



Sikkim being close to Darjeeling Hills has been affected on numerous occasions by the Gorkha agitation. Indefinite shut-down in the Darjeeling Hills in the past had affected Sikkim extensively, making life difficult for its people.

THE MERGER THAT MATTERS

The political climate in Sikkim and its adjacent hilly region of Darjeeling is changing with a political party from the latter raising the issue of a merger with Sikkim

Vivek Ghatani

'Gorkhaland is a demand but the merger of Darjeeling with Sikkim is a right,' says Subodh Pakhrin, chief coordinator of the Gorkha Rastriya Congress (GRC), an outfit active both in Darjeeling and Sikkim. Pakhrin adds that the creation of Gorkhaland will separate the region from West Bengal which is not a division in the strictest sense

of the word because Darjeeling was once an integral part of Sikkim.

With the Sikkimese political circle remaining mum on the sensitive issue, it can be safely surmised that the political class in Sikkim is not in favour of the merger. However, that has not discouraged the GRC. 'Whether Sikkim refuses to accept Darjeeling or not, one must accept the facts.

One day or the other, they will have to accept the idea of a merger of Darjeeling,' cautions Pakhrin.

Many in the political circuit believe that the merger would pave the way for the eventual creation of Gorkhaland. A political analyst from Sikkim surmises that the idea of the merger is a genuine one because both the regions share many things in common.

However, it is equally true that once Darjeeling is merged with Sikkim, the creation of Gorkhaland is a foregone conclusion.

Homeland Aspirations

The demand for Gorkhaland by the Nepali speaking population of Darjeeling Hills is a longstanding one which has seen two rounds of agitation—the first was led by Late Subash Ghisingh, the leader of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) during the late eighties and the second round from 2007 to 2011 was led by Bimal Gurung, the chief of Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM). However, the Bengal government has remained steadfast in its stand on not allowing any further division of the State.

The Sikkim Legislative Assembly had passed a common resolution supporting the creation of Gorkhaland. The Chief Minister Mr Pawan Chamling had also promised that his party will take up the demand with the Central government. The Sikkim government also extended an olive branch to mend its fall-out with Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) by announcing earlier that it would help strengthen the Gorkhaland movement spearheaded by the party as and when required. 'The demand for Gorkhaland is justified because the Gorkhas are not demanding a separation from the country, rather a separate state within India. Even the Union Minister has said that this is not an unconstitutional demand. We will support the demand in all ways that we can,' B B Gurung, advisor to Sikkim Chief Minister Pawan Chamling had said in 2008. Incidentally, the Sikkim government has remained mum over the demand of a merger with Darjeeling.



The Gorkha cause has drawn a lot of support from the people of Sikkim.

SPCC against Merger

The Sikkim Pradesh Congress Committee (SPCC) has registered its protest against the idea of merging neighbouring Darjeeling district with Sikkim before President Pranab Mukherjee. A six member SPCC team led by party president Nar Bahadur Bhandari met Mukherjee at Raj Bhawan sometime ago and submitted a memorandum opposing the move. 'SPCC is the only party raising its voice against the merger to save Sikkim and its people from getting overwhelmed by outsiders. Unfortunately, none of the other political parties including the ruling Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) seems to be concerned about such an important issue', the party said. The main opposition party in Sikkim, the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM), incidentally, has also not spoken on the issue.

Strive for Stability

Nepali is the dominant language spoken in both Darjeeling and Sikkim. People from both

the regions have traditionally formed marriage ties and share a common culture. Many have crossed over from Darjeeling to earn their livelihood in the State, and eventually settled down there. Also, tourism is the backbone of both the regions, and the main source of revenue.

However, with the issue of an impending merger cropping up, the relationship between the two has taken a turn for the worse. Sikkim being close to Darjeeling Hills has been affected on numerous occasions by the Gorkha agitation. Indefinite shutdown in the Darjeeling Hills in the past had affected Sikkim extensively, making life difficult for its people. The only highway which connects Sikkim to the rest of the country passes through the proposed Gorkhaland state, thus it is strategically important for Sikkim's economy that peace prevails in the area. 🇮🇳

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Photos: Vivek Ghatani