

GORKHALAND AGITATION 2017: THE POLITICS AND SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT

DINESH SHARMA^{1a}

^aSocial Activist, Malviya Nagar, New Delhi, INDIA

ABSTRACT

The latest bout of protest for Gorkhaland in 2017 crippled the Darjeeling Hills of North Bengal in India for over 105 days, resulting in the death of 12 protesters in police firing, burning down of several Heritage structures and a lasting impact on the economy of the region. For over 100 days, everything in the Hills came to a standstill including markets, schools, businesses, and public places. While the political blame-game between the Central government and West Bengal state government is still ongoing, the agitation of 2017 also exposes the trust deficit between local political leaders and their inability to charter a common path. The public as always, has been weighed by their desire for self-rule and also by emotional outburst on the streets. To justify or nullify the demand for Gorkhaland as something black or white is a difficult proposition for any political party given the huge sentiment attached to the Hills on both sides - the Bengal Government as well as the Local population. This article makes an attempt to present the reasons, history, political aspirations, and the events that led to a renewed Gorkhaland movement in 2017.

A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The demand for a Gorkha state in India is one of the longest pending democratic demand for self-rule and determination. Beginning with the first petition for a separate administration for Darjeeling region in 1907, placed before the British Commissioner of Bengal Province by the Hillmen Association of Darjeeling, there have been numerous representation made for the exclusion of Darjeeling Hills from Bengal province (1907, 1917, 1929, 1930, 1941). Throughout its history, Darjeeling's ownership has never been resolved completely - first it was a fiercely independent buffer region between the Kingdoms of Sikkim and Nepal, then as a ceded territory as part of the Anglo-Nepal treaty of Sigauli (1850) it exchanged hands multiple times between the Chogyal of Sikkim, Commissioner of Bengal Province, Bhagalpur province (1905-1912), and sometimes even remained as an excluded and non-regulated area. The South Asia Forum for Human Rights (SAFHR) website lists detailed chronology of events in the history of Darjeeling Hills.

In Independent India, the All India Gorkha League (also referred as Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League) was the first political party from the region to submit a memorandum to the first Prime Minister, Pt Jawaharlal Nehru in 1952. It may also be recalled that the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) had called for formation of Gorkhasthan in 1947, comprising Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Nepal. After independence, when most Indian states were created based on language and ethnic identities, the aspirations of the Gorkha were sidelined despite being one of the largest linguistic minority community in the country. The reasons for the exclusion perhaps lies in the deep

sense of distrust and the strong media campaign to project the legitimate demand as a secessionist movement against the nation. This deep sense of misguided bias amongst the Indian high power corridors can be best reflected in the 'Mongoloid Prejudices' of Sardar Vallabhai Patel (letter sent to Jawaharlal Nehru on Nov 7, 1950) and the justification of Nepali as a 'Foreign Language' by Morarji Desai (1977) when demanding the inclusion of the language under the Eighth Schedule of Indian Constitution ("*Nepalis: Demanding a voice*" August 31 issue, India Today).

However what was brazenly overlooked was the fact that the demand for a Gorkha state has always been a democratic aspiration of the Nepali-speaking community to assert their distinctive identity well within the constitutional framework of India. The Gorkhas lost out on their state, first because the Indian government could not trust a state to the Nepali-speaking Gorkha community right on the borders with Nepal, and secondly because the community lacked a cohesive nature of settlement in a particular region. They lived scattered across the country from Assam to Darjeeling to Himachal Pradesh, UP, and Punjab.

THE VIOLENCE OF 1980'S

The absence of a state identity created various problems for the scattered Gorkha community across the country and they still continue to remain at the receiving end of different political and social propaganda. Often labelled as 'foreigners', the Gorkhas live without the acceptance or protection of their parent states and are excluded from most state-sponsored welfare and benefits, and sometimes, even serious incursions on their civil and human rights.

The mass exodus of the community from the North-East during the ‘Bhumiputra Aandolan’ (son of the soil movement) of the 1980s heightened the anxiety among the community. Many were forced to evict their homes on the pretext of being illegal immigrants and foreigners. (“*The North-East: The spreading conflagration*”, May 1980 issue, India Today)

The exodus of the 1980s was the final nail in the coffin that broke all patience and turned a historically non-violent movement to a bloodbath resulting in the death of over 1200 people between 1986-1988. Subash Ghising, the founder of Gorkha National Liberation Front became the champion of Gorkha rights and took up arms to fight against the injustice. During this phase, Ghising coined the word ‘Gorkhaland’ state and termed it as the only means for constitutional protect the identity and future of the community in India. People were convinced that without the constitutional guarantee of their identity, the Gorkhas will be evicted from everywhere across the country and the future generations will continue to suffer injustice.

While the violence of the 80s brought the Gorkhaland issue to a national discourse, the fulfilment of the statehood demand continued to remain elusive. Peace was negotiated between GNLFF, Government of West Bengal and the Union of India resulting in the formation of a separate administrative body for the Hills, called Darjeeling Gorkha Hills Council (DGHC) with Subash Ghising at its helm.

The separate administrative council did manage to negotiate peace temporarily, but the aspiration of the people for separte state did not die altogether. The demand for a separate state was renewed again in the early 2000s with Bimal Gurung leading the fresh agitation, culminating in the formation of another semi-autonomous administrative body, Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA).

ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST GORKHALAND

While discussions and debates are integral part of any democratic reform, there is very little media awareness about the ground realities and the justification for the demand for a state. The most unfortunate thing for Gorkhaland supporters is finding their voice in mainstream media, which is heavily dominated by Bengali people, for whom any further division of Bengal is an emotional issues, outweighing all rationality and logic. More than the legitimacy of the demand, it is today a ‘war of intellect’ between the Bengali ‘Bhadraloks’ (intellectuals) with several generations of highly educated people, as against the Gorkhas who were exposed to formal education just about a couple of decade ago.

NO Gorkhaland	YES Gorkhaland
A secessionist movement aimed at breaking the country. Not different from North-East insurgency and its idea of ‘independence’	Breaking away from India has never been the agenda; the demand is for a state within Indian dominion. The comparison with NE insurgency is simply absurd because at no point of time was Gorkhaland a separatist movement.
The crux of the issue is under-development and economic upliftment	The crux is Linguistic identity and constitutional guarantee for a community that is often accused of being foreigners and illegal migrants.
Bengal has already suffered enough breakaways and separation. We cannot afford another break	Partition of Bengal is sad. However, Gorkhaland demand has nothing to do with Bengal history. We do not share any historical of cultural heritage with Bengal. It was never part of Bengal. There is no question of breaking Bengal. This New York times article sheds light on the history of Darjeeling
Too small geography to be a state	Goa and many North-eastern states are smaller than the proposed Gorkhaland state
Financially unviable to be a state	Tea economy, forest, water resources, tourism can easily make the state one of the most prosperous in India.
The is nothing called Nepali-speaking Indian	The Nepali-speaking Gorkha community in India came with the land and not just human influx. The treaty of Sigauli 1850 is a standing testimony of the geographical re-arrangement between India and the Kingdom of Nepal.

THE UNDERCURRENT LEADING TO THE AGITATION

The renewed agitation of 2017 cannot be pointed to an isolated incident, announcement or event. It has been in the making for several months that finally burst with the perceived high-handedness of the West Bengal government.

The seeds for a new round of agitation were perhaps sown 10 years ago, when the most powerful party of the Hills, Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) joined the BJP-led NDA coalition sending Jaswant Singh as the Member of Parliament from Darjeeling constituency in 2009 elections. The visit of

Narendra Modi during the build-up for 2014 parliamentary elections and his verbal announcement that “*Gorkhaon ka Sapna, Mera Sapna*” was the highest form of any assurance the community had ever received. Darjeeling re-elected another BJP candidate SS Ahluwalia (a self-proclaimed crusader of Gorkha rights) in the 2014 elections. The eventual rise of BJP in the center gave the much needed push to the realization of the Gorkhaland dream and everybody was looking forward for a discussion in Parliament on the issue.

Meanwhile, Trinamool Congress with an overwhelming majority in West Bengal outrightly rejected any discussion or consideration on Gorkhaland. For the Mamata Banerjee led government, Darjeeling Hills was the only unconquered region and the challenge became increasingly important to its core philosophy of Akhand (United) Bengal. Any compromise on the issue was a direct confrontation to its ideology and could have major fall-outs across the state. The West Bengal Government with its new slogans like “*Pahaad Haaschey*” and the Switzerland dreams tried all its might to break into the Gorkhaland power corridor, creating numerous development boards and helping organizations that were outside the GJM grip.

April 2016: In what could be interpreted as a major breakthrough for Mamata Banerjee in the Hills, the vote shares of Trinamool Congress and its allies increased significantly although they lost the elections. The declining shares of GJM indicated their loosening grip on the Hills amidst increasing allegations of corruption and autocracy. The GJM, which was in control of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), the administrative Hills body had no option but to rush to the center for any grievances as there was no way the West Bengal government would entertain their proposals.

May 2017: For the first time since the 1980s, a mainstream West Bengal party won the local civic polls for Mirik sub-division, one of the three divisions in Darjeeling Hills. Elated with the party making inroads in the region and their efforts finally paying off, the Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee termed the results as the beginning of a new era, promising more funds and development in the Hills. The result and the neck-to-neck contest across all the divisions shook the GJM, who till recently enjoyed monopoly over the Hills.

June 2017 and after: In what can be termed as a brazen display of power, the education minister of West Bengal announced that Bengali language should be mandatory across all schools (from Class I to Class X) in the state. The announcement became a sore point for an already grumpy GJM, the party that claimed to be the only crusader for Gorkhaland and Gorkha rights. While Bengali was already being taught in all schools as an optional subject, the announcement of making it mandatory was an outright imposition on the majority Nepali-

speaking Hills students. The new announcement meant that students will have to choose Bengali over their mother-tongue Nepali.

Soon enough, the protest over the language imposition spilled over the the streets with people pouring their outrage against it. The government soon retracted their earlier announcement alleging that the statements has been misconstrued. However, it was already too late and the damage was already done. This only leaves one to only wonder why did the Minister made the announcement in the first place, because all schools in the Hills always had Bengali language as an optional paper in their curriculum.

THE “WHAT’S IN IT FOR ME” QUESTION ?

Every political movement, including the Gorkhaland is bound to have something in store as opportunity for all the stakeholders including the political parties and the public. The June 2017 protests opened a Pandora’s box in the entire region and every political party attempted to up their electoral ante in the region. Each and every party began to claim proprietorship of the street protests. For the public, the streets were now a free-for-all arena to vent frustrations against the government, about financial mismanagement in the Hills, and a chance to criticize leaders who had failed them on their aspirations for a separate state. Trinamool Congress, the ruling West Bengal party after the civic polls saw the events as a manifestation of public anger against GJM and a real opportunity to increase their influence over the Hills and to increase their vote shares for the future. Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, the ruling Hills party is suddenly faced with the slumping vote shares and a strong wave of anti-incumbency. Losing the Mirik sub-division to TMC was a direct reflection of their eroding popularity and a threat to their political monopoly. The fact that the 5-year term for GTA was ending in August, provided the much-needed reasons to demand scrapping the upcoming elections and to renew a fresh agitation for Gorkhaland state. Managing to revive the statehood demands provided a real chance for GJM to regain their control of the Hill politics. For the opposition parties of the Hills, like GNLF, JAP, ABGL, and others, the strong anti-incumbency sentiment against GJM; the Trinamool breaking into GJM vote shares, and the outrageous level of corruption charges against GTA provided an opportunity to play the game at level ground. This was an opportunity for them to redeem themselves and find their lost turfs.

For the public, this was the time to let out their frustrations against the politics, leaders, and parties of the Hills. This was the time when anyone could come out openly against any leader and question their politics, something that could not have been imagined a year before. The social media became the tool of choice for the people.

THE TURNING POINT

The Gorkhalad agitation of 2017 gained momentum following the death of 3 protesters in police firing on 17th June 2017. With the help of Social Media, the sacrifices of the protesters became the emotional bonding and face of the movement's spirit in both Darjeeling and the outside world.

Internet Shutdown

The news of the death of 3 protesters spread like wildfire with the help of Social Media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Youtube. The government soon realized that the agitation cannot be suppressed so easily in the presence of Internet. Fearing a global backlash, the District Magistrate clamped shutdown on broadband and mobile internet service providers on 18th June for a period of seven days. The temporary suspension of internet services went on for over 3 months until it was finally resumed on 25th September 2017. The official idea of the ban was intended to impair communication and coordination amongst the protesters and to avoid spreading of rumors and false information over the internet. However, for the advantage of the Government, the blanket Internet ban plunged the entire city into a state of virtual isolation impairing communication services and media reportage of the agitation. Verbal orders were also issued to local news channels to stop reporting on the agitation. By shutting down internet services, the Government effectively cut-off the region from the rest of the world, stifling the agitation, and preventing national and international media from reporting the gross human rights violation and undemocratic means adopted by the police to quell the protests.

Protest spreads outside Gorkhaland

While Darjeeling was enveloped in virtual darkness, and curfew being clamped across the Hills, Gorkha people and activists across the world stood up to highlight the issue and kept the issue alive and burning by organizing protests and rallies across Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, and other cities of the world. Social media became the most effective tool, allowing people to uphold the freedom of expression and protest in a democratic form. For the first time in the history of the Gorkhaland movement, the internet offered a revolutionary potential for social activists to reach out directly to the citizens of the world, outwitting the official press releases and messages of political parties and traditional media. Mobile phones coupled with social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp gave an undue advantage to citizens offering them the tool to forward their views.

Online platforms as Alternate Media

Social media gained prominence simply because people had lost confidence in mainstream media that was

heavily controlled by the state and often neglected the pulse and ground realities that prompted the demand of Gorkhaland state. Using different social platforms, people exchanged thousands of messages about economic exploitation, police brutality, unjust judiciary, and undemocratic policies of the West Bengal government and the silence of the center. Online communication promoted interactive dialogues that built an understanding of different points of view. Everyone with a mobile phone and internet data suddenly became publishers and a critic.

From a leader-centric to cause-centric movement

A major difference between the Gorkhaland agitation of the past and in 2017 is the tectonic shift in the public outlook for the movement. In the past, the media was heavily guarded by the state machineries and the official communication of the leaders. Social Media brought about an unanticipated support and solidarity from Gorkhas across the world. It took the movement from the clutches of the leaders and made it available for a public discourse. None of the regional leaders and parties were spared of common people's ire on social media. Leaders, political parties, and the government faced unprecedented criticism for repeatedly compromising the public aspiration for a separate state in the name of semi-autonomous administrative bodies political deals.

CONCLUSION

The first and foremost challenge to the creation of a Gorkhaland state is the absence of a political consensus amongst the political parties of the Hills. Different parties claim to possess a blueprint of the roadmap for Gorkhaland; some believe that implementing 6th schedule in the Hills will strengthen their voice, some other believe that aligning with a mainstream political party is the way forward to table their bill in the parliament bypassing the state government; and there are others who want to continuing the protest on the ground. With the reinstatement of the erstwhile Gorkhaland Territorial Administration by the state government has bought peace for the time-being, the uncomfortable silence in Hills seem to indicate an erupting volcano. It is high-time that the Center, State Government, and the local parties sit down to discuss how to bring lasting peace to the long-neglected issue. It is a given fact that any protest for Gorkhaland threatens to disturb peace on the narrow chicken-neck corridor that connects mainland India to the North-east. It surely will be in the greater interest of the nation to broker peace in this sensitive region that share close proximity to the Chinese border.