GORKHALAND
MOVEMENT

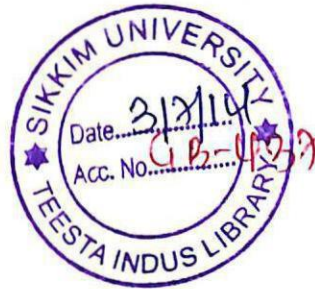## Ethnic Conflict and State Response

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Gorkhaland Movement

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Siliguri, Darjeeling   **Swatahsiddha Sarkar**
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now proliferated in those regions of the world, which remained largely outside the purview of ethnic upsurge earlier. Ethnic identity issues now stirred not only the so-called developed countries like Canada, United Kingdom, Spain, France, and the United States but also in the former Communist countries too. Ethnic and racial cleavages have now become a part of the global political landscape (Jalali & Lipset. 1992-93:586). Indeed, there has been an ethnic revival throughout the globe, which showed that the clashes the modern political systems are experiencing with, are more cultural and civilizational rather than economic, political or ideological (Huntington, 1997: 21).

Besides being a global issue of concern, ethnic conflicts and movements are gaining momentous growth in South Asian political landscape in general and in countries like India, in particular. It is no exaggeration to put that post-independent Indian politics is torn between politics of identity and politics of culture. Gorkha bid for a homeland, among others articulated on the pretext of language, culture, community, and region within Indian union has been a recurrent theme of India's national politics for quite some time now. However, Gorkha ethnicity in India is not of recent origin. It did maintain a colonial pedigree too. In that Gorkha movement appears as a historic occurrence having more than hundred years' legacy. On the contrary the conflict resolution initiatives taken so far in Indian subcontinent, in general and in case of Darjeeling hills, in particular are not many but practically few in number.

The attempts to resolve the growing ethno-regional conflicts in India remain by and large amenable to a single approach that presupposes the conflicts principally as political problems and hence attempts were made to resolve the same politically. Consequently, the several measures adopted so far to bring in ceasefire and peace in conflicting zones in India fall back upon such initiatives like political intervention and negotiating political power-sharing agreements, or initiation of new political structures. The recommendations of the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC), Constitutional recognition of language, the regional autonomy proposals, Sixth Schedule status, or the sub-state level autonomous district councils are some such strategies used so far to dissipate tensions and resolve issues effectively whenever conflicts have arisen in the wake of ethno-regional claims within the larger body polity of India. However, on certain particular occasions, the Indian state

took resort to direct military intervention to dismantle domestic conflict permanently (Kashmir, Nagaland etc.). In a certain sense, the experience of conflict resolution measures in India does suggest that as if the ethno-regional conflicts and movements are more a law and order problem and hence the recurrent need is to discipline the unruly subjects according to the pedagogic substance of an archetypical nation state, which disapproves by and large the social and cultural plurality of individual minds and souls. The ethnic conflict resolution measures undertaken by the government attempted to function more as an apparatus of power by virtue of the field of visibility in which communities were to be located, each in their respective places for a centralised and unseen observer.

The experience of Gorkha movement throughout its more than hundred years' history has been reflective of two major claims: firstly, an aspiration to govern themselves without jeopardizing the sovereignty of the nation-state (i.e. 'self-determination without secession'); and secondly, the urge to recognize collective rights and almost all salient cultural and social issues that earmarked their distinctions and distinctiveness from an inescapable 'other' (i.e. 'politics of culture', 'identity' and 'recognition'). Although the conflict resolution measures have been able to fulfil, at least initially, the aspiration of self-government of the contending parties, they fail to meet the challenges posed by politics of identity and recognition. Consequently, conflict resolution measures in deeply divided societies like India fail to usher in peace and tranquillity in a sustainable manner.

The Government, however, has remained engaged in settling down Darjeeling imbroglio not only when it turned violent but also in such situations when the movement was more or less peaceful. It is interesting to note in this context that available studies on Darjeeling [like those of Subba (1992), Timsina (1992), Kar (1999), Samanta (2000) among others] despite having made significant contribution in understanding ethnic phenomena in Darjeeling hills have avoided making any assessment regarding the peace keeping initiatives. Available narratives of Gorkhaland have documented the track record of violence (e.g. Samanta, 2000) and the historical development of the movement with enough detail (e.g. Subba, 1992). Undoubtedly, such analyses pinpointed the strength of Gorkhaland as a specific case of an ethnic movement. Nevertheless, the issue of conflict resolution or for that matter such

crucial questions like what were the definite strands (i.e. approaches) and steps (i.e. the strategies of conflict resolution) the state has taken recourse to while dealing with the overall dynamics of Gorkha ethnicity and movement of Darjeeling hills, are completely glossed over, if not ignored. More particularly such issues like: did the state responded to the Gorkha movement in equal terms especially when we do know that the movement has been continuing for more than a century and obviously followed both a violent and a non-violent warpath? What was the overall treatment Gorkhaland movement received from the part of the state? How to conceptualise it? How to theorise relationship between ethnicity and the state? All these are significant areas of inquiry particularly in the treatment of Gorkha problem not merely as a case of ethnicity but as a significant example that could well set the tune of the study of ethnic conflict resolution in a micro perspective in deeply divided societies like India. This is not to claim that the present study has drawn attention to a virgin field. Rather what is novel is its approach towards an issue that has already been considered in some detail. Precisely, the present effort is but an attempt to fulfil the above posed academic void (in relation to Gorkha ethnicity) by analysing the pros and cons of peace initiatives and conflict resolution measures adopted and exercised by the state in the context of Darjeeling hills and thereby to arrive at a micro-level understanding of ethnic conflict resolution and peace keeping measures in Indian situation.

Although scholarly works with particular reference to Darjeeling's ethnic conflict and conflict resolution measures are rarely available, there is no dearth of literature on the conceptual and theoretical aspects of conflict and peace resolution initiatives with reference to Indian situation. It would not be out of place to pay attention to some of the recent works of this genre.

Baruah (2010) in his recently edited *Ethnonationalism* collective poses the question: "How is India doing *vis-à-vis* the challenge of managing its exceptional diversity?" The essays presented in the volume have answered differently to the problem posed by the editor. For example, Kanti Bajpai suggested that a mix of state violence and political compromise with militant groups has been successful at least in the sense that India has not splintered. Gurharpal Singh questioned the conventional wisdom about India's successful record in managing diversity. Sumit Ganguly warned of the dangers of using the army against particular ethnic groups in poly-ethnic states like

India. Ganguly further argued that insurgency in India, in general and Kashmir, in particular, arose out of a process of political mobilisation that was juxtaposed with steady institutional decay. Atul Kohli while analysing the trend of ethno-nationalist movements in India has argued that such movements followed an inverse 'U' curve: heightened mobilisation of group identities are followed by negotiations, and eventually such movements decline as exhaustion sets in, some leaders are repressed, others are co-opted, and a modicum of genuine power-sharing and mutual accommodation between the movement and the Central and State authorities is reached. The inverted 'U' curve explains Tamil Nadu situation rather well and even Sikh ethnonationalism can be explained through this model, argues Kohli. However, there is doubt whether the inverse 'U' curve model can help us appreciate Darjeeling situation, which in fact, showed a curvilinear pattern of growth.

J.S. Chima (2010) in his book on Sikh separatism attempted to develop a coherent and consistent theory for explaining the rise and decline of Sikh insurgency in India. The central argument of Chima's thesis is that internal disunity and competition between state elites often contribute to the rise of violent ethno-nationalism, and their internal unity and coordinated action can conversely help dampen violent ethno-nationalist movements.

What would be the possible answer to the recurrent dilemma faced by the policy-makers over the ideal mix up of development and military approaches to contain insurgency is the central theme of another major collective on counter-insurgency edited by Barauh (2009). While one of the contributors of the collective pointed out that development in north-eastern India means a little more than externally delivered economic packages which can be translated through various backdoor means and leakages, at the soonest possible into hard cash, another contributor argues that neither development nor a military fix can achieve peace in north-eastern region. Only concerted efforts to establish the rule of law, a system of accountability, and faith in the institutions of government can break the cycle of violence, the authors say. Bethany Lacina, one of the contributors, suggested that the influence and endurance of insurgency in the north-eastern region are because of the fact that armed groups are embedded in the workings of the north-eastern civilian politics which makes it difficult for politicians or bureaucrats

to act independently of the rebels. This finding seems to be the case in Darjeeling hills too.

Benedikter (2009) has produced a useful short guide on autonomy movements in South Asia and attempted to show, through various case studies, how such ethnic conflicts were solved through self-government measures. Although the guide includes a separate chapter (Chapter 23) on Darjeeling situation (written by the editor himself) and covers the recent eventualities of Gorkhaland movement but it hardly maintains any conclusive statement regarding the effective step to promulgate peace in future Darjeeling. However, elsewhere the book did count on the potentiality of autonomy as a device for regional democratic self-government and minority rights protection. The case studies available in this book help gain a synoptic view on the contemporaneous problems of ethnic conflicts in South Asia and the possible ways to resolve such conflicts amicably through autonomy measures of different sorts.

The Context

The Gorkhas are spread all over the subcontinent; however, the present study is concerned precisely with the Gorkhas located in the Darjeeling hills and their claims to have separate state of their own. Darjeeling is the northern most district of the State of West Bengal containing hills and plains regions. Three hill subdivisions (namely Darjeeling *Sadar*, Kurseong and Kalimpong) constitute the hill portion of the district while Siliguri subdivision represents the plains part of the district. Until recently the demand for a separate state in the name of Gorkhaland covered uphill portion of the district only. With the passage of time the territorial jurisdiction of the much hyped Gorkhaland State went on increasing. Along with the hills the proposed territorial limits of the Gorkhaland movement in contemporary days claims to cover the areas of Teari (located in the plains areas of the district of Darjeeling) and Dooars (located in adjacent district of Jalpaiguri). The following map (Fig. 1.1) indicates the territorial limits of the proposed State of Gorkhaland.

The Gorkhaland agitation was built, as its name indicates around Gorkha ethnic identity. Its perception of the problems of the ethnic Nepalis in India differs from that of the leadership in Sikkim, and so do their political strategies (Dube, 1997: 194). However, it would be erroneous to conceive of the demand for a separate state called

Fig. 1.1: Proposed Map of Gorkhaland

Source: Available at: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/50/
Proposed_Gorkhaland_Map.jpg(Accessed on 8.1.12)

Gorkhaland as an abrupt upsurge of 1980s. In fact, the demand for a separate statehood has its seeds rooted deeply in the developments of colonial rule of the early 20th century. The first recorded instance of the demand for separation of Darjeeling hills from the then Bengal on the grounds of ethnic difference can be traced back in the year of 1907[1]. Since then the demand for a separate arrangement for Darjeeling hills has been raised time and again. Moreover, the same demand still remains unabated and the movement is still continuing with added vigour and vitality. Within this long stretched time frame (i.e. from 1907 to 2012) Gorkhaland movement has had harped not only on statehood alone but on several issues like constitutionalisation of Nepali language, citizenship issue, political status of the territory, abrogation of Indo-Nepal peace treaty of 1950, tribal status, sixth schedule status, Darjeeling-Sikkim merger, inclusion of more areas within the purview of the proposed state of Gorkhaland, Gorkha Adivasi Pradesh, Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), and finally, Gorkha Adivasi Territorial Administration (GATA).

There is no gainsaying the truth that in any analysis of ethnic movement emphasis on the domain of state is obvious. Since it is around the institution called the state the question of ethnicity or

for that matter ethnic movements revolve. In ethnic situations, such as in Darjeeling hills, the state in fact, plays a dual role. It can instigate and aggravate the ethnic problem and at the same time it has the capacity of containing the conflict that it provoked. In case of Darjeeling hills the relationship between the State and Gorkha/Nepali ethnicity has been found to be intimate from the very beginning. The Colonial State structure has well maintained the difference of the hills from the plains for politico-economic reasons. The administrative arrangements of different sorts were implemented so as to fulfil their own imperial interest in the hills. The people of Darjeeling hills from the very beginning were thus trained in the logic of difference but hardly realised the hidden colonial design of exploitation camouflaged as differential administrative arrangements. In a certain sense, the British had left Darjeeling by successfully invoking the idea into minds of the hill people that Darjeeling has been a segregated tract from the mainstream of Bengal.

The hill masses have actively participated in the democratic governance (there were exceptions too in this regard) of the country since Independence. However, this hardly implies that they have left their claims for separating their tract from the rest of West Bengal. Even though the post-colonial state structure is different from its colonial predecessor on the ground that it discontinued the colonial designs of exclusion and hence exploitation, the contending groups have often charged the post-colonial State as 'neo-colonial' on the pretext that it hardly takes heed of their claims. State run welfare and developmental activities on the one hand and the percolation of political power through the different democratic institutions of governance in post-independent era, on the other hand have made the ethnically conscious groups aware regarding the strength of ethnicity. Ethnicity thus has been continuously written and re-written within these processual arrangements of state welfarism and political power. Gorkhaland movement is no exception to this trend. The different demands the movement has raised over the years can be understood within these processual linkages of state and power.

Methodological Concerns

Dwelling upon interviews, observations, and secondary data analysis the present study attempted to arrive at a critical understanding of conflict resolution initiatives taken place with respect to the question

of Gorkhaland movement. The in-depth understanding of the peace building efforts initiated by the State and the responses of the people towards the same requires a thorough knowledge of the internal dynamics of the local society and culture. This has been undertaken through repeated visits to the hills and also gleaned out of the experience of the present researcher's decade long association with the problem and the area.

In fact, the question of methodology depends much upon the conceptual frame one intends to pursue while analysing the problem at hand. The conceptual framework tells us much about how to approach and contextualise the problem of study, what to investigate, how to investigate, and how to design the whole fact finding programme. Thus the question how we should approach the issues of conflict, peace and conflict resolution initiatives constituted the very first step to work out a methodological stand for the present study.

Peace is a normal condition of human society characterised by a relatively high degree of interpersonal harmony that renders a commitment to avoid violence of any short. Conflict similarly is also a normal aspect of all societies although it implies incompatible needs, deeds and desires leading towards interpersonal/group antagonism, rivalry and often hostile encounters too. The point is that no society can remain all the time peaceful or conflict ridden. Both peace and conflict are relative social condition and stability in either term is neither feasible nor even desirable. Conflict resolution measures in this sense involve such strategies which aim at maintaining the relativity of both conflict and peace in a desirable manner. Peace initiatives thus do not suggest the complete dismissal of conflict in order to achieve eternal peace. The study has not considered the terms like peace or conflict in any fundamental sense. Ethnic conflicts do involve fierce battle, and often hostile manner of group rivalry figured out in violent terms but even in such situations too peace is not desirable if it attempts to eliminate any of the contending parties. This means peace could be gained and conflicts would be resolved in a meaningful sense if the measures protect the interests of the either party and provide the scope for the full blown growth of human capacities without any barrier or hindrance.

Having said all these, the methodological stand for the present study becomes clear enough. That is to say in other words, the relevance of both the ideas of peace and conflict needs to be judged from the vantage point of the state and government and at the same

time from the vantage point of the people's perception regarding the same. Both the perspectives are necessary in the sense that both reveal different predilections regarding the same issue. And through a proper sociological analysis of these differential viewpoints a workable solution to the problem of peace building could be well founded. In an attempt to grasp the modalities of the differential perceptions of both the state and the people, fieldwork and secondary data analysis have been made.

For collecting primary data a detailed questionnaire was prepared and circulated among more than fifty individuals (fifty-seven in actual number). The respondents were purposively selected using the criteria of sex (out of 57 respondents 37 were males and 20 were females) and occupation (17 male teachers, 8 employed males, 12 male students, 5 employed females and 15 female students constituted the universe of 57 respondents). The questionnaire was specially designed for the educated persons alone and in majority of the cases the respondents were found to be tied up with some variety of associations available in the local society. In a certain sense sincere efforts were thus made to cover the viewpoints of civil society members and as a matter of fact all of the respondents were having at least graduation as minimum educational background. All the respondents did maintain close connection with the hills (either because the hills is their native place, or that they do have close relatives in the hills and make frequent movement to the hills and feel concerned regarding what happens there in the hills). Covering the viewpoint of the hill people through the questionnaire was made personally by spending the month of June 2011. However, field assistants were engaged in collecting data particularly from the plains region. Collection of questionnaire was completed by the end of July 2011. As such the field trip was significant in the sense that it was completed during that phase of time when the recent conflict containment strategy Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) was just on its offing and the issue has been made so popular that even a child would have known that something was going on in the name of GTA. For consulting Government documents visits in District Collector's office have been made. Besides libraries of North Bengal University, Centre for Himalayan Studies, Ratan Tata Library of Delhi School of Economics, Delhi University have been visited for the purpose of collecting secondary data on the issues of peace, conflict and conflict resolution. Close scrutiny of everyday

eventualities has also been made through content analysis of available news reports published in local and national news dailies.

There are three principal modes of narration popular in social science research, viz. 'ethnography', 'thick description', and 'stylised facts'. Ethnography is a preferred mode for anthropological research providing the every detail of the life cycle of a tribe, or a community. Thick description is also preferred by those who attempt to narrate the research problem in splendid detail but is sceptical of cross-case theorisation. Concentrating on the 'essentials', stylised facts as a mode of narration tends to present a disembodied and linear narrative. That is to say, it presents a selection of facts first and present the analysis later (Varshney, 2002: 21). The present study intends to follow neither the methods of ethnographic detail, or 'thick description', nor even the format called 'stylised facts'. However, the endeavour throughout the whole study would be rather to use the various sources of data more in the form of narration that aimed at amalgamating the facts with interpretations. In true sense the format of narration for the present study would stand in between the three principal methodological strands (as discussed above) popular in social science research.

In the present study an attempt has been made to arrive at a critical understanding of the peace keeping measures undertaken so far to mitigate the problem of Gorkha ethnicity and movement in Darjeeling Hills, West Bengal. This has been done by probing into the pros and cons of the movement *vis-à-vis* the response of the State as manifested in its deep seeded history and as emerged in the contemporaneous past. To put the matter in other words, the movement in its long drawn history has raised several issues and that the State also responded variously towards such burgeoning claims. The book contains six chapters and in the following pages the issue of conflict resolution has been critically estimated both with analytical rigour and with empirical data culled out from the biography of the Gorkha Movement. Finally, the study attempted to raise the plea for an alternative approach while thinking in terms of peace and conflict containment in liberal democracies like that of our own.

With the help of a detailed analysis of the event structure of Gorkhaland Movement further efforts were made to answer the grave question that: why ethnic conflicts do survive in Darjeeling hills despite several efforts to resolve the same have been made time to time? In the course of analysis the present study also attempted

to throw some light on the possibility of developing an alternative approach grounded on sociological reasoning towards the issue of conflict resolution. This has been done against the backdrop of a detailed analysis of Darjeeling's Gorkhaland Movement which served the purpose of being a pointer to the fault lines involved in the path of settling the rather emotive issue covering community sentiments, regional consciousness, and cultural-historical lineages all at once. The study has shown in clear terms that conflict resolution strategies worked out to resolve Gorkha imbroglio were out and out political in nature and piecemeal in approach. The study ends up with a rather pessimistic prognosis and arrived at a conclusion that the way Gorkha Movement has been handled so far by the State can hardly foster sustainable peace and tranquillity. However, it is also proposed that there is scope for working out strategies with due emphasis on the social concerns that the movement has upheld but somehow got delinked in the process of devising strategies to resolve the problem. The study strongly argues against the tendency of the liberal nation state to view ethnic loyalty in contradistinction to national loyalty. The study also raises the argument that the missing link between ethnic loyalty and national loyalty can be established by a different approach that, in fact, poses a challenge both towards the liberal expectancy of peace and tranquillity on the one hand and the very foundational logic of liberal bourgeois democratic state, on the other. It is proposed that the real threat lies neither in the conflicting claims nor even in the violent gestures that the Gorkhas have shown but perhaps in the attempt that nullifies the significance of 'us-them' divide in the name of forging a universal 'we'. Instead of 'forceful assimilation' due recognition of claims raised by different stakeholders of the movement may help us derive policies/measures directed towards 'integrative peace'.

Chapter Outline

The present study throughout its six chapters has elaborated different aspects of conflict containment keeping in view Gorkhaland movement as a test case. The second chapter deals with the conceptual issues involved in the understanding and analysis of peace work. Global as well as national level experience of conflict resolution measures have been critically estimated in order to pinpoint the

necessity of devising an alternative analytical framework. From third chapter onwards specific attention was put towards tracing out the genealogy of state response towards Gorkha ethnicity starting from the colonial days. The fourth chapter specifically locates the violent turn of the movement and change of stand of the State towards handling the situation in Darjeeling hills. The chapter covers up the eventualities leading towards the formation of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) as the first such experiment initiated by the State outside Sixth Schedule areas. Fifth chapter emphasizes on the twists and turns taken place in the response of the State and the development of the movement during post-DGHC phase. Sixth chapter hinges on the contemporary experience of conflict resolution taken shape in the form of the new tripartite agreement called Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA). A social forecasting has been made on the possible outcome of the new treaty signed recently to resolve Darjeeling problem once again. Chapter seven in lieu of arriving at a conclusion attempts to expand such arguments which may lead towards developing further courses of fresh analysis. In order to make the study thoroughly updated the Postscript has been included. The Postscript has been prepared keeping in view the very recent developments taken place in the area under study.

In fact, the critical analysis of conflict resolution measures with particular reference to Darjeeling situation is overdue. Since Darjeeling hills has not only experienced the continuation of an ethnic movement for more than a century but also the region experienced war of nerves, severe tension, violence, enough bloodsheds, loss of life and resources in the wake of Gorkhaland Movement that turned violent in the 1980s. Again a new arrangement has recently been agreed upon by the conflicting parties on the one hand and the State and Central Government on the other, which have finally led towards the formation of the new set up called the GTA. The Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) has started its march with the expectations of all-round peace and development in the Darjeeling hills. Within such a crucial juncture the significance of the present study could hardly be brushed aside.

NOTES

1. *Vide* Appendix I for a detailed chronology of the movement.

Other Books of Interest

T.B. SUBBA, A.C. SINHA, G.S. NEPAL and D.R. NEPAL (Eds.)
Indian Nepalis: Issues and Perspectives

K.L. PRADHAN
Thapa Politics in Nepal

ANJOO SHARAN UPADHYAYA (Ed.)
Nepal in Transition to Democracy

J. TALBOYS WHEELER
History of India: And of the Frontier States of Afghanistan, Nepal and Burma

B.B. KUMAR
Problems of Ethnicity in the North East

OLIVER THORNE MILLER
Little People of Asia

SIR WILLIAM WILSON HUNTER
A Brief History of The Indian Peoples

KHEMRAJ SHARMA
Gorkhas in the Wilderness: A Study in North East India

J.V. HLUNA (Ed.)
History and Ethnic identity Formation in North-East India

SA