



Ethnic and Linguistic Identity in Darjeeling Hills and State Responses

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Abstract

The Nepali community is a medley of racial and linguistic groups which has been a perfect example of 'unity in diversity'. These different ethnic groups have been involved in a close alliance united by a common lingua franca, a shared sense of economic and political disadvantage and have been pressing the demand for a separate homeland for more than a century now. This literature tries to chronologically record the demands made for a separate homeland since 1907 until the recent times. It also tries to examine the different responses made by the government in power and also expresses fear and concern about the greater ethnic identity being threatened due to the search for roots of sub-communities.

Key-words: *Ethnic identities, separate homeland, diversity, disunity, merge*

1. Introduction

Ever since his existence man has liked to live in a group so to be identified as a social animal. Nature and environment have also played a pivotal role in his development. In due course of anthropological history same herd of social animals formed communities. By and by several communities and races came into existence on earth fighting for their better socio-economic and political livelihood. Same holds true in the different parts of the contemporary world in the name of ethnic identity and Darjeeling hills is no exception.

2. Brief History of Darjeeling

The Darjeeling district, with a small geographical area of 3149 square kilometers (census 2011) has a heterogeneous population. It is a medley of racial and linguistic groups but, remarkably dominated by the Gorkha community. There is still some controversy regarding the nomenclature of this dominant community i.e. the Gorkhas. Some argue that Gorkhas include the hill ethnic groups living in the Darjeeling district like the Nepalis, Lepchas, Bhutias, etc. Others opine that the name is roughly derived from a district of Nepal from where martial races were chosen for fighting the war in the name of Gorkha platoon which later on became the world famous Gorkha army during the World War I and II. Again, the former group argues that Nepali is the only language spoken as vernacular in this region and the same should not be confused with race.

Anthropologically similar figure is obtained in the nearby state of Sikkim.¹ Without getting into these controversies, 'Nepali' and 'Gorkha' are used to mention the above dominant community of the hills for the present communication.

Darjeeling in the early years of the 19th century was a part of the dominions of the Rajah of Sikkim. Captain Llyod and Mr. J.W.Grant on an expedition against Nepal chanced upon Darjeeling where they stayed for about a week. They were mesmerized by the cool and bracing climate of the hills and the sight of the magnificent Kanchenjunga. They felt the hills would be ideal for a sanatorium for which they opened negotiations with the Rajah of Sikkim for the cession of Darjeeling. So in February 1835, a strip of hill territory, 24 miles long and about 5 to 6 miles wide, was successfully transferred from the Rajah of Sikkim over to the British by a deed of grant. This strip of land known as the British Sikkim then included the villages of Darjeeling and Kurseong, and it formed the nucleus of Darjeeling District. The relation between Sikkim and the British Government having turned sour due to the infirm Rajah's corrupt Prime Minister, the British Government sent a punitive expedition against Sikkim in 1850. This led to the annexation of the Terai and a portion of the Sikkim hills, bounded on the north by the Rammam and the great Rangit rivers and by the Tista River on the east and by the Nepal frontier on the west. In 1866, to keep away the Bhutanese from marauding into Darjeeling, a hilly tract of 486 square miles east of the Tista was annexed from Bhutan. This hilly tract was amalgamated in Darjeeling District which subsequently formed Kalimpong sub-division. The hills of Darjeeling have faced various ups and downs of delimitations from the kingdom of Sikkim, kingdom of Nepal, British East India Company, British India, annexation of Kalimpong from Bhutan and finally to Indian Union in the state of West Bengal.

First acquired, this hilly strip of land was under forest and sparsely populated. Under the administration of Dr. A. Campbell who was appointed the Superintendent of the new hill station, it developed rapidly. The opening up of tea gardens resulted in the immigration of plantation laborers. There was an influx of settlers to cultivate the wastelands and clear the forest areas.² This led to a major increase in population. With the construction of roads and railway, communication improved which in turn led to employment opportunities and hence the rise in population. All those who immigrated to Darjeeling during that time were carriers, porters or cultivators. The once practically uninhabited strip of land steadily came alive. During his botanical exploration of the Indian sub-continent in mid 19th century Sir J.D. Hooker has mentioned the names of some sub-communities of the Gorkhas like the Magars, Limboos along with Lepcha aborigines to be indigenous to the region.³

Another plantation that also took a boom was cinchona, which became a live saving drug during the World War I and extension of the British colony to fight malaria, a tropical disease which hindered the expansion. The tea and cinchona company fulfilled elementary needs of the people by providing food, shelter and clothing both in cash and kind. With the passage of time they were also imparted with elementary education in the form of science, hygiene and elementary mathematics. One can have an example looking at the records of the Scottish University's Mission Institution in Kalimpong having 800 students in 1907.⁴

3. Demand for a Separate Homeland- Pre Independence

In the same year, Liberal Party came into power in Britain and the government appointed John Morley as the Secretary of States for India. The then Viceroy, Lord Minto along with Lord Morley instituted The Indian Act of 1909 known as the Minto-Morley Reforms. Based on this Minto-Morley Reforms, Lord Minto received the Muslim delegation and agreed to give a due consideration to their demand. Having witnessed this, a memorandum in the name of leaders of Hill people was submitted in 1907 demanding a separate administrative setup when there was a proposal to merge Darjeeling District with Bhagalpur Division of Bihar. The logic behind the idea of this merge was that the people of Darjeeling Hills and the people of Bihar used the Devnagiri script. 'There could be a theoretical argument to reinforce this arrangement. Linguistic regions would, it could be argued, make it possible to use the vernacular as the effective language of political transactions, and therefore bring the administration closer to ordinary people by making affairs of the state transparent to

¹Singh 1993, People of India

²O'Malley 1907, Darjeeling District Gazetteer

³Hooker 1854, Himalayan Journals

⁴Wangyal 2002, Sikkim and Darjeeling Division and Deception

them.⁵ However, this did not solve the problem. The very act of shunting the district from one division to another became a proof that the British did not quite know where to place the district.

This initiation may be considered as the outbreak of the movement of identity crisis or a political consciousness of the hill people. And though nothing materialized out of the 1907 petition, it can be treated as the first indicator of the want of ethnic and linguistic identity in the hills. Despite the Government's indifference, the year in history did not draw a total blank for Kurseong and Siliguri obtained municipality status in that year.

The process of submitting memoranda by different groups and organizations demanding the formation of separate administrative setup for Darjeeling District continued. After almost a decade from the first demand for a separate homeland, the Hillmen's Association petitioned Edwin Montague, the Secretary of State for India that "Darjeeling's inclusion in Bengal was comparatively recent and they were historically, ethnically, socially, linguistically, culturally different from Bengal" and they wanted their own homeland, distinctly apart from Bengal". The signatories were S.W. Laden La, Dr. Yenshing Sitling, Khardga bahadur Gurung, Meghbir Singh, Lachaman Singh, Narprasad Kumai and Deonidhi Upadhaya.

The Hillmen's Association once again appealed to Edwin Montague on 11th February 1920. In the same year, the Darjeeling Planters' Association and European Association of Darjeeling with the Hillmen's Association also petitioned the government to create an "Excluded Area" comprising of Darjeeling District and the Doars, as they themselves saw that Darjeeling somehow did not quite fit in with the province of Bengal. This was an extremely strange but an interesting development because these two associations were purely European and never had they before aligned themselves with the local Gorkhas in an attempt to establish a separate self governing region.

The Hillmen's Association of Darjeeling on 25th October, 1930 submitted a memorandum to the Government for a homeland stating that "Darjeeling, where the Gorkha population predominate should be excluded from Bengal and be treated as an independent administrative unit, with the Deputy Commissioner as the Administrator, vested with much more powers than that of a District Magistrate, and assisted by a small Executive Council, representative of all the interests in the administration of the area". The appeal, however, was totally ignored.

Once again on the 6th of August, 1934, the Hillmen's Association led by Laden La, submitted another appeal to Sir Samuel Hoare, Secretary of State for India stating that Darjeeling District be totally excluded from Bengal.

On behalf of the Hillmen's Association, Rupnarayan Sinha made an appeal to the Bengal Government in 1935 for the creation of a separate homeland.

Darjeeling District was transformed into Partially Excluded Area by the Government of India Act of 1935. This only facilitated in sending a representative to the Bengal Legislative for which the election on limited franchise was held on 25th March 1937.⁶

The 1940's witnessed the emergence of political parties and the disintegration of the Hillmen's Association. In 1941, the Association appealed for the last time.

The All India Gorkha League, a political party formed in May 1943 proposed the merger of the district of Darjeeling together with the Doars section of Jalpaiguri with the Province of Assam. The demand was made through memorials submitted to Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, the Cabinet Mission and the Constituent Assembly through the sub-committee, Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas.

District Committee of Communist Party of India submitted a memorial to the Constituent Assembly on 6th April 1947, demanding the formation of Gorkhastan with the areas of Darjeeling District, Southern Sikkim and Nepal making necessary revision of the existing boundaries.

4. Demand for a Separate Homeland – Post Independence

In 1949, leaders of different parties from Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Sikkim and Darjeeling met in a conference at Darjeeling and resolved to demand the creation of a separate province comprising of the above mentioned areas. This way the Darjeeling hills experienced various cool and warm breezes for long years.

The demand for a separate homeland continued after independence. In 1949, Gorkha League stalwart Randhir Subba conceived the idea of "Uttarkhand" carved out of the Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar

⁵Kaviraj 1997, Politics in India

⁶ Pempahishey 2013, Roadmap on the Trail to Gorkhaland

Districts. Six years later in 1955, Atulya Ghosh, Bimal Sinha and Shankar Das Bannerji of the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee submitted a memorandum to the State Re-Organisation Commission (SRC) disputing the data for the viability of 'Uttarkhand' and strongly opposed the idea.

When Jawaharlal Nehru visited Darjeeling and Kalimpong in 1952, Narbahadur Gurung, the President of the All India Gorkha League submitted a fresh petition for a separate homeland for the Gorkhas, even summarizing the history of all the previous demands. As usual, nothing came out of the petition.

4.1 Demand for the Constitutional Recognition of Nepali Language

There was a simmering discontentment among the people of the hills as they were facing a step-motherly treatment from Bengal. To rub salt into the wounds, the West Bengal Government on 19th March, 1958 moved a resolution that proposed to make 'Bengali' the only language for all administrative and official purposes in the state. An attempt was made to remove the Nepali Language courses from Calcutta University which, in July 1918 had been accorded approval for teaching Nepali Language up to the graduation level. The resolution was enacted by the West Bengal Government and became an Act of Law in 1961.

The 1955 State Re-Organization Commission Report had explicitly stated that "If 70% or more of the total population of a District consists of a group which is a minority in the state as a whole, the language of the minority group and not the state language should be the official language of that district". The people of Darjeeling demanded that 'Bengali' not be forcibly imposed upon them and that "the language of the minority group" – 'Nepali', who comprised "70% or more of the total local population ..." should be permitted in the District of Darjeeling.

While moving the Bill, the Chief Minister B.C. Roy had appraised the impracticality of making 'Nepali' as official language. And in support of his argument, a distorted figure of 1951 census report pertaining to Darjeeling was used as his gambit. As per the distorted report, the percentage of Nepali speaking population was stated to be 19.96 numbering the total population 88,958 only. But in the preceding census the Nepali speaking people was shown as 98 per cent. The distortion was that Chhettri, Brahmin, Kami, Damai and Sarki only were counted as Nepali speaking people in Darjeeling. And the other large chunk of Nepali speaking population such as Tamang, Limbu, Gurung, Rai, Sherpa, Lepcha and others whose lingua franca was Nepali were not counted as Nepali speaking community on the ground of having their own dialects. Subsequent studies reveal that the question in the census was misleading which is what created the confusion. The question asked was – What is your "original tribal" mother tongue? People replied that their original mother tongue was the language of their respective tribes, Lepcha, Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Magar, Tamang, Newar, etc.⁷

There were massive protests, which resulted in the Bengal Government instituting a "Darjeeling Enquiry Committee". Following its report, on 25th September 1961, sanction and approval of Nepali as Second Official Language was accorded in the state of West Bengal under the provision of West Bengal Language Act, 1961 passed by the State Assembly for its applicability in administrative purposes in the sub-divisions of Darjeeling Hills.

The demand for the inclusion of the Nepali Language in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution had first been raised in 1956 by Anand Singh Thapa of Dehra Dun, Editor of a Nepali magazine called 'Jagrit Gorkha' published from Dehra Dun. The All India Bhasha Samiti tiled selflessly for the Constitutional recognition of the Nepali Language. After thirty six years of sweat and toil, specially the untiring efforts and sincere devotion of Dil Kumari Bhandari, Hon'ble Member of Parliament from Sikkim, the Indian Parliament finally enacted the 71st Constitutional Amendment Act on 31st August 1992 whereby 'Nepali' Language was formally included in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution.

Subash Ghising, the Gorkha National Liberation Front Supremo, who had affixed his signature to the Memorandum of Settlement, had agreed to drop the demand for recognition of the Nepali language and had therefore opposed the demand of All India Nepali Bhasha Samiti. So instead of taking pride and celebrating the glorious occasion on 31st August, 1992, Ghising let loose jeeploads of his hoodlums led by DGHC Councilors shouting slogans such as "*Nepali is a foreign language, anybody who speaks Nepali, go back to Nepal*". Oddly enough such slogans were shouted in Nepali!!!

⁷ B.B. Lama 2008, The Story of Darjeeling

4.2 Demand for a Separate Homeland Continues

The feeling of resentment and distaste among the people of Darjeeling Hills against the Government of West Bengal grew. Any kind of development that took place after 1947 had all taken place in and around Kolkata. Sailen Das Gupta in his book 'West Bengal in the Doldrums', has criticized the Bengal Government for total neglect of far flung North Bengal and its exploitation since 1947. In spite of Bengal making huge income from the natural resources like tea and timber from North Bengal including Darjeeling, Bengal Government never obliged by giving something in return by executing suitable developmental scheme for the region. No significant developmental activities were carried out at all in the hills. All this brought about more dissatisfaction among the hill people as they felt totally discriminated in comparison to their compatriots in the plains. Sensing this discontentment of the people of Darjeeling Hills, West Bengal under Siddhartha Shankar Ray (1972-76), woke up to the need of doing some development after almost thirty years of India's independence. With a view to bring some relief to the hill people, Hill Affairs Department under Government of West Bengal, and Hill Development Council for Darjeeling were set up.⁸

Despite what Siddhartha Shankar Ray and the successive political governments did to lessen the grief and meet the needs of the hill people, their aspiration still remained unfulfilled which led them to continue their movement for a separate homeland.

In 1979, Pranta Parishad, a confederation of different political parties of the hills demanded that a separate state be created for the hills considering its geo-political situations and ethnic, social, linguistic and cultural differences from the plains.

In 1985, Anand Pathak, MP, Communist party proposed an Autonomous region comprising of the district of Darjeeling and neighboring areas where Nepali speaking people were in majority. However, the proposed Bill never saw daylight as none of the CPM members voted for it.

It was around this time that a bloody but futile agitation started under the leadership of Subash Ghising, The Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) supreme. The demanded a separate homeland for the Gorkhas. This agitation (1986-88) was turbulent, violent and a harrowing experience unknown in the history of the peaceful Darjeeling Hills. The people paid a heavy price but the goal achieved was very light. The then Chief Minister of West Bengal Mr. Jyoti Basu dealt with the movement very sternly. CRPF were deployed who randomly picked up any person and threw them behind bars. Innocent people were unnecessarily harassed and detained, some were even shot down. The agitation turned utterly violent and Ghising was compelled to negotiate with an accord signed between him and the Chief Secretary of West Bengal in the presence of Union Home Minister, Sri Buta Singh and Sri Jyoti Basu, Chief Minister of West Bengal in Calcutta on 22nd August 1988, whereby Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) was awarded to the hill areas of Darjeeling. "With the signing of the DGHC accord, Ghising had made two crucial concessions – i. he gave up forever in writing the demand for Gorkhaland and ii. He gave up forever in writing the demand for a constitutional recognition of the Nepali language".⁹ This led to other political outfits in the hills taking up the cause of a separate state for the Gorkhas of Darjeeling Hills. They tried to convince the people that they were more sincere than Ghising in realizing the aspiration of the hill people. The trials made by these political parties were however, not very effective. Subash Ghising, who had slowly but steadily lost popularity made a frantic attempt by demanding a tribal status for the hill region within the purview of the Sixth Schedule. However the Standing Committee's report on The Sixth Schedule clearly stated the dissatisfaction of the hill people against the Sixth Schedule. This made it loud and clear that the DGHC and Sixth Schedule did not meet the aspirations of the hill people.

In October 2007, Bimal Gurung, under the banner of another political outfit, Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM) rejuvenated after almost two decades of the signing of the DGHC accord as a brave captain of a sinking ship to reawaken the demand for a separate homeland. It was full of zest and vigour. The movement was sprinkled with Gandhigiri and in comparison to the previous turbulent movement of the 80's the loss impact was lower whether of lives or property. No matter how sincere they insisted their endeavors were, it took only a few years for GJMM too, to come to a tripartite agreement changing the nomenclature and constituencies delimitation of the erstwhile DGHC to Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) agreement. Bimal Gurung

⁸ Tamlong 2012, Darjeeling Diaries

⁹ B.B.Lama 2008, The Story of Darjeeling

became the Chief Executive of the GTA. They are also in agreement that economic development and political identity should go together at length to gain ethnic and linguistic identity for the people of the Darjeeling hills irrespective of their anthropological identity. The state government played a crucial role to sublimate the agitators by means of administrative aptitude and diplomatic negotiations. However, when the Central Government showed a green signal for the formation of Telangana in July 2013, the entire Darjeeling hills once again resounded with the demand for a separate state for the Indian Gorkhas. The GJMM called for strikes and the schools, offices were closed down for more than a month. The State Government not to be outdone, showed her subtle statesmanship declared to form the Mayal Lyang Lepcha Development Board (MLLDB) considering the demand of the indigenous Lepchas on 1st August 2013. The focus of the Board was the overall development of the community, preservation of their language and culture, education, to provide support for improving their lifestyle through agriculture, horticulture, tourism and cottage industry. The other sub-ethnic and linguistic groups within the Nepali ethnic group, witnessing the benefits and the prerogatives their Lepcha brethren would be enjoying wasted no time in requesting the state government for the development councils for their respective ethnic groups. On the 22nd of January 2014, she also declared to constitute a separate Tamang Development Board also for the ethnic crisis of the Tamangs. Accordingly, several developmental boards for different ethnic communities have been set up by the ruling TMC government in Darjeeling Hills. But, when Chief Minister Miss Mamata Banerjee announced that Bengali will be the compulsory subject in all West Bengal Schools including in Darjeeling Hills under Three language Formula in May 2017, people of Darjeeling vehemently opposed the decision made by the Chief Minister and again the violence erupted in Darjeeling. The discontentment and the anger of people towards the ruling government was huge which resulted into the mass public support to the movement, Nepali from all over the world supported the movement by different means, several people died and huge public property damaged ultimately the movement ended with nothing new but the old existing GTA (Gorkhaland Territorial Administration) with new Chairman and Vice Chairman named Binoy Tamang and Anit Thapa. Now, the common people of Darjeeling are fed up with all these political upheaval in hills, they want peace and tranquility in hills which has been disturbed from last many decades.

4.3 Concern about Possible Disunity

It is well known that Nepali or Gorkha community has admixture of two separate roots – Mongoloid and Indo Aryan. In course of social livelihood from generations, ‘Nepali’ became the vernacular language among the different subgroups like Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Newar, Rai, Limbu, etc. The different sub-ethnic and linguistic groups within the Nepali ethnic community had been living harmoniously all these years but with these sub-groups demanding formation of councils on similar lines to that of the Lepcha Development Council, Tamang developmental Board seems to have created a faction and people who were earlier ‘us’ has now become parts of ‘them’. Well, is this sudden and alarming shift of vision from the greater cause of a separate state to a more narrow interest of uplifting one’s own racial and linguistic group within what we call the Nepali ethnic community due to the apprehension in the minds of the different linguistic groups and the loss of trust in the leadership?

The greater ethnic identity of the Gorkhas has now broken into pieces for sub-identity crisis. Still in the words of CK Shrestha, a celebrated dramatist of the Gorkhas, “searching for roots of sub-community will not hamper the total common identity of ‘us’”. In spite of these words that provide solace, there looms a fear in the minds of many for there may come a time when this age old demand of the Indian Gorkhas may be silenced forever. Will the word ‘Nepalis’ an umbrella term used to refer to all the various ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups become obsolete? But there is also the question of whether these development councils will meet and fulfill the aspirations of the various ethnic groups. Will the state government’s policy of Divide and Rule become successful and the cause lost forever? Or will it suffer a breakdown and the greater cause finds its way back again? These are still big questions in the minds of the people.

This kind of grand design to split a compact Nepalese community in the line of sectarian/ casteism on the basis of their language and dialects solely for the narrow political interest of the ruling community of the state had once before been tried by Dr. B.C. Roy while supporting his argument for the impracticality of making Nepali an official language. Fortunately for us, his plan failed terribly.

5. The Issue of Sikkim Darjeeling Merge

The ethno-political movement of the Indian Nepalis dates back more than hundred years and is the oldest political demand in India but the failure to have materialized this political demand, has resulted in few groups of people like the political outfit, Gorkha Rashtriya Congress (GRC), formed on 7th January, 2004 advocating the merger of Darjeeling with Sikkim, for the fact that Darjeeling was once an integral part of Sikkim. It is absolutely true that historically the region was part of Sikkim prior to Gorkha invasion on the province and the first British encounter with the Gorkhas.

However, D.S. Bomjon a renowned writer and a political activist belonging to CPRM, in his book 'Darjeeling-Doars People and Place under Bengal's Neo Colonial Rule' has advocated that the former Chief Minister Narbahadur Bhandari, who was also one of the prime activists for the merger of Sikkim in India in 1974, was adverse to the merger of Darjeeling with Sikkim. He dismissed the story of his seeking Sikkim's merger with Darjeeling as a plan to discredit him. With a population of 1.3 m, Darjeeling would submerge Sikkim with only a third that number. Similarly, the present Chief Minister Dr. Pawan Kumar Chamling is also not in favor of Sikkim Darjeeling merge. But he is extending support for the formation of Gorkhaland as a separate state within India comprising Darjeeling and its contiguous areas. Thus the former and present Chief Ministers of Sikkim for inexpressible reasons of administrative and political aspect related to ethnic morphology of state seem adverse to the issue of the amalgamation of Darjeeling with Sikkim. Other reasons could be impossibility of unity in thought and approach between the people of the two regions that was politically, administratively, psychologically kept separated for more than one and half century. At the height of the Gorkhaland movement in 1986, its President Subash Ghising also rejected the idea of Darjeeling Sikkim merger. He had said "if we are to be a part of any other state, it is hundred times better to be in West Bengal".

Prior to the merger of Sikkim into the union of India, the relation between Sikkim and India having soured, the Chogyals and his American wife Hope Cook had raised the issue of Sikkim's claim to Darjeeling which had been ceded in 1835 to the British. Instead, they lost their own kingdom and Sikkim merged with India as its 22nd state in 1975. And many political writers were of the view that Sikkim being a protectorate state of India; it should have merged at the time of the attainment of independence by India. When maneuverings for the merger of Sikkim with India was hectic, there was Mr. B.S. Das as the Chief Executive in Sikkim from Government of India and after the completion of the merger, he wrote in 1983 that "if the mistake of 1947 in denying merger to Sikkim with India could be corrected in 1975 why could Darjeeling not be restored back to Sikkim thus fulfilling the aspirations of a homeland for the Nepalese".¹⁰

s6. Conclusion

Myron Weiner, an American political scientist has written that "Indians have two views of the impact of politics on ethnic group conflict: that it worsens group relations and that politics is the way to reduce group conflict." Well we have lived to see the first impact of politics that he has talked about. And we fervently and optimistically hope to see the second kind of impact!

¹⁰ Bomjan, D.S. (2008). Darjeeling-Doars People and Place Under Bengal's Neo- Colonial Rule

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