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THE GORKHALAND MOVEMENT: A STUDY OF CENTRAL AND STATE GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

KEY WORDS: Gorkhaland, Autonomy, Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, Sixth Schedule, Gorkhaland Territorial Administration

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ABSTRACT

The paper looks at the response of the central and state government to the Gorkhaland movement in the Darjeeling Hills. It argues that the state's repertoire, from dialog and concession to co-optation, internal sabotage and constitutional improvisation, has always understood an identitarian claim as a law-and-order problem that can be solved through development. Tracing the arc from colonial classificatory exclusion through the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, the failed Sixth Schedule experiment and the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration to the 104-day shutdown of 2017, it concludes that each accommodation reproduced rather than resolved the underlying grievance.

INTRODUCTION:

The Spectrum of State Responses In a country like India, the state and movements do not have a fixed ideology and method; the state is constantly challenged by demands for needs, aspirations, concessions and accommodations, which results in the reconstruction of the ideology of the state and the creation of new means. Movements usually start in constitutional and peaceful ways, but when the state ignores such demands and peaceful persuasions, they turn to more violent and unconstitutional ways, which in turn provoke violent police responses. When their leaders weigh the costs and benefits of their mode of agitation, relatively weaker dissident groups enter into dialog with the government. The state has a choice of soft strategies such as dialog and negotiation, or hard strategies such as military assault and repression, or co-opting frontal leaders by giving them power, concessions, and leniency.

Co-option and Inside Sabotage

The Left Front government's Machiavellian stunt of buying peripheral groups off with benefits and concessions in the legal and constitutional gray area to placate Gorkha National Liberation Front leader Subhash Ghising and dilute the movement's impact. This strategy was later repeated by the Mamata Banerjee government with the senior leaders of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha to subvert the internal dynamics of the movement through subterfuge and to install intermediaries for creating confusion and organizational disintegration. And so the state "internally sabotages" movements, muzzling and demoralizing them, by covertly bribing and transplanting leaders in an effort to create a schism at the core. This was between GJMM chief Bimal Gurung and spokesman Harka Bahadur Chhetri and reflected in the relationship between Gurung and Binay Tamang.

The Dual Role of the State and the Law and Order Frame

The state played a dual role in the uprising, provoking and exacerbating ethnic grievance on one side, and demonstrating its ability to contain the conflict it sparked on the other (Sarkar, 2013). In the Indian context, attempts at resolving ethno-regional discord are limited to a 'single approach' that treats all conflicts as political problems to be resolved politically. Initiatives are limited to political interventions, power-sharing arrangements and new political structures — the recommendations of the States Reorganization Commission, constitutional recognition of language, regional autonomy proposals, Sixth Schedule status and autonomous district councils at the sub-state level. In other cases the state sent in military personnel for direct intervention, such as in Kashmir and Nagaland. Such conduct indicates that ethnic issues were seen essentially as law-and-order problems to be solved through a "carrot and stick" policy, while the Gorkhaland movement was an identitarian movement that required a completely different approach.

Colonial Exclusion and the Making of Identity

The state's relationship with the aggrieved factions in the Darjeeling highlands has been close and deeply asymmetric since the colonial era. Hence, the colonial state devised administrative mechanisms that successfully separated the highland people from the plains in its imperial interests. From the very beginning of their identity consciousness, the people of Darjeeling were used to differentiating themselves from the 'other', internalizing a separate identity existence that could be achieved only by separation from Bengal and a Gorkhaland state.

The classificatory categories, "Backward Tract", "Scheduled Area", "Excluded Area", "Partially Excluded Area" and "Waste Land" were devised to delimit the possibility of intermixing with the mainstream population. Darjeeling was declared a non-regulated area from the very beginning. The Indian Councils Act, 1861 abolished the non-regulated area but the Act of 1870 brought back the status quo ante 1861. Darjeeling was, under Act XV of 1874, declared a "Schedule District", free from the general laws of the rest of India. In 1907 it was included in the Bhagalpur Presidency, and in 1912 it was transferred to Bengal. It was a "Backward Tract" under the Government of India Act, 1919, administered by the Governor in the Governor-General in Council, and a "Partially Excluded Area" under the Act of 1935, so that an Act of the Federal or Provincial Legislature applied to it only with the Governor's sanction. In 1947 even this measure was revoked. The colonial regime passed this policy of exclusion on to the newly created Indian nation-state.

The question of self-rule was raised in the Constituent Assembly debates on "excluded" and "partially excluded" areas after independence. Dambar Singh Gurung was one of the five co-opted members out of the seven-member subcommittee that represented thirty lakh Gorkhas domiciled across the country. The tribal population of the Darjeeling district in 1941 was 1,41,301 or 37.54 per cent of the total population of 3,76,368, mostly tea garden workers and a few Lepchas and Bhotias. Gurung's demand for separation was found to be unjustified and put aside for the time being. The Radcliffe Boundary Commission demarcation isolated the northern West Bengal from the rest of the state until the annexation of the Islampur subdivision in Bihar ended the enclave status of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar (Sengupta, 2007).

Language and citizenship as anchors of identity

The connection between Gorkha identity and the Nepali language has always been a sensitive one, a marker of cultural distinctiveness, a way of forging a sense of national unity and a means of creating political communities. India's putting linguistic principles at the center of nation-building and the demand for recognition brought Lepchas, Bhutias, Rais, Limbus and Magars on one platform, giving a filip to the politics of Nepali. The Nepali speakers of Darjeeling rose from about 20 per cent in the 1951 census to 60 per cent and

they unanimously declared Nepali their mother tongue in 1961. Resentment was caused by the West Bengal government's refusal to abide by Article 345 and the selection of Bengali as the sole official language based on the 1951 figure of 20 per cent. The States Reorganization Commission had stated that a state would be considered bilingual if a significant minority accounted for not less than 30 per cent of the population and unilingual if one language group constituted not less than 70 per cent, and this was to be applied at the district level (Samanta, 2000). The banning of Nepali from the three-year degree program of Calcutta University led to the establishment of the Bhasa Manyata Samiti, and in the wake of the 1961 census the West Bengal Official Language Act of 1961 declared Bengali and Nepali as official languages in the three subdivisions of Darjeeling; North Bengal University established a postgraduate Nepali department in 1978.

In 1956, Ananda Singh Thapa had advocated the inclusion of Nepali in the Eighth Schedule and Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterjee's recommendation to include Sindhi and Nepali had got support from 74 members of Parliament. The fact that Sindhi, not Nepali, was recognized only added to the grievance. It was rejected as foreign by Morarji Desai in 1979 but agreed to in principle by Indira Gandhi in 1980. The 71st Amendment in 1992 added Nepali to the Eighth Schedule. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the hill leaders of Darjeeling and the Dooars pursued two causes – recognition of Nepali and autonomy (Bomjan, 2008).

Citizenship made the problem worse. The Indo-Nepal Treaty signed on 31 July 1950 provided for equal rights of residence, property, trade and movement in the territory of each state to nationals of the other. Settlers had no citizenship or political rights and could not vote. Its liberal provisions were against Gorkhas holding Indian citizenship, who were easily confused with "reciprocal" Nepalis, weakening citizenship criteria for those born in Nepal and those born in India. Indian Nepalis were conflated with non-citizen migrants who benefitted from the treaty, and their identity as true Indian citizens was undermined (Bagchi, 2012). Those who came to India before 26 January 1950 were given citizenship under the Indian Citizenship Act, 1952.

CONCLUSION

Most of the demands for statehood, including Gorkhaland, Bodoland, Jharkhand and Telangana, have been considered by the state government as law-and-order issues directly linked to underdevelopment or lack of development, and therefore ignored the core components of identity-based movements such as culture, self-respect and self-determination, and classified these as problems of underdevelopment to be addressed through development initiatives (Sarkar, 2013). Hence development was seen as a magical solution to all the autonomy related problems considering that development in this region is more related to humanitarian than purely economic advancement (Sarkar, 2013).

The historical record examined here illustrates the limits of this paradigm. The persistence of the movement can be explained by three structural features of the state's approach. Second, the punitive moment of the state produces the grievance it then seeks to control. This circularity is contained in the double role played during the uprising: that of provoking ethnic grievance and that of showing its capacity to manage the conflict it provoked (Sarkar, 2013). The second is the consistently partial accommodative moment. The DGHC was not constituted under the Fifth or Sixth Schedule despite having comparable powers (Samanta, 2000). The GTA was vested with significantly more authority but lacked legislative competence and did not address the core demand. Thus, the arrangement provided limited autonomy and left the issue unresolved (Sharma et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2022). Third, the

moment of co-optation disintegrates movements without resolving them, fracturing leadership, but sustaining the underlying aspiration (Tamang, 2025).

But the Gorkhaland movement has never been allowed to die down, and popular sentiment continues to foreground the identity claim over and above purely economic ones. The lesson for Indian federalism is that ethno-regional movements of this sort cannot be fully explained by the internal resonance of the community alone; they must be read against the external configuration that the community shares with the mainstream population (Sarkar, 2013). It may delay confrontation by turning a hundred-year-old demand for self-rule into one of roads and audits and boards, but as the 104 days of 2017 showed, it does not solve it.

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