

The struggle for Gorkhaland

The Himalayan foothills of Darjeeling are boiling again after 20 years of relative calm. Residents there have taken to the streets in the quest for independence from West Bengal and a separate state, Gorkhaland, within the framework of the Indian Constitution.

As with other low-intensity conflicts in India, such as Jharkhand and Uttarakhand, the Gorkhas seek independence from the state, but not the country. Within many Indian states, one ethnic group often dominates a number of linguistic, ethnic or religious minorities. This holds true for majority-Bengali West Bengal.

Separatist leaders have used complaints from the Gorkhas of neglect and domination by the Bengalis to mobilize the Nepali-speaking minority of the Darjeeling hills, emphasizing their common Gorkha identity. Yet, that very identity is controversial, and there is a lack of agreement among the locals on what "Gorkha" means.

The Gorkhas, an ethnic group originally from Nepal, migrated to India during and after British rule. Many were recruited for service in the colonial army. In today's Darjeeling, however, the term Gorkha tends to be applied to all Nepali-speaking people. It is a political rather than an ethnic label to embrace a multi-ethnic group consisting of indigenous tribes of the area and Nepali immigrants with Indian citizenship. What unites them all is probably their common aversion to the Bengali majority.

The Bengalis own most places of business in the hills' main towns. The Nepali-speaking locals, however, often perform menial jobs and resent the success of the Bengalis, whom they consider outsiders in the hills. Moreover, they blame the government of West Bengal for their underdevelopment.

But the Gorkhas are all but united. While the four-month-old Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM) party and its leader Bimal Gurung want nothing less than an independent Gorkhaland within India, the former radical Subash Ghisingh has dropped that idea in favor of a more viable solution: greater autonomy.

Ghisingh and his Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) led a violent two-year conflict in the 1980s for a separate state. In 1988 he accepted a political settlement, signing a tripartite agreement with the governments in Kolkata and New Delhi that gave a great deal of autonomy to the newly founded Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), the governing body for the district of Darjeeling. Ghisingh has been the chairman of the DGHC since its inception.

In 2005, the same parties signed another tripartite in-principle memorandum of settlement to include Darjeeling in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which addresses administration of tribal

areas. In the agreement, the DGHC would be granted more power. A standing committee in New Delhi is currently hearing arguments for and against the proposed constitutional amendment.

For the opposition parties, especially the GJMM and its leader Bimal Gurung, the Sixth Schedule solution is a betrayal to Gorkhaland. In fact, the sudden rise and appeal of a party like the GJMM is only possible in the light of the deep dissatisfaction of the Gorkhas of Darjeeling. In spite of Ghisingh's many promises, not much has improved for the hill people in the last 20 years: Unemployment is high, towns face water shortages every summer and road conditions deteriorate with every monsoon and landslide.

While many are quick to blame the West Bengal government for neglecting the hills, others claim that it is as much the fault of the local administration and the ruling GNLFF itself. They accuse the DGHC of siphoning funds and claim that some GNLFF functionaries, including Ghisingh, have amassed personal fortunes with money allocated for development. These accusations have sparked strong anti-GNLFF sentiments in Darjeeling and the surrounding villages.

Yet, many locals fear that neither autonomy nor independence will change their fate. They refer to the state of Jharkhand, where the tribal population was successful in gaining independence from the state of Bihar in 2000, as an example. Today, Jharkhand is still as dominated by Biharis as it was eight years ago.

New Delhi and Kolkata do not face an easy task. Scholars speculate about a "balkanization" of India, with minorities in other states being likely to follow the Gorkhas if India deems their area a separate state. If India denies the request, the conflict will likely turn violent. The autonomy granted to Darjeeling within the DGHC in 1988 was seen as a clever move on the part of the central government. Granting even more autonomy with the Sixth Schedule status seems a viable appeasement strategy. However, one should keep in mind that the Sixth Schedule is designed for the administration of tribal areas. It is therefore of utmost importance for the Gorkhaland movement to actually come to terms with their "tribal" identity.

A total shutdown called by the GJMM on 20 February has disrupted normal life in Darjeeling. GJMM supporters have also resumed a hunger strike that had been suspended for meeting with the state government. Since the parties have not reached an agreement, the GJMM announced that they will continue their protests until Subash Ghisingh is removed from power and the imposition of Sixth Schedule status dropped.

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1.1 GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Status Paper on the Internal Security Situation, by the Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, India
This paper assesses the internal security situation in India as of the end of 2007. The main challenge for the government is political violence in Jammu and Kashmir, the northeastern states and in areas affected by the Naxalites. The paper offers statistical data on incidents and casualties and lists

measures taken by the government to cope with internal security risks. It is noteworthy that the paper does not mention the current independence movements of Gorkhaland, Telangana or Bundelkhand.

1.2 RESEARCH AND ACADEMIA

Is Economic Inequality a Foundation of Separatist Identity? An Examination of Successful and Unsuccessful Movements in India, by Claremont Graduate University, US

This paper, presented at the Annual Meeting of Asian Studies on the Pacific Coast (ASPAC) in Honolulu in 2007, assesses the role of economic inequality in three successful movements in India. It looks at the movements which gave rise to the new states of Uttaranchal, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh in 2000, and three ongoing movements: Telangana, Gorkhaland and Vidarbha.

National Minority Rights in the Himalayas, by the South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, Germany

This paper, published in 2004, discusses India's multiculturalism, constitutionally prescribed in the Sixth Schedule that might be granted to Darjeeling in the near future. Because the Sixth Schedule provides for self-governance in tribal areas, the author scrutinizes the concept of "tribe" in the Darjeeling area. She states that the Gorkha identity being created is a pan-ethnic identity based on the Nepali language. She argues that this identity is socially constructed in opposition to the dominant Bengali culture of the state of West Bengal, in which Darjeeling is located.

Federalism and Regionalism in India: Institutional Strategies and Political Accommodation of Identity, by the South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, Germany

This article, published in 2005, discusses the "imminent balkanization" of post-independence India. The author examines the role played by Indian federalism in ensuring the country's unity, stability and survival in the face of persistent regionalism, often verging on separation. He explores the complex social and cultural diversity and extreme regional unevenness in development. The author also offers information on the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

Rage, Reconciliation and Security, by the Delhi Policy Group, New Delhi, India

This is a transcript of a talk in 2007 by the chair for Non Traditional Security of the Delhi Policy Group (DPG). The speaker examines India's ability to accommodate diversity and multiple identities. He concludes that the Indian nation state must modify its policy to cater to growing ethnic and social demand. The DPG is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan think tank focusing on public policy in India.

Low Intensity Conflicts in India: An Analysis, by SAGE Publications, New Delhi, India

This 2005 book, accessible through Google Scholar, offers a history of low intensity conflicts (LICs) in India since independence. It analyzes the roots of conflict in a range of contexts. One chapter is dedicated to the Gorkhaland movement. Further chapters discuss similar independence movements in the northeastern states of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. In a book review by the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi, the reviewer highlights that the author of this book does not try to oversimplify the concept of LICs and looks at them

through the prism of challenges which a plural civil society faces while consolidating its national identity.

Poverty, Malgovernance and Ethnopolitical Mobilization: Gorkha Nationalism and the Gorkhaland Agitation in India

This 2005 journal article in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* discusses the main reasons behind Gorkha nationalism in West Bengal, which led to the demand for a separate "Gorkhaland" and the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC). To read this journal, a subscription to *informaworld*, a website hosting journals published by Taylor & Francis, Routledge, Psychology Press and Informa Healthcare, is needed.

The Changing Politics of States' Reorganization, by Publius, UK

This 2003 journal article in *Publius* highlights the change in attitude among the Indian ruling elite that the reorganization of states can lead to good governance if such reorganization stems from administrative convenience, economic viability, similarity in developmental needs of a subregion and cultural-linguistic affinity. To access this journal article, a subscription to *Publius* or pay-per-access registration is needed.

The Indian Community in Nepal and the Nepalese Community in India: The Problem of National Integration, by Asian Survey, University of California Press, Berkeley, US

This 1986 article in *Asian Survey* discusses the problems of people of Indian origin in Nepal, and likewise of the Nepali people of hill origin in India. It was published just before the first Gorkhaland conflict erupted. To access this journal, a subscription to JSTOR is needed.

1.3 NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Amra Bangali's Demand for Cancellation of the Unconstitutional Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), by the World Prout Assembly

This article was published in 2006 on the website of the World Prout Assembly, an NGO dedicated to the Progressive Utilization Theory (PROUT). It shows the perspective of the Bengali opposition, namely the political party Amra Bangali ("We are Bengalis"). Since 2005, Amra Bangali has been organizing rallies and demanding cancellation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council as well as the arrest and trial of Shubhas Ghising for anti-national activities.

1.4 MEDIA

"Gorkhaland is my monkey": An Interview with Subash Ghisingh, by The Statesman, Kolkata, India

In this rare January 2008 interview with DGHC leader Subash Ghisingh, he explains why he dropped the demand for a separate state. He refers to his former right hand and now political opponent Bimal Gurung as a village leader without mass base and rejects all accusations of embezzlement by his party members.

The Himalayan Beacon

This blog by Barun Roy, a citizen of Darjeeling, sparks debate on current issues in the Darjeeling

hills, and in particular the Gorkhaland conflict. Even though comments to blog entries can be rather abusive at times, the site offers an unfiltered insight into the controversy not only between Bengalis and Nepalis, but also within the Nepali-speaking population on what is the proper and viable way to acquire more autonomy.

Darjeelingtimes.com

Darjeelingtimes.com is a regional online news media outlet with occasional print magazines devoted to Darjeeling district issues. It is a start-up project with limited resources, but it is transparent and gives voice to different opinions by allowing comments on all articles.

Darjeelingtimes.com also republishes newspaper articles from other Indian news sources.

Battle for Gorkhaland gathers steam, by the New Delhi Television Limited (NDTV), India

This video on the Gorkhaland conflict was produced in November 2007 by NDTV, one of India's leading broadcasting companies, and uploaded to YouTube. It offers a short introduction to the Gorkhaland conflict, and focuses especially on the ethnicity issue.

Sixth Schedule Status for Gorkha Hill Council, by The Hindu, Chennai, India

This is a news article from The Hindu on the signing of the second tripartite Memorandum of Settlement for granting Sixth Schedule status to the Gorkha Hill Council on 5 December 2005.