



Politics in the Mist: Ethnicity, Identity and Power Struggles in Darjeeling Hills

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Abstract

Darjeeling is located in the eastern foothills of the Himalayas and it has long been plagued by issues of ethnicity, identity politics, and power dynamics. The article attempts a perspective on the intricate political landscape of Darjeeling as mediated through ethnic identities – primarily Gorkhas – that reframe political objectives, mobilize autonomy movements, and challenging existing political authorities. It tries to take a look at how ethno-consciousness evolved when talking about aspirations for both territorial and administrative control right from colonial plantation politics to the post-independence demand for Gorkhaland and the emergence of regional political parties like GNLF, GJMM, BGPM, and Hamro Party. This paper also attempts to discuss how varying party support among different political factions and interventionism on the part of West Bengal served to fragment the movement while still keeping the very core desire for autonomy alive.

Keywords: Darjeeling, Ethnicity, Gorkhaland, Gorkha identity, Regional politics, Hill politics.

Introduction

Darjeeling, aside from being a beautiful hill station famous for tea gardens and colonial charm, offers an interface of history, identity, and politics in very complex and often precarious ways. The lingering question of the unresolved matter of identity, mainly the Indian Gorkhas, is central to the political narrative of this region. Over time, it is this very issue that has raised aspirations for a separate Gorkhaland State which has consequently been driving forces politically, economically and socially in the region ever since. This movement highlights wider problems on marginalization, cultural diversity and political exclusion. The primary demand for Gorkhaland remains unfulfilled despite several periods of protest, notwithstanding the formation of semi-autonomous bodies like DGHC and GTA thereby rendering the hills' political scenario fragmented with intra-party conflicts along with state and central government interventions.

Historical Context: Colonial Legacy and Ethnic Composition

Darjeeling was previously a part of the Kingdom of Sikkim but later got handed over to the British East India Company. This transfer happened by way of the Deed of Grant in 1835, not as a result of any war but through diplomatic bargaining. The British understood well the strategic value that this region occupies at the meeting point between Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet. Holding it would mean keeping an important stake for military and

economic reasons. Thus, rapidly developing into a hill station, a place for British officials to escape from heat of the Indian plains, later on becoming a significant area for tea production. With plantation growth, large immigration labour came from Nepal, establishing a large Gorkha (Nepali speaking) population.

The demographics of Darjeeling have, over time, changed into a complex mix of Lepchas, Bhutias, Gorkhas (Nepali speaking), Adivasis, and others. However, due to their historical marginalization and large numbers, the Gorkhas developed a stronger political awareness. Despite their long history in India and making very important contributions—mainly at the armed forces—the Gorkhas have always found themselves out of the mainstream Indian identity. The feeling of being left out has driven several political movements in this region.

The Rise of Gorkha Identity and the Demand for Gorkhaland

As early as the 1900s, local political groups like the Hillmen's Association raised concerns about Gorkha's representation and identity. However, calls for a separate administrative structure gained significant momentum only after independence. The main concern was the political invisibility of Nepali-speaking community within West Bengal and the broader Indian Union. The desire for Gorkhaland, a separate state for the Gorkhas emerged as a movement for recognition, dignity, and development.

In 1986, Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) led by Subhash Ghising started a new violent movement for a separate state of Gorkhaland. The violent agitation of 1986–88 resulted in more than 1,200 deaths and brought national attention to the situation of Indian Gorkhas, prompting the establishment of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), a semi-autonomous administrative body in 1988.

Despite two decades since the establishment of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), developmental achievements have mostly failed to reach the local community, reinforcing perceptions of deprivation and marginalization. In response, a new wave of unrest erupted in 2007, which once again centered on the demand for Gorkhaland. This second wave was led by Bimal Gurung, a former aide of Ghising, who left the GNLF due to ideological and strategic differences with its leader, Subhash Ghising and formed his own party, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM). The GJMM revitalized the Gorkhaland demand, leading to mass mobilizations, strikes, and disagreements with the state.

Once again, the settlement to long-standing demand for Gorkhaland had been presented as an administrative compromise rather than a political concession addressing the basic issues of statehood and identity. This resulted in the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), which was formed in 2011 through a tripartite agreement among the Government of India, the Government of West Bengal, and the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha. Although the GTA was meant to be a semi-autonomous body with greater administrative powers over the Darjeeling hills, it fell well short of the expectations of many who had participated in large mobilizations and enduring struggles for a separate state.

Ethnic Assertion, Identity Formation, and Electoral Politics

In the political landscape of Darjeeling, ethnicity plays the dual role of being a cultural marker and a major factor in political mobilization. The assertion of the Gorkha identity mostly takes place vis-a-vis the cultural-cum-administrative dominance imposed by the

Bengali-speaking state of West Bengal. Factors like Nepali language, traditional dress, and festivals such as Dasain (Dussehra) and Tihar (Diwali) have become symbols of resistance and cultural pride, which have helped to create distinct communal identity.

Regional political parties often use ethnic consciousness as a resource for electoral mobilization. In most cases, campaign messages articulated on an ethnic rally and preserved the identity of Gorkha overshadowed the already pressing needs for education, employment, and infrastructural development. The emergence of political parties like the Bharatiya Gorkha Prajatantrik Morcha (BGPM) and Hamro Party (HP) along with the increased involvement of central and state government like BJP and TMC clearly manifests the deployment of ethnic narratives across the entire political spectrum in garnering electoral support. This type of interplay between identity politics and electoral strategy, therefore, places ethnicity at the heart of local governance along with raising barriers to efforts directed at fostering inclusive issue-based political discourse.

Fragmentation and Factionalism in Hill Politics

The journey of Darjeeling's hill politics after the Gorkhaland movement has been marked by increasing factionalism and political division. This has weakened the previously united call for a separate state. The early unity seen in the 1980s under Subhash Ghising's Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) eventually gave way to internal conflicts and a decline in public trust. This decline became evident after the formation of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988. The DGHC did not fulfill its promises of autonomy and development, creating a political gap. Bimal Gurung, once a close aide of Ghising, stepped in to fill that gap when he broke away in 2007 to create the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM).]

Initially, the GJMM stood for a strong and firm desire for Gorkhaland. However, it began to disintegrate due to personal rivalries, leadership disputes, and unclear ideologies. After the violent agitation in 2017 and a 104-day shutdown, significant divisions emerged within GJM's leadership. This led to rival factions, most notably the GJMM led by Gurung and another led by Binay Tamang. These factions claimed to represent the real aspirations of the Gorkha people.

As the GNLF and GJMM lost credibility, new political parties began to arise. The Bharatiya Gorkha Prajatantrik Morcha (BGPM) was founded in 2021 by Anit Thapa, who had previously been part of the GJMM. This party emphasizes development and is allied with the TMC. The Hamro Party, established by Ajoy Edwards, a former leader of the GNLF, advocated for clean governance and community involvement. However, the Hamro Party was officially dissolved in late December 2024 after Edwards merged it into the Indian Gorkha Janashakti Front (IGJF).

This political upheaval brings out the problems about which there has been no clear plan for Gorkhaland to be discussed, frequent changes in leadership, and fading ideologies. While every faction claims its representation of the interest of the Gorkhas, their continuous realignments in politics—mostly support to ruling parties either at the state or central level—have created an environment of mistrust among people.

The Role of the State and Centre

The political trajectory of Darjeeling has been profoundly shaped by the dynamics between the state government of West Bengal and the central government of India. The relationship moved between conflict, cooperation, and negotiation at the cost of local democracy and stability. The ambiguous position of both the state and central governments on the demand for Gorkhaland ensured an imbalance of power in hill politics.

The West Bengal government has continually tried to pacify separatist movements through local administrative bodies in the region without conferring full statehood. From the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988 and later on as the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2011, it's basically an attempt by the state to canalize the Gorkhaland movement within some sort of administrative means under its control. These were supposed to provide limited autonomy but have, in practice, been totally dependent financially and politically upon the state-without any legislative authority over key areas in matters relating to law enforcement, land, and revenue.

The ruling government has tried to assimilate the hills by setting up development boards and through administrative schemes, seen by many as a process of balkanization on sub-ethnic lines (for example, Lepcha Board, Sherpa Board, Tamang Board, etc.) rather than true integration.

The central government, particularly under the BJP, has maintained a position of deliberate ambiguity. Though it extends its support to Gorkha aspirations in electoral campaigns, it does not fulfill its constitutional responsibilities regarding statehood. By entering into electoral alliances with hill parties like GJMM and BGPM, without even touching the core issues, BJP managed to win the hearts of people in these hills by winning parliamentary seats.

Labour and Political Unions in Tea Gardens: A Parallel Power Struggle

Beyond the formal domain of electoral politics, it is in Darjeeling's tea gardens that the most profound levels of economic exploitation and significant political contestation are witnessed. The autonomy struggle overlaps with labour rights, wage issues, and union competition within the tea gardens, thereby providing a space for asserting both class and ethnic identities. The labour structure in the tea industry of Darjeeling is highly colonial where migrant Gorkha workers were assigned to tea estates with little or with hardly any land rights. Having a historical presence and making significant contributions, these workers still remain economically marginalized; generally, by means of low wages, limited benefits, and precarious employment

Trade unions are not just typical labour organizations. They come under deep impetus by regional political dynamics. During the 1980s and 1990s, the major labour unions within the tea sector were under the firm aegis of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). This later transcended into Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) post-2007. More recently, Bharatiya Gorkha Prajatantrik Morcha (BGPM) and Hamro Party emerged as significant players. All these groupings strive for a stake in influencing garden labourers. Wages, bonuses, and garden reopening talks have gone highly political. Many unions are struggling to emerge as the real representatives of tea workers. This competition has most times given rise to conflicting orders, sporadic strikes, and even some violence. It works against the bargaining power of workers when put together.

The 2017 Gorkhaland Agitation and Its Aftermath

The Gorkhaland agitation of 2017 marked a significant moment in Darjeeling's political history. It started as a response to the West Bengal government's unilateral decision to make Bengali a required subject in all schools, even in the mostly Nepali-speaking hills. This policy was seen as a direct threat to ethnic and linguistic identity, leading to large protests in Darjeeling and nearby hill areas.

Within days, the protests escalated into a full political movement led by the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM) under Bimal Gurung. The movement gathered support from political parties, student groups, and civil society organizations, all uniting under the Gorkhaland banner. An indefinite strike lasted three months, disrupting daily life, shutting down schools, colleges, and markets, and severely impacting the vital tea and tourism sectors of the hills.

The West Bengal government's harsh response, which included police and paramilitary forces, effectively dismantled the GJMM's organizational structure. Many key leaders went into hiding or exile, allowing the Trinamool Congress (TMC) to place its supporters in hill governance while sidelining the GJMM faction loyal to Gurung. As a result, the demand for Gorkhaland faded from the political agenda, shifting focus to urgent issues like governance, local development, and control over the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA). The movement, once marked by a shared ethnic and territorial goal, fractured into competing claims for control and party power within the hill administration.

Although the 2017 agitation increased awareness of Gorkha identity and marginalization, its aftermath signaled a turning point in Darjeeling's history, moving from unified opposition to a more divided and pragmatic political landscape.

Conclusion

The Darjeeling Hill region has played a major role in reshaping the political dynamics of Indian multicultural democracy. The Gorkhas' quest for recognition and socio-economic justice in India goes beyond the disputes over administrative boundaries.

Despite period agitation and the formation of semi-autonomous bodies like the DGHC and GTA, the region has remained trapped in cycles of unfulfilled promises, inadequate administrative development, and political fragmentation. There has also been a dilution of the core objectives of the movement with opportunistic factionalism taking center stage due to electoral compulsion both at the state and central levels rather than principle engagement. But all these go behind masks of fractured leadership and shifting alliances; issues that relate to fair representation, cultural autonomy, and the right to determine one's own political destiny remain unresolved.

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