, Bhotiyas and Tibetans took to Gorkhali or Gorkha bhasa for communication. This syncretic development of the language served as a foundation for the emergence of Gorkha ethnicity. The trend was consolidated through the formation of the Nepali Sahitya Sammelan in 1924 which became the forum of the emergent Gorkha intelligentsia. The *NSS Patrika* became the vehicle of communication of Nepali language and literature among the literati (Ghosh 1986; Das 1982). The inclusion of Gorkhali or Gorkha bhasa in the Eighth Schedule had been a long-standing demand of the Gorkhaland movement. Nepali was declared the official language in the hill subdivisions according to the West Bengal Official Language Act of 1961. The Gorkha intelligentsia also demanded that Nepali should be made the language of instruction in schools. In 1977, the West Bengal legislature passed a resolution requesting the Parliament to amend the Constitution and include Nepali as a scheduled language. While this resolution was tabled in Parliament by Ananda Pathak, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) member of Parliament from Darjeeling, its implementation would take another 15 years. In 1992, the Constitution was finally amended to include Nepali in the Eighth Schedule with this clarificatory statement by the home minister in the Rajya Sabha on 20 August:

While including Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, the Government of India has also noted that in some areas this language is also known as Gorkha bhasa. In fact, the Autonomous Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council has declared Gorkha bhasa to be its official language. The Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council will therefore be free to continue using Gorkha bhasa as its official language (quoted in Pradhan 2007: 312).

Gorkha ethnic identity has also been constituted through the manner of colonial classification by the British who had established the Gorkha Regiment in the British Army since 1815. Recruitment into the British Army entailed the Gorkhas' classification as a martial race. Gorkha recruitment centres were set up in Shillong, Darjeeling and Dehra Dun. In 1902, the British set up a recruitment centre in Ghoom, Darjeeling. The Gorkha identity actually derives from a place-name, the city of Gorkha which is about 40 miles west of Kathmandu. As the capital of the Shah dynasty which ruled Nepal in the 18th century, the king of Gorkha was the king of Nepal. In 1742, king Prithvinarayan Shah built his army through the inclusion of a large number of castes and tribes of Nepal like the Magars, Khas, Bagale Thapa, Tamangs and Sunuwars. While the Gorkhas are said to have been of Rajput descent, the other communities acquired the Gorkha identity through their participation in the army. This composite tradition was fostered by the recruitment to the British army as Magar, Gurung, Rai, Limbu and others were recruited to the Gorkha Regiment. It has been continued in the Indian army. Gorkha identity was invariably connected with the martial traditions of the hill people (Chattopadhyay 2008: 187-88).

The disillusionment with the DGHC and Ghising has emerged in recent times owing to the (mal)functioning of the Hill Council and Ghising's apathy towards securing a niche for the Gorkhas. The DGHC was formed to accord self-rule to the Gorkhas after the Gorkhaland movement (1986-88). Its purpose was to allow for the autonomy of Gorkha governance in the hill subdivisions of Darjeeling. With Ghising as the DGHC chief, the state government found in him a stable conduit. Once the Hill Council was formed, Ghising did not again raise the demand for a separate Gorkhaland. The administrative autonomy for the DGHC was confined to the hill subdivisions and did not include the terai region. The purse strings of the Hill Council were controlled from Writers Building in Kolkata and hamstrung the prospects of development in the hills. Coupled with rampant corruption, failure of governance and the increasing isolation

of its chairman, the hill people's confidence in the DGHC was undermined over the two decades. In an effort to shore up the autonomy of the Hill Council a demand for inclusion of the Council under the Sixth Schedule was gaining ground. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution proposes the formation of autonomous district councils for the tribal areas of the north-east in order to enable the tribal communities to enjoy self-governance over their territory. However, for the Hindu Gorkhas, the attribution of tribal status was demeaning. The caste Hindu Gorkhas resented the homogenisation with the scheduled tribes who are mostly Buddhists (i.e., Lepchas, Bhotias).

Re-emergence of 'Gorkhaland' Demand

The disaffection with the functioning of the DGHC crystallised into the re-emergence of the Gorkhaland demand under the leadership of Bimal Gurung and the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM). Gurung had been Ghising's lieutenant during the earlier phase of the movement. He had led the Gorkha National Volunteer Force under Ghising. Later when the DGHC was formed he became an elected Council member. However, as differences with Ghising surfaced he kept himself apart and took up residence in Kurseong. It was the short message service (SMS) campaign in 2007 for Prashant Tamang, a promising young Gorkha singer from Darjeeling competing for the Indian Idol crown, that once again brought Gurung into the limelight. Unlike Ghising who was disdainful of the young lad's efforts, Gurung actively campaigned for Tamang who eventually won. It was this electronic campaign which again brought Gurung into the forefront of Gorkha solidarity. The GJMM was formed soon after in October 2007 and took up the cause of a separate Gorkhaland state again. Its first move was to scuttle the inclusion of the Hill Council under the Sixth Schedule. Secondly it united the veteran Gorkha army personnel and led them to express their solidarity for Gorkhaland. The GJMM called for a number of *bandhs* during May-June 2008 thereby halting traffic on Hill Cart Road, the main thoroughfare to the hills of Darjeeling and Sikkim. For Sikkim the stalling of traffic meant a

disruption of its principal lifeline. It led to the Sikkim government filing a suit against GJMM. When a GJMM supporter was allegedly shot at by a GNLFF supporter in the hills during a procession, popular anger was directed at the GNLFF chief, Ghising who was unceremoniously driven out of Darjeeling in July 2008 and ultimately had to take shelter in Siliguri town. Secure in the knowledge of people's support in the hills Gurung now turned his attention to the plains, mainly Siliguri town. In order to extend their influence in Siliguri and the adjoining *duars* area, protest actions in the form of *bandhs*, meetings and demonstrations were initiated by GJMM. While the protests were by and large peaceful, there were some incidents of ethnic confrontation between GJMM supporters and members of Amra Bangali and Jan Jagaran Manch. These revivalist and ethnically chauvinist organisations of erstwhile refugee Bengali youth and adivasi workers from the tea-gardens, are alleged to have sprung to life through the covert ministrations of some Left leaders. This has added an ethnic edge to Left politics in the state.

A Majoritarian Response

The state government's response to the renewed agitation in the hills was predictably majoritarian. It maintained that the demand for a separate Gorkhaland was an attempt to further divide West Bengal, thereby evoking the bogey of partition and its association of loss. Further while the government was willing to accede to demands of greater autonomy and had even proceeded to initiate consultations to include the DGHC under the Sixth Schedule, it was not amenable to suggestions of a separate Gorkhaland. Moreover, it felt that the conflict between Ghising's GNLFF and Gurung's GJMM was internecine conflict among the Gorkhas. All the opposition parties in the state including the Indian National Congress (INC), Trinamool Congress (TMC) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have been united in their opposition to the idea of a separate Gorkhaland. In other words political parties with stakes in the plains were hardly willing to jeopardise their electoral chances by supporting the demand for a separate Gorkhaland. Here even the BJP which had deputed its senior

leader Jaswant Singh to fight the Lok Sabha election from Darjeeling at the request of the GJMM, had engaged in doublespeak. While in the hills, Singh had promised to raise the issue of a separate Gorkhaland in Parliament if elected, his compatriots in the plains had maintained that "the party had not made any commitment to fulfil the demand for Gorkhaland, but only to look into the matter sympathetically" (*The Telegraph*, 17 April 2009). This equivocation suggests the quandary in which the BJP found itself. By fielding Jaswant Singh as the BJP candidate from Darjeeling supported by GJMM, it had found itself isolated in the plains. Consequently it sought to dissociate itself from the promise of a separate Gorkhaland made in the hills, even as the GJMM had welcomed the candidature of Jaswant Singh as an ex-army man and a prospective weighty voice for a separate Gorkhaland in Parliament. This of course has allowed a certain national exposure to GJMM and bore fruit in the elections as Jaswant Singh won the seat with an overwhelming margin of 2,53,000 votes. Significantly, the BJP candidate polled 85,000 votes in the plains, 30,000 more than in the 2004 elections (*The Times of India*, 18 May 2009). But has Singh's victory served GJMM's purpose of a separate Gorkhaland? For the National Democratic Alliance's (NDA) defeat at the national level has plunged the prospect of Gorkhaland into uncertainty.

Yet by aligning with the BJP, GJMM has fanned the upper caste Hindu sentiments in the Darjeeling hills which has mirrored the majoritarian impulse of their Bengali counterparts in the plains. In an effort to emerge as the dominant voice the Gorkhas have silenced the autochthonous Buddhist minorities (e.g., Lepchas, Bhotias, Tibetans, Magars, etc) in the hills. A section of the Kamtapuris have supported the BJP stalwart's candidature from Darjeeling. Atul Roy of the Kamtapur People's Party (KPP) had expressed willingness to withdraw his candidature in favour of the BJP candidate. But this does not imply complete adivasi support for Jaswant Singh in the terai region. The Adivasi Vikas Parishad (AVP) had opposed the inclusion of the plains area into Gorkhaland. They eventually called for a poll boycott which benefited the BJP candidate. Moreover, even Ghising

has been asserting his presence against the GJMM, through rallies of his supporters, albeit in Siliguri. GNLF loyalists, as well as Left Front supporters have become isolated in the hills and the fielding of a candidate from the plains by the Left Front did not go down well with the Gorkhas who ultimately voted overwhelmingly against him. But the decisive verdict in favour of the GJMM supported candidate does put to rest speculations of popular support in the hills.

To return to the question of a replay of the Gorkhaland movement, this time with Gurung and the GJMM in the leadership instead of Ghising and the GNLF, the Gorkha homeland question is no longer as simple. With a relatively open border between India and Nepal and Nepali-speakers dispersed widely in the trans-Himalayan region, to

what extent can the Darjeeling Gorkhas represent the entire Nepali-speaking population in India? Further, given the two decades long existence of the DGHC how far have the Gorkhas been able to exercise leadership in development for the hills? Does that enable them to assume a dominant position among the Nepali speakers across the trans-Himalayan region? How has Gorkha autonomy in the Darjeeling hills compared with the developments in neighbouring Sikkim which is fast emerging as a model hill state? Doubts remain as the quest for Gorkha identity renews itself in Darjeeling.

NOTE

- ¹ Amanda Burrell's documentary film, *The Forgotten Refugees*, broadcast on BBC World Television on Saturday, 25 April 2009 and Sunday, 26 April 2009.

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