

Identity Movement of the Gorkhas of Assam

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ABSTRACT: *The Gorkhas migration into Assam is not new. Before the arrival of the British into Assam, there had been Gorkha migration into Assam. With the arrival of the British and after the independence the migration of Gorkhas became more intensive. With the growth of numerical strength and spread of education there emerged educated elite among the Gorkhas. This elite group of Gorkhas realised that they must be organised in order to remove their backwardness on the basis of socio-cultural identity. As a result different socio-cultural organisations formed such as the Assam Provincial Gorkha League (1944), the Assam Gorkha Sammelon (1966), the Navadhwani Sangthan (1969), the Nepali Sahitya Parishad, Assam (1974), All Assam Nepali Students' Union (1976), the Nepali Janasangrham Parishad (1993), Nepali Suraksha Parishad (1993), etc. These different organisations of Gorkhas placed a plethora of demands before the government in order to safeguard.*

Keywords: *Gorkha consciousness, formation of organisations, demands*

I. INTRODUCTION

The first and foremost organisation of the Gorkhas in India was started in Darjeeling of West Bengal namely the All India Gorkha League in 1943. On the eve of Independence, this organisation pleaded a plethora of demands of which recognising Gorkhas as a “Minority Community” was one as a measure to maintain its distinct socio- cultural identity.¹ Beside this, the Gorkhas of Darjeeling of West Bengal submitted a memorandum to the Governor General of India to integrate it into Assam² which will facilitate them to consolidate their strength as they realised. To strengthen their position the All India Gorkha League initiated the formation of the Assam

Provincial Gorkha League (APGL) 1944 in Shillong with similar aims and objectives which was renamed as Assam Gorkha Sammelan (AGS) in 1966.

On 1st January 1947, in the first annual conference of APGL held in Guwahati resolved:

*The three million Gorkhas, through sharing common tradition with rest of the Indians, nevertheless, have a language, culture and tradition of their own; thus are forming a distinct community in India. Hence, this session of the Assam Provincial Gorkha League demands the constituent Assembly to recognize the Gorkhas statutorily as a minority community of India.*³

After the independence the Gorkha elite of Assam started demanding the inclusion of Gorkhas into the list of Other Backward Classes (OBC). In this connection the lone Gorkha MLA of Assam Legislative Assembly Dalbir Singh Lohar moved a resolution in the assembly which maintained that:

*In view of appalling illiteracy and poverty of the bulk of people of Gorkha community in Assam, this assembly is of the opinion that the Government of Assam do move to the Government of India if necessary to recognize the said community as a backward.*⁴

Ultimately, a few castes of Gorkhas were recognised as other backward classes (OBC) in 1964 by the government of Assam. However, a section of Gorkha elites were not happy with the government and as such a memorandum was submitted to the Chief Minister of Assam by another articulated organisation of Gorkhas on 21st July 1985 which pleaded:

The Nepalese being one of the backward communities in the state may in the country do not receive as much facilities as they should have been afforded to. Although Nepalese figure in the category of the “Other Backward Classes” but that remains a naked paper policy and opportunities and benefits do not percolate to

¹ Reported in the “Gurkha” (a Nepali weekly), Gauhati, 30 May 1946. Cited in A.C Bhuyan and S.P de (eds.), political History of Assam 1940-47, Volume III, 1980, p. 318

² Reported in “ASOMIYA” (in Assamese), 31 May 1947. Cited in A.C Bhuyan and S.P De (eds.) Ibid., p 320

³ Resolutions of Assam Provincial Gorkha League adopted in its first annual conference held at Guwahati on 1st January 1947.

⁴ Assam Legislative Assembly debate, Volume I, No. 5, 3rd April 1951. P 1220

*the general members of the Nepali community. The AANSU urges upon you to revise the OBC list of the Nepalese which has left many Nepalese similar to OBC.*⁵

It appeared to them that the Gorkhas in Assam were more backward than other backward communities of the state. They, therefore, felt the indispensability of some constitutional safeguards so as to remove their backwardness. In view of this, like the AGS, the AANSU also put forward similar demands and grievances before the concerned authority. Thus, in a memorandum submitted to the prime minister of India at New Delhi on July 24, 1980 the AANSU logically pleaded:

*The Nepalese of India are Hindu by religion and as such they inherit the virtues and vices of the great Hindu society. They are traditionally backward and neglected castes and Tribes including 'untouchables have their counterparts among the Nepali – Speaking people also, but they are not enlisted as the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe. For example Domai, Kami, Gainay, Bhujel and sarki should be enlisted as Scheduled Castes. Similarly, Limbu, Rai, Mogor, Gurung, Bhutia, Lepcha etc. are the counterparts of the recognized Tribe of other Hindus. The list is of exhaustive. We urge upon the Government to prepare the list of Nepali speaking social groups who may be recognized as Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes after consulting the various social organizations like Assam Gorkha Sammelon, All India Nepali Bhasa Samiti etc*⁶

The Gorkha elites argue to strengthen their demands that the Gorkhas of similar castes were recognised as the Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribes in other parts of India particularly in West Bengal and Sikkim.⁷ The Gorkha elites felt that it was deprivation to in getting their rights.

Another very important demand of the Nepalese community was the demand for constitutional recognition of Nepali language⁸. As is well-known, the constitution of India has guaranteed the preserve, cultivate and promote the language and culture of different communities. In consonance with this, the Nepalese too desired to preserve their socio-culture heritage including the language as a measure of maintaining distinct identity. The constitutional recognition of Nepali language, they deeply believed, was quite imperative for the maintenance of distinct maintenance of distinct Nepali identity.

in the late fifties of the last century the leadership of the linguistic movement of the Nepalese was predominantly shifted to Darjeeling when the district committee of the AIGL adopted resolution demanding constitutional recognition of Nepali language in 1959. In order to justify their linguistic demand the Nepali elite very often referred to the remark made by a celebrated Indian linguist, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee who maintained that in his famous book 'Languages and literatures of modern India, 1956 other 'Indian languages are to be added in this (Eighth) Schedule following the wishes of their speakers and their importance i.e. Sindhi and Nepali.'⁹ Such remarks invariably encouraged the Nepali elite to pursue their linguistic demand which, they thought, would ensure the maintenance of their distinct identity in India.

Furthermore, the constitutional recognition of Sindhi language in 1967 made the Nepali elite more aggrieved and assertive of their linguistic demand. For this reason, with an objective of popularizing and mobilizing their people in a bigger way they decided to form the All India Nepali Bhasa Samiti on January 31, 1972 at Darjeeling. Thus, the linguistic movement of the Nepalese in India assumed greater significance with the formation of the AINBS which thenceforth spearheaded the linguistic movement of the Nepalese in India. in a bid to strengthen the organizational capacity for the cause of the constitutional recognition of Nepali language, the AINBS formed its branches in other Nepali-inhabiting parts of the country including Assam. in a memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister of India at Shillong on January 20, 1972 the AGS strongly pleaded:

Nepali is a language which is spoken by nearby 5 millions of Indian Nepali Citizens and over one lakh of defence and security personal leaving aside hundred and thousands of other community people such as Lepchas and others who are also speaking this language. It has a sufficiently advanced literature, rich and very ancient culture and can rightly claim to deserve recognition as a Major Indian language. In the opinion of eminent linguist like Suniti Kumar Chatterjee Nepali is one of the fifteen major Indian languages. Being in the main lineage of Sanskrit, it is very closely related with Hindi, Bengali, Assamese, Marathi and other languages of

⁵ Memorandum of AANSU submitted to the chief minister of Assam on 21 July 1985 appeared in the Smarika fifth annual conference held at Hwaiipur, Karbi Anglong on 10th January 1988.

⁶ The memorandum of the AANSU submitted to the Prime Minister of India, New Delhi on 24th July 1980.

⁷ Reported in Asian Age on 8th Sept 1995.

⁸ According to Encyclopedia Britannica: "Nepali the language of Brahmins and Chetris, is of Sanskrit derivation and has become the lingua/franca of Nepal, but mongloid tribes and Newars have their own language which belong to the Tibeto-Barman group." See William Bentorn, Encycloperia Britannica, University of Chicago, Volume 16, 1966, p. 223.

⁹ Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, "Language and Literatures of Modern India", cited in Ugen Golay's "Some aspects of the Demand for the constitutional recognition of Nepali Language."

Indo-European Group. We, therefore, urge upon your benign self to recognize Nepali languages as one of the major languages of India and include it in the eighth schedule of the constitution of India”¹⁰

The Gorkha elites argue that Nepali language traced its origin to Sanskrit for which there was a great deal of similarities with other recognised Indian languages. Moreover, it was provided as official language in the District of Darjeeling of West Bengal and the Universities like Calcutta, North Bengal, Patna, Bhagalpur, Allahabad, Banaras, Gauhati, Dibrugarh and Manipur provided it as MIL subjects and some state assemblies like Tripura, Himachal Pradesh, West Bengal and Sikkim passed the resolution to recognise it in eighth schedule of the constitution.

The constitutional recognition of Sindhi language in 1967 made the Gorkha elite more aggrieved and assertive of their linguistic demand. For this reason, with an objective of popularizing and mobilizing their people in a bigger way they decided to form the All India Nepali Bhasa Samiti on January 31, 1972 at Darjeeling. Thus, the linguistic movement of the Gorkhas in India assumed greater significance with the formation of the AINBS which thenceforth spearheaded the linguistic movement of the Nepalese in India. However, the Gorkha leadership realized that in order to fulfil their linguistic demand, the Nepalese of other parts of the country need to be vigorously mobilized and actively involved. Thus, in a bid to strengthen the organizational capacity for the cause of the constitutional recognition of Nepali language, the AINBS formed its branches in other Nepali-inhabiting parts of the country including Assam.

Therefore, inclined that the Government of India might be sympathetic towards the fulfilment of their long-standing linguistic demand. Expressing such a hopeful sentiment in a memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister of India on July 24, 1990 the AANSU maintained:

That the Nepali-speaking people of India have a long-standing grievance, viz. Non-fulfillment of their legitimate demand for the inclusion of the Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the constitution. After the last Lok Sabha election, Indian Nepalese have entertained the hope that this just and legitimate demand of theirs would be fulfilled soon. We, therefore, urge upon the Government to take necessary steps towards the constitutional recognition of the Nepali language, a language spoken by more than 50 lakh of Indians.¹¹

In the early eighties, the AGS, dropped their demand for Nepali Language as medium of instruction. Perhaps, they realized that this demand was not feasible and such claim might create bitterness and misconception in the minds of the Assamese. So, the Gorkha elite decided to adopt Assamese as the medium of instruction. Instead of ‘Nepali’ as the medium of instruction they, however, went on insisting in the introduction of ‘Nepali’ as an MIL subject from lower to higher levels. This demand of the Gorkhas has been partially fulfilled although Nepali as a subject of study at the post graduate level is not yet introduced.¹²

The Gorkha elite also pleaded for some other constitutional safeguards in order to gain for the community .For instance, they wanted that a certain percentage Government jobs should be reserved for the Nepalese .In view of this, even as far back as in 1947The APGL resolved.

It is a great injustice to the Gorkhas, who although forming an important Minority Community in Assam With a population of 13 lacs who are educationally and economically backward, have hitherto been given no special facilities for recruitment in Assam provincial Civil Service. Hence, this session of the Assam Pradeshik Gorkha League strongly urges the popular Ministry of Assam not to over look the legitimate rights of Gorkhas but to give their proper representation in the Assam Civil service.¹³

The Gorkha elites started demanding some quota of seats be reserved in the educational institutions for the Gorkha candidates. It was realised by them that to develop their people reservation to be made in educational institutions of medical, engineering, veterinary colleges¹⁴ by which they can occupy positions in the beau racy.

Another crucial demand of the Gorkhas is the demand for inclusion of their cultivators and graziers in to the list of protected class. The non –tribal particularly the Gorkha cultivators and graziers living in the tribal

¹⁰ Memorandum of AGS Submitted to the Prime Minister of India, New Delhi on 24th July 1972.

¹¹ The memorandum of the AANSU presented to the Prime Minister of India, New Delhi on July 24, 1980

¹² Of late, with the introduction of the Institute of Distance and Open Learning (popularly known as IDOL) under Gauhati University in Nepali language subject in post graduate level has been initiated.

¹³ The resolution of the Assam Provincial Gorkha League adopted in its 1st Annual conference held at Gauhati on 1st January 1947

¹⁴ Resolutions adopted by the AANSU in its 6th biennial session held at Margherita in November 1990. (Reported in The Sentinel on 11th November 1990)

Belts and Blocks since the colonial era were accorded the status of 'Protected Class' in 1949 and similar benefits were extended to the Gorkha cultivators and graziers. But in 1969 the colonial era i.e. 1947¹⁵

Government of Assam unilaterally excluded the Gorkha Community from the list of 'Protected Class' particularly those who entered the Tribal Belts and Blocks in the post colonial period.

It may be reiterated that during the foreign National Movement the Gorkha in many places were allegedly harassed and tortured in the name of the Gorkha in many places were allegedly harassed and torture in the same foreigners. In fact, it created a sense of apprehension and insecurity in the minds of the Gorkhas.

It may also be noted that reportedly a militant section of Gorkha elite not only demanded a separate state, they even went to the extent of demanding a sovereign independent state incorporating Nepali-inhabiting areas of Assam and its neighboring states. In fact, it appeared to a section of Gorkha elite that like most of the ethnic communities in the state, unless they develop a militant leadership their demand would remain unheeded and unrealized. Thus, it seems that a section of the Gorkha youths were so considerably inspired by the growing militant organizations in the regions which culminated in the formation of the Nepali Liberation Front of Assam (NELFA) in 1992¹⁶. However, this organization could not be effective and popular due to its loss of mass-based among the Gorkhas in Assam.

It may be mentioned here that due to the relentless demands from the organizations such as AGS the Government of Assam has created the Gorkha Development Council (GDC)¹⁷ in 2010 along with other thirteen tribes of Assam which is funded by the Assam Government for the socio-economic development of the ethnic community.

In another move a number of resolutions have been adopted in the triennial conference of Assam Gorkha Sammelan held at Golia, Biswanath Charali on 19th, 20th, 21st and 22nd January in 2012 after which a memorandum was submitted to the Chief Minister of Assam as:

The Govt. of Assam was pleased to authorize the Assam Gorkha Sammelan to issue Gorkha Community certificate which was to be countersigned by the Deputy Commissioner of the concerned district. However, except a few district administrations, most others have not complied with the said instructions as yet. Hence, the Government of Assam should publish a Gazette Notification immediately regarding the issuance of the Gorkha Community Certificate. It is also urged that one Gorkha eligible member from Gorkha Community be appointed as member of Assam Public Service Commission as there was a member of this community during 1996-2002. The memorandum further demanded to appoint at least two Asst Professors in the Deptt of Nepali in Gauhati University to facilitate IDOL post graduate Nepali Deptt, appointment of teachers from primary to college level and do necessary arrangement to publish the text books of Nepali MIL subject in the elementary level accordingly, patta be issued to all Gorkha settlers and land-holders who are in simple possession of lands for more than thirty years and who are living in tribal block & belt, to increase the funds to Gorkha Development Council (GDC), to appoint in Govt job to the next kin of Bhimajuli massacre and up gradation of the police station.¹⁸

The AGS felt deep concern before the central government regarding ongoing injustice done against the Gorkhas living specially in Assam. They argue that the brave and loyal Gorkhas who came to Assam due to annexation of the parts of Nepal and Bhutan as a result of Anglo-Nepal & Bhutan treaty and by other ways are not being treated equally with other tribes of the state. They are being harassed and land patta has not been issued specially in BTAD, Sixth Schedule areas and Gorkha youths are denied to recruit in defence forces by the authority. As such a memorandum was submitted to the Hon'ble President and Prime Minister by the AGS on 24th July 2013 which demanded:

To recognize the mongloid origin Gorkhas like Rai, Limboo, Tamang, Magar, Sherpa, Gurung, Thakali and Newar as the Schedule Tribes, the socially and economically more backward caste of Gorkhas like Kami, Damai, Sarki, Gaine and Bhujel as Schedule Caste and remaining Gorkhas as Other Backward Classes Community in Assam, the Government of India specially Ministry of Home and Defence should pass necessary instructions to the concerned authorities of defence forces, SSB, ITBP, and other Para-Military forces to honour the Gorkha community Certificate issued by AGS in the matter of youths hailing from Assam, 50% vacancies of Gorkha Regiment and Assam Rifles (originally it was Gorkha Rifles) be filled up with Gorkha youth of Assam with relaxation in heights and chest, to set up a special recruitment centre of the Gorkha Regiment at Tezpur at the earliest, provide land settlement to the indigenous Gorkhas living since time immemorial in the forest villages of Kokrajhar and Chirang district of BTAD and other parts of Assam as other traditional forest Dwellers

¹⁵ Notification issued by the Secretary to the Government of Assam, Revenue (Settlement) Department No. RSD/26/64 PI/15 Dated Shillong on 27th June 1969.

¹⁶ Reported in the AGRADOOT (An Assamese biweekly), November 8th, 1992

¹⁷ GDC was formed by the Govt. of Assam vide order/circular/circular No. DW. Council-83/2010/10-A dtd. 22-11-2010.

¹⁸ Resolution adopted in AGS triennial conference held in Golia, Tezpur in 2012.

(Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, to form a full- fledged 'Gorkha Development Board' in the Bodoland Territorial Council in Assam with amendment of provisions of Para 4 of BTC Act, 2003 for the safeguard and distinct identity with language, culture, education, and all round development of indigenous Gorkhas in BTAD area under the provision of Indian Constitution, reservation of seats to the non-tribal be increased to ensure political rights of the Gorkhas in BTAD, the Government of India should ensure the safeguard and protection of the lives and property of Gorkhas living in BTAD in particular and Assam in general and the Government should provide the round clock vigilance and police pickets in the tensed areas. Further, the culprits involved in the act of extortion and harassment be booked and punished as per law.¹⁹

The Gorkha elites convinced that in order to get fulfilled their manifold demands the coordination and support from the other ethnic groups and organizations of Assam are inevitable. From time to time they made meetings with different ethno-groups of Assam. It is to mention here that a bilateral discussion took place on 16th November 2014 between the All Assam students Union (AASU) which was represented by its Advisor Dr Samajul Bhattacharjya and leaders of the Gorkha organizations such as Assam Gorkha Sammelan, All Assam Gorkha Students' Union, Nepali Sahitya Sabha, Bharatiya Gorkha Parisangha (Assam State Branch)

The meeting unanimously adopted the resolution regarding Updation of National Registration of Citizenship (NRC) which maintained that the NRC work updation work should be done on war footing motion. The NRC of 1951 to be updated before the begin of 2016 assembly election by including all the voters whose name have been appeared in the electoral list till 1971. The meeting also came into the conclusion that a unit/group be formed regarding the issue and to meet in the next meeting regarding the permanent solution of foreign national problem as per the Assam Accord and to work unitedly on the issue of national life of Assam.²⁰

The demands made by the Gorkhas to the government continued one after another whatsoever it has been full filled by the later. By and large similar demands of earlier were made once again by the AGS to the newly elected dynamic leader and honorable Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi on 8th June 2015 which maintained that to recognize the mongloid origin Gorkhas like Rai, Limboo, Tamang, Magar, Sherpa, Gurung, Thakali and Newar as the Schedule Tribes, the socially and economically more backward caste of Gorkhas like Kami, Damai, Sarki, Gaine and Bhujel as Schedule Caste and remaining Gorkhas as Other Backward Classes Community in Assam, the Government of India specially Ministry of Home and Defence should pass necessary instructions to the concerned authorities of defence forces, SSB, ITBP, and other Para-Military forces to honour the Gorkha community Certificate issued by AGS in the matter of youths hailing from Assam, 50% vacancies of Gorkha Regiment and Assam Rifles (originally it was Gorkha Rifles) be filled up with Gorkha youth of Assam with relaxation in heights and chest, to set up a special recruitment centre of the Gorkha Regiment at Tezpur at the earliest, provide land settlement to the indigenous Gorkhas living since time immemorial in the forest villages of Kokrajhar and Chirang district of BTAD and other parts of Assam as other traditional forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, to form a full- fledged 'Gorkha Development Board' in the Bodoland Territorial Council in Assam with amendment of provisions of Para 4 of BTC Act, 2003 for the safeguard and distinct identity with language, culture, education, and all round development of indigenous Gorkhas in BTAD area under the provision of Indian Constitution, reservation of seats to the non-tribal be increased to ensure political rights of the Gorkhas in BTAD, the Government of India should ensure the safeguard and protection of the lives and property of Gorkhas living in BTAD in particular and Assam in general and the Government should provide the round clock vigilance and police pickets in the tensed areas. Further, the culprits involved in the act of extortion and harassment be booked and punished as per law. The Assam Gorkha Sammelan and the Gorkhas of Assam support the agitation done by Gorkha people of Darjeeling district of area for creation of Gorkhaland within the constitution of India which is a long standing demand before the TELENGANA demand. So, Gorkhaland demand should be solved at an early date by considering Gorkhaland.²¹

In a significant positive move the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India constituted a committee on 22nd April 2016 headed by Ashok Pai, Joint Secretary, Ministry of tribal Affairs to examine and recommend regarding granting of Schedule Tribe status to eleven communities namely Bhujel, Gurung, Magar, Newar, Jogi, Khas, Rai, Sunwar, Thami, Yakhha (Dewan) and Dhimal living in Sikkim and other Gorkha dominated states and areas.²²

The above discussion shows that the identify movement of the Gorkhas in Assam initially started in collaboration with the Nepali organization especially the AIGL of Darjeeling of West Bengal. First the Gorkhas started movement with the demand for minority status. However, subsequently they went on enhancing with the

¹⁹ A memorandum was submitted by AGS to the president and Prime Minister of India on 24th July 2013

²⁰ Meeting between All Assam Students Union and Assam Gorkha Sammelan, All Assam Gorkha Students' Union, Bharatiya Gorkha Parisangh, All Assam Nepali Sahitya Sammelan held on 16th November 2014.

²¹ A Memorandum was submitted by the AGS to Prime Minister on 8th June 2015.

²² Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India, Order No. 12016/6/2001-C & LM-I (Pt.) dated 22nd April, 2016

number of demands which gained much popularity among the Gorkha community were the inclusion of the Nepalese into the list of scheduled caste and scheduled Tribe, constitutional recognition of Nepali language, inclusion of the Gorkhas into the list of 'Protected Class' living in the Tribal Belts and Blocks, Introduction of Nepali as an MIL subject of study, and so on. The Gorkha elite were of the firm opinion that the fulfilment of these demands is highly indispensable for the socio-economic and cultural development of the Gorkhas at large. On the whole, they profoundly believed that socio-economic development of the community is inextricably connected with the maintenance of district identity.

Nevertheless, the nature of the movement of the Gorkha organizations is characteristically different from the, movement launched by the other ethnic communities of the state. Like most of the ethnic communities, the Gorkhas did not find it convenient to launch a state-wide movement due to lack of contiguity of Gorkha inhabiting area in the state. In other words they are living scattered all over the state that has put them in a different position to get united easily for an effective state-wide agitation. Moreover, they did not adopt the form of movement such as bandh, gherao, and road –blockade and so on.

Thus, it appears that most of the times the Gorkha elite wanted to maintain cordial relationship with the ruling elite of the state so as to gain success politically and they were convinced that they must remain with the ruling party in order to fulfill their demands and get share in the administration of the state. While seeking the fulfilment of their demands the Gorkha elite usually applied policy of persuasion rather than confrontation.
