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Politics of identity and Nepali ethnic people of Darjeeling: A historical perspective

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Abstract

Darjeeling hills, which is one of the famous hill stations of India is famous for Tea, Tourism and Toy train. Geographically, ethnically, culturally, linguistically, the history of Darjeeling hills is totally different from the rest of Bengal. The British government after taking this tract of land as a gift from the Raja of Sikkim use the area only for their imperialistic interest. But the people of Darjeeling hills gradually felt neglected, economically backward, ethnically, culturally insecure. Such circumstances led to the rise of the demand of a separate political setup for the people of the hills. In course of time this political demand of the people of Darjeeling is one of the major political issues in the North Eastern part of India.

Keywords: Darjeeling, ethnical, cultural, political demand

1. Introduction

Darjeeling is the northern most district of West Bengal. Geographically, the Tarai region, which stretches along the foothills of the district, is located in the southern part of the district, and the northern part of the district is a part of the Great Himalayas, which are located between 300 and 12000 feet above mean sea level. Sikkim state is located in the north of the Darjeeling district, Jalpaiguri district is located in the east, Utter Dinajpur district is located in the south, and borders with Nepal are located in the west. Darjeeling's population, as of the 2011 Census, is 18, 46, 823, comprising 9, 37, 259 men and 9, 09, 564 women.

The origin of the name Darjeeling is the subject of numerous theories. According to one account, the term "Darjeeling" is derived from two Tibetan terms: "ling," which means "place or land," and "Dorje," which means "thunderbolt," originally referring to the sceptre of Indra or Bajra (O'Malley, 1907) ^[1]. According to a different account, it was named after an ancient Tibetan monastery that was formerly located on Darjeeling Town's Observatory Hill (O'Malley, 1907) ^[1].

Objective of the study

1. To understand the political history of Darjeeling
2. To understand the question of ethnic identity of Nepali people of Darjeeling
3. To investigate struggle of Indian Nepalis for political identity

Research Questions

1. How Darjeeling became a colonial town?
2. How the English developed Darjeeling into a modern town?
3. Who are the major residents of Darjeeling?
4. What is the ethnic identity of the people of Darjeeling?
5. What is the history of the demand for their political identity?

1.2 Brief History of Darjeeling

The histories of Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, and British India are all either directly or indirectly connected to the history of Darjeeling. In the past, Darjeeling was a region of Sikkim. Thus, a thorough understanding of Sikkim's past is necessary in order to comprehend Darjeeling's history. The current Darjeeling district was taken from Sikkim in 1835 and in 1866 after Kalimpong was added to it after defeating Bhutan by the British force, Kalimpong is currently a separate district (O'Malley, 1907) ^[1].

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Under Prithivinarayan Shah's leadership, the Gurkhas took control of Nepal in the eighties of the eighteenth century and again invaded Sikkim in the early nineteenth century. The Tarai belt, which stretches along the lower slopes between the Tista River and the Mechi, was captured and seized by the Gorkhas, who had also overrun Sikkim as far as east of the Tista River (O'Malley). The British entered the picture as a result of disturbances in the north. The relationship between Nepal and the British declined along the frontier between 1804 and 1812, and in November of 1814, war was declared (O'Malley). The Gorkha army's surrender and the signing of the Treaty of Sugauli in 1814 marked the end of the Anglo-Nepalese War (O'Malley). After Nepal conquered the region, the British seized control of the entire region between the Sutluj and the Kali River. Sikkim's strategic location is the reason the British had extended its assistance to Sikkim during the war. Hence, following the war, the English East India Company restored the Raja of Sikkim, who had been driven from his realm by the Nepalese army, through the Treaty of Titaliya in 1817. The Company also ceded the territory that the Nepalese had taken from the Raja of Sikkim between the rivers Mechi and Tista, a territory that covered more than 4,000 square miles and guaranteed Sikkim's sovereignty which covered the hilly areas east of the Mechi and a portion of the Terai between the Mechi and Teesta rivers (O'Malley).

A conflict between the Deb Rajah of Bhutan and the British administration began in 1864 over atrocities that the Bhutanese had inflicted on the inhabitants of Sikkim and Cooch Behar, who were protected by the British. Accordingly, Sd. John Lawrence's notice of June 9, 1864, declared that the district of Ambaree Fallacottah would be annexed to the British dominions and that all Assam Doars' revenues would be cancelled and given to the Bhutan government (Moktan, 2004)^[2]. However, the Bhutanese government gave a vague response. In the end, the Anglo-Bhutanese War ended with the latter's loss, and on November 11, 1865, the Treaty of Sinchula was signed. According to this treaty Kalimpong was transferred to Darjeeling by the British in 1866 (Moktan, 2004)^[2]. Following the incorporation of Kalimpong, the district was split into two subdivisions: the Terai subdivision, which covered 274 square miles and included the entire country at the base of the hills, and the Headquarters subdivision, which covered 960 square miles and included all of the hills on both sides of the Tista. From 1864 until 1880, the Terai subdivision's headquarters were located in Hanskhawa, close to Phansidewa. Following that, it was moved to Siliguri (Dash, 1947)^[3].

1.3 Discovery of Darjeeling

A disagreement developed on the border between Sikkim and Nepal ten years after the Titalya Treaty was signed and in accordance with the agreement, the Governor-General of the Company was tasked to resolve it. With this task, Captain Lloyd and Mr. J.W. Grant, the Malda Commercial Resident, were dispatched in 1828. They became attracted to Darjeeling by its location at this time while they were traveling through the hills there (O'Malley).

According to H.V. Bayley's report, Lloyd and Grant were the first Europeans to visit "the old Goorkha station called Dorjeling" and spent six days there in February 1829. They were instantly struck by how well-suited it was to serve as a sanitarium (O' Mallay). On both fronts, he made a

compelling case for why it was crucial to take control of the location and highlighted its benefits as a hub that would dominate national trade and as a key strategic location that would control the entry into Nepal and Bhutan. Simultaneously, Mr. Grant persuaded Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General, of the many other benefits that would arise from establishing a sanitarium in Darjeeling. He also fervently supported the occupation of the area for military purposes, seeing it as a crucial route to gain entry into Nepal. (O' Mallay)

Governor-General Lord William Bentinck soon dispatched Mr. J.W. Grant and Captain Herbert, the Deputy Surveyor-General at the time, to inspect the location. The Court of Directors approved the project on the grounds that it might prove to be a valuable depot for the temporary reception of European recruits and even a permanent cantonment for a European regiment. The reports of these two gentlemen conclusively proved the feasibility of establishing a sanitarium at Darjeeling. As a result, General Lloyd was instructed to begin negotiations for the cession of Darjeeling in exchange for an equivalent amount of cash or land with the Raja of Sikkim as soon as it was convenient. On February 1, 1835, the Raja of Sikkim executed a deed of grant as the result of the negotiations (O'Malley). That was an unconditional cession of what was then a worthless uninhabited mountain, but in 1841 the Government granted the Raja an allowance of Rs. 3,000 as compensation and raised the grant to Rs. 6,000 in 1846. (O'Malley)

Following the Deed, surveys were conducted to determine the area's nature and climate, and the British formally decided in 1837 to develop Darjeeling as a "sanitarium." As new areas began to emerge, the road network in Darjeeling began to grow around 1840, starting with the Pankhabari region and continuing alongside the construction of bungalows and private dwellings. The British provided the district of Darjeeling with a defined civil, criminal, and fiscal administration from 1839 to 1852. The settlers were given special incentives and grants to develop the land from the virgin forest and cultivate the mountain slopes. Numerous humanitarian centres and schools were established. The population grew from 100 to 10,000 between 1839 and 1849, mostly due to immigration from neighbouring Sikkim, Bhutan, and Nepal regions (O' Mallay). But a good number of Lepchas, Bhutia and some Nepali ethnic people was already there even before the British taking the charge of the place. Due to the difficult terrain and landscape the British officers failed to record the exact number of populations of Darjeeling when it was taken from Sikkim (Pradhan, 1982)^[7]

By the end of 1850, however, the Sikkim king's relationship had deteriorated to the point where the British withheld the King's allowances and seized the Terai region up to the Teesta River in the east. As a result, the Plains areas of the modern Darjeeling district came under direct British rule, with the Superintendent of Darjeeling taking administrative control. The British found the rich Terai region to be economically fruitful very quickly, primarily because of the expanding plantations of Cinchona and tea. The British then continued to enlarge their holdings northward by 1861, relying on their Army base in the Darjeeling region. Due to the Anglo-Bhutan War, the entire Bhutan Doars region came under British rule by 1866, including the modern-day Kalimpong area that is part of Darjeeling District (O'Malley)

The British made significant infrastructural advancements between 1860 and 1870. Numerous new roads were constructed, the foundation of the renowned Darjeeling Himalayan railways was laid, Kurseong, Kalimpong, and areas under the Terai region were connected to Darjeeling Town through a well-built road network, and the cultivation of tea and cinammon flourished. Remarkably, over the decade, forest conservators were employed to address the widespread deforestation brought on by the development of cash crop production. After the 1870s, Darjiling's growth was steady but uneventful. The region consisted of just two towns until 1901: Kurseong and Darjiling Municipality, which was established in 1850. Darjeeling town, known as the "Queen of Hills," kept expanding as a popular tourist destination (O'Malley).

This is the background of how Darjeeling was acquired by the East India Company, marking the beginning of Darjeeling's unique history. At first, Darjeeling was built as a sanitarium, but with time, other components of its development emerged. Following the construction of the basic infrastructure - roads, buildings, hotels, hospitals, etc.- the successful experiment of a tea plantation was built. English began to take the tea plantations in Darjeeling seriously over time, and in the twenty years after they were established, Darjeeling rose to prominence in the tea industry. Later, the Cinchona cultivation in some areas of Darjeeling developed into a powerful industry.

1.4 Population of Darjeeling

The region of Darjeeling is renowned for its mix of ethnicities and cultures. Nepalis or Gorkhas make up the bulk of the Darjeeling hills' population. Many sub-ethnic groups, including Lepcha, Bhutia, Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Manger, Tamang, Sherpa, Dukpa, Yakkha, Khambu, and others, are combined to form the ethnic Gorkha community. No hard data exists to show how many Nepalis actually reside in India today. According to A.C. Sinha, a sociology professor at North-Eastern Hill University claims that the highest number might be between five and ten million, with the majority of people concentrated in states like Sikkim, the northern region of West Bengal, Assam, and other northeastern Indian states. According to Tanka Bahadur Subba, a former anthropology professor at NEHU and former vice chancellor of Sikkim Central University it is crucial to define the terms "Nepali" and "Nepalese" in this context. "Nepali" refers to a broader culture-linguistic denomination, but "Nepalese" particularly refers to the language and people from Nepal. On the other hand, "Nepali" refers to a broad category of individuals who speak Nepali regardless of geography, racial background, or ethnicity. There is a common misperception that all Nepali speakers in India are native to Nepal, even though the term "Nepali" is generally used to refer to both the language and the people of Nepal. Likewise, the term "Gorkha" was mostly coined by the British following the conclusion of the Anglo-Nepal War in 1814. The name "Gorkha" may have come from Prithivinarayan Saha's initial kingdom, which led to the unification of modern-day Nepal and whose army battled the English East India Company Government. The Gorkhas were chosen to join the Company Government's army because of their military prowess, courage, and integrity. The Gurkha or Gorkha Rifles was the name of the first battalion of "Gorkhas," which was established in 1815. Since then, those who speak Nepali outside of Nepal have

used the word "Gorkha" to denote their ethnicity.

The word "Gorkha" was mostly used by officials and associates in Colonial India, although Indian Nepalis preferred to be referred to as "Indian Gorkhas" in post-independence India. The fact that India and Nepal have an open border is one of the key justifications for highlighting these distinctions with the people of Nepal. The foundation of the unique connection between India and Nepal is the stipulations of the India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which was signed in 1950. Free border access and residence are permitted for its citizens, although they do not have political rights. Due to their complex historical and political background, the Gorkha people of India, who have lived for generations, have struggled with identity. The Gorkhas, a predominantly borderland minority group in India, suffer from severe psychological distress when it comes to defining their identity. Since 1907, there has been a significant demand from the Darjeeling region primarily for the political recognition of Indian Gorkhas' political identity, despite the fact that a sizable portion of the Gorkha community lives in India and is experiencing an identity crisis.

1.5 Formation of Nepali Ethnic Group in Darjeeling

Nepali is the language spoken by the individuals that make up the Nepali community. With Austric and Dravidian substrata under the racial distribution, they are both Mongoloid and Aryans. Another group is the Tibeto-Burman group, who most likely arrived by traveling through Tibet and up to Tsangpo or by the southern Himalayan foothills (Chatterjee, 1951) ^[5]. There are two categories of Nepalis in India: first, there are individuals who were Indian nationals by birth and settled there. Second, those who hold Nepalese citizenship but have made their home in India or own property there. There are Nepalis in practically every state and union territory in India, according to the 1961, 1971, and 1981 Censuses of India. But the states of Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, West Bengal, Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh have the highest concentration of them. (Timsina, 1992) ^[6]

Reputable historian and scholar of Darjeeling Dr. Kumar Pradhan in his essay 'Pahilo Prahar' claims that the name Nepali has three unique meanings. Nepali first suggests a language. Secondly, the term has a political connotation that designates people who are native speakers of Nepali and hold Nepalese citizenship. Third, he used Nepali as a cultural emblem of a unique people whose adherents are not constrained by the borders of the nation known as Nepal. The term "Nepali" is used throughout his writings to allude to this latter cultural meaning - a construction of identity that may be regarded as a "nation," but which exists outside the boundaries of any one state. Furthermore, he contends that the term "Nepali" refers to a linguistically cohesive community that is unrestricted by the political borders of any nation-state, whereas the term's cultural significance refers to identity by citizenship of the subject population of Nepal (Sarkar and Khawas, 2018) ^[8]. Only when one is willing to acknowledge the term "Nepali" as a culturally expressed phenomenon rather than as a politically motivated phenomenon can one truly appreciate Pradhan's contribution. Finally, (Sarkar and Khawas) provide Pradhan's critique, which questions the merging of nation, state, and society or culture into one.

Insights on crafting a critical understanding of Darjeeling's social history and social imagination of community solidarity can be found in Pradhan's contribution. He admits that he was hesitant to classify the Nepali nationality dispute in India as an ethnic problem in his essay "Darjeeling MA Nepali Jati". The term "ethnic group," in his opinion, is more akin to the Nepali word "janajati," which describes many community identities such as Kieat, Tamang, Newar, Sunuwar, Gurung, Mangar, Limbu, and so forth. It was on a cultural and linguistic plane rather than an apolitical one that these many janajati, or ethnic communities, were appropriated into a Nepali national identity formation in Darjeeling (Sarkar and Khawas.180)^[8].

Here, the development of Nepali national identity based on culture implies elements like the colonial capitalist class and their allies' exploitation of the working class or cheap labor, the shared interests of the working class Nepalis, and similarities in the experiences of the oppressed and exploited classes. These elements contributed to the division of people into "us" and "them." Kumar Pradhan (Pradhan. 11–12) asserts that the concept of "us" included a sociocultural meaning in addition to an economic one. Aside from the British, the Nepalis living in the hills were viewed as "matwalis," or alcoholics, and "mlechhas," or barbarians, by educated clerks and conformist Hindus from the plains. In addition, there were significant cultural, linguistic, religious, and caste distinctions between plainsmen and Nepalis. Once more, lowlands authorities and moneylenders derisively referred to laboring Nepalis as "coolies." In the history of Darjeeling, these conditions led to the consolidation of the several hill ethnic groups into a single, more extensive ethnic group known as the hill people.

1.5.1 Indian Nepalis or Gorkhas and their Identity Issues in India

Since the colonial era and relocation to Darjeeling's plains and hills, the Indian Gorkhas have long struggled with an identity dilemma. The Gorkha, a group of diverse sub-ethnic people, worked in a variety of professions and fields under British rule following the discovery of Darjeeling in 1829. During this time, this ethnic group grew in a variety of social domains, enabling them to become conscious of their class, status, rights, and responsibilities. In the hill community, the construction of schools and universities created a class where people began to consider their place and rights within the system. As a result of these developments, people started to feel uneasy about their status as an ethnic minority and started looking for a solution. Against this backdrop, we may observe the political involvement of the Darjeeling Gorkhas in defence of their ethnic identity and their quest for their own state.

1.6 Quest for Identity

Due to its turbulent past and the boundaries that have caused it to be part of Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, and British India, Darjeeling is a contested area that is frequently the topic of contentious debates on its status. Due to the numerous sub-ethnic Gorkha settlements in and around modern-day Darjeeling, the desire for a political boundary for the Indian Gorkha population has been voiced from this region of India for generations. Creative geographies mirror these need. Some of them see Darjeeling as "Nye Mayel Lyang" (Lepchas), as part of Sikkim, as part of West Bengal, as a separate entity called Gorkhaland, or as a part of "Greater

Nepal." According to Wenner-Diasporic Imagination of Darjeeling: Gorkhaland as an Imaginative Geography, (Subba and Sinha, 2016)^[9], the demand for Gorkhaland as a separate state is the most prominent among these various imaginations.

The aspiration for a separate administrative set-up had already evolved in 1907 with the establishment of the Hill Men's Association, which submitted a memorandum before Morley Minto Reforms. Ten years later in 1917, another demand of the Nepali speaking people of the hills of Darjeeling for a separate administrative was launched. The Hillmen's Association sent a memorandum to the chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal in 1917, in response to the invitation issued by the Government to the people of India to make representation to be laid before the Secretary of State. In the wake of Communal Award, the unity of these groups was sought to be strengthened by forming the Hill People's Social Union. On December 23, 1934, a public meeting of the hill people i.e. the Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis of Darjeeling was held under the Presidentship of Sardar Bahadur S.W Ladenla. With the patronage of this union "a Nepali periodical known as "NEBULA" (NE for Nepali, BU for Bhutia and LA for Lepcha) was launched with a view to promoting a sense of brotherhood among the three hill communities and making Nepali language a language of communication with the non-Nepali people. The common ethnic term "Gorkha", and the Nepali language thus accepted by them (Bhattacharya and Mandal. 2023)^[10].

Since 1907 on several occasions the associations and public organisations of Gorkha ethnic people have been submitting memorandums and demanding a separate political set up to assure and secure their political identity in this multi ethnic, multilingual and multi cultured nation. Mainly after independence and with the signing of Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty in 1950 the Indian Nepali or Gorkhas facing the issue of identity crisis due to the open border provision of the treaty between India and Nepal. On several occasions the Indian Nepali delegation's such demands were addressed with humiliation and derogatorily on the part of both the state and union government of India.

Only in the 1980s was the word "Gorkhaland" first used, first by Pranta Parisad and then, more forcefully, by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). Demands for special administrative arrangements have existed for a century, but both their nature and the claimed territory have evolved. The nonviolent autonomy movement took a violent turn in 1986–1988 when the GNLF began a vigorous campaign for Gorkhaland, primarily against members of the CPI (M) government. In addition to the three hill subdivisions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Kurseong, the Dooars and Tarai regions of North Bengal were also included in the demand for Gorkhaland (*et al.*).

The three hill subdivisions and a tiny portion of the Siliguri subdivision are part of the semi-autonomous Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), which was established in 1988 with an agreement signed by the GNLF, State of West Bengal and Indian Union Government. But the Council was marked by corruption and poor management, failing to live up to public expectations. When popular indignation reached a breaking point in 2008, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, led by Bimal Gurung, drove the GNLF from power. Despite having resurrected and promoted the demand for statehood, the GJM and the newly elected West

Bengal government, led by the Trinamool Congress, reached an agreement in July 2011 to replace the DGHC with a new semi-autonomous body called the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), which would have slightly more authority than the previous regime. The GJM emphasizes that the GTA is merely a step on the path to statehood, nevertheless. However, the establishment of Telangana state in 2013 marked the beginning of another protest only two years after the GTA MOU was signed and raised the demand of separate state. The GJM, the GTA's ruling party, and the State Government had a quick conversation to resolve the movement. In 2017, yet another violent uprising broke out when the state government announced that Bengali will be made mandatory throughout the entire state. There was a total strike for over 105 days in the the hill regions. However, a small number of leaders who were undermining the GJM central leadership, who was leading the movement, forced the people to call off the strike and agitation. During the three months of the agitation for the separate statehood, there were serious atrocities, human violations, the release of police, and the death of thirteen people.

Conclusion

The struggle of the Gorkha people of Darjeeling for a separate political setup in pre-independence and the demand of separate state in post-independence since more than hundred years is the most burning issue of the region till today. This political demand for self-determination of the Gorkhas of Darjeeling is also linked to the idea of a distinct identity for their ethnic group. In spite several unsuccessful attempts in achieving their political aspiration people are still optimistic that in the course of time an able leadership would definitely take their issue in the right way and make it successful. Because a separate state for the Indian Gorkhas with any nomenclature is the only solution to resolve the identity crisis of this ethnic group. Several people from this region have sacrificed their life for this purpose and still ready to extent their honest support for this cause. It is only because in lack of proper and strong leadership and both state and union government's political manoeuvre and their reluctant attitude such an old and genuine demand has been suppressed either forcefully or diplomatically till today.

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