Exploring the Dynamics of Ethnonationalism Through the Gorkhaland Movement

Pamela Bera, Department of Political Science, Sardar Patel University, Balaghat
Dr. Priti Kushwaha, Supervisor, Sardar Patel University, Balaghat

Abstract

The present paper is a critical review of the Gorkhaland movement as a form of ethnonationalism in the Indian federal and multicultural system. It follows the historical antecedents of the movement, which started in 1907, and examines the way the Indian Gorkha community, through the decades has been asking its representation in the form of a separate state and over time has migrated over phases of political advocacy, administrative dialogue and even a cultural assertion. Based on the theoretical literature of such authors as Anthony D. Smith, Benedict Anderson, Walker Connor, the paper puts the movement in the context of the broader ethnic identity, vision of community, and ethnic self-determination discourse. The study examines the major causes of the movement, e.g. cultural marginalization, economic neglect, political exclusion, and citizenship insecurity, as well as it analyses the effects of the change of political leadership and alliances. Even after giving Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) and Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) as an intervention, the movement has not been curbed and that is because there are felt to be deficiencies in autonomy and representation. The paper draws attention to the shortcomings of the present federal arrangement of India in meeting the demands of sub-nationalism and presents the case of a more democratic and decentralized system of governance that is tolerant of cultural differences without impairing national unity. In this view, the Gorkhaland movement becomes not just a political agitation of statehood; it becomes very much a notion of identity, a desire of dignity and democratic inclusion.

Keywords: Gorkhaland movement, ethnonationalism, Indian Gorkhas, political marginalization, identity politics, statehood demand, federalism in India, cultural autonomy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Political and social phenomenon ethnonationalism focuses around the conviction; a specific ethnic group forms a nation that needs political autonomy, identification, or even separate statehood. It appears with a great power in the multi-ethnic communities where certain groups feel pushed out or marginalized in the context of the national society. Ethnonationalism has burrowed in many areas in India, both geographically and socially such as in the northeastern states, Jammu and Kashmir and in the Darjeeling Hills, and reflect a distinct form of cultural pride, historical resentment and political reorganization. These mobilizations usually undermine the federal plasticity of the Indian state and their democratization inclusiveness.

The Gorkhaland movement that was a result of the Indian Gorkha community striving to attain a different identity is a captivating example of ethnonationalism. A demand of separate state of Gorkhaland in the Indian Union is being influenced by a lengthy history of socio-political disregard, cultural marginalization and poor representation in the state of West Bengal. The aim of the study is three-fold, besides describing the phenomena of ethnonationalism as a mobilizing process and an idiom of collective desires, to analyse the case-study of Gorkhaland movement to evaluate the process, the struggles, and the leadership, and what it can do to Indian federalism.

1.1. Background of the Study

The need to establish Gorkhaland is as old as the request by the leaders of Gorkha community when they asked the British colonial government in 1907 to grant them a separate administrative unit. The movement that has been in existence over decades has experienced various stages: starting with peaceful petitioning through to violent agitations, and militant leadership to democratic negotiating. Formation of semi-autonomous structures like the Darjeeling Gorkha hill council (DGHC) and the subsequent Gorkhaland territory administration (GTA) indicate the efforts of the state to satisfy the demands without a complete statehood. In spite of all this, the movement continues, which only indicates that the problems

of ethnic grievances remain unsolved and that the federal responses are not sufficient. This history path is on which the dynamics of ethnonationalism and the challenge it poses to the democratic governance and national integration in India is based..

1.2. Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the historical trajectory and evolution of the Gorkhaland movement as a case of ethnonationalism in India
- To examine the key socio-cultural, political, economic, and identity-based factors driving the demand for a separate Gorkhaland state.
- To evaluate the role of political leadership and shifting party dynamics in shaping the direction and momentum of the movement.
- To assess the responses of the state and central governments, including administrative interventions and the limitations of India's federal framework in addressing such demands.
- To explore the implications of the Gorkhaland movement for democratic governance, regional stability, and the broader discourse on ethnic identity and political autonomy in India.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ghatani (2022) discussed a neglected aspect of the involvement of women in the movement of Gorkhaland especially between the period of 2007 to 2017. Her work exposed the emotional, physical, and political work women did and was largely ignored in the mainstream accounts. She stressed that women were not mere spectators in protests and demonstrations but they also played important roles in ensuring that the movement thrived at grassroots. Capturing testimonies and the experiences of people on the ground, Ghatani highlighted the gendered aspects of ethnonationalist conflicts and made the case that women should receive more credit in the local movements, such as Gorkhaland.

Ghimiray (2017) considered the issue of the demand of Gorkhaland considering the perspective of fragmentation and self-determination, where the movement was discussed as a divisive or justified political autonomy movement. The article also demonstrated how ethnic identity, cultural alienation added to the long-term desire by the community to have an independent state. The details of detailed publication were vague but the study provided significant information of the ideological background of the movement and estimate its implication on Indian federalism and regional stability.

Joshi et al. (2018) carried out a comparative study on civil society responses to hydropower development in Darjeeling and Sikkim regions and placed environmental activism in a larger socio-political context. Although they did not especially address the Gorkhaland movement, they brought the Gorkhaland phenomenon into their film as the civil society groups in Darjeeling interacted with issues of control over resources, regional autonomy, and state responsibility. They also discovered that the issues of the environment were interpersonal in many cases with the politics of identity which also contributed to the need of local areas to have more say and control on its governance.

Khosla (2015) focused on roots of concerns and problems behind the Gorkhaland movement and outlined socio-political, cultural, and economic reasons that generated the need in statehood. The paper highlighted that due to unique identity and a long history of administrative carelessness which occurred alongside lack of political representation, the Gorkha community developed the sense of marginalization. Khosla noted too that governmental reactions to events have been repetitive as represented by the semi-autonomous institutions, which have done nothing to take root the basic grievance, thereby creating a flow of unrest and agitation within the area.

Kothi and Dixit (2020) provided an incisive detailing of the meaning of Gorkhaland movement in the larger perspective of Indian federalism and ethnic assertion. Their paper lived into the historical context of the movement, evaluated the changing leadership patterns within the movement, and assessed the input of regional and national political forces. Instead, they claimed that the movement was not a separatist claim but a valid claim to recognition, cultural

survival and autonomy of governance. The conclusion that the authors drew says that the perseverance of the movement pointed deeper structural weaknesses in the Indian state in dealing with the problems of ethnic and regional identity.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ETHNONATIONALISM

The concept of ethnonationalism is theoretically grounded and aimed at establishing a juxtaposition between the ethnic and the national identity. Historians such as Anthony D. Smith have stressed the importance of collective memories, myths, values and symbols as key in the process of ethnic communities being formed as nations. The ethnonationalism unit by Smith is the ethnic, where one hopes that his particular group should have its own country since there is some notion of a shared past and identity. In his masterpiece on the topic, Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson writes that nations are socially constructed communities, and are in fact imagined by the people who feel that they belong to this community. Ethnonationalism, in this opinion, is a form of allowing ethnic groups to turn their imagined cultural unity into a real-life political one. Walker Connor goes further to state that ethnonationalism sort of is propelled by an ethnic uniqueness feeling that very often has an upper hand over civic or territorial nationalism. He emphasizes that they may be more powerful and significant than the national loyalty, and in multiethnic society, some loyalty may be stronger, namely, the emotional call of the ethnic kinship.

Within the Indian scenario where multiplicity of linguistic, cultural and ethnic communities has been a characteristic feature of its pluralistic democracy, ethnonationalist movements become commonplace when these communities feel politically marginalized or culturally subordinate. This scenario is quite evident in the Gorkhaland movement whereby the Gorkha community, though Indians by nationality, has been undergoing a prolonged identity crisis since the 1910s due to culture stereotyping and negligence on part of the administration. Their insistence on independent state exists not only due to administrative convenience, it is the exclamation of ethnonationalist claim of distinct identity that needs to be given recognition and self-determination. When examined, vis-a-vis Smith, Anderson, and Connor, the Gorkhaland movement becomes consistent with the theoretical constructions of ethnonationalism- which aims at transforming collective feelings of single ethnic group membership into a legitimate political state that attests to their cultural autonomy and historical continuity within the Indian Union.

4. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE GORKHALAND MOVEMENT

The history of the movement can be traced back to the year 1907 when the need of an independent administrative unit was first directly expressed by Hillmen of Darjeeling Association of Hillmen who demanded an independent administrative unit as opposed to administrative district of Bengal. Gorkhas came across as soldiers to work in the tea plantations and also as staff at the tea plantations during the British colonial rule and settled mainly in Darjeeling Hills. In the years that followed there was a formulation of a cultural propaganda in the Gorkha community, but the overlooking in the political and administrative areas continued to be a constant concern.

After independence, identification of Indian Gorkhas as Nepali-speaking and culturally Chinese meant that they agreed with the rules of the rest of India. Feeling alienated led to attempts to ensure that loyalty was questioned. During 1980s, the movement became more militant led by Subhas Ghising and the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). The uprising resulted in violent demonstrations against the state forces that cost more than 1200 lives. All of this culminated into the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988 that offered partial autonomy and did not satisfy the quest of full statehood.

The lack of satisfaction as to the effectiveness of DGHC led to the emergence of Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) in 2007 led by Bimal Gurung that resurrected the call of Gorkhaland. The movement picked up its pace again particularly following the creation of new states such as Telangana raising hopes among the Gorkha population. The fight reached a major turning point in 2017 when the West Bengal government announced to forcefully make Bengali an official language a move that sparked off massive protest. This resulted in the subsequent

mobilization, a 104- day shutdown and a vicious struggle between the police and demonstrators.

Even with several political agreements, the formation of administrative organizations such as the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2011 is still seen as nothing more than a token compromise, and of no governative power or self-rule. The movement has since turned out to be a repetitive upheaval signifying protracted socio-political discontentment and the continuing need of the community to have its recognition, identity, and self-determination in the Indian Union.

5.   KEY DRIVERS OF THE MOVEMENT

Gorkhaland movements are driven by both cultural and political feelings, economic deprivation, as well as a sense of identity grievances, which constitute the heart of the Gorkhaland ethnonationalist platform:

1.   Cultural and Linguistic Identity:

The Indian Gorkhas also have a different cultural and linguistic background, which makes them stand out of the prevailing Bengali culture of the West Bengal region and is based on Nepali language as well as Himalayan ones. Although Nepali became an official language of India in 1992, Gorkhas still believe that their culture, language and the history lack enough use and respect within the mainstream Indian debate. The urge to define their identity imminently by the state government to introduce the Bengali language occasionally to schools, is seen as a threat resulting in calls of revolt. At its base, the movement is a quest to maintain and defend Gorkha identity in the Indian federation.

2.   Political Exclusion:

Most Gorkha people have always felt underserved by West Bengal since the political structure of West Bengal is largely viewed as offices that work in the disfavor of the Bengali-speaking community of the plains. Decisions taken with regard to the Darjeeling Hills end up being taken without proper consultations with local leaders and consideration of regional aspirations. This has been compounded by lack of proportional representation in the state assembly and even administrative positions thereby causing the secession demand to seem the sole, feasible way to achieve political empowerment.

3.   Economic Neglect:

The Darjeeling Hills have been an economically underdeveloped region despite being the major contributor in the economy due to tea, tourism and timber. The area has poor accessibility to quality education, medical facilities, roads and jobs. The lack of long-term investment by governments in backlogged infrastructure and poverty has been continued through chronic deficits. There is a common view that stalling of the economy is a result of the systemic fact that state government failed to take cognizance hence reaffirming the notion that only a separate state will help develop the region to its full potential.

4.   Citizenship Insecurity:

Despite the fact that Indian Gorkhas have been serving and contributing with pride in the Indian Army and other areas, they are not free of allegations of being non-citizens, not loyal to the country and this is attributed partly to the Nepali origin as well as the open-border treaty between India and Nepal. These misgivings, which are not based on any truth and have created stigma and marginalization, have also raised the further need to have a political entity that can not only establish their Indian identity, but also protect their self-respects and rights.

As a combination, these drivers play into the ethnonationalist discourse of the Gorkhaland movement which demands a separate state in the Indian Union where Gorkhas could enjoy cultural preservation, political representation, economic growth, and social dignity. The pressure is not administrative only, but highly emotional and historical statement in favor of recognition and auto-determination under a federal democratic system.

6.   POLITICAL DYNAMICS AND SHIFTING LEADERSHIP

Dynamic and much subdivided political leadership has characterized the Gorkhaland movement with consolidation, transition and internal competitions, and shaped and re-shaped

it several times. Such changes have influenced extensively the inertia, plausibility and the strategic integrity of the movement.

- **GNLF Era (1980s–1990s):**

The movement got a political garb when, under Subhas Ghising and his party, Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), a violent and large-scale agitation was organised in the 1980s to carve out a separate state of Gorkhaland. Ghising became the only face of the movement and his influence was high. But there occurred the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) agreement of 1988, which was a compromise after confrontation between the GNLF, the state and the central governments. Although the DGHC accorded certain administrative rights, its acceptance by Ghising was being perceived by much of the community as a step backwards in the striving of achieving the final destination of statehood and therefore, there was an increasing disappointment in the community.

- **Rise of the GJM (2007–2017):**

The Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) under Bimal Gurung evolved as the dissatisfaction rose over the incompetence of the Ghising leadership and the DGHC. Gurung made use of the situation of general frustration and revived the interest in Gorkhaland with more fervor and popular proportions particularly among the young generations. The GJM dismissed the DGHC and campaigned to achieve full statehood, which got popular support. In 2011, the GJM accepted the creation of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), which similarly to its predecessor, did not bring actual autonomy and made the demands of the movement even angrier.

- **Fragmentation Post-2017:**

Agitation in 2017 characterized by mass mobilization and 104 days of strike failed to achieve significant result and led to the political fragmentation period. Bimal Gurung hid himself following the charge of the anti-terror laws and intra-factional disagreements gave out to divisions within the GJM and the emergence of various splinter groups. One of them was:

- The refurbished GNLF, trying to re-strategize its previous power.
- The Gorkha Janmukti Nari Morcha, the organization targeted at women involvement in movement.
- The Bharatiya Gorkha Prajatantrik Morcha (BGPM) is headed by Anit Thapa who are presenting themselves as being the more realistic developmental oriented alternative to confrontation.

This disintegration undermined the centralized leadership that used to be typical of the movement, undermined its bargaining and degraded its political message. The level of trust held by the people to the leaders of the movement also started falling by the wayside with reports of opportunism, corruption and back-room deals with the ruling parties about.

- **Role of National Parties:**

During elections, national political parties especially the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have tried to leverage on the Gorkha aspirations in the electoral fortunes. BJP has repeatedly made promises to the formation of Gorkhaland and even has contested with Gorkha candidates in Darjeeling so as to consolidate the hill vote. Nevertheless, even though the BJP has secured parliamentary elections in the region on several occasions, the party has been very restive towards taking any tangible steps as far as a policy or legislature to create statehood is concerned, and thus, the failure has been labeled as political dabbling.

The national and regional parties such as the Congress and TMC (Trinamool Congress) have opposed bifurcation of West Bengal making focus on territorial integrity and administrative unity. Such opposing stances developed a complicated political scene in which local leader gets trapped between political interests as well as ideological interests, a factor that complicates the move landscape of the movement.

7. GOVERNMENT RESPONSE AND FEDERAL CHALLENGES

The Indian state: the state government and the central government have been ambivalent, hesitating and inconsistent in its reaction to the Gorkhaland movement influenced as it has been

by the contradiction between appeasing regional aspirations on the one hand and the need to uphold national integrity on the other. The approaches used are a mixture of a political compromise, administrative decentralization and coercive suppression none of which have successfully resolved the main issues of the movement.

a)   Creation of Semi-Autonomous Bodies:

During the agitation by the GNLF led to the formation of a Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988 in an effort to satisfy the demand of Gorkhaland without being out of full statehood. In spite of the struggles aimed at bringing limited self-rule, the DGHC lacked financial independence, significant legislative authority and was over-reliant on the state government hence failed regardless of serving locally-held interests.

Subsequently, a tripartite pact between GJM, West Bengal and the Union government led to the creation of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2011. The GTA presented more extensive administrative framework and was equally devoid of constitutional nature, financial independence, as well as any true political distance. The repeated collapse of those institutions accelerated the distrust towards the state and the central governments, but also strengthened the belief that only the full state could fulfill political and developmental needs of the region.

b)   State Government's Reluctance:

The West Bengal governments both in the Left Front and also with the Trinamool Congress have always been deeply opposed to the concept of Gorkhaland. The main theme of their argument is about the possibility of balkanization of the state and how this would start cascading effect in other parts of the state with separatist tendencies like Junglemahal and Cooch Behar. According to the position of the state, the concession to a demand would hurt the administrative cohesion, economic unity, and political control. Because of this, law-and-order has been frequently used by the state to deter agitations such as police crackdowns and arrests of movement leaders as well as curfews.

c)   Central Government's Ambiguity:

The strategic position of the Union government has been that of non-committal and has at times swerved between diplomatic silence and tongue-in-cheek assurances. Although there are a few central leaders whose sympathies lie with the cause of Gorkha (most notable when it comes to elections), there has not been any decisive move in terms of giving the state its rights. This is the fear of a political precedent by which the demand may become an example for other sub-national regions in India, like in Vidarbha, Bodoland, and Ladakh (before its UT status). In addition, coalition politics and using favourable relations with the ruling parties in West Bengal have found their way in ensuring that the Centre is cautious in its action.

d)   Federal Dilemmas and Structural Challenges:

The Gorkhaland issue reinforces the structural conflicts in Indian federal system. Although India is federally structured in the features of its constitution, there are still firm unitary elements, which make ethnonationalist movements hard to achieve any solution in the procedures of the existing institutions. Such demands lack a democratic process of decision making because there is no legal procedure to establish new states on an ethnic, linguistic or cultural basis.

The movement therefore brings out inadequacies of decentralization and regional autonomy within the present structure of federalism in India. The failure to meet acceptable solutions of sub-state identity based on claims will pose a risk of long term alienation, occasional violence and break down of trust in democratic institutions.

8.   CONCLUSION

The Gorkhaland movement in India highlights the dynamism of ethnonationalism in a multicultural and federal democracy. The Indian Gorkhas have been demanding a separate state for over a century, seeking political recognition and autonomy due to historical marginalization, cultural specificities, and grievances around identity. Although semi-autonomous institutions have been created, they have not provided true autonomy and little economic and political support. The movement has gone through various stages, including militant and democratic struggles, internal changes of leadership, and strategic electoral

alliances. The Gorkhaland case highlights the inadequacy of the current federal system in India to meet sub-nationalistic aspirations and calls for an urgent adaptation of a responsive, participatory, and decentralized model that upholds national integrity while respecting ethnic diversity. Addressing such movements requires administrative reform and an earnest political will to accommodate the sense of identity and emergent needs of marginalized identity groups like the Indian Gorkhas.

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