



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Identity Politics and Regional Aspirations: A Case Study of the Gorkhaland Movement

JOYPAL HEMBRAM

Masters in Political Science from the University of Kalyani, West Bengal .

WB SET for Assistant Professor of Political Science .

ABSTRACT :

Identity politics and regional aspirations play a powerfully intertwined role in the Gorkhaland movement, which advocates for a separate state for the Nepali-speaking Gorkha population within India. This study explores the many facets of the Gorkhaland movement, following its historical roots, socio-political dynamics, and economic complaints to offer a thorough grasp of the elements influencing this persistent call for statehood.

The Gorkhaland movement's historical origins can be found in the British colonial period, when they brought Nepali-speaking laborers to the Darjeeling hills to work on tea plantations. Due to the cultural and linguistic marginalization these communities experienced after independence, Subhas Ghising and the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) led the first concerted campaign for a separate state of Gorkhaland in the 1980s. Understanding this historical background is essential to comprehending the movement's underlying ethnic identity and long-standing concerns.

The declaration of a unique Gorkha identity forms the basis of the Gorkhaland movement. For an extended period, the Nepali-speaking Gorkhas residing in the Darjeeling hills have experienced a feeling of cultural and linguistic differentiation from the majority Bengali populace in West Bengal. The movement has been largely mobilized by this sense of identity, with language, celebrations, and cultural symbols all serving important roles. Effectively utilizing identity politics, leaders and groups such as the GNLF and subsequently the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) have maintained the demand for statehood.

The Darjeeling region has experienced serious economic difficulties. The region has underdeveloped despite its contributions from tea, tourism, and forestry, which has caused considerable economic dissatisfaction. Feelings of marginalization have been made worse by the state government of West Bengal's alleged indifference. A separate state for Gorkhaland, according to the movement, would enable better governance and more targeted development initiatives that would cater to the unique demands of the local populace.

Negotiation and repression have been used by the government in response to the Gorkhaland movement. There have been talks and attempts to use administrative means to meet the requests, but there have also been crackdowns on movement leaders and protestors. The movement has frequently seen brief lulls as a result of this dual strategy, but the fundamental problems have not been addressed, which has caused recurring resurgences of the desire for statehood.

Keywords: Identity politics, Regional aspirations, Ethnic identity, Statehood demand, Darjeeling hills Gorkha.

Introduction:

Understanding the complex relationship between identity politics and regional ambitions is made easier by looking at the Gorkhaland movement, which has its roots in the sociopolitical landscape of India's Darjeeling area. Encapsulating the intricacies involved in negotiating issues of ethnicity, governance, and territoriality within the Indian framework, the movement is marked by the Gorkha ethnic community's passionate aspiration for statehood. With the goal of elucidating the movement's historical roots, socio-political dynamics, and current significance in the context of identity politics and regional autonomy movements, this study project aims to explore the complex aspects of the Gorkhaland movement.

The Gorkhaland movement is fundamentally about the Gorkha people claiming their identity and fighting for their right to self-governance and political representation. The movement, which arose in the context of historical marginalization and cultural estrangement, is a reflection of the ongoing difficulties ethnic communities have faced to claim their identity and protect their rights within the parameters of a pluralistic democracy. This research attempt aims to clarify the ways in which ideas of identity, belonging, and territoriality intersect to influence political mobilization and aspirations for autonomy by placing the Gorkhaland movement within the larger framework of identity politics.

The state and federal governments have used a combination of repression and diplomacy to deal with the Gorkhaland movement. Crackdowns on protests and movement leaders have alternated with periods of discussion and administrative concessions. This dual strategy has frequently resulted in brief lulls in the agitation, but the underlying problems have not been addressed, causing the call for statehood to periodically resurface.

The historical trajectory of the Gorkhaland movement is marked by a series of socio-political developments that have shaped Gorkha identity and aspirations for self-determination. From the colonial era, when the British annexation of the Kingdom of Sikkim and parts of Nepal led to the integration of the Gorkha community into the Indian subcontinent, to the post-independence period marked by struggles for linguistic and cultural recognition, the movement reflects a complex tapestry of historical legacies and contemporary grievances. By tracing this historical evolution, this research proposal aims to provide insights into the socio-cultural, economic, and political factors that have contributed to the emergence and sustenance of the Gorkhaland movement.

Furthermore, the Gorkhaland movement serves as a prism through which to analyze the dynamics of regional aspirations and demands for autonomy within the Indian federal framework. As an ethno-regional movement, it raises fundamental questions about the nature of democracy, federalism, multiculturalism in India, challenging existing governance structures and norms of political representation. By interrogating these dynamics, this research proposal seeks to shed light on the broader implications of identity-based mobilization for governance, inter-ethnic relations, and the democratic fabric of Indian society.

The Gorkha community has long felt politically underrepresented in West Bengal's governing bodies. Attempts to grant administrative autonomy included the founding of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988 and the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2011. These actions have drawn criticism, meanwhile, due to their restricted scope and failure to meet the movement's main demands. More political representation and decision-making power have been repeatedly emphasized by the movement's political leadership, which has moved from the GNLF to the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) and other factions.

Historical Background

The Origins of the Gorkhaland Movement:

The origin of the Gorkhaland Movement may be traced to the colonial period in India when the British introduced tea plantations in Darjeeling, whose climate and terrain were conducive for the crop. A considerable number of impoverished Nepalese immigrated and worked in these plantations, some as porters. By 1861, 22 tea plantation estates were operational in Darjeeling. The British employed approximately 2,534 laborers, many of whom were Nepalese immigrants who were paid considerably low wages (Dasgupta 1999, 53). Furthermore, the British recruited several Nepalese youth as soldiers to form the "Gorkha regiment," thereby consolidating their numbers in the region (Banerjee and Stöber 2013, 5).

Immigration into Darjeeling from undivided Bengal had been occurring intermittently even before 1947. The numbers increased drastically when India's independence and subsequent partition triggered one of the largest mass migrations in history; vast numbers of Hindu Bengalis poured into northern West Bengal from former East Pakistan (Haque 1995, 185). Many of them settled in Darjeeling, as well as the adjoining forested Dooars, and became the socioeconomically dominant population. The Bengali community acquired sizable agricultural lands in Dooars, making the Gorkha populace insecure (Banerjee and Stöber 2013, 5–6). By this time, Darjeeling had a reputation of being a beautiful hill station, enticing the Marwari and the Bihari communities "because of business prospects" in the area. They and the Bengalis eventually owned "numerous enterprises in Darjeeling." A considerable section of the middle-class Bengali community also occupied most of the regional tertiary services. Conversely, the Nepalese working in the tea gardens felt exploited.

In 1943, the All India Gorkha League fought for Gorkha rights, leading to regional autonomy for Darjeeling. In 1980, the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) proposed a separate homeland for the Gorkha community, primarily in hill subdivisions. The Gorkhaland movement was sparked by the eviction of Nepalese mine workers from Meghalaya in 1985 due to lack of official entry permits. The Nepalese community of Darjeeling protested against unfair treatment in 1986. Economic backwardness, labor problems, and insolvency in tea estates exacerbated unrest. The GNLF launched an insurgent movement demanding official recognition of their language and a separate Gorkhaland for the Nepalese community in Darjeeling. Strikes were rampant between 1986 and 1988, causing casualties and injuries. GNLF recruited Gorkha youth and urged the Nepalese to stop paying taxes. The Leftist government of West Bengal declared the movement anti-national because of reports that Gorkha agitators had received external assistance for their initiatives. However, the Central government refused to acknowledge these reports, believing them to be uncorroborated. It was only trying to propagate its own political interests, which differed from those of the leftist government of West Bengal (Datta 1991, 230–32). At any rate, the Darjeeling Accord was signed in 1988 by the Indian government, the West Bengal state government, and the GNLF. It ratified the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC). The GNLF agreed to give up its separatist demands for an "autonomous Hill Council" (Datta 1991, 237), which would promote the socioeconomic interests as well as "cultural advancement" (ibid.) of the Gorkha community. However, it took only "a few months" for the DGHC and the West Bengal government to become embroiled in a bitter dispute regarding fund "allocation" for the development of Darjeeling. Their relationship

deteriorated rapidly, and the state of unrest in the region continued for a few more years (Datta 1991, 239). The Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM) was formed in 2007 to challenge the Gorkhaland Movement, urging the Gorkha people to avoid paying taxes and restricting tea and timber movement. Despite occasional violence, the GJMM gained a loyal following and achieved significant success in the 2011 state elections.

Economic Impact of the Gorkhaland Movement:

The Gorkhaland movement, centered in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, India, has had profound economic impacts on the region. The movement, which seeks the creation of a separate state for the Gorkha ethnic group, has led to periods of intense agitation and unrest, significantly affecting various sectors of the local economy.

1. Tourism Industry :

Disruptions and Losses:

Darjeeling, known for its scenic beauty and iconic toy train, faces significant disruptions due to frequent strikes, protests, and road blockades associated with the Gorkhaland movement. During unrest, hotel bookings and tourist arrivals often decrease, leading to severe financial losses for tourism-dependent businesses like hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, and local guides.

Seasonal Impact:

Peak tourist seasons, like summer and autumn, often coincide with increased agitation, exacerbating economic impact and causing significant revenue loss for local businesses.

2. Tea Industry:

Production and Export Challenges:

Darjeeling tea is globally acclaimed and a significant contributor to the region's economy. The industry has faced considerable challenges due to the Gorkhaland movement. Prolonged strikes and shutdowns result in the closure of tea gardens, leading to a halt in production. This disruption affects the delicate harvesting cycles crucial for maintaining the quality of Darjeeling tea.

Financial Strain on Workers:

Tea garden workers, who are primarily daily wage earners, suffer from loss of income during strikes. The uncertainty and financial instability impact their livelihoods, leading to broader socio-economic issues.

3. Employment and Livelihoods

Impact on Daily Wage Earners:

Frequent agitations and shutdowns severely impact daily wage earners, including street vendors, construction workers, and small business owners. These workers often live hand-to-mouth, and the loss of even a few days' income can have severe consequences.

Business Uncertainty:

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the region face operational challenges due to the unpredictability of strikes. This uncertainty hampers business growth and investment, leading to stagnation in local economic development.

4. Investment and Development

Deterrence of External Investment:

Political instability and frequent unrest deter external investors. Potential investors often perceive the region as high-risk, leading to a reluctance to invest in new projects or expand existing ones. Infrastructure development projects are often delayed or abandoned due to the unrest, further stifling economic progress.

5. Education and Healthcare

Disruption of Services:

Educational institutions, including schools and colleges, face frequent closures during periods of unrest. This disrupts the academic calendar and impacts students' education and future prospects. Healthcare services are also affected, with strikes leading to the closure of clinics and hospitals. Patients, especially those requiring regular treatment, suffer due to the inaccessibility of medical services.

6. Government Revenue

Reduced Tax Collection:

The economic slowdown resulting from the Gorkhaland movement affects government revenue collection. Reduced business activity and lower tourist inflows lead to a decline in tax revenues. The state's ability to fund public services and infrastructure projects is hampered, creating a cycle of underdevelopment and economic stagnation.

Cost of Management:

The government incurs additional expenses in managing the unrest, including deployment of security forces and administrative costs. These expenditures divert funds from development projects and essential services.

Research Objectives:

The following objectives of the proposed research will be taken into consideration:

1. To trace the historical evolution of the Gorkhaland movement, elucidating its socio-cultural, economic, and political underpinnings.
2. To analyze the discursive construction of Gorkha identity and its intersection with regional aspirations for autonomy and self-determination.
3. To assess the impact of the Gorkhaland movement on governance structures, inter-ethnic relations, and the broader framework of Indian federalism.
4. To assess the impact of the Gorkhaland movement on governance structures, inter-ethnic relations, and the broader framework of Indian federalism.
5. To identify potential pathways for conflict resolution, inclusive development, and peacebuilding in the Darjeeling hills and surrounding areas.

Research Methodology:

The research will adopt a qualitative approach, incorporating a mix of primary and secondary data collection methods. Primary data will be gathered through interviews with key stakeholders, leaders, activists, and members of the Gorkha community involved in the movement. Secondary data will be collected from academic literature, government reports, media sources, and archival documents related to the Gorkhaland Movement.

Conclusion:

Identity politics and regional aspirations are intricately linked, as seen by the Gorkhaland movement. This movement, which is based in West Bengal, India's Darjeeling hills, emphasizes the Gorkha community's fight for recognition and independence. The Gorkhaland demand, rooted in a separate ethnic identity, is a result of a feeling of economic neglect and cultural marginalization inside the state controlled by Bengalis. The movement's intensity has fluctuated over the years according to sociopolitical shifts and economic issues. When it comes to organizing the community and engaging in negotiations with the federal and state administrations, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) has been instrumental. The deep-seated frustrations and aspirations of the Gorkha people have been reflected in the movement's techniques, which have ranged from nonviolent protests to violent agitations.

The Gorkhaland movement is fundamentally about development, resource distribution, and government, not just ethnic identity. The Gorkhas think that having their own state will better meet their particular needs and goals, giving them a foundation for true socioeconomic advancement and empowerment. Internal strife, political manipulation, and striking a delicate balance between regional autonomy and national unity pose major obstacles for the movement. The Gorkhaland movement's wider ramifications draw attention to the complexity of India's federal system and the demand for a more welcoming view of regionalism. In addition to political talks, policies that guarantee equitable development and acknowledge regional identities are necessary to address such movements. The Gorkhaland case emphasizes the value of inclusive governance and communication in addressing regional ambitions while preserving national unity. Thus, this movement continues to be a crucial illustration of the relationship that exists in modern India between identity politics and regional desires.

REFERENCES:

1. Vanaik, Sanjay. "Ethnicity and nationalism in India: A study of the Gorkha people." *Asian Survey* 29, no. 7 (1989): 683-697.
2. Upadhyay, Suraj K. "Gorkhaland movement: A quest for Gorkha identity in India." *Asian Ethnicity* 20, no. 3 (2019).
3. Mukerji, Sumit. *Gorkhaland: The Dormant Volcano*. Kolkata: Rupa Publications India, 2014.
4. Gurung, Subrata. *Gorkhaland: Crisis of Statehood*. Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2009.
5. Rai, C. K. "Ethnic movements in Darjeeling hills: A historical perspective." *Journal of Indian Research* 5, no. 2 (2017): 51-58.

6. **6.**Samanta, Amiya K., 2000, Gorkhaland Movement: A Study in Ethnic Separatism, APH Publication Corporation, New Delhi.
7. **7.**Lama, M.P. (1996). "Gorkhaland Movement: Ethnic Conflict and State Response". Indian Journal of Political Science.
8. Hutt, M. (1997). "Nepali: A National Language and its Literature". Journal of Asian Studies.
9. Subba, T.B. (1992). "Ethnicity, State, and Development: A Case Study of the Gorkhaland Movement in Darjeeling". South Asia Research.
10. Dozey, E.C. (1922). "A Concise History of the Darjeeling District Since 1835". Bengal Secretariat Book Depot.
11. **11.**Sarkar, S. (2017). The Gorkhaland Movement: Identity and Politics in Darjeeling. Orient Blackswan.
12. Dutta Majumdar, Arkamoy. 2018. "Has BJP fallen out of favor with Gorkhas in Darjeeling?" Livemint, 21 February. <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/4DTdZTQgNLyqKXBZKjm00J/Has-BJP-fallen-out-of-favour-with-Gorkhas-in-Darjeeling.html>.
13. Hussain, Monirul. 1987. "Tribal movement for autonomous state in Assam." Economic and Political Weekly 22 (32): 1329–332.
14. Nayak, Purusottam. 2010. Human development reports in north-east India: A bird's eye view. Shillong, India: North-eastern Hill University.
15. Sengupta, Sulagna. 2017. "Gorkhaland protests get bloody: 2 GJM supporters killed, one cop stabbed." CatchNews, 17 June. <http://www.catchnews.com/india-news/gorkhaland-protests-get-bloody-2-gjm-supporters-killed-one-cop-stabbed-66048.html>.