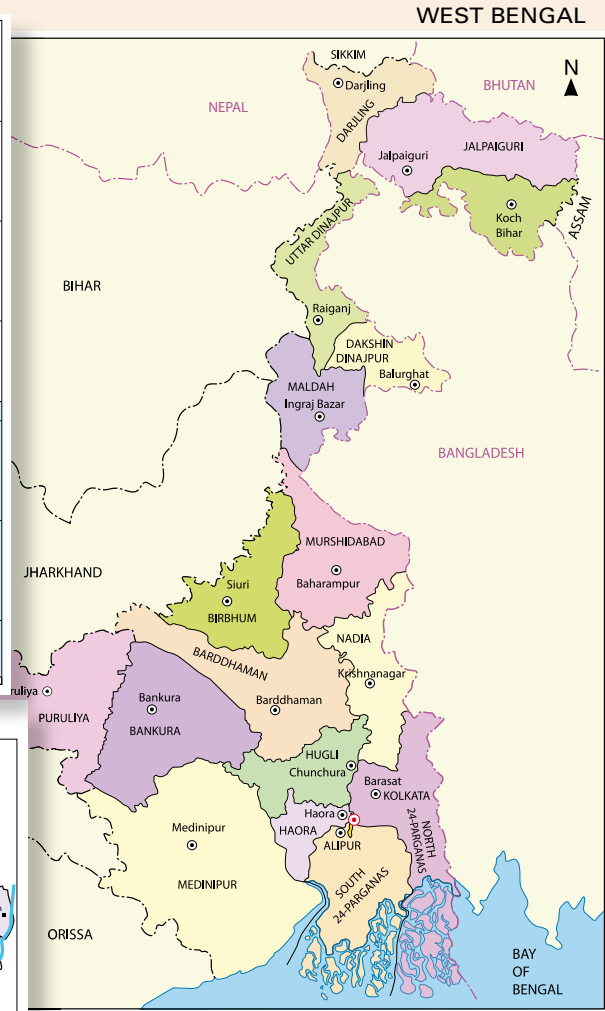


RESURGENT GORKHALAND: ETHNIC IDENTITY AND AUTONOMY

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PROPOSED MAP OF GORKHALAND



Introduction

India is a multi-ethnic country with a federal democratic polity. There are 28 states, which are multi-ethnic in nature. The state of West Bengal is predominantly ethnically Bengali; however, its famous hill station of Darjeeling is populated by the Gorkha ethnic group. Due to sheer numbers, the Bengalis effectively control the political, economic and social fabric of the state of West Bengal. This has caused much resentment among the Gorkhas, resulting in

violent conflict in the mid-1980s. The agitation was led by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), which raised the demand for the creation of a separate State of Gorkhaland, outside West Bengal but within India. The conflict was finally resolved by a tripartite agreement between the GNLF, the state government of West Bengal and the government of India in mid-1988. In order to accommodate the ethnic aspirations of the Gorkhas, the government agreed to create the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) and conceded



The Gorkhas of Darjeeling demand autonomy and recognition of their identity through a separate Gorkha state.

to granting citizenship to pre-1950 settlers. The state government agreed to review all cases against GNLFC activists and the GNLFC, in turn, called for the surrender of all unauthorised arms and withdrew all agitation activities.

Granting of the above concessions did not fully satisfy the Gorkhas, as this was not what they had fought for. The Darjeeling area was granted autonomy on the basis of democratic ideals in the form of the DGHC, and was expected to satisfy the autonomy and self-control needs of the Gorkhas. As the Gorkhas comprise a very small portion of the West Bengal population, they do not have much voice and power in the West Bengal legislative assembly. The hill council was expected to give them more decision-making powers in local matters. It also satisfied the Bengalis, as well as the government of West Bengal, in the non-bifurcation of their state.

Thus far, elections for the DGHC have been held thrice: in 1988, 1993 and 1999. The GNLFC has swept the polls each time. It has also successfully negotiated for more powers and infrastructure for the DGHC and its councillors. However, the DGHC has been

accused of non-performance, dictatorial tendencies, lack of transparency and corruption, and hopes of development of the area have not become a reality. Recently, the hills again witnessed *bandhs* (strikes) and a resurgence of demands for a separate state of Gorkhaland under the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) political party.

Conflict and Peace Defined

Peace or conflict resolution studies and research aim at increasing the knowledge and understanding of the nature and causes of conflicts, to help build structures at national and international levels that facilitate the long-term solution of violence and conflict. "Peace" not only means the absence of wars, weapons and conflicts, but also implies the presence of conflict resolution, management and prevention. "Conflict" occurs where there is an interaction between at least two individuals or groups, whose ultimate objectives are perceived by the contending parties as so much opposed to each other that these can only be achieved at the expense of the other, and vice versa. When the conflicting parties become engaged in overt mutually



Subhash Ghising, leader of the Gorkha National Liberation Front, was the early spokesman for the Gorkha people and their demands for a separate state.

opposing and violent interaction aimed at destroying, injuring or controlling their opponents, such interaction is armed conflict.

Conflicts indicate the existence of the incompatibility and indivisibility of goals in the relationship among different parties. For peace and conflict resolution practitioners, “autonomy” and “democracy” have come to represent paths towards successful conflict resolution, as they are able to provide solutions to the problems of indivisibility and incompatibility of goals. Such processes satisfy parties to some extent, but they do not grant all the parties their absolute claims or demands. Autonomy represents the solution to conflicts arising from territorial or territorial-related

IN SPITE OF THEIR GRIEVANCES AND URGE TO MAINTAIN THEIR ETHNIC IDENTITY, THE GORKHAS ALWAYS EXPRESSED THEIR DESIRE TO REMAIN IN THE INDIAN MAINSTREAM, THOUGH AT TIMES THEIR ETHNIC INTERESTS DOMINATED NATIONAL INTERESTS

conflicts, while democracy is seen as representing the solution to conflicts arising from power and power-related conflicts. A combination of the two was applied to the case of the Gorkhas of the Darjeeling area. This article examines how successful the DGHC solution has been.

Ethnicity and Identity

The present-day Darjeeling district was originally part of Sikkim (now a state in India – but during British colonial rule, it was India’s neighbour). Darjeeling was annexed from Sikkim by neighbouring Nepal in 1780 and, from 1780 to 1816, it remained under Nepalese rule. In 1816, it was added to British India, and then returned to Sikkim in 1817. However, in 1835, British India acquired this land from Sikkim¹ and encouraged the Gorkhas, who originally came from Nepal, to settle in the hills. The Gorkha population increased rapidly, and today they constitute nearly 90% of the total population of the hill area. Darjeeling now has a predominantly Gorkha population in the predominantly Bengali-populated state of West Bengal.

The ethnic consciousness of Gorkhas increased with the growth in their numbers. They organised themselves into a number of organisations² and put forward many demands asserting their identity, thereby giving birth to a stronger Gorkha ethnicity and identity. Their demands ranged from wanting powers in the local district administration to wanting a separate, autonomous province. However, it was the GNLF, under the leadership of Subhash Ghising, who took the lead and became their sole spokesman in the 1980s. The GNLF raised many demands over time, such as a separate state of Gorkhaland; inclusion of Nepali/Gorkhali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution; granting of citizenship to pre-1950 settlers; abrogation of Clause 7 of the Indo-Nepalese Treaty of 1950³; and the creation of a separate Indian Gorkha Regiment.

In spite of their grievances and urge to maintain their ethnic identity, the Gorkhas always expressed



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Gorkha youth patrol a road in Kurseong as part of the recent resurgent demands for a separate Gorkhaland in West Bengal (July 2009).

their desire to remain in the Indian mainstream, though at times their ethnic interests dominated national interests. Initially, they used peaceful means to express their demands and grievances, but the avoidance of their demands by the government till the mid-1980s resulted in their adoption of violent action.

Compromise and the Accord

To resolve the conflict – after much negotiation – two agreements were signed in 1988 between the central government, the state government and the GNLF.⁴ Under these agreements, the GNLF agreed to drop certain demands such as recognition of their language, a separate state of Gorkhaland, a separate Indian Gorkha Regiment, and abrogation of Clause 7

of the Indo-Nepal 1950 treaty of Friendship. In order to accommodate their other demands, the government agreed to make provision for DGHC, conceded to their request of citizenship to the pre-1950 settlers, and also allowed them to join the regiment of their choice in the Indian Army.⁵

Granting of these concessions did not fully satisfy the Gorkhas' desire for establishing an ethnic identity within the Indian union. The state government agreed to grant autonomy to the Darjeeling area, in the form of the DGHC with a "mix" of democracy, as nearly half of the councillors were to be elected by the people of the Darjeeling area. However, the government did not grant full statehood in the form of Gorkhaland, as demanded by the GNLF.

THE STATE GOVERNMENT AGREED TO REVIEW ALL THE CASES AGAINST GNLF ACTIVISTS, AND IN TURN THE GNLF CALLED FOR THE SURRENDER OF UN-AUTHORISED ARMS AND WITHDREW ALL AGITATION ACTIVITIES



Indian supporters of the Gorkha People's Liberation Front shout slogans as they stage a protest in Darjeeling.

As per the agreements, the executive powers of the DGHC covered agriculture, public health, sanitation, hospitals, dispensaries, tourism, vocational training, public work, roads, transport, burial and cremation grounds, livestock, water, fisheries, education, markets, fairs, small-scale and cottage industries, and so on. The council had power of supervision over *panchayat samitis* (local elected bodies), *gram panchayats* (village-level elected bodies) and municipalities under the council's jurisdiction. The general council consisted of a total of 42 members, out of which 28 members would be elected and the rest nominated by the state government.

The state government agreed to review all the cases against GNLF activists, and in turn the GNLF called for the surrender of unauthorised arms and withdrew all agitation activities. Ghising expressed happiness over the signing of the two accords,

stating: "We are happy, very happy. We have got our 'identity'."⁶

Implementation of the Accord

In the elections held on 13 December 1988, the GNLF secured 26 out of 28 seats, while the opposition party in power in the state of West Bengal won only two seats.⁷ A very happy Ghising declared: "We will change the face of Darjeeling in the next few years."⁸

However, the GNLF and the state government soon began accusing each other of attempting to sabotage the new council. Ghising accused the state government of withholding funds meant for the council while the state government, in turn, alleged that this had been done because of the non-submission of accounts by the council. Ghising also criticised the state government for not providing the needed infrastructure for the smooth functioning of the council.

Meanwhile, dissatisfaction against Ghising rose, due to his dictatorial style of functioning, unfulfilled promises and rumours of corruption. To divert people's attention, Ghising raised the issues of "Greater Nepal" and "no-man's land".⁹ The Indian prime minister warned him that stern action would be taken if he tried to inflame passions in the area once again.

The Nepali language was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution in August 1992. This, too, angered Ghising, who wanted Gorkhali instead of Nepali to be included in the Eighth Schedule. He threatened to revive the agitation for a separate state, refused to talk to the state government and decided to dissolve the council.¹⁰ However, in a sudden reversal, Ghising agreed to talks and, after a number of meetings on the issues of how to make the council more powerful and efficient, it was finally agreed

that the bureaucratic set-up of the council would be restructured.

In elections held in December 1993 for the DGHC, the GNLF won 24 out of 28 seats.¹¹ A pleased Ghising later announced that he would like to work in cooperation with the state government.¹² However, Ghising and the state government soon drifted apart on the issue of panchayat (local self-government) polls, which were scheduled to be held in April 1994. Ghising argued that there was no need for the panchayat bodies in the hills, because the DGHC was empowered to look after most aspects of the administration. The DGHC requested that the state government postpone the elections and also examine the various issues and implications of holding elections in the hill council. The state government maintained that the panchayat elections were a constitutional obligation and proposed



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Gorkha People's Liberation Front leader, Bimal Gurung, holds up a proposed map of separate Gorkhaland.



Villagers clash with supporters of the Gorkha People's Liberation Front in the Champasari village area on the outskirts of Siliguri (February 2009).

a two-tier panchayat system, with the third tier taken care of by the council. The state government offered to make some concessions, such as making DGHC councillors ex-officio members of panchayat samitis, and vice versa. Ghising argued that no poll could be held in Darjeeling, since the GNLFF had filed a case in the Supreme Court seeking clarification on the status of Darjeeling.¹³

In the DGHC elections held in 1999, the GNLFF won 23 out of 28 seats in the council.¹⁴ However, the Indian government's decision to create new states of Jharkhand, Uttaranchal and Chattisgarh was a new stimulus for the agitation for a separate state of

Gorkhaland. Meanwhile, the GNLFF boycotted the Lok Sabha elections of 1996, 1998 and 1999.¹⁵ Ahead of the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, the GNLFF supported congress candidate Dawa Narbula, resulting in his election victory with a large margin in the Darjeeling constituency. In the state assembly elections in West Bengal in 2001, three GNLFF candidates (out of five) were elected.

Recent Resurgence of Demand for Gorkhaland

The last term of the DGHC expired on 23 March 2005 but Ghising continued as the caretaker administrator of the council for three years, thanks to the state government, which passed the Darjeeling

ELECTIONS COULD NOT BE HELD BECAUSE OF THE OPPOSITION FROM GHISING, WHO DEMANDED TRIBAL STATUS FOR THE DARJEELING HILLS IN JUNE 2005 UNDER THE SIXTH SCHEDULE, WHEN HIS DEMAND FOR A SEPARATE STATE OF GORKHALAND WAS NOT ACCEPTED

Gorkha Autonomous Council (Amendment) Bill. Elections could not be held because of the opposition from Ghising, who demanded tribal status for the Darjeeling hills in June 2005 under the Sixth Schedule, when his demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland was not accepted. Acquiring “tribal status” would mean the protection of rights through the reservation of allocated seats in the state legislature. A tripartite agreement was finally signed on 6 December 2005 for inclusion of the hill council in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, to give the council more legislative and administrative powers.¹⁶

Intelligence agencies soon warned the Indian government against giving special status to the region in haste, as there was no consensus on the demand for inclusion in the Sixth Schedule among

the different factions, including non-tribals and tribals represented by the GJM and GNLF respectively. The warning soon became real, when thousands of GJM activists resorted to an indefinite *bandh* (strike) in February 2008. The GJM leader, Bimal Gurung, demanded the ousting of Ghising from the council for his non-performance, halting the process of conferring Sixth Schedule status to the Darjeeling hills and a separate state of Gorkhaland.¹⁷ Later, Ghising was forced to resign as caretaker of the council, and the GJM resorted to further *bandhs*, hunger strikes and rallies in June 2008 to resume their demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland. They refused to talk to the state government alone, and requested tripartite talks with the Indian government and state government. The GJM emphasised that their demands



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Gorkha People's Liberation Front flags are placed on a blocked highway during an indefinite strike in Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Mirik and the nearby hills (2009).


for Gorkhaland were not separatist, and that it fell within the framework of the Constitution. The genesis of the present crisis lies in the Indian government's attempt to turn Darjeeling into a tribal region. This resulted in upsetting the non-tribal groups, who formed about 70% of the hill population, and who felt that the move would further divide the community.

Conclusion

From the above account, it is very clear that the Gorkhas and the GNLf have always wanted a separate state of Gorkhaland in the Darjeeling area. However, they had to accept only the DGHC as a solution, as the West Bengal government was not ready for a partition of the state. The Gorkhas have always regarded the DGHC as a stop-gap arrangement until they are able to achieve their final aim of Gorkhaland within India. The issue of a separate state of Gorkhaland has never been a closed chapter. However, Gorkhaland is not a possibility in the near future, as the opposition and ruling party in West Bengal – the Communist Party of India-Marxist – and the Trinmool Congress (another regional party of West Bengal) are against the idea. Moreover, the current Indian government, led by Dr Manmohan Singh, is dependent on the Trinmool Congress for its survival as they are coalition partners, and the government would therefore not upset the Trinmool Congress on this matter. But the Indian government has engaged the GJM in talks regarding the future of the area.

The council experience has, however, been successful too. It did ensure the absence of armed conflict during the mid-1980s. It also placated the ethnic Bengalis, as well as Gorkhas, to some extent. Bengalis were satisfied as the state of West Bengal was not divided, and Gorkhas were satisfied as they now controlled the affairs of Darjeeling. Moreover, the end of violence gave relief to all. However, hopes of development for the area have not become a reality, due to the non-performance of Ghising's team over the past 17 years. During the 1980s, Ghising had fired the imagination and passions of the Gorkhas of Darjeeling, and they had envisioned a better future under his leadership. However, the non-performance of the Ghising-led DGHC has left many disillusioned.

The DGHC has been a victim of the same disease that affects Indian politics and administration generally – that is, autocratic and corrupt politicians and officials who are more interested in self-aggrandisement than the welfare of the masses that they profess to represent and serve. The masses are cheated by politicians, who raise emotional issues instead of concentrating on developmental issues. What was required to make the DGHC experience a success was more accountability and transparency in its functioning, along with a

comprehensive regional development strategy capable of addressing socio-economic and environmental issues of concern to this region. This would bring sustainable development and general improvement in the quality of life of the masses. 

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Endnotes

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- 2 Examples include: Gorkha Samiti, Hillmen's Association, Gorkha Association, Hill People's Social Union, All India Gorkha League, Gorkha National Liberation Front, and so on.
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- 4 Rattan, Kamaljeet (1988) Signs of Peace: Accord on Gorkhaland. *India Today*, 15 September, p. 56.
- 5 (1988) Memorandum of Settlements on GNLf Agitation. *The Hindustan Times*, 23 August.
- 6 Rattan, Kamaljeet (1988) Return to Peace. *India Today*, 15 November, p. 16.
- 7 (1988) GNLf: Tensions Reappear. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24-31 December, p. 277.
- 8 Rattan, Kamaljeet (1989) Hope of Peace: GNLf Wins Hill Council Poll. *India Today*, 15 January, p. 63.
- 9 Ghising alleged that an international conspiracy to form a "Greater Nepal" was being hatched by joining together Darjeeling, Sikkim, the Duars and parts of lower Bhutan, with the ultimate aim of joining Nepal. In January 1992, he argued that Darjeeling and its adjoining areas were leased out to British India by Nepal and that, after independence, the lease had expired and nothing was done to sign a new treaty. Since Nepal has not reclaimed the territory, the hills of West Bengal formed a "no man's land". He declared that no elections could be held in the hills until it was proven that the region had been incorporated into the Indian Union after British rule.
- 10 (1993) Mr Ghising's New Offensive. *The Hindu*, 3 April.
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