

CLICK HERE **\$10** Digital Subscription 

ABOUT US | CLASSIFIEDS | EVENTS | ADVERTISE | REGISTER | LOGIN

CURRENT ISSUE | VANTAGE | ARCHIVE | REPORTING & ESSAYS | OPINIONS | BOOKS | ARTS | FICTION & POETRY

SUBSCRIBE

Home › Opinions › Perspectives › Darjeeling Limited

PERSPECTIVES POLITICS

# Darjeeling Limited

How politics subsumed the popular sentiment for Gorkhaland

By MIRIAM WENNER | 4 September 2017



PRAVEEN CHETTRI

While the demand for Gorkhaland is a popular one, over the decades it has been used by the movement's leaders as a lever with which to gain power and political influence, and to extract resources from the government.



In August, the Gorkhaland protests in Darjeeling entered their third month. They had begun in mid June, after fears spread that the state government would make the study of Bengali compulsory for school students in West Bengal, including in the Nepali-speaking areas administered by the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration, or the GTA. After an initial protest directed specifically against the move, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, or GJM—the political party that controls the GTA—expanded the scope of the agitations by reviving a demand that has its roots in the twentieth century: that a slice of the northern part of West Bengal, including the districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, be carved out into the separate state of Gorkhaland.

Over the following weeks, thousands of protestors took to the streets, disrupting normal life. Some attacked vehicles and property, and clashed with the police. The protests were led by the GJM's controversial chief, Bimal Gurung, who, in media reports, was frequently described as the face of the separatist movement, and the region's unchallenged mass leader. The protests themselves were described as an expression of popular sentiment.

Print | E-mail | Single Page

CURRENT ISSUE



Cover Story

In this Issue

Want to sell, but not sell out?

caravanclassifieds@delhipress.in

GET YOUR COPY TODAY

In this volume are thirteen definitive profiles of pivotal figures, with new insight from the authors on the places their subjects hold in contemporary Indian history. With this collection, *The Caravan* presents a valuable and far-reaching record of our times—for readers, citizens, and aspiring journalists alike.

**THE CARAVAN BOOK OF PROFILES**

Edited by Praveen Chettri

Rs. 298

Available on Amazon, Flipkart, Snapdeal, & major bookstores. [CLICK HERE TO BUY](#)

Published by Penguin Random House India, January 2017

MANIKSHY DIGHI, ARUN JATLEY, SMAM ASEEMANAND, NARIN D. SHARIF, PRACHANDA, SUDAN SHARMAVATI, RAGHURAM RAJAN, SAMIR JAIN, POETRY CHACHA, N. SRINIVASAN, M.S. SUBRAMANIAM, FARIDA DASHNUBI, VIKRAM

DIGITAL SUBSCRIPTION AT

To a large extent, this is true. The dream of Gorkhaland is shared by many Nepali-speakers in India, including many of Darjeeling's local members of the state's ruling Trinamool Congress, which officially opposes the demand. But a closer look at the history of the movement, and the parties that have led it, reveals a more nuanced picture.

Movements need to be organised, usually by groups that can coordinate between people, represent specific interests and negotiate with the state. This organisational groundwork ensures that movements' visions remain intact. In the Gorkhaland agitation, this work has been done by regional political parties. And the course of the movement over the years suggests that though the parties do represent a popular sentiment, what serves the leaders is not the achievement of Gorkhaland itself, but rather keeping its demand alive.

The first party to lead the movement, in the 1980s, was Subhash Ghisingh's Gorkha National Liberation Front, or GNLF. The agitations soon took a violent turn, and the party's supporters repeatedly clashed with the cadres of the then ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist). Over the course of that decade, at least 1,200 people were killed in the violence, and nightmarish memories of raids, rapes and beheaded bodies still haunt many residents of Darjeeling.

The agitations ended in 1989, with the formation of a semi-autonomous body, the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, or DGHC, to oversee the region's administration. But as studies by scholars such as Bethany Lacina and Swatahsiddha Sarkar have shown, instead of bringing development to the region, the GNLF-led council soon became a corrupt body, and the Gorkhaland demand became a mere lever with which to extract more resources from the state government. Niraj Lama, a former journalist of *The Statesman*, who covered the movement in the 1990s, told me in 2013 that those who dared criticise the GNLF and its self-proclaimed "king of the hills," Ghisingh, were victimised, or even killed.

Despite great public dissatisfaction with Ghisingh, it was only in October 2007 that a challenger rose up against him: Gurung, his former right hand and a DGHC councillor. Gurung declared that Ghisingh had "sold the soil" of the region to the West Bengal government for personal gain. He revived the Gorkhaland movement and established the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, or GJM.

A dramatic shift in power equations followed. Within a few months, thousands of people who had been waiting for a leader to take on Ghisingh pledged loyalty to Gurung. GNLF leaders who refused to switch allegiances saw their homes burnt, and had to flee to the plains—Ghisingh himself was among them.

Though Gurung had at first declared that his was a non-political movement, the very next year, the GJM became a recognised political party. In his speeches and statements, Gurung began equating the Gorkhaland movement solely with the GJM—and specifically with himself, declaring that he would sacrifice his life for the cause if necessary. Other parties that were also dedicated to the Gorkhaland cause were sidelined, among them the Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxists, or CPRM, and the oldest Gorkha party, the All India Gorkha League, or AIGL. The latter party suffered a particularly tragic setback: its president, Madan Tamang, who was an outspoken critic of the GJM, was hacked to death in May 2010, allegedly by a GJM supporter, while preparing for a public meeting at a central area of Darjeeling town.

The violence and suppression distanced Gurung from other leaders in the GJM. Prominent intellectuals who were associated with the party, such as Amar Lama (Tamang's brother) and Anmole Prasad, parted ways with him, leaving the party bereft of people who knew how to negotiate with the state and central governments. Those who dared to speak against the GJM were branded anti-Gorkhaland. Many tea plantation workers I spoke to in 2012 and 2013, while I was conducting fieldwork on the movement, told me that they stayed with the party to avoid the risk of punishment.

Apart from using violence, the GJM also maintained its authority by exercising influence over public officials who oversaw various developmental funds and welfare schemes, including projects of the DGHC. Several GJM leaders I spoke to in late 2011 and 2012 boasted that though the DGHC was officially administered by the West Bengal government, applications to it for funds had to be recommended by Gurung, who ensured that only supporters of the party benefitted. For many, then, pledging loyalty to Gorkhaland became merely a form of lip service that allowed them to gain access to patronage.

While this control helped the party maintain its position, it also created a base of supporters who were hungry for resources, and had to be appeased at regular intervals. GJM leaders faced the double pressures of delivering statehood while also maintaining relationships of patronage. It was impossible to pursue the two aims at the same time, since access to developmental funds required maintaining friendly relations with the very state government that they officially challenged in order to demand Gorkhaland.

By 2010, the GJM's negotiations with the state government—then led by the Left Front—moved towards the creation of a new administrative body. In 2011, with the Trinamool Congress's Mamata Banerjee at the helm of the state, the GJM signed an agreement for the formation of the Gorkhaland Territorial




DELHI PRESS E-STORE

MAGZTER zinio readwhere


Follow us on

f t YouTube g+

 **Shantanu**  
@misalpao

@karthik\_20 @kunalkamra88 @thecaravanindia All are human and all missed something. Can't use it against them when they do act. 6/6

1h

 **Shantanu**  
@misalpao

@karthik\_20 @kunalkamra88 @thecaravanindia This is a never ending argument and really pointless argument in my opinion. This was even political.

Embed View on Twitter

**SUBSCRIBE NOW**

THE CARAVAN

₹ 950

12 ISSUES

DELIVERY THROUGH REGISTERED POST

MOST READ MOST COMMENTED

The Tempest

The Emperor Uncrowned

Is Patanjali's Desi Cow Ghee Even Cow Ghee?

Unhealed Wounds

Fast and Furious

Administration, or GTA, which replaced the DGHC. The new body became functional in August 2012, following its first election. The GJM won all the seats and Gurung, who had earlier said he would “watch the GTA from the outside” took office as its chief executive. But while GJM leaders presented the GTA as a “stepping stone” towards the attainment of Gorkhaland, stories of corruption and nepotism became common again, and it seemed to many that history was repeating itself.

The Trinamool Congress moved quickly to capitalise on the resulting dissatisfaction. Perception of GJM leaders as selfish catalysed the spread of Trinamool Congress units in the hills. Among the measures it undertook was the establishment of state-sponsored “development boards” dedicated to the welfare of Darjeeling’s various ethnic groups, including Lepcha, Gurung and Rai. Processions of other political parties, such as the GNLF, protected by the police, became more common in the hills.

In the May 2017 municipal elections in Darjeeling, Mirik, Kalimpong and Kurseong, it became clear that the GJM’s hold over the region had weakened: for the first time, it lost one municipality seat (Mirik) to the Trinamool Congress, and saw a major decline in support in the other three.

In the weeks that followed, pressure on Gurung’s party continued to grow. Ahead of the end of the GTA’s tenure, in July 2017, the state government announced an audit to scrutinise the utilisation of funds that it had allocated to the GTA.

Given this context, the timing of the current agitation is not surprising. In fact, Banerjee’s announcement to make Bengali compulsory came as a blessing for the GJM, since it gave it an opportunity to revive the statehood demand, and to regain its credibility and legitimacy. Banerjee’s insistence on holding a cabinet meeting in Darjeeling town on 8 June in an already charged atmosphere provided the perfect spark for Gurung. The GJM organised a demonstration that ended with stone-pelting at the police, which responded with lathi charges and tear-gas shelling. On 15 June, police raided Gurung’s house. More protests followed, in which three young protesters were killed. The GJM soon announced an indefinite strike in the region.

While various GJM leaders claimed that it was their party leading the movement, other Darjeeling-based parties, including the GNLF, CPRM, AIGL and the Gorkhaland Rajya Nirman Manch, pledged support to the agitation. The parties joined hands to form the Gorkhaland Movement Coordination Committee, or GMCC; but despite this show of unity, little progress was made in the committee’s meetings.

Representatives of these various parties also met the union home minister, Rajnath Singh, on 13 August—but that discussion too yielded nothing. The lack of any significant breakthrough underlined the fact that the central government has no serious inclination towards the idea of Gorkhaland. Ahead of the 2014 general election, the BJP had promised to “sympathetically examine and appropriately consider the long-pending demand of the Gorkhas,” which ensured that its candidate won the Darjeeling seat. But that promise has since been sidelined by the party’s efforts to expand its base in West Bengal—any support for carving out the hills into a separate state would cost it politically in the rest of the state.

For different reasons, the GJM, too, benefits more from keeping the demand for Gorkhaland alive than from actually delivering it. This is apparent even from the party’s history. After using the demand to oust Ghisingh and the GNLF, equating the GJM to the Gorkhaland demand allowed the party to silence its detractors—whereas the attainment of a separate state would open it up to the rough and tumble of regular political criticism. Now, keeping the demand for statehood alive allows regional leaders to blame the state government for numerous social and economic failures. In effect, this makes it impossible for residents of the hills to hold the GJM accountable.

Questions were raised about the party’s commitment to the movement when, after months of saying it would not talk to the state government, it announced suddenly in mid August that it was open to negotiations. That this happened around the same time as a Kolkata court discharged Gurung in Tamang’s murder case only fuelled further speculation about the party’s motivations. By the end of the month, the party confirmed that it would be attending negotiations with Banerjee’s government.

The extent of this rupture between the popular sentiment and the politicians who claim to represent it is apparent in the latest protests. Most of the nine young men who lost their lives in the current agitation were from impoverished, rural backgrounds. The leaders who made political gains through the protests did so over the dead bodies of people who truly believed in statehood.

But the dynamic between citizens and their leaders may be changing. At the end of July, I travelled to Darjeeling to conduct further fieldwork on the movement. Most people I spoke to, ranging from tea-plantation workers to urban residents, believed the current agitations had gone beyond divisive party politics and become a united people’s movement. Many stressed that, regardless of the hardships they faced, they would not allow their leaders to withdraw the months-long general strike unless something tangible was achieved. It seemed that the movement, called by leaders to make political gains, has begun to transform into an expression of popular sovereignty—which, in turn, would put immense

pressure on the leaders to deliver on their promises.

---

---

**MORE FROM THIS SECTION**

Darjeeling Limited  
Missing Links  
Running Argument  
Poor Fielding  
The Quality of Mercy  
Early Warning

**RELATED ARTICLES**

Silent Prayer  
Gorkhaland | A Bitter Darjeeling  
Boils Over  
Border Crossing  
The Telangana Factor

**KEYWORDS**

Darjeeling, Gorkha  
Janmukti Morcha,  
Gorkha National  
Liberation Front,  
Gorkhaland,  
Separatism

---

**READER'S COMMENTS**

[Terms of Service](#)  
[Privacy Policy](#)

[About Us](#)  
[Masthead](#)  
[Policies](#)  
[Classifieds](#)  
[Syndication](#)  
[Careers](#)  
[Internships](#)  
[Contact Us](#)

[Facebook](#)  
[Twitter](#)  
[YouTube](#)  
[RSS](#)  
[Store Locator](#)

[Vantage](#)  
[Archive](#)  
[Reporting & Essays](#)  
[Opinions](#)  
[Books](#)  
[Arts](#)  
[Fiction & Poetry](#)  
[Subscribe](#)