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Fire in the Hills: As Darjeeling Burns, Bad News for India

Kanchan Gupta

Darjeeling, June 2017 | Ashok Bhaumik/PTI

ABSTRACT

The demand for a separate Gorkha state has come back to life. Long dormant, the desire for a Gorkhaland has been given new breath by the West Bengal government's ill-conceived move to impose the teaching of Bengali to Nepali-speaking Gorkhas. The Gorkhas are agitated over the attempts by Trinamool Congress to intrude into the hills and occupy the political space that has until

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now been their preserve. Language supremacism and intrusive politics have coalesced to trigger a popular backlash, and the hills of Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts, straddling strategic topography, are in ferment. The deployment of paramilitary forces has not helped control the situation, and it may have been a wrong decision to call the Army in, given that a large number of Gorkhas serve in India's defence forces. What are the implications of this simmering conflict on Calcutta and New Delhi; what are their options?

INTRODUCTION

In August 2016, the editor of an NCR-based news channel, asked why he had chosen to ignore the raging violence in Assam's Bodo hills while sending multiple reporters to cover an inconsequential incident in a nearby town, had infamously blamed the so-called "tyranny of distance" for what was clearly a lapse in editorial judgement. He was not necessarily being facetious. The "tyranny of distance" has for long been the cause of an enormous gulf that separates New Delhi's warped perception and the objective reality of events in that part of India which lies beyond Farakka Barrage.



Protestors demanding the creation of a separate state of Gorkhaland, June 2017. | Photo: PTI

And so it is that in the last week or so, there has been little or no concern, leave alone alarm, in New Delhi as the hills of Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts in West Bengal burn once again with renewed calls for a separate Gorkha State, or Gorkhaland. In a throwback to the violence that gripped the

sleepy, heartachingly beautiful hills between 1986 and 1988, widespread protests are once again being witnessed as angry people have been taking to the streets every day, defying the Army and paramilitary personnel who have been deployed to restore order. Shops are closed, hotels shut, businesses stalled, and bank ATMs dry, at a time when tens of thousands of tourists flock to Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong. It is indeed a summer of discontent whose ominous portends can be overlooked only at the risk of adding to India's list of worries, not the least because it threatens to profoundly impact national security concerns.

A most casual glance at the map of India would explain why: Darjeeling district begins in the Dooars at the Siliguri corridor, or what is referred to as the "Chicken's Neck", less than 27 km at its narrowest, separating Nepal and Bangladesh, which links India to eight northeastern States and offers the only passage to the frontier beyond Sikkim. To allow the discord in the hills to brew would mean running the risk of choking the "Chicken's Neck", something which India cannot afford. This weak link in India's strategic topography is the tactical strength of the usual suspects who are known to fish in troubled waters.

COOPTION, COLLABORATION, CORRUPTION

The Great Indian Rope Trick of snuffing out identity-driven political aspirations through the expedient means of coopting those leading the disgruntled and disaffected into the very 'system' that caused discontent seems to have run its course in Darjeeling. Subhash Ghising, who led the call for separation and whose Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) wrought havoc for more than two years in the late 1980s, was coopted by the West Bengal Government and the Union Government in 1988 when they got him to sign a tripartite agreement. That agreement provided for the setting up of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) which was to have autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution but would remain under the legislative control of the West Bengal Government.

Ghising became the chairman of the DGHC and what followed was predictable enough: the 'autonomy' that was guaranteed to the council turned out to be bogus, but not so the sizeable funds that were placed at its disposal. Cooption, followed by collaboration, was accompanied by corruption, both real and perceived. Ghising, the popular hero, quickly became the popular villain. By the time he died in 2015, his reputation lay in tatters, his legacy in pieces. His story was no different from the rise and fall of Sagina Mahato.



Wall graffiti, Gorkhaland agitation, 1986

Meantime, in 2007, Ghising's close confidants, led by Bimal Gurung, walked out of a discredited GNLFF and launched their own organisation, Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), which marked its arrival with a 40-day shutdown and call to the people not to pay any bills or revenue to the government. Gurung and his colleagues went back to the demand for a separate Gorkhaland but changed their strategy. Since Calcutta would not give them what they wanted, they reached out to the BJP to push their case in Delhi. LK Advani, as Leader of the Opposition, lent them a patient ear. As a proponent of small states – as Home Minister in the Vajpayee Government, he had overseen the creation of Jharkhand, Uttarakhand and Chhattisgarh, and was supportive of both Telangana and Vidarbha – he found merit in the case for Gorkhaland. Gurung was looking for a useful national ally; Advani was keen to ensure accretion of Lok Sabha seats to the BJP's tally. It was 2009 and he was hopeful of becoming prime minister. Jaswant Singh was fielded as the GJM-backed BJP candidate from Darjeeling at the last minute and merely days before the BJP's manifesto was released. Till then the BJP, which had also aligned with the Trinamool Congress (TMC) led by Mamata Banerjee, had officially shown disinterest in a separate Gorkhaland carved out of West Bengal—a sore point with Bengalis.

Advani had the 2009 Election Manifesto amended to include the BJP's support for Gorkhaland, using elliptical language: "We will sympathetically examine and appropriately consider the long pending demands of the Gorkhas, the Adivasis and other people of Darjeeling district and Dooars region." Jaswant Singh told cheering masses in rally after rally how the BJP in power in

New Delhi would over-rule the Government in Calcutta by amending the Constitution and creating the state the Gorkhas wanted. He staked his regimental motto, '*Izzat o Iqbal* (Honour and Glory)', on fulfilling that promise. As it happened, the BJP lost the 2009 election by a mile and a half; Advani never became prime minister; Jaswant Singh, who won by a massive margin, never went back to Darjeeling, at least not to "settle in the lap of the Himalayas" as he had told his voters he would do if elected to office.

Gurung, left to fend for himself, stepped up the agitation. For two years it was an on again, off again affair. In the summer of 2011 the Left Front was booted out in West Bengal and Mamata Banerjee's TMC was swept to power. In July 2011 Gurung did a Ghising and signed a similar tripartite agreement that led to the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council being replaced by the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA). Gurung was sold the lemon that the GTA would be thrice as powerful as the DGHC as it would have control over 59 departments, including education and agriculture, compared to the council's authority over 19 departments. The GTA's control would extend from Darjeeling to Dooars. In the elections that followed, the GJM won all the 45 seats and Gurung became its head.

Like Ghising, Gurung soon realised he had been taken for a ride. The GTA was a placebo that had been giftwrapped and given to him instead of the trophy his people fought for. Financial authority remained vested with the District Magistrate and Writers Buildings, the West Bengal Government's secretariat in Calcutta, controlled decision-making. Factional politics, which had plagued the Gorkhaland movement ever since it began (some say it dates back to 1907 when the Hillmen's Association first sought a separate homeland for the hill people), hobbled him and aborted whatever chances he had in succeeding where Ghising had failed. The GTA was a nonstarter. Like its previous avatar, this supposedly 'autonomous' body too did not address the real issues: political aspiration defined by ethnic identity and the desire to see an end to 'Bengal-Bengali rule'.

MAMATA'S EXPANSIONIST POLITICS

Mamata Banerjee had other plans. She began encroaching on the Gorkhas' land, striking alliances with local leaders disgruntled with Gurung's authoritarian style of functioning. She forged an alliance of sorts with what remained of the GNLF and made the first moves in 2016 during the Assembly election. Gradually she stepped up the TMC's intrusion in the run-up to this year's municipal elections and, with the GNLF's help, bagged Mirik, the

smallest of the four municipalities in the hills. The TMC lost heavily in Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong. But that did not stop the TMC from indulging in raucous triumphalism. It unnerved the many warring factions sufficiently to unite them.

The flashpoint came on May 15 with the State Education Minister, Partha Chatterjee, announcing a three-language policy with Bengali as a compulsory subject in all schools in West Bengal. A day later Mamata Banerjee reiterated that this would be done without any exceptions. Gurung, down in the dumps, seized upon this moment to reignite the demand for a separate Gorkhaland where the Gorkhas' identity—largely defined by what in India is the most inflammable of issues, next only to religion, language—would be protected and not trampled upon by 'outsiders', namely, Bengalis. The dormant agitation was revived in no time and Mamata Banerjee rushed to douse the flames by clarifying that schools in Darjeeling would be exempted from the new rule and offering to include Nepali (Gorkhali) as an optional subject in the state civil services exams (which strangely allow aspirants to opt for Arabic, Persian and French, among others). It cut no ice. Such is the popular rage even the GNLF has dumped the TMC and joined ranks with arch enemy Gurung.

Mamata Banerjee, who has sworn not to allow the “division of Bengal” and dismissed the protesters as “terrorists”, has taken an inflexible position since mid-May. On June 8, protesting Gorkhas were teargassed and lathicharged, setting the stage for the violence that has followed since. On June 17, three protesters died when security forces fired on them; a policeman was stabbed by



Security personnel, Darjeeling, June 2017 | Photo: Ashok Bhaumik/PTI

frenzied mobs; the situation has palpably worsened. The dysfunctional GTA's five-year term has expired and it has been taken over by bureaucrats brought in from Calcutta. If Mamata Banerjee was eyeing TMC control over the GTA, those plans of hers have come a cropper. It is doubtful fresh elections will be held any time soon.

In essence, it is a rising against Mamata Banerjee's expansionist politics of bringing all of West Bengal under the sway of the TMC. The unwritten code till now was that Darjeeling, Kurseong, Kalimpong and Mirik, the hills and the plains up to the Dooars, would be left to the Gorkhas. If Mamata Banerjee was looking for a 'GJM-mukt Darjeeling', she has only spurred those who feel that their turf is being encroached upon to declare 'TMC-mukt Darjeeling'. What has added to the bonfire of political vanities is her attempt to divide and rule by setting up 15 separate development boards, one for each tribe. The Gorkhas see this as an attempt to weaken the collective identity and will of their people.

LEGACY OF LINGUISTIC CENSUS

The demand for Gorkhaland, though articulated in the mid-1980s, owes its origin to the flawed report of the language census of 1949 that preceded the creation of linguistic states. The census found that only 49,000 people in the Darjeeling hills spoke what was then called Gorkhali, and thus decided that a linguistic state carved out of Bengal was not called for. The Gorkhas say this number did not reflect the reality—that while there are various tribes like the Lepchas, Bhotias and Tamangs who have their own dialect, Nepali was and remains the common language in the hills.

But that is all history. Nor is it any longer consequential that the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution lists Nepali as the official language in Sikkim and Darjeeling. Old grievances like state-run Nepali-medium schools not getting textbooks in time from the West Bengal Government have surfaced all over again. It is 'Gorkha pride' versus 'Bengali supremacism'. It is a replay of what has been witnessed in other places in India's northeast where too in the past people have rejected the assumed supremacy of the Bengali language, most notably in Assam and Manipur. A heady cocktail of identity, language and territorial control is now driving the Gorkhaland agitation sweeping through the hills.

Yet, the anger has not percolated to nativist hate towards Bengalis – there are numerous Bengali families who live in the hills and they have not been targeted, neither before nor now. Notable Bengali voices in Darjeeling are

supportive of the demand for Gorkhaland; there has been no exodus of ‘settlers’. This is in sharp contrast to the openly hostile and racist posts that have flooded Facebook, penned by both resident and nonresident Bengalis of Bengal, giving vent to crass and crude sub-nationalism. This definitely does not calm tempers, and only serves to lend credence to Darjeeling’s demand for separation.

CHOICES FOR MODI GOVERNMENT, BJP

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government could do without the distraction of the Gorkhaland agitation at this moment. But turning a blind eye would serve no purpose; the problem will not disappear, it will either flare up further or fester like a malignant sore till the demand for a separate state within India transmogrifies into demanding separation from the Union. Nothing would delight China or its proxies in Nepal more than that.

For the BJP, it would be tempting to push the envelope for Gorkhaland, if only to take its political battle against the TMC to a stage of direct confrontation. The party’s 2014 manifesto repeats the 2009 promise that “it will sympathetically examine and appropriately consider the long-pending demands of the Gorkhas, the Adivasis and other people of Darjeeling district and the Dooars region”.

Given this commitment, there is tremendous pressure on SS Ahluwalia, who now represents Darjeeling in the Lok Sabha and is a junior Minister in Modi’s government, to do what the Gorkhas expect of the BJP. But there is a catch. Pushing the case for Gorkhaland too hard would alienate Bengali voters from the BJP, thus throwing a spanner into its plans to intrude into TMC-held territory. Irrespective of political loyalties, an overwhelming majority of Bengalis are not even willing to debate the merits of the demand for Gorkhaland: Darjeeling, they believe, belongs to West Bengal. Which places the BJP in a Hamletian jam and possibly explains BJP president Amit Shah’s cryptic comment, “We are yet to decide our stand on the issue of a separate state of Gorkhaland.”

That apart, there are other factors to consider. Would it be administratively tenable to have Gorkhaland as a full state? Or should it be a Union Territory? What about the political implications like the Koch-Rajbongshis raising a similar demand? Or the Bodos upping the ante for Bodoland? Or, for that matter, Vidarbha joining the clamour for separation? The strategic location of the proposed Gorkhaland raises its own set of security-related issues. In a

region of contested histories and rooted identities, there can be no easy solution.

WHOSE DARJEELING IS IT ANYWAY?

In the summer of 1966, Hope Cooke, the American socialite-turned-Gyalmo, or Queen Consort of the ill-fated 12th Chogyal of Sikkim, created a furore in New Delhi by contesting, in an article published in the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology's bulletin, India's possession of Darjeeling that was 'gifted' to East India Company by Tsugphud Namgyal. In his book, 'Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim', the former editor of *The Statesman*, Sunanda K Datta-Ray recounts how she argued that "no Sikkimese monarch was empowered to alienate territory".

According to Hope Cooke, Tsugphud Namgyal's gift to the Company was "in the traditional context of a grant for usufructage only; ultimate jurisdiction, authority and the right to resume the land being implicitly retained". She claimed Darjeeling's cession was the "gift of a certain tract for a certain purpose and does not imply the transfer of sovereign rights".

The immediate context of the Gyalmo's assertion of the Chogyal's indivisible rights was the plot that was being hatched, with more than a little help from the Kazi and other local players, by New Delhi to bring Gangtok within the orbit of its absolute control, converting India's suzerainty into sovereignty over Sikkim. What happened subsequently is well known: Sikkim was annexed and made a part of the Union of India; the Chogyal was stripped of



CRP jawans in Darjeeling, June 2017 | Photo: Ashok Bhaumik/PTI

all powers and died a broken man; and, Hope Cooke, after separating from the Chogyal, returned to the US where she now lives in Brooklyn Heights, New York.

These details are immaterial today. What, however, is relevant is the history of Darjeeling which is seeing a revival of the popular demand for Gorkhaland. History tells us how Sikkim's borders once stretched up to eastern Nepal; how Prithvi Narayan Shah, who welded feuding clans and warring regions into a sprawling kingdom, grabbed Darjeeling; and, how General Ochterlony's campaign against the Gorkhas resulted in the Treaty of Sugauli (also spelt Segouli) in 1816 when Nepal ceded 10,000 sq km of territory, including Darjeeling, to the East India Company. That is where history begins and ends for the Gorkhas both in Nepal and in India who are clamouring for Gorkhaland: Folklore has ensured that Gorkhas do not ever forget that Darjeeling was Nepali territory ceded to the British and, therefore, must now be returned to them. This is where the search for political identity starts.

But history is not a linear narrative. It also tells us that the Treaty of Sugauli was followed by the Treaty of Titlya in 1817, whereby the British restored the land between Mechi and Teesta rivers to Sikkim, to which it legitimately belonged. Eighteen years later, the then Chogyal leased Darjeeling to the British who wanted to set up a sanatorium in its soothing, sylvan climes. In the brief lease agreement signed on February 1, 1835, the Chogyal is referred to as the 'Sikkimputtee Rajah'. *The Bengal Gazetteer* informs us that in 1841 the East India Company granted the Chogyal a compensation of Rs 3,000; it was later raised to Rs 6,000.

This is how Darjeeling, or what was once called Dorjeling, till then an uninhabited mountain region, came to be inhabited. The British administrators needed 'natives' to first build and then maintain the postcard-perfect town that came up in Darjeeling. Some Bhotias and Lepchas were already there, others came from Sikkim. The demand for labour increased after planters cleared forests for tea gardens and Darjeeling Tea became a source of enormous revenue. The Gorkhas came, as did tribals from what is now Jharkhand, to work as 'coolies' in the gardens, plucking leaves and working shifts in the tea-curing and packaging factories. Bengalis sought and found employment as babus (clerks) in the tea gardens, in the municipal administration and other establishments, for example schools set up by missionaries primarily for the children of Anglo-Indian families.

In 1907, the Hillmen's Association petitioned the British for a separate administrative set-up free from Bengal; the petition was contemptuously

ignored. After independence and the reorganisation of States, Darjeeling, along with the Dooars, became a part of West Bengal for reasons that have been explained above. Darjeeling has since been designated a separate district (from which Kalimpong district has been further carved out), Siliguri is part of Jalpaiguri district in the foothills, and the Dooars are part of Cooch Behar district. The Gorkhas of Darjeeling, Siliguri and the Dooars became citizens of India in 1950; a separate Gazette notification was issued to settle this point and remove any ambiguity about their citizenship.

The status of Darjeeling may have been considered a settled issue by Calcutta and New Delhi, and after Sikkim's annexation, Gangtok, but not by the Gorkhas. The sutured wound has never healed; it continues to bleed every so often and, unless dressed and cured, will bring tragic consequences for the people, and for India, if not today or tomorrow, then the day after. ©RF

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kanchan Gupta is a senior journalist and political commentator based in the National Capital Region.

NOTES

1. Sagina Mahato is the tragic hero of Gour Kishor Ghosh's eponymous story of the 1942-43 labour agitation in Darjeeling's tea estates. A critically acclaimed film was later made by director Tapan Sinha, in both Bengali (Sagina Mahato) and Hindi (Sagina) based on Ghosh's book.
2. The author has used excerpts from his weekly column, 'Coffee Break', published in *The Pioneer* on June 29, 2008, for the brief history of Darjeeling. His views have considerably changed since then. <http://kanchangupta.blogspot.in/2008/06/say-no-to-gorkhaland.html>
3. For the history of Darjeeling, the author has relied upon 'Smash and Grab' by Sunanda K Datta-Ray, which he regards as perhaps the only authentic version of events leading up to the annexation of Sikkim by India.
4. A brief profile of Bimal Gurung, his fallout with his mentor Subhash Ghising, and his rise in Darjeeling politics can be found here: http://kanchangupta.blogspot.in/2009_04_01_archive.html



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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-43520020, 30220020. Fax : +91-11-43520003, 23210773
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org