

The Struggle for Identity and Existence: Reflections on Gorkhaland Movement.

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It is a fact that India is a multilingual and multiethnic country where most of the ethno lingual have lived continuously over the ages. Since independence, particularly after the States' Re-organization Act, 1956, some states of India were organized basically on linguistic consideration. In spite of this the reorganized units could not be made homogenous. Nowadays regionalism, ethnicity, sub-nationalism, identity and statehood movements are the growing trend of Indian politics. It's been more than 100 years the longest statehood demand in India's history, the one for Gorkhaland has reached its peak many times. Yet, it has always come tumbling down. Time and again, the unfulfilled aspirations of people have been doused by temporary promises and in 2017, the 'Queen of Hills', Darjeeling, was under siege as Gorkhas all around the world stood in unison against this incessant predicament of proving their identity as Indian citizens. In the simple terms, the demand for Gorkhaland state is an attempt on the part of people from Darjeeling hills, Terai and Dooars to do away with this "crisis of identity" that Gorkhas across India had and have to face and to assert our Indian Identity. The people of Ladakh wanting to become Indian for over 70-years, the people of Darjeeling absolutely understood what it meant. So they need their own distinct Indian identity, concrete and stable. In this long period of one century they have overcome great hurdles coming out victorious after every adversity. This is the dynamism that has kept this community moving ahead towards its goal. After one century, they are more able not only to read and write history but to make, to rebuild our history as well. In this backdrop, the question of identity has saddled itself firmly at the center stage of both academic and political debates. The crisis of identity as seen as a part of wider process of change which is dislocating the central structure of modern societies. It is in such an academic climate this paper will try to understand the emergence of Gorkhaland Movement as an ethnic and identity Movement in India spanning a period of over hundred years of continues crisis and arrived at a conclusion.

Keywords: Darjeeling, identity, ethnicity, Gorkhaland, statehood.

I

The geographical space lying between 26°31'N to 27°13'N and 87°59'E to 88°53'E and within an area of 3015 square kilometers, back grounded by the ever majestic Kanchanjunga is called Darjeeling. In terms of population and physical area, it is slightly bigger than the independent countries such as Maldives and Macao of the Asian continent, Gibraltar and Malta of Europe and Bermuda and British Virginia of North America. In spite of being small in area, Darjeeling has international borders extending 145 kilometers with Nepal, 52 kilometers with Bhutan and 26 kilometers with Bangladesh. Sikkim, once an independent country, but presently a hill state India, also shares a 165 kilometer border with Darjeeling.

Darjeeling is a land famed for more than one reason. Darjeeling's journey to fame initiated from the third decade of the nineteenth century. Prior to the debut of two officials of East India Company named George W. Alymer Lloyd and JW Grant [ICS] to the place, the present three sub-divisions, namely, Darjeeling, Kurseong and Siliguri were parts of Sikkim which was then a sovereign state. Present Kalimpong District was then a part of Bhutan. The duo happened to pass through Darjeeling on their way to Antu (a flat hill top near to Mirik on the Indian border but situated in Nepal) wherein a dispute of boundary between Nepal and Sikkim had taken place in 1827. The two Britishers were deputed in the year 1828 by the then Governor General, William Bentinck to investigate and settle the boundary dispute. The Governor General was requested to do so as per the Treaty of Titalia, by the erstwhile Chogyal of Sikkim.

II

Darjeeling Hills been a conundrum of agitation with violence particularly since early 1980s, for the demand of Gorkhaland, separating from West Bengal. This demand for Gorkhaland for the minority Nepali gorkha speaking communities of Darjeeling hills in a majority Bengali dominated West Bengal is positioned as a resistance against the tyrannical control of local resources (land, water and forest) by an outsider, ethnically alien state. (Ethnic) identity lies in the core of this movement, with Nepali ethnic identity used as a powerful idea with materials consequences that are fundamental to the politics of "who get what when and how". In a way it is this idea that has sales the image and idea of the Gorkha that in the mind and heart of the people. Identity has become the sentiments of the peoples among most. The political history if Darjeeling gives evidences of the repeated resurrection of Gorkha identity as a political resources to negotiate primarily, with the state. All the political parties have had to orient their agendas around the attainment of Gorkhaland, using images of languages commonly attracted to the imagery of the Gorkha and even the early pioneers of communism knew what would sell in Darjeeling not Marxism, not Leninism but, "Gorkhalism". In the tea estates of Darjeeling hills class conflates with ethnicity that has been chosen as the mean through which to negotiate with the state for greater control over resources. In such an atmosphere identity plays an important role in shaping the vulnerabilities of the people.

Most ethnic Movements and else where has given birth to controversies of history of the region where such groups occurs and the ethnic groups which participate them. Their demand are justify in their own version of the history of the region and the people. The district of Darjeeling was the part of the Raja of Sikkim. In 1706 what is now the Kalimpong district was taken from the Raja of Sikkim by the Bhutanese. The Raja latter engaged in unsuccessful struggle with the Gorkhas who has seize power in Nepal and invaded Sikkim in 1780. During the next 30 years the Gorkhas extended their Territory up to the Tista in the east and conquer band annexed the terai. In the meanwhile war brook out between East India Company and the Nepalese at the end of which in 1817 by the Treaty of Titaliya the track of which the Nepali has wrested from the Raja of Sikkim was seceded to the Company. The company restorated the entire territory of the country between Mechi river and the Tista by the Raja and guaranteed his sovereignty. Darjeeling was primarily a part of the theocratic monarchy of Sikkim. In course of search of Himalayan route to Tibet and thence to China, the East India Company took Darjeeling from Sikkim on lease in the year 1835. Kerseang was taken in 1841 from Sikkim and Kalimpong from Bhutan in 1865 by the British Crown. The tea politics of British become the all issues. Tea as a commodity in Darjeeling hills in 1859. The present Siliguri sub-division was annexed by the British in 1850. It may be remember that the British too swept by the Gorkhaland movement was a part of Sikkim conquer by Bhutan in 1706 and annexed to the British in 1865. It may also be added that till the late as 1874 Darjeeling was "Non Regulated Area" From 1874 to 1919 it was a "Schedule District" and from 1919 to 1935 a "Backward

Track". Finally from 1935 to till Independence of India it was partially excluded area under the Government of India Act, 1935. Hence until 1947 Darjeeling was not fully integrated to West Bengal though politically it was a part of it since 1866 itself.

III

Siliguri Corridor "Chicken Neck" and Gorkhaland Movement: Siliguri corridor, tenuous link with eight states of North East is indeed one of the most sensitive strategic vulnerabilities in the country. This stretch of approximately 200 km with width varying from 27 to 60 km, is aptly referred to as Chicken's neck. It has borders with Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh and pointed at the very corridor is Chumbi valley dagger, where currently, an ugly face-off with China is keeping the world on tenterhooks.

Humphrey Hawksley's scenario of 130 km thrust by Chinese through Doklam and Jaldhaka, as described in 'Dragon Fire' seems to be within the realms of possibility. Corridor has major airbases, large number of Army, ITBP, BSF and SSB installations. The responsibility of borders is divided between Army and ITBP for China; SSB for Nepal and Bhutan and BSF with Bangladesh.

Most of the border except for Bangladesh is unfenced and porous. Almost all economic activity centred on tea, timber and tourism is controlled from Siliguri. Notorious Kaliachak in Malda is hub of criminal activities notably counterfeit trafficking and narco-terrorism.

Migration from Bangladesh has complicated demographics and Islamist radical groups and madarsas have proliferated with tacit support. Adding to complexity are new non-indigenous settlements like Meitei, Bodo villages, where cadres find shelter in addition to ULFA and KLO militants, who consider it as hinterland.

Gorkhas, early settlers from Nepal, migrated in 17th century as part of expansion of Nepali kingdom and made hills as their homeland. In 1777, Nepal had appropriated Sikkim including Darjeeling district. They have leveraged their entrepreneurial skills and taken over Sikkim and adjoining Darjeeling marginalising native Lepchas and Bhutias (settlers themselves). The treaty of Sugali in 1816, brought these areas under British rule, Gorkhas literally came with their land. Gorkhas articulated demand for a separate administrative unit in 1907 through Hillmen Association.

Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) under an ex-soldier, Subash Ghising, gave the movement a new lease in 80s leading to establishment of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill council in 1988 after a violent phase from 1986 to 1988, which included loss of 1200 lives. GNLF ruled for twenty years with a say in economic development, tourism and culture. Following in the mould of militant turned failed leaders like Laldenga, Ghising got virtually booted out in 2008 and was a non entity till his demise. His legacy got appropriated by Bimal Gurung and Roshan Giri under Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), surprisingly riding the popularity wave for Indian Idol candidate, Prashant Tamang. After second wave of agitation lasting three years, modified council, Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) was established in August 2012 with enhanced mandate and additional five mouzas (revenue unit corresponding to village) enlarging geographical scope into Dooars.

IV

"Gorkhas are Indian and deserved their own homeland"- Conrad Sangma. Meghalaya chief minister and National People's Party President Conrad K. Sangma has written to Union home minister Amit Shah, batting for Gorkhaland and reminding the Centre that "the Gorkhas too are rightful Indian citizens who deserve to have their own identity and Bas Bhoomi (homeland)". The letter was written on September 4 but made public on Tuesday by the NPP, an NDA constituent. The letter comes at a time the NPP is looking at expanding its support base in north Bengal after having opened its unit here.

"Sir, you are aware of the long pending constitutional demand of the Gorkhas for a separate state of Gorkhaland," is how Sangma has flagged the statehood issue in the letter.

"Sir, as stated, the Gorkhas have contributed immensely to the fabric of Indian society and as with other citizens of India, the Gorkhas too are rightful Indian citizens who deserve to have their own identity and "Bas Bhoomi," the chief minister said. He also highlighted the contributions of Gorkha freedom fighter Durga Malla, members of constituent assembly Damber Singh and Ari

Bahadur Gurung and Captain Ram Singh Thakuria, “a prominent Gorkha freedom fighter and musician who composed the music of the inspiring “National Anthem”. Sangma has requested the Centre to “offer an honourable and lasting political solution” to the Gorkhas. The letter was made public when the monsoon session of Parliament was in progress and there were growing demands by NDA allies in Darjeeling for finding a “permanent political solution”.

Sangma is the second chief minister to lend support to the Gorkhaland demand. When Pawan Chamling was the Sikkim chief minister, he got a resolution adopted in the Assembly on March 29, 2011, terming Gorkhaland as a “genuine and legitimate” demand of the people of the hills.

Gorkha ka Sapna, Mera Sapna”-Modi. Ahead of 2014 general elections, BJP had released their election manifesto that they would consider “the long pending demand of the Gorkhas”. PM Modi delivered his speech in Siliguri on April 2014 and one famous line of his speech among the Gorkhas was – “Gorkha ka Sapna, Mera Sapna”. This assurance had indeed made Gorkhas believe that this person if elected to the highest office would definitely fulfil the only dream of Gorkhas- a Gorkha state. The other tall BJP leaders like Sushma Swaraj, Rajnath Singh and Subramaniam Swamy have supported the cause of Gorkhas both inside the parliament and in public. The present HRD minister, Mr Prakash Javedkar had even said during UPA II that BJP supports the creation of a separate Gorkha state. He made this statement at the official BJP press conference when Telangana formation was being discussed. But it seems that the rise of Modi-Saha duo has changed the entire dynamics within the party and the formation of Gorkha state probably has been black-listed.

It has been a long struggle for the demerger of our Darjeeling and Dooars which were officially merged with West Bengal in 1954 under the Absorbed Areas Act. Today if we are to settle for any other setup within Bengal then it would be a very gross injustice to the 1200+ martyrs from the past three Gorkhaland agitations. Gorkhas are determined even after all the downfalls. There is a silver lining even in the lowest of the times and the future is for those who work for it. We have examples of such determination when on 10th February hundreds of Gorkhas had flagged a relay marathon from Darjeeling to Delhi along with seminars advocating Gorkha state in Patna, Banaras, Aligarh and Delhi Universities.

Yoga Guru Baba Ramdev today batted for Gorkhaland to the delight of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha. Ramdev today held a yoga camp for hill residents at Chowrasta, which was jointly organised by the GTA and Hamro Swabhimani - a cultural unit of Patanjali Yogpeeth of Ramdev.

During his speech here, Ramdev said: "If Gujaratis can have Gujarat, Bengalis Bengal, Telegus Telangana, what is wrong in creating Gorkhaland for Gorkhas. It is after much struggle that the Nepali language was recognised in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution and Gorkhaland will also be created. “According to him "If a small state like Goa can be famous on the world map, why can't Gorkhaland? Gorkhaland will definitely be created”.

V.

The search for identity of diverse group in India has become a living phenomenon in the politics of the region. Different ethnic groups like the Gorkhas have been pressing for the creation of the separate state within the framework of Indian Constitution to safeguard their respective identities. If there is any reason behind the failure of all the programs that have been carried out regarding the crisis of the national identity of the Gorkhas up to now, it is because the concept of this issue is not clear, the nature of the issue is not known and the issue cannot be assessed as a whole. In this way, the history of people who, being irritated by their own failures, have reached an extreme state of prejudice and discouragement towards other castes, prejudice towards the nation, and tried to find alternative solutions by following the principle of 'half as much' is not hidden from anyone. If we accept the problem of the national identity of the Gorkhas in India as a question of fulfilling the aspirations of the one and a half million Gorkhas of India, and if we want to move forward with this issue with sincerity and commitment, then it is imperative to establish a clear concept, correctly analyze the problems and solutions, and take the right steps for fulfillment.

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