

# Geopolitical issues in West Bengal associated with 'Gorkhaland' agitation in hilly Darjeeling – Search for peaceful suggestions for the Gorkha life

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## Abstract

After just finishing of Panchayat Election of 2013 in West Bengal, Darjeeling had raised a demand for separate state 'Gorkhaland', though it has originated from the issue of state reorganisation agitation regarding Telengana division in south India. West Bengal is a state of eastern part of India and Darjeeling is a district of northern part of West Bengal. Darjeeling is a hilly district excepting Siliguri because Siliguri is a plain area. This paper has its importance in sighting, geopolitically, the causes of Gorkhaland demand, standpoint of West Bengal government, reasons of failure of Gorkha movement and peaceful solution.

**Keywords:** *Gorkhaland, Darjeeling, West Bengal, agitation, GTA, Indo-Nepal treaty, language, tribe, British rule, support.*

## 1. Introduction:

During British rule, India was divided into provinces, administered by viceroy. These provinces were made for British administrative feasibility irrespective to the linguistic division. Thus a province might involve more than one language groups, e.g. during British rule province of Bombay included Gujrathi and Marathi speakers and several other languages. After independence agitations started by different linguistic groups to revise the state boundaries based on the language. During 1953, a demand had been arisen to make Andhra Pradesh for Telugu speakers at the north of the province of Madras and at the same time other linguistic groups also started shouting for separate states. Though, Indian National Congress (INC) which was the single largest party in India after independence never supported linguistic measure to

reorganise the state boundaries but, after six years of independence INC was compelled to set up State Reorganisation Commission (1953) to reform the boundaries of states and united territories.

It is worthwhile to say that state boundaries which were set up during 1951 remained unchanged mostly for northern part of India. South India, on contrary to it, has got change totally (Map-2 and 3). So, agitation regarding state reorganisation is not new in India. We may find several examples of changing the state boundaries and that tradition is still going on. It is very much interesting to say that a new state Telengana which formed in recent past (2014) dividing Andhra Pradesh was a part of Hyderabad state. That was merged with Andhra State (i.e. Andhra Pradesh) just before 57 years (1956). We have also seen Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Mahdy Pradesh to be divided in 2001. These examples are not only to show the history of state reform but also to make base of geopolitical analysis of 'Gorkhaland Agitation' which had recently been started just after Telengana issue. "If there can be a Telangana state then why not a Gorkhaland? We are demanding that our 107-year-old legitimate demand (for a separate state) be fulfilled," GJM general secretary and spokesman Roshan Giri told reporters after a party core committee meeting here on 31st July, 2013 (Times of India 1<sup>st</sup> Aug, 2013).

There are 20 districts in West Bengal. Darjeeling is one of them. Darjeeling is having with four administrative divisions namely Kalimpong, Kurseong, Darjeeling and Siliguri. Now, the ministerial members (Gorkha Janamukti Morcha) of Darjeeling are demanding atleast first three administrative divisions out of four to make separate state Gorkhaland (Map-1). The

Government of West Bengal is against of this demand.

**2. Discussion:**

**Standpoint of West Bengal Government:**

Darjeeling was not actually with the state boundary of West Bengal. It was included with in West Bengal during 1912. Before 1912, Darjeeling was with in Sikkim and Bhutan. Only for 28 years (from 1788-1816) a part (i.e. Terai at the foot hill) of it was under King of Nepal, because Nepal won it at that time from them (Sikkim and Bhutan). British Empire owned it from Nepal during 1835, “following the wars and treaties signed with these two kingdoms (Sikkim and Bhutan), this territory came under control of British Empire in India” (Gorkhaland Agitation-The Issue-An information document.). So, Darjeeling was not a ‘ceded tract’ of Nepal.

What development we can see presently in Darjeeling is largely due to British Empire during pre-independence period. There were only around 100 inhabitants in Darjeeling. They all were Lepcha. This land was full of forest. Three ‘T’s, in the form of tea, tourism and timber which form the present economy of Darjeeling were totally absent before the British had come. But it is true that

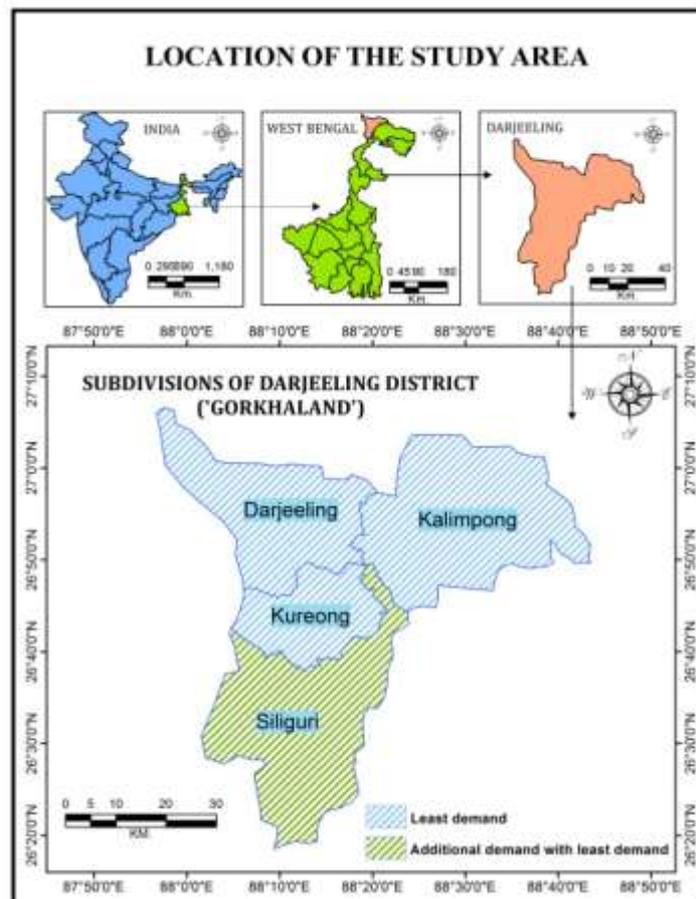
British Empire who initiated all these development needed labour; consequently many Nepalese immigrated in this area to be labour and gradually became permanent inhabitants of this area. As a result of this, population increased rapidly.

Though majority belong to the Nepali language group but only a meagre percentage of them are tribal being aborigines of that area. Agitation is mostly from non-tribal Nepali. It is also true that in Indian constitution tribe is out of the criteria set up for the state reform, though the chief of GNLF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) Subhas Gheising told on 2<sup>nd</sup> June of 1985 that “Gorkhaland is our ethnic demand...” (Gorkhaland Agitation-The Issue-An information document.).

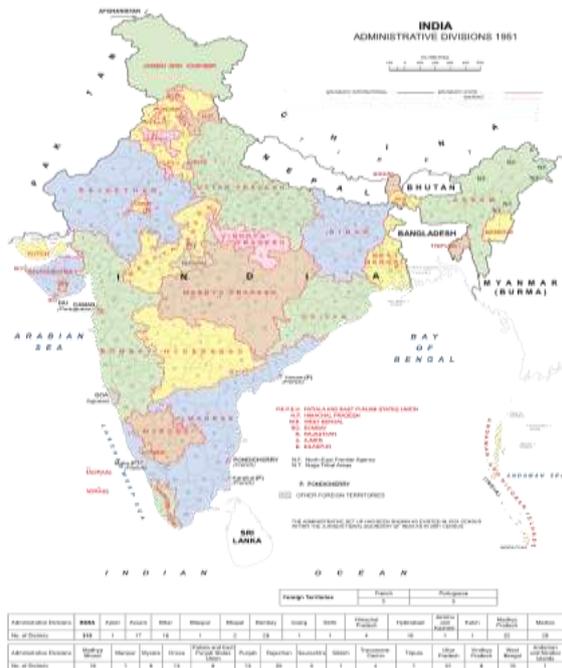
Several times briquette demand of Gorkhaland came in front of us, sometime to make it separate state or separate union territory or even country. None of them can be accepted to keep states’ integration intact.

However, from the view point of all sorts of development Darjeeling is ahead of other districts of West Bengal. Beside this, state government has launched several plan programmes to develop this region. Moreover, they have been given autonomous power to run their region.

So, why are they willing to be separated from West Bengal? This is the asking of state government.



Map-1: Location of the study area



Map-2: Administrative divisions of India in 1951.   
 Source: en.wikipedia.org



Map-3: South Indian States prior to the State Reorganisation Act.   
 Source: en.wikipedia.org

**Standpoint of GJM (Gorkha Janamukti Morcha) Leaders of Gorkhaland agitation:**

"We are carrying out a peaceful agitation through democratic means for statehood of Gorkhaland. If the state government depresses it we will intensify our agitation ... We will continue our agitation ... at any cost, any sacrifice till we get our Gorkhaland," GJM (Gorkha Janamukti Morcha) general secretary and spokesman Roshan Giri said (Times of India, 1<sup>st</sup> Aug, 2013).

"Simply we have demanded a separate identity or separate State within Indian Union. If the centre can give separate State Bengal for Bengalis, Rajasthan for Marwaris, Assam for Assamese, why we the Nepali, Gorkha can't get separate State 'Gorkhaland' within Indian Union?.... If the citizen of any country could not get bonafide justification, how the democracy can remain alive? The India Government talks about secularism, national integration but in practice it is nil" (Gorkhaland Agitation-The Issue-An information document.).

Tea, tourism and timber are main resources of Darjeeling which on large scale are supplied to the plain region of West Bengal. Despite, people of Darjeeling hills are deprived from their own share. During establishing of GTA (Gorkha Territorial Administration), according to pass out bill, some treaties were signed which were/are not fulfilled. Thus GTA formation to give them autonomy is not supported by them. Gorkhaland Territorial Administration is an autonomous hill council formed a year ago. Bimal Gurung faxed his resignation letter to Governor M. K. Narayanan. "I

have resigned from the GTA. I am severing ties with the state government," he told the media persons. Giri blamed the West Bengal government for 'compelling' Gurung to quit as GTA CEO. The state government did not allow GTA to function properly and never handed key departments like home and finance to it, he said. "My resignation is on the demand for the formation of Gorkhaland state within the framework of the Indian Constitution and interference of West Bengal Government in the day-to-day functioning of GTA which has made it a total failure...." (The Indian Express 31<sup>st</sup> July, 2013).

He termed as 'untrue' chief minister Mamata Banerjee's allegation that Congress had instigated the Darjeeling agitation. "Congress did not instigate us ... The Gorkhas are very peace-loving people. But we have not been given any recognition and no state was given to us despite our sacrifices in the various wars. Today we have no identity - nobody, neither the Centre nor the state gave it to us," Giri said (Times of India 1<sup>st</sup> Aug, 2013).

"Mangal Singh Rajput set himself on fire. We have admitted him to a local hospital. The doctors told me that he is stable and will survive," Kunal Agarwal, Superintendent of Police, Darjeeling, told The Hindu over telephone from the district. Mr. Gurung described Mr. Rajput as a "brave soldier" and added that "the entire Gorkhaland family" should be praying for his life. "I would also like to ask the Central government how many [more] people have to set themselves on fire for Gorkhaland" (The Hindu- 30<sup>th</sup> July, 2013).

**Causes of failure of Gorkhaland agitation:**

**Firstly:** GTA members had taken many wrong steps. For example they called 'bandh' (i.e. strike) which lasted more than one month. Where we feel one day 'bandh' very much destructive, no doubt is there that one month 'bandh' was enough to form stunted and regressive growth of economy of Darjeeling. The goods are normally costly at Darjeeling because it is hilly region. The 'bandh' had increased the rate of goods. Moreover, all the schools, colleges, administrative sections, tea industries, tourism had been closed. So, it is questionable after a limit whether the 'bandh' called by leaders are beneficial for Darjeeling people or harmful for Darjeeling people. Answer must be second one. Thus GTA members probably lost local public support by heart at that time. After two or three days 'bandh' it was better to call the hunger-strike from GTA members. Then more pressure could be created not only on state government but also on central government.

**Secondly:** They became failure to raise their actual problem. Why have they not focused keenly on the treaties of GTA which have not been fulfilled till date? Instead of this, they made some stupid and backdated commence like- "If there can be a Telangana state then why not a Gorkhaland? We are demanding that our 107-year-old legitimate demand (for a separate state) be fulfilled," etc. It is because of the fact that if they have been provided with the separate state all the separate language groups will start shouting for separate state. Then neither it will be possible to give them separate state nor it will be possible to maintain the unity in diversity through out the country.

**Thirdly:** They again and again went to central government hoping central interference on the matter of Gorkhaland. But they perhaps have forgotten the past that even after several request and memorandum to the central government, no step has been taken by central government. It is noteworthy that most of those memorandum were given to most famous congress PM namely Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi etc. So, how can they expect that Congress government who was at the centre will take step forward to accept the same proposal?

**Fourthly:** Why have they not involved Lepcha tribal group in the agitation? If Lepcha might involve in the agitation through hunger-strike then state government might fall in pressure. Beside these, they were unable to acquire the people support of plain region. For that they had to come in street of Kolkata to agitate peacefully by showing their practical problems by banner and hand poster. By such activity they could acquire a percentage support not only from Kolkata but also from entire West Bengal. They had also to push up

leaders of Sikkim and Nepal. Anyhow if they can acquire support of Nepal then the agitation can get a new direction. But it is matter of sorrow that Subhas Gheising, chief of GNLF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) in neither past, nor present GJM members could acquire support of Nepal. Speech of GNLF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) Subhas Gheising dated 02/06/1985 was like that "To our demand for a separate State 'Gorkhaland' neither India nor Nepal Government is giving any attention" (Gorkhaland Agitation-The Issue-An information document).

**Peaceful Solution:**

**Solution I:** Hill Darjeeling can not be divided as separate state. Rather it can be better to incorporate hill Darjeeling with the Sikkim because language and race of these two provinces are same. Beside this once Darjeeling was with in Sikkim. Thus there will be no problem to include Darjeeling with them. However, after joining Darjeeling with Sikkim, the name of Sikkim must be unchanged.

**Solution II:** Indo-Nepal treaty which was made during 1950 includes ten articles. Few of those articles must be modified. In Indian history we have seen that China did not obey the treaties of Shimla Convention (1914) fixed by British Government of pre-independent India with China. Even it had been asked by China "the then Chinese government representative did not sign the Shimla Convention of 1914. How can it, therefore, be binding on the present communist regime to accept the McMahon line?" (Dwivedi, 2007). Perhaps there were some controversial lines. Thus fault should be removed from the treaties. Article VI and VII of Indo-Nepal treaty which was made during 1950 must be modified. Article VI and VII are –

**Article VI**

*Each Government undertakes, in token of the neighbourly friendship between India and Nepal, to give the nationals of the other, in its territory, national treatment with regard to participation in industrial and economic development of such territory and to the grant of concessions and contracts relating to such development (Indo-Nepal treaties, Kathmandu, 31<sup>st</sup> July 1950).*

**Article VII**

*The Government of India and Nepal agree to grant, on a reciprocal basis, to the nationals of one country in the territories of the other same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature (Indo-Nepal treaties, Kathmandu, 31<sup>st</sup> July 1950).*

Degree of liberization is more than needed in these two articles. It was important to indicate clearly that how one of a country to others' country can reciprocally use the residence, property and can participate in trade and commerce, movement and

other privileges of similar nature? Article VI is also not clear similarly. It is important to say that recently, for Indo-Nepal cross border movement passport is not required. For Indo-Nepal cross border movement passport must be assigned. Thus migration can be checked. At the same time criminal activities can be restricted because it has been proved that Indo-Nepal border is being used by the terrorist activities. So, regarding this one more article must be included. Nowhere, it has been included in none of any article clearly regarding the Nepali immigrants in India or vice-versa.

**Solution III:** If Darjeeling is not separated and remain as integrated part of West Bengal then treaties which were passed for hill Darjeeling during formation of GTA much be launched completely. For example, provision of separate recruitment for Darjeeling youth which was one most important treaties of GTA has not been launched till this date. This may be sited as a fault of West Bengal Government.

**Solution IV:** Darjeeling may be separated as Union territory. Then each and every problem can be solved under direct supervision of centre. At the same time, much more privileges will be achieved.

**Solution V:** Darjeeling can be separated as separate state on the basis of population. Population of Darjeeling is 18,42,034 (2011 census). There are five states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Sikkim having population less than Darjeeling. Moreover Sikkim is a Nepali state having only one third population (6,07,688 according to 2011 census) of Darjeeling. Not only that but recently Darjeeling has almost 9,00,000 of Gorkha also. Then why Darjeeling can not get separate state.

### 3. Conclusion:

Agitation for separate state is not new issue for India. But it is also true that such type of activity

has led to immense loss to general people during agitation. Agitation for state division is largely political than human action. To remove this drawback new act must be made in Indian constitution. Media should act well from all view point with such agitation. However Darjeeling is known as Queen of West Bengal. So, neither should queen be divided nor should she be deprived. Demand of Gorkhaland is 107 years old. Thus any time this agitation can come again in front like lava of volcano. Though several alternative solutions have been provided but each of them may lead to another problem. For instance, whether there will be no agitation in Sikkim if Darjeeling is merged with Sikkim? Secondly, if Darjeeling is separated then number of Nepali immigrants may increase in Gorkhaland. So far estimated Nepali population in India (2011) is 41,00,000 which is second highest in world after Nepal. So, more immigrants in future may lead to civil war at Darjeeling and then that may lead to harm for Gorkha brothers and sisters.

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