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DEMAND FOR GORKHALAND: REASON AND EVOLUTION

KEY WORDS:

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ABSTRACT

A population of Nepali speaking individuals living in highlands of Bengal especially the Darjeeling hills has been demanding a separate state of Gorkhaland since 1907. After the merger of Darjeeling, Terai and Dooars into West Bengal in 1954, Bengalis started treating them as illegal migrants from Nepal. This wounded their sentiments as their identity and citizenship was questioned. Political parties exploited this for winning elections giving fake promises of Gorkhaland. Neither the region underwent development nor a state of Gorkhaland was formed till this moment.

INTRODUCTION:

The term 'Gorka' is attributed to those individuals belonging to native communities of the region and Nepali immigrants who have migrated from Nepal to India before 1950s to work in tea plantations in the Darjeeling Hills. According to 1950 Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty these individuals were granted Indian citizenship. In earlier days, British Government classified Darjeeling as a "Non-Regulation District" and was placed in the category of "Backward Tract" by the Act of 1870, but owing to the hill people's backward regional identity, the territory was again made a "Schedule District" through the Act of 1874. Later, Darjeeling district was included in the "Partially Excluded Areas" by the Government of India Act 1936. Regulations intended for Bengal Province were not applicable in Darjeeling district because of the aforementioned diverse legal structures. The Governor General created unique laws specifically for the Darjeeling district. The Government of India Act of 1935 mandated representative governance at the provincial levels. Bengal conducted elections for its Provincial Assembly in 1937, and Darjeeling also took part by electing a representative to the Assembly. Darjeeling, Terai and Dooars were absorbed in West Bengal in 1954 through Absorbed Area Act, 1954, and have lost its distinct administrative structure. They lost all their privileges and were considered as illegal migrants by the Bengalis hurting their sentiments. To get rid of this migrant tag they started the fight for a separate state where they would not be treated as migrants and their Indian citizenship would never be questioned. British Government's divide and rule initiative providing special status for the region could be the primary reason for the Gorkhaland initiative. In order to exploit the riches of Darjeeling, the British gave them a unique identity and privileges separating them from the Bengalis in the lowlands.

Reason and Evolution:-

In 1907, leaders of the hill people (Lepchas, Bhutias, and Gorkhas) presented the British Government with the first-ever demand for "a separate administrative setup" for the District of Darjeeling. The leaders or representatives of the hill people formed the Hillmen's Association, to demand for a distinct administrative unit for Darjeeling. Hillmen's Association, was a group controlled by tea planters that promoted the historical, racial, and cultural distinctions between the Gorkhas and the Bengalis. They pushed British Government for an autonomous government for the Darjeeling area. As the number of Gorkhas increased, their fight for ethnic identity gained momentum. The Gorkhas organised themselves into a number of organisations and made numerous demands asserting their identity, giving birth to a stronger ethnicity and identity. Their demands ranged from local district administration authority to a distinct, autonomous province. The Hillmen's Association had ceased operations by March 1943 and a renamed organisation All India Gorkha League (AIGL) came into existence in May 1943, and Damber Singh Gurung was appointed as its leader. Its goal was to include the Gorkhas

residing all throughout India in the national struggle and incorporate the Gorkhas into Indian society as a whole and they succeeded. In the 1980s, it was the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), led by Subhash Ghising, who seized the initiative and became their solitary spokesperson. A tripartite agreement was signed on July 25th, 1988 between the Government of India, the Government of West Bengal, and the GNLF to establish an autonomous Hill Council (DGHC) under a State Act for "the social, economic, educational, and cultural advancement of the people residing in the Hill areas of Darjeeling District". The Council's jurisdiction included three hill subdistricts of the Darjeeling district and a few Mouzas within the Siliguri subdistrict. The Council was granted limited executive powers, but the desires of the region's inhabitants could not be met without legislative authority. The exclusion of the Dooars region from the Council has become a significant source of discontent. The residents of the Dooars had participated equally in the movement and therefore felt duped. Subhash Ghising's plans to include Darjeeling in the Sixth Schedule backfired and Gorkhas lost their confidence on their leader. After dethroning Subhash Ghising, Bimal Gurung established the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM) in Darjeeling on October 7th, 2007 to support the movement. On March 14th, 2012, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's Government published a gazette notification for the GTA Act. The West Bengali administration interfered with GTA's operations inhibiting their legal as well as financial operations. The state administration kept on harassing and victimising the GJMM leaders. Thus GTA's autonomy never came to existence. Gorkhas speak Nepali, Bengal Government forced Gorkha children to learn Bengali by making it a mandatory language in schools, without consulting or considering the Nepali speaking Gorkhas. They feared that the ruling Bengali Government would eliminate Nepali or Gokhali and instead replace it with Bengali even when Nepali is listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Statewide protests made TMC government to back off from this decision. Thus, the only option for the Darjeeling Hills and the growth of the Gorkha community was a separate state. The GJMM and other parties pushing for a separate state said that Gorkhaland should also include the estimated 4-10 million Gurkhas who live throughout India in addition to Darjeeling. Hence without their own Government their traditions, cultural and linguistic identity, and even citizenship are always under threat.

Earlier Gorkhas were mostly laborers working for meager daily wages in tea plantations run by the British. They were also recruited into Army due to their fearlessness and bravery. With time they started migrating to different parts of India and abroad in search of new opportunities and have settled there. But their struggle to be known as Indian citizens has not yet succeeded. They are still fighting for Gorkhaland, a state governed by Gorkhas.

These groups are economically vulnerable, and the region lacks essential amenities such as employment opportunities,

health care facilities, schools, colleges, higher education institutions, roads, transportation facilities, electrical infrastructure and water. Members of these communities feel dissatisfied and deprived when compared to their fellow citizens in their developed capital cities and neighbouring states. The group believes that their region is economically prosperous, but the West Bengal Government exploits the economy by taking all revenues and providing minimal development funds. Along with their deteriorating economic conditions, their representation in government decision-making bodies is inadequate. Consequently, the Gorkhas demand equality with the Bengalis.

Political expediency and vote-bank opportunism are other major factors that made this movement unsuccessful. The State of West Bengal was governed by CPI (M) for 34 years, Subash Ghising's DGHC got support from this party even for silently including the region in Sixth Schedule by converting the people of different communities into tribal communities overnight. In 2004, with the support from Subash Ghising's GNLf the last Congress MP came to power. Later, Bimal Gurung's GJM supported BJP MP Jaswant Singh in 2009 election as he supported the Gorkhaland Movement, even though he won but NDA did not come to power. From 2011 onwards, Gurung supported TMC and was a close ally with Mamata Banerjee and GTA was formed. After the agitation which broke out with the formation of Telengana State in 2013, S.S. Ahluwalia, a BJP candidate won the Parliamentary election by GJM support in 2014 but in 2017 he raised the demand for Gorkhaland again and agitation restarted. GJM party split into two factions, one under Anit Thapa and other under Binay Tamang. Binay Tamang was appointed by Mamata Banerjee as GTA head. Again in 2019, Raju Bista, BJP MP won the elections with Gurung's support. In the coming year, he resurfaced into the Hills supporting Mamata Banerjee's TMC for 2021 West Bengal Legislative Assembly elections after leaving NDA. Binay Tamang left TMC in 2022 and joined hands with his former leader Bimal Gurung, whereas Anit Thapa formed a new political party named Bharatiya Gorkha Prajatantrik Morcha (BGPM). He made alliance with TMC and won GTA in 2022 as well as the Darjeeling Municipality this year. These changing leaderships could not achieve statehood till this moment but had won elections in the name of Gorkhaland exploiting people's emotions for their own State.

CONCLUSION:

Political parties and leaders like Subash Ghising and Bimal Gurung initiated protests or dharnas which ultimately ended claiming nothing more than lives of poor individuals and destructing public properties. They failed to understand the emotions of the population and hence the movement failed. Congress, BJP and CPI (M) also politicized this issue just to gain votes in the elections after which the demand for statehood stayed silent until next elections arise. These leaders very well knew that granting statehood would not be that easy. TMC Chief Minister had clearly told that she will never let West Bengal to be divided which meant that until she is in power, Gorkhaland cannot come into existence. Establishment of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) and similar autonomous councils in the highlands were part of Governments divide and rule policy whereby Gorkhas will never unite to achieve their common goal, instead they will be kept in a delusion. They will be convinced that the Bengal Government will meet all their demands thereby crippling the Movement.

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