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DEMAND OF AUTONOMY IN DARJEELING HILL AND ITS ETHNO-POLITICAL DYNAMIC

KEY WORDS: Ethnicity, Nepali identity, Autonomy and statehood.

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ABSTRACT

Darjeeling, one of the tiniest districts of West Bengal, consists of the majority Nepali community. The Nepalis are the unassimilated minority group in West Bengal. The people have always looked upon themselves different from Bengal and Bengalis physically, culturally, traditionally and linguistically. Ethnic identity systems generally incorporate political aspirations of a group and are effective in mobilizing members for political goals. The ethnic demand of the Nepali speaking population of the Darjeeling region for a separate administrative set up goes back to 1917. It was a little before 1917, that the Hillmen's Association had been formed consisting of the three ethnic groups, the Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis. The Gorkhaland Agitation was the ultimate cause of feeling of relative deprivation, language threat to identity of the Nepalis.

INTRODUCTION

India is considered as one of the world's oldest multilingual societies is known for its ethno-political, socio-religious and economic diversity. The rise in self-awareness and identity consciousness of the ethnic groups has given rise to ethno-nationalism, which is based on socio-psychological, cultural traits of an ethnic group to maintain its separate identity. Ethnic or group identity itself does not constitute a subject of politics unless such an identity is used as a basis for a group's political action (Rais, 2002:222). Ethnic identity systems generally incorporate political aspirations of a group and are effective in mobilizing members for political goals.

Darjeeling, one of the tiniest districts of West Bengal, consists of the majority Nepali community. The Nepalis are the unassimilated minority group in West Bengal. The people have always looked upon themselves different from Bengal and Bengalis physically, culturally, traditionally and linguistically. The Demand of the Indian Nepalis of Darjeeling had the same rationale. They were historically, ethnically, socially, linguistically, and culturally different from Bengal and they wanted their own homeland, which is distinctly apart from Bengal. It has more than hundred years that the Darjeeling people have been nursing their demand for a separate homeland (Lama, 2008:191). In 1907, the first ever demand for "separate administrative set-up" for the district of Darjeeling was placed before the government by the "leaders of the Hill people". The Hill people here referred as to Lepchas, Bhutias, and Nepalis (Subba, 1992:76).

On November 8, 1917, the representatives of the "Darjeeling District" submitted a memorandum to the Chief Secretary, Government of Bengal, demanding for the creation of a separate unit. The copies of this were subsequently submitted to E.S. Montagu, the then Secretary of State for India, and Lord Chelmsford, the then Viceroy of India. The memorandum contained a demand for Separate Administrative Arrangement for the region comprising the whole of Darjeeling district and the portion of the areas taken from Bhutan in 1865 and tagged to Jalpaiguri. The demand of the representatives of Darjeeling District is found to have been based on the incontrovertible data and facts of distinctiveness of the history, culture and geography of the place, which being the homeland of the nationalities speaking and following entirely different language, custom, tradition and mind-set to that of Bengal (Bomjan, 2008:78).

Later in 1930, the three native associations, Hillmen's Association of Kalimpong, Darjeeling Officer's Association and Kurseong Gorkha Library laid memorandums to Sir Samuel Hoare, Secretary of the State of India, to treat Darjeeling as an independent administrative unit. This memorandum was jointly signed by H.P. Pradhan (President, Hillmen's Association, Kalimpong), Lt. Gobardhan Gurung (President, Gorkha Officers Association) P.M. Sunder (Secretary, Kurseong Gorkha Library), N.B. Gurung (Secretary, Hillmen's Association, Kalimpong) and P.P. Pradhan (Secretary, Hillmen's Association, Darjeeling (Subba, 1992:79).

Under section 92 of the Government of India Act, 1935, Darjeeling as a "partially excluded area" and an "independent Administrative unit" as demanded by Hillmen Association, was not granted (Subba, 1992:81). T.B Subba stated after last draft of memoranda submitted by Hillmen's Association, began with the demand by the Nepalis to introduce "Nepalis" as a medium of instruction in schools, which in turn was a response to the Nagpur Resolution of 1920 by the Indian National Congress on the Linguistic principle of reorganisation of province (Subba, 1992:81). The very spirit of the reorganisation of province as propounded by the Congress in its Nagpur Session weakened the unity of the demand for the separation of Darjeeling and its contiguous areas from Bengal, on the fact of difference of language, culture, tradition, history and geography with the rest of Bengal (Bomjan, 2008:83).

The All India Gorkha League (AIGL) was organized in 1943. It took demanded that the District of Darjeeling together with the Dooars, a section of Jalpaiguri be included in the province of Assam. The petition demanded a separate administrative setup for the district of Darjeeling (Subba, 1992:450). The AIGL had various aims and objectives, namely, amongst others to organize and consolidate the Gorkhas, who are all widespread in India and elsewhere as an organic whole. Initially, the various ethnic groups in Darjeeling such as Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis were known as the Hillmen. Later, they were bracketed under the umbrella term, 'Gorkhas'. The Lepchas and Bhutias spoke the Nepali language apart from their mother tongues. The above gamut of various demands for autonomy began to be more crystallized because of the aggravation of the economic problems in the Hill sub-division during the last decade of the colonial rule (Dasgupta, 1999:14).

Darjeeling in the Post-independent Period

During the post-independent period, there were more demands for autonomy of Darjeeling. The Communist Party was formed by Ratanlal Brahmin in Darjeeling in 1943, with the help of Sushil Chatterjee. Later, other prominent persons like Ganeshlal Subba and Bhadrabhadur Hamal also joined the CPI. The Darjeeling District Committee of the CPI, led by Ratanlal Brahmin put forth a memorandum on 6th April, 1947 (Moktan, 2004:99). It laid down that the three contiguous areas of Darjeeling District, the feudal states of South Sikkim and Nepal be formed as one single zone as a sovereign state called Gorkhasthan, to safeguard interests of the Gorkhas. Further, they stated that the principle of proportional representation must be introduced, so that the smallest minorities like the Gorkhas do not go unrepresented.

Pranta Parishad was another political party had been formed in the Darjeeling hills. It was formed at a convention in Sukhiapokhari on 8th August 1980. It was formed by former Gorkha League and Congress leaders and I.B.Rai, Madan Thapa, Madan Tamang and others. It demanded the formation of a separate state of Gorkhaland. It comprised the Nepali speaking areas of the Dooars Jalpaiguri district and the whole of Darjeeling district in accordance with Article 3(C) of the constitution (Why Gorkhaland?, 1986:3). They believed that in the formation of a separate state of

Gorkhaland. However, it was operating within the framework of the Indian Constitution. The party was declined mainly because of weak organization. In early 1980's, the congress was shrinking in the hills. Swatantra Manch is yet another political organization that promoted the idea of a separate state of the people of the hills. CPI (M) demanded the "Regional Autonomy" within West Bengal. This needs an amendment of Article 244A of the Constitution, which permits regional autonomy within a State in case of tribal region (Chettri, 2013:16). On 2nd August 1980, Subhas Ghising, the President of the newly formed GNLFF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) Party submitted a Memorandum to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It demanded a separate State within the Constitution.

Again in 1981, Communists in the Legislative Assembly of West Bengal passed a "unanimous resolution" to support the formation of an Autonomous District Council that comparing the District of Darjeeling and all its historically contiguous area of Dooars. The proposal was forwarded to the Central Government at Delhi for due consideration. Following that nothing was happened and it was stated by Basant. B. Lama (Lama, 2008:213). The movement was raised with same agenda from time to time by different political parties, but the motive behind the movement was same.

Quest for National and Political Identity

The demand for Gorkhaland raises with the question of Gorkha Indian political identity as the spectre of being 'foreigners', 'alien-ness', 'debarred as bonafide citizens of India', which continues to rummage the Indian Gorkhas even today. The words like 'Gorkha', 'Bharपाली', which is an acronym of 'Bharatiya Nepali' and 'Bhargoli', an acronym of 'Bharatiya Gorkhali' have also been proposed at different points of their struggle for carving a separate Indian identity for themselves (Subba, 2003:4). However, none of this nomenclature seems to have received wide acceptance in achieving their goal. This long demand history has been reflective of two major claims: firstly, an aspiration to govern themselves without jeopardizing the sovereignty of the nation- state and secondly, the urge to recognize the collective rights and almost all salient cultural and social issues that earmarked their distinctions and distinctiveness from an inescapable other i.e. 'politics of culture', identity and recognition (Sarkar, 2013:3).

Gorkhas of India are struggling for their survival and identity. They demand their own distinct Indian Identity, concrete and stable. The identities of the Gorkhas are intertwined with instrumental perspective. The Gorkha identity is more of a constructed identity woven by the internal force of colonialism. They have struggled to forge their identity in terms of its relationship with other communities. Thought out this century, they distinguish themselves across the borders; it is difficult to distinguish between the two identities, Indian Nepalis and Nepalese from Nepal. The treaty has however been criticized by Nepalis living on the both sides of the borders. Nepalese of Nepal considered that the treaty as symbolizing India's hegemony and infringement of their political sovereignty. On the other hand, Indian Nepalis remain resentful of the treaty as it entitles Indian Nepalis to all the rights like Indian citizen and not as Indian citizen (Chettri, 2013:16). The most disturbing part of Indian Nepalis is the fear and insecurity of their own nationality, even though being the bonafide citizen of Indian like other communities where they also have their relatives across national boundaries of India (Subba, 2003:43).

Another Ethno Political Dynamic in Darjeeling Hill

As per the triangular discussion held between Sri Subhas Ghising, President GNLFF, the Chief Secretary on behalf of West Bengal Government and the Union Home Secretary on behalf of the Central Government at New Delhi on 22nd August 1988, that resulted in the working agreement of the DGHC (Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council) administration (Tamlong, 2006:93). The Council elections held on 13th December 1988 and the Office was opened on 17th January 1989. The DGHC replaced the existing Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samitis and Municipal came the super-visionary powers over the Darjeeling hill sub-divisions. DGHC came as into existence as a model Autonomous Administrative unit and almost all the departments except the

Home department, Police, Relief, Fire, Excise etc were transferred to it. There were about 26 Government Department transferred to the DGHC. The setup had a council of 28 elected and 14 nominated Councilors, with the Chairman (Status of State Cabinet Minister), a Vice-Chairman, Executive Councilors and other Councilors holding charge of the departments. The Chairman DGHC also functioned as the Chief Executive Councilor of DGHC (Tamlong, 2006). The DGHC was unsuccessful in producing any concrete results for the welfare of the people. There is disapproval against the despotic way of functioning of the political leadership.

The Gorkhaland movement can be pointed as a particular case where the Nepali ethnic identity was used for personal identification, communal anchorage and political goals. Ghising and the GNLFF's demand for Indian citizenship was their main objective for inclusion within the Indian framework. Their demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland outside the purview of West Bengal but within the federal system of India was also legitimate. It was because of this that the Centre did not consider the movement anti-national unlike the Bengal government. Ultimately, it was mainly to appease the agitators that the DGHC was granted with limited powers in social, cultural, development and educational fields. The ethnic minority community in Darjeeling, the Nepalis had voiced their demands for a separate state and the state had also accommodated their demand in the form of the Autonomous Council.

Conclusion

The demand of Gorkhaland Movement is not a recent phenomenon. It appeared as political struggle for more than hundred years. The demand has been raised considerably in pre-independence period and is still remains unabated. The long history of the movement does not only prove its antiquity but also establishes the distinct history of the region. This is a protracted movement, which has been raised by Gorkhas to preserve their cultural identity, which has been tangled around to prove their Indian nationality and citizenship. The demand for autonomy is still in a process though different groups or associations or parties has come up but their main agenda remains the same. The motives was the same but the ways of their procedure remain dynamic.

Note

1. The word Gorkha was originally the name of the principality located on the west of Katmandu valley. Prithivinarayan Shah who credited to have unified the present Nepal in late 18th century was from this principality known as Gorkha King and his force Gorkhali fought with the British in Anglo- Nepal War and won the praise of British. Many of them served the British India and finally settled in various parts of India mostly in North east India (Subba, 2002)
2. Indo-Nepal Peace Treaty signed in 1950 allows the nationals of Nepal and India to cross the border freely without any difficulty and privileges in matters of residence, ownership of property, employment, trade and commerce etc.

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