

# The Gorkha: A Subsumed Identity

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## Preface

I must be very specific about one thing. The issue being tackled is of a very sensitive nature and is an ongoing struggle that is very much alive and prevalent, despite what the mainstream narrative might be. This article is merely my attempt at adding to the limited literature prevalent on the issue of statehood for Darjeeling, written from the perspective of a native resident. I do not intend to slander nor demean any particular individual or group.

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## Introduction

When one thinks of Darjeeling, they are often flooded with beautiful imagery of the Kanchenjunga, the widespread tea gardens and the toy train. They think of the good food and the picturesque buildings and landscape. What many don't realise is the fact that the streets of the same idyllic town are riddled with a history of violence, bloodshed and revolution. It is a history which is continuously being suppressed by certain powers and groups, determined at creating a false narrative about the identity of its denizens. Their arguments, no matter how unbiased, inadvertently end up going against the natives, leading to the solidifying of this false narrative. One such article "*Ethnic Problems and Movements for Autonomy in Darjeeling*" by Atis Dasgupta talks about the "complexities" associated with the identity of the people of Darjeeling, and the challenges associated with statehood. This article is a direct response to the arguments made by Dasgupta in the article.

## A Brief History

For those who are unaware, Darjeeling has its historical roots in the Treaty of Sugauli, signed post the Anglo Nepalese War where The British East India Company took Sikkim, the Kumaon and Garhwal regions, as well as the majority of the Tarai territory from the *Gorkhas*, and the recruitment of the *Gorkhas* began (Manishsiq, 2023). It consists of a diverse population, primarily dominated by the Nepalis, who were brought as migrants to work on the tea plantations by the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Datta, 1991). Darjeeling and the surrounding hills have been demanding for the creation of a separate state, "*Gorkhaland*" even before independence. The West Bengal government has had governance over this province since independence, relying on its Tea and Tourism industries as important sources of revenue, with the state earning nearly 2,52,863 lakh rupees in tea alone in the year 2019 (NATIONAL STATISTICAL OFFICE et al., 2022). This is perhaps one of the oldest movements for state autonomy in India, starting with the establishment of the Hillmen's Association in 1917, who submitted a memorandum to the then Secretary of State, Edwin Montague, a written memorandum calling for the creation of a separate administrative unit (Datta, 1991). Post Independence, the most significant event for statehood emerged in 1986, with the creation of the *Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF)*, taking a more militant turn under the leadership of Subhash Ghising, who desired to create the "*Gorkha*", different from the "Nepali", as the "*Gorkha*" was the Nepali loyal to India (Tamang, 2018). By 1988, violent agitation was quelled, with the leaders settling on the creation of the *Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC)* a semi-autonomous governing body functioning under the Bengal government (Middleton, 2020). In the 2000s and 2010s, the movement took a different turn, with separate agitations in 2008 and 2017 under Bimal Gurung, leading to a resurgence (Middleton, 2020). Currently, the question of Statehood remains a mystery for the people.

## The Question of Loyalty

Dasgupta prods indirectly at the loyalty of the *Gorkhas* when it comes to the Indian government. Quoting former Prime Minister Moraji Desai, who said “*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,*” Dasgupta writes that the statement hurt the “sensitive minds of the Nepali educated middle class (Dasgupta, 1999).” Although he acknowledges the irresponsibility of the statement made by Desai, he parrots a sentiment which fails to see the *Gorkha* or any other non-conformist denizen of Darjeeling as “foreigners.” He even insinuates that the 1986 agitation as a foreign-backed movement and that Ghising “*did not put much emphasis on demand for inclusion of Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule*” ((Dasgupta, 1999, p. 64).” However, what he does not mention is that Ghising advocated for the creation of the “*Gorkha bhasa*” a language almost identical to Nepali but under a different guise (Pradhan, 2019). Moreover, when it comes to the question of loyalty of the *Gorkhas*, the author needs to be reminded of the blood spilt by the countless valiant soldiers of the *Gorkha* Regiments. *Gorkha* soldiers were recruited in both the British as well as the Indian armies post-independence since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The *Gorkha* Recruiting Depot in Ghoom, Darjeeling, serves as a stark reminder of how brave young men from the neglected community of the hills gave their lives for the motherland, during the two world wars as well as the 1971 Indo-Pak War (Pakhrin, 2022). Many of the *Gorkhas* have paid the ultimate price, the most recent being Capt. Brijesh Thapa from Ging, Darjeeling, who paid the ultimate price fighting insurgents in Jammu and Kashmir in 2024 (Banerjee, 2024). Moreover, there have been many *Gorkha* freedom fighters in Indian history who have fought for independence, including Dal Bahadur Giri (“The Gandhi of the Hills”), Capt. Ram Singh Thakuri (Composer of the Indian National Anthem) and Helen Lepcha (named “*Sabitri Devi*” by Gandhi) among others (Desk, 2018). Hence, the author needs to be reminded. Asking for recognition and fairness does not deter one’s loyalty to their country, it is simply a question of being treated with equality and respect.

## Internal Colonialism and the Subsumption of Identity

Internal colonialism refers to a situation where an ethnic or racial group maintains control over certain subordinate groups within the same country, with the subordinate group facing various forms of systematic exploitation including economic, political, and social among others (Hass, 2023). The reason for using this terminology in the case of *Gorkha* identity is that one can draw a lot of parallels between colonial India and Darjeeling under the rule of Bengal. Hence, the best term to describe this phenomenon would be the use of the term “internal colonialism.”

A common characteristic of British colonialism in India was the suppression of the identity of the “Indian.” The British viewed Indian identity and unity as a myth. They codified Indian

identity to follow their own hierarchical norms, creating an antagonistic divide between the Hindu and the Muslim, as well as within the Hindu community, in order to quell resistance (Tharoor, 2017a). Long has it been since India broke free from the chains of colonial rule. However, Bengal continues to carry the dim torch of colonialism from its former master, and impose it upon the denizens of Darjeeling. Internal Colonialism is practiced by Bengal, which is a situation where a dominant ethnic or racial group maintains control over subordinate groups within the same country, treating them as if they were colonies (Hass, 2023). Dasgupta writes that “*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.*”(Dasgupta, 1999).” He talks of how the *Gorkhas* remained loyal ‘immigrants’ to the British, essentially subsuming the question of identity of the people. As mentioned earlier, it is very much clear that the loyalty of the *Gorkhas* lies with India. Moreover, it is Bengal which refuses to acknowledge the identity of the *Gorkhas* and aims to further division by the introduction of Development Boards to several minority tribes (Middleton, 2020). While one might argue about the positives of such boards, it is evident that this move is an attempt, direct or indirect, at hindering the unity of the *Gorkha* community. Moreover, it is almost reminiscent of colonial Britain, who were infamous for their policy of Divide and Rule by providing concessions to certain minorities such as the Muslims (Tharoor, 2017b). This almost identical parallel reveals how internal colonialism is very much alive and prevalent in the context of *Gorkhaland*. Hence, how can the author question the integrity of *Gorkha* identity when it is constantly under threat from forces of its colonial master. This colonial trope of how *Gorkhas* are seen as “less Indian” due to being migrant workers is a common ploy to try and undermine political freedom and autonomy. By creating a binary between the “Hill People” and the “Plain People” it is merely heightening the alienation and the foreign “immigrant” tag associated with the *Gorkhas*.

### **A Call for Solidarity**

While Dasgupta’s article has its merits of being precise and trying to provide a detailed view of the *Gorkha* movement, it fails to understand the nuances of *Gorkha* identity, seeing the movement as more of a misguided nuisance. It sees the diversity of the Darjeeling population as being an issue for future governance, fearing a hegemony of the *Gorkha* population over other minority groups. However, what the author does not realise is that *Gorkhaland* is not just an attempt to provide a safe haven for the *Gorkhas* alone. It is a call for fairness and equal treatment, a recognition of the culture of Darjeeling. It is a plea for protection against outside interference, a plea for a better future for its children, one which does not need to be dependent on West Bengal’s aid (Mazumdar, 2017). It is not an attempt at separatism or balkanisation. It is only a long, hard fought battle for recognition, one which will last for a long time.

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