

GORKHALAND – WHY?

- *Aloke Mukherjee*

Of late not only West Bengal but also whole of India is being shaken by the movement for a separate Gorkhaland state. Already the government of Sikkim has officially sent letter to the Centre to resolve the problem once for all. The West Bengal government is adamant to pay no heed to the demand for a separate state by the Gorkha people. As a result the agitation is going on. All round effort is being carried on by both the government, all the parties of the establishment as well as the media of the establishment to mobilise public opinion against the agitation. But unlike earlier cases, this time people of West Bengal are not being so easily carried over by the Bengali chauvinistic propaganda barrage. However it has become imperative to look at the problem in all its aspects and come to a conclusion through a concrete analysis.

History of the Region

The region where the present agitation is being concentrated is Darjeeling district, Kalimpong district (which has come into existence as recently as February 2017) and Dooars area at the north of Jalpaiguri district.

Darjeeling district (including Kalimpong) was under the rule of King of Sikkim still the first quarter of the eighteenth century. In 1906, the king of Bhutan annexed a part of Sikkim (present Kalimpong district) through a war against the king of Sikkim. Towards the end of that century there was a long drawn war between kings of Nepal and that of Sikkim. Slowly Nepal got hold of the southern part of Sikkim, from the river Mechi in the east to the river Teesta in the west. This strengthening of Nepal drew the attention of the British rulers. The British started a war against Nepal. Nepal was defeated and through the Sagauli Treaty this area came under the British East India Company in 1815. But the British felt it more advantageous to hand over this tract of mountainous terrain full of forests to a buffer state loyal to it than directly administering it. So in 1817, through the Titalia Treaty the British handed over the area back to Sikkim.

But later they were attracted by the natural beauty and cold weather of the village Darjeeling (which came from 'Dorjie' meaning thunderbolt and 'Ling' meaning land). They found the possibility of building up a hill station there. So they took this land of 24 miles long and 6 miles wide from the loyal Sikkimpati king as a gift at Rs.3000 per year (which was increased to Rs.6000 from 1875) through a deed in 1835. Later in 1850, on a flimsy ground another 1600 Sq.Km. of land was added to it. In 1865, defeating the king of Bhutan the British took possession of presently Kalimpong district and Jalpaiguri- Dooars. The Kalimpong part was added to Darjeeling district. This is more or less how this area took its shape during the British rule. Post 1947, there was almost no change in the administrative formation.

People of the Region

The hill residents of this region belong mainly to two ethnic groups. One section Indo-Tibetan like Nepali upper cast Brahmins, Thakurs, Chhetris and lower castes like Sarki, Damai etc. The other section is Tibeto-Mangolian like Tamang, Gurung, Lepcha, Limbu, Rai, Bhotia (they are not Bhutanese, divided into groups like Sherpa, Kagate, Yalmo etc). Almost all of them speak in different dialects (kura) belonging to Tebeto-Burman language group. Later on through mutual exchange, contacts and development of tea industry, they developed a lingua franca (for them khaskura) which is called Gorkhali, sometimes Nepali. This Khaskura acted as a very strong element in the development of Gorkha nationality. Original local residents like Lepcha, Bhotia etc have adopted this as their medium for exchange of ideas. The Nepali Language Association and its organ established in 1924 became instrumental to work for the development

of their own language and literature. Through a circular on July 30, 1956 the Calcutta University recognised Nepali as the language of Darjeeling district.

It is true that except the original residents like Lepcha, Bhutia etc, all others have migrated here from the end of eighteenth century. In 1770, after building a strong feudal state in Nepal, the king Prithwinarayan Singh introduced "Raykar" system instead of traditional 'Kipat' system in agriculture. Because of this tribals like Limbu, Rai etc, had been evicted from land. They migrated towards forest land and much less populous Sikkim and present Darjeeling. Their skill of tilling hilly slopes very soon brought them to the fore. The British also encouraged such migration to develop agriculture in their mountainous region. The beginning of tea - plantations in 1840 and its wealthy development needed huge labour. The poor hard working tribals from Nepal who were used to move easily in the mountainous terrain were employed there as workers. Such migration stopped at the beginning of twentieth century because by that time possibility of more employment in tea gardens and recovery of more land for agriculture dwindled to its lowest limit. Rather another sort of migration in the plains of Terai and Dooars started from neighbouring districts like Ranjpur, Dinajpur and certain other parts of Jalpaiguri. They were mainly the Rajbanshis. Some of them went on as far as Terai of Nepal. After 1947, large scale of migration of refugees from East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh) took place in the plains. There was a change in demography in the plains.

In fact, in the hills and adjacent plains of this region residing in the same natural atmosphere living in the same economic situation and speaking in same lingua franca (khasura) a Gorkhali nationality has developed. Almost all other people from other societies who have come to this region have been going through the same process of assimilation at different levels. Thus they have become sons of the soil of the region; the only exception being the Bengalis who came as refugees. Because of this earlier development as a nationality, they could not get mixed up. These are the people who are being used by ruling governments to break the movement of the Gorkha people.

Economy and Exploitation of Gorkhas

These Gorkha people have built up agriculture, tea-industry, chona plantations, cattle rising - in short all economic activities of this region.

In fact economy of this region rests of four pillars viz. a) tea-industry b) agriculture c) forest resources and d) tourism. Let us take one after another.

Agriculture: Considering the infertile state and tendency of land slide, in a report by Mr. Filport minimum size of land was fixed as 5 acres. So up to 1950's there were very few marginal holders and agricultural labourers were also few. But by 1981 it was found that 80% of the peasants in Kurseong, 81% in Darjeeling and 54% in Kalimpong were marginal farmers. Agricultural labourers also increased in number. Agricultural produces like cardamom, ginger, orange and different types of vegetables depend largely on the plains for their marketing. There is scanty arrangement for preservation of these agricultural produces. Processing industry has also not been developed. So, the businessmen from the plains take them at throw away prices to gain huge profit and the producers are fleeced. The successive governments be it led by the Congress, Left front or TMC have done precious little to stop this.

Tea Industry: World famous Darjeeling tea is grown here. More than 150 years ago tea plantations were started by foreign tea - planters. Now some Indian big capitalists have entered. But the health of the tea industry is gradually diminishing. Though the economic life of tea plants is supposed to be 50 years, most of the gardens have plants of 90-100 years old. The financial assistance from the state is drained out for other purpose. So number of workers in tea industry is gradually decreasing. Workers are losing jobs. At the same time, those who work are ill paid. The planters do not care to honour the tripartite agreements.

Forest Resources: Forest resources are plundered by the contractors in connivance with the state administration. So, on the one hand it adds very little to the economic life of the region, and on the other hand destroys the serenity of the environment and creates danger of landslides.

Tourism: The less said about tourism the better. The state government earns huge revenue from tourism. But most of hotels, big trades and big tour operators are outsiders. Only very few of them have become part of the hill community, vast majority of them drain the profit out. The local residents act only as luggage carriers, drivers or at the most guides. They also run very small shops and tea-booths. Some of them are street hawkers.

Actually state government squeeze out a large amount of revenue from all the economic fields, but less than one-third of it is ploughed back to the hills.

Whatever has been done in the name of development is not in the interest of the people. For example, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway with its toy train has been declared as heritage by the U.N. But the fare of train ride has become so high that even middle class people cannot afford it. Huge buildings and unplanned roads are being constructed; resulting is highly increased incidents of landslides.

The present state government has created as many as fifteen development boards which are used to plunder the state exchequer for creating some agents of the TMC.

History of the Movement

A brief sketch of the movement for a separate state by Gorkha people for the last 10 years is given below:

In 1907, the demand for an administration separate from the then Bengal province was raised by the Hillmen's Association and a memorandum was submitted before Morley-Minto Reforms Commission.

In 1917, under the leadership of M.W.LadenLa the Hillmen's Association submitted memorandum to the secretary of state Montague and the Viceroy demanding a separate administrative unit for Darjeeling including Jalpaiguri-Dooars.

1929 – The same demand was raised before the Simon Commission.

1930 – Karseong Gorkha Library raised the demand for separation from Bengal.

1941 – Hillmen's Association led by Rupnarayan Singh again demanded separation before the Government of India.

1942 – Same demand was placed before the Cripps commission.

1947 – Undivided Communist Party of India submitted memorandum to the Constituent Assembly demanding formation of a separate Gorkhasthan.

1952 – Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League (ABGL) president NB Gurung met Prime Minister Nehru and demanded separation from west Bengal.

1980 – Pranta parishad wrote to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for a separate state. Same year Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) was formed.

1984 – GNLF Started agitation for a separate Gorkhaland.

1988 – After four years of agitation, an accord was signed amongst the GNLF, the Left Front headed by Jyothi Basu and Central government to form Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC). After prolonged deliberations the word "Gorkha" was included.

2007: Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJM) was formed on the demand for a separate Gorkhaland.

2011: After the death of three GJM workers at Sipehu, another accord was signed between the GJM, the West Bengal Government led by Mamata Banerjee and the Central Government to form Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA). Thus the word "Gorkhaland" was recognised and included, but a separate state was not accorded.

Aspirations are Justifiable

Actually demand for a separate state could never be satisfied by DGHC or GTA. The aspiration of the Gorkhas was not for an administration under the control of the West Bengal Government, they wanted a state.

Moreover, there were contradictions and conflicts on limits of authority of the GTA. The West Bengal government continually have been trying to reduce the authority of the minimum, where as the GJM had been trying to expand it as much as possible and to get that constitutionally

recognised. The role of the Central government was just to act as a silent observer and enjoying it.

Financial control rested on the state. Mamata Banerjee herself constituted as many as fifteen development boards for different groups of people such as Lepchas, Gurungs, Limbus, minorities and others bypassing the GTA. Object was to divide the Gorkha people on the basis of different communities and to win their loyalty to the state government and the TMC by generously funding them and turning the leaders of those boards as powers of the TMC. The Gorkha people took it as a betrayal to the cause. Then the BJP stepped in to support the GJM. By getting elected with the support of the GJM they did nothing to expand the authority of the GTA. Rather they started a double dealing role; the MP at times talks of the need for small states as if he is supporting the cause of a separate Gorkhaland state, and the West Bengal BJP strongly opposing formation of a separate state.

Under such circumstances Mamata Banerjee slowly but steadily strengthened her party in the hills. To get support she had already formed 15 development boards, and then she declared the formation of new district, Kalimpong. When in the municipal elections her play of dividing the people paid dividend and the TMC could manage majority in Mirik Municipality, she started spewing venom. While addressing a rally of her party at Karseong she declared against some unnamed enemies (everybody understood it was the GJM) “*Hamara Saath jo takrayega, chur chur ho Jayega*” (whoever would dare us would be broken to pieces). Then suddenly her government decided that all schools in West Bengal would have to teach Bengali language compulsorily. For the Gorkha people it was an absurd proposition. People started agitating against it. Mamata Banerjee told that this would not be carried on in the hills. But no government order to that effect was forth coming. In this situation as if challenging the Gorkha people, Mamata Banerjee convened a Cabinet Meeting at Darjeeling knowing full well that there would be agitation at that time. While agitators brought out a procession from the Bhanu Bhakta Bhawan, where they held a meeting, the state police started lathi charge. Taking advantage of the terrain the agitators reasserted and some police personal were injured. The police opened fire killing two agitators. The state declared that agitators themselves had killed their own men and cases were lodged against the leaders of the GJM.

Result was that all the people of Gorkha land got united. It was no more a political tussle between the GJM and the TMC, but a struggle for the honour of Gorkha nationality and the call for a separate Gorkhaland for which they had been fighting for the last 110 year raised again. Mamata Banerjee wanted to divide the people, but her steps managed to unite not only the Gorkha people, but also the all the parties in Gorkhaland region. People are ready to go through all hardship for the fulfilment of their cause – the formation of a separate Gorkhaland. So far, five agitators have been killed by the police. But “Bandh” is going on with no sign of yielding under pressure of the state oppression.

The demand for the separate state of Gorkhaland is the expression of democratic and national aspirations of Gorkha people which denied and being suppressed by the Indian ruling classes for the last 70 years. The Gorkha people should not fall prey to the manipulative games being played by the ruling class parties –Congress, BJP and TMC – to meet their narrow political ends. They have been using the methods of repression and consoling offers like district councils together with divisive methods instead of conceding the just demand of the people. We hope that the Gorkha people struggling for a separate state pursue an independent course and be free from the influences of various ruling class parties in order to realise their demands and move ahead in the common struggle of Indian people against Indian ruling classes and their exploitative and oppressive policies.

State Government Trying to Whip Up Bengali Chauvinism

The state government is whipping up Bengali chauvinism in the plains. The TMC workers and some chauvinists rallied in Siliguri opposing Gorkhaland. They are not allowing the transport

of essential commodities to the hills. Some of them burnt cars owned by Gorkhas, even cars of Sikkim were not spared.

But one thing is observed. That this time people in general are not so much against the agitation. Though very weak -yet very bold- opinion is also coming out that demand for Gorkhaland is a democratic demand.

Some people are opposing with the argument that such a small state is not viable. They forget that in India, there is a state named Puduchery (Pondicherry) with a population of meagre 12.48 lakhs whereas the proposed Gorkhaland has a population of more than 14 lakhs.

Some people also opposing the addition of hilly areas of Jalpaiguri Dooars and adjacent areas of Terai and Dooars. There was commission which had to agree upon adding a few areas, but Gorkhas were not satisfied. This can easily be served by following contiguity as principle and village as unit, and whichever of the such villages are Gorkha majority or wish to join Gorkhaland be added to it.

For 110 years Gorkhas have been demanding a separate administrative unit or a separate state. Their demand had been suppressed for a long time. This is undemocratic. Everybody should understand that the aspiration of linguistic and cultural minority who has developed into a nationality against all odds must be honoured. This aspiration of a separate state of Gorkhaland might be suppressed this time also, but the cause will rise again till victory, because it s a just cause.
