

## THE FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

**Lepchas Demand Justice**

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While the Nepalispeaking people of Darjeeling under the banner of Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha (GJMM) were celebrating the victory as they inched towards one step closer to full statehood—their dreamland or Gorkhaland—the original inhabitants of Darjeeling—the Lepchas—otherwise ignored by the mainstream media, concerned rights activists and government authorities, had no option but to organise an indefinite sit-in (dharna) at Subodh Mullick Square in Kolkata, to air their age-old grievances. Ironically enough, the sons of the soil in the Darjeeling hills have been totally forgotten by all. For the civic society they don't count. And for the government whether they exist or not, is not known. At least they are not officially treated as an ethnic minority with distinct linguistic, cultural and religious peculiarities. But they were silently bypassed in the tripartite mechanism of Gorkhaland Territorial Authority (GTA) as agreed by and between the parties—GJMM and West Bengal State Government and the Centre. They didn't figure on their agenda. They were not a party to the agreement.

Lepchas nurse the feeling that they are aliens in their own homeland while the Nepali-speaking migrants—Gorkhas—dominate the political and economic space of Darjeeling because of their sheer numbers. Today they are a minority tribe in terms of number and ethnicity but the hills once belonged to them. It's no more. Now it's Gorkhaland having no statutory provisions to safeguard their interests, their identity.

They have been agitating silently and peacefully for the last two years in the hills while making repeated representations to the Centre highlighting their minority status and plight without being heard by any government authority. Finally they came to Kolkata to make their presence heard and narrate the historical injustice meted out to them. Their demands are simple. It's a 3-point Charter of Demands:

- i) A separate Lepcha Development Council / Board for the protection of Language, Culture and Economic Development of Lepcha Community.
- ii) Recognition of Lepcha Language and its introduction in Formal Education System.
- iii) Reservation for People's Representation in State Assembly and Parliament.

In an exclusive interview with this correspondent N T Lepcha, the chief co-ordinator of Lepcha Rights Movement, groaned the apathy of the West Bengal government not to pay any heed to their demands and as a consequence they have been pushed in a most vulnerable state during the last three decades. However, Mr Lepcha welcomes the endeavour made by the present Chief Minister of West Bengal in dealing with the Gorkha problem. When he was asked about the inclusion of the plain land of Terai into the proposed GTA as claimed by the GJMM, he made no comments. But he wants Lepcha Development Council within the purview of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) for the overall economic, cultural and social development of the Lepchas. Mr Lepcha lamented that once the Lepchas were not only the dominant community, but also the only community which had roots in the hills. Gorkhas actually are infiltrators and they have been continually infiltrating since the takeover of Darjeeling by the British from the King of Sikkim in 1835, he added further.

At present the Lepchas constitute about two lakhs of population all over West Bengal of which 1.5 lakhs belong to the district of Darjeeling alone. When Darjeeling was handed over to the British by the then King of Sikkim, the deed was made in Lepcha as well as in Hindustani languages in 1835. But the declaration was made in Lepcha, Hindustani, Bengali and in Urdu in the year 1838. For the administrative purposes Lepcha remained the official language of Darjeeling along with English till 1911. After Independence of India Lepcha community became a minority due to continuous influx of other communities. At present the Gorkhas of the Darjeeling Hills constitute seven to eight lakh population. Lepchas had representation in the DGHC during the Ghising's tenure. But there was no development of the Lepcha community.

Mr N T Lepcha is demanding introduction of the Lepcha language as first language in the School and the College curriculum. He referred their place of dwelling as *Mayel lyng*, the area falls under the Sikkim and Darjeeling. He strongly advocated their representation in the three tier system of villages, Subdivisions and the districts which they used to enjoy as *Sezum* earlier. Barring noted writer and social activist Mahasweta Devi, nobody came forward to express solidarity with the Lepcha cause. It remains, to be seen whether the Lepchas under the organization Lepcha Rights Movement Mancha can make their voice heard among broad masses.

At last after a 3-week sit-in (dharna) at Subodh Mullick Square the Lepchas withdrew their movement following an assurance from the State Government of West Bengal that Lepcha Development Council would be formed. Everybody in the Lepcha community, hopes not against hope that this time they would get justice and the persons in power in Bengal, political parties and civic society have an opportunity to right historical wrongs that the Lepchas have been subjected to for so long. □