

Gorkhaland

LONGINGS FOR ANOTHER NEW INDIAN STATE BUBBLE UP AFTER A COMMUNITY LEADER IS MURDERED IN THE TEA REGION OF WEST BENGAL

A Bitter Darjeeling Boils Over

BY ADAM JADHAV

FROM THE RAMAN BORDER CHECKPOINT, once you enter West Bengal from Sikkim, it's easy to tell how much spine-rattling road is left before Darjeeling. The closer the jeep gets to the romanticised hill station, the more you'll see the green and white and yellow paintings on guard rails, embankments, sign posts, shop doors, homes and everything in between.

All the paint requests, demands, cries out for one thing: a new Indian state, Gorkhaland.

The color scheme belongs to the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, the ruling political party and latest spearhead of demands of statehood for the Gorkha community of Nepali speaking Indians mostly in the Darjeeling area.

For more than two years, the GJM, as many know it, has ruled the hills, controlling the Gorkha Hill Council, the mostly autonomous body formed more than two decades ago to govern the Darjeeling region.

The GJM has also been leading the 'agitation' of regional strikes and political tirades to force the issue. It's the Darjeeling area's voice in ongoing talks, progressing slowly, with the West Bengal and central governments about a permanent solution.

But on a Friday in May, a flash of anger burned white hot through Darjeeling; locals erupted at the GJM, shaking fists, tearing posters and excoriating the GJM's president Bimal Gurung.

A challenger to GJM popularity, the leader of a smaller separatist organisation, Madan Tamang, had been murdered—hacked by thugs armed with traditional Gorkha knives—in broad daylight.

Shops and roads closed for the weekend. Headlines screamed about tension, about a region on edge. Gurung,

as political boss, was in the crosshairs. The hills of tea were about to boil.

A week later, a few hundred family members, friends, and political hangers-on gathered at the site of Tamang's murder. Condolences abounded. Speeches railed against the GJM as well as the West Bengal government.

Afterward, I sat for tea in the solarium at the assassinated man's colonial-style house. In a wicker chair across from me, his widow Bharati Tamang explained why she has now taken the helm of her husband's Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League.

The ABGL has been a steady, if small, thorn in the side of the GJM. For example, Tamang had called for a probe into GJM assets, alleging corruption via the contracts the hill council awards. ABGL had also formed a multi-party alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party as well as the Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxists, for which Tamang drew criticism.

Still, under the rule of the GJM and parties past, the ABGL has remained a minor player. Tamang insisted that was going to change.

"We are the party of democracy," Tamang's widow said. "Our opponents, the GJM and Bimal Gurung, they cannot claim that. He [Bimal Gurung] does not have the true support of the people. People say they support him because they have to say they support him. He coerces them. He controls the money of the local government."

Tamang also reminisced about her husband, never an elected politician, but known to powerful people in Darjeeling. He was educated, wealthy and generally respected as an entrepreneur and tea plantation owner. Some political observers say the thousands that attended his funeral procession, even though he was not a ruler in Darjeeling politics, were a testament to his base of support.

A murder investigation was ongoing in early June, with cell phone numbers and a YouTube clip grabbing headlines. Various sides have also demanded that the central government step in.

Bharati Tamang said she believes the killers are likely Bimal Gurung acolytes, even if they weren't on direct orders. Further, she accused the state government of complicity on the theory that instability in the region would hamper the Gorkhaland movement.

The outpouring of anger toward Bimal Gurung and the GJM seems unexpected. Security forces descended quickly on the region. In the streets of Darjeeling, at the end of May, paramilitary troops in camouflage were conspicuous.

But Gurung didn't abscond. He paraded a convoy of vehicles through the region in dramatic fashion. The day after I met with Bharati Tamang, tens of thousands of people—supporters claimed hundreds of thousands—descended on Darjeeling to attend a political rally; roads were choked with people, traffic halted and shop owners mostly drew their shutters.

Hundreds of green, white and yellow flags fluttered in what felt like a pep rally before the big match. Speaker after speaker shouted at the crowd, in those grating, too-shrill tones of Indian politics. Gurung spoke for almost 90 min-



Across Darjeeling, most storefronts are painted with the region's political demands; a new state of Gorkhaland.

utes, even though nearly half the crowd had left by the time he finished.

All the while, the GJM's youth corps, dressed in maroon berets and olive green military sweaters with epaulets, stood guard attempting to look fierce.

Before the rally, the GJM had been negotiating for an interim state arrangement for Gorkhaland—to include the Darjeeling hills and some Adivasi (tribal) areas where Gorkha people also live. A final Gorkhaland would then be discussed.

But the 'interim' uncertainty with the West Bengal government drew criticism from Madan Tamang and others. Bharati Tamang, when I met her, repeatedly accused the GJM of capitulating to a state within the state, still ultimately responsible to Calcutta. Tribals were also resistant to be included in the calculations.

So it was a bit of political turnabout when Gurung shouted from the dais at his rally that the GJM would now reject any interim setup and work to establish a renamed Gorkha Adivasi Pradesh state. The announcement seemed calculated to gain wider support and stand more strongly against the West Bengal government.

After the rally, Gurung had no time for anything other than a handshake and other senior members of the GJM were also unavailable. But supporters said the GJM enjoyed wide regional support, whatever opposition parties had to say.

"We (the GJM) are the leaders of this movement," said Kumar Gurung, uncle and occasional advisor to Bimal Gurung. "(The opposition) doesn't have sufficient power, they don't have enough representation or membership."

Separatist demands date to the early 1900s, when hill leaders advocated their own area based on a culture and

language more connected to Nepal and Sikkim than the Bengali people further south.

In past decades, the sometimes-violent Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) led the Gorkhaland movement. Those struggles forced the 1988 creation of the autonomous hill council as something of a truce.

But the GNLF reignited the push for a separate Gorkhaland, and by the late 2000s, the GJM had risen to critical mass. Tamang's ABGL remained in the background.

Gorkhaland supporters said they have precedent, in cases such as Jharkhand, the state that in 2000 was carved out of southern Bihar. More recently, in December, the central government agreed to steps to create Telangana out of Andhra Pradesh.

Darjeeling residents invariably threw their allegiance to the idea of Gorkhaland. If they were willing to talk politics with a foreign journalist, most professed allegiance to the GJM.

"This is about our identity, our culture and creating a place for us, the Gorkha people," said PB Subba, a retired local agriculture official. "The GJM is the best hope for that."

But the community has occasionally shown signs of frustration with the GJM's agitation. In May, the local communist party told some of its members to turn up for work at the tea plantations, in defiance of a GJM-called strike. And in Darjeeling, when pestered enough, some residents let loose their frustrations, if only for a moment.

"We want peace," said Rajiv Mitra, owner of a Darjeeling exporter, the Tea Emporium, and a fourth-generation hill resident who considers himself Gorkha. "We are sick and tired of these strikes, to be honest. We want a normal life." ■