

## **Demands for Statehood and the Gorkhaland Movement an Analysis of the Issues and Perspectives**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

India is a veritable mosaic of culture, race, language and ethnicity. Since its birth in 1947, India has witnessed violent ethnic conflicts in Punjab, Kashmir and the North East. Sadly, it has not learnt any lessons from any of these conflicts and more often the roots of the conflict have never been identified or recognized. The dissatisfaction of the people has been undermined by the state and the conflicts quelled with false assurances or use of force and coercion. The demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland in the hill and contiguous areas of North Bengal of West Bengal is arguably one of the oldest statehood demands in India. The demand can be traced back to as early as 1907 with the demand for a separate administrative set-up for the hill region by the leaders of the hill people.

The demand thereafter has appeared at periodic intervals both before and after Independence. The nature, dynamics, characteristics, parties and mode of the conflict has changed and evolved at different phases and episode of the movement. While some parties resorted to submission of petitions and pleas seeking a separate administrative unit, others have resorted to violence and outright rejection of the claim laid by West Bengal over Darjeeling. The period between 1986 and 1988 was one of the most violent phases in the history of the region with violent conflicts between opposing party members, the State government and police personnel. The violence came to an end with the signing of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Accord (DGHC) of 1988 which was formed with the vision that a measure of autonomy for the hill communities would quell the demand for Gorkhaland.

However rampant corruption, nepotism, lack of democracy and the non-fulfillment of the basic aspirations of the masses led to the re-emergence of the demand in 2007. This movement too was settled through the signing of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2011 with the promise of granting more funds and transfer of more administrative departments to the GTA. However the formation of autonomous councils and the granting of more funds prove just to be temporary solution to a problem which seeks a more detailed analysis and begs a holistic approach to the processes of resolution and decision making.

The present paper brings forth a few of the important issues and perspectives regarding the sources of the conflict and the threats perceived in acceding to the demand. The paper divided into two sections first analyses the causes of the movement along the lines of identity and economy. The second section focuses on the threat a perception that forms the opposition to the formation of Gorkhaland.

### **SOURCES: ECONOMY AND IDENTITY:**

The sources of the Gorkhaland conflict hinges on the planes of both economic as well as identity factors. While there certainly has not been a single dominant push towards the issue of economy and underdevelopment, it certainly has been pivotal in sustaining the long drawn movement through its various phases. The pleas and memorandums submitted to the erstwhile British government (and later to the Indian government) focused more on safeguarding the economy of the hills and keeping it in the hands of the hill people through the administrative separation of the hills from Bengal rather than the ethnic distinctiveness from the people of the plains.

The demand during the formative years and till the eighties sought the separation of the district from Bengal on the grounds of politico-economic disadvantages from the people of the plains along with the idea of reforms and greater prosperity to the hill communities if they were given the chance to manage their own affairs. The demands put more stress on working towards ameliorating the plight of the Gorkhas situated throughout India and the issue of asserting their ethnic claims had yet to be given a formidable shape.

The economic basis of the conflict addresses the theme of under-development, haphazard exploitation of the natural resources of the region, the lack of benefits for the hill communities from the resources of the region along with the absence of any concerted effort to develop the region. It is felt that Darjeeling with its global brand name would do better if it was a separate state rather than being bungled into West Bengal.

This feeling is also perpetuated by an acute employment crisis and an over flowing quantity of quality human resource who inevitably migrate to the larger cities to earn their livelihood. The formation of Gorkhaland creates the silver lining wherein they can return back and get decent jobs in Darjeeling. The economic viability of the region and its potential to be a major commercial hub of the Northeast, Nepal and Bhutan has also become an added incentive for the demand.

The issue of development and economy of the region had been consistently present till the issue of identity made it secondary after the violent conflict of the eighties. Presently, the identity crisis faced by the Indian Nepalis vis-à-vis the Citizens of Nepal and Indian counterpart is by far the major source of the conflict in the present context. The existence of Nepal as an independent country has invariably led to its reference in the discourse about Indian Nepalis who in turn are labeled as migrants or foreigners and have found themselves unable to answer the questions of their origin in every sphere of their life.

The issue of “lost or threatened identity” was first voiced during the violent decade of the eighties by the GNLF leader Subhas Ghising, and subsequently has come to have an overbearing influence on the conflict. Ghising’s rhetoric of ‘threatened identity’ was readily accepted by the Gorkha populace out of their own experience of being labeled as foreigners and through the persecution of Nepalis at times of ethnic conflict or anti-foreigner movements in the North East. Now, the issue of identity separates the Gorkhaland conflict from other autonomy/state-hood movements which are usually based on a sense of deprivation and marginalization and are intrinsically economic in nature.

The primary goal of the conflict in the present context therefore has been to assert their identity as a part of the broader national Indian identity. The existence of Nepal as an independent country has invariably led to its reference in the discourse about Indian Nepalis thus positing them between the demands of Indian citizenship and the national culture and the preservation of their own cultural identity (Dhamala, 2009:172-73). The insecurity of identity has also flown from their everyday experiences making it necessary to carve a political space for their own cultural identity in India (Golay, 2009:86-87).

It is widely believed that the creation of a separate state of Gorkhaland will secure them an equal treatment that the Indian polity and the masses at large devote to other Indian communities. The primary goal of the conflict in the present context therefore has been to assert their identity as a part of the broader national Indian identity. The fear of ‘loss of identity’ is also not helped by the fact that they have been pitted against a very ethno-centric dominant group whose measures to assimilate the Nepali group into the larger Bengali culture and language, have till now been met with stiff resistance.

It is also interesting to observe that the various demands placed prior to the eighties suggested the creation of a separate province based on any of the following alternatives:

- a) Joining Darjeeling district and the Dooars areas and merging with Assam.
- b) Joining the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri and the states of Cooch Behar and Sikkim.
- c) Joining the Darjeeling district, Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar.
- d) Joining Darjeeling district and Sikkim.
- e) Joining Darjeeling district with the Dooars area of Jalpaiguri.
- f) Darjeeling district only.

Therefore the crux of the demand clearly lies on the separation of the region from Bengal and the willingness to be incorporated or merged into any region except Bengal. It can also be observed that a certain feeling of distrust, fear and suspicion had developed over the years towards Bengal and its populace due to the perceived socio-economic superiority of the Bengali population and the existence of unequal and unfair competition between them as well as the ethno-centric attitude of the larger Bengali political class. Therefore, the rationale for separation from Bengal ultimately dwells on the liberty to manage their own affairs as a conscious, independent community contributing towards the growth of the region and the nation as a whole.

Even though the economic considerations of the demand are susceptible to inquiry and debate, the atom of 'threatened identity' cannot be easily misplaced. The region fares much better than many other districts of Bengal in terms of per capita income and the economic basis of the movement largely follows the notion of faster and better economic growth if separated from a financially ailing Bengal. On the other hand the demand being raised on the issue of identity has turned it into an ethno-nationalist and sub-nationalist movement leading to the formation of 'we-ness' and 'other-ness'. The 'othering' of the remainder of Bengal and its populace has come to have an overbearing influence on the conflict and any attempt at resolution necessitates the examination of this ethnic chasm.

**THREAT PERCEPTIONS:**

The sources of the Gorkhaland movement can be summarized as a fear of "Bengalification, discrimination, deprivation, denial of resources (deemed essential for the preservation, expression and development of a separate Gorkha/Nepali identity), lack of access to linguistic and educational facilities and the inaccessibility of the community to avail positions of power in the institutions of the state. However it is also necessary to examine the threats perceived by the 'episteme of power' and in particular the West Bengal government in trying to accede to the demand of Gorkhaland.

**NATIONAL SECURITY:**

The relationship between the central and state governments and the Gorkha population is an interesting paradox. While the Gorkha population is seen with distrust and contempt on one hand, the same population is also trusted with the responsibility of guarding the national frontiers. This ambiguous relationship is a direct corollary of the British relationship towards the Gorkhas who perceived them merely as mercenaries in the armies or cheap labourers for manning the tea gardens and other commercial projects. The attitude towards the Gorkha population did not change much after Independence. The lot was an untrustworthy appendage and their efforts at asserting their economic and cultural rights was seen with suspicion and pronounced as anti-national or against the interests of the nation.

The denial of the claims for a separate state through the perceived threat to national security has primarily two interlinked dimensions. First, the strategic location of the region with four international borders and the chicken neck corridor connecting the mainland with the rest of the northeast region is crucial from both military and economic considerations. Furthermore the nation's attitude towards the Bengalis as being more loyal and patriotic than the Gorkhas has also added to the apprehension of granting a separate state to the Gorkhas. The popular opinion is that if the chicken neck area falls under a possibly Gorkha home state, then the nation's security will be compromised.

Secondly, the myth of Greater Nepal through the reclaiming of the lost territories (from the river Teesta in Sikkim to river Sutlej in Punjab) of the erstwhile kingdom of Nepal through the mobilisation of the Nepalis/Gorkhas in India has also fuelled the national security concerns. It is perceived that the creation of a separate state of Gorkhaland will be the first step towards a more sinister design of Greater Nepal and ultimately secession from India. The fact that the Gorkha community is seen as migrants and mercenaries and their seemingly insignificant participation in the freedom struggle and loyalty to the British government also helps bolster this argument.

**SENTIMENTAL VALUE:**

Darjeeling with its global brand name is a priceless jewel in the crown of Bengal. The phrase “Amar Sonar Bangla” is incomplete without Darjeeling as the region is a very special and unique possession of Bengal. The region possesses immense sentimental and emotional value to Bengal. Historically, it is fancied as the seat of the British colonial heritage in which they were also involved in its development and growth. Many Bengali luminaries like Rabindranath Tagore, C.R. Das, Subhas Chandra Bose etc had spent a certain significant part of their lives in the hills. The involvement of the Bengali population during the formative years of the region by serving in the lower and middle echelons of the erstwhile British administration had also produced a ‘sense of belongingness’ to the region.

The region is a precious gift which has changed possession from Sikkim to Nepal to British India to present day Bengal. The colonial mindset which had stressed on the importance of a sanatorium in the form of a hill retreat is still strongly embedded in the minds of the Bengali population. If the acquisition of Darjeeling as a hill retreat was of significant importance to British India, the preservation of the same has been of utmost importance to Bengal.

With the passage of time, Darjeeling has truly emerged as an idyllic paradise for the quintessential Bengali. Away from the harsh climes of the plains, it offers the perfect recreation spot. Families swarm in numbers to witness the magnanimous glory of the Kanchenjunga and the lustful freshness of the tea gardens. Furthermore through popular mediums such as films and novels, the Bengalis have come to regard Darjeeling as their own little utopia. Be it Satyajit Ray’s Kanchenjunga to numerous other commercial movies which are shot in Darjeeling, the average Bengali always longs to visit the “Queen of the Hills”.

Darjeeling as a hill station offers great beauty and an ideal climate to the family oriented Bengali who always treasures the fond family vacation. The sense of pride and satisfaction is also bolstered in knowing that the region is a part of Bengal as the region continues to serve the colonial design. The region may be in shambles but the magnificence of the Kanchenjunga has not diluted. The steady political and economic domination of the prized British legacy is upheld by the belief that Kolkata, - the ‘City of Joy’- will be joyless if the region is separated from Bengal. The separation of the region from Bengal is invariably compared to the partition of Bengal of 1905 which had been a tragic event in the minds of the culturally proud and ethno-nationalist Bengali. The leaders of the state have time and again declared that “Bengal will not be further divided” and they are willing to accept any other alternative other than the separation of Darjeeling.

**POLITICAL SUICIDE:**

It is commonly believed that public memory is shortbut when it comes to power and politics a digression from the usual inevitably means the death knell. The ‘politics of blame’ which has been the central plank for all political parties fighting elections, the creation of Gorkhaland will simply mean the obliteration of the party from the politics of Bengal. The ignominy of political defeat prevails amongst any political party willing to accede to the demand of Gorkhaland.

The revenues generated from tea and tourism provides a small measure of financial relief to the debt ridden state. The gains from the hills also help the state in developing the infrastructure in the contiguous area of Siliguri which has now come to serve as an important business centre of the North Eastern region, Nepal and Bhutan. The demand for Gorkhaland also includes the Siliguri sub-division and its separation from Bengal will imply the loss of a potential business hub. There is also a nagging fear that the creation of Gorkhaland will bolster and justify the demand for a separate state of Kamtapur or Greater Cooch Behar, thereby further “dividing” the state.

The conflict with all its complexities ultimately seeks a political solution. The political will required for the creation of Gorkhaland has been non-existent in the legislative assemblies of Bengal. Furthermore, the task of garnering political support for the creation of Gorkhaland in the State’s legislative assemblies is next to impossible. The fact that the Darjeeling district sends just three members to the state assembly consisting of 294 members effectively weakens their voice. There is also no political benefit to be derived

from supporting the demand for Gorkhaland as the state's political parties have negligible support base in the hills. This however does not imply that everyone in political circles is against the creation of Gorkhaland. The long standing demand has elicited moral support from certain quarters but the fear of their political careers coming to an untimely end eventually prevents them from doing so.

**IN LIEU OF CONCLUSION:**

Even though the Gorkhaland movement traces its origins to the year 1907, it was only after the eighties that the movement gained prominence in the Indian mainstream. The failure of peaceful negotiations and submission of pleas for decades naturally gave way to a more militant approach which immediately brought the demand into the foreground. It is ironic that the land of the Gandhi is deaf and blind to non-violent protests and only the blazing of guns and the cries of the tormented rings into the ears of the national political class.

The demand justifies itself on the basis of ethnic exclusiveness and greater economic reforms while it faces opposition and resistance in the form of national security concerns, lack of any significant political leverage and the sentimentality attached to the region. The failure of autonomous district councils and the continual resurgence of the demand hint at the many complexities of the crisis apart from the issue of identity. Even the issue of identity does not suffice itself through representations in the electoral voter rolls or the recognition of the Nepali language in the VIII<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Constitution. Rather it involves a whole gamut of nebulous enterprises which are expressed through greater economic advantages and stakes in the political decision making processes.

The impracticality of the formation of autonomous district councils lie in the non-fulfillment of the very basic aspiration of the masses in the form of recognition of their separate Gorkha or Nepali identity. Also the miserable administration of these councils plagued by corruption and nepotism has left an indelible mark on their efficacy. The idea of resolving the conflict through the granting of Sixth schedule status proved to be a hare-brained scheme as only an approximately thirty percent of the Gorkha population are recognized as Scheduled Tribes and now the issue sits idly at the Standing Committee of the Parliament. The idea of making the whole population of the hills into Scheduled tribes would have acceptance among the masses in a country that is run along the lines of reservation and quotas, but it would certainly not guarantee the resolution of the demand for a separate state.

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