

**Pending Gram Panchayat Elections since 2005: Through the Lens of Rural Darjeeling**

Name: Dr Pema Lama  
Designation: Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science  
Name of College: New Alipore College, Calcutta University  
Address: Block-L, New Alipore, Kolkata – 700053  
Email Id: [pemalama737@gmail.com](mailto:pemalama737@gmail.com).

**ABSTRACT**

The rural people of Darjeeling Hills – a district in the state of West Bengal have endured the pressure of the political turbulence that puts them at the receiving end. Political developments in the hills have seen the inception of a single tier Panchayati Raj with only the Gram Panchayat functioning. The situation deteriorated when the Gram Panchayat was dissolved in 2005. Regardless several negotiations with the state and the central government the matter lies unsettled. The restoration of the Gram Panchayat with elections long overdue since 2005 can help to reconstruct the scenario of stagnating development.

**Keywords:** Darjeeling Hills, Development, Political turmoil, Overdue of Gram Panchayat elections.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Darjeeling, fondly called “Queen of the Hills” lies in the lap of the Himalayas is a district in the state of West Bengal”. Bounded on the north by Sikkim, Darjeeling is flanked by Bhutan on the East and Nepal on the west. The meandering hills with smiling tea gardens, firs, pines, flower, pristine spring, gives this place a picturesque setting. The Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA)<sup>1</sup> an autonomous self-governing body administers the region. GTA was formed in 2012 to replace Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) which was set up in 1988 and administered the Darjeeling hills for 23 years.

It dates at the time of the British rule in India when the people of Darjeeling district, refrained from all political activity during the freedom struggle. The local people however, were not happy being one of the many districts of the Bengal Presidency with the centre of government in Calcutta as it was known in that period. They wanted the British government to understand that they were different from the rest of the people of Bengal, geographically, historically, religiously, traditionally and linguistically. India became independent on August 15, 1947 but the legal status of Darjeeling remained undefined and undetermined. Thus, the demand to split from West Bengal for creation of a separate state over the years, has taken various political turns and twist. The moment too arrived when for the first time the struggle was incorporated as a mass movement. It was towards the end of the 1970’s when Subash Ghising<sup>2</sup> addressed the Gorkhas in India. He appealed to every Gorkha to come under one banner and demand a separate state known as ‘Gorkhaland’. It all happened on April 22, 1979 when Subash Ghising raised the demand for a separate state for the people of the Darjeeling Hills. Consequently, it gave birth to a political party - The Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF).

An intense movement began in Darjeeling demanding for a separate state. After a prolonged struggle and bloodshed the central government under the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi invited Subash Ghising and the West Bengal government to redress the genuine

grievances of the Gorkhas of the Darjeeling Hills. Meetings and discussions over a long period culminated into the first tripartite talks on January 25, 1988 followed by another on June 29, 1988 and the final one on July 25, 1988. These discussions finally lead to the signing of the Memorandum of Settlement on August 22, 1988 that lead to the establishment of an autonomous Hill Council, which would be known as DGHC. The creation of DGHC meant that the GNLFF would give up the demand for Gorkhaland. The council would work for the upliftment of the Gorkhas and other communities of people living in the Hill areas of Darjeeling district in the social, economic, cultural and education field.

## **1.1 Rural Development Scenario in Darjeeling**

### **1.1.1 GP Setting**

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the most important 'grass-roots units of self government' is today the backbone of the Indian villages. The institution promotes rural people's participation in development programmes and projects and acts as a bridge to bring the people closer to the government. The objective is to provide opportunity for people who are socially and economically marginalized to participate in the management of decentralized development process (Ravi and Raj, 2003).

In context of the study areas, its operation has deviated from what it should have been. Looking back the GNLFF had always played off the Panchayat system ever since DGHC was established in 1988. Subash Ghising often accounted the co-existence of DGHC and Panchayat as 'putting two feet into one shoe'. It was never in favour of a Panchayati Raj and was obvious that DGHC wanted to reign supreme over the rural belt also. However the state government managed to hold the first Panchayat poll (after the formation of the council) in 1995. This was only possible after the passing of two constitutional amendments which was based on Ghising's condition. This lead to the creation of a single- tier Panchayat system for the Hills. Theoretically a special provision was made for a two-tier but GNLFF only wanted the GPs to function. This was largely because the GNLFF feared that the powers of the

Panchayat Samiti might overlap with those enjoyed by DGHC. The single tier has not received a warm welcome at the grass-root level as interaction with several GP staff reveal that a three-tier would have been much transparent, efficient for socio-economic development than what it is today.

### **1.1.2 Dissolution of GP**

Elections to DGHC and Panchayat were to be held in 2005. However, before the elections could be held Darjeeling Hills witnessed some major political developments where Subash Ghising the then Chairman of DGHC demanded an alternative to DGHC and hinted at Sixth Schedule<sup>3</sup> status for the new body. The priority he said was to get a better alternative to DGHC and for greater autonomy. Thus, began the political battle with the state government. The Sixth Schedule was seen as Ghising's stratagem to further prolong the overdue DGHC election in the region. Ultimately the state government in discussion with the then Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh and the then Union Home Minister Shivraj Patel introduced a bill (March 14, 2005) to amend the DGHC Act to set up an interim government and create the post of a caretaker-administrator till the next polls (within six months). On December 06, 2005 a tripartite agreement between Ghising, the central and state government was signed to include DGHC in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

On March 26, 2005 Subash Ghising was appointed as caretaker administrator of DGHC. The unfolding of such events culminated in the withholding of the third GP elections. Thus, the GP body was dissolved with no further expectation of elections. This was purely a political crisis. The GPs stagnated and elections were likely to depend following the central and state government's ability to work out an alternative to DGHC as well as after elections to the council were conducted. Even during normal times the flow of fund was never enough and observation shows a mere trickle down of fund after the dissolution of the GP and the legacy continues till at the time of writing the paper. Thus, elections to the GP are long overdue since 2005 (the last Panchayat election was held in 2000). In the existing scenario and in

the absence of the elected body that continued in office till 2008 and thereafter resigned is now presently administered by the government appointed staff. Such ‘unconstitutional’ and ‘undemocratic’ demeanor and selfish political interest has affected development in the Hills. Therefore the GP which is supposed to act as the medium to ensure development of the individuals and the community has stagnated. It has also affected the active contribution and involvement of the local rural people, both male and female.

## **2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

- i. To study the political unrest in the Darjeeling Hills that has left the GP defunct since 2005.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study relied heavily on the local field data and covered three GPs. Jhepi, Nayanore and Chongtong from Darjeeling Pulbazar (DP) Block and Samtar, Upper Ecchey and Seokbir from Kalimpong 1 Block. 8 percent of the population based on Purposive Sampling was selected to collect factual information and data. Interactive interviews with questionnaire formed an important part of the research technique to ensure the maximum response. Visits and interviews with the officials and staff of GP and block also formed part of the method. The secondary source included government reports and orders, official reports on rural development programmes and booklets on people’s entitlement under government schemes.

## **4. FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Rural Connectivity: Is it taking place?**

As the GP shows no sign of revival in the hills despite several political negotiations, it is all but natural to state that rural development has receded to a snail’s pace with rural people as the sufferers. They have managed to live their lives in the face of underdevelopment and

scarcity. Despite the difficulties they face the 'rural voice' has not lost hope and make effort to participate and cooperate with the GP whom they look upon as the guardian of the rural poor. "They need to be empowered - as the stock phrase goes – to realize their self-worth, and to have their opinions heard and factored into the development dialogue" (Quebral,2006). Despite the obstacles the GP is enduring, the local rural people have a desire to get rid of deprivation. Interactions with the people reveal their hopes for the comeback of the GP at the same time they nurture the willingness to participate in the various programmes to improve the quality of life.

Community meetings like the gram sabha, supposed to be the most viable channel for peoples participation are hard to come by since 2005. Despite the prevailing situation the people display their eagerness to participate whenever it is held. They are willing to cooperate with authorities in any kind of programme, even if it means only a step towards development. As 48 years old farmer<sup>4</sup> of Jhepi GP remarks, "We always look forward for the gram sabha but are seldom held. Even if held, submission of application has become mere formality." Most of the people interviewed agree and are aware that participation in such meetings provides opportunity to openly interact, share their views, their problems and place their demands.

In the absence of the elected GP body the administration is looked after by the government appointed staff. But in the study areas there is irregularity in their attendance as most of them do not stay in the office and usually have 'fixed' dates and days to keep the office open and the situation is worse in far flung areas. Local villagers lament that they cannot get their work done as the staffs are either missing or the office is closed. This is waste of time as they have to leave their precious work and even walk for more than a mile to get to the office. This hampers regular communication and limits participation. However there are GPs that seem to have taken their work seriously, despite the difficult state of

affairs. They have built a ‘sound rapport’ with the local people which is confirmed by the local people themselves.

#### **4. 2 Pivotal Role of Ward Members**

The elected members of the GP act as an important agent taking information to the people at the grassroots level. Interactions with the people reveal that they are more comfortable with the members who are regarded as ‘their’ representatives to the government, those who bring the issues of *bikash* (development) to them. But the observation needs to be qualified. At the other end, the loss of power and legal status of the ward members has left the people with no choice but to abandon their dependency.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

Rural people are central in development programmes to improve their socio-economic condition. It is a means to place human resources high in relation to rural development process (Brown *et al*, 2013). Regardless of the fact that Darjeeling Hills is in dire need of development the ‘ordinary’ people of the study areas portray a positive attitude. It is not a scenario of blanket despair as the local people are prepared to cooperate with the government. It is a question of – when will the state government and the political leaders of the hills sit to negotiate for elections to the GP long overdue since 2005.

Thus the incessant political struggles with the state of West Bengal on the demand of statehood, the dissolution of the GPs has put the Hill people, particularly the rural poor, at the receiving end. Thus, the revival of the GP can help to reverse the scenario and can go a long way in encouraging and improving community participation in the implementation of local development initiatives. Another important aspect to ponder upon is a situation where the local rural people have not been able to exercise their democratic rights for the last nineteen years. What could be worse than this?

**EndNotes**

1. The Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) formed in 1988 did not fulfill its goal of forming a new state. It led to the rise of another party Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) in 2007 that launched a second agitation for the state of Gorkhaland. After three years of agitation, GJM reached an agreement with the West Bengal government for the creation of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) on August 02 2012. GTA is an autonomous self-governing body to administer the region so that the socio-economic, infrastructural, educational, cultural and linguistic development is expedited and the ethnic identity of Gorkhas established, thereby achieving all-round development of the people of the region.
2. Subash Ghising founded the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) in 1980 with a mission for statehood demand from West Bengal.
3. The Sixth Schedule included in Article 244 (2) and 275 (1) of the Indian Constitution provides for administration in the tribal areas of the state of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. It gives small tribal communities, disadvantaged by lack of opportunities, extensive powers through the system of autonomous district councils and protect their traditions as well as their land.
4. Dhurva Tamang, Personal Communication, April 12, 2017.



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