

Insurgencies in Northeast India: The Case of the Gorkhaland Movement

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Introduction

Despite being one of the most rapidly advancing economies in the world, poverty-related unrest is one of India's most persistent problems since its independence from British colonial rule in 1947. Most of the economic growth has usually been registered by states which were already well-off to begin with. Conversely, the poorer states continue to suffer (Kopf 2017). Northeast India in particular has remained economically backward since India's independence because of poor infrastructure, low investments, inefficient governance, and insensitivity towards ethnic groups (De 2017). Consequently, several violent sovereignty movements persist (Mehta 2016; Pradhan 2017; South Asia Terrorism Portal 2018). This essay will focus on the Gorkhaland Movement in Northeast India, identify challenges to conflict resolution, and describe a comprehensive socioeconomic development plan that can help address the problems much more effectively.

The Political Landscape of Northeastern India

Northeast India consists of eight federal states: Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim. The northern districts of West Bengal are also considered part of the region. Siliguri, the largest urban agglomeration of northern West Bengal, contains a narrow piece of land, popularly known as the “chicken neck,” which is the only link between the northeast region and the rest of India (Singh and Singh 2010, 78). Northeast India is also strategically important because of its proximity to Bhutan, China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. It displays considerable geographical diversity, from plains to rugged, mountainous terrains (Nayak 2010, 2). Despite its position and bountiful natural resources, the region has often been neglected by the Indian administration (Purkayastha 2014).

Average literacy rates have been consistently high in several northeastern states (Nayak 2010, 2–3) because of extensive Christian missionary work since the nineteenth century (Anikuzhikattil 2010). Unfortunately, educational progress still failed to bring about substantial economic transformation (Ministry of Labour and Employment 2012; Reserve Bank of India 2017) because of “underdevelopment” (Dubey and Pala 2009, 65) and insufficient investments in infrastructure. Widespread poverty and lack of faith in the Indian government have engendered intertribe conflicts and the displacement locals from their land, who compete with immigrants from the erstwhile East Pakistan, Nepal, and other parts of India. The situation has helped fuel innumerable insurgent movements across the region (Datta 2000, 2126–127; Choudhury 2015, 82; Das 2009, 18; GlobalSecurity.org; Hussain 1987, 1331; Misra 2009, 13; Singh 2017; Singh 2019; Tohring 2010, xv; IANS 2017).

This essay will focus on the Gorkhaland Movement of northern West Bengal, which differs from most sovereignty movements in northeast India. Almost all of the latter’s demands have been made by natives, but the Gorkhaland Movement is driven by the nonindigenous Nepalese, or

the Gorkha community of Darjeeling, parts of Jalpaiguri, and the newly formed Kalimpong district. Indeed, the Gorkhaland movement is a singular case of conflict between two sets of immigrants—the Gorkhas and the Bengalis (Banerjee and Stöber 2013).

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 labourers, 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 migration in history; vast numbers of Hindu Bengali 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 (Khatun

2014, 170, 190). Conversely, the Nepalese working in the tea gardens felt exploited (Banerjee and Stöber 2013, 5).

In 1943, the All India Gorkha League made the first organized attempt to struggle for Gorkha rights. Gorkha animosity towards the Bengali and an emerging consciousness regarding their language and identity instigated the League to call for regional autonomy for Darjeeling (Datta 1991, 227). The demand for a separate homeland for the Gorkha community was first put forward in 1980 by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) under its leader, Subhash Ghising. The GNLF was primarily active in the “hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong” (Datta 1991, 228). While these were important reasons for demanding a separate state, the “immediate” catalyst of the Gorkhaland movement was the eviction of Nepalese mine workers from Meghalaya in 1985 because of the lack of official “entry permits” (Sarkar 2014, 36). This was followed by demands in Assam to oust immigrants from these regions. Subsequently, the Nepalese or the Gorkha community of Darjeeling protested against unfair treatment in 1986 (*ibid.*). After the incident in Meghalaya, the GNLF lost faith in the state government of West Bengal, which was led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). They opined that the latter, which was predominantly controlled by the Bengali community, could easily treat the Gorkha as they had been treated in Meghalaya and Assam. Economic backwardness arising from the decrease in tea production, labour problems, and insolvency in the existing tea estates exacerbated the unrest (Datta 1991, 228–29). Under these circumstances, the GNLF launched an insurgent movement demanding official recognition of their language, and a separate Gorkhaland for the Nepalese community in Darjeeling. Incidentally, the “proposed” boundaries of the (Datta 1991, 229) new state was supposed to include parts of Jalpaiguri and Koch Bihar, which were not even predominantly Nepalese. These developments engendered an apprehension that a separate Gorkhaland might eventually lead to a cataclysmic situation in the entire northeast (Datta 1991, 229–30). Strikes were rampant between 1986 and 1988, causing several casualties and injuries

(Singh 2017). The GNLF recruited Gorkha youth and urged the Nepalese to stop paying taxes. The Leftist government of West Bengal declared the movement antinational 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 formation of the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJMM) in 2007 marked another important phase in the history of the Gorkhaland Movement. The GJMM urged the Gorkha people not to pay taxes and utility bills; they were also “restricting the tea and timber to move outside the hills, etc.” (Sarkar 2012, 21). However, unlike the GNLF, the GJMM did not always resort to force and violence. Except for reports of sporadic incidents of violence (*ibid.*), the GJMM was generally more “peaceful” than its predecessor. During this time, the GJMM garnered a substantial and loyal following in the region and achieved remarkable success at the 2011 state elections (Sharma 2014, 49).

This compelled state and the central governments to attempt a peaceful solution to the Gorkhaland issue: the creation of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2011 (*ibid.*). The GTA stabilized the situation to a considerable extent, although occasional unrests still erupted in Darjeeling (Giri 2017a), Sukna (Giri 2017b), and Kalimpong (Sarkar

2017). Severe violent protests in May 2017 occurred after the West Bengal government decided to make Bengali a compulsory language in every school of the state, a policy lobbied by the All India Trinamool Congress (Scoop Whoop 2017). On the whole, the GTA remains functional in Darjeeling, and relative peace prevails. Even so, tension and brutality will probably continue in the near future unless holistic solutions are achieved.

Economic Impact of the Gorkhaland Movement

The Gorkhaland Movement had adverse impacts on Darjeeling's economy. Mass agitation, road and railway blockades, and strikes have occurred frequently over the last 40 years. During such movements, trading enterprises, offices, hotels, banks, and hospitals remained closed indefinitely, causing massive monetary losses (Baskota 2017). Tea gardens stopped operation for indeterminate periods, thereby resulting in income loss among daily wage plantation labourers, in the short run at least. Persistent violence has also deterred tourism and disrupted the livelihoods of shopkeepers, car rental service owners and drivers, porters, and hotel and restaurant owners and employees. Closure of several national highways during protests affected trade and industry (ibid.) and severed connectivity to important urban centres, stopping the inflow of goods and services (Chattopadhyay 2008). Unsurprisingly, the Bengali and other non-Nepalese residents disapprove of the movement. But the onus of these losses cannot be placed solely on the Gorkha who view the Gorkhaland Movement as the only way to attain a homeland for themselves. Anecdotal interactions with a few local Gorkha inhabitants reveal that they are willing to face economic difficulties during unrests because statehood was far more important to them.

Understanding the Gorkhaland Movement in West Bengal: Approaches

The interrelationships between poverty and ethnic conflicts have been studied using a wide range of approaches. The “developmental,” the “reactive ethnicity,” and the “ethnic competition” approaches may be considered the most relevant for the Gorkhaland Movement (Hechter 1974, 1154; Nielsen 1985, 133–34; Ragin 1979, 620–23). According to the developmental approach, marginalized ethnic communities inhabiting socioeconomically underdeveloped regions engage in political movements that demand sovereignty when the government cannot bring about their holistic upliftment and “integrate” them into “mainstream” society (Ganguly 2005, 470).

On the other hand, the “reactive ethnicity” approach asserts that “ethnic political mobilization” (Ragin 1979, 621) of backward communities occurs primarily because of the inequitable distribution of resources that ensues “due to the cultural division of labour” (Nielsen 1985, 133) after the immigration of other ethnic groups in a particular region. These immigrants usually become the dominant socioeconomic and political force after acquiring the majority of resources and better jobs. This leads to the marginalization of groups in the resulting ethnocratic state. The “ethnic competition” approach emphasizes conflict over “scarce rewards and resources” (Ganguly 2005, 471) between hegemonic and subaltern sections of a society. In this case, the “dominant groups politically mobilize to safeguard their privileged positions whereas subordinate groups do so to demand a more equitable share of the rewards and resources” (Ganguly 2005, 471). Although the “reactive ethnicity” and the “ethnic competition” approaches have inherent theoretical similarities, there is a difference in perspectives. The former emphasizes the unequal allocation of resources between communities, while the latter focuses on the capability of groups to acquire more resources through competition.

All three viewpoints apply to the Gorkhaland Movement, albeit with certain qualifications. It is true that the Gorkha community was not successfully incorporated into mainstream society by the state and central administrations. Immigrants from other communities, especially the Hindu Bengalis, eventually gained most of the regional resources and jobs. And the Gorkhas lost to the socioeconomically dominant community in the competition over scarce resources. Nevertheless, the Gorkha themselves are not the “sons of the soil” (Banerjee and Stöber 2013, 5) of Darjeeling, but immigrants from Nepal. Thus, the reactive ethnicity holds only partially true in this context.

The Need for Comprehensive Development

The Gorkhaland Movement has been accused time and again of maintaining connections with other armed insurgent groups in the northeast. These allegations were most recently made by the Chief Minister of West Bengal in 2017 when the police recovered illegitimate arms and large amounts of unaccounted cash from the Gorkhas (Sengupta 2017). If true, such liaisons are extremely perilous since they can potentially exacerbate the Gorkhaland conflict. At the same time, however, the intensification of poverty—because of the aforementioned government neglect of northeast India and Gorkha aspirations, and continued disruption to the economy—may incite the northeastern political movements and other local penurious inhabitants to indulge in, and earn from, narco-trafficking, which has escalated in the Golden Triangle of South Asia (Lyttleton 2004, 909–35). The proximity of the Golden Triangle to India’s northeast makes this region especially vulnerable to the rising illegal narcotic trade. Continuous political instability in the region may encourage other neighbouring countries to manipulate the situation in their favour and influence public opinion.

Even so, the most vital reason to address the conflict—and resolve the foregoing issues—is justice for the Gorkha people. The comprehensive socioeconomic development of Darjeeling and its surroundings, and a sympathetic understanding of the Gorkha populace’ sentiments, are the primary solution. An overall economic upliftment of the Gorkha community shall be of utmost importance since economic exploitation by immigrants is one of their major grievances. The introduction of a modern form of education, using Nepalese language as the primary medium of instruction, may assure the Gorkha of the government’s willingness to recognize their language. It shall also enable people to better understand the curriculum. Better education will in turn help expand job opportunities and improve standards of living. Formulation of strategies to achieve this situation is essential since the tea industry remains one of the main pillars of the regional economy, which employs many Gorkhas. Establishment of industries which are compatible with the mountainous terrain and the environment of Darjeeling and Kalimpong shall also create new employment prospects and help effect large-scale development. Additionally, involving the Gorkha populace in microlevel planning decisions will allow them to support the government.

Development is a relative concept. As such, one’s ideal of development may not coincide with that of the Gorkha community. Economic advancement on its own may not be enough to restore peace in the region, since the Gorkha are willing to face economic deprivation in their struggle for a separate state. Cultural recognition as an integral part of their idea of well-being needs to be understood and respected as well. Therefore, it is monumentally important that they feel culturally secure in Darjeeling. The dominance of Bengali culture in the region has been one of the main and persistent sources of anguish for the Gorkha community. Therefore, the state government of West Bengal, as well as the national government, must preserve the Gorkha identity and language, instead of forcing them to assimilate into the dominant, mainstream culture. For instance, the state’s decision in 2017 to make Bengali a compulsory language in all its schools, including those in Darjeeling, proved to be hasty and

unwise. Gorkha activists resorted to violence to express their outrage (Pradhan 2017). Additionally, mere appeasement of the Gorkha community for votebank politics by various regional political parties has only prolonged the conflict. The declarations of the present central government of India—led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—to support the Gorkha people without making any constructive efforts to improve their condition, have disillusioned many of them, and contributed to ongoing rifts between the GNLf and the GJMM (Dutta Majumdar 2018). Moreover, inconsistencies within the BJP party regarding support for Gorkhaland has generated confusion among the community about its true intentions (Datta 2017). All in all, economic integration of the Gorkha populace with the mainstream Indian society, along with maintenance of their cultural uniqueness, is crucial to solving the problems related to the Gorkhaland Movement in West Bengal.

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