

DEMAND FOR GORKHALAND: TRACING THE MOVEMENT

Dr. Ritu Khosla*

Abstract: The paper traces the journey of Gorkhaland movement from 1907 till the present times- from the demand made by Hillsmen's Association to the current agitation taken by GJM. The rationale behind Gorkhaland movement is preservation and development of language, culture and identity of Gorkha minority group in West Bengal. The supporters of the movement have a perception that once the state of Gorkhaland is fabricated then the other Indians would not designate Gorkhas as 'foreigners'.

Keywords: Gorkhaland, Gorkhas, GNLF, DGHC, GJM, GTA

* **Assistant Professor, Department of Political science, MCM DAV College for Women, Chandigarh**

The demand for the creation of new states has not been a new one in India. Its roots can be traced back to 1905 when linguistic principle was discussed out the partition of Bengal, then dividing it on regional basis. The Montague-Chelmsford report in 1918, Nagpur session of 1920 and Nehru report in 1928 also accepted the linguistic principle of reorganization of states. The *raison d'être* behind this demand was to create states on linguistic basis and it got support from the congress leaders too. But soon after independence, this idea was dropped by the national leaders in the context of maintaining national unity and integrity of India. This, however, could not calm down the aspiration of people who desired separate statehood.

In 1951 there were 27 states in India which were divided into Part A, B, C and D. This number of 27 states got reduced to 14 by the States Reorganisation Act of 1956. However, due to the ever increasing pressure from various regions in India, the number got increased to 29 in 2014. With the formation of Telangana as the 29th state of Indian union, the demands for new states became more frequent. Such demands include Gorkhaland and Kamtapur in West Bengal; Tulunadu in Southern States of Karnataka and Kerala; Harit Pradesh, Purvanchal, Barj Pradesh, and Awadh Pradesh in Uttar Pradesh; Vidarbha in Eastern Maharashtra; Bodoland in Assam, and many others. Among all these demands the most vigorous one is of Gorkhaland from the state of West Bengal.

Gorkhaland is the name proposed for a new state that embodies the regions namely, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong. The demand for Gorkhaland first arose in 1907 with the demand by the Hillsmen's Association for the creation of separate province. Since then the demand has been raised several times at various platforms. The rationale behind Gorkhaland movement is preservation and development of language, culture and identity of Nepalese minority group in West Bengal. The supporters of the movement have a perception that once the state of Gorkhaland is fabricated then the other Indians would not designate Gorkhas as 'foreigners'. The individuality of the Gorkhas as Indians will be collateralised. Thus the crusade for Gorkhaland manifests a growing sense of identity amidst the lesser group. Even the archives of several organisations on Nepali legacy dated back to 1920s and 1930s in their objectives had exhibited the ideals of development and upliftment on the rationale of ethnic identity (Shneiderman. 2017: 21).

Tracing the Movement: A Political Journey

During 1930s, the Nepali speaking people became conscious of their language as a symbol of identity. The newly emergent bourgeoisie class of small shopkeepers, businessmen, contractors, clerks, teachers and intellectuals took the lead in organising a forum for articulating their interests (Datta.1993: 147). The outcome of this was the formation of All India Gorkha League (AIGL) also known as Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League (ABGL) which was founded in 1943 by Damber Singh Gurung.

AIGL as a movement was an upshot of union and communist movements among tea garden workers. The initial demand of AIGL was that Darjeeling should become part of the neighboring state of Assam so that Gorkhas have larger population share than in Bengal. In addition, it demanded that the districts of Jalpaiguri, Sikkim, Cooch Behar and Darjeeling should form a single province. In 1948 two more demands were added by AIGL along with the original-protection of Nepali language; and, India for Indian Nepalis. When AIGL framed its constitution it declared Nepal as the motherland of all the Gorkhas (Article 1) with the purpose to protect of cultural and political rights of the India Gorkhas (Article 2) (Kaushik.2007: 26).

When the process of linguistic reorganisation of states was initiated in 1956, AIGL requested State Reorganisation Commission to declare Darjeeling as a separate state or centrally administered unit. Its demands were, however, not accepted by the Commission. Further, during the period of ongoing militant activities in Darjeeling, AIGL presented a memorandum to Home Minister of India in 1981 asking for separation of Darjeeling on the ground of national security and justice to linguistic minority (Samanta.2007: 89). Despite continuous efforts, all efforts of AIGL remained futile.

AIGL is currently part of the Democratic Front and stands for peaceful democracy in the hills and is against setting up of an interim authority like DGHC, GTA in Darjeeling in place of a full-fledged state of Gorkhaland.

Another movement that made its present felt in the region was *Pranta Parishad* established on August 8, 1980 at a convention held at Sukhipokhri. This extremist organization was made with

the efforts of ex-congressmen of the district that included I. B. Rai, Madan Thapa, Madan Tamang, Gajendra Gurung, Kumar Bhatia, Prem Thapa, and others with the purpose to demand formation of Gorkhaland that would comprise of the Nepali speaking areas of Dooars of Jalpaiguri district and Darjeeling district within the provision of Indian Constitution. The party made a call for vote boycott in 1982 Assembly Elections by raising slogan 'No State No Vote'. Though this organization could not win support of Nepalese in the state but it was successful in creating a secessionist movement. The movement tried to mobilize Gorkhas through plays, meetings and powerful writings in its weekly called 'Aba'. The movement was, however, short lived as leaders of the movement could not form unanimous view point on several issues and even its supports failed to make a substantial impact.

The reduction in the impact of AIGL and Pranta Parishad led to the strong emergence of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) and its leader Subhash Ghising was looked upon as the *Massiah* of the movement that could fulfil the dream of people for Gorkhaland state. The struggle of GNLF can be broadly classified in three stages that followed the trail- from secessionist movement to movement of statehood within Indian union to movement of autonomy within West Bengal.

GNLF in its earlier days propagated the view that Nepalese are stateless people whose future in danger. This organization too boycotted 1982 assembly elections in order to connote that they have no faith in constitutional system of India. GNLF made a significant contribution to the movement by making distinction between Indian Nepalis from the citizens of Nepal by adopting the term Gorkhali for them. Thus their demand is called Gorkhaland (Sinha. 2013).

The prime phase of Gorkhaland was extremist in temperament. During mid-1980s, the Hills of Darjeeling were transformed into a volatile bloody struggle for attaining a separate state of Gorkhaland out of West Bengal. The main reason behind it, as discussed earlier, was the expulsion of hundreds of Nepali citizens from Meghalya and a strong opposition from Assam Students Union followed by the denial of shelter by West Bengal government. The processions under GNLF came with Kukri in one hand and a flaming torch in other.

Reacting to the methodology adopted by GNLFF, the state government declared the Gorkhaland movement led by GNLFF as divisive, anti-people, anti-national and anti-state as it did immense harm to the interest of the Nepali speaking people (GoWB. 1987: 34). 21 years of rule by GNLFF proved to be a lesson of anarchy. Common masses residing in the Hills who became victims of violent activities and bandhs in the region got frustrated with it. At least, 1200 people died in the first Gorkhaland campaign (ANI.2013). There was shortage of food, water, fuel, loss of life and property, etc.

Later a change was witnessed in the working of GNLFF due to prevalent unrest among masses. The movement became subtle in nature as GNLFF was neither able to gain international support nor support of Indian Nepalese residing outside Darjeeling district. In the mist of such environment there was a strong urge to end the movement and thus GNLFF felt pressurized to negotiate for separate state for Gorkhaland but within the framework of Indian Constitution. Many Gorkhas residing in Darjeeling district became antipathic to the revolutionary movement. In this second phase along with the subject of statehood, GNLFF made an addition of the issue of citizenship in its demand. It claimed that all the Nepalese residing in India before the commencement of Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1950 should be considered as Indian citizen. In addition, GNLFF tried to convince central government that their movement was not anti-national. The third phase of the movement was more of patch up in nature. GNLFF tried to repair its relations with state government through a proposed regional council named Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC). DGHC was an autonomous body bestowed with the responsibility of administering three subdivisions under its authority, namely, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong. By this agreement, government not only agreed to create DGHC but also conceded to grant citizenship to pre-1950 settlers.

The major shortcoming of the formation of DGHC was that it dropped the demand for formation of Gorkhaland altogether without taking into confidence the Gorkhas in whose interest the movement was initiated. Another mistake committed by Ghising was the demand for the implementation of Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in Hills which further diverted him from his original goal of getting statehood for Gorkhaland. There was big opposition for the sixth schedule as it promised the rule of minority as the tribal population that hardly constituted 30 per

cent of total population. But later the draft bill for including the Darjeeling hills in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution lapsed with the dissolution of the 14th Lok Sabha and was thus not implemented (Chhetri. 2013).

Currently the demand for Gorkhaland is led by Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJM), a registered political party launched Bimal Gurung on 7th October 2007 as a disagreement to the Sixth schedule status for the Hills. The supporters of GJM showed their aggression towards Sixth Schedule and burnt the copies of '1988 Memorandum of Settlement' in which GNLF had agreed to give up its demand of Gorkhaland. GJM led by Bimal Gurung resorted to bandhs, hunger strikes, and rallies to carry on their demand for separate statehood of Gorkhaland.

It was very well understood that the battle fulfilling their dream can't be fulfilled without having support of union government and for that such political power should come in power that has sympathetic attitude towards such movements. Thus, in order to give form to their demand, GJM conferred its support to BJP in 2009 general elections and later in 2014 as BJP had announced its policy of having smaller states and to create new states like Gorkhaland if they come to power. GJM also entered into an electoral alliance with Trinamool Congress and when the later came to power in 2011 state assembly elections, both came out with a solution namely, Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), a semi-autonomous administrative body for Hills. The Memorandum of Agreement was signed on 18 July 2011 at Pintail Village near Siliguri and the concerned bill was passed in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly on 2 September 2011. The President of India Pratibha Patil gave assent to the GTA bill on 7 March 2012 and a gazette notification regarding this was issued by the West Bengal government on 24 March 2012.

Considering the agreement, Gurung made it very clear that GTA does not mean end of the demand for Gorkhaland. The text stated, "...GJM while not dropping their demand for a separate State of Gorkhaland has agreed to the setting up of an autonomous Body..."(Sarkar.2013)

Under this agreement, GTA under the leadership of Bimal Gurung was promised a sum of Rs 200 crore per annum from the central government for the developmental of region. The

agreement generated a ray of hope amongst people as it was anticipated that the region would be able to keep behind its period of turmoil. It was also hoped that GTA would be able to address the issues of power and water shortage, inadequate infrastructure development and lack of employment avenues that the region had been facing and GNLF had failed to address in its 23 years of reign. The agreement seemed to be an assurance that the ongoing disagreements between the state government and GJM would be settled to a great extent with this new arrangement.

Unfortunately the agreement was unable to produce its desired effects. Supporters of Gorkhaland complained undue interference on the part of state government in working of GTA. Even GTA was not granted all the powers as promised in agreement. For instance, according to the agreement, West Bengal government was to transfer 56 departments to GTA but it transferred only 28 departments. Likely, under GTA Act, panchayati raj was a transferred subject but the services of BDOs (officers implementing development schemes) were not placed under the district magistrate. Similarly, disaster management is a transferred subject but neither the staff nor the budget was transferred to GTA (Banerjee. 2013). Thus there has increased doubts on the efficient and autonomous nature of GTA.

Gorkhaland issue re-emerged with full force in the Hills after central government's endorsement of Telangana state to be carved out of Andhra Pradesh. Subsequently, a number of pre-Gorkhaland groups formed an alliance called the Gorkhaland Joint Action Commission (GJAC) to jointly lead the movement. The main context reasserting their demand was that in the creation of Telangana, centre had upturned a precedent of taking the state government's nod in rearranging state's boundary. It implies that for passing state reorganisation bill approval of state government is no longer required. This made people of Darjeeling believe that Gorkhaland movement is now possible as the main hindrance in the path of their dream had been the state government.

The movement, however, continued in a peaceful manner on the Gandhian path. For instance, Bimal Gurung started with Pad Yatra on October 2nd 2015 for 400 days covering 25 kms on an average per day in support of Gorkhaland. The peaceful agitation, however, did not last for

long. The demand for Gorkhaland became vigorous recently following the West Bengal Government's announcement to make Bengali language compulsory in schools. The movement has become violent, creating unrest in the Hills. The leaders are not ready to settle down for anything else, except for Gorkhaland.

Thus the whole fight of Gorkha community reflects their century's old struggle to secure identity and gain a respectable place in federal India. The struggle continues with a lot of hopes and dreams but the demand for Gorkhaland put forward a lot of questions that need to be answered. Darjeeling has only one district, so will the new state be able to provide adequate resources to its people or it would be dependent upon the centre government for the same? What is the guarantee that these small states would for sure fulfill its laid objective? Can ethnicity be considered as base for the formation of new state taking into consideration that in India there exist n number of ethnic groups? Would Gorkhaland state not create new minorities in the new state as there resides Lepchas, Bhutias and other minorities in the region?

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