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*Ethnic Problems and Movements for
Autonomy in Darjeeling*

The complexities of the ethnic problems were embedded in the demands and the resultant movements for autonomy which came to the surface from time to time in the district of Darjeeling in West Bengal. The trajectory of this interlinkage can be comprehensively analysed only if a systematic explication of the different historical stages of the whole process is undertaken. We will try to envisage such an explication in this paper.

Nestled as it were in the Singalila range of the eastern Himalayas, the territory of Darjeeling historically belonged to Sikkim and Bhutan. From the beginning of the 19th century the English East India Company began to take active interests in Darjeeling, and the whole territory came under the British occupation in three phases during the thirty years from 1835 to 1865. During the first phase, in 1835, by a deed of grant, the Raja of Sikkim ceded to the British rulers a portion of the Sikkim hills which covered the areas south of the Great Rangit river, east of the Balasan, Kahel and Little Rangit rivers and west of the Rangnu and Mahananda rivers. The second phase followed a war with Sikkim which resulted in the annexation of Sikkim 'Morang' or 'Terai' at the foot hills as well as a portion of the Sikkim hills which was bounded by the Rammam river on the north, by the Great Rangit and the Tista rivers on the east, and by the Nepal frontier on the west. This area had always been under Sikkim, excepting the Morang or Terai in the foot hills which was for a time (1788-1816) conquered by Nepal. However, following the East India Company's victorious war with Nepal, this tract was ceded through the Treaty of Segauli (1816) to the British rulers who, in turn, temporarily returned it to the Raja of Sikkim by the Treaty of Titaliya (1817). As

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indicated above, the British soon began a war with Sikkim and the ceded territory was annexed by them which was ratified by the Treaty of Tunlong (1861). The third phase was marked by the outbreak of the Anglo-Bhutan war which ended in the Treaty of Sinchulia (1865) and led to the British annexation of the hill tract which was situated to the east of the Tista river, the west of the Ne-chu and De-chu rivers, and the south of Sikkim. In other words, the total territory of the present three hill subdivisions of Darjeeling district - i.e., Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong sub-divisions - historically belonged to Sikkim and Bhutan before their annexation to British India. However, there is no recorded historical evidence that these three hill sub-divisions were ever a part of Nepal. As mentioned above, only the Terai portion of the Siliguri sub-division (and not the hills in the other sub-divisions) was for a short time conquered by Nepal from Sikkim, but was soon returned to Sikkim in 1816, long before the district of Darjeeling took shape.

The thrust of the English East India Company towards Darjeeling and the adjacent region was motivated by several factors. One of the major reasons emanated from the geo-political importance of Darjeeling as being a part of Sikkim with which the British commercial compulsions were also closely associated. Throughout the 19th century the British interest in the overland trade with Tibet and Central Asia and the concomitant urgency for safeguarding the northern border of India against China and Tibet turned out to be the guiding parameters in the British policy towards the kingdoms of Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal. Sikkim was of special interest to the English rulers because of its strategic position. The borders of the kingdom of Sikkim touched China, Nepal, Bhutan and India. The small kingdom commanded the historic Kalimpong-Lhasa trade route which was the shortest one from India to the heart of Tibet. Two main ranges of the Himalayas - the Singalila range and the Chola range - enclosed Sikkim on the north of Darjeeling district and it was bounded on either side by Nepal and Bhutan. In the wake of the Gorkha conquest of Nepal led by Prithvinarayan Shah, the British rulers were obliged, since the closing decades of the 18th century, to shift a major volume of their trade with Tibet and Central Asia through Sikkim to the Chumbi Valley and thence to Lhasa and Central Asia. However, after the successful conclusion of Anglo-Nepal war through the Treaty of Segauli (1816), the English rulers were able to contain the territorial ambition of the Gorkha kings of Nepal who hence forward began to maintain a friendly relation with British India. With the annexation

of Darjeeling from Sikkim and Bhutan and the containment of Nepal, the English traders started to increase trade with Sikkim, Nepal, and Tibet through Darjeeling. While the import items included horses, blankets, tea, tar, coal, wool musk, musical instruments and shoes, the export items consisted of European piece-goods, rice, salt, indigo, brass and copper wares, tobacco etc. Throughout the 19th century, the volume of trade through Darjeeling went on increasing and the prospects of the Central Asian trade through the Himalayas appeared to be more alluring.

The friendly relationship between British India and Nepal gradually became a subservient one which provided another major factor for the British thrust towards Darjeeling. After Jung Bahadur Rana (1846-77), the Prime Minister of Nepal, replaced the Gorkha King by making him only a tutelar entity, the process of subservience to the English rulers was set in motion. Jung Bahadur not only offered the British Government military assistance in the Anglo-Sikh war (1848-49) but himself appeared at the head of 9000 Nepali soldiers to help the English suppress the Great Sepoy Revolt in 1857 and rescued Lucknow from the rebel hands. This mercenary role of the Nepali soldiers motivated the British rulers to use Darjeeling as a permanent recruiting centre for the British Indian Army. The recruitment of the Gorkhas (all categories of Nepali-speaking recruits were known as 'Gorkha' in the British Indian Army) had started in the second half of the 19th century. Pleading for more recruiting centres at Darjeeling, E. Drummend, the then Magistrate of Dinajpur, urged upon the Government of Bengal to increase the Nepali recruitment as "they would in every way be more efficient, courageous and trustworthy body of men than any to be had in the plains". This was the beginning of the formulation of "martial race" theory which Lord Roberts, Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army (1885-1893), would subsequently make the corner-stone of the British recruiting policy in armed forces. Lord Roberts wrote: "the first step towards improving the quality of army was to substitute men of more warlike and hardy races for the Hindusthani sepoy of Bengal, the Tamils and Telugus of Madras and the so-called Marathas of Bombay." The underlying compulsion of the British rulers in the post-Sepoy Revolt period was to recruit "loyal" Nepali soldiers who would not be affected by the incipient nationalist feelings which were distinctly found among the Indian sepoy during the Revolt of 1857. Consequently, the increase in the number of the Gorkha battalions was dramatic; from five in 1862 to twenty in 1914. Darjeeling became

an important recruiting centre for these battalions because the Nepali rulers in Kathmandu did not initially favour recruitment of Gorkha soldiers for Indian Army from within Nepal.

The next major factor which motivated the drive of the British rulers towards Darjeeling was the possibility of the growth of tea industry in the district. In 1834 Lord William Bentinck had appointed a committee to suggest ways and means for developing tea industry in India. In 1841 Dr. Campbell started in Darjeeling the experiment of growing tea plant with a few seeds from Chinese stock. Campbell's experiment followed the progress report of Jackson on tea plantation in Darjeeling. Tea cultivation on commercial scale began in the district from 1856 onwards and the industry flourished rapidly which attracted the British planters in considerable number. The following table would show the rate of growth of tea industry in Darjeeling during the second half of the 19th century.

Year	No. of gardens	Area under cultivation (in acres)	Net production (in Lbs)
1866	39	10,000	4,33,000
1870	113	18,888	39,28,000
1885	175	38,499	90,90,000
1895	186	48,692	1,17,14,551

(Source: Darjeeling district Gazetteers, by L.S.S.O'Mally, 1907)

Along with tea plantation, the prospects of forest products and cinchona plantation had also attracted the Britishers. The most remarkable feature of the forests of Darjeeling, which constituted more than 90 per cent of the hill areas of the district in mid-19th century and which even now cover 54 per cent of the hill region of the district, has been the amazing variety of species laden with immense possibilities of commercial utilisation.

The last, but not the least, important factor which had initially encouraged the English East India Company to move towards Darjeeling was the possibility of setting up a sanatorium and health resort for the British officials and businessmen in the cool climate of the Sikkim hills. In 1829-30 two officials of the East India Company - Lt. Col. Lloyd and J.W. Grant (Commercial Resident of Maldah) - explored the places in the Sikkim hills and recommended Darjeeling for the location of a suitable sanatorium. They suggested to the authorities of the East India Company that Darjeeling, compared to

the hill stations in Shimla, Almorah, Nainital and Shillong, would be considerably nearer to Calcutta which, throughout the 19th century, was regarded as the main metropolis for the British settlers in India. As indicated earlier, on February 1, 1835, the Raja of Sikkim was persuaded to cede to the East India Company the Darjeeling hill tract under a deed of grant for the specific purpose of “enabling” the British officers, “suffering from sickness, to avail themselves of” the “advantages” of the “cool climate” of “the hill of Darjeeling”. Preparations to develop Darjeeling as a sanatorium and health resort continued at a brisk pace. Between 1839 and 1842, the Pankhabari Road to Darjeeling through the virgin forest of Terai was constructed by a young lieutenant of the Royal Engineers, who later on became Lord Napier of Magdala. The construction of the Hill Cart Road began in 1861 and was completed in 1866 at a cost of nearly Rs. 15 lakhs. There was a spurt of construction of buildings on the ridges of Darjeeling hill which included churches, schools, bungalows, hospitals and theatre halls for the use of the British and other Europeans of Calcutta. This process of development also gradually encouraged the growth of tourism in Darjeeling.

When in 1829 Lloyd and Grant, the two officials of the English East India Company, first visited Darjeeling (then known as the Old Gurkha Station), they had seen a few Lepcha households in and around the place. But they did not find any Nepali inhabitant. Similarly in 1835 when the East India Company first acquired the nucleus of the Darjeeling district from the Raja of Sikkim, there was no Nepali household. The hill tract was, then, almost entirely under forest and contained a small population of one hundred Lepchas who were the original settlers in Darjeeling. The Lepchas spoke a language of Tibeto-Burman origin and came under the religious influence of the Indo-Tibetan or Lamaist Buddhism. Dr. Campbell, the first Superintendent of Darjeeling, reported in 1850 that the total number of inhabitants in the district had risen to 10,000. The ethnic majority of the Lepchas began to be rapidly outnumbered by the migrants from Nepal. The rapid influx of the Nepalis was also noted by Sir Joseph Hooker when he visited Darjeeling in 1850-51. When in 1869 a rough census was taken of the inhabitants of the district, the total was found to be over 22,000.

In 1872, the first Census of India was published and the total population of Darjeeling appeared to have steadily increased to 94,712. In 1876 W.W. Hunter wrote in his ‘Statistical Account of Bengal’ (Volume X): “The Nepalis, who form 34 percent of the

population of the district, are all immigrants from the state of Nepal. They are a pushing, thriving race...". The Nepalis, though 'pushing' and 'thriving', were yet to be the majority ethnic group in the population of Darjeeling district. However, the migration from Nepal went on unabated and by the time of the second Census of India in 1881, the Nepalis formed the absolute majority not only in the three hill sub-divisions but also in the whole district of Darjeeling. The following table would indicate the pattern of the increase of the Nepali population in Darjeeling during the period from 1881 to 1941:

Year	Total population in the whole district of Darjeeling	Total population in three hill sub- divisions of the district	Total number of Nepali-speaking population in the district.
1881	1,55,179	92,141	88,000
1891	2,23,314	1,50,311	1,34,000
1901	2,49,117	1,73,342	1,52,167
1911	2,65,550	1,89,763	1,66,974
1921	2,82,748	2,06,961	1,61,308
1931	3,19,635	2,39,377	1,75,285
1941	3,76,369	2,86,355	2,23,888

Source: Census of India Reports

The migration from Nepal continued as before and, in 1931, out of a total population of 3,19,635 in the whole district, 59,016 had migrated from Nepal. From 1951 onwards, following the Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship (1950), there was visible reluctance among the Nepalis to divulge the place of birth. But the sudden upswing of the population figure in Darjeeling district, from 3,28,785 in 1951 to 4,64,762 in 1961 underscored the quantum of migration from Nepal to Darjeeling.

The ethnic composition of the three hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling, which had, thus, undergone a sea-change since the middle of the 19th century till the present times, was evidently caused by the waves of massive migration from Nepal which, in turn, emanated from three major factors. In the first place, the ascendancy of Prithvinarayan Shah, the founder of Gorkha dynasty, in Kathmandu in the second half of the 18th century unleashed an aggressive drive of the high caste Hindu monarchy of Nepal for centralisation and expansion. This drive caused considerable socio-economic tensions inside Nepal and imposed a series of repressive measures in order to ensure domination of the high caste Hindu Nepalis over the Buddhist and

other non-Hindu Nepali tribes and communities. In the Kirat region of Nepal, in particular, the tribal land tenure was marked by the system of 'Kipat' landholding which was a kind of community land ownership system. Such 'Kipat' lands, which were vested in a particular ethnic group, could not be permanently alienated. But the Gorkha rulers, after they had established their supremacy over the Kirat region in eastern Nepal, changed the collective ownership of the 'Kipat' lands into the royal possession, making the Nepali tribes of the region landless. The Nepali communities in the Kirat region, such as the Rais, the Limbus, the Gurungs and the Tamangs, were downgraded to the status of 'Sudra' in the Nepali Hindu society, making them vulnerable to the oppressions of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya castes. Non-conformity to Hindu scriptures invited serious punishment known as 'panchakhat', which included confiscation of property, banishment, mutilation, enslavement and even death. Faced with these repressive measures, a large number of Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Tamang and other low-caste Nepalis started migration from the eastern region of Nepal. After Darjeeling passed into the British hands in the first half of the 19th century, the above Nepali communities found the hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling a convenient and accessible place for settlement.

A second major factor originated from the inclination of the British rulers, in general, and the willingness of the English tea planters, in particular, to encourage settlement of the Nepali migrants as the plantation workers in the tea gardens of the hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling. The Nepali migrants were hardworking and could adapt themselves to the working conditions of the tea gardens which were situated at the high altitude in the hills of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong. For the tea gardens in the Terai plains, the English planters would prefer the tribals from the Chhotanagpur region of Bihar - such as the Santals and the Oraons - who began to be employed as indentured labourers. However, because of their poverty-stricken background, both the Nepali migrants and the tribals from Bihar could be recruited by the British planters with low remuneration throughout the second half of the 19th century and the early decades of the present century. As indicated earlier, the tea industry flourished in Darjeeling rapidly in the initial phase. This resulted in a considerable number of recruitment at the level of plantation workers and the majority of them came from Nepal as the migrants. Though the growth of tea industry tended to slow down from the early decades of the present century, the total number of workers employed in the tea

gardens of the hill sub-divisions (excluding the Terai plains) amounted to 60,979 as late as in 1961. Once the tea industry developed in the second half of the 19th century, this led to the growth of ancillary economic activities in Darjeeling and created a demand for more immigrants, many of whom now took to agriculture. Presently the census data indicate that one-third of the total working population of Darjeeling district are engaged in activities connected with plantations, orchards, forestry and livestock, that one-third are occupied in agricultural activities, and that another 8 per cent are involved as agricultural labourers. The rest of the working population are engaged in manufacturing, construction, mining, trading and various service activities.

The third major factor which encouraged migration from Nepal to Darjeeling was the British policy to enlist the Nepalis for the Gorkha Battalions in the Indian army through the recruiting centre in Darjeeling during the post-Sepoy Revolt period. The basic reason, as indicated earlier, was the British recognition of the Gorkha loyalty which was amply proved during the Sepoy Revolt of 1857. In 1863 the Sappers and Miners stationed at Darjeeling were composed almost entirely of the migrant Nepalis. As there was initial reluctance on the part of the Nepali rulers at Kathmandu to allow enlistment for the British Indian Army within Nepal, the migration of the Nepalis tended to increase for the attraction of military recruitment through the Army centres in Darjeeling. The British rulers also encouraged the Nepali migrants for recruitment in the police service as well as in various construction works which were connected with the growth process of Darjeeling as a sanatorium and a tourist centre. As a cumulative result, the Census data indicated that, in 1881, out of 1,55,179 which was the total population of Darjeeling district, 88,000 people of the district were recorded to have been born in Nepal, while the total population in the three hill sub-divisions amounted to 92,141. It should be further noted that, according to the Census data, the total number of Nepal-born population in India in 1881 was 2,23,314.

As regards Darjeeling as well as with regard to Sikkim and Bhutan, the encouragement, which the British rulers had so explicitly extended to the Nepali migrants throughout the second half of the 19th century and in the subsequent period, originated from the colonial design to outbalance the original ethnic domination of the Lepchas and the Bhutias in the region. In the British colonial perception, the Lepchas and the Bhutias were unlikely to shift their loyalty from Tibet as they were strongly integrated by a common heritage, religion, language

and culture. All of them belonged to the Tibeto-Burman language group and adhered to the religion of Lamaist Buddhism. On the other hand, the Nepalis had not only proved their loyalty to the British during the Sepoy Revolt of 1857 but also they were mostly Hindus. Dr. Campbell pointed out this Hindu religious anchorage of the Nepalis and wrote in his diary in the middle of 19th century: "The British were keen that the Nepalis should settle in newly acquired land in Darjeeling because they were considered to be traditional enemy of the Buddhist Tibetans and the Buddhist Bhutias". The British found in the Nepali immigrants a group of loyal subjects whose allegiance would lie with the British and not with the Dalai Lama of Tibet. In Bhutan and Sikkim, the English rulers sought to create a subservient Nepali land-owning class in order to counteract the traditional predominance of the Tibetan and the Bhutia landed aristocracy. In *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* (1894), H.H. Risley spelt out the colonial objective underlying the British-sponsored migration of the Nepalis: "Influx of the hereditary enemies of Tibet is our surest guarantee against revival of Tibetan influence. Here the religion will play a leading role. Hinduism will assuredly cast out Buddhism."

The rapid emergence of the dominant position of the Nepalis in the ethnic composition of Darjeeling during the second half of the 19th century was gradually accompanied by the settlement of a small number of Bengali middle class families from the plains in administrative services and learned professions in the urban areas of the hill sub-divisions as well as in managerial and clerical services in the tea gardens. The Biharis and the Marwaris also began to settle in small numbers as the dealers in wholesale and retail trade of the district. However, by 1941, the population figures of the Bengalis, the Biharis, the Marwaris and the others coming from the plains did not constitute more than 5.1 per cent of the total population in the three hill sub-divisions of the district, while 86.8 per cent of the population were Nepali-speaking. The other hillmen and the scheduled castes formed another 8.1 per cent. On the other hand, in the Siliguri sub-division of Darjeeling district, which mostly included the plains and a part of the Terai forests and a segment of the tea gardens, the Bengalis constituted majority of the population which tended to increase further after the influx of the refugees following the partition of Bengal in 1947.

In spite of the above ethnic complexities of Darjeeling district, a composite culture began to take shape in the three hill sub-divisions from the beginning of the present century. The bond of unity was

provided by the Nepali language which, in Nepal, used to be known as 'Khaskura' or 'Gorkha' since the end of the 17th century. In Nepal, however, 'Khaskura' language mostly remained confined to the upper castes of Brahmin-Chetris even after the Gorkha ascendancy under Prithvinaryan Shah and it could not easily form a link for linguistic or cultural affinity with the various low-caste ethnic groups of Nepal who spoke Tibeto-Burman languages. But in Darjeeling the situation was altogether different. The low-caste Nepali migrants like the Rais, the Limbus, the Pradhans, the Gurungs, the Tamangs and the Kirats, who spoke Tibeto-Burman dialects, picked up as a second language 'Khaskura' Nepali of the upper-caste Brahmins and the Chetris. In India, in general, and in Darjeeling, in particular, Nepali language gradually forged a bond of cultural unity and an ethnic link among various groups who had migrated from Nepal. Even the Lepchas and Bhutias, in spite of their religious and linguistic differences with the Nepalis, slowly but ultimately accepted Nepali as the lingua franca in the hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling. The overwhelming demographic predominance of the Nepalis, which became a hard reality towards the end of the 19th century, contributed to this acceptability of Nepali language as the lingua franca. Another major contributing factor was the steady permeation of the process of Sankritisation among the low-caste Nepali migrants. With the gradual increase in the number of the upper-caste Chetri and Brahmin migrants from Nepal since the beginning of the present century, the Hindu places of worship started coming up in Darjeeling which subsequently outnumbered the Buddhist monasteries. In course of time, the influence of Buddhism on the low-caste Nepalis like the Tamangs, the Rais and the Limbus began to wane and most of them gradually embraced Hinduism. Even a section of the Lepchas could not ultimately avoid this process of Sankritisation. Ethnic unity was further reinforced in Darjeeling by the settlement of a large number of retired Nepali officers of British Indian Army as well as Nepali police personnel, as a part of the conscious British policy of creating a segment of "loyal" immigrants in the hill sub-divisions of the district.

Though a composite Nepali culture was striking its early roots in Darjeeling, the Nepali communities remained stratified along economic lines. Among them, the aristocratic elements were represented by the landholding class and the retired army and police officials, while the other major strata were formed by the middle class service-holders and small traders and by the working class consisting of plantation and construction workers as well as small

peasants and agricultural labourers. The ethnic identity of the Nepalis strove to cut across these major economic strata and sought to express itself in two distinct streams, which sometimes flowed together. The first one pivoted around the spread of Nepali language and literature which became the focal point for the composite ethnic culture of the hill sub-divisions of the district. In the second stream, the ethnic identity of the Nepalis was, expressed in terms of an exclusiveness which gradually took shape through demands for various forms of autonomy for Darjeeling.

The move to improve Nepali language was initiated by the Christian missionaries at Serampore in Hooghly district of Bengal during the 1820s. A grammar of Nepali language was published by them. Later on Rev. William Macfarlane introduced Nepali as a language in the schools which he established in Darjeeling. However, all these efforts of the Christian missionaries were mostly motivated by their proselytizing zeal. Rev. Ganga Prasad Pradhan, one of the earliest Nepali converts to Christianity, translated the Bible into Nepali language. It was only after the emergence of a middle class Nepali literati led by the personalities like Parasmoni Pradhan, Dharanidhar Koirala and Surya Bikram Gewali that the ethnic cultural identity of the Nepalis of Darjeeling began to assert itself. It was because of their efforts that in 1918 Calcutta University recognised Nepali as a vernacular language for the purpose of composition in the Matriculation, Intermediate and B.A. examinations. In 1920, the first authentic revision of the Nepali grammar was done by Parasmoni Pradhan, who himself was an Inspector of Schools. Dharanidhar Koirala composed simple poems dealing with the themes of social reforms, urging all Nepalis to the task of national awakening. Surya Bikram Gewali, in his writings, gave a nationalist perspective on the Nepali royal and martial heroes. This literary movement was further strengthened by the publication of a Nepali monthly paper *Chandrika* which was edited by Parasmoni Pradhan in 1918. However, it was in 1901 that the first Nepali journal was published from Darjeeling and it was entitled as *Gorkha Khabar Kagat*. The famous *Gorkhapatra* was simultaneously published from Nepal. The journals, published from 1900 to 1940, concentrated on different aspects of the Nepali society, culture and language. The social evils were criticised and a radical change in the social outlook was advocated. *Nepali Sahitya Sammelan Patra*, published in 1932, contributed to the development of serious prose in the language.

Along with the growth of literary movement for Nepali cultural

identity, ethnic exclusiveness was also expressed through the demands for autonomy in Darjeeling which were not always homogeneous in nature. At least three types could be discernible which, however, tended to converge on certain occasions. The first type was initially voiced by the retired Nepali army and police officers, who were supported by the Nepali landed aristocrats and rich traders. They submitted a memorandum in 1907 to the British Government, pleading for the creation of a separate administrative entity for Darjeeling outside Bengal but within the British Indian Empire. These elitist Nepalis of Darjeeling were subsequently supported by a small group of aristocratic Tibetan and Bhutia families and all of them formed the Hillmen's Association under the leadership of S.W. Ladenla who was an Additional Superintendent of Police in Darjeeling and also the Aide-de-Camp of the British Governor of Bengal for a while. When Edwin Montague, the British Secretary of State, visited India in 1917, the Hillmen's Association submitted a memorandum to the Chief Secretary of Bengal, demanding a separate administrative unit comprising "the present Darjeeling district and the portion of Jalpaiguri district which was annexed from Bhutan in 1865". This elitist organisation was extremely loyal to the British rulers who had also openly encouraged these upper strata of Darjeeling hillmen to voice their demand for separation from Bengal in order to insulate the Nepalis from the militant anti-British nationalist movements which were, then, spreading in different districts of Bengal. The memorandum of the Hillmen's Association was also supported by the English planters in a meeting held in Darjeeling in March 1920 in order to protect the British interests in the tea gardens of the district from the possibility of labour agitation which could be associated with the trade union activities from the plains. In the subsequent period, the Hillmen's Association continued with their separatist demands and presented memoranda to the British Government in 1930 and in 1941.

Another petition was placed by them to Sir John Anderson, the Governor of Bengal, in 1934. At that time, the militant nationalists of Bengal, particularly those who belonged to the Dacca Anusilan Samiti, were trying to assassinate the British Governor for his brutal repressive measures unleashed against the activists of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The following extracts are given from the memorandum of the Hillmen's Association, which was submitted to the Governor at Darjeeling shortly before the historic attempt on his life which was made by the daring members of the Dacca Anusitan

Samiti at the Lebond Race Course on May 8, 1934. The extracts would indicate the docile loyalty of the representatives of the Hillmen's Association expressed to the British rulers as well as their apathy towards the militant nationalist movement:

We are sure that your Excellency will find a congenial atmosphere in the bracing climate of these hills and your Excellency will undoubtedly feel a happy change here especially after heated political controversies which characterise life in the plains below. We are not so ambitious as... the extremist political party in the plains. We assure your Excellency of our readiness to any call on our people at all times and in any emergency.

Though the appeal of the Hillmen's Association for creating a separate administrative unit for Darjeeling was not immediately realised, their repeated demand for separation from Bengal sowed the seeds of a cleavage between the Nepalis of the hill sub-divisions in Darjeeling and the inhabitants of Bengal in the plains.

The second type of demand for autonomy was formulated by the educated Nepali middle class of Darjeeling which differed from the elitist perception of the pro-British Hillmen's Association. This middle class was led by the educationists like Parasmoni Pradhan whose pivotal interest, as mentioned earlier, was to nourish Nepali ethnic identity and the incipient nationalism by developing Nepali literature. At a meeting in Kalimpong held in 1920, Parasmoni Pradhan and his supporters objected to the Hillmen's Association's plea for separation from Bengal which, they argued, would perpetuate the backwardness of the poor Nepalis. In the same year Parasmoni Pradhan and other eminent representatives of the Nepali middle class submitted a separate memorandum to the British Government, demanding the regional autonomy of Darjeeling within the province of Bengal. A few representatives of this class took part in the Swadeshi movement and had connections with the militant nationalists of Bengal. A journal Gorkha-Sathi, which was published from Calcutta in 1906 for the dissemination of nationalist ideas among the Nepalis, was banned by the British Government. Another section of the educated Nepalis, led by Dal Bahadur Giri, took the lead in spreading the Gandhian Non-Cooperation Movement in the tea estates. The untimely death of Dal Bahadur, after his release from prison in 1923, was consoled by Gandhi himself at the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress in 1924.

The third type of demand for autonomy grew out of the Communist-led movements of the Nepali working class engaged in

tea plantation who were also supported by the poor peasants of the district and a section of the Nepali middle class. Sushil Chatterjee, a leading member of the undivided Communist Party of India, took particular initiative to organise the tea garden workers and, in a sense, the popular mantle of Dal Bahadur Giri descended on this plainsman who devoted himself for the uplift of the rural proletariat in Darjeeling. From the beginning of the 1940s, he got able assistance from the Communist activists of the district such as Ratanlal Brahman, Ganeshlal Subbah, Bhadrabahadur Hamal and Charu Mazumder and all of them sought to deepen the anti-imperialist nationalist movement with the active participation of the plantation workers and the poor peasants of Darjeeling district. As far as the demand for autonomy of the district was concerned, the above Communists stood for regional autonomy within Bengal and strove to expand its social base on the specific premises of class struggle.

The above gamut of various demands for autonomy began to be more crystallized because of the aggravation of the economic problems in the hill sub-divisions during the last decade of the colonial rule. This economic deterioration was associated with the impact of the Second World War and it was manifested in the decline in employment opportunities in the tea gardens, in the wanton destruction of the rich forest resources, and in the constriction of recruitment possibilities in the service sector. In this background the representatives of the Nepali middle class came forward to form, under the leadership of Dambar Singh Gurung, a new political party in 1943 which came to be known as the All-India Gorkha League. The growth of the All-India Gorkha League signalled the gradual demise of the elitist organisations like the Hillmen's Association, and the Gorkha League began to put forward the demand for autonomy with a broader social base.

During the Second World War, after the fall of the British Empire in Singapore and Burma in face of the onslaughts of the Japanese army, a large number of Indian prisoners of war, till then belonging to the British Indian Army, came forward for recruitment in the Indian National Army or INA which was fighting against the British in Burma under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose. At this time, several Indian Nepali soldiers joined the INA and enriched the freedom struggle of India in sharp contrast to the pro-British loyalist tradition of the retired Nepali army officials who had floated the organisations like the Hillmen's Association in Darjeeling. Captain Durga Malla and Major Dal Bahadur Thapa (both from the village of Bhakshu in

Kalimpong sub-division) were ultimately captured by the British during the War, court-martialled and hanged: Malla on 29th August, 1944 and Thapa on 9th March 1945 (in Tihar Jail, Delhi), some months before the beginning of the historic INA trials at the Red Fort. Another INA officer, Captain Ram Singh Thakuri, became famous as the composer of the popular marching songs of the INA. Other eminent Nepali officers in INA included Colonel Dilman Singh Thapa and Major Puran Singh Khawas.

In the turbulent post-War days when the British Empire began to crumble in India, the elections were held in 1946 for the Legislative Assembly in Bengal and in other provinces under the Government of India Act of 1935. So far as the two constituencies of Darjeeling were concerned, Dambar, Singh Gurung was elected from the Darjeeling general constituency, while Ratanlal Brahman, then a young Communist leader of the district, won from Darjeeling Sadar sub-division constituency of the tea garden workers. This was the first electoral victory of a Nepali Communist leader in Darjeeling. It should be noted that Ratanlal Brahman, along with Ganeshlal Subba, sent a memorandum to the Constituent Assembly on April 6, 1947, formulating the demands of regional autonomy and projecting the issue of Nepali nationality in Darjeeling and in the adjacent areas in the context of the urgent socio-economic problems of the region which had continually remained neglected under the repressive British colonial rule. As far as the All-India Gorkha League was concerned, the party was trying to maintain its middle class base and, at the same time, reaching out for a trade union front, having to face the competition from the Communists among the masses. Its sponsorship of a Shramik Sangha was started by young Deo Prakash Rai, who shifted the Gorkha League to a more decisive stand accepting Indian nationality, yet not giving up the cause of relative autonomy within West Bengal.

On the heels of Independence of the country came the partition of Bengal, and the Government of India tried to be initially cautious against further dismemberment of West Bengal. In face of this stiff attitude, various types of demands for autonomy of Darjeeling began to converge in the 1950s and the 1960s and tended to pivot round the movements for the recognition of Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution as well as for the autonomous status of Darjeeling within the province of West Bengal. In the mean time, the State Government of West Bengal passed the official Language Act in 1961, accepting the amendment brought by Deo

Prakash Rai of the All-India Gorkha League to give official language status to Nepali in the three hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling. This bill was expectedly supported by all political parties in West Bengal. The inclusion of Nepali in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution emerged as a major ethnic issue when Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, as a member of the Official Language Commission formed by the Government of India in 1955, advocated in his minority report the inclusion of Sindhi and Nepali in the Eighth Schedule. As many as 74 members of the Parliament supported this inclusion, but the Government of India did not follow up the case of Nepali. This discrimination created a deep frustration among the Nepali middle class of Darjeeling. In a conscious effort to organise a sustained movement for the constitutional recognition of Nepali language, the All-India Nepali Bhasa Samiti was formed on January 31, 1972. Both the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India as well as the All-India Gorkha League extended sincere cooperation to the various positive programmes and agitational activities of the All-India Nepali Bhasa Samiti in an organised manner.

At this stage, the intervention of certain factors resulted in a shift of emphasis in the movements for autonomy in Darjeeling and gradually the demand for a separate Gorkhaland came into the forefront. In the first place, during Indira Gandhi's premiership, Sikkim was made a constituent unit of India on April 10, 1975, and soon after, on May 16, 1975, Sikkim became the 22nd State of the Indian Union. As in terms of population and area Darjeeling happened to be considerably bigger than Sikkim, the Statehood of the latter rekindled the ethnic aspiration of the Nepalis for re-emphasising the need for making Darjeeling an autonomous province like Sikkim.

Secondly, while this aspiration was not immediately realised, the Nepali psyche was bitterly hurt when Morarji Desai, as the Prime Minister, made a public statement in 1979 that he would not recommend the inclusion of Nepali in the Eighth Schedule because he considered Nepali to be a 'foreign' language. Almost a similar derogatory remark was made in 1956 by B.G. Kher, the then Chairman of the Official Language Commission, and its repetition by the Prime Minister caused serious frustration among the Nepalis in Darjeeling. They also became suspicious about the perception of the Government of India, as they recollected with bitterness that Vallabhbhai Patel had written to Jawaharlal Nehru on November 7, 1950: "The people inhabiting this portion have no established loyalty or devotion to India. Even Darjeeling and Kalimpong areas are not free from pro-

Mongoloid prejudices". Such indiscrete and somewhat irresponsible statements on the part of the leaders who were at the helm of affairs of the Government of India alienated the sensitive minds of the Nepali educated middle class who began to move away from their moderate and legitimate demand so long articulated for the constitutional recognition of their language. It is, however, significant to note that the State Assemblies of West Bengal (in July, 1977), Sikkim (in October, 1977) and Tripura (in June, 1978) resolved that Nepali language should be included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The resolutions of the Left-dominated Assemblies of West Bengal and Tripura were in tune with the Communist cooperation so long extended to the All-India Nepali Bhasa Samiti in its struggle for the constitutional recognition of Nepali language. The resolution of the Sikkim Assembly was ensured by the presence of the Nepali-speaking members who formed the majority in the same Assembly.

Thirdly, Rajiv Gandhi, during his premiership, allowed the creation of more small provinces in North-East India in the 1980s on the ground of ethnic consideration, and concessions were also given to the militant ethnic movements in Mizoram and Assam. These decisions encouraged ethnic militancy among the Nepalis to strive for the creation of an autonomous small province in Darjeeling through a course of violent confrontation. That apart, the political eclipse of the All-India Gorkha League following the death of Deo Prakash Rai in 1983 and the organisational weakness of the Prantiya Parishad during 1983-85 paved the way for the emergence of a more militant organisation such as the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) under the leadership of Subhas Ghising. The expulsion of the Nepalis from Meghalaya in the early months of 1986 played on the anxiety of the Nepalis in Darjeeling regarding their status in India and, in the process, helped Ghising to gather further support around him in unleashing the movement for the formation of Gorkhaland outside the province of West Bengal.

The GNLF movement was marked by certain special features which were not found in the earlier movements for autonomy organised in Darjeeling since the beginning of the present century. For example, Subhas Ghising sought the support of the King of Nepal and sent appeals to some other Heads of the countries as well as to the United Nations seeking their cooperation for the movement for Gorkhaland. In fact, he received financial help from Nepal on a few occasions, though the King himself did not meet him. There were also allegations that he maintained indirect connections with the

imperialist agencies who have been engaged in the diabolical programmes for destabilising North-East India.

From the beginning the GNLF movement opted for armed confrontation with the State police and para-military forces who also retaliated with occasional excesses. It is clear from the seizure lists of the West Bengal police that Subhas Ghising and his followers procured a considerable amount of unauthorised arms and ammunition. After two years of confrontation (1986-88), they surrendered the following items: 6910 pipe guns, 101 SBBL, 66 DBBL, 5 rifles (.303), 12 revolvers (.22), 3 revolvers (.38), 5 stenguns, 54 SBML, 2 DBML, 554 imported pistols, 8 R/S pistols, 3 revolvers (.45), 58 hand grenades, 22 imported airguns, 63 imported canon, 1 rifle (.79), 1 rifle (7.62), 1 airpistol, 1 tear gas gun, 12 bore rifles, 38 special pistols and 38 MM grenade (7.16). They also surrendered the following items of ammunition: 45 artillery shells, 11,000 bombs and mines, 1000 detonators, 300 gelatine sticks and thousands of ammunition for various types of fire arms. It is significant that the retired Nepali army officers and ex-service men have always enjoyed the close confidence of Ghising and they dominated the central leadership of GNLF during the agitation and even after.

Ghising considered the State police forces and the Nepali CPI(M) activists as well as the organised employees and the tea garden workers to be his main enemies in Darjeeling and selected them as the target for his lethal attacks. The Nepali CPI(M) activists of Darjeeling along with the organised plantation workers, put up a stiff resistance in the midst of immense difficulties in the hills. The leaders of the All-India Nepali Bhasa Samiti also did not escape the wrath of Ghising. It is noteworthy that Ghising did not put much emphasis on the traditional demand for inclusion of Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule. His main thrust was to regain, for his promised Gorkhaland, all the hills and the Terai area of Darjeeling district which were ceded by Sikkim and Bhutan to the British between 1835 and 1865 and which Ghising now claimed, without any authentic recorded evidence, as the territorial possession of Nepal from undefined historical times. According to him, the ethnic problems of the Nepalis in Darjeeling would be solved only if a separate State of Gorkhaland could be established totally outside West Bengal. On August 16, 1986, Ghising stated that the GNLF did not "have any economic grievances other than those which are common everywhere in the country. Indeed, we are better off than many of the districts in West Bengal."

Though he did not include any economic programme in the GNLF

agitation for Gorkhaland, Ghising, in the course of his provocative public speeches in the hills, gave absurd promises on several economic issues of the district and always blamed, without any reliable data whatsoever, the Left Front Government of West Bengal for the economic backwardness of Darjeeling. These provocative speeches, however, were effectively used to form a populist base for GNLF among a large section of the gullible Nepalis belonging to the lower middle class and the poorer strata of the hill population. The Nepali ethnic symbols for violent retaliation, like the blood-stained Kukris, were skillfully utilised by Ghising for mobilising the volatile Nepali youth in the various GNLF programmes, including militant processions and strikes. All these programmes, however, created a deep cleavage between the common people of the hills and the plains, for which, as mentioned earlier, the seeds were sown by the Hillmen's Association during the first three decades of the present century.

After indulging for two years (1986-88) in a violent separatist movement for Gorkhaland, which caused 283 deaths and 615 serious injuries and which destroyed 852 private houses/cottages, 502 Government offices/buildings/culverts and 49 Government buses and vehicles, Ghising and his followers had to climb down and agree to the formation of an elected Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council within West Bengal. The formation of this autonomous District Council for the hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling, which was an innovative experiment for the whole country, was suggested by the Left Front Government of West Bengal in August 1988 and it was supported by the Government of India.

As during the last ten years (1988-1998) the performance of Subhas Ghising and his GNLF in the autonomous Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council has turned out to be unsatisfactory and as the basic economic problems of Darjeeling are yet to be solved with a comprehensive approach, the demand for ethnic exclusiveness in terms of a separate province has recently surfaced again. Once again, the public statements of the leaders who have been at the helm of affairs of the Central Government at Delhi, encouraging the possibility of the creation of Uttarakhand to be carved out of the present province of Uttar Pradesh, has prompted the political leaders of Darjeeling to resume their demand for Gorkhaland. It is noteworthy that these local spokesmen presently belong not only to GNLF or Prantiya Parishad but also to a section of erstwhile CPI(M) leadership hailing from the hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling district. The Central Committee and the West Bengal State Committee as well as the

Darjeeling District committee of the CPI(M), however, have not supported this fresh demand for Gorkhaland. The Left Front Committee and the State Government of West Bengal have also opposed this recent clamour for a separate province of Gorkhaland in Darjeeling.

We would like to conclude by delineating certain points which tend to emerge from the above explication of a turbulent historical process and which may appear to be relevant in the context of a search for an enduring solution of the long-standing ethnic problems of Darjeeling. In the first place, the violent movement of GNLF has acutely disturbed the three major aspects of the economy of Darjeeling - tea, timber, and tourism.

The situation in 72 tea gardens in the hill sub-divisions became ominous, which accounted for 50,000 regular workers and 30,000 casual workers and which supported a population of around 3,00,000. These tea gardens, now owned by the Indians, were making a handsome contribution to the foreign exchange earnings of the country from its yield valued at around Rs. 32 crores per year. The estimates made by the Darjeeling Tea Planters' Association showed, for example that nine days of work stoppage by GNLF had cost the tea gardens Rs. 5 crores in production loss. That apart, one million kilograms of tea production was adversely affected, while the workers had lost wages amounting to Rs. 1 crore. Several tea gardens declared lock-out because of the GNLF movement. The supply of various essential materials to tea industry had suffered from the frequent 'bandhs' and roadblocks organised by GNLF who deliberately denied food supply to tea garden workers because they were unwilling to accept the GNLF directives. As regards timber industry, the total amount of round log extracted in Darjeeling and Kalimpong amounted to 41,629 cubic metres in 1985-86 and it declined to 16,600 cubic metres in 1986-87 following the GNLF movement. As the annual earnings of the district from timber industry amounted to Rs. 7 crores and as a large number of hillmen used to depend on this industry, Darjeeling is yet to recover from the setback in this regard. So far as tourism was concerned, the total number of tourists who visited Darjeeling during 1985 was 1,32,000. When the GNLF movement began in 1986, the corresponding figure came down to 49,000 by the end of that year. In normal times, the hill stations of Darjeeling used to earn Rs. 25 crores annually from the visits of the tourists from the plains.

In the past, there were sharp articulations of differences of opinion on the ethnic problems of Darjeeling and various democratic

movements also took place on the urgent economic demands on several occasions during the long period from 1919 to 1985. But, before the onset of the GNLF movement in 1986, the earlier agitations had never affected the economic base of the district and the hill subdivisions had hardly experienced any protracted armed confrontation, so much so that 'curfew' was never imposed in the hills in pre-1985 period.

Secondly, the fraternal relationship which has historically developed between the educated Nepali middle class and the intelligentsia of West Bengal on the issues of Nepali language and literary movements should be strengthened further with the possibility of rejuvenation of the All-India Nepali Bhasa Samiti. The cultural aspects of the Nepali ethnic identity should be reasserted which suffered a setback during the GNLF movement for Gorkhaland.

Thirdly, the solidarity between the Nepali workers and the toiling masses belonging to non-Nepali communities of the Terai plains which has been nourished in the tea gardens of Darjeeling through the tradition of heroic trade union movements should not be allowed to disintegrate by any kind of separatist movement in future. It should be realised that the working class solidarity does not hinder the blossoming of ethnic identity provided such ethnic thrust is not directed against the democratic movements of the toiling masses.

Fourthly, an enduring solution of the ethnic problems of Darjeeling should take into account the symbiotic relationship which has developed over the years between the Siliguri plains and the Darjeeling hills. This intimate relationship is unfolded through the timber industry, tourism tea auction centre and road-rail linkages. The economies of the plains and the hills are closely integrated also in terms of the provisions supplied through Siliguri to the hills. In 1985, 24,000 tons of rice, 25,000 tons of wheat, 4,500 tons of sugar, 11,000 kilolitres of kerosene and 15,000 tons of soft and hard coke reached the hills by way of Siliguri, which met some of the basic requirements of the hill population.

Fifthly, the process of democratic decentralisation of power, which has started with the functioning of the elected and autonomous Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, should be nourished further to include all relevant aspects of Nepali ethnic aspirations. This process can be more comprehensively enriched if not only the urban middle class of the towns of Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong but also the plantation workers and the poor peasants of the hills are allowed to be actively involved in the grass-root decentralisation of power.

This will be one of the surest guarantees of the ethnic recognition of the Nepalis in Darjeeling.

Finally, in view of the bitter experiences suffered by the common people in Punjab and Kashmir and elsewhere over the issue of ethnic problems during the last ten years, the possibility of the destabilising moves on the part of the imperialist agencies of the West or of their henchmen should be investigated carefully in the context of Darjeeling also. The problem of ethnic identity of the Nepalis of Darjeeling is basically an internal affair of India which is related to the general problem of the uneven development of different nationalities in our country. The Western imperialist regimes, particularly the U.S.A., can only aggravate the problem of nationalities in the Third World countries in tune with their drive for global domination. The positive alternative is to approach the same problem on the premises of national integration based on the twin processes of class struggle and democratic decentralisation of power.

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