



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Political Science

THE GORKHALAND MOVEMENT: ETHNIC IDENTITY, SUB-REGIONALISM, AND THE QUEST FOR STATEHOOD

KEY WORDS:

Nirjan Singh

ABSTRACT

The Gorkhaland movement in the Darjeeling hills of West Bengal is one of India's most enduring sub-regional movements. Based on the experiences of the Indian Gorkha community, it calls for the creation of a separate state of "Gorkhaland" within the Indian Union. This paper, investigates the historical roots of the movement, its development as an ethnic and identity-based struggle, and its present political dynamics. It demonstrates how colonial legacies, post-independence marginalization, linguistic and cultural assertion and changing strategies of leadership have shaped the long-term campaign for autonomy and recognition. The discussion emphasizes the value of identity politics, the contradictions between autonomy arrangements and full statehood, and the continued importance of Gorkhaland to wider debates on ethnicity and federalism in India.

INTRODUCTION

The Gorkhaland movement is a decades-old socio-political movement that demands the formation of a separate state from parts of northern West Bengal with the Darjeeling hills at its center. It is the product of the historical, social and political forces that have shaped the identity and aspirations of Gorkha community of this region.

The Gorkhaland demand is a part of the larger pattern of sub-regional movements in India. It is the desire of a territorially concentrated cultural group for autonomy, equal rights and recognition within an existing state unit, multiethnic federal democracy. Based entirely on the thesis, this paper considers the convergence of historical experiences, sub-regionalism and contemporary political developments in the demand for Gorkhaland and what this tells us about the management of ethnic diversity in India.

History Of Gorkha Community In India

The Gorkha people are primarily settled in the mountainous regions of Bhutan, India and Nepal, and are historically from the Kingdom of Gorkha in mid-18th century Nepal. During the colonial period, when the British East India Company recruited Gorkhas for their martial abilities, their integration into the state machinery of South Asia increased. In time the Gorkhas were a significant component of the British Indian Army, and later the armed forces of independent India. This military link influenced both the external image of Gorkhas as 'martial' and their own feeling of loyalty and stake in the Indian state.

On independence in 1947, Gorkhas serving in the British Indian Army were given the choice of joining either the Indian or Nepalese armies. Most voted for India, a symbolic statement of their connection to the Indian nation. However, despite this record of service the Gorkhas of the Darjeeling hills suffered from a sense of political and developmental marginalization under the West Bengal government dominated by the Bengali elites. Within the framework of a larger Bengali paradigm, their unique cultural and linguistic identity was eclipsed and the specific needs of the region were often ignored. This disjuncture between contribution and recognition provided the context for later mobilization around statehood and identity.

Sub-Regionalism and the Rise of the Gorkhaland Movement

The demand for Gorkhaland can be located within a conceptual framework of sub-regionalism. The sub-region is understood in the thesis not simply as an administrative sub-division, but as a territorially defined space, inhabited by a culturally distinctive group of people who regard the territory as their ancestral homeland or "motherland." The collective identity is built on a strong emotional attachment to territory, a common language and shared cultural practices. Sub-

regionalism is a concrete expression when such a group begins to organize around political goals – such as autonomy, equal opportunities or statehood.

In this sense, Gorkhaland is a classic sub-regional movement. The hills are not just a land of residence for the Gorkhas of Darjeeling and its adjoining areas, but a homeland that signifies their historical presence, sacrifices and aspirations. It is rather a search for institutional arrangements which will recognize their distinct identity and afford them meaningful self-rule within the Indian federation.

Language, Culture & Identity Politics

Language has been a major axis of the Gorkhaland movement. Nepal's position in educational and administrative institutions has been a flashpoint time and again. The thesis points to controversies such as the university decisions to marginalize Nepali as a vernacular language that were projected as direct challenges to Gorkha dignity and legitimacy. The result of these developments was organized protests with committees like Bhasa Manyata Samiti demanding linguistic recognition.

Prolonged unrest over time resulted in significant institutional alterations. The recognition of Nepali as an official language in some areas of West Bengal and the inclusion of Nepali in higher education curricula were important achievements. They were not considered ends but steps in a larger project. The Gorkha community's achievement of separate official status for the Nepali language secured its claim to a separate identity within India and strengthened its normative foundations for demanding a matching territorial unit.

Cultural practices and symbolism were also made into weapons of political struggle. In later phases, especially under the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJMM), activists promoted the public display of "traditional" Gorkha dress, festivals and rituals as visible markers of difference from the Bengali majority. Everyday practices became politicized: adherence to movement-sanctioned cultural norms could signal loyalty, while deviation might invite social pressure or even public shaming. Thus the movement spread beyond the realm of formal politics into the private spaces of dress, behavior and community life, embedding the demand for Gorkhaland in everyday routines.

Political Pathways and Organizational Tactics

Organizationally, the Gorkhaland movement has gone through several distinct phases, characterized by different styles of leadership, strategies of engagement with the state, and repertoires of contention. The first mobilizations consisted of petitions, memoranda and constitutional appeals for recognition and limited autonomy. Mass protests occurred at different points, and there were violent confrontations at times during the most intense episodes of unrest.

The turning point came with the establishment of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988. The DGHC, headed by Subash Ghising, was a compromise formula, an autonomous council in West Bengal which was to fulfill the aspirations of the Gorkhas without creating a separate state. Initially the DGHC was hailed as a major concession. But gradually dissatisfaction grew. Critics doubted the council's effectiveness, transparency and ability to deliver either development or deeper recognition.

The controversy came to a head when Ghising mooted bringing Darjeeling under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, meant mainly for tribal-majority areas in the Northeast. Many non-tribal residents feared that Sixth Schedule status would limit their rights in land ownership and transfer, and in effect reorder local hierarchies and entitlements. This move fractured Ghising's support base, created new tensions among hill communities and raised questions about what interests the leadership of the movement truly represented.

Ghising's legitimacy was being eroded and that created space for new actors. Bimal Gurung, a former close aide of Ghising, has become an alternative leader, notably by backing a Darjeeling-born contestant on the popular TV show Indian Idol. What was intended as a cultural and media event was turned into a vehicle for ethnic solidarity, as Gorkhas across India and abroad rallied behind the contestant through SMS campaigns and public events. Gurung's involvement in this campaign raised his profile and credibility and he was able to convert cultural enthusiasm into political organization under the GJMM banner.

Under Gurung's leadership, the movement embraced new and, at times, more aggressive tactics such as hunger strikes, bandhs (general strikes) and rallies on a massive scale. It simultaneously tried to present itself as democratic and 'Gandhian', emphasizing non-violent repertoires like prayer meetings and community engagement to gain greater legitimacy.

Mass Mobilization, Discipline and Everyday Life

The Gorkhaland movement is sustained not just through elite negotiations and formal institutions, but also by mass participation and disciplined collective action. The mobilization has involved men and women, young and old, from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds living in the hills.

The rhythms and expectations of the movement have profoundly changed everyday life. Directives to wear traditional dress on certain days, to close shops during bandhs or to attend rallies and prayer meetings created a sense of shared purpose but also placed pressures to conform. Non-compliance could lead to being labeled a "enemy" of Gorkhaland or to public humiliation such as symbolic acts of shaming. Through these methods the movement created internal discipline and an external image of unity, vis-à-vis the state and the media.

These practices underscore an internal tension in identity-based mobilization: the process of creating solidarity and collective power can at the same time constrict internal pluralism and dissent. The disciplining of everyday practices in the Gorkhaland case reveals the deep penetration of the political project into the social fabric of the hills.

Historical Narratives and the Politics of Memory

One of the recurring themes in the thesis is the role of historical writing and public memory in legitimizing or contesting the Gorkhaland demand. History here is not a neutral archive but a site of struggle. The thesis contends that the hills and plains' political actors have, at times, repressed archival evidence or put forward selective narratives to

bolster their positions on Darjeeling's status and its relation to neighboring regions like Sikkim.

The author cautions against "politicians turned historians," who distort the past to serve narrow agendas and hinder intellectual progress at the cost of the realities faced by marginalized groups. The thesis, however, advocates for the democratization of historical knowledge, allowing for archival records to be made available to ordinary people so that they can critically engage with their own past.

In the Gorkhaland movement, control over historical stories is directly associated with claims over territory and identity tags. If Darjeeling can be shown to have a distinct historical trajectory, or prior political ties separate from Bengal, this strengthens the normative case for a separate state. Narratives that emphasize integration with Bengal and downplay difference, in contrast, reinforce the status quo. The politics of memory therefore overlaps with contemporary struggles over land, language and legitimacy.

Contemporary Relevance and Ongoing Challenges

The Gorkhaland movement is a microcosm of the interweaving of social, cultural and political factors that make up Gorkha identity in India. Gorkhas in the Darjeeling hills have faced persistent neglect, cultural imposition and uncertainty about their political status, despite their long-standing contributions from military service in the colonial and post-colonial armies to participation in national development. These kinds of experiences have created a deep sense of injustice that still drives demands for recognition and autonomy.

The case of Gorkhaland, whether in terms of autonomous councils, constitutional experiments such as the proposed Sixth Schedule status or renewed campaigns for full statehood, shows that deep-rooted grievances cannot be addressed either by material development alone or symbolic concessions alone. Institutional arrangements that combine distributive justice and the need for meaningful recognition must be part of sustainable solutions.

CONCLUSIONS

The Gorkhaland movement is best understood in terms of sub-regionalism and ethnic politics as a long-term fight for dignity, recognition and self-rule by a territorially concentrated cultural group. The Gorkhas' historical trajectory from the Kingdom of Gorkha to their crucial role in the British Indian Army and subsequently their marginalization in West Bengal post-independence have provided the backdrop for sustained mobilization for statehood.

Finally, the politicization of history and memory in the case of Gorkhaland demonstrates that struggles over the past are inextricably linked to contemporary battles over rights and resources. Thus, the movement raises larger questions about how India can reconcile diversity and unity, and how historically marginalized groups can achieve both material development and meaningful recognition within the arrangements of the state.

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