

GORKHALAND ISSUE

HISTORY OF GORKHALAND DEMAND:

In 1780, the Gorkhas captured Sikkim and most part of North Eastern states that includes Darjeeling, Siliguri, Simla, Nainital, Garhwal hills, Kumaon and Sutlej, that is, the entire region from Teesta to Sutlej.

- After 35 years of rule, the Gorkhas surrendered the territory to British in the **Treaty of Segoulee/Sugauli in 1816**, after they lost the Anglo-Nepal war.
- **1907:** The first demand for Gorkhaland is submitted by Hillmen's Association of Darjeeling to Minto-Morley Reforms Panel. In 1917, Hillmen's Association submitted a memorandum to the then Viceroy for the creation of a separate administrative unit comprising of Darjeeling district and adjoining Jalpaiguri district. In 1929, Hillmen's Association raised the issue before the Simon Commission.
- **1907-1980s:** After that on several occasions demands were made to the British government and then government of Independent India (most notably to state reorganization commission) for separation from Bengal and creation of Separate Gorkha land State.
- **1980-90:** The demand for Gorkhaland was intensified in the 1980s under the leadership of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) supremo Subhas Ghising. The movement turned violent during the period of 1986-88, and around 1,200 people were killed. After a two-year long protest, the **Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC)** was finally formed in 1988 and limited powers were given to GNLF, only in Darjeeling district.
- **2007-2011:** In 2007, Bimal Gurung started the GJM. Termed as the 'Next Robinhood', he slowly gathered support for the formation of Gorkhaland.

At the last phase of left front's regime, the mass movement for Gorkhaland took place under the leadership of Gorkha Janmurti Morcha (GJM) Supremo Bimal Gurung. The four-year long movement came to an end after new CM Mamata Banerjee replaced the DGHC with Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) and made Gurung its chief.

- **2013:** There was peace between the two parties until Telangana was formed in 2013 which sparked the demand for Gorkhaland the movement for Gorkhaland state again intensifies. **Gurung resigns from the head of GTA**, saying people have lost all faith. However, making her stand clear, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has said: **“Bengal cannot suffer the pain of yet another Partition”**

What triggered the protests?

On May 16, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee announced to make Bengali language compulsory in all schools from Class I to Class IX, including private English-medium schools, of the state.

“If the student chooses Bengali, Hindi, English, Urdu , Gurmukhi, Nepali, Alchiki as a first language, he/she may opt for two other languages of their choice. One of the three languages would have to be Bengali. The two other choices are completely dependent on what the student chooses. This method would enable them to reach regional, national and international standards,” she wrote in her Facebook post.

Even though most schools in the state had provisions for teaching language, Bengali as one of the three languages was not mandatory. The government’s move had far-reaching political and social implications than Ms Banerjee could comprehend.

As people of the proposed state of **Gorkhaland in the Darjeeling hills officially speak Nepali**, the state government’s decision was met with massive hostility.

Government response

As the protests in the hill district turned violent, the West Bengal government responded with asking the Centre to deploy the army to bring law and order in the region. The police fired tear gas shells and lathi charged the protesting crowd who tried to break barricades and hurled bricks at the cops.

West Bengal power minister Sovandeb Chatterjee termed the indefinite strike called upon by the GJM as ‘suicidal’ as they (GJM) are spoiling the life of Darjeeling people for ‘political gain’. CM Banerjee branded the protest as “abhorrent” and appealed to the public to maintain peace in the region.

The CPI (M) state secretary accused the CM Mamata Banerjee government of treating the situation in Darjeeling akin to the Centre’s treatment of Kashmir.

Arguments given for Demand of Separate State for Gorkha Land:

i. **Gorkhas have Linguistic and cultural differences from Bengali culture**

- Almost 14 lakh people who are inhabitants of the proposed Gorkha Land speak Nepali language, have distinct cuisine, custom and culture which is different from that of rest of Bengal.

ii. **Lack of development and unemployment in the region**

- Infrastructure development in the region along with employment opportunities are poor. Most locals earn their living by working in tea estates.
- With deteriorating situation in tea gardens and poor wages, the situation has further worsened.
- Health and education facilities especially the higher education in the region is very poor.

iii. **Flawed language census of 1949:**

- 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 of Nepali, Nepali was and remains the common language in the hills.

iv. **Political Reasons**

- There is a lot of politics over the issue. The parties in opposition, tries to sympathize with the cause of Gorkhas to get their electoral support.
- Further regional parties, in order to stay relevant invigorate the issue from time to time.

- v. **Failure of GTA:** There have, however, been inadequacies in the functioning of the GTA because substantial administrative and fiscal authority has remained with the state government's district heads, i.e., district magistrates, instead of being delegated to the executives under the GTA.

Moreover, the entire resource allocating authority and a broad spectrum of fiscal powers have continued to remain vested with the state government headquartered at Kolkata. This hiatus in authority has been one among several factors affecting developmental activities in the area, and in triggering the recent agitation.

vi. **Gorkhas are subjected to Discrimination and exploitation and were seen as foreigners**

- The Gorkhas find themselves reduced to second class citizens, at the hand of otherwise miniscule inhabitants (Bengali speaking government officers, Businessmen and other prosperous groups from outside). The Nepalese inhabitants of the Darjeeling hills have been looked as migrants from Nepal and therefore seen as “foreigners” even though their history in the area predates an independent India
- With the demand for Gorkhaland, the tea plantation workers raise their demands for a fairer share of wages. **Under Plantation Labor Act, 1951**, they are paid a mere 132.50 when the minimum wage of a non-skilled worker is Rs 226.

How the situation should have been avoided?

CM should have consulted the Bengali language rule after consulting GTA. It was imprudent for the CM to have made the announcement without consulting the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), the semi-autonomous body that runs the affairs of the hill town.

How the situation should be dealt with? [or] WAY FORWARD:

- i. Removing the communication and credibility gap
- ii. Development alone is not enough to win the hearts of Gorkhas
 - Equally important is to establish social and personal contact with the people of the hill region
 - It is only through a long process of interaction that the feeling of 'we' and 'they' can be overcome and the basis for a permanent and lasting peace in the hills can be laid.
- iii. Transfer the subjects promised in 2011 to GTA for real autonomy
- iv. Disabling any kind of foreign interference by curbing the flow of money or weapons from outside.
- v. Considered historically, culturally, linguistically and socially, long overdue recognition of the not unreasonable demands of the indigenous Nepalese population by granting Gorkhaland autonomy may be one of the option with the Governments at Delhi and Kolkata to improve

their lives.

- vi. Creation of an Autonomous State of Gorkhaland within an undivided West Bengal can be considered. **Article 244 A** provides for an autonomous state for certain tribal areas in Assam with its own legislature and council of ministers. By a constitutional amendment, the applicability of this article can be extended to West Bengal. Alternatively, through a constitutional amendment, an Article similar to Article 244 A, can be inserted as a new chapter in Part VI of the Constitution. This will enable the establishment of an Autonomous State of Gorkhaland, with a legislature and council of ministers within the existing state of West Bengal without bifurcating.

Such a restructured autonomous entity may be acceptable to the Gorkhas of Darjeeling-Kalimpong. It is for the Centre and West Bengal to act with foresight and devise an arrangement that gives a sense of ownership to the Gorkha stakeholders in the overall national interest. Without suitable empowerment and effective operation of the empowered institution, the Gorkhaland issue may not be susceptible to a satisfactory resolution.