

## A Gorkhaland State: How Justified?

**A**t a time when the Indian economy is in a tailspin with the rupee maintaining a sustained southward penchant to Newtonian forces, it is really quite disturbing and disconcerting to see some dormant statehood movements rearing their heads in the wake of the recent decision to form a new Telangana state through division of the extant state of Andhra Pradesh. Such demands *inter alia* include demands for a separate state of Gorkhaland (comprising Darjeeling and adjoining areas of Terai and Dooars), Kamtapur (comprising areas of Assam and North Bengal) and Greater Cooch Behar (comprising most of North Bengal) in West Bengal, Bodoland and Karbi–Anglong in Assam, Harit Pradesh, Bundelkhand and Purvanchal in Uttar Pradesh, Mithilanchal in Bihar, Vidarbha in Maharashtra, and Saurashtra in Gujarat.

It is really quite painful to know that even after 70 years of our hard-earned independence, we are yet to complete our State-building process, not to speak of the nation-building process. One feels that all these statehood movements of different genres are nothing but morbid expressions of these incomplete processes. Having followed many such movements at close quarters, one can definitely say that most of these statehood movements are more of a reflection of the selfish and egotistic desires, steeped in self-aggrandisement, of the local elites of different hues than being embedded in the genuine aspirations of the local inhabitants. Most of the times, such movements are inspired by the politics and politicking of one or the other kind rather than being rooted in the real desire for a holistic development and good governance of the area concerned.

In West Bengal, the demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland is claimed to be as old as 110 years. The proponents of this movement advance many reasons in support of their demands. They argue that Darjeeling geographically was never a part of West Bengal, that Darjeeling has been hugely exploited and underdeveloped by West Bengal, and that Gorkhas being a different ethnic community, they deserve a separate state of their own.

Then, the Gorkhaland supporters also demand the 398 contiguous and non-contiguous *mouzas* (read villages) of adjoining Terai and Dooars areas of Siliguri and Jalpaiguri

to be added to the proposed Gorkhaland state, mostly against the will and desire of the people therein. The argument proffered for such inclusion is the inhabitation of a substantive Nepali speaking population in these areas though there is already a counter movement by majority of the population in these areas against any such thinking or attempted move.

Now, if we dissect and discuss all these reasons along with some other more important associated factors of statecraft dispassionately, the demand for a separate Gorkhaland state definitely does not appear more than emotional outpourings of the people of Darjeeling. If we really consider the historicity of Darjeeling as a ground for formation of a separate state of Gorkhaland, then all the hard work done by our founding fathers led by the redoubtable Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel of unifying those 565 motley princely states into a united Indian federal state might come apart. The real idea behind consolidating all these small princely provinces into a larger unit to be part of a larger federal entity called India was to put together a unified and a more cohesive country. However, once we allow this logic of historicity, India should actually be having hundreds of states today with West Bengal itself being broken into many. Such regressive revisionism would be a very negative development and might unravel our composite co-existence as a modern nation-state.

Now, let's consider some other issues involved here. The hill areas of Darjeeling (Gorkhaland movement is primarily confined to the three hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling district of West Bengal, namely Darjeeling Sadar, Kurseong, and Kalimpong) has a population of around 9.75 lakhs of which around seven lakhs people can roughly fall into the category of Gorkhas, the remaining being Lepchas, Bhutias, Marwaris, Biharis, Tibetans, and other non-Gorkha communities. So, the proponents of this movement are actually seeking a separate state for these seven lakh people; the others perforce being part of the movement with no choice being available to them. In fact, the Lepchas have already been expressly complaining of being shortchanged by the Gorkhaland champions. The term 'Gorkhaland' itself is not a hold-all concept and ergo, does not do justice to the identities of the various other ethnic communities residing in Darjeeling.

So, if a recognition were to be given to a statehood demand for a people of seven to nine lakh population, then how many constituent states or provinces should we be having in this country of over 125 crore people. If our mighty Gorkhas were to be given a separate state, then how many states are we actually bargaining for in a country where we have over 5000 ethnic communities and castes with around 850 languages? If this demand is recognised, then what justification shall we have to deny a state for the Yadavas, the Jats, the Rajputs, the Santhals, the Meenas and what not, with most of them having a sizable population, in fact, many of them being much more numerous than the Gorkhas?

Again, the demand for ceding the contiguous *mouzas* or areas with sizable Gorkha population attacks the very concept of pluralism which is the hallmark of our salad-bowl or

Ganga-Jamuni co-existential culture. The Gorkhaland proponents desire that all the nearby areas with substantial Nepali speaking population also be given to the proposed Gorkhaland state. Even if we ignore this most important factor of our societal pluralism being compromised as a result of such a parochial demand for a while, still such a demand is very difficult to be accepted for some practical considerations.

First, this is plainly wrong to assume that all the Nepali speaking people are *ipso facto* Gorkhas or want Gorkhaland. Secondly, most of the demanded areas have a predominant majority of the people other than the Nepali speaking population. Thirdly, even some of the areas where the Nepali speaking people are in majority are mostly enclaves within another district or other community dominated areas. Annexing these areas to the extant Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) or later to the demanded Gorkhaland state is administratively not a feasible proposition as also observed by the Justice Shyamal Sen Commission which was constituted to explore the feasibility of such inclusions. Also, the Nepali speaking population in most of these *mouzas* is estimated to be not more than 20–30 per cent, meaning thereby that by ceding such areas to the new entity, a great disservice shall be done to the desire of the other communities who are in majority in those *mouzas*. In fact, there is already a strong counter movement against this desired merger with the proposed Gorkhaland state.

Besides, once we recognise such a demand, a Pandora's Box shall be opened. It not only jeopardises the plural character of our society by artificially trying to make it monochromatic, but also opens the floodgates for similar such demands from vested interests in different parts of the country. After all, every state has some population of one or the other ethno–linguistic groups which can suitably be demanded by other states. By this logic, all the Bengali speaking areas of Assam should come to West Bengal or the Hindi speaking or tribal dominated areas of the latter should go to Bihar or Jharkhand, respectively. By the same logic, the entire Hindi heartland of North India should become a huge monolithic state. The resultant outcome of acceding to such a demand may indeed be very chaotic. It is a very archaic and regressive thinking which ought not to be given any further encouragement.

Again, the alleged historical exploitation of Darjeeling by the state of West Bengal does not hold because Darjeeling has the best of social development indicators in the country and is definitely among the best in West Bengal. As per the West Bengal Human Development Report, 2004 prepared under the supervision of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Darjeeling was ranked second and fourth in terms of the gender and human development indices respectively, among all the districts of West Bengal.

If under-development and exploitation of Darjeeling can be cited as a justification for statehood, then Darjeeling ought to fall much behind in the queue for promotion to statehood as there are many more regions in the country which would have the first claim to statehood. Be it the income, literacy rates, educational attainments, nutritional status, percentage of BPL (below poverty line) population, longevity, infant and maternal mortality,

overall health status of people and infrastructures, Darjeeling fares much better compared to most parts of the country or the different districts of the state of West Bengal. Be it noted that Darjeeling has for the past more than two and a half decades been under such autonomous local self-government bodies as Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) and GTA.

But still, if the statehood proponents believe that Darjeeling needs more development, then statehood is definitely no solution. We are all well conversant with the experiences of some of the already existing states whose development record is just pathetic, to say the least. Jharkhand became a state against the same background of alleged underdevelopment, but even after a lapse of more than a decade, it is still much far off from realisation of the developmental goals it set out to achieve way back in the year 2000. Jharkhand today fares very badly among the newly created states and has only become worse since its creation. The fact remains that the proponents of any such statehood movements including those of Gorkhaland should actually be talking of good governance and good administration than anything else. A statehood trapping sans the desideratum of good governance will achieve nothing but zilch.

Then, given its size, both demographically and geographically, Darjeeling already receives a disproportionate per capita share of resources compared to many other parts of the country. And a substantial share of these resources come from the state of West Bengal, meaning thereby that West Bengal has traditionally been providing disproportionate resources to Darjeeling, often at the expense of the more backward and deserving areas of the state. The extant Gorkhaland Territorial Administration's revenue from all sources is assumed to be not more than three crores annually. If we also include the revenue received by the state government from such sources as land, excise, transport, and professional and sales tax, then at the most the figure is likely to go up to around 30 crore rupees. At the most and at its best, tapping all the obtaining and potential sources of revenue, it can barely go up to 100 crore rupees annually in the most ideal of situations. In the shorter run, however, 50-crore rupee annual revenue appears a more practical figure.

Moreover, GTA reportedly has a non-plan expenditure of around 600 crores at the moment which with plan and schematic expenses would come to around 1400 crores. If at all Darjeeling comprising the three hill sub-divisions becomes the cherished Gorkhaland state, the combined plan and non-plan expenditure is likely to shoot up to, at least, 2000 crores factoring the expenses for general and police administration, not to speak of various attendant expenses which comes with the formation of a new state. So, if a region which has the best of developmental indicators and which has the revenue generation potential of only around 50 crore rupees, why should they be getting a disproportionate 2000 crores at the expense of the more deserving parts of the countries, particularly those areas of Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and other states reeling under extremist menace.

The Gorkhaland proponents should show that they are in a position to bear all the non-plan and, at least, a portion of the plan expenses of the proposed Gorkhaland state before demanding the same. If such a new entity expects to be spoon-fed through the Central

government's doles, would not there be similar justified demands from different parts of the country. And if we allow this for one particular region, can we deny the same to others. We ought to understand that an eponymous Gorkhaland state is not just about emotional wishes of our countrymen in Darjeeling, but has much far-reaching insidious implications for the rest of the country, as the same would only spur more and more such demands as already seems to be happening in the wake of the announced creation of a new state of Telangana.

The Gorkhaland proponents often compare their status with the neighbouring Sikkim or the smaller states of the North East when they claim statehood or disproportionate share of the developmental pie. We are all aware of the historical reasons and circumstances which led to the statehood or special status of these north-eastern states. If Telangana has today been proposed to be a state, it is because of its geographical compactness, a suitable demographic size, administrative viability and self-sufficient resources. But the same does not apply to many such demands elsewhere including Gorkhaland.

If all of us keep demanding statehood on such grounds, then our state-building process shall never come to an end, not to speak of the nation-building process. The Gorkhaland proponents should actually aim at making the GTA work successfully, which came into being through a tripartite agreement between the Central Government, the Government of West Bengal and the dominant hill party, i.e., Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM) on the 18th of July, 2011. GTA is an autonomous and empowered body which has just completed one year of its existence and can be suitably harnessed to fulfill the developmental aspirations of the local people, if development is what they are looking for.

One really feels that our policy makers should really do some serious thinking to consider all such statehood demands dispassionately once and for all through the instrumentality of a second States Reorganisation Commission or any other such mechanism as might be practically possible. Any such decision by the said Commission should be predicated on some logical pre-determined criteria including geographical contiguity and compactness, administrative cohesiveness and financial viability. If we continue dithering on such issues and allow them to be decided by the narrow forces of politics and politicking, then we are certainly doomed as a modern nation-state with the entrenched vested interests slowly but surely eating into the vitals of our beloved country.

## **Salient Points**

- Most of the statehood movements are inspired by the politics rather than real desire for a holistic development.
- Real idea behind consolidating all small princely provinces was to put together a unified and a more cohesive country.
- Alleged historical exploitation of Darjeeling is not true because it has the best of social development indicators in the country.
- Other issues which negate the demand of Gorkhaland are:
  - It does not do justice to the identities of the various other ethnic communities.
  - It is difficult to deny a state for the Yadavas, the Jats, etc.
  - It attacks the concept of pluralism.

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- Telangana created because of its geographical compactness, a suitable demographic size, administrative viability and self-sufficient resources.
- The Gorkhaland proponents should aim at good governance and making the GTA work successfully.
- Policy makers should seriously consider all statehood demands through the second States Reorganisation Commission or so.

### Glossary

**Tailspin:** a sudden and helpless collapse into failure.

**Penchant:** a strong inclination

**Aggrandisement:** the act of making something appear greater than it actually

**Redoubtable:** commanding or evoking respect

**Motley:** exhibiting great diversity of elements

**Perforce:** by force of circumstance

**Ergo:** therefore

**Monochromatic:** of or having one colour

**Doles:** receiving payment from the government, as relief

**Eponymous:** giving one's name to a tribe, place, etc.

**Dithering:** a state of flustered excitement or fear

**Doomed:** fate or destiny, especially adverse fate