

The Paradox of Autonomy in the Darjeeling Hills: A Perception Based Analysis on Autonomy Aspirations

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Abstract

Understanding on autonomy is premised on pluralistic ontologies based on identity, gender, class, race, caste etc. and their interactions and intersections, which in notional terms can be categorized under two broad typologies of – ‘reason’ and ‘aspiration’. Historically it seems to be evident that rational root of autonomy tends to co-opt the aspirational one, although existentially it is only the ‘self’ that defines autonomy. Similarly, it is also observed that the pluralities concerning autonomy often get subsumed under a single ethnic mobilization that lacks plural ontological understanding. In this regard, an inherent question arises: how should one negotiate autonomy? This paper, seeks to introduce perception in between reason and aspiration, as an ontological tool in analyzing an autonomy aspiration – the Gorkhaland Movement. In our analysis, the ‘self’ has been sub-divided into three components to understand the related perception, namely, ‘overarching self’, ‘constituents self’ and ‘individual self’.

1. Introduction

Notions related to autonomy are hardly singular, but sometimes, it bears the risk of becoming a victim of monistic ontological understanding. The question of autonomy, in general, is entwined with pluralistic ontological visions; e.g. a mobilization of the communities for fulfilling their autonomy aspiration or self-rule can be analyzed through the dimensions of identity, gender, class, race, caste etc. However, they often get subsumed under the banner of a singular ethnic mobilization which leads to a lack of plural ontological understandings. So any meaningful discussion on aspiration for self-rule saddled in overarching ethnic connotation should also negotiate with the interplay of other layered imperatives for analyzing the overall picture.

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Usually, in overall terms, it is said that the notion of autonomy in the political context is primarily franchised only to those ‘civic communities’ who enjoy legislative and self-governing authority, which later on, has been used in connection with individual rights as well. But in India, the usage of this term got momentum in the context of the anti-colonial struggle, where it was entrusted with newer ontological questions like: ‘autonomy of whom, for whom, and in respect of what’ (MCRG 2004)! In a nuanced format, autonomy has two roots; one is ‘rational’ i.e. – the legal jurisprudential version and the other, the ‘aspirational’ root, or the desire of the people being governed. Here, it should be noted that the efficacies of autonomy have historically been sought to be appropriated by ‘reason’, putting the popular aspiration at bay. This schism leads to the paradox on understanding on autonomy ‘pulled’ between ‘reason’ and ‘aspiration.’ Conceptualizing autonomy amidst this dualism appears to be an academic challenge. The problem lies in the way ‘self’ defines autonomy and the way it chooses the issues of rights. In most of the cases, the legal-jurisprudential provisions, dripped in from the top, become the only possible form of autonomy (MCRG 2004).

So, in this dilemma we may encounter these two questions - how to conceptualize ‘autonomy’ and how is it being negotiated! Is it the ‘reason’ or the ‘aspiration’ that is essential component for the ‘self’ to negotiate autonomy! It is interesting to note here that the term ‘self’ can represent a ‘group’ as well as an ‘individual.’ Amidst this dialectic constraint, we seek to analyze the notion of ‘*perception*’, in between ‘reason’ and ‘aspiration’, as our epistemological vantage point to examine the situationality of the ontologies of autonomy amongst the Darjeeling Hills dwellers. Although the notion of *perception* can be subsumed within the notion of ‘aspiration’, epistemologically it can help us analyzing an ethnicity based movement in a different manner. A recent study on perception based autonomy in three states of North East India by Fernandes and Borgohain (2017) highlights that the people from Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura understand the notion of autonomy in plural terms. Their perceptions about autonomy included the power to take political and economic decisions, control over natural resources as well as the rights and jurisdiction in their community or over the area they inhabit. In addition to these, people stated to perceive autonomy as a political power with no outside interference coupled with sovereignty over land, cultural affairs and identity formation (Fernandes & Borgohain 2017).

With these insights, this paper seeks to analyze the different perceptions of the ‘self’, related to autonomy aspirations, in the Hills of Darjeeling. In this paper, we have used the notion of ‘self’ with its varied connotations. We have the entire constituency of the Hills of Darjeeling as one ‘self’; the different ethnic communities within the Hills as the ‘constituent self’, which have emerged recently in the form of *Development Boards*; and finally the individual member within the different ethnic communities as an ‘individuated self.’ Simultaneously, we also aspire to take the epistemologies of autonomy - ‘reason’ and ‘aspiration’ - into perspective to analyze the ontologies of autonomy more holistically. To analyze the same, a select groups of people and political organizations have been interviewed on various issues accompanying the movement, namely, the rationale behind the movement, the council mode of autonomy

vis-a-vis Sixth Schedule, the drawbacks of mobilization tactics, the issue of identity, the likelihood of attaining statehood in the emerging future, among others. The perceptions of these people and organizations are then analyzed under several categories to understand the movement and its various dimensions and its course of action. In a nutshell, this paper proposes to understand the pluralistic ontologies of an autonomy movement quelled by ethnicity through *perceptions* which is precisely our epistemology in this context.

The next section deals with the question of autonomy itself while the succeeding sections seek to deal with the politics and practises so far in the name of autonomy functioning in the Darjeeling Hills and its surrounding areas with a conclusion highlighting the lessons learnt so far.

2. Autonomy in Question

Autonomy aspirations in the Hills of Darjeeling had been one of the oldest in its genre in the country. Starting during the first decade of the 20th century or 1907 to be precise, it has been well documented by various scholars that the demand for a separate administrative set-up for Darjeeling in 1907 by the 'leaders of Hill people' or the 'leaders of the "overarching self"' may be regarded as the benchmark event in initiating the process (Datta 1991; Subba 1992; Samanta 2000; Sarkar 2013). Here, it must be stated that the autonomy movement in the Hills have experienced number of ebbs and flows, where the spikes represented the success of mobilization whereas the trough symbolized the lull before the next storm. The event of 1907 was followed by an event of submission of a memorandum by the 'representatives of Darjeeling District' to the Chief Secretary of Government of Bengal on November 8, 1917 asking for a creation of separate administrative unit, in the lines of 'home rule.' In this demand for a separate administrative unit, not only the district of Darjeeling was included but also the Dooars of Jalpaiguri as well. The grounds on which the demand was put forward were geographical, racial, historical, religious and linguistic as well (Dasgupta 1988; Subba 1992).

Later on, this aspiration in the Hills for a separate administrative unit further gathered momentum due to the role played by the Government of West Bengal during the *Bhasa Andolon* (1920-1992). This momentum, sparked by a host of factors, later paved the way for demanding a full-fledged state of Gorkhaland during 1980s in the name of security and identity of the Gorkhas living in India since generations. It is interesting to note that scholars have differed in identifying the major imperative that sustained the movement. This included 'economic stagnation' (Dasgupta 1988), 'improper implementation of development policies' (Chakraborty 1988), 'economic negligence' (Nanda 1987; Lama 1988), 'uneven development' (Datta 1991; Dasgupta 1999), 'ousting' of Nepalis from Northeast India (Misra 1986), 'identity crisis' (Subba 1992; Samanta 2000; Sarkar 2013), 'de-territorialized subjectivity' (Golay 2006), 'growing tribalism' (Chhetri 2017; Middleton 2013; Tamang & Sitlhou 2018) etc. Moreover, keeping the Darjeeling and adjoining areas as 'Scheduled' districts, 'Backward Tracts' and 'Partially Excluded Area', in subsequent Acts of 1874, 1919 and 1935 by the British (Samanta

2000; Sarkar 2013), along with economic poverty and the perceived ‘mal-governance’ of the hill-dwellers (Ganguly 2005) ultimately set in the motion for separatism from Bengal/West Bengal. However, West Bengal Human Development Report 2004 indicates that Darjeeling is ranked as second and fourth in gender and human development indices (Mohan 2013) which may partially refute the lack of development clause related to this movement.

Keeping the above literature into perspective, the select group of individuals and organizations during the field survey were asked to identify the most important form of autonomy and the factors compelling to ask for that in the Hills of Darjeeling; the unanimous answer cited was that when they travel beyond the Hills of Darjeeling, they are termed as ‘Nepalese’ - meaning the citizens of Nepal - which necessarily puts their identity under a scanner. To secure their identity, the movement activists want a visible Gorkhaland state on the map of India. For example; Roshan Giri¹, the then Gorkha Janamukti Morcha [GJM] General Secretary, explains, ‘it is assumed that Gujarat is for Gujaratis, West Bengal is for Bengalis and Punjab is for Punjabis but there is no home for the Indian Gorkhas.’ Even, some journalists and leaders in our select sample, said that this demand is also an auto-reflection of their lack of *security* as they have been victims of various atrocities and ‘push back’ movements, especially in North East India in general and Meghalaya in particular, which resulted in the mass exodus of the ‘Gorkhas’ from these areas. Basically, they pleaded for a territorial arrangement, to secure the identity of the Indian Gorkhas, which they feel will embolden their citizenship status in India. This is the widely accepted form of ontology, amongst a host of others, on autonomy. When placed with a counter question e.g. will the *territorial identity* be sufficient to provide them the stable social identity in India! Few of them replied in affirmative tone while others like Bimal Rai² and C.K. Shrestha³ said that the territorial arrangement is only to have a permanent home and, securing identity – especially, the social identity - depends upon the talents and professions of the people. Bimal Rai said, ‘*Gorkhaland will not give us identity, identity will come with our talent.*’ In addition to that, Pramod Giri⁴ also mentioned that, ‘*identity is enshrined by profession and talent.*’ By saying so, they were perhaps pointing towards social identity and development of the Gorkhas in order to make their identity visible to others. The kind of identity the Bengalis have in the field of education, film, singing, literature etc.; the kind of identity the Gujaratis have in the field of business, such visible identities they

¹ Roshan Giri, the then general secretary of Gorkha Janmukti Morcha [GJM], in an interview conducted with him on January 27, 2016 as a part of field-work of this study, revealed this information.

² Bimal Rai is the Bureau Chief at Himalayan Darpan, a Darjeeling based Nepali daily. The interview was conducted on February 03, 2016.

³ C.K. Shrestha is a writer, novelist, dramatist, journalist and the founder of Gorkha Bharati Vichar Manch. An interview with him was possible only on February 02, 2016.

⁴ Pramod Giri is a Siliguri based journalist with the Hindustan Times. An interview with him was conducted on February 05, 2016.

want for the Gorkhas and that can only be attained if they have a separate state of Gorkhaland, Bimal Rai added.

Moreover, Shrestha during the field survey proposed another ontological alternative form of autonomy to do away with the national security grievances of the Gorkhas residing outside Darjeeling. He said; more Gorkhas are living in Assam than in West Bengal. It is equally true that the Gorkhas are scattered throughout India and the World. In this regard, Shrestha emphasized that the creation of Gorkhaland will only ensure *territorial identity* to the Gorkhas living in Darjeeling, but when asked what about those who will continue to live outside the proposed state! He replied; the creation of Gorkhaland will only provide a *symbolic identity* to the Gorkhas residing outside Darjeeling as well, although it will fail to guarantee their territorial identity. For the 'Gorkhas' living outside Darjeeling, he proposes the formation of *Gorkha National Satellite Council [GNSC]* which will basically be a national level body to look after the Gorkhas scattered throughout India. He conceptualized his idea of *GNSC* with the working of a satellite or a tower providing mobile network. According to him, this body will have the representation from the members elected across the communities [including the Bengalis from the aspired state also] which will look after the provisions and benefits to Gorkhas residing outside the jurisdiction of the proposed Gorkhaland. The representation in that body should be from the members enlisted under the *Representation of People's Act, 1950 [RPA]*. It means that, there will be a non-territorial arrangement for the Gorkhas residing outside Darjeeling. Precisely, these are the epistemological submission on the ontology of autonomy.

3. Perceived Strategies to Achieve Autonomy

Moving forward from questioning about the most widely accepted form of ontology on autonomy to the ontological strategies to achieve that autonomy, the same political organizations and other select interviewees were asked about the same to fulfil their demand for autonomy i.e. to attain statehood. We found varied epistemological understandings to pursue those ontologies. We will analyze those epistemological answers in this section subsequently with having the available literatures into perspective.

During 1947, the undivided Communist Party of India [CPI] for the first time raised the bogey for a separate, sovereign state called 'Gorkhasthan' (Subba 1992: 89-90) with their concept of 'right to self-determination' (Chakrabarti 1988: 24). Ratanlal Brahmin and Ganeshlal Subba were the two leaders who coined such a 'utopian' demand, although they were aware about its denial in the past. They did the same because they knew that neither 'Marxism' nor 'Leninism' but 'Gorkhalism' would sell there in Darjeeling (Subba 1992). This tactics of 'Gorkhalism' can be seen in the Hills of Darjeeling even after the breaking up of Communist Party of India [CPI], whose broken limb in the hills is nowadays recognize themselves as Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxists [CPRM]. As the 'Left' failed to incorporate the identity issue congruously, the CPRM emerged in the hills by taking its new ontological definition of 'class' which is way different from that of the CPI [M], a CPRM leader added. The

economic issues are always mired in the undivided CPI's definition of 'class' precisely this is the departure of the CPRM. The CPRM defines a 'new class' on the basis of identity, culture etc. To them, the emergence of 'Gorkha Muslim' is a finer example of 'new class'. This group is a blend of class, religion and ethnicity. The Gorkha Muslims are nothing but the descendants of the couples married across ethno-religious communities; i.e. the Muslims and the Gorkhas. When a marriage happens between these groups, the offspring so born, are calling themselves as *Gorkha Muslims*, according to a local Muslim at Darjeeling. Thus, it is also an important 'constituent self' around which the contemporary Darjeeling politics is revolving. The 'Left' [CPRM] is trying to get its hold back in the hills in this fashion (Saha 2016).

In addition, Ganeshlal Subba, the intellectual member of CPI unit at Darjeeling, knew that perhaps a separate administrative unit was possible in Darjeeling through Constitutional provisions but hardly there was any possibility of forming an independent 'Gorkhasthan' (Subba 1992: 90-91). Hence, in the sixties, the CPI shifted its focus from Gorkhasthan to the issue of 'autonomy' (Dasgupta 1988) but the demand by the Communists for Gorkhasthan (Subba 1992) in 1940s and 'Gorkha autonomy' in 1950s were an attempt to secure its base in the hills in the form of trade union in the plantation sector. Ratanlal Brahmin wanted to mobilize the people on the notions of '*exploited and dissatisfied*' feeling that was perceived to have been in existence in the Hills. In 1982 and 1985 the CPI [M] moved a private bill to grant autonomy to the three hill sub-divisions in the form of a district council (Dasgupta 1988). The bill of 1985 was moved by an elected Member of Parliament [M.P.], Anand Pathak but was defeated on the floor of the House [Parliament]. Although, it was expected to be defeated, but surprisingly and unexpectedly, there was no protest against the defeat of the Bill by the CPI [M] unit of Darjeeling (Subba 1992). When it was asked to the representative of Darjeeling unit of CPI [M] about their stand on Gorkhaland, Suraj Pathak replied that his party is against the idea of creating smaller states as it will compromise with the federal principle enshrined in the Constitution of India. The burgeoning power of these states, if so created, will reduce the discretion of the Parliament and provide the Centre with more manoeuvrability hampering federal relations since the smaller states will have less number of Members of Parliament [MPs], Pathak added. Earlier Jibesh Sarkar, the then Darjeeling district secretary of the CPI [M] said that neither Gorkhaland can be achieved⁵ now nor it is desirable but it should not be denied by the use of force (Frontline: September 20, 2013).

When these apprehensions about the movement were posed before our select group of interviewees in order to understand their epistemological strategies to achieve the proposed state of Gorkhaland, Roshan Giri expressed his desire to adhere to the politics of '*negotiation*' both with the Centre and the state. On the other hand, Amar Singh Rai [GJM] wanted the State to first discard the *Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship*

⁵ Frontline (September 20, 2013). Twist in Gorkhaland Demand, Online, Available at [HTTP] <http://www.frontline.in/the-nation/twist-in-gorkhaland-demand/article5084978.ece> [Accessed on April 13, 2016]

1950 and then start negotiation afresh. However, Suraj Sharma [journalist] and GJM legal advisor Raju Pradhan thinks that initially the State should designate Darjeeling as Union Territory [UT] which may be considered as the first step towards achieving statehood. Sharma cites that Punjab and Haryana before being granted full-fledged statehood were first designated as UTs. Political organizations like TMC and CPI [M] seem to highlight ambiguous statements. The hill unit of TMC blamed the hill-leaderships for turning up the history to churn the '*false dream of Gorkhaland*' whereas the latter decreed for achieving '*identity through regional autonomy*.' It is however far less than clear that what does CPI (M) mean by 'autonomy'. Amar Singh Rai alleged that the term 'autonomy' is a misnomer for continuation of the chauvinistic rule of the Government of West Bengal.

Moreover, the formation of Telengana state provided a new fillip to the demand for Gorkhaland spearheaded by the Gorkhaland Joint Action Committee, a platform of nine political and 'apolitical' organizations called for '*Janata Curfew*' or '*ghar bhitrai janata* agitation' for two days asking the inhabitants to stay indoors 'voluntarily' (Frontline: September 20, 2013). On the other hand, BJP in its successive manifestoes of 2009 and 2014 Lok Sabha elections stated that it will treat the issue of Gorkhaland with 'sympathy' if voted to power⁶. Even the then Prime Ministerial candidate from the ruling BJP, Narendra Modi in his election rally⁷ on April 10, 2014 in Darjeeling said, 'I tell my Gorkha brothers, your dream is our dream. Give us a chance to ensure development for you' (IBNLive: April 10, 2014). With the hope of this that the BJP would consider the cause of Gorkhas in Parliament, the GJM had supported the party in the Lok Sabha elections of 2009 and 2014. Then a BJP candidate contesting from Darjeeling, S.S. Ahluwalia claimed⁸ that 'BJP is in favour of creation of smaller states.' But the then state [West Bengal] BJP chief, Rahul Sinha, disapproved the claim by saying that 'the party's candidate for the Darjeeling constituency had only reiterated the BJP's stand in favour of smaller States [regional governments] and had never advocated the demand for Gorkhaland' (The Hindu: March 22, 2014).

However, BJP does not see the issue of Gorkhas and Gorkhaland alone. It holistically takes into consideration the problems and demands of Gorkhas in and around the Darjeeling Hills, Adivasis of Dooars and the Rajbangshis of Cooch Behar. If required, BJP may consider the creation of *North Bengal state* rather than Gorkhaland, Manoj

⁶ The Telegraph (April 09, 2014), BJP adds 'Gorkha' in manifesto, Online, Available at [HTTP] http://www.telegraphindia.com/1140409/jsp/bengal/story_18170975.jsp#.VtAQN_196M8 [Accessed on February 26, 2016]

⁷ IBN Live (April 10, 2014). Your dream is our dream, Narendra Modi tells Gorkhas, Online, Available at [HTTP] <http://www.news18.com/news/politics/your-dream-is-our-dream-narendra-modi-tells-gorkhas-680237.html> [Accessed on June 09, 2016]

⁸ The Hindu (March 22, 2014). There will be no Gorkhaland: West Bengal BJP chief, Online, Available at [HTTP] <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/there-will-be-no-gorkhaland-west-bengal-bjp-chief/article5843717.ece> [Accessed on June 09, 2016]

Dewan⁹ added. So, from our discussion it seems that the national party only plays with the demand for statehood of Gorkhaland as per their requirement during elections and this has been continuing since the inception of this movement. The newly formed [in 2016] Kalimpong based Jana Andolan Party [JAP] in its 2016 West Bengal Assembly Election manifesto mentions that India as a nation is still in the process of making. The JAP manifesto also highlights that regional identities adds strength to the pan-Indian national identity rather than posing a threat to the Indian national identity, much like Sanjib Baruah's interpretation of *Assamese Sub-nationalism* (Saha 2016).

For resolving the issues associated with the formation of proposed state of Gorkhaland, the Jana Andolan Party [JAP] has drafted a bill¹⁰ called *The West Bengal Reorganization Bill 2016*, for the Indian Nepalis, Bhutias, Lepchas, Sherpas, Adivasi, Rajbangshi and all other communities residing in Darjeeling and Dooars region of Jalpaiguri district. In response to such a move, BJP's Darjeeling MP asked the JAP to place the same in the state Assembly for its ratification by the Government of West Bengal. If the West Bengal Legislative Assembly ratifies such a bill, the Union Government [BJP] will be able to consider this. But this again seems to be a tactics to hoodwink as the Constitution of India empowers only the Indian Parliament to take initiatives for the creation of a new state under Article 3 without consulting the concerned state/s out of which a new state is supposed to be carved out. According to the Constitution, a bill for creation of a new state is to be introduced with the consent of the President of India and according to Article 74; the President is bound to act according to the advice of the Council of Ministers. Similar process was seen even during the contemporary era during the creation of Telengana, which happened without consulting the Andhra Pradesh [united] Legislative Assembly. Although this practice should be questioned as it has a tendency to curtail the regional voices, it is still not necessary to take consent from the concerned states to introduce such bills. Thus it becomes clear that although there appears to be a lot of *hullabaloo* on the issue of Gorkhaland but there is hardly any epistemological clarity amongst the political parties regarding the *modus operandi* to achieve the same. Political movement in the name of the proposed state thereby continues unabatedly.

Thus, it is clear from the above discussion that the ontologies of autonomy had always been dynamic which had its situational manoeuvrings, in its spirit. Starting with demand for separate administrative set-up in the second decade of Twenty First Century to Gorkhasthan in 1940s; autonomous politico-administrative structures in post 1950s the movement went ahead with a full-fledged statehood demand in 1980s. But, our epistemological understandings in this section remind us that there is a lack of praxis in the ontologies to achieve autonomy.

⁹ Manoj Dewan, a 52 years old Siliguri based representative to the Darjeeling unit of Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP]. A personal talk with him was possible only on February 09, 2016

¹⁰ Indian Gorkhas, Gorkhaland Bill prepared by JAP (Jan Andolan Party) full text, online blog, Available at [HTTP] <http://www.indiangorkhas.in/2016/04/gorkhaland-bill-prepared-by-jap-jan-andolan-party-full-text.html> [Accessed on June 22, 2016]

4. Questioning the Autonomy Practiced in the Hills of Darjeeling

As the struggle for autonomy in the Hills of Darjeeling has reached the milestone of 111 years now, it had witnessed several forms of autonomy burgeoning from the Darjeeling dwellers to the Union as well as the state. A brief description of the autonomy burgeoning of this movement and its criticism is presented in this section.

Darjeeling had remained 'excluded' in the successive Government of India Acts in 1919 and 1935, and as a result the rules and regulations regarding landownership and taxation has been maintained in order to safeguard the interest of the tribal people from the encroachment by 'outsiders' (Samanta 2000: 23). It was in 1954 that this region was merged with West Bengal by the *Absorbed Areas Act* (Saha & Chakraborty 2017). It is astonishing that after India's independence, the '*Nepalis*' [Indian Nepali speaking people] felt insecure as they were branded as foreigners on Indian soil. Their fear further got entrenched when a section of the Assamese started a drive to push the *Bahiragatas* [the outsiders] out from Assam (Misra 1986) and the '*Nepalis*' were also a constituent of what the Assam dwellers had termed as '*Bahiragatas*'. Simultaneously, the then Chairperson of the Language Commission, B.G. Kher, characterized Nepali language as 'foreign' language in 1956. In this situation the '*Nepalis*' started demanding the inclusion of Nepali language into the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Scholars had argued that at the root of the demand for inclusion of Nepali in the Eighth Schedule was the understanding that no government machinery will be able to effectively implement or enforce the safeguards preserved for minorities [religious, cultural and linguistic] in the Constitution, unless Nepali is given constitutional recognition (Munshi & Chakrabarti 1979). When the demand is to recognise the local language [Nepali] as the medium of instruction in the hills, the Government of West Bengal engaged itself in the process of bargaining with the hill masses in order to neutralise their demand for a separate state. In several occasions, state had turned down their legitimate demand to introduce Nepali as the medium of instruction in the hills. After much contestation, Nepali was inserted into the Eight Schedule of the Constitution of India in 1992 (Saha 2016).

The historical transformation of this ethnic movement got reshaped in the form of demand for a separate politico-administrative institution in the hills. The leadership and the masses in the hills felt the need for such arrangements to carry forward their demands for autonomy. After a long struggle, a legislatively and financially inept politico-administrative body called Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council [DGHC] was formed in 1988. Despite the then prevailing mood of high anticipation from the Council [DGHC], the pattern of development, by DGHC and the leadership of GNLF who led the Council hardly succeeded in actualizing the dreams of the people in the Hills. Although, DGHC was entrusted for economic, social, cultural and linguistic development of the people inhabiting the areas under its purview, its functioning not only failed to meet the expectations of the people but also found itself mired in alleged irregularities, favouritism in the case of employment, nepotism, autocratic leadership and highhandedness by the members of DGHC (Sarkar 2013). In addition to these, Ghising was unwilling to accommodate or listen to other leaders from the hills who also aspired

for the creation of Gorkhaland. Critics allege that Ghising used different manoeuvres to outsmart his critics in the hills e.g. back and forth on the issue of implementing Sixth Schedule in the Darjeeling Hills, deferring elections (Sarkar 2013), playing politics over the worship of Durga in different forms etc (Middleton 2013; Saha 2016).

It is noteworthy to bring the issue of Sixth-Schedule in this context as an epistemological measure to bargain autonomy, which many ethnic movements in Northeast India showcase as a Constitutional arrangement for safeguarding their rights. This particular issue is important because of the fact that earlier there was a proposal of granting Sixth-Schedule¹¹ status to the erstwhile DGHC but Ghising then declined the proposal by saying that the Sixth-Schedule status is for the tribal areas and Gorkhas are not tribes. But later on in 2006, he demanded the same provision for Darjeeling by saying that the Gorkhas are tribal (Saha 2016). The Indian Constitution provides with a provisions under the Sixth Schedule in Article 244[2] and 275[1] which states, ‘If there are different Scheduled Tribes in an autonomous district, the Governor may, by public notification, divide the area or areas inhabited by them into autonomous regions’ (Bakshi 2009: 341). This provision was thereby thought of as an arrangement for the Darjeeling Hills. But this was strongly opposed by GJM as a provision for the tribal areas whereas Darjeeling is a non-tribal area. They alleged that if Darjeeling is brought under this provision, it will mean that the region will be ruled by tribes and it will be a minority ruling the majority. Presently, there are almost 35 per cent people belonging to tribal¹² background (The Telegraph: January 24, 2006). It is also noteworthy that just five years before such political drama; Ghising introduced the *eighteen armed Durga* instead of the traditional image of Durga with *ten arms*. All these happened because of a tripartite meeting held in New Delhi on July, 2005, which agreed to bestow special arrangement under Sixth-Schedule for the Darjeeling hills which is a pro-tribal arrangement. Ghising introduced such idol worship to show the *distinctiveness* of Darjeeling hills in terms of its culture and practice (Outlook: October 11, 2005). Contrary to the above, there has been a growing ‘tribalism,’ among some sections of the people from the Hills of Darjeeling in order to get the Scheduled Tribe (ST) status so that they can bargain with the Government of India for their betterment (Middleton 2013; Tamang & Sitlhou 2018). This phenomenon re-asserts the notion that the Hill Dwellers have situational identity fixation (Saha 2016).

At the hindsight, the mass-appeal for achieving the goal of Gorkhaland under Ghising’s leadership started showing cracks while the popular discontent of the masses swelled significantly. Ghising tried every trick to stay relevant in hill politics. But when his ‘pet slogan’ of conferring ‘Sixth Schedule status to DGHC did not get desired support

¹¹ There is also a provision of granting autonomous councils to accommodate such dissents under the Sixth Schedule [applicable to tribal regions] of the Constitution of India, which can also be termed as protective discrimination.

¹² The Telegraph (January 24, 2006), Ghising on tribal status mission, Online, Available at [HTTP] http://www.telegraphindia.com/1060124/asp/siliguri/story_5759568.asp [Accessed on June 16, 2016]

from the residents of Darjeeling; Ghising's days seemed to be numbered. Final attempt was hammered when his undisputed leadership got challenged by Bimal Gurung. His emergence as the new leader of the hills and the formation of GJM was preceded by the Prashant Tamang¹³ episode. Gurung arranged support for Tamang as a patron of the Prashant Tamang Fan Club for a popular Television programme called *Indian Idol* in 2007. Within two weeks of Tamang becoming the winner of this particular musical show, Gurung formed his party named GJM. He portrayed himself as the new *messiah* of the hill people, who felt alienated and victimized by the State in their struggle for self-rule and preservation of their unique identity. He, like Ghising, earlier was successful in unifying different sections of the hill people under the banner of Gorkha identity. This earned him support in the hills apart from his anti-Ghising and anti-DGHC campaigning (Sarkar 2013: 94-96). He overnight became the undisputed leader of the hills and with his style of functioning he provided an opportunity to the State to co-opt his leadership as well.

Gurung, who figured in the hill-politics after hard pressing the demand for Gorkhaland, he was also made to sit in for negotiation by the Government of West Bengal. As an outcome of repeated negotiation with the Government of West Bengal, the GJM accepted the formation of *Gorkhaland Territorial Administration* [GTA] in 2011 which did not have specific legislative and financial powers, although it was empowered to frame few rules and regulations over the subjects handed over to it. Just on the eve of the signing of this Accord, the Trinamool Congress [TMC] assumed power in the Government of West Bengal and the supremo of the party found GJM as its ally to enter into the Darjeeling hill-politics. After the formation of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration [GTA], the West Bengal Government introduced a new ploy in the hill politics which was an antithesis to the demand for Gorkhaland under a united Gorkha banner. The state government started creating the Development Boards for the Lepchas, Sherpas, Bhutias, Mangars, Tamangs and others. It is regarded as an established fact that the Lepchas are the aboriginal people of Darjeeling and they want to preserve their culture and identity, which they deem to be distinct from that of the Gorkhas since 1920s. Moreover, they had been the rulers of Kalimpong which is still strongly etched in their mind. Now, as the Gorkhas are demanding a state in the name of Gorkhaland, it gives them a kind of *negative romanticism* to their past. If the Gorkhas have a new state, then the apprehension is that all the Darjeeling dwellers will be ruled by the dominant ethnic group i.e. the 'Nepalis'- in the name of 'Gorkhas.' That is why, during the *Nepali Bhasa Andolan* in the hills, the Lepcha-Bhutias were less presumptuous to come under the banner of *Gorkha*, as they perceived it to be a threat to their culture (Subba 1992; Sarkar 2013). Hence, this sort of ontological assertion of autonomy is self-defeating in nature as there is internal political dynamism quelled by intra and inter-ethnic conflict.

¹³ Prashant Tamang of Darjeeling won the Indian Idol, a popular Television singing show, in September 2007.

5. Contemporary Politics of Autonomy in Darjeeling

We have discussed in the earlier section about the ‘reluctance’ of the Lepchas and Bhutias to come into the Gorkha-fold and presumably there seems to be lot of imagination to this process by these groups. It is said that the seeds of this shrinking of solidarity among the Lepchas and Bhutias was sown during 1920s when the Nepali speaking people of Darjeeling demanded Nepali to be introduced as a medium of instruction in the schools (Subba 1992). Whether these ethnic [Lepchas, Bhutias etc.] groups were taken into confidence and how participative the process was if at all they were taken into confidence to bring them under the umbrella ethnicity of ‘Gorkha’ is still questionable. As these groups are being provided different development boards by the Government of West Bengal, if the granting of the same can be termed as the whimsical act of the state? It is also still questionable. Apart from that, the cause of degeneration of solidarity among them has been felt by the emerging ‘Nepali leaderships as well’. When there are diverse ethnic groups in the hills, it is less likely that the other groups [Lepcha, Bhutia etc.] will have an inclination to always congregate under the umbrella of a single *Gorkha* ethnicity or solidarity under a *single* [Nepali speaking] ethnic group. This might pave the way for the emergence of *multiple leaderships* in the Hills of Darjeeling (Subba 1988).

The irony of this movement has also been the lack of understanding among the leadership of the Gorkhaland movement who have largely failed to realize their own cultural, ideological and racial heterogeneity in Darjeeling and thereby the chances of an emergence of ‘*negative solidarity*’ (Subba 1988). Now, with the creation of different ‘Development Boards’ for various existing ethnic groups in Darjeeling these negative solidarities have spilled over, which have affected the Gorkhaland movement. This phenomenon has influenced a change in the contemporary politics of Darjeeling as well. It is observed that taking the advantage of such internal divide and the lack of foresight of the leadership of the movement, the ruling party in the Government of West Bengal have started making inroads into the hill politics with the lure of ‘development’. Some of these ‘development’ measures of the state government included - declaration of providing land rights in Mirik (The Telegraph: May 10, 2017), opening up a campus of Presidency University at Dow Hills in Kalimpong (Business Standard: August 22, 2015), Rs 1500 crore investment proposal at ‘economic summit’ in Darjeeling (Business Standard: March 14, 2018) etc. among others. It is important to note here that the question of land-right has always been an important issue in most of the ethnic movement in the Northeast India as well where ‘identity and land’ appears to be a rallying point in these movements (Ray, Sarmah, & Chakraborty 2017). This is perhaps one of the important reason, apart from other developmental planks declared by the state government, that the Trinamool Congress [TMC] was able to capture the Mirik civic body in 2017 Hill election. The presumption gets more astute when we consider the following statement of a person from Mirik in a press briefing:

Whether it is in Gorkhaland or in Bengal, the land issue has to be solved. Since the land is not registered in our names, we get nothing. Every land transaction is unofficial. We cannot avail ourselves of house loans or even

agriculture loans from government. Even to get an electricity connection, one needs a no-objection certification from the tea garden.

(The Telegraph: May 10, 2017).

Although the quoted report only mentions about Mirik but there are a number of literature which suggests that land has a role to play in ethnic struggles in these areas. Inter-ethnic conflicts between the Nepalis and Lepcha-Bhutia communities over land possession were noticed in Kalimpong in 1876 even before the First Settlement in 1882 (Hunter 1974: 122; cited in Sarkar 2010). Evidently enough, it was also reported that the Lepchas were fast losing their lands to the Nepalis (Bell 1905; Philpot 1925; cited in Sarkar 2010: 96). Astonishingly, most of the ethnic Nepalis were the ones who were encouraged to become *mandals*¹⁴ in Kalimpong and were also favoured to possess land by the British, because of their familiarity with the work as well as their Khaskura speaking abilities. Although only the hill-men of the ethnic communities [Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali] were entitled to become *mandals*, eventually the Nepalis grabbed the opportunity bypassing the ethnic Lepchas and Bhutias (Sarkar 2010: 94). So, land remains embedded in the struggle for autonomy in the Hills of Darjeeling and identity as well. Taking advantage of the prevailing situation in the Hills, particularly with Gurung's waning 'popularity', the lure of 'development' and the ethnic factionalism over land; the ruling party in the state succeeded in 'eluding' the hill people under its fold and also to vote for it in the Civic Body Election of 2017. This is for the first time a plain-based party became victorious in any civic poll at the Hills of Darjeeling since the formation of Gorkha National Liberation Front [GNLF] in 1980s. The expectations of the hill people were thought to be reflected in the victory of TMC, which would usher in 'development'. But, events unfolded in a different manner as the Government of West Bengal declared Bengali as a subject to be taught compulsorily under the three-language formula throughout the state. Later on, after realizing the loopholes in this decision, this policy was rolled back but by then most of the damages was already hammered (The Indian Express May 27, 2017).

This issue, which the hill dwellers had termed as 'linguistic imperialism' by the state, gave Gurung a fresh chance to regain his waning popularity among the masses. It was a golden opportunity for Gurung, which he grabbed with both hands, to once again portray himself as the *messiah* of the hill people. However, this time the Government of West Bengal co-opted another GJM member, Benoy Tamang, a fellow activist of Gurung and the movement which was at its peak, ultimately started waning. This phenomenon reminds us of the fate of late Subhash Ghising, who similarly, if not identically, was forced out of Darjeeling as Bimal Gurung was ousted. In fact, Ghising was ousted by Gurung which created a vacuum in hill politics ultimately fulfilled by his co-optation and the formation of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration [GTA] in

¹⁴ Mandals were basically are responsible for revenue collection and this system existed in Bhutan. So, they possess a huge chunk of land and later became de facto landowners of this area. As Kalimpong was a part of Bhutan before it was merged with Darjeeling, it inherited the system of revenue collection as it is.

2011 by discarding the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council [DGHC] altogether. In similar lines, Gurung whose popularity was declining was outsmarted by Benoy Tamang *albeit* with state patronage to become the new Chairperson of the GTA Board of Administrators without any fresh mandate. Thus, Tamang became the new Gurung who became the new Ghising during his heydays; a cycle of leadership follows the other where appropriation and extermination with the tacit indulgence of the state continues unabatedly.

6. Conclusion

The above discussions clearly point out that the widely accepted form of autonomy, among the available ontologies of autonomy, in the Hills of Darjeeling is anchored in the creation of a separate state named Gorkhaland. This is also reflected in the secondary literatures as well as in the perceptions of the select groups of interviewees during our fieldwork. Other than having a state for them, there is another ontological assertion, although not hard-pressed, for a national level body – the *Gorkha National Satellite Council* - for the ‘Gorkhas’ living outside the proposed area of Gorkhaland. But, the ontological strategies to achieve the aspired form of autonomy i.e. Gorkhaland varies from discarding the Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship 1950 to making Darjeeling an UT as well as the reluctance of the hill-intelligentsia towards implementing the Constitutional provision of Sixth-Schedule to the drafting of *The West Bengal Reorganization Bill 2016*. However, scholars (Subba 1992; Samanta 2000; Sarkar 2013) have noted that there are other sections of people like Lepchas and Bhutias who have other ontological submissions on this autonomy question. This section of the people epistemologically feels lukewarm to subscribe to the term ‘Gorkha’ in their demand for a separate state. As the Lepchas’ claim that they are not ‘Gorkhas’, so anything in the name of Gorkha is merely against their ontology of autonomy, they believe. Lepchas’ ontological aspiration also reflects in their imagination to have a state, but epistemologically they want it in a different nomenclature, which will hardly accommodate the name Gorkha. Although there are pluralities in the ontological strategies to arrive at the aspired form of autonomy, there is a serious lack of epistemological unanimity amongst the people to bargain the same. This is one of the foremost paradoxes of this autonomy movement.

Secondly, the practice of autonomy in the Hills of Darjeeling puts a question mark over the fructification of this autonomy aspiration. Observers of this movement may notice a unique pattern where the state government is ultimately able to change the rhetoric of the movement once it gathers sufficient momentum. Whenever the popular aspiration of getting a full-fledged statehood reaches its zenith, as it happened during 1980s and 2000s, both Ghising and Gurung were co-opted through the statist version of ‘rational’ legal-jurisprudential form of autonomy by respectively signing the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Accord in 1988 and Gorkhaland Territorial Administration in 2011. In the contemporary times, as observed in case of Gurung, this statist version of autonomy thriving on ‘rationality’ dismantled the leadership through the formation of different ‘Development Boards’ by activating the ‘constituent self’ within the overarching ethnic mobilization in the Hills. This paved the way for the ruling TMC to capture the

Mirik local body at the cost of overall ethnic unity in the Hills. The final attempt was hammered out when Benoy Tamang, who replaced Gurung and became the new leader of GTA Board of Administrators in Darjeeling. As mentioned in the introduction regarding the roots of autonomy – ‘reason’ and ‘aspiration’ – the legal jurisprudential provisions based on ‘rationality’ again co-opted the situationality of the ‘aspirational’ root of this autonomy struggle. Whether it was during Ghising or Gurung, the results were the same. This shows that whenever the aspirational form of autonomy tries to make headway, it is the rational form of autonomy that pulls down the aspirational form of autonomy. Precisely, this is another paradox of autonomy in the Hills of Darjeeling.

Thirdly, within the autonomy movement in the Hills of Darjeeling there is now a tendency towards a ‘tribal’ turn amongst the ‘constituent self’ in the absence of any epistemological unanimity amongst the section of the hill-leadership to realize the popular aspiration on autonomy. Now, every section of the hill-people aspires to achieve the constitutionally guaranteed Scheduled Tribe status, which earlier was negated by the majority in the leadership since according to their understanding the majority in the hills are non-tribal; paradoxically this arrangement now retreats in the imaginations of the people on their ontologies of autonomy. The ‘constituent self’, particularly the Lepchas and Bhutias among others, are epistemologically at loggerheads with the ‘overarching self’. The ‘constituent self’, are now demanding the ST status, through the Constitutional provisions; even though at the cost of ‘overarching self’ in order to benefit the ‘individuated self’ within the ‘constituents’.

Fourthly, it is observed in the ethnic-movements throughout the Northeast India that control over land act as positive catalyst in fuelling such conflicts, so is the case in the Hills of Darjeeling. Surfeit of literature points to the role it plays in the conflict between Lepcha-Bhutias with Nepalis in Kalimpong. The declaration of the Government of West Bengal to provide land-patta to the landless in Mirik and the aspiration of the landless people to ask for the same paradoxically seems another tactics of the state. This appears to be the underlying paradox often submerged within the monistic ontological understanding associated with the movement in the Darjeeling Hills.

Although the notion of *perception* can be subsumed within the conceptual understanding of *aspiration*, the paper attempted to provide a nuanced epistemological understanding of this autonomy movement by analyzing it through *perception*.

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