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The Causes and Persistence of the Demand for Gorkhaland: Identity, Language, Political Marginalization and Socioeconomic Grievances

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Abstract
The demand for Gorkhaland as a separate state in the Darjeeling hills of West Bengal is an old sub-regional movement shaped by historical, ethnic, linguistic, political, economic and cultural factors. It cannot be explained simply in terms of economic deprivation or political dissatisfaction. Instead, it has arisen out of the intersection of the struggle for a unique Gorkha identity, recognition as Indian citizens, linguistic and cultural preservation, limited political representation and feelings of economic and social deprivation. The long history of the Darjeeling region, colonial policies, the emergence of Nepali linguistic consciousness and the effect of the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty has influenced the evolution of this identity based political demand . Institutional frameworks for regional governance have been created through the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council and the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration , but the demand for statehood has not been eliminated . The paper analyzes the major causes behind the Gorkhaland movement and argues that the persistence of the movement can be attributed to a cumulative effect of identity issues, political aspirations, language awareness, economic grievances and the sense of unsatisfactory regional autonomy.

Keywords
Gorkhaland, Gorkha identity, Darjeeling, Nepali language, Indian Nepalis, regionalism, political marginalization

I. Introduction:

The Gorkhaland demand is one of the most enduring sub-regional movements in contemporary India. Its geographical and political heart is in the Darjeeling Hills and adjacent areas, although the imaginary territorial boundaries of Gorkhaland have changed over time. The movement has been shaped by the distinct historical experience of the Gorkha people and by their perception that their cultural identity, political interests and developmental aspirations have not been adequately recognized within West Bengal. The demand thus involves questions of identity, dignity, political representation, economic development and administrative autonomy (Bagchi, 2012).

The movement has its origins in the historical settlement and development of Darjeeling region. The chapter singles out the early nineteenth century as an important period in the development of the region's demographic and political character. After the Treaty of Sugauli in 1815 and the cession of Darjeeling to British possession in 1835 large numbers of Gorkhas moved into the hills. Later, they contributed to the development of tea plantations, military services, education, tourism and other sectors (Khanduri & Fabi, 2014). However, despite such contributions, a section of the Gorkha population started feeling politically and socioeconomically marginalized.

The Gorkha Identity and the Struggle for Recognition

One of the most important pillars of the Gorkhaland demand is identity. Indian Nepalis have a long-standing complex identity dilemma, which is the result of the cultural and linguistic traits they share with Nepalese citizens across the international border who may be confused over their Indian nationality. The chapter highlights that the search for an identity separate from Nepal but with the Nepali cultural traditions intact has been central to the movement. Therefore, the terms "Gorkha" and "Indian Nepali" became salient signifiers by which parts of the community sought recognition of their Indian identity (Subba et al., 2009).

Historically, Gorkhas have been linked to military service – which also contributed to their collective self-perception. Colonial images of Gorkhas as a 'martial race' fostered a powerful pride in their bravery, military service and loyalty. This image was incorporated into the community's understanding of itself (Khanduri and Fabi, 2014). But the same historical representation could also generate a feeling of alienation from mainstream Indian society. Identity thus became a cultural resource and a political instrument.

Thus, the demand for Gorkhaland was not merely an administrative demand. It was associated with the desire for dignity, recognition and an

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institutional space for the community to retain its cultural identity and exercise more political agency (Bagchi, 2012).

Language and Cultural Considerations

Language has been a special factor in the development of Gorkha political consciousness. Nepali was not just a language of communication but an important symbol of collective identity. With the growth of Nepali education and publishing in Darjeeling, linguistic consciousness was strengthened. Missionary schools, writers, newspapers and language activists contributed significantly to the development and standardization of Nepali in the region (Malley, 1985; Adhikari, 1986).

The demand for recognition of Nepali increased in the post-independence period. The exclusion or under-recognition of Nepali in the educational and administrative institutions created political mobilization. The chapter says Nepali was subsequently recognized as an official language along with Bengali in some parts of Darjeeling by the West Bengal Official Language Act of 1961. Later, Nepali was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution with the 71st Constitutional Amendment in 1992. This recognition was historically significant in that it reinforced the perception of Nepali as an Indian language and subsequently enhanced the Indian identity of Nepali-speaking Gorkhas (Sarkar, 2013).

Recognition in language, however, did little to assuage broader concerns of cultural and political autonomy. In this way the language issue became connected to the wider Gorkha identity movement.

The Indo-Nepal Treaty and the Question of Citizenship and Identity

The other important factor discussed in the chapter is the Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950. Articles VI and VII of the treaty provided for reciprocity of privileges regarding residence, economic activity, property, trade and movement between India and Nepal. Although these provisions were meant to improve bilateral relations, certain groups of Indian Nepalis were also concerned about their distinctiveness in terms of citizenship and identity (Bagchi, 2012).

The problem was not so much the cultural link between India and Nepal, but the difficulty of telling Indian Gorkhas from Nepalese citizens who enjoyed reciprocal rights in India. Subba et al. (2009) argue that this situation gave rise to the feeling among Indian Nepalis that they were sometimes treated as outsiders or migrants, despite their long-term residence and citizenship in India.

The identity problem thus assumed a political dimension. Certain segments of the Gorkha movement argued that Indian Nepalis required more explicit acknowledgment as an indigenous and legitimate part of Indian society. The treaty debate thus became entangled in questions of immigration, citizenship, electoral representation and demographic change (Kar, 2009).

Colonial Heritage and Historical Exclusion

Colonial policies also played a role in the historical evolution of the movement. Darjeeling was a special or restricted area . This gave it some administrative separation from the surrounding areas . Such policies, the chapter says, fostered feelings of isolation and contributed to the formation of a unique hill identity.

The colonial economy also shaped the socioeconomic relations. The tea plantations became an important economic institution. The workers were employed mostly under difficult conditions, with low wages and little social protection and limited access to education and health care. Workers associated with cinchona plantations and other types of employment faced similar problems (Malley, 1985).

Missionary education helped to raise literacy and consciousness in the population. Education thus had a twofold effect: it offered chances for social advancement and raised awareness of perceived inequalities and demands for recognition. So political consciousness developed along with the growth of education.

Political Marginalization and the Battle for Autonomy

Another important aspect of the Gorkhaland movement is political representation. The Gorkha population traditionally has felt underrepresented in the political and administrative structure of West Bengal. The chapter notes concerns over access to government employment, representation in senior administrative positions, and the perception of dominance of plains-based groups in political and economic institutions.

A major attempt at regional autonomy was the establishment of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988. But dissatisfaction remained, particularly with the degree of legislative, administrative and financial powers available to the regional institutions. The later formalization of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2011 also brought an institutional framework of governance, but it did not address the core demand for a separate state (Bagchi, 2012).

The history of state reorganization in India also shaped the political expectations. The formation

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of states on the basis of language, culture and region set a precedent that Gorkha political organizations could appeal. In this way, the movement increasingly framed statehood as a means to improve political representation and regional development.

Relative Deprivation and Economic Underdevelopment

Another important foundation of the movement is economic concerns. Tea, tourism, forestry and agriculture have traditionally provided the economic base for the Darjeeling hills. The chapter deals with the decline of tea-garden conditions, limited industrialization, unemployment, poor infrastructure and inadequate diversification of the regional economy.

Economic grievances were especially acute among tea workers and other sectors dependent on low-wage jobs. Migration and socio-economic insecurity were exacerbated by a lack of alternative employment opportunities. The sense that the resources generated in the hills did not result in equal developmental benefits only contributed to the regional discontent.

The movement can thus also be understood in terms of the concept of relative deprivation. Political mobilization was not simply a function of absolute poverty, but of perceptions of unequal access to jobs, administration, infrastructure and economic opportunity that became politically significant. The chapter observes that Gorkha political organizations have consistently linked statehood to economic growth and increased control over regional resources.

Demographic Change and Insecurity in the Regions

The demographic shift has also affected the political discourse surrounding Gorkhaland. Migration, refugee resettlement and population change in the plains and adjoining areas helped engender a perception among sections of the Gorkha population that their demographic position was becoming more and more insecure. Hence, at different points of time, the territorial claims of the movement extended to areas like Dooars and Siliguri (Kaushik, 2013).

These demographic worries became linked to the question of identity. The feeling of the Gorkha population becoming a minority in some areas increased the desire for a territorial defined homeland in which cultural and demographic interests could be protected.

II. Summary

The Gorkhaland demand is not one grievance but the outcome of plurality of interconnected historical processes. The movement has been shaped by a range of factors, such as identity formation, language consciousness, colonial administrative legacies, the intricacies of citizenship in the Indo-Nepal Treaty, political marginalization, economic underdevelopment, and demographic changes.

The recognition of Nepali in the Eighth Schedule, the establishment of regional administrative bodies and the successive political negotiations have addressed some aspects of the movement but not the underlying identity and autonomy concerns. The persistence of the demand shows that political movements based on regional identity are often sustained by the interplay of cultural recognition and material conditions.

Thus, the Gorkhaland movement can be seen as a long drawn out struggle for recognition, representation, development and preservation of a distinct Gorkha identity within the Indian Union. Its historical development illustrates how language, ethnicity, political participation, economic opportunity, and perceptions of citizenship can mutually reinforce each other as factors in the emergence and persistence of a sub-regional movement for statehood.

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