

CHAPTER VIII
QUEST FOR IDENTITY: A MULTICULTURAL
PERSPECTIVE OF GORKHALAND AND KAMTAPUR
MOVEMENTS

Multiculturalism successfully highlighted that nation states, which were not culturally neutral but were ‘projects’ for the legitimization of dominant cultures, had in the name of national identity either suppressed distinctive minority cultures or devalued them. Modern societies as such are increasingly confronted with what Will Kymlicka phrased ‘challenges of Multiculturalism’. Minority groups in modern societies are demanding recognition of their identity as well as accommodation of their cultural differences. Accordingly the presence of diverse population in modern societies has necessitated the adoption of policies aimed at safeguarding minority interests. Multiculturalism believes that the mere presence of many plural cultures and communities were not enough; the state should ensure that different communities were treated as equals within the democratic polity. Multiculturalism as such seeks to establish equality between the minority and majority groups in a society.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN WEST BENGAL

To Kymlicka, a Multicultural state can be both multinational and polyethnic. It is Multicultural when there exists involuntary incorporation of different culture into a single state through invasion or colonisation where one cultural community is invaded and conquered by another, or is ceded from one imperial power to another. It can also come into existence voluntarily if different cultures mutually agree to form a federation for their mutual benefit. It is polyethnic when a country accepts immigrant families and individuals from cultures distinct from its own which results into cultural diversity. ‘Polyethnic’ state allows the immigrants to maintain their ethnic distinctions and attempts to bring about their institutional integration. In this context given the geo-political formation of West Bengal which is the result of both immigration as well as voluntary/involuntary incorporation of territory makes West Bengal both Multicultural and Polyethnic. Prior to 1778, the three subdivisions namely Darjeeling, Kurseong and Siliguri were part of Sikkim. Later in 1789, Nepal by way of conquest captured the hill subdivisions ruling the region till 1815. Nepal lost these hill districts to British in

the Anglo Nepal war resulting into the Treaty of Sougulee, 1815. Two years later the British through the Treaty of Titalia, 1817 handed over Darjeeling and Kurseong back to Sikkim. However from February 1835 to 1850 the three hill subdivisions of Darjeeling District were taken by British through a Deed of Grant with the erstwhile kingdom of Sikkim. The Treaty of Sinchula, 1865 between British India Government and Bhutan led to the amalgamation of Dooars and Kalimpong into the British India. Thus the three subdivisions of Darjeeling, Kurseong and Siliguri were amalgamated into British India by way of negotiation, war and Treaty from 1835 to 1865.¹

Historically Kamtapur was the capital of Kamata Kingdom in the history of Assam. It is said that Sandhya Rai established the Kingdom of Kamata in the 13th century comprising few portions of North Bengal and West Assam of present Northeast India. Kamata and Kamrup were treated as the same kingdom. Historian N N Acharyya has written a brief chapter on Kingdom of Kamata in his book 'A brief History of Assam'. He writes, "Shortly after the invasion of Kamrup by Tughril Khan Malik Yuzbeg, the capital of Kamrup was transferred by King Sandhya from 'Kamrup Nagar' (North Guwahati) to Kamatapur (Coochbehar) in the West. From that time onward, the Kingdom of Kamrup was known as 'Kamata' or Kamrup-Kamata. The rulers of Kamata were designated as Kamateshwara or Kameswara (Lord of Kamata). The Kingdom of Kamata became, however, much smaller in extent than ancient Kamrup. It included, Dhubri, Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Nalbari and Kamrup district of modern Assam, besides portions of Northern Bengal and Mymensingh (Bangladesh)..." The Kingdom of Kamata was ruled by different rulers of different dynasties from the period of mid 13th century to the end of the 15th century. During the period 1765-1783, the interference of the Bhutanese in the affairs of the Kamata Kingdom coupled with frequent attacks on the Kingdom became prominent. Kamata King Dharmendra Narayan in order to contain Bhutanese intrusion in Koch-Kamata Kingdom signed a treaty on April 5th, 1773 with East India Company to seek British assistance. Subsequently Koch-Kamata alias Cooch Behar (Koch Bihar) became a native state of the British India and continued so

¹ Why Gorkhaland, **Gorkha Janamukti Morcha, Darjeeling, 2009.**

till 1947. Post Independence by a document dated 28th August 1949 Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan of Koch Bihar ceded his territory to the Dominion of the Government of India. By an order under section 290A of Government of India Act of 1935, Koch Bihar was transferred and merged with the Province of West Bengal on 1st January 1950, since then Koch Bihar is being administered as a district of West Bengal much against the will of the people of Cooch Behar who were not in favour of its merger with West Bengal.²

Every modern state to Parekh is marked by cultural diversity with the presence of different cultural communities seeking preservation of their distinct culture. The state of West Bengal is also culturally diverse and of the four forms of cultural diversity as enumerated by Parekh the one emanating from the indigenous peoples or the ‘original nations’ is predominant in West Bengal. The ‘original nations’ as termed by Parekh seek to preserve their distinct ways of life which is integrally bound up with land which they lost to colonizers. Although they once enjoyed independence which they later lost to white colonizers, they do not generally seek to form themselves into independent states. Rather their primary aim is to recover or retain their land and be given the autonomy to lead their traditional ways of life within the framework of the existing states. This form of cultural diversity emanating from the indigenous peoples or the ‘original nations’ in West Bengal reflects the case of Koch Rajbangsi who lost their princely state of ‘Cooch Behar’ to the British colonisers and were later integrated into the state of West Bengal through Instrument of Accession. Koch Rajbangsi now seeks to recover or retain their land in the form of a separate state of Kamtapur. They do not demand secession from India but a separate state within the Indian Union distinct from West Bengal.

The Gorkhas demanding separation from West Bengal in the form of a separate state of Gorkhaland further adds to the dynamics of cultural diversity in West Bengal. The geographical region of the Darjeeling, Terai and the Dooars is the habitat and settlement of the Gorkhas and Rajbangsi even before the West Bengal

² See Arup Jyoti Das, **Kamatapur and the Koch Rajbanshi Imagination**, Montage Media Publication, Assam, India, 2009.

formed the present geo-political shape. With the incorporation of these geographical regions the ethnic groups too amalgamated into West Bengal. There is no similarity in thought, perception as well as socio-political behaviour between majoritarian community that is the Bengalis and the minority ethnic communities of Gorkhas and Rajbangsi who form a dominant settlement in the geographical areas of Darjeeling and Cooch Behar respectively in West Bengal. The Gorkhas and Rajbangsi profess and follow language, culture, tradition, social rites entirely different to the rest of West Bengal. According to Kymlicka indigenous people as national minorities resist state nation-building policies and instead fight for some form of territorial self-government. They offer justifications for doing so by appealing to their unjust incorporation into the state and the central importance of their land, language and culture to their identity and autonomy. Indigenous communities challenge state authority and seek autonomy to assert and restore the status that they once had as separate Nations within the polity and it is in this capacity that they seek these rights. One can thus say that though the historical background is not the sole criteria for the creation of a separate state, it of course forms an important factor in any such demands.

It is thus interesting to note that the present Kamtapur movement has emerged from the historical 'Kamata' or 'Koch Bihar' area of the northeast India and the area of the territory they are demanding for the proposed Kamtapur state is more or less as that of the old Kamata Kingdom, which was under the Koch dynasty. The Rajbangsi identify themselves with the princely state of Kamatapur or Kamata Kingdom. The memory of the Kamata kingdom works as the solo inspiration for the Koch Rajbangsi in Cooch Behar area who wish to restore the glory of old Kamata Kingdom and of the Rajbangsi. The merger of Cooch Behar state with the West Bengal and its transformation from a native state to a mere district of West Bengal thus plays a very important role in triggering the present Kamtapur Movement.³ Darjeeling, Terai and the Dooars, too never formed a part of Bengal before the advent of the British rule in India. Like Orissa, Bihar and Assam these formed a part of the Bengal Presidency for administrative convenience. Throughout the period of British colonialism these regions were

³ Ibid.

administered as Excluded Areas and Partially Excluded Areas by setting aside the rules, regulation and acts meant for Bengal. Post Independence Orissa, Bihar and Assam were disassociated with the Bengal Presidency to form separate states under the Indian Union. Darjeeling, Terai and the Dooars however continued to remain a part of Bengal, ignoring the popular aspiration of the people.⁴ Accordingly the leadership of the Gorkhaland Movement demand a separate state of Gorkhaland on historical grounds that Darjeeling and the adjoining areas were never a part of the West Bengal and are composed of ethnic groups with culture and language totally distinct from that of West Bengal.

INSTRUMENTALIST DIMENSION OF MULTICULTURALISM IN WEST BENGAL

Multiculturalism provides a romantic picture of communities as collectivities tied together by a sense of group belongings and non-contractual bonds of sharing. It however fails to incorporate the instrumentalist dimension of group identities which at times is designed to meet political and economic interests of the ethnic community. Ethnic communities are guided by survival needs and the desire for a share in the limited public resources. Claims to preserve a collective identity and public recognition by the ethnic minority are means to challenge the hegemony of the majority in politico-economic structure of the state. Thus the assertion of a cultural identity is closely intertwined with the demands for political and economic rights. Both are interdependent and so any attempt to understand a movement of cultural identity is futile if the politico-economic position of the ethnic community is not taken into account. Cultural deprivation cannot be separated from the issues of socio-economic inequalities in society. Discrimination is not merely a cultural phenomenon but also has a politico-economic dimension in the context of scarce resources. Therefore provision of cultural protection is incomplete in the wake of vast politico-economic disparities between the majority and minority cultures.

It is in the situation of politico-economic marginalisation of the minority ethnic community that the dispossessed leadership give a call for cultural preservation. It is those who are deprived of traditional affluent status by the politico-economic

⁴ Op.cit.no.1

changes that actively support the need to preserve culture. This is mainly so as the social, cultural and economic structures are very closely linked together and protecting one's culture implies building a shield against the outside influence and penetration. Cultural communities therefore demand rights to determine its own affairs and control its resources.⁵ Considering that the North Bengal region of West Bengal has remained underdeveloped and backward, the formation of a separate state appears as a panacea to the prevailing economic ills of the region to the ethnic minorities inhabiting the region. Even the long rule of the Left Front in West Bengal based on the ideology of socialism failed to overcome the backwardness of these regions. This under development has adversely affected the ethnic communities of the region which are numerically large in number and ethnically distinct from others. The ethnic leaders thus harp on the financial vulnerability of the region to mobilise these ethnic communities for the formation of separate state as a solution to the backwardness of the region.

Ethnic or identity politics has in the similar lines taken the form of autonomy movements in West Bengal. Regional imbalance in terms of development and sharing of political power have triggered ethnic demand for separate statehood of Gorkhaland in the hill district of Darjeeling and the concurrent demand for a separate state of Kamtapur comprising of the six northern districts in the plains of North Bengal. The economic neglect of the indigenous communities of the North Bengal region led local ethnic organisations like the GNLF, GJMM, the two factions of the Kamtapur People's Party (KPP) and the Greater Coochbehar People's Association (GCPA) to mobilise the people around the separate statehood agenda.⁶

According to the Rajbangsi ethnic community of West Bengal, Coochbehar in spite of a monarchical rule was a model in the whole of the Indian sub-continent in the first half of the twentieth century in terms of education, agro-based

⁵See Gurpreet Mahajan, **The Multicultural Path: Issues of Diversity and Discrimination in Democracy**, Sage Publications India, New Delhi, 2002.

⁶ See Ashutosh Kumar, **Rethinking State Politics in India: Regions Within Regions**, Routledge, Darjeeling, 2012, pp. 183.

industry and agriculture sector. However with the merger of Coochbehar with the state of West Bengal it is decaying and lagging behind most other districts of the southern Delta of West Bengal. The rural areas are in skeletal shapes of economic resources. Thousands of jobless people are migrating to other states in search of means of livelihood. This has resulted into mounting frustration owing to the dispossession of their earlier self-sufficient way of life leading to emotional outburst against the government and people in power by the Rajbangsi in West Bengal.

The Gorkhas in Darjeeling and Dooars too allege that the so called “development” undertaken by the Government of West in the Darjeeling Hills and Dooars has invariably taken on the character of colonial exploitation in the interest of Bengal. The resources accrued from the two major economic sources such as Tea, Tourism, Forests and Cinchona are transferred to Kolkata and not utilised to bring economic progress of Darjeeling and adjoining areas. Many Tea Gardens in the Dooars and Darjeeling lay closed or in a deplorable state with no efforts from the government to reopen and develop the same. Lack of infrastructure and proper planning has resulted into downfall of the Tourism sector in Darjeeling. The demand for a Hill University, Technical Institutions and institutes of advanced medical facilities continue to be ignored by the government. To GJMM the economic policies and programmes of the West Bengal Government favour and fulfil the larger interest of the dominant majority community. Most of the developmental projects are concentrated in western part of Bengal where the Bengalis are the dominant community whereas no major developmental projects have been undertaken in the hills. Such feeling of economic deprivation of the Gorkhas in Darjeeling and adjoining areas was articulated and aggregated by organisations like GNLF and GJMM in the form of autonomy movement for a separate state of Gorkhaland.⁷

IMMIGRANT MULTICULTURALISM IN WEST BENGAL AND IDENTITY POLITICS

The last twentieth century of Globalisation can be described as the ‘age of migration’. With large number of people moving across borders every country in

⁷ Op.cit.no.1

the world is now more polyethnic in its composition. This in turn ushered the 'age of nationalism' with national groups mobilizing and asserting their identity with the desire to preserve their distinct ethnic culture. A new 'politics of cultural difference' as such is now taking a centre stage in a globalised world clamoured with diverse ethnic communities.⁸ The process of immigration cannot be fully controlled and is certain to continue. Immigrant multiculturalism is thus the rising trend in the era of Globalisation. National minorities are now confronted with the issue of maintaining their own distinct culture amidst the influence exerted by alien cultures that come in with the immigrants. Apart from this, there lurks the threat of becoming a minority in their own land together with the compulsion to share the limited resources with the immigrants over which the indigenous population claim to have primary right. Under such circumstances the national minorities are found to come up with the approach adopted by the majority nations, i.e., they demand that they exercise control over the volume of immigration in order to ensure that the immigration is not so great as to override the culture of the national minority.⁹

Immigrant Multiculturalism has also generated challenges for the ethnic minorities in West Bengal as cross border migration from Bangladesh and Nepal continues to remain unchecked mired with the compulsions of electoral politics. The Rajbangsi in West Bengal although do not view cross border migration from Bangladesh as a threat to their distinct identity but do express discontent over the resultant economic setback as their land and jobs are passed away either to the Bangladeshis or Bengalis from South Bengal. Even the exchange of enclaves between Bangladesh and India was apprehended to cause large scale migration of people from Bangladesh to India which would then turn Rajbangsi into minorities in areas now dominated by them. The subsequent alienation from their ancestral land and the transformation of Rajbangsi from land owning peasants to wage labour class and the land acquisition by the immigrants has resulted into

⁸See, Chandran Kukathas, 'Are There Any Cultural Rights?' in Will Kymlicka (ed) **The Rights of Minority Cultures**, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009.

⁹ See Will Kymlicka, **Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship**, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001.

cornering of the Rajbangsi people in West Bengal. The Kamtapur movement is thus an ultimate outcome of the struggle for power and the associated privileges between the indigenous communities (particularly the Rajbangsi) on one hand and the Bengali migrants as well as Bangladeshi immigrants on the other. It exemplifies the efforts of an indigenous community in putting up a resistance to their gradual economic marginalisation and erosion of cultural and linguistic identity due to cross border immigration.¹⁰

In contrast, cross border migration from Nepalese from Nepal is viewed by the Gorkha leadership as a threat to the ethnic identity of the Gorkhas. An analogy whereby the difference in the culture and language of Bangladeshi of Bangladesh and the Bengalis in West Bengal is cited to explain the difference in the language and culture of the Nepalese of Nepal and Gorkhas in Darjeeling. To the Gorkhas such nuance in the culture and language of the Nepalese of Nepal and that of Gorkhas in Darjeeling largely goes amiss and results into the problem of mistaken identity for the Gorkhas in Darjeeling who are addressed as citizens of Nepal. Fear of increased competition for scarce economic resources like land, government jobs and Darjeeling being swayed by the population from Nepal turning the Gorkhas into minorities in their own land was expressed by the Gorkha leadership presently leading the Gorkhaland Movement. The Indo Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty, 1950 was also held responsible for the problem of mistaken identity of the Gorkhas in West Bengal and India who have settled here long before the signing of the Treaty. Though desire to revise or even abrogate the treaty was suggested yet the limitation of the GTA to do the same was pointed out as it is a treaty involving two nations and GTA being an interim organisation cannot suggest revision or abrogation of an international treaty.

¹⁰ Moumita Ghosh Bhattacharyya, *Rajbangshis: The Deprived People of North Bengal (in the State of West Bengal)*, **International Journal of South Asian Studies**, Volume 2 Number 2, Puducherry, July-December 2002.

VERNACULAR COMMUNITARIANISM AND ETHNIC MINORITIES
IN WEST BENGAL

A culturally diverse society although attempts to treat all its citizens equally, its ability to do so are necessarily limited. The language policy of the state in a culturally diverse society in particular exhibits a dominant language syndrome. This is because no language is culturally neutral. Thus the language displayed by the state puts the community associated with it in a dominant position. The Linguistic Reorganisation of the States seems to give impetus to what Beng Huat Chua calls “vernacular communitarianism” in India. Vernacular communitarianism refers to the feelings of obligations many people have, not so much to the modern nation-state, but rather to their own local ethnic, religious or linguistic community. According to Chua, these local obligations or loyalty lend support to a more communitarian form of multiculturalism with less emphasis on individual choice and freedom to exit as promoted in Western Liberal theory.¹¹

Apparently vernacular communitarianism has found ground in West Bengal with minority ethnic groups demanding recognition of their distinct language. Nepali language was recognized by the State Government of West Bengal in 1961 as an official language in the state. It was also recognised by the Sahitya Academy, New Delhi. In 1992 it was recognised in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution as one of the major National languages in the country.¹² In spite of all these the stalwarts of Gorkhaland Movement view the recognition of the Nepali language by the state as inadequate to preserve the cultural identity of the Gorkhas in West Bengal. To GJMM, it remains more on paper as Nepali was never promoted by the West Bengal government either in its education policies or job/service sector. The language and education policies of the West Bengal state favour the dominant culture of West Bengal as Nepali is not included as optional paper in West Bengal Civil Service examination though the language is accorded a place in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution. GJMM alleged that in the West Bengal Public Service Commission/ School Service Commission Nepali

¹¹ Will Kymlicka and Baogang He, edited **Multiculturalism in Asia**, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005.

¹² Why Not Gorkhaland, **Gorkha Janamukti Morcha, Darjeeling**, 2013.

language is not used and the working knowledge of Bengali language is a must in administrative services and governmental official work. Any non-Gorkha officer of West Bengal cadre, serving in Darjeeling District, passing the preliminary exam in Nepali language receives a special financial incentive while a Gorkha officer unless he or she passes the Bengali proficiency exam do not receive his or her due increment. Despite Nepali being the Official Language in the Hills, many important documents are still published in Bengali. Barring North Bengal University and Calcutta University, other Universities in Bengal have not introduced Nepali as a Language at the Under-Graduate or the Post-Graduate levels.¹³ Bengali language thus continues to remain dominant and Nepali although guaranteed in the Eighth Schedule is more of a secondary language in West Bengal.

While the Gorkhas with a more organised movement have been successful in registering a place for their language in the Eighth Schedule, the inclusion of the 'Kamtapuri' language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution still remains a desire unfulfilled of the Rajbangsi. The KPP failed to project the language issue with the necessary force of argument, although they insisted on recording their language as Kamtapuri in the census. In view of this, the state started the campaign that Kamtapuri was not a language but a dialect of the Bengali language and desisted people from recording it as their mother tongue. Several public meetings were held with linguistics from Kolkata to drive home their argument. This triggered off the emotion and anger of the Rajbangsi intellectuals who responded by holding meetings and seminars and denounced the state campaign against the Kamtapuri language as cultural colonialism. The Rajbangsi insisted that the Kamtapuri from earlier times is an autonomous language of Rajbangsi community living within the Kamata culture. The Rajbangsi is not the sub caste of Bengalis and Rajbangsi language not the sub-language of the Bengali as claimed by the dominant community in West

¹³ Op.cit.no.1

Bengal.¹⁴ According to them, Kamtapuri is a different language having particular traits of its own. They insist that the Rajbangsi language is the originator of the Sanskrit language for every word of the Rajbangsi has the pronunciation of ‘Om’ in it making it one of the oldest language in the civilization.¹⁵ Thus all other language including Bengali, Poliya and Desias originated from the Rajbangsi language. The Rajbangsi are inclined to the idea that the Bengali language has been imposed upon them, and the very existence of their culture is threatened by Bengali chauvinistic aggression. With the background of linguistic state formation in India, the Rajbangsi struggle to prove Kamtapuri as a separate language to strengthen their claim for a separate state Kamtapuri along linguistic lines.

IDENTITY POLITICS AND POLITICS OF MAJORITARIONISM IN WEST BENGAL

The number of lawmakers a state can send to the Indian Parliament depends on its population and a state’s bargaining power in a federal coalition government. Such electoral calculations determine how both the federal and state governments respond to popular demands. The asymmetry in population ensures that more federal and state funding flows to the more populated regions and the majority community. In the West Bengal state assembly, which has 294 legislators, Darjeeling and Coochbehar sends a mere three members respectively. Both the Gorkhas and Rajbangsi as an ethnic minority in West Bengal as such lack adequate political representation in the governmental machinery. The total strength of MPs and MLAs representing the Gorkhas and Rajbangsi is insufficient in relation to area and growing population since the inception of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. The desire and the hope of the Hill people to elect their representatives to Lok Sabha and increase the number of MLAs in the

¹⁴ Girindra Narayan Ray, *The Rajbangsi Identity Politics: The Postcolonial Passages*, in Debnath Sailen, edited **Social and Political Tensions in North Bengal (Since 1947)**, N.L. Publishers, Siliguri, West Bengal, 2007.

¹⁵ This is the opinion expressed by the General Secretary, The Greater Cooch Behar People’s Association, Dinhat, Cooch Behar during the interview undertaken as part of the field work conducted for the present research.

State Assembly were belied when the Delimitation Commission, 2002 ignored the demand for more representation in the State Assembly for Darjeeling Hills.¹⁶ The Gorkhas and the Rajbangsi thus claim to be subjected to “the tyranny of the majority” in West Bengal. They feel politically oppressed and marginalised in the wake of the Govt of West Bengal’s policy which to them reflects gross neglect, lack of concern, oppression and planned marginalization. This has caused a deep sense of alienation and frustration pushing the minority ethnic groups to assert their unique ethnic identity challenging the multicultural framework of West Bengal. The Gorkhas claim that they have been denied equal representation or treatment in public sphere like gazetted holidays, naming of public streets, buildings and so on. They demand that Bhanu Jayanti and Buddha Jayanti should be declared as a gazetted holiday instead of being Restricted Holiday. The West Bengal government does not provide any financial support or other related state resources to sustain the cultural institutions like architecture, music, art, literature of the Gorkhas. It has not undertaken any special consideration for the protection and maintenance of the cultural institutions of the Gorkhas in West Bengal. Rather the Gorkhas being minority suffer from cultural discrimination in West Bengal as exhibited in the language and cultural policies of the West Bengal government that favours majority culture over the minorities.

The Rajbangsi too have formed the opinion that the culture and the history of the Rajbangsi is neither recognised nor promoted by the West Bengal Government. The Rajbangsi heroes and history are not glorified in West Bengal in spite of the legendary history as Arnold Toynbee said that there are three heroes in history: Chilarai (Rajbangsi legend), Bonaparte and Napoleon.¹⁷ Even the Lal Kothi in Darjeeling was the residing place of the royals of the princely state of Cooch Behar which is now the GTA office. Moreover the Rajbangsi Academy established by West Bengal Government is a namesake organisation and does not promote the culture of the Rajbangsi. Even the Cooch Behar State Library has been renamed as North Bengal State Library to deny Cooch Behar recognition and relevance (see the image below). The Kamtapuri language, culture and

¹⁶ Op.cit.no. 1

¹⁷ Op.cit.no.15

practices although is totally different from Bengalis of West Bengal, the majority community deny the Rajbangsi to be different from Bengalis and consider it to be a part of the broader culture of the Bengalis. This is mainly because of the fear that if they glorify the history and culture of the Rajbangsi it would overshadow the history, culture and language of the Bengalis itself.



Figure 10 North Bengal State Library, Coochbehar

Thus identity politics challenging the multicultural framework of West Bengal escalated because of three reasons; **First**, the difference in terms of language and culture between the marginal indigenous ethnic groups and the dominant Bengali majoritarian community; **Second**, the economic marginalisation of the minority ethnic communities; **Third**, absence of an organised kind of opposition that can aggregate and articulate the interests and demands of these disparate ethnic groups owing to the political underrepresentation of the ethnic minorities in the formal legislative forum.

MAJORITY VERSUS MINORITY

Minorities in a culturally diverse society often face challenge from the majoritarian community who oppose unravelling of the cultural character of the state that reflects the majoritarian cultural biases giving advantage to the majority communities over the minorities. Accordingly any attempt by the minority

community to establish its claim in the majoritarian cultural structure is met with resistance by the majority community. This is visible even in the case of the Gorkhas and the Koch Rajbangsi as their demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland and Kamtapur respectively have not been received well by the majority community of Bengalis in West Bengal. The GJMM demand for a separate statehood in particular has been vehemently opposed by the organisations formed by the majoritarian community of Bengalis in West Bengal like Amra Bangali, Bangla and Bangla Bhasa Bhachao Committee (BOBBBC) and Janachetna in the plains or Terai region of Darjeeling district. These organisations are formed with the aim to prevent any further partition of West Bengal which following linguistic provincial fervour was bifurcated into the provinces of Bihar in 1911 and later Orissa in 1936.

These organisations view the demand for a separate Gorkhaland to be a ploy of the Gorkhas to partition Bengal so as to create 'Greater Nepal'. They view interim self government in Darjeeling in the form of autonomous councils like DGHC and GTA to be 'Gorkhaland in disguise' and therefore an effective partition of Bengal. They allege that any form of self government to Nepalese would lead to total disintegration of West Bengal. This is because it will encourage other minority communities to agitate for separate statehood like the one already by the Rajbangsi for a separate state of Kamtapur in West Bengal. Instead of a separate state of Gorkhaland it suggests that the present Darjeeling district may be divided into two districts: - Siliguri district comprising Siliguri sub-division plus eighteen *mouzas* unfairly handed over to DGHC in 2007 and, Darjeeling district comprising three hill sub-divisions, i.e. Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong. In addition to this there should be adequate bureaucratic supervision to prevent corrupt practices and misuse of funds in the region.

With regard to the identity of the Gorkha they are of the opinion that the term 'Gorkha' as used by the Nepalis in India is fictitious. Gorkhas are an illegal and artificially created community. It was during the British colonialism that the British army recruited Nepali youths from Gorkha district of Nepal to constitute the Gorkha regiment. The serving and retired soldiers of the Gorkha Regiment used to identify themselves as the Gorkhas. Subsequently, the Nepalese in the

Darjeeling hill areas started addressing themselves as Gorkhas collectively to establish themselves as the martial race with a distinct ethnic identity. The theory of 'Gorkha race' in India is thus falsely propagated by vested interest who wants to justify their claim for a separate state along ethnic line in order to partition Bengal. Moreover a separate Gorkha language as claimed by the Gorkhas in Darjeeling does not exist as the same Nepali language is spoken by the Gorkhas in Darjeeling and Nepalese of Nepal. In addition to this, they allege that Gorkhas are unfaithful mercenaries as they have been fighting for the British Government as well as for India and Nepal. Accordingly they have dubious allegiance and therefore cannot be trusted. They belong mainly to the Mongoloid race having linguistic, cultural and spiritual affinity to Tibet, China and Arakan hill tracts distinct from rest of India. Their aim is to destabilise and disintegrate India in connivance with China. Thus the claim of the Gorkhas as a distinct ethnic community in West Bengal is viewed by these organisations as endangering the sovereignty of India. This is more so given the geographical proximity of Darjeeling hill areas to many international borders that makes it a strategically important part of India (chicken neck). A separate state of Gorkhaland as such will jeopardise the security and integrity of the country as the already troubled North east India could then be cut off from the rest of the country. They claim that it would be suicidal for the unity and sovereignty of India to grant a separate state of Gorkhaland to Gorkhas bearing a fictitious cultural identity that does not exist.

They further claim that the Gorkhas are not the original inhabitants of Darjeeling. 'Darjeeling' originally comprised an area of 138 sq miles and had only 100 Lepcha inhabitants as the original 'sons of the soil'. Change in the demographic pattern of the Darjeeling hills occurred with the opening of the tea gardens in 1849 by the British colonisers. Post independence Clause VII of the Indo Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty, 1950 which gives reciprocal right to the citizens of India and Nepal to travel without restrictions, acquire property, take part in commerce and industry further resulted in the swamping of foreign Nepalese from Nepal into Darjeeling district. Subsequently the original inhabitants of the Dajeeling were vastly out-numbered by the Nepalese from across the border. As

per 2001 Census report there are only 13% Scheduled Tribes in the district of Darjeeling none being ethnic Nepalese. Lepchas, Bhutias, Santhals, Tudus, Murmurs, Limbus, etc, have their own distinct language and culture. Nepalese in India therefore have no right to make a separate statehood demand as majority are not Indian citizens.

Moreover, Darjeeling has been an integral part of undivided Bengal since the time when Darjeeling and Kurseong were ceded to British Government by the Chogyal (King) of Sikkim under a 'deed of grant' dated February 1, 1835 and Treaty of Sinchula (1865) between Bhutan and Britain resulting in the annexation of Kalimpong and its subsequent addition to the district of Darjeeling. Besides Nepalese of Darjeeling district are much better off in terms of per capita income, education, health, employment and standard of living. Government of West Bengal has granted massive development funds which have been misused by DGHC and GTA. Thus the claim of the Gorkhas that the hills of Darjeeling are neglected by the West Bengal is propaganda to misguide the people and gain sympathy for the Gorkhaland movement. They view the GJMM as a hill group terrorising the population with no elected mandate to represent the Nepalese. They condemned its non-violent Gandhian philosophy alleging that Madam Tamang was hacked to death in broad day light by GJMM activists. They accused GJMM members of indulging into illegal activities like changing the number plates on vehicles in Darjeeling and adjoining areas and forcing the eviction of the Bengalis from the hills. The majoritarian organisations thus upheld that it would not accept any form of self government to the minorities in West Bengal. To them if a population of Ten Lakhs Nepalese in Darjeeling are given the right to form self government it should then follow that the Bengali majority states can be carved out of Jharkhand, Bihar, Assam, and Meghalaya. They as such raise slogans of 'No Gorkhaland' and 'No Partition of Bengal'.

The majoritarian organisation like BOBBC as a reaction to the separate statehood demands in West Bengal makes the following demands on the West Bengal government:

- **Identifying and excluding foreign Nepalese** – Identification of non-Indian Nepalese as first step before holding any talks with the GJMM, removal of the

names of non-Indian Nepalese from voter lists and putting an immediate stop to all discussions with anti-India elements.

- **Visas for Nepalese** - Introduce Visas for the stays of non-Indian Nepalese in India, Abrogation of Clause VII of the Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1950 and ensure that the border between India and Nepal is sealed.
- **Judicial action against GJMM-** Judicial action against GJMM and its leadership for fomenting ethnic hatred and for its illegal acts like erasure of WB from vehicle registration number plates etc, arresting murderers of Madan Tamang and restoration of the rule of law in the hills using the help of Central Reserve Police Force if needed.
- **Setting up a commission of enquiry-** Government of India should urgently constitute a high power commission on the lines of States Re-organisation Commission for an in-depth study and investigation regarding not only of Gorkhaland issue but also on the demands of self government by other linguistic minorities.¹⁸

BOBBC together with Amra Bangali have staged demonstration in Siliguri against the tripartite talks on Gorkhaland held with Union as well as state authorities in Delhi. A call for 48 hour (16th January to 17th January, 2011) shutdown in Siliguri district of West Bengal was called by the BOBBC as a mark of protest against the frequent shutdowns called by GJMM for a separate state of Gorkhaland. It was an economic blockade the main motive of which was to stop the supply of ration from Siliguri to the hills to disenable GJMM to store the ration prior to declaring indefinite *bandh* in Darjeeling. A scuffle also broke out between the members of BOBBC and GJMM in the Dooars region during the *bandh* that disrupted the normal life of the region. Later section 144 was imposed in at least three *thana* areas of Dooars region to restore law and order in the region. Thus the majoritarian organisations protest any progressive step taken by the Government towards granting the self government rights to the minorities. These protests are mainly stronger in the areas dominated by the majoritarian communities such as Siliguri in West Bengal. BOBBC and other like organisations have clearly demonstrated their aversion to the minorities being

¹⁸ See Annexure No. VII

granted more power in the form of self government rights. To them, any expression or assertion by the minorities for their rights or identity is a mark of rebel against the state and a conspiracy to partition Bengal which they at any case would not accept or support.¹⁹ Accordingly the majority community is not encouraging either the Gorkhaland or the Kamtapur Movement in West Bengal. Instead BOBBC attempts to mobilise the majoritarian community to unite together and detest any attempts to territorially divide West Bengal.²⁰



Figure 11 Protest March by BOBBC against the holding of Tripartite Meeting on Gorkhaland Movement

GJMM however do not account the dominant community, i.e., Bengalis for the politico-economic deprivation of the Gorkhas in West Bengal. According to the members of the GJMM, it is not the masses but the state that is responsible for the under development and alienation of the Gorkhas. They insisted that it is not a personal battle between the majority community and the minority and that the majority community made no attempts to assimilate the culture of the Gorkhas with the majority culture. Rather it is the policies of the state that has assimilationist tendency as reflected in its education and language policies that

¹⁹ See www.banglabanchao.wordpress.com

²⁰ See Annexure No. VIII

favour majority culture more than that of the minorities. The GJMM members however find the response of the majority community, i.e., Bengalis in West Bengal to the Gorkhaland Movement to be antagonistic and not supportive.²¹

MULTICULTURALISM AND ISSUE OF INTERNAL MINORITIES

According to Leslie Green Minority groups are rarely homogeneous. They contain within itself other minorities. These minorities are ethnic, cultural, religious, or sexual minorities termed as 'internal minorities'. To Green, some of the attempts to safeguard the minorities from the oppression of the majority make it more likely that those minorities are able to oppress their own internal minorities. The rights guaranteed to the minorities to protect their interest end up violating not just the legitimate claims of the majority but also that of the internal minorities. Special rights to minority groups thus empower them to make decisions that persecute their own internal minorities. Leslie Green asserts that the internal minorities too are minorities. Consequently they should be granted not just individual rights but also collective rights as members of internal minority. If cultural membership can ground special rights of the minority groups; so can membership to sub-culture be a source of special rights to the internal minorities. Here he cites the example of English-speaking Quebecers who, in addition to the individual rights of freedom of association and expression also enjoy a collective right to the resources needed for their cultural and linguistic security.²²

Accordingly to Multiculturalism minority discrimination exists not only in the public domain but also within a community. To promote the ideal of non-discrimination Multiculturalism challenges the assumption that ethnic community is a homogeneous group. Rather it attempts to explore the differences and heterogeneity that exist within a group that do not necessarily speak in a single voice or consent on minority group issues. Minority discrimination therefore cannot be overcome by not only accommodating marginalized communities in the public domain but also marginalized groups within the community in a non-

²¹ This is the opinion expressed by the members of GJMM during the interview undertaken as part of the field work conducted for the present research.

²² See Leslie Green, 'Internal Minorities and their Rights', in Will Kymlicka (ed) **The Rights of Minority Cultures**, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009.

discriminatory way. Accommodation of ethnic minorities and the internal minorities within these ethnic minorities is necessary in the public as well as private domain to ensure the success of Multiculturalism.

Amidst the struggle between the majority and minority one cannot sideline the internal minorities who also form an important component of a multicultural state. The cultural diversity of the West Bengal as discussed earlier does not emanate only from the minorities like the Gorkhas or Rajbangsi. Rather it is also marked with the existence of many ethnic communities that form the internal minorities, i.e., minorities within minorities. While the hills of Darjeeling comprises within its manifold internal minorities like Lepcha and Marwari; the plains of Dooars and Terai region are domiciled by Adivasis or the Tribals like the Uraons, Mundas, Totos, Rabhas, Mechey and Santhals alongside the Gorkha and Koch Rajbangsi populace.

Akhil Bhartiya Adivasi Vikas Parishad and Gorkhaland Movement-

The GJMM demand for separate state of Gorkhaland comprising of Darjeeling, Dooars and Terai has received diverse reactions from the internal minorities. The inclusion of the Dooars and Terai within the territorial boundaries of the proposed Gorkhaland state has received opposition from the Akhil Bhartiya Adivasi Vikas Parishad (ABAVP) in the Dooars and Terai. They refute the argument of the GJMM that the adivasi share with Gorkhas cultural commonalities as well as problems of deprivation and discrimination as ethnic minority in West Bengal. The ABAVP strongly resists being a part of the proposed state of Gorkhaland. Rather it demands that they be granted the autonomy to preserve their distinct culture and bring about their development by bringing the Dooars and Terai under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. A 16-Point charter of demand was submitted to the West Bengal government by the ABAVP that organises strikes and dharna, hunger strikes, road blocks asserting their demands. Such counter mobilisation and opposition to the demands of the GJMM by the ABAVP is likely to put the Gorkhas and the Adivasis in conflict with each other which could dampen the spirit of Multiculturalism in West Bengal.

Lepchas and Gorkhaland Movement-

The Lepcha ethnic community in the hills of Darjeeling have clearly distanced itself from the Gorkhaland Movement. Adopting a passive approach to the ethno identity based demand of the Gorkhas in Darjeeling for a separate state of Gorkhaland, the Lepchas do not as such oppose the 'Gorkhaland Movement'. In fact when questioned about their view on Gorkhaland Movement they opined that every community/people have the right to self government and hence to demand a separate state. However they claimed that anthropologically it is the Lepcha community and not the Gorkhas who are the aboriginals of the Darjeeling and Sikkim. They further refute the claim that the Lepcha is a part of the Gorkha ethnic community thereby emphasizing that the Lepchas have their culture, tradition, language and practices distinct from the Gorkhas in Darjeeling. Rather they opined that the Gorkha identity is composed of diverse ethnic community (Limbu, Rai, Tamang) which is now endangered with the rising political consciousness of the ethnic communities about their identity as distinct from the umbrella identity of 'Gorkha'. They further rebuffed the prospects of organisation of separate statehood movement by Lepcha community itself. According to them the Lepchas who are the aboriginal of Darjeeling have stronger claim than the Gorkhas over Darjeeling and the adjoining areas. However as an economically backward and numerically a minuscule community the Lepchas are not in a position to demand a separate state. Its focus as such is only on the economic development which would guarantee political as well as cultural development of the Lepcha community.

According to the Lepchas, the Gorkhas no longer suffer from identity crisis as their identity has been established and recognised by the Indian Government through its language policies whereby Nepali has been incorporated in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and adopted as one of the official languages of Govt. of West Bengal. Issuing of the Indian passport to the Indian Gorkhas by the Indian Government is another way through which the identity of the Gorkhas as Indian nationals has been politically recognised and established. The granting of self government rights to the Gorkhas in the form of GTA further illustrates the fact that the Gorkhas are no longer treated as foreigners in West Bengal.

Moreover they opined that the onus lies with the ‘community’ itself for preserving and developing one’s culture and community.²³

They view the West Bengal government to be supportive and encouraging of the interests of its ethnic minorities. The granting of the GTA to the Gorkha ethnic minorities and Development Boards to the Lepchas as well as Tamangs in Darjeeling shows the co-operative and sympathetic approach of the West Bengal government to the needs of its ethnic minorities to preserve their culture. The Govt of West Bengal, according to them never tried to impose the majoritarian culture on its ethnic minorities. In contrast the GTA seems to be non co-operative and unresponsive to the needs and interests of the internal minorities in Darjeeling particularly the Lepcha community. It asserted that the GTA did not announce any package or policies/programmes for the preservation and development of the Lepcha community in Darjeeling. In fact GTA owing to its structural lacunae refused to co-operate with regard to the appointment of primary school teachers from the Lepcha community in Darjeeling on the grounds that the subject of education lies with the GTA and not the West Bengal government. Moreover GJMM during the on the going movement for Gorkhaland (2007-2008) imposed Nepali dress code on all the people showing intolerance to the ethnic distinctiveness of other ethnic minorities in Darjeeling.²⁴ A sense of doubt with regard to the status of Lepchas within the proposed state of Gorkhaland has therefore being raised by the Lepcha community in Darjeeling. Although they have no issue with regard to the separate statehood demands of the GJMM but deny giving away their own identity for the sake of a separate state of Gorkhaland. They emphasised “unity with identity” whereby they deny giving away one’s own ethnic identity in the name of unity and diversity. They emphasised the “cosmopolitan” society prevailing all over India and emphasised the preservation of all the ethnic communities for the peaceful co-existence.

²³ This is the opinion expressed by the Vice Chairman of the Lepcha Development Board in Kalimpong, West Bengal during the interview undertaken as part of the field work conducted for the present research.

²⁴ See Annexure no. VI



Figure 12 Dharna by the teachers of the Lepcha community in Darjeeling against scrapping of their recruitment by GTA

Marwaris and Gorkhaland Movement-

In contrast to the Adivasi and the Lepcha community in West Bengal, the Marwaris who are mainly the business community in Darjeeling appear to whole heartedly support the separate statehood demand of the Gorkhas. They view Gorkhaland Movement as an attempt to establish a distinct identity of the Indian Gorkhas from the Nepalese of Nepal and want to be recognised as Indian citizens. They also view the Gorkhaland Movement as a reaction to the politico-economic deprivation of the sons of the soil and to such problems as poor road connectivity between urban and rural areas, poor electrification of the region, poor water supply, no drinking water and unemployment in the region and underrepresentation of the Gorkhas in political institutions of West Bengal. However, they claim Gorkhaland Movement to be more a movement for identity than resources as the identity of the Indian Nepalis is often questioned in other states which would cease if a separate state of Gorkhaland is carved out of West Bengal. The separate state of 'Gorkhaland' would thus solve the identity crisis of Gorkhas as it would give them a clear identity. It will also promote better development of the region. This is because separate statehood would grant separate budget or more development budgets like Sikkim which would raise the

living standard of the locals increasing their purchasing capacity which would in turn bring about the development of the business class. They therefore support the Gorkhaland Movement as the interests of the Marwaris as the business community would be served better in Gorkhaland than West Bengal.

According to them, the Gorkhas being ethnic minorities do not suffer from cultural discrimination in West Bengal. The Gorkhas have not been denied equal representation or treatment in the public sphere like gazetted holidays, naming of public streets, buildings and so on. The West Bengal Government has thereby not taken attempts to promote cultural homogeneity in West Bengal. The language and education policies of the West Bengal state do not favour the dominant culture of West Bengal. The state of West Bengal as such does not identify with the majority culture of the Bengalis. They were however not certain that the political and territorial autonomy would protect minority cultures from assimilation and discrimination by the majority community as there is no influence of the dominant culture whatsoever. They however asserted that any form of Self Government rights may encourage more such statehood demands but will not encourage segregationist sentiments among the Gorkhas. This is because India is like a guardian and smaller states needs guardian to protect and to bring about its development.

They further explained that the West Bengal Government although has given the Gorkhas cultural rights recognising their language and giving them autonomy to maintain their distinct ethnic culture. It is the politico-economic policies and programme of the West Bengal Government that favour and fulfil the interest of the majority community as the percentage of distribution in hills is very poor compared to plains where Gorkhas are in minority. All the development projects are concentrated in plains. The West Bengal government fails to provide any financial support or other related state resources to the ethnic minorities for their socio-economic development. In addition to this the Gorkhas lack adequate political representation in the governmental machinery of West Bengal. The centralisation of political power exist in West Bengal with all important decisions made in political forums (legislature, executive and local panchayat bodies) where the dominant group forms a majority whereby the powers related

to decision making rest in Kolkata and the voice of the hills remains unheard. The Govt. of West Bengal has as a result failed to establish politico-economic equality between the majority and minority ethnic communities in West Bengal. The government has denied the Gorkhas separate statehood because it propagates only one theory that they do not want a separate state giving away the only hill station of West Bengal. There is no difference in the approaches of the Govt. of West Bengal led either by Left Front or TMC with regard to Gorkhaland Movement. Both were antagonistic to the demand for the separate state of Gorkhaland as the Govt. of West Bengal does not want Bengal to be divided. They find the response of the UPA government to Gorkhaland Movement not supportive but that of the BJP government to be supportive as seen during election campaign of Narendra Modi. They further view GJMM as a mass organisation that is successfully leading the Gorkhaland Movement in West Bengal as most of the people in Darjeeling are supporting GJMM. They further opined that the GJMM is not different from earlier organisations demanding a separate state of Gorkhaland as the aim and objective of all organisations are the same that is a separate state of 'Gorkhaland'. They regard GTA as a step towards a separate statehood of Gorkhaland.²⁵

GJMM view on Internal Minorities-

The members of the GJMM when quizzed about the question of the internal minorities in Darjeeling and the Dooars alleged that Gorkhas, Bhutias and the Lepchas have social, cultural and linguistic affinity with the tribals of the Dooars region, i.e., Santhals, Uraons, Mundas, Totos, Rabhas, Mechey, and Rajbangsi. Nepali is the lingua-franca and is spoken throughout the length and breadth of Dooars. There are remarkable affinities too in respect of their rites and rituals, for instance, the Santhals have no dowry system similar to that of the Gorkhas. Their family pattern and their gastronomic habits are also akin. Animism or Shamanism is the cult of the inhabitants of Dooars as of a great bulk of the Gorkha people.

²⁵ This is the opinion expressed by the President of the Chamber of Commerce, Kalimpong, West Bengal during the interview undertaken as part of the field work conducted for the present research.

All their festivals are related to the worship of nature. Cross-cultural interconnection and inter-racial marriages are also commonly observed in the region.²⁶

In addition to this, GJMM opined that the internal minorities are supportive of the Gorkhaland Movement and that any opposition on their part is actually the outcome of the divide and rule policy adopted by the West Bengal government to weaken the Gorkhaland Movement. They also insisted that the GTA is composed of members from diverse communities. However, the GTA which lacks a constitutional status and is functioning under the control of the Govt. of West Bengal do not have extensive powers to implement policies specifically meant for the internal minorities. They assured that once a separate state of Gorkhaland is formed provisions for the reservation of seats would be made to ensure representation of the internal minorities in the State Legislature. Besides, all ethnic communities residing within its territorial jurisdiction will be able to enjoy freedom and rights guaranteed to the minorities within the Indian Constitution. The separate state of Gorkhaland would thus work towards establishing the ideal of unity in diversity bringing the internal communities into the mainstream and inculcating a sense of belonging.

KPP and Internal Minorities-

To KPP the internal minorities in Cooch Behar such as Poliyas, Mech and Desias support the demand for separate state of Kamtapur. 'Kamtapur' according to KPP is to be state comprising diverse communities including Poliyas, Mech, Desias, Nepalis and not just the Rajbangsi which is why the name of the proposed state is 'Kamtapur' which not a community based term and is therefore speaks of its inclusive nature.

MULTICULTURALISM IN WEST BENGAL: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

According to Will Kymlicka states will not voluntarily accord self-governing powers to minorities that are perceived as potential allies for external enemies. Minorities in the Western European countries with no potential enemies and surrounded by allies enjoy significant levels of minority language rights, political

²⁶ Op.cit.no.3

representation and even territorial autonomy as the question of whether minorities would be loyal in the event of aggression by a neighbouring enemy country hardly arises. However, geopolitical insecurity remains an obstacle to concrete forms of minority rights in Asia. Most Asian countries perceive themselves surrounded by neighbouring enemies with territorial ambitions. In this context, minorities are seen as a potential weakling, prone to collaboration with a neighbouring enemy, particularly where they are linked by religion, ethnicity or political ideology to the neighbouring state. Examples of this in Asia are Muslims in Kashmir; ethnic Malays in Thailand; ethnic Chinese in Vietnam; ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia; ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka.²⁷

West Bengal is surrounded by four international borders viz Nepal in the west, Bhutan in the East, Bangladesh in the South and Tibet/China in the North.²⁸ The Siliguri corridor known as the “Chicken’s Neck” is a strategic gateway to the North East India which is vulnerable from the security point of view. The ‘corridor’ extends length wise 200 kilometres approximately with the width between 10 to 50 kilometres. The only road link to the North East i.e. NH-31 and 31 C and the Northeast railways runs through the Siliguri corridor connecting the mainland with the Northeastern region. Siliguri shares international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Some of the vital installations like Bagdogra Airport, Hasimara airfield and oil pipelines are also located in this strategic area. GJMM spearheading the Gorkhaland Movement assert that only a separate state of Gorkhaland can be a “buffer” in relation to the neighbouring states and prevent the North-East from being carved out as a client state.²⁹ However, West Bengal government is marked by a sense of geopolitical insecurity that desist it from granting right to self determination to the Gorkhas who are believed to have cultural and linguistic affinity with the Nepalese of Nepal. The separate statehood demand of Gorkhas in Darjeeling is perceived as a discreet strategy to ally with Nepal to form ‘Greater Nepal’ by the Govt. of West Bengal. It is viewed that Gorkhaland is a conspiracy of the Gorkhas to segregate from India and integrate with the neighbouring state of Nepal. Separate statehood is thus denied to the

²⁷Op.cit.no. 11

²⁸ Op.cit.no.8

²⁹ Op.cit.no.1

Gorkhas in Darjeeling. It is feared that granting of statehood would cost the political party in power the electoral support of the people in the plains who are completely averse to the idea of the division of Bengal.

The formation of a separate state comprising Darjeeling district and Dooars is further opposed by describing it to be a demand made by immigrants. The Gorkha settled in Darjeeling and adjoining areas are not considered to be the aboriginals of the region. Instead they are viewed to be immigrants from Nepal who voluntarily immigrated to Darjeeling for better economic prospects. Thus the identity of the Gorkhas as national minorities is mired in controversy and so their demand for a separate statehood is viewed as a process to disintegrate the Indian state. One cannot deny that historically the settlement of the Gorkhas in India was largely an outcome of organised migration brought about by the British administration involving voluntary immigration of the Gorkhas. However the question arises that does voluntary immigration and settlement make the Gorkhas in Darjeeling liable to assimilation into the majoritarian culture in West Bengal. According to Will Kymlicka the assumption that the voluntary immigration makes the immigrants liable to adopt the ways of the majority culture is deeply flawed as the act of immigration is a bilateral relationship between the host society and the immigrants involving the consent and commitments of both the parties. A state often encourages immigrants (or migrants from other parts of the country) to move into the historical territory of the national minority. Such large-scale settlement policies are often planned for the following reasons; **first**, to break open access to their territory's natural resources; **second**, immigration are used as a weapon against the national minority to disempowering them politically by turning them into a minority even within their own traditional territory; **third**, a host state in need of labour can also encourage immigration by offering lucrative incentives to the migrant recruits and **fourth**, immigration is many a time the only way available to the immigrants to escape persecution and preserve their ways of life such as the immigration of the Bangladeshi refugees to India.

The act of immigration is thus triggered by several factors. Whatever may be the cause one cannot deny that the immigration occurs with the complete knowledge

of the cultural differences and consensus of the state. The immigrants thus cannot be made to give away their cultural practices and thereby surrender their cultural identity as a condition to lead a life of honour and enjoy equality as the citizens of the host society. Multiculturalists claim that it is a breach of commitment undertaken by the state if the voluntary immigration entitles the state to impose on the immigrants the culture of the host society.³⁰ The voluntary immigration of the Gorkhas was a part of the British frontier policy who wanted to use the Gorkha mercenary from Nepal to expand the colonial empire to the Northeast region. The British thought that the Gorkhas through their valour could successfully contain the tribes of the NER enabling the British to penetrate into these regions and thereby establish its dominance over it. The British further encouraged immigration of labour force from Nepal offering lucrative incentives to break open the natural resources of the region that it had discovered such as Tea Gardens and Coal mines. The immigration of the Gorkhas to colonial India involved the consent of both the parties as the Gorkhas too in view of better economic prospects gave in to the colonial call for migration. Thus the claim that the Gorkhas being historically immigrants from Nepal do not have the rightful claim to maintain or preserve their distinct cultural identity is completely against the very spirit of Multiculturalism in West Bengal.

Moreover given that the settlement of the Gorkhas dates back long before the independence they cannot be rightly considered to be immigrants. In fact their identity has been fraught with confusion owing to the cross border migration of the Nepali nationals from Nepal post Indo Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty, 1950. It was a bilateral treaty involving the Governments of Nepal and India whereby the later failed to take into account its ethnic implications. The history of the Rajbangsi too can be traced to the 16th century Kamta Kingdom which continued to remain a princely state under the British colonialism. Like Darjeeling, the Cooch Behar province enjoyed the status of Chief Commissioners Province to be administered by the Chief Commissioner appointed by the British colonial government. Thus both Darjeeling and Cooch Behar were not brought

³⁰ See Parekh Bhikhu, **Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory**, Palgrave Macmillan, United Kingdom, 2006.

under the rules of general administration existing in the larger parts of British colonial India. Their demand for self-government can therefore be justified as the one by the national minorities with the desire to preserve and maintain their unique culture as distinct from the majoritarian community of West Bengal. Moreover, post Bangladesh liberation the Terai region of Darjeeling district as well as Cooch Behar was swamped by refugees from Bangladesh in an attempt to escape persecution. Immigration of the Bangladeshi nationals still continues in the region. This is perceived by the Rajbangsi as well as the Gorkhas to be a meticulous and systematised political move of the West Bengal government so as to weaken their claim for self government by gradually reducing them to a minority in their own traditional territory.

Under such circumstances one is confronted with the questions as to how to accommodate ethno cultural differences and avoid exclusion of the members of minority groups. According to Multiculturalism ethno cultural differences can be remedied by minority rights. Will Kymlicka as such propagate three group-specific rights namely self-government rights, poly ethnic rights and special representation rights so as to accommodate the demands of the minorities emanating in a culturally diverse society. Self-government rights in order to accommodate the demands for political autonomy or territorial jurisdiction by the Gorkhas in Darjeeling has been granted by the West Bengal state in the form of autonomous council like DGHC and GTA. The poly ethnic rights have also been granted together with the self-government rights as the Gorkhas enjoy the freedom to express and celebrate their culture and tradition. Both these rights however have been denied to Rajbangsi ethnic communities in Coochbehar as they are neither given any self government power nor their culture or language has been recognised as distinct from that of the majoritarian culture in West. Special representative rights in the form of proportional representation have been granted to both the Gorkhas as well as the Rajbangsi. It however falls short to provide adequate representation of these ethnic communities in the legislature and governmental agencies as ethnic minorities'. Accordingly reservation of seats can be an effective means to ensure greater share of the Gorkhas and the Rajbangsi in the political institutions of the state.

To conclude it is important to note that Kymlicka clearly underlines that the self government rights is meant for the national minorities while poly ethnic rights are

for the ethnic minorities. While Multiculturalism does not seek assimilation rather integration of the ethnic minorities in the host society their right to preserve and practice their culture is rightly promoted by the Kymlicka in the form of poly ethnic rights. What is denied to them is the self government rights on the grounds that they voluntarily chuck their culture and migrate to the host society and so is unethical on them to demand self government rights. Kymlicka distinguishes between national minorities and the ethnic minorities on the ground that the while the former are indigenous people occupying homelands the latter are immigrants that do not occupy homelands. However categorising minorities into indigenous peoples, national minorities, and immigrant groups on the lines of Western models of Multiculturalism and minority rights have limitation when applied to the case of ethnic minorities in West Bengal. For instance, the settlement of Gorkhas in India can raise question as to which category they fit in. This is because their settlement in India was partly a result of voluntary immigration during the British colonial rule and partly due to the realignment of boundaries upon conquest and resultant treaties whereby the Gorkha population involuntarily found themselves part of India.

Similar complexities may arise in the case of Rajbangsi as well. While the Rajbangsi clearly fit in the category of national minorities the self government right as suggested by Kymlicka involving federalism, require that the boundaries of the federal subunits be redrawn to ensure that the national minority forms a majority in one of the subunits. If this is effected this may empower Rajbangsi to make its own decisions without the fear of being outvoted by the majority. However redrawing of the boundaries of the federal subunits has the potential to unravel the territorial integrity of not just West Bengal but also Assam as the Rajbangsi form a majority not only in the Coochbehar district of West Bengal but also in the neighbouring districts of Assam. In spite of the limitations of the Western Models in the West Bengal context the absence of any other well articulated theories or models of the democratic management of diversity makes the intellectual vacuum to be filled by Western models. This although may result into possible narrowing of the conception of the issues of cultural diversity. There is therefore an urgent need to articulate conceptions of Multiculturalism that are more truly reflective of the circumstances in the region.