

SWORD OF DAMOCLES

Tackling Gorkhaland

Gaur Ghosh & Abhijit Datta

THE EX-CHIEF MINISTER OF West Bengal late Mr Jyoti Basu entered into an agreement with the then Gorkha National Liberation Front leader Subhas Ghising at Rajbhaban, Kolkata about twenty-three years back. At that the then Union Home Minister Mr Buta Singh represented on behalf of the Central Government. It was 22nd August, 1988. The day is still memorable specially from the point of view of the political history of the Hills. The seething discontent of the Hill people that developed into conflagration before the signing of the treaty led the then Prime Minister Rajib Gandhi to think about signing a treaty to bring in peace in the region. All these laid down the platform for bringing Subhash Ghising and Jyoti Basu together to discuss about the process in winsome manner to usher in an era of peace putting an end to the crisis that spread from smoldering discontent to a wildfire that covered vast region in the Hills and its adjoining regions. Rajib Gandhi was keenly interested to resolve the crisis at an early stage so that it could not reach the magnitude which could hardly be stemmed easily. Not only in Darjeeling, Rajib Gandhi also entered into an agreement with Laldenga in Mizoram and Prafulla Mahanta in Assom. It cannot be an infructuous venture from the part of the then Prime Minister Rajib Gandhi, as after the signing of agreement Laldenga, the Mizo leader was dragged out of the path of violence to the mainstream of politics. In Assom, Prafulla Mahanta of the Assom Gana Parishad was brought to the mainstream of politics dragging him away from the secessionist politics. There is no gainsaying the truth that Rajib Gandhi was successful to a large extent, in his mission. The signing of the treaty and the constitution of the Gorkha Hill Council followed by the power handed over to Ghising to run the administration of the Hill tracts in a limited way, the Union Government was successful in curbing the menace of secession for the time being at least. There was a different ploy of Rajib Gandhi. It was the device to defuse the separatist movement and give them opportunity to enjoy money and power of administration so that they could be brought to fold of usual national politics. It cannot be denied that Laldenga of Mizoram, Prafulla Mahanta of Assom and Subhas Ghising of Darjeeling Hill tracts became easy prey to the ploy of Rajib Gandhi. The intension was to weed out their tendency for movement. They could not think of retracing the path of violence in the future. Laldenga is no longer in the world now. Prafulla Mahanta and Subhas Ghising are now insignificant in the politics of Assom and West Bengal.

Gorkhaland is the name of the proposed state in India demanded by Nepali/Gorkhali speaking Gorkha ethnic group in Darjeeling and DOOARS in North Bengal. The demand for a separate unit has been there since 1907 when the Hillmen's Association in Darjeeling submitted a memorandum to Minto Morley Reforms Committee demanding a separated administration set up. In independent India Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League (ABGL) was the first political party from the region to demand greater identity for the Gorkha ethnic group and economic freedom to the community. Before the 1780s, the area of Darjeeling formed a part of the dominions of the Chogyal of Sikkim who had been engaged in unsuccessful warfare against the Gorkhas of Nepal. From 1780 the Gorkhas made several attempts to capture the entire region of

Darjeeling. By the beginning of the 19th century they had overrun Sikkim as far eastward as the Teesta River and had conquered and annexed the Terai. In the meantime the British were engaged in preventing the Gorkhas from over-running the whole of the northern frontier. The Anglo-Gorkha War broke out in 1814 which resulted in the defeat of the Gorkhas and subsequently led to the signing of the treaty of Sugauli in 1815. According to the treaty, Nepal had to cede all those territories which the Gorkhas had annexed from the Chogyal of Sikkim to the British East India Company (the area between Mechi river and Teesta river).

Later the East India Company by virtue of the Treaty of Titalia reinstated the Chogyal of Sikkim and restored all the tracts of land between the Mechi and the Teesta to the Chogyal of Sikkim and guaranteed his sovereignty. Later, in 1835, the hill of Darjeeling including an enclave of 138 sq miles was given to the East India Company by Sikkim . In November 1864 Bhutan by virtue of the treaty of Sinchula ceded Bhutan Dooars with passes leading to the hills and Kalimpong to the EIC. The present Darjeeling district can be said to have assumed its present shape and size in 1866 with an area of 1234 square miles.

The 18th of July 2011 and 22nd August 1988 are historic days in the politics of the hills and West Bengal. It was after the lapse of twenty-three years that an agreement was signed to bring into birth of 'Gorkhaland Territorial Administration' as the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha of Bimal Gurung entered into an agreement with the government of West Bengal. On the occasion of the signing of the pact at Sukhna near Siliguri, the West Bengal chief Minister Miss Mamata Banerjee, the Union Home Minister Mr P Chidambaram and the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha chief Bimal Gurung were present. It was agreed by and between the parties that Gorkhaland Territorial Administration would be formed without further delay. A bill has to be brought in the West Bengal Assembly to enact laws for the purpose. After the approval in the West Bengal Assembly, the matter has to be placed before the President for approval. Legislation process may be initiated after the final approval of the President. The process of election for the constitution of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration should be completed within six months. The process for the same should be initiated within two months from the approval.

A council of 50 members will be created. Among them 45 members will be the elected representatives and the rest five members will be nominated. All the members of Assembly and Parliament of the Hill region along with the chairpersons of the Municipalities will be the members of the Council by virtue of their posts. A person should be at the helm of affairs in the council apart from a Deputy Chief. The administrative activity will be carried out in the name of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration. The meeting will be conducted by a Chairman. The Deputy Chairman will help him in conducting the administration. The tenure of the council will be of five years. Important offices will be under the jurisdiction of the administration of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration. Among the offices the most important are Education, Health, Roadways and Communication, Drinking Water supply, Tourism, improvement in Tea plantation etc. The unit will be able to collect taxes to strengthen the fund.

The three sub-divisions, within the district of Darjeeling of the previous Darjeeling Gorkhaland Hill Council of Subhas Ghising will remain within the periphery of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration of Bimal Gurung and for the time being no part of Dooars and Terai will be incorporated in the outfit. Giving due cognizance to the demand of the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha, a high power committee will be constituted. They will decide whether any part of the regions of Terai and Dooars of North Bengal will be included within the ambit of the unit of GTA. The Union Government will extend the hands for financial assistance to the improvement of the condition of the hills. The Central govt. will provide an amount of 200 crore of rupees for the coming three years to the hills and the state govt. will provide 50% of the central government's amount as state share.

Now, it is clear that all important departments of administration excepting Home, Finance and Law are going to be included in the ambit of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration. The agreement that took place between the West Bengal government and the GNLf leader Subhas Ghising handed over minimum amount of power to the Hill Council in comparison to what is handed over to the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration of Bimal Gurung. As a result the new outfit is not only more powerful, but also holding much more autonomy.

Why the GTA is more powerful than DGHC? It is because the DGHC was holding the control of only 38 govt. departments and the GTA is going to hold 59 departments. All departments other than Finance, Home, Law and Reserved Forest are going into the jurisdiction of the GTA. DGHC was entitled only to appoint Group 'D' staff in the offices. But the GTA is now entitled to exercise the power of making appointments of the group B, C and D category of staffs in different offices. The department of Higher Education was outside the realm of administration of DGHC, but the department is now being under the Control of GTA. The Morcha always was very much articulate about holding the ownership of the Tea Estates. The GTA is now getting the right for the same. Apart from all these, the Centre was able to assist the DGHC with only 10% of the amount of money, though the outfit could not even spend the same without the concurrence of the state govt. But the GTA will be able to spend the whole amount. The GTA will have the right to spend independently the amount of money coming from the central government. The state will provide 50% of the amount yearly and the GTA will have the right to spend that amount independently. In a word the GTA is getting much more than what was given to the DGHC and the former will have more autonomy than what was held by the DGHC. That is why the general secretary of the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha Mr Roshan Giri said that they have succeeded in getting a lot from the deal.

So it is apparent that there is much difference between the treaty that was signed twenty-three years back between the then Chief Minister late Jyoti Basu and the GNLf LEADER Subhas Ghising and that is recently being signed between the current chief minister of West Bengal Miss Mamata Banerjee and the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha leader Bimal Gurung. It is also true that Bimal Gurung is capable of gaining more than what was obtained by Subhas Ghising. In the Gorkhaland regional administration there will be minimum amount of representation of the state government than what was in the GNLf administration. As a fallout of that the reins of

administration will mainly lie with the GTA. They are now getting more offices than previous outfits. They are independent of exercising the right of making expenditure of money coming from the central and state governments. The number of seats in the council that will be set up soon will be more than Gorkha Hill Council. What is more significant is that a committee is being constituted to look into the matter of the feasibility of the inclusion of any region of Dooars and Terai within the GTA. The success of Gurung and his followers lies in the fact that the demand they raised for the inclusion of some regions of Dooars and Terai is being acknowledged by the constitution of the committee. All these are enough for delight of Bimal Gurung and others. It is evident from their body languages at the time of the signing of the agreement and the day that followed the signing of the agreement. They could not suppress their hilarity. The mirth and merriment in the hill is supposed by some as the ushering in of an era of peace.

The crux of the question lies here. How long will the environment of peace continue in the hills? Will the second peace treaty be able to bring about perennial peace in the region? Has the fire in the hills been controlled for some time only to spread like wildfire in the future? It cannot be refuted that the treaty which was signed in the year 1988 brought in peace in the region for sometime at least till the beginning of the ongoing century. The first agreement in the hills of Darjeeling dragged Subhas Ghising away from his favourite demand of separate Gorkhaland. Ghising understood that the demand for separate Gorkhaland could hardly be endorsed by the state as well as the central government. He found it reasonable to remain confined to the post of the chairman of the DGHC. Finding no other way out he was satisfied with enjoying limited political power in the hill tract of Darjeeling. The then prime minister Rajib Gandhi was successful in his mission of providing political and economic power to the secessionist leader and thereby bringing him to the mainstream of national politics. The philosophy of Rajib Gandhi got proper application in the case of Subhas Ghising of Darjeeling. Ghising never retracted to the course of separate statehood movement once again after being the head of the Hill Council. On the contrary, many leaders of the DGHC were accused of corruption, favouritism, arbitrariness etc and Subhas Ghising turned steadily from the leader of the people to a traitor of the people. The people began thinking that Subhas Ghising could not remain faithful to the ethnic movement that he launched in the beginning of the 80s of the last century. The commotion generated in the hill people. This commotion and conflict of power brought into being a new outfit in new political firmament of Darjeeling. The name of the front was Gorkha Janamukti Morcha. The leader of the front was Bimal Gurung and Roshan Giri. The hill tracts once again fell in the scourge of restlessness. The most powerful person of the hills Subhas Ghising was driven away from the hills of Darjeeling. The dexterity that the then prime minister Rajib Gandhi adopted to resolve the crisis in the hills by virtue of agreement fell to the ground and the era of peace gradually weeded out. It was clear that the agreement brought in peace for a short time but the emotion that generated, taking into account, the separate ethnic identity of the Gorkhas frittered away the possibility of ushering in the age of permanent peace.

In the second agreement at Sukhna the Union Home Minister Mr P Chidambaram and the West Bengal Chief Minister Miss Mamata Banerjee categorically expressed their views against the formation of separate Gorkhaland. According to the Union Home Minister 'Unity in diversity' is the bedrock of Indian culture. The people of different ethnic cultural and linguistic identities are living in this country for a long time. It is the responsibility of the administration to prepare the ground so that all may remain together in a congenial atmosphere. The voice of the Chief Minister of West Bengal was more perspicuous. According to her, the West Bengal should not be divided. Darjeeling would remain forever an integral part of West Bengal. Far from accepting the demand for Gorkhaland, the West Bengal Chief Minister Miss Mamata Banerjee and the Union Home Minister Mr P Chidambaram will not be able to give slightest indulgence to the demand. Miss Mamata Banerjee knows very well that if she provides slightest indulgence to the demand of Gurung, it is certain to give birth to mass separatist tendencies in the whole of West Bengal, particularly in North Bengal. The Telengana issue in South India has been already given lesson to the Union Home Minister that it is dangerous to play with the fire. Bimal Gurung is now driven home to the fact that the demand of separate Gorkhaland will in no way be accepted by the Union and the state govt. Having been convinced of the very fact he has agreed upon to enter into a pact to ensure regional autonomy, to a large extent, in the hill tracts of Darjeeling with the addition of the name 'Gorkhaland' in the territorial Administration. But the countless supporters may not easily reconcile themselves to the hard reality of achieving limited success. That is why the placards are being pasted by the supporters of Gorkha Janamukti Morcha with the label "Welcome to Gorkhaland". The Gorkha Janamukti Morcha leader is unable to disavow the sentiments of numerous supporters demanding separate Gorkhaland. Gurung articulated in an unequivocal voice that he was not going to abandon the demand of separate Gorkhaland. They will not conduct election for the formation of Council till the areas of Terai and Dooars are coming to the jurisdiction of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration. Now the question arises normally whether the second treaty with Gorkha Janamukti Morcha will bring in peace in the hill section of Darjeeling. Given the volatile nature of 'give and take' bargaining Darjeeling may go in flames, possibly in the near future.

Bimal Gurung is also playing with fire in the same style as was done by Subhas Ghising. If Subhas Ghising was between devil and deep sea, why Bimal Gurung will not face the same fate? Subhas Ghising got hold of the power in the hills of Darjeeling by way of playing with Gorkhaland card and he lost hold in the region when he forsook his demand for Gorkhaland. He also understood that it was extremely difficult to play with Gorkhaland for long time. Taking advantage of the emotion of the hill people demanding separate Gorkhaland Bimal Gurung has taken over the leadership of the people there superceding Subhas Ghising. His politics revolves round the demand of separate Gorkhaland. He knows very well that he will also be turned from the supreme patriarch to a traitor if he recedes from the demand for separate Gorkhaland. He also knows very well that the Bhutiyas, Lepchas and the tribal people of Terai will be more consolidated with the strengthening of his demand for separate Gorkhaland. The distance between him and the government will go on widening. Yet Gurung cannot refrain from demanding separate Gorkhaland. He is to articulate unequivocally that though he is becoming

a part of the government of West Bengal yet at the core of his heart he is nourishing the demand for separate Gorkhaland. They are not ready to forgo the opportunity to be a part of the administration. At this juncture Bimal is not willing to hurt the sentiments of the people. He is not even ready to come out of the realm of power at the pressure of his followers. He is now to play the double role of demand for separate Gorkhaland and to be a part of the administration. Subhas Ghising had played the same role about 23 years back. It cannot be said definitely that Bimal Gurung is not stepping into the shoes left by Subhas Ghising.

The future will say if the same fate as that of Subhas Ghising is waiting for Bimal Gurung or the situation will be different from the past. True, Bimal Gurung is going to enjoy much more power than Ghising. If the manipulative design adopted by the government goes on successfully Bimal is certain to fall a prey to it and he will turn to be a traitor and in that event there may be the rising of another Bimal Gurung in the future. □□