



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
Volume-I, Issue-III, November 2014, Page No. 254-260
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

Gorkha Ethnicity: Cultural Revolution and the Issue of Gorkhaland **Priyankar Datta**

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Abstract

As is well known all over the world that India is a land of unity in diversity - often it is boasted. Rightfully, India is a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-lingual area. The society in the area is made up of various elements drawn from diverse origin. The social diversity is perhaps the most powerful materialization of the area. The social groups with diverse ethnic and linguistic origins representing several racial stocks and social status have found places for themselves at various points of time adapting themselves to several ecological niches offered by the Physiographic and climatic setting of the area. The waves of immigration have drawn the ancestors of the majority of the present population of the area from the surrounding territories and across the Himalayas. Their dissemination has ensued in a creation of a social mosaic with ethnic disparateness. With such diversity in the area in terms of ethnicity, culture and language, the region is made up of groups and sub groups with varied and diverse demands and needs. The chief responsibility of the State as an agent of development and planning is, thus, to take heed of the diverse demands of social groups, not only of the majority social groups but also the groups in minority, residing within the length and breadth of its territory. It is argued that ethnic expressions are in one way or the other related to development schemes adopted by a State and therefore the failure and disparity in development strategies makes the association with the State less worthy and generates a multiplicity of different cultural expressions.

Key Words: *Multicultural, Ethnicity, social Diversity, Territory, Development, Decentralization, Democracy, Diversity.*

Introduction: Over the years, the failure and disparity in development schemes (i.e. development planning) in India has led to the generation of multiplicity of separate ethnic expressions like Gorkhaland movement and many others. And often it is celebrated that the agitating ethnoses are in minority, have a distinct culture, language; they are geographically isolated, socially, economically and political unsafe and have a low self-sensing equated to Those occupying the state berth.

Furthermore, sociologists believe that the ethnic movements in India are basically based on the perceived demand to overcome poverty as against the conventional sociological arguments that the prospects of progresses enhance the utilization of ethnic identity.

Careful scrutiny of the ethnic expressions in India reveals the significance of planning for development in ethnic and linguistic lines. There is a need for development plans to address cultural and linguistic elements besides economic aspects. This becomes especially true and relevant in a nation like India where we talk of unit in diversity. The popular phrase that India is a land of unity in variety itself suggests identification of diversities and giving due respect to them - which we, in fact, have misapprehended over the years.

The district of Darjeeling belonged to the non-regulated province before 1861; that is to say, Act and Regulations did not come into force unless they were particularly extended to it. Under the system, the Governor General possessed the power of taking on legislation for the non-regulated states by means of executive orders.

Although, the district was let in under the general regulation system for a brief period of 1861-70, on account of certain reasons (like the desirability of the preservation of autochthonal system of land tenures which would break up if submitted to normal processes of litigation under civil courts without knowledge or experience of them; and the requirement of inventing simple laws conforming to the native

institutions keeping in perspective the simplicity of the people of the area), the Act of 1870 once more took it out of the regulation system.

Nevertheless, such administrative set up for the Darjeeling district that was regarded as the less advanced district was only for a short period of time from 1870-74. Along with such other districts the district was brought under the purview of the Scheduled Districts Act, 1874 (also known as the laws local Extent Act). As per the provision of the Act, in the listed districts the normal lawmaking's and jurisdiction were in force only in part or with change if essential of any enactment in force at the time in any part of British India. The Act specified five district including Darjeeling of the then Bengal and others elsewhere to be described as the Scheduled district

The administrative organization as led down for the Scheduled districts including the district of Darjeeling continued unchanged for a quite a long period. The Indian Council Act of 1909 brought about no changes in this respect, too. Nevertheless, it was in 1919, the Government of India Act, although holding back almost all the provisions rendered for Scheduled district and their corresponding administration, put all the Scheduled districts under a new terminology, that is, 'the Backward Tracts'. The Act further authorized the Governor General in Council to entrust to the Governor of Bengal the sole responsibility of administering the areas named as the Backward Tracts and in the context, to find out if any law of the Bengal legislature was applicable with or without modifications or exceptions as the Governor might adjudicate or was not applicable at all.

Thus in accordance with the Act of 1919 the district of Darjeeling was a Backward Tract and stayed on so till the passing of the Government of India Act, 1935 which declared the district along with some others as a partially barred area. No Act either of the federal legislature or of the provincial legislature was to be reached either the excluded or the partly excluded areas until and unless the Governor of the province concerned would give his assent to the application of the Act in its entirety or with such modifications or exceptions as he thought essential. In addition, the governor was authorized to make regulations for such areas for their peace and good government and the rules therefore made could annul any federal or provincial or Indian law in being in case of their nonconformity to the relations thus made.

Such administrative arrangement that rendered the district of Darjeeling the status of partially excluded areas remained till the acquirement of the independence by India. Thus it becomes possible to assert that the district of Darjeeling had been kept outside the purview of general administration and that it remained more or less isolated throughout the greater part of British rule in India.

The partition of Bengal in August 1947 left the boundaries of the district intact and in the share of West Bengal. The district was placed thenceforward in the Presidency Division. Under the Constitution of India the district no longer enjoys special privileges. All statutes except the Bengal Tenancy Act in certain of its details, apply to it. The Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling is now also the District Magistrate and has to be advised as such in the official Gazette when a new DC is nominated. Nevertheless, under the statue of the state of West Bengal Darjeeling district enjoys a special status in that the district is governed through two development agencies namely, District Collectorate and the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council formed following the precedence of the DGHC Act, 1988.

As long ago as in 1907, the people of Darjeeling had felt that the district of Darjeeling had been barren from the purview of general administration and were kept comparatively isolated during the central rule. Under the leadership of the various regional political organizations the people of Darjeeling hills made repeated demands (1907, 1920, 1929, 1930, 1934, 1947, 1952, and 1955). Through their demands they showed their will to break away from Bengal. Demands, worth noting and which were comparatively systematic, put forward from time to time till the mid 1950s may be highlighted as below:

- Separate Administrative Unit directly administered by the Centre,
- Separate Province constituting the district of Darjeeling and the neighbouring areas,
- Inclusions of Darjeeling district with a section of Jalpaiguri viz. the Dooars in Assam.

The causes, which forced the people of this district to demand a break away from West Bengal, had been put forth in all the memoranda submitted to the Central Authority from time to time. Some of the notable reasons invoke by these local political organizations may be foregrounded as follows:

- Administrative inconvenience.

- Ethnologically speaking, the Mongoloid and semi Mongoloid races inhabiting the district of Darjeeling and greater part of Jalpaiguri have more kinship with the Hill tribes of Assam than with the people in the plains of Bengal.
- Geographically the district of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar are entirely cut off from the main body of West Bengal creating inconveniences in matter of large transport and other overland communications, which in times of crisis may create serious delays and difficulties.
- Historically speaking, the district of Darjeeling never formed a part of Bengal and no King who ruled the plains of Bengal ever had any suzerainty over those areas.
- Linguistically, the people residing in the hill areas in question have greater affinity with Hindi, the Lingua Franca of India, than with the state language and the average student find themselves burdened with too many languages in their curriculum of study.
- The University of Calcutta had not conceded the demand for recognition for Nepali as a major language although the University of Patna had accorded such recognition.

A noted anthropologist, T. B. Subba (1992), remarks, "Long years of interaction between the hill communities and the plainsmen (mainly the Bengalis) had more to do with the above demands than anything else. On the one hand these communities had already developed various sorts of interdependence, agrarian and trade being two most significant in this regard. Then there was the Nepali language to express themselves with each other and lay the foundation of hill ethnicity. On the other hand, they suffered from certain politico-economic disadvantages Vis-a Vis the plainsmen. Besides whatever little communication that took place between the hill men and the plainsmen being through the English or Hindi language such an interaction was limited to the educated class and businessmen".

Again, Subba maintains that "the argument that the Bengalis in particular often behaved as a masters in Darjeeling hills cannot be easily brushed aside.. Had their attitude towards the hill people been healthy the latter would probably have no strong reason to seek a separation from the former."

Contemporary Gorkha Politics: Political parties in Nepal do not have a common scheme to deal with the problem of Gorkhas and other problems. The opposition parties treat it as the problem of the government. The Nepali Government ab initio regarded the Maoist insurgency as a law and order problem. Action was initiated against the Maoists in 1995. It was code-named 'operation Romeo' in Rolpa and Rukum area and involved the torture and arrest of the many suspected Maoists. This, nevertheless, did not help the government other than in accomplishing short-term targets of controlling the situation. This alienated large segments of the population and strengthened the Maoist resolve to fight for a 'class-less' society and their rights more convincingly. The political imbalance, particularly after the 1994 mid-term elections, resulted in a hung parliament.

The government policy towards the Maoist insurgency was tongue-tied and lacked a well-defined strategy. While politicians were bickering for power, the Maoists strengthened their cadre. In 1997, the UML government tried to introduce a terrorism law to give the police wide-ranging powers to deal with the insurgency. The law was later drawn back due to the lack of support from other political parties, intelligentsia and the human rights groups. The government efforts to start talks also went wrong due to various preconditions set by the rebels. Some of the conditions put forward by the Maoists are: insurgents killed in police action to be declared as martyrs, release of party cadres lodged in several jails, and withdrawal of police from the insurgency affected areas. With violence increasing and a political solution to the problem not within sight, the government adopted strong-arms measures. The government in 1998 began operations against the Maoists in eighteen districts believed to be the strongholds of the rebels, resulting in wide-spread killing and torture of the distrusted rebels. This caused further alienation of the people. Employing police actions without corresponding socio-economic measures to relieve the grudges of the people failed to accomplish the desired effect. At the same time due to violence and killing, the government officials found it hard to operate from the region under the Maoist command.

As per some estimates, till April 2001, 1900 people have been killed in the insurgency. Interestingly, the Maoists while assuming a political posture vis-a-vis the government have established their autonomous political entity'- a state within the state. The Maoists announced the formation of People's Revolutionary Government in seventeen districts of Nepal. In these districts the insurgents levy taxes, provide justice, solve common problems, manage agriculture and at the same time provide security to the villagers. These are the issues which, should have been on the agenda of the government. The government's initiatives have been half-hearted due to corruption in the local administration and incapability of the implementing

authority. Furthermore, after insurgency broke out any initiative by the government was frustrated by the Maoists. In 1997 the Maoists even threatened the local elections by vowing to kill those who contested the elections and those who would cast the ballot. At last, the elections were held only after the security forces were deployed on a large scale.

The police forces are not fitted out to fighting the well-armed and motivated insurgents. They are unable to tackle the problem due to a lack of modern instrumentation and also a lack of motivation arising from the government's halfhearted policies concerning insurgency. Moreover, the police force is not adequately trained to deal with the insurgents. They also get demoralised due to frequent criticism by the human rights watch groups for rights abuse. It is also a problem for the police to identify a Maoist sympathiser from a collaborator and supporter. The police force is disappointed owing to the lack of sophisticated weapons to deal with the insurgency and these frustrations have resulted in torture, illegal detention and in some cases even led to the disappearance of suspects. Or else of dealing with the situation to bring peace, police actions have aggravated it. The Nepali Army is opposed to the upgrading of the arms of the police force due to their institutional interests. As a result, the operations against the Maoists have been poor.

On assuming as the prime minister, Deuba introduced land reforms and started talks with the rebels after halting the operation against them. In the third and most recent round of talks, the Maoists had even dropped their demands concerning a republican system. Nevertheless, around mid-November the leaders of the insurgent groups announced that the ceasefire was over, although their basic stand remained as was apparent from an interview of Baburam Bhattarai, the Maoist leader. He emphasised that the basic goal of the Maoists is "a people's republic and socialism and communism". There are also discernments considering the brewing rift within the Maoist party and the increase in dominance of the hardliners in the party. This dominance is attributed to be one of the grounds behind the withdrawal method of the Maoist leaders from the peace talks with the government. While talking to a regional media, the NCP (Maoist) Chairman Prachanda, said, "It is up to the people to decide whether or not they want a republican state. This is why we are demanding the election of a constituent assembly. We have put forth this requirement as the best and the last alternative to peace. If the government does not address our demands and the talks fail, we will be obliged to take up arms once again". Backed by the chief opposition parties, the government has rejected the call for an elected constituent assembly or to take any initiative to declare Nepal as a secular state. The government has repeated that it does not have the mandate to scrape the present constitution which guarantees the constitutional monarchy and the multi-party parliamentary democracy.

Maoists have exploited the prevailing 'anti-Indianism' of the elite. In Nepal the Nepali nationalism is often understood as synonymous with anti-Indianism. Misgovernance and economic retardation is attributed to several policies adopted by India. Many people resent the geographical realities, which make Nepal dependent on India. In fact many Nepali political parties have played on this sentiment and have exploited this to lay down domestic credibility. Even to the Maoists this has been an easy way to lay down domestic credibility and reiterate their patriotism.

One of the requirements of the Maoists is the abrogation of the Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1950 and annulment of the Mahakali Treaty. Though at present the Joint Working Group, constituting officials from both the countries has had several meetings regarding the revision of the 1950 Treaty, nothing concrete has been attained so far. Though the Nepali side is eager about the revision, it has been unable to propose what exactly would be incorporated in a new Treaty. Furthermore, the Mahakali Treaty itself has been signed by the Nepali Parliament. Though both the issues are highly controversial in Nepal and have been used by the political parties to increase their domestic credibility, there is not much scope for revision unless Nepal has an alternative proposal. India has a porous border with Nepal. It is reported that the Maoists have linkages with the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) active in Bihar and the Peoples War Group (PWG) in Andhra Pradesh. Though both these groups have ideological linkages with the Maoists of Nepal and there is a possibility of sharing operational skills, it is less likely that the group active in India would be supplying weapons to the Maoists in Nepal.

The spillover effect of the Maoist insurgency would have entailments for Indo-Nepal relations. Any close coordination of the Maoist groups functioning in both the countries could create more problems for the security forces since the open border can be used as a conduit for illegal arms. There is, so far, no evidence of the Chinese involvement in the problem in Nepal. India has to tread carefully because stability in neighbouring Nepal is of strategic significance. It would be prudent for India not to offer any suggestions on the issue unless asked for. If requested, India can help Nepal in gathering intelligence,

training its police force and the army in counter-insurgency operations and supply necessary weapons. At the same time India should be careful enough not to get directly involved in the counter-insurgency efforts of the Nepalese Government. There are reports that many of the insurgents are likely to cross the Indo-Nepal border into India to escape the army action. The Indian Government has sounded a red-alert along the border. India is also apprehensive about the links of Nepal's Maoists to the MCC and PWG, and their suspected links with the United Liberation Front of Assam and other separatist groups.- There is a need for both the countries to cooperate closely and evolve a joint strategy to deal with the insurgents and their linkages with each other. Since the border is open it would be difficult to tackle the problem with a unilateral strategy.

The army has been employed to deal with the Maoists and emergency has been declared in Nepal. The government resolve to fight terrorism can be accomplished with the cooperation of not only the political parties but also the palace. However, military solution to the problem would be a short-term gain. To deal with the problem in a comprehensive manner the government needs to implement developmental planning and land reforms. Furthermore, since Nepal is largely dependent on revenue from its tourism industry the insurgency would affect the flow of tourists and this would compound political problems and ultimately the political stability.

Even if Nepal succeeds in counter-insurgency measures to deal with the Maoists and is able to alleviate socio-economic problems, the issue of bringing the radical cadre of the ultras to the mainstream politics would be a difficult proposition. Another aspect of the problem is that the Maoists have been able to hold their sway due to the socio-economic grievances of the people. Though the Maoists have used these grievances to strengthen their cadres and have succeeded in earning people's faith, the focuses of their last negotiations with the government do not reflect their concern for the public. The issues that were discussed in the three rounds of discussions affirm the fact that the Maoists are more interested in their larger political agenda i.e. an elected constituent assembly. If the Maoist leadership eventually decides to join the mainstream politics, it would need to negotiate with the government for economic development of the region. This would, in the long run, help them to strengthen their political base since creating an ideological state in Nepal by encashing only on common political grievances is too far-fetched a scheme. People are more interested in the economic well-being. They are not concerned whether Nepal is a republic or a constitutional monarchy. If the Maoists fail to deliver as representatives of the people of the underdeveloped region of Nepal, it would lead to their political failure. This would lead to the death to the Maoist movement and their cardinal principles of establishing a people's republic would die even before taking shape.

As per Thomas A. Marks, who has worked extensively on Maoist insurgency, "Maoist insurgency is a technique for purposive (i.e. deliberate) action. It is a means to an end, political power; political power to be seized for the purpose of overthrowing the existing order... only democracy offers a realistic counter to the Maoist approach". Only a vibrant democracy with economic progress would deal with the Maoist problem in Nepal. The political parties of Nepal therefore have a greater responsibility. Only time will tell whether a fractious political party like the Nepali Congress and uncooperative opposition like the United Marxist and Leninist party could mend their political differences to find a lastine solution to the Maoist problem.

Issue of Gorkhaland: Gorkhaland is the name given to the area around Darjeeling and the Duars in North West Bengal in India. Residents of the area, mostly Gorkhas have long demanded a separate state for themselves to preserve their Indian-Nepali/Gorkha cultural identity and to improve their socio-economic conditions.

Historically, Darjeeling and its surrounding terai areas formed a part of the then Kirat kingdom known as Bijaypur. After the disintegration of the Bijaypur kingdom, it annexed with Sikkim and Bhutan. After the Anglo Nepalese War (1814-1815), the Treaty of Sugauli was signed between Nepal and the East India Company. Darjeeling was taken from Nepal by the British and returned to the Sikkimese after the Treaty of Titaliya. In 1835, Col Lloyd became the representative of East India Company for Darjeeling. During his tenure Darjeeling was leased by the British Indian Empire from the Maharaja of Sikkim for an annual amount of Rs 3000. However the original map of Darjeeling came into existence only after the induction of Kalimpong and Duars area after the Anlgo-Bhutanese war of 1864 (Treaty of Sinchula). Darjeeling as we know of today was organized in 1866. The term Gorkha is used by the people of Darjeeling to separate themselves from the Nepalese (citizens of Nepal). The term Gorkha encompasses all the three original

inhabitants of the Darjeeling Hills viz: Nepali, Lepcha and Bhutia.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, Gorkhas made socioeconomic advance through government service, and a small fraction developed among them as literate people. Following this in 1907, the first ever demand for a separate administrative setup for the District of Darjeeling was placed before the British government by the leaders of the hill people. Their main reason for doing so was to assert their identity, which was entirely different and separate from those who lived in the plains. In 1917 the Hillmen's Association came into being and petitioned for the administrative separation of Darjeeling in 1917 and again in 1930 and 1934. In 1923 the Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League (All India Gorkha League) was formed at Dehradun. It soon spread to Darjeeling. On 15 May 1943, All India Gorkha League came into existence in Darjeeling. On 19 December 1946, the party's heart and soul, D.S. Gurung even made a supplication in the Constitution Hall before the Constituent.

Assembly for recognition of Gorkhas as a minority community "Sir, the demand of the Gorkhas is that they must be recognized as a minority community and that they must have adequate representation in the Advisory Committee that is going to be formed. When the Anglo-Indians with only 1 lakh 42 thousand population have been recognized as a minority community, and Scheduled Castes among the Hindus have been recognized as a separate community, I do not see any reason why Gorkhas with 30 lakhs population should not be recognized as such."

But leaders within its own ranks such as Randhir Subba were not satisfied with this meagre demand. Soon after the death of D.S. Gurung, Randhir Subba raised the demand for a separate state within the framework of the Indian Constitution known as Uttarakhand. Uttarakhand could be composed one of the following ways.

- Darjeeling district and Sikkim only or
- Darjeeling district only or
- Darjeeling district, Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar or
- Darjeeling district, Sikkim, Jalpaiguri, Dooars and Coochbehar

Initially Randhir Subba was in favor of a militant movement. The movement never gained momentum as its leaders were mobilized to other purposes by apt politicians of Central Govt. and leaders of the West Bengal government.

On April 6, 1947, two Gorkhas Ganeshlal Subba and Ratanlal Brahmin members of the undivided CPI (Communist Party of India) submitted a Quixotic memorandum to Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Vice President of the Interim Government for the creation of Gorkhasthan - an independent nation comprising of the present day Nepal, Darjeeling District and Sikkim (excluding its present North District) in the line of Pakistan.

Throughout the 1940s, the Communist Party of India (CPI) organized Gorkha tea workers. In presentations to the States Reorganisation Commission in 1954, the CPI favored regional autonomy for Darjeeling within West Bengal, with recognition of Nepali as a Scheduled Language. The All India Gorkha League preferred making the area a union territory under the Central government. In all from the 1950s to the 1985, first the CPI (1954), then the Congress (1955), then the triumvirate of Congress, CPI and AIGL (1957), then the United front (1967 & 1981), then again Congress (1968) and finally CPI (M) 1985.

Then throughout the 80s Subash Ghising raised the demand for the creation of the state of Gorkhaland to be carved out of the hills of Darjeeling and areas of Dooars and Siliguri Terai contiguous to Darjeeling, with a large population of ethnic Gorkhas.

The Gorkhaland movement took a violent turn in 1980s when Subash Ghising lead Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) entered a violent demand for statehood, which lead to the death of over 1200 people (official figures). This movement culminated with the formation of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988. Over the years the state government allowed a free reign to Subash Ghising and GNLF, there was a tactical understanding of West Bengal government not meddling in DGHC affairs as long as the demand for Gorkhaland was not brought up again.

After 20 years of GNLF rule the people of Darjeeling revolted against the tyranny, atrocities, high handedness, and corruption of GNLF and prevented Subash Ghising from entering Darjeeling hills. Since then the people of Darjeeling and Doors have restarted their fight for right to self assertion and development of the region by demanding the formation of Gorkhaland.

Since late 2007 the demand for a separate state within the Indian Union has been started more

intensely by the Gorkha leader Mr. Bimal Gurung, under the newly formed party known as Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM). He has known as for a more non violent form of protest by refusing to pay state taxes to the government including electricity and phone bills. People have resorted to changing vehicle numbers from WB (West Bengal) to GL (signifying Gorkhaland). Currently the administrative machinery in the hills of Darjeeling seems to have broken down, with most of the Government offices non functional, and even the police unable to maintain law and order in the district. The scene became particularly violent when a woman GJMM supporter was shot dead allegedly by GNLF supporters during a protest. Chaos and lawlessness reigned supreme while the administration was nowhere to be seen.

The situation became normal after GJMM leaders known as for restraint. The center and the West Bengal government have known as for a tripartite meeting with the GJMM leaders to resolve the issue. However break through seems unlikely as both the GJMM leaders as well as the West Bengal government seems to be taking a hard stance, where the former has refused to consider anything less than Gorkhaland while the later has been adamant in claiming that they would not allow further division of Bengal.

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