

Ethnicity, Alienation and Underdevelopment: The Gorkhaland Statehood Demand

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Abstract

The demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland is one of the oldest such demands in the country. The ethnic Gorkhas residing in the North Bengal region of Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong are at the centre of the Gorkhaland movement. Originally immigrants from neighbouring Nepal but full fledged Indian citizens today, the grievance that the Gorkhas nurse is that despite being an integral part of India in every sense of the term, they are marginalized as aliens and denied the basic dignity that they deserve, not only in the region but throughout the country. This, coupled with the economic underdevelopment of the region has fuelled the movement for separate statehood which has gained pace over the years. The movement, thus, has revolved around the issues of linguistic identity and economic neglect of the people and the region. The Gorkhas believe that having a state of their own shall mark a clear distinction between the citizens of Nepal and ethnic Indian Gorkhas – one that is blurred at present and the major cause of their alienation. This paper is an attempt at tracing the genealogy of the movement by situating the demand for Gorkhaland into its historical context. It shall also enquire into the bases on which it rests and the extent of legitimacy it possesses.

Introduction

Demand for internal remapping of India's boundaries have been raised since the days of British rule. It was in 1920 at the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress that the British were exhorted to reorganize the provinces on linguistic lines. Although little heed was paid to the demand by the British rulers, the Congress party went ahead with an internal reorganisation of its own party by structuring it linguistically all over the country. In independent India, the issue was revisited when the demands were raised yet again for an internal restructuring of the country with linguistic criterion as its basis. In response, the Constituent Assembly of India set up the Dar Commission in 1948 to examine the matter. The Commission, in its report recommended that it would not be in the best interests of the country to go ahead with linguistic reorganisation of states as the new found independence and the accompanying partition had created conditions that had perched the country precariously. Paying any heed to demands that evoked 'parochial' sentiments of religion, language or region should be steered cleared of as they were not only potentially explosive but could lead to the 'balkanisation' of the country. There were, the Commission emphasized, concerns of more serious nature that need to be given a priority.

The JVP Committee that was set up to examine the Dar Commission Report too echoed similar sentiments and the reorganisation question with language as the basis was shelved for the time being. However, in 1952 the death of P. Sriramulu, after a fast unto death in pursuance of the demand for a separate state of Andhra to be carved out of the then state of Madras for the Telugu

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speaking people brought the issue to the fore yet again. Owing to the serious law and order situation in the southern part of the country coupled with the overwhelming sentiment for the demand in the region, the government finally relented and Andhra - the first linguistic state of India was created. This was soon followed by the setting up of the States Reorganisation Commission and on the basis of its report submitted in 1956, a number of other states came into being during the first wave of reorganisation between 1956 and 1966 in the western, north western and southern India. This was followed by the second wave in 1970s when the internal boundaries of north -eastern region of the country were remapped. After a long interregnum, three new demands for creation of new states were accommodated in the year 2000 when the states of Uttarakhand, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand were created by reorganizing the "Hindi heartland"¹. The creation of Telangana in 2014, the twenty ninth state of the Indian Union has once again raised questions regarding the demand for new states and has not only revived old demands but has also drawn scholarly attention to the issue. One of the demands that saw its revival in recent times is that of Gorkhaland with violent agitations in the northern region of West Bengal.

The renewed demand for Gorkhaland raises several questions: under what historical context is the demand for Gorkhaland situated; what are the essential bases on which this demand is rooted; and finally, do the bases on which the demand rests provide enough legitimacy to it. This paper explores the issue by attempting to provide an explanation to these questions. The structure of the paper follows the sequence of the above mentioned research questions.

I

Situating Gorkhaland: The Historical Context

The demand for Gorkhaland centers around three hill areas of the northern region of West Bengal – Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong. The area is inhabited by Nepali speaking ethnic Gorkhas. The British saw the feasibility of developing Darjeeling as a hill station and tea estate and therefore started intense infrastructure development activities in 1835. The requisite manpower for the purpose was provided by immigrants from Nepal who came and settled in large numbers in the area during the period, enticed by employment opportunities and better prospects of life. They rendered their services in tea plantations, construction of roads and significantly in the British army. Bound together by their *lingua franca* – Nepali – the period that followed saw the consolidation of their identity as 'Gorkhas', a term derived from a hill town in Nepal with similar nomenclature.

The demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland finds its roots in 1907 when a demand for autonomy was raised by the Gorkha people citing their differences with the rest of the people in Bengal on linguistic, cultural, and geographical bases.² A memorandum was presented by the Gorkhas to the British government in pursuance of their demand. In the In 1917, the Gorkhas formed the Hillmen's Association to campaign for their interests and presented another memorandum to Lord Montague, the then Secretary of State for India for constituting Darjeeling as a separate administrative unit along with the adjoining dooars area of Siliguri. A similar demand was presented to the Simon Commission by the Hillmen's Association in 1929.³ In 1943 the All India Gorkha League (AIGL) was formed with the aim of articulation of interests of the Gorkha community. The AIGL actively campaigned for regional autonomy for Darjeeling and demanded that it be separated from Bengal and made a part of Assam.⁴

The post – independence period saw not much change in the strategy adopted by the Gorkhas with repeated demands for recognition and autonomy. In the year 1980, the Gorkha National

Liberation Front (GNLF) was formed by Subhash Ghising which was to play a pivotal role in the movement in the years to come. The early eighties saw Ghising lay the groundwork for his newly formed party and by 1985, he had acquired a mass base for it. In March 1986, Ghising's GNLF formally launched the movement demanding a separate state of Gorkhaland. The event was immediately preceded by mass forcible eviction of Gorkhas from the Jowai Hills in Meghalaya by the Khasis, one of the dominant tribes in the region. More than five thousand Gorkhas were ousted from the region and were left jobless as a result.⁵ The incident was marked by large scale violence and was one that brought the complex issues of citizenship and identity crisis to the fore⁶ and prepared ample ground to launch the movement for separate statehood. The issue of citizenship and identity crisis proved to be the building blocks of the movement and were made a part of the standard vocabulary of the Nepalis by Ghising through the launch of the movement.

The movement was launched by the declaration of an eleven - point programme of action. Despite prohibitory orders, thousands of Gorkhas assembled in Darjeeling demanding separate statehood for Gorkhaland. On July, 27, 1986 an agitating group of people in Kalimpong was fired upon indiscriminately by the police that led to the loss of lives of fifteen people, most of them women and children. This incident was a critical juncture of the Gorkhaland movement. The movement that was steadily gaining pace suddenly acquired mass support. The movement continued for more than a year. The GNLF took a decision to boycott assembly elections held in 1987. The mass support that the GNLF led movement had acquired can be gauged from the fact that in the three hill constituencies of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong, the call for boycott of elections was followed by the people resulting in a mere 7 per cent voter turnout in the region.

Throughout the mid 1980s, the movement remained active. The agitation for the new state finally ended in 1988 through a tripartite agreement between the Government of India, the state of West Bengal and the Gorkha National Liberation Front. The agreement promised the setting up of a Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) that was arrived at with the GNLF dropping the demand for separate statehood. The agreement thus read:

“In the overall national interest and in response to the Prime Minister's call, the GNLF agree to drop the demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland. For the social, economic, educational and cultural advancement of the people residing in the Hill areas of Darjeeling district, it was agreed to have an autonomous Hill Council to be set up under a State Act.”⁷

The West Bengal state legislature subsequently passed the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Act, 1988. The setting up of DGHC provided internal autonomy to the Gorkha people within the state in the three hill subdivisions of Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong along with a thin strip of land in the plains. The total area over which the DGHC could exercise jurisdiction was 2965 square km. The General Council was to be comprised of forty two members out of which twenty eight were to be elected and the rest were to be nominated by the state government. It was vested with wide ranging executive powers covering subjects like forests, canals, agriculture, public health and sanitation, development and planning of public works, tourism, construction and maintenance of roads, small scale and cottage industries, general powers of supervision over gram panchayats and municipalities falling within the jurisdiction of the Council.

The functioning of the DGHC during the next two decades was marked by allegations of corruption and scuttling of oppositional voices from within the Gorkha community. This gradually led to the eroding of the mass support that Subhash Ghising and his GNLF enjoyed amongst the

people. On his part, Ghising started campaigning for inclusion of the area under the Council's jurisdiction under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.⁸ This move by Ghising could not muster popular support and led to the demand for separate statehood rise once again in the region.

The erosion of support for Ghising can be gauged from the fact that even his long term confidants started distancing away from him. One such man was Bimal Gurung who was once Ghising's trusted lieutenant but later became his *bête noire*. Gurung floated a new party, the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJM) in 2007. Rejecting the demand for inclusion of the Darjeeling hills under the sixth schedule, the demand for separate statehood was now raised once again under the banner of GJM.

The subsequent years were marked by clashes between the GNLFF and GJM, with the GJM emerging as the representative of the Gorkhas. The supremacy and the representative character of the GJM was established by its spectacular victory in the state Assembly elections in the year 2011 whereby it won seats in all three hill sub divisions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong. The pressure mounted by the GJM over the years for separate statehood finally led to several round of tripartite talks between the Centre, Government of West Bengal and the GJM which culminated in the creation of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2011 which replaced the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council.

The DGHC was created as “an autonomous self governing body to administer the region so that the socio-economic, infrastructural, educational, cultural, and linguistic development is expedited and the ethnic identity of Gorkhas established, thereby achieving all round development of the people of the region”⁹

Like the DGHC, the GTA too was an autonomous body created to ensure the development of the Gorkhas. However, it was provided with much more power than its erstwhile counterpart. Moreover, unlike the previous agreement, the new Council had 'Gorkhaland' within its nomenclature itself and the creation of this new autonomous body was agreed upon by the GJM without dropping the demand for separate statehood. The GJM even made sure that this fact was recorded in writing in the agreement itself.

“Whereas after several rounds of tripartite meetings at the ministerial and the official levels, the GJM, *while not dropping their demand for a separate State of Gorkhaland*, (emphasis added) has agreed to the setting up of an autonomous Body empowered with administrative, financial and executive powers in regard to various subjects to be transferred to the said Body for the development of the region and restoration of peace and normalcy there at.”¹⁰

The new body was to have forty five elected members and five members to be nominated by the Governor. Besides, the GJM also bargained for a huge central financial assistance of Rs two hundred crore per annum for the next three years over and above the normal plan assistance by the Government of west Bengal.

The Gorkhaland movement entered its third phase in the year 2017 when the West Bengal government led by Mamata Banerjee's Trinmool Congress took a decision to make studying of Bengali language compulsory in schools across the state. This led to a spate of protests across the state led by the GJM. In response the Chief Minister decided to hold a meeting of the state cabinet in Darjeeling. This move was significant as this was the first Cabinet meeting in the region in forty years. However, the representatives of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration and the three hill MLA's were given cold shoulder by the Chief Minister. Miffed, the GJM asserted that such

discriminatory treatment and complete insensitivity towards the genuine issues of the Gorkha community are at the centre of its demand for separate statehood. The third phase of the movement also saw months of vigorous protests throughout the region.

The Bases of Gorkhaland Demand

The advocates of separate statehood also speak of a better past with respect to Darjeeling and claim that due to systematic neglect by the West Bengal state government post independence, it was in a state of impoverishment. They stress that whatever development was done in the region happened during the British time and subsequently the area fell prey to the discriminative policies of the state government which led to the region being in a constant state of underdevelopment. The All India Gorkha League, in a memorandum to the President of India asserted:

“Development of hill areas of Darjeeling district has been utterly neglected. While crores of rupees from public exchequer have been spent for the development of various projects in the plain areas of the state of West Bengal, no fund worth the name has been spent for the development of Darjeeling Hill Areas during the regime of the Left Front Government. This has resulted in acute unemployment problem and retarded the growth and protection of the existing industries in the Hill areas, particularly tea.”¹¹

Although the issue of economic backwardness of the region is a contested one, it is a well documented fact that due to the tussle between the hill region and the rest of West Bengal, the former is often at the receiving end of things. Owing to fact that most of the political elite in West Bengal comprises of Bengalis, the perception that area has been discriminated against in matters of development is strong in the region. Even the establishment of the DGHC could not address the issue. “The purse strings of the Hill Council Council were controlled from Writers Building in Kolkata and hamstrung the prospects of development in the Hills”.¹² This “imagination of Darjeeling as a neglected place provides an explanation for poverty and decline that is contrasted with the redemptive idea of Gorkhaland. The only way to return the wealth would be the creation of a separate state and self-government according to the specific needs of the place.”¹³

The associations that are opposed to the formation of a separate state of Gorkhaland like those led by Bengalis and other groups based in the Dooars and the Terai region have claimed that the demand for Gorkhaland has secessionist undertones and in the garb of demanding a separate state, they intend to foster and create the idea of a Greater Nepal. This, they claim, may prove to be a threat to the unity, integrity and sovereignty of India. The Gorkhas, on the other hand claim that their demand is not “antithetical to the existence of a pan-Indian nationalism and national integration”¹⁴ and that India nationality “is a matter of privilege and proud possession, not a liability”¹⁵ The grievance that the Gorkhas nurse is that despite being Indian citizens in every sense of the term, they are often identified as foreigners from Nepal. This not only alienates them in their own country but also forces them to live in a constant fear of eviction similar to the one that happened in Meghalaya in the 1980s. The leaders of the Gorkhaland movement posit that a separate state is a solution to this misery of theirs.

“It is geographical space that will ease the way out of this half-consummated national life for the Gorkhas, it is quite clear that a state of their own is now imperative for them to assert a full Indian identity—a state that roots them to India, a state that they can give as an address should someone in Delhi ask them where they come from, a state that tells everyone that an Indian Gorkha is not a migrant from a neighboring country but a landholder.”¹⁶

The Gorkhas have actively objected to Article vii of the Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, 1950 during the movement as they claim that it is detrimental to their cause. The said Article pertains to free movement of citizens of India and Nepal between the two countries. The Article states:

“The Governments of India and Nepal agree to grant, on a reciprocal basis, to the nationals of one country in the territories of the other the same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature”¹⁷

The Gorkhas articulate that the operationalization of this Article has led to a blurring of the distinction between Gorkhas who are Indian citizens and the citizens of Nepal who are settled or working in India under the said provision of the treaty. They are often confused with the citizens of Nepal and are subjected to alienation in their own land. The leaders of the Gorkha movement also emphasize the contribution of the community to the defence of the country. The young men from the community have a well established reputation of serving in the Indian armed forces. The leaders of the movement claim that their objection to Article vii of the Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship and the contribution of Gorkhas in the defence of the country undoubtedly points to the fact that allegations regarding the hidden 'Greater Nepal' agenda of the movement is not only misleading but sham. Proponents of separate statehood for Gorkhaland also assert that from Jammu and Kashmir in the north to Arunachal Pradesh in the north-east, this is the only hill region in the Himalayas that still does not have a state of their own.

Conclusion

The demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland is one of the oldest such demand in the country. Over the years it has been articulated around the twin issues of language based identity and economic underdevelopment. The bases over which the demand is premised do provide it with enough legitimacy so as to be considered as one of the significant and prominent such demands in the country. The States Reorganisation Commission in 1956 had recommended creation of states with language as a primary factor, among others. Also, recent demands for new states that have been agreed upon viz. that of Uttarakhand, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh in the year 2000 and that of Telangana in 2014 were also centered around the issue of economic neglect by the parent state and the consequent underdevelopment. Thus the demand does satisfy the criteria that have been employed by the Union government in the past while considering and accepting demands for new states in India. However, the violence that has often accompanied the demand is not only deplorable but unacceptable. The major parties pursuing the demand show allegiance to the principle of non violence in pursuing the demand. But it would serve the best interests of the country as well as the parties if it is followed in letter and spirit. As far as the issue of nationalistic credentials of the Gorkhas are concerned, the demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland does not stand in opposition to nationalism; it rather reinforces it through the idea of unity in diversity. The issue of statehood for Gorkhaland is not simply one of separation of the region from West Bengal but one of integration of a marginalized yet significant ethnic community into the federal structure and the national consciousness of the country.

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