

Ethno- Politics in Contested Urban Spaces: Analysing the Gorkhaland and Koch-Rajbanshi Sovereignty Movements of Northern West Bengal in India

CHANDREYI SENGUPTA¹, MRINMOYEE NASKAR² AND DEBAJIT DATTA^{*3}

^{1&3}Department of Geography, Jadavpur University, Kolkata (W.B.) India

²Department of Geography, Baruiipur College, Baruiipur, South 24 Parganas (W.B.) India

ABSTRACT

The north-eastern parts of India have been severely afflicted by recurrent ethno-political conflicts since the country gained independence in 1947. The northern parts of West Bengal are mostly plagued by two distinct ethno-political movements, namely, the Gorkhaland Movement and the Kamatapur or Greater Cooch Behar Movement. Although both conflicts originated primarily due to socio-economic marginalization of ethnic groups by the hegemonic sections of society, considerable variations were observed in their spatio-temporal distributive patterns as well as their implications upon the local inhabitants, economy and urban governance. Analytical in-depth reviews of relevant literatures and personal field surveys revealed that urban centres were used as platforms for expressing aggression by both the Gorkha and Koch-Rajbanshi communities although the former was able to leave more socio-political clouts on urban landscapes and affect the sensitivities of the general populace due to its longer lasting, more violent and widespread effects.

Key Words : Ethno-politics, Gorkhaland, Koch-Rajbanshi, Urban governance, Urban social conflict

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation and consequent changes of political economy in the post-Second World War era have stimulated the synchronized functioning of two apparently incongruous phenomena in the contemporary world. While the frequencies and intensities of sovereignty movements have increased noticeably in several parts of the world since the 1950s, nation-states themselves have been considerably debilitated. Lack of operational checks on the unhindered flow of foreign exchange, funds and information in free economies has restricted the scope of nation-states in controlling economic undertakings (Kurien, 200; Sevänen, 2000). Accordingly, accentuated economic disparities especially in multi-cultural societies, consolidation of local units at the cost of nation-states and enhanced ethnic awareness among marginal groups owing to modernization have engendered sovereignty

movements and ethno-political conflicts worldwide (Mann, 1997). Urban places as ethnic melting pots and politically unstable states have usually been the most common centres of such conflicts (Kymlicka, 1995).

These conflicts have generally been helmed by marginal ethnic groups subjected to prolonged socio-economic deprivation as well as cultural subjugation by hegemonic sections of the regional society. Usually, such communities are based primarily in rural areas. As a result, rural centres have traditionally acted as principal sites of such unrests. However, the importance of urban centres in the context of ethno-political struggles should not be neglected. Towns and cities have often been used by ethnic groups as podiums for articulation of demands as urban areas are more likely to elicit stronger media attention than their rural counterparts owing to elevated social importance and better connectivity (Bollens, 2000; Burkholder, 2006). Impact assessments of such conflicts

How to cite this Article: Sengupta, Chandreyi, Naskar, Mrinmoyee and Datta, Debajit (2019). Ethno- Politics in Contested Urban Spaces: Analysing the Gorkhaland and Koch-Rajbanshi Sovereignty Movements of Northern West Bengal in India. *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.*, **6** (1&2) : 28-39.

also indicate that although rural societies have been more rigorously affected in the long run in general, larger numbers of people have been mobilised and adversely impacted within a single urban centre at a particular point of time (Sengupta and Datta, 2016). Over the past few years, several urban centres in various parts of the world, such as Belfast in Northern Ireland, Jerusalem in Israel, London in the United Kingdom and Durban in South Africa, have faced the wrath of ethnic groups that demand social as well as territorial privileges (Bollens, 2000; Flanagan, 2015; Sengupta and Datta, 2016).

India, being a multi-ethnic nation, has been repeatedly scathed by numerous violent ethno-political movements since its independence from the colonial rule in 1947. Similar trends have also been observed in several other countries with pluralistic societies that have been emancipated from the shackles of colonialism or have disintegrated from larger states to form new immature sovereign democracies (Ellingsen, 2000). Darjiling, Kalimpong, Siliguri, Koch Bihar, Jalpaiguri, Diphu, Kokrajhar, Imphal, Shillong, Hisar, and Muzaffarnagar are some of the Indian towns and cities that have been severely affected by violent ethno-political conflicts in recent years (Merchant, 2015; Sengupta and Datta, 2016).

For the purpose of the present paper, the ethno-political situation in the northern part of West Bengal, which is a smaller unit within the entire north-eastern part of India, had been focussed upon, with special emphasis on the implications upon the urban centres of the region. Northern West Bengal has been beset by primarily two ethnic movements since the last three decades- The 'Gorkhaland Movement' in Darjiling, Jalpaiguri and some parts of Alipurduar and the 'Kamatapur' or the 'Greater Cooch Behar Movement' in the entire region excluding the hills. The objectives of the present paper were to identify the spatio-temporal distributive patterns of ethnic conflicts in the urban parts of northern West Bengal and to assess the impacts of such conflicts on local inhabitants, economies and governances of the urban centres within the study area. The pertinent research questions that had been framed for this purpose were, (1) did the natures and intensities of ethnic conflicts vary in the rural and urban parts of the study area?; (2) how were the ethnic conflicts distributed throughout the urban parts of the study area with respect to both space and time?; (3) what were the impacts of the ethnic conflicts on the society, economy and administration in the urban parts of the study area?

Study area :

The northern parts of West Bengal comprising the districts of Kalimpong, Darjiling, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Koch Bihar are among the strategically most important parts of India. The rest of north-eastern India is linked to the country only by a thin strip of land at Siliguri in northern West Bengal, commonly known as the 'chicken neck' due to its shape (Singh and Singh, 2010). Therefore, any turmoil in Siliguri has the potentiality to disconnect the entire north-east from the rest of India. Incidentally, such instances are exceedingly common in the city as northern West Bengal is beset by primarily two notable ethno-political movements, both of which have affected Siliguri and other important urban centres of the region on several occasions during the last three decades. Consequently, massive economic losses and disruption of daily lives have been common in not only these affected urban centres but throughout north-eastern India. These movements are being led by the Nepalese community of Darjiling, also known as the Gorkha community and the KR community, respectively (Mandal, 2015; Pradhan, 2017). Both ethnic groups are engaged in separate statehood demands although the movement for a separate Gorkhaland is comparatively more violent and urban-oriented than the KR sovereignty movement.

METHODOLOGY

The methods that had been used for the purpose of this study included reconstruction of the ethno-political history of northern West Bengal, identification and mapping of the spatio-temporal distributive patterns of ethno-political conflicts throughout the urban parts of the study area, and assessment of the impacts of such conflicts on the urban centres within the study area. Historical documents, books, government reports and research papers had been reviewed thoroughly to obtain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the genesis and evolution of the principal ethno-political conflicts prevailing in northern West Bengal. Personal interviews with resource persons revealed important historical facts regarding these conflicts which had been inflicting destruction and disorder in the region over the last thirty years. The spatial pattern and temporal sequence of violent events pertaining to the conflicts in the study area were identified through newspaper reports, websites and interactions with members of the local communities. Furthermore, the spatial patterns of violence in urban areas were mapped with the help of ArcGIS

v10.3 software. The impacts of the major ethno-political conflicts on urban inhabitants, economies and governances were identified through in-depth reviews of published research papers as well as newspaper reports and personal interviews with local respondents. An analytical discourse on the implications had been presented in the present research paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Genesis and progression of ethno-politics in northern West Bengal :

Severe socio-economic and political marginalization of the Gorkha and KR communities, predominantly by the hegemonic Hindu Bengali community as well as local administration, engendered the Gorkhaland and KR sovereignty movements in northern West Bengal (Das, 2009; Singh, 2017). The evolution of these ethno-political conflicts since their inception has been traced in a sequential format in the present paper.

The Gorkhaland Movement :

The quest for a separate administrative unit for the Gorkha community of Darjiling district was initiated back in 1907. However, organized separatist demands began in the late 1980s. This event may be considered as the first important landmark in the ethno-political scenario of northern West Bengal. Gorkhaland refers to the proposed new state and encompasses the present Darjiling and Kalimpong districts as well as parts of the Himalayan foothills or the Dooars.

An inquiry into the origin of the movement must begin with the introduction of tea plantations in Darjiling and the adjoining Dooars region by the British during the colonial rule in India. Consequently, a considerable section of Nepalese population immigrated into these parts to work as labourers and porters in tea plantations. Many among these immigrants were also conscripted as soldiers by British administrators whereby the 'Gorkha regiment' came into existence (Banerjee and Stöber, 2013).

Independence of India in 1947 was followed by its partition which induced mass immigration of a substantial section of Bengali Hindu people into northern West Bengal from the erstwhile East Pakistan (Haque, 1995). Large numbers of these immigrants settled in Darjiling as well as parts of the Dooars and procured considerable portions of land which became a major cause of concern for the Nepalese population. Darjiling had also begun to grow as an important hill resort, and numerous members

of the Bengali, Bihari and Marwari communities were enticed into settling in it. Gradually, the middle class Bengali population began to obtain most services in the tertiary sector while non-Bengali communities virtually monopolised the major business activities in the district. The Nepalese populace who were forced to take up lower positions and manual jobs, felt subjugated by these communities and a separate homeland for themselves seemed to be the best possible solution to their problems (Banerjee and Stöber, 2013).

A fierce struggle under the direction of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) for the separate state of Gorkhaland was launched in 1986 and continued with full fervour till 1988 when an agreement was reached between the GNLF and the central as well as state governments to end all separatist demands (Singh, 2017). Peace prevailed in the region until the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM) was established in 2007 and separatist demands were renewed. The district of Darjiling witnessed violence accompanied by frequent road and railway blockades for about four years. Formation of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) by the government of West Bengal in 2011 managed to assuage the tense situation in Darjiling to some extent. Nevertheless, the decision of the West Bengal government to introduce Bengali as a mandatory subject in all schools of the state generated fierce protests and grave violence throughout the district of Darjiling for a period of approximately 104 days in 2017 (Giri, 2017).

Activists of the Gorkhaland Movement had not only engaged in direct conflict with administrative personnel of northern West Bengal during their struggles but also with other communities, especially in Siliguri and the adjoining Dooars region. Organizations like the Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikas Parishad (ABAVP), Amra Bangali, Jana Jagaran Mancha and Jana Chetana Mancha had frequently voiced their outrage against the demand for Gorkhaland and held protest rallies and strikes to make themselves heard in the recent past (Chanda, 2017). The ABAVP aims to safeguard interests of the Oraon, Santhal and Munda tribes which had immigrated into the Dooars region of northern West Bengal during the pre-colonial era to work as plantation labourers (Ganguly, 2011). Inclusion of several parts of the Dooars region within the proposed Gorkhaland generated acrimony among these tribes who wished to prevent such amalgamation. The Amra Bangali outfit represents the emotions of the Bengalis. It has been considerably vocal in protesting against the formation of a

separate Gorkhaland and the potential hazards of this altered political and socio-economic dynamics in northern West Bengal. Although unbridled violence in the region has ceased at present, the issue of sovereignty remains unsolved and possibilities of further unrests in the future cannot be ignored (Singh, 2017).

The Kamatapur or Greater Cooch Behar Movement :

The indigenous KR community of northern West Bengal has been demanding a separate state for itself since more than fifty years although organized movement was initiated much later during the 1990s. The proposed homeland is denoted by different names such as 'Kamatapur' or 'Greater Cooch Behar' even though both refer to the same geo-political territory which is composed of areas falling under the present northern West Bengal and western Assam (Sengupta and Datta, 2016).

Similar to the Gorkhaland Movement, the first seeds of the KR sovereignty movement were sown during the colonial period in India. Tea plantations were introduced in the Dooars which brought about a change in the population dynamics of the region when Oraon, Santhal and Munda tribes immigrated into these parts to work as labourers in those plantations. During this time, the KR community had occupied the topmost tier in the existing regional socio-economic hierarchy followed by the native forest dependent Rabha, Mech and Toto tribes. After the immigrant tribes settled in the region, the position of the native tribal groups began to be adversely affected although the KR people, who were mostly engaged in sedentary agriculture, continued to enjoy a dominant position in the regional society of Dooars and the adjoining plains of northern West Bengal. The native tribes were primarily shifting cultivators and failed to compete with the immigrants who took up plough cultivation at the encouragement of the British rulers. The indigenous tribes were also distraught because tea plantations had flourished at the expense of forest lands and they viewed the Oraon, Santhal and Munda populace as intruders who along with the British government had facilitated this transformation (Nandi, 2002). The situation was further complicated with legislations like The Indian Forest Act, 1927 which curtailed the use of forest resources by the native tribal communities and created problems in their livelihood generation. Thus, the immigrant tribes were able to marginalize the native Rabha, Mech and Toto populations in their own homeland. The KR community

remained more or less unaffected by these changes until a massive inflow of chiefly Bengali Hindu migrants due to the partition of India radically altered the existing socio-economic order. The immigrants, who were also known as the Bhatiya in local dialect, were superior sedentary cultivators, and better educated than the KR as well as all other existing communities inhabiting the region (Sengupta and Datta, 2016). They acquired lands from the relatively more naive sections of their KR neighbours at minimal prices and gradually, substituted the later as the dominant socio-economic as well as political community of the region. The KR commons experienced socio-cultural ostracisation and severe economic marginalization from the Bhatiya. The accumulative rancour against such exploitations eventually manifested in their demand for a separate homeland (Das, 2009).

The KR activists had time and again indulged in violence during the last two decades, most of which was perpetrated by the Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO) between 1999 and 2013. The armed KLO was the first to demand a separate sovereign state for the KR community. Most of the other notable KR political outfits like the Kamatapur Peoples' Party (KPP) and the Greater Cooch Behar People's Association (GCPA) adhere to a moderate ideology and have been content with the demand for a separate federal state within India (Das, 2009). After the downfall of KLO in 2003 due to the dual action of the Indian and the Royal Bhutanese governments, the frequency of violent events relating to the KR sovereignty movement decreased and the organization has remained relatively dormant since 2014. In the last few years, the GCPA took over the leadership of the movement quite passionately with repeated blockades, protests and rallies. Although violence ensued during some of these events in the form of struggles and fights with law enforcement officials, planned attacks on local people and politicians had not been orchestrated. At present, the KR community has efficaciously persuaded certain proportions of the Rabha and Mech populace to take part in the movement. This alliance has been made possible on the basis of a common conviction among all indigenous groups that their rights over the resources of the land were stronger than that of the outsiders (Sengupta and Datta, 2016).

Spatio-temporal distributive pattern of ethno-political conflicts :

The Gorkhaland Movement as well as the KR

sovereignty movement affected both rural and urban centres throughout the study area since their inceptions. However, most events with far-reaching impacts had been predominantly concentrated in the urban parts. In this context, it is worthwhile to note that although the natures of violent incidents relating to both the conflicts were more or less similar in rural as well as urban areas, the frequencies, scales and intensities of the same had been far more overwhelming in the later (Gazmer and

Bhattachariya, 2010; Giri, 2017). For the purpose of the present paper, a detailed analysis of the patterns of these conflicts in the urban areas has been presented.

Extremely violent uprisings relating to the Gorkhaland Movement took place mostly in Darjiling followed by Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar (Table 1).

Here, the largest urban centres of Darjiling (132,016 persons) and Siliguri (701,489 persons) were found to be the principal sites of conflicts and were naturally chosen

Table 1: Ethno-political conflicts in urban areas of northern West Bengal

Date	District	Block/ Subdivision/ Municipality/ Town	Affected area	Nature of Violence
Gorkhaland Movement				
1986-88	Darjiling	Darjiling subdivision	Darjiling	About 1200 people dead and severe economic losses
2008	Darjiling	Darjiling and Siliguri subdivision	Darjiling, Siliguri	25 people injured when police clashed with peaceful Gorkha volunteers at a rally
2008	Darjiling	Siliguri sub division	Siliguri, Bagdogra	Strike; blockade of NH 31 by GJM and clashes between members of GJM and Amra Bangali, Jana Jagaran Mancha, Jana Chetana Mancha injured about 16 people; 16 tourists injured by GJM supporters
2008	Darjiling	Darjiling subdivision	Darjiling hill areas	Police firing killed three rioters; road and rail blockades
2008	Darjiling	Darjiling sub division	Siliguri	Seven people killed and properties destroyed during fight between GJM and ABAVP
2009	Jalpaiguri	Jalpaiguri and Malbazar subdivision	Banarhat, Malbazar	GJM members attacked a local driver
2010	Darjiling and Jalpaiguri	Darjiling, Malbazar and Siliguri subdivision	Darjiling, Malbazar, Siliguri, Chalsa	Strikes
2010	Darjiling and Jalpaiguri	Darjiling, Siliguri, Malbazar, Subdivision	Darjiling, Siliguri, Malbazar	Murder of a leader of the Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League, NH31 blocked, strike, assault on commoners
2011	Darjiling, Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar	Siliguri, Malbazar, Alipurduar subdivision	Siliguri, Malbazar, Alipurduar	Strikes
2013	Darjiling	Darjiling subdivision	Darjiling	Strikes
2017	Darjiling	Darjiling subdivision	Darjiling	12 tourists injured; eight campaigners killed; six police officers killed; properties damaged; strike
Koch-Rajbanshi Sovereignty Movement				
1999	Darjiling	Siliguri Subdivision	Siliguri	Railway cash counter plundered
1999	Alipurduar	Kalchini	Latabari	Kidnapping of a tea garden owner by KLO
2000	Jalpaiguri	Jalpaiguri Sadar	Jalpaiguri	Elimination of a local CPI(M) leader by KLO
2001	Jalpaiguri	Jalpaiguri Sadar	Jalpaiguri	Explosion at Jalpaiguri station by KLO
2002	Darjiling	Siliguri Subdivision	Siliguri Metropolitan Area	Clash between Indian Army and three KLO militants
2002	Jalpaiguri	Dhupguri Municipality	Dhupguri	Murder of 5 CPI(M) ¹ leaders and injury to 14 at local office
2005	Koch Bihar	Cooch Behar Municipality	Cooch Behar Town	Death of two GCPA campaigners and three policemen at a mass hunger strike organized by the GCPA
2011	Koch Bihar	Cooch Behar Municipality	Cooch Behar Town	Police and GCPA volunteers clashed at a hunger strike and several were injured
2013	Jalpaiguri	Jalpaiguri Sadar Subdivision	Jalpaiguri	Six people died due to an explosion
2014	Jalpaiguri	-	-	Fear generated by KLO through newspaper threats
2016	Koch Bihar	Cooch Behar-I	New Cooch Behar Station	Three passengers died due to medical emergency during a four day railway blockade organized by the GCPA

Source: (After Sengupta and Datta, 2016; Singh, 2017)

¹ Communist Party of India (Marxist)

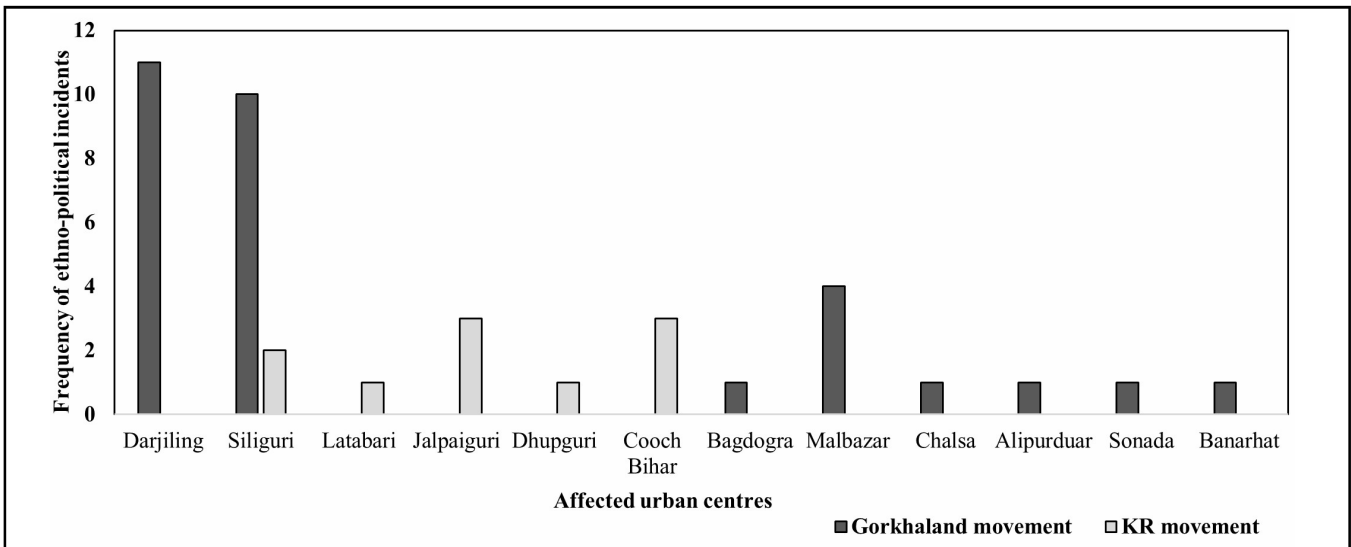


Fig. 1 : Ethno-political incidents in the urban parts of the study area[#]
 (# The figures of 1986-1988 for the Gorkhaland Movement have been excluded from calculation because data on the frequencies of incidents that occurred during this time were unavailable)

to be so by Gorkha agitators so that both media attention and impacts could be maximised (GoI, 2011). Doubtlessly, the Gorkha activists were able to achieve their purpose by organizing mass protests in these areas. Additionally, both these urban agglomerations received a large number of tourists every year which made them more vulnerable to such protests. Smaller urban centres like Malbazar, Bagdogra and Alipurduar had also been affected but to a much lesser extent (Fig. 1).

Violent events associated with the KR sovereignty movement affected large urban centres like Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Siliguri although the instances of such events were fewer in comparison to the Gorkhaland conflict. It is to be noted that the KR campaigners preferred Cooch Behar over other urban centres to hold mass protests, hunger strikes and rallies. Cooch Behar (106,760) was not as heavily populated as Siliguri and Darjiling but it held special cultural significance for the KR community as it used to be the capital of the princely state that was ruled by the Koch kings before India became an independent nation (GoI, 2011; Das, 2009).

It should also be mentioned that the KR activists could not hold mass protests in the most important urban centre of the region, Siliguri, in spite of the fact that it was a part of their proposed homeland. The city of Jalpaiguri had been targeted by the KLO more than once during its series of violent attacks. Nevertheless, these incidents were sporadic in nature, as a result of which,

they failed to be as devastating as the violence perpetrated by the Gorkha despite claiming quite a few lives (Sengupta and Datta, 2016). It is necessary to point out in this regard that the Gorkhaland Movement was comparatively more urban oriented than the KR sovereignty movement (Fig. 2).

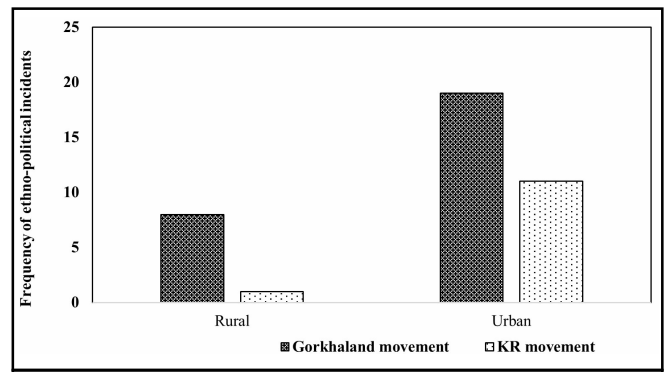


Fig. 2 : Rural-urban dynamics of ethno-political incidents in the study area[#]
 (# The figures of 1986-1988 for the Gorkhaland Movement have been excluded from calculation because data on the frequencies of incidents that occurred during this time were unavailable)

As far as the temporal pattern of conflicts is concerned, the Gorkha agitators mainly operated in three phases - 1986-88, 2008-2011 and 2017. Events connected with the KR sovereignty movement continued from 1999

to 2005 after which there was a break of about five years. This was the time when the KLO was at its peak. After the camps of the KLO were destroyed during 'Operation All Clear' in 2003, violent incidents became infrequent. However, between 2011 and 2014, the KLO exhibited occasional activeness. The GCPA also organized mass rallies and rail blockades in 2005, 2011 and 2016. While the Gorkha agitations had been carried out on a much larger scale for a continuous period in each of its phases, the events pertaining to the KR sovereignty movement were standalone and erratic (Sengupta and Datta, 2016; Singh, 2017).

Urban facets of ethno-politics in northern West Bengal :

The implications of ethno-political conflicts transpiring here may be categorized into short-term and long-term depending upon the extent of transformation brought about in the affected society. Impacts ranging from loss of human lives and disruption of economic growth to an overall degradation of the socio-political conditions of communities had been found to be commonly associated with most of these conflicts (Das *et al.*, 2015).

The repercussions of the Gorkhaland Movement were found to have spread beyond the hilly terrain into the foothills and plains of northern West Bengal, leading to alterations in the social, economic and political dynamics of the entire region (Chattopadhyay, 2008). As already aforementioned, urban centres had been primarily targeted since the inception of the movement in the 1980s. The first massive insurgencies took place in the district of Darjiling between 1986 and 1988 which caused the deaths of approximately 1200 people (Singh, 2017). The town of Darjiling had been the principal site of such furore although the entire district was adversely affected. Since then, unrests and agitations of diverse magnitudes continued recurrently in the area which often hampered the normal urban life. Rallies, violent vandalism and strikes gravely affected a wide range of people and economic activities within a relatively short span of time in important urban centres like Siliguri and Darjiling (Gazmer and Bhattachariya, 2010).

Enormous troubles were created for the general populace who had been frequently compelled to continue their lives without basic public facilities during the periods of unrests, often for indefinite time. In 2017, the policy of the state government to include Bengali as an obligatory subject in all schools instigated extraordinary violence in

Darjiling for a continuous period of almost 104 days during which all business enterprises, schools and important offices remained closed (Chatterji, 2017). The residents of the hill subdivisions of Darjiling district had to travel to Siliguri secretly amidst the strike to buy food as even such bare necessities were no longer available in the urban parts of Darjiling and Kalimpong (Baskota, 2017). The government of West Bengal retaliated with strong measures like the deployment of paramilitary forces in the municipal town of Darjiling which was the main centre of all violent activities and the shutting down of internet facilities as well as local media channels to stop the propagation of news about the movement (Chatterji, 2017; Baskota, 2017; Giri, 2017). To add to the woes, banks remained closed and ATM machines ran out of cash. A situation of medical emergency cropped up when most Bengali doctors had evacuated the town, thereby making the hospitals almost dysfunctional (Baskota, 2017).

Repeated struggles between members of GJM and groups like the Amra Bangali and ABAVP occurred in Siliguri and Malbazar during the violent phases of the Gorkhaland Movement. Personal interactions with several local Bengali residents of Malbazar revealed that there was widespread discontent among the community regarding the demand for a separate Gorkhaland. One of the local Bengali respondents disclosed, "*we do not condone the issue of Gorkhaland. The Gorkha community migrated from Nepal into our country and now they want another state within India. That is unfair*".

Frequent blockades of the National Highways namely NH 31, NH 31A and NH 55 as well as rail routes during every major period of violence in the history of Gorkhaland drastically affected the economy of the entire region (Chattopadhyay, 2008; Gazmer and Bhattachariya, 2010). Both rural and urban areas along these roads were disconnected from the rest of the state although the impacts on urban centres acquired greater importance because they caused not just lack of mobility among the inhabitants but also extensive losses in trading and business related opportunities (Fig. 3). The effects of these blockades were not limited to the districts in northern West Bengal but also severely impacted the rest of north-eastern India which was cut-off from the rest of the country (Chattopadhyay, 2008). The main industries of the region, namely, tea and tourism, had been severely affected during these conflicts (Chattopadhyay, 2008; Baskota, 2017). Tea plantations had often remained

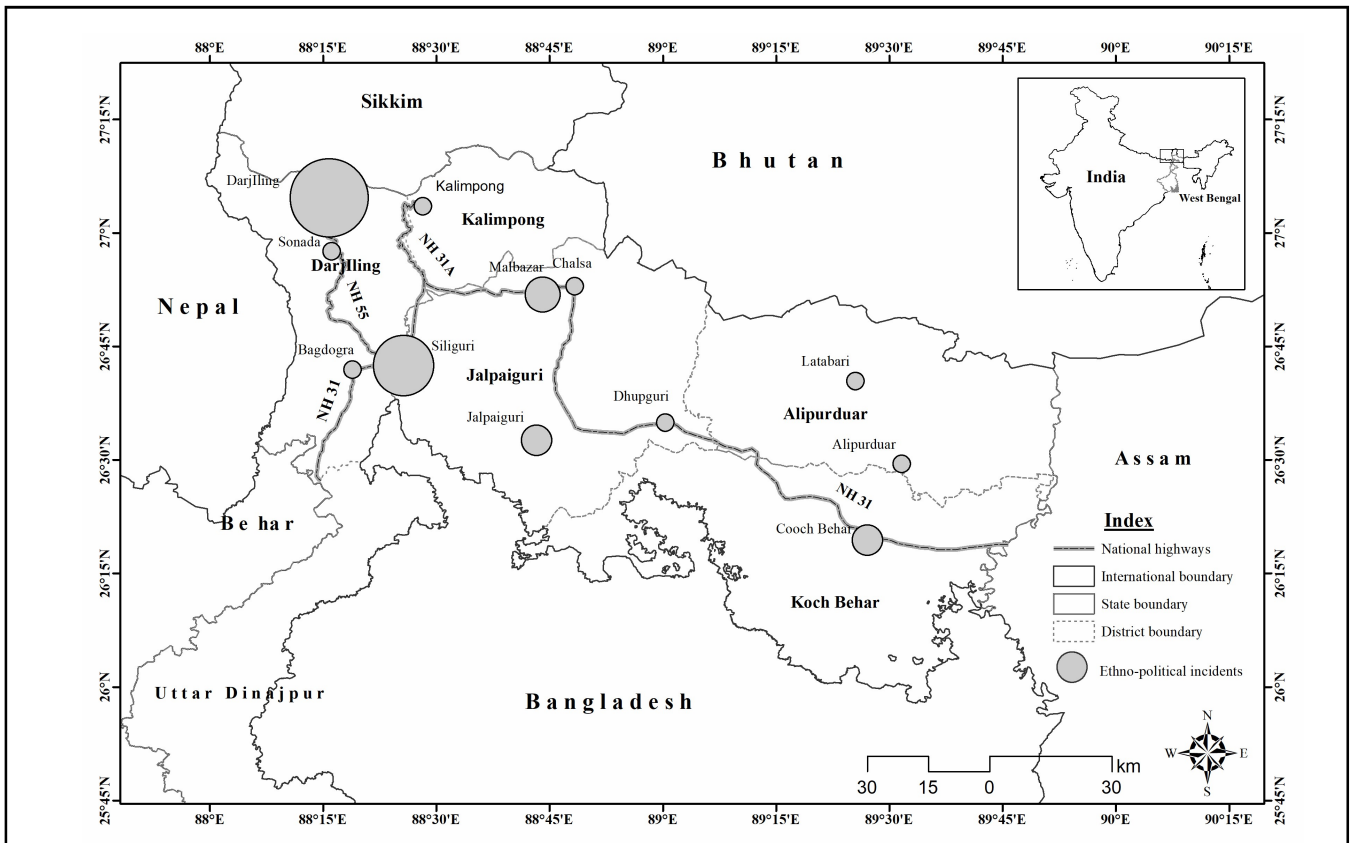


Fig. 3 : Spatial manifestations of urban ethno-political conflicts[#]
 ([#] The figures of 1986-1988 for the Gorkhaland Movement have been excluded from calculation because data on the frequencies of incidents that occurred during this time were unavailable)

closed during strikes which wreaked havoc in the lives of the plantation workers who survived on daily wages. Majority of these workers belonged to the Nepalese community which was testimony to the fact that the movement had brought about an overall degradation in the lives of all communities including that of the protestors themselves (Baskota, 2017). Interestingly, most local Nepalese respondents of the area believed that such hardships were natural outcomes of their struggles and had to be taken in stride for the eventual betterment of the entire community. *“We have lived longer than the Bengali people in this region. Yet, we have been exploited and marginalized while they have prospered. Gorkhaland is our right and we are willing to face difficulties during periods of strike”*, a 67-year-old Nepalese man claimed.

The tourism industry which is among the most important sources of revenue for the inhabitants of Darjiling and Kalimpong, suffered from a major stumbling block during these periods of violence. Unrests and

recurrent blockades hindered the flow of tourists into the urban hill stations of Darjiling, Kalimpong and Mirik in the past decades (Baskota, 2017; Giri, 2017). Sudden announcements of strikes often forced them to leave the hill stations before their scheduled departures. Such an instance occurred during the Gorkhaland protests of 2008 when approximately 20,000 tourists were required to leave within 24 hours after the GJM called for an indefinite strike within a day’s notice (Chattopadhyay, 2008). Reduction and often, complete stoppage in tourism adversely impacted not just hotel owners and workers but also street vendors, small shop owners, tourist guides and car drivers who had been dependent on the tourism industry for their incomes (Giri, 2017).

The impacts of the KR sovereignty movement were comparatively less widespread than those of the Gorkhaland Movement. Most of the violent activities associated with the KR movement had been executed by the KLO between 1999 and 2014. During this time, the KLO orchestrated a number of political murders,

kidnappings of local businessmen, explosions as well as vandalism of shops, offices, railway stations and railway coaches mostly in urban areas. Apart from the KLO, other KR political outfits often imposed strikes in urban areas to attract media as well as administrative attention (Das, 2009; Nandi, 2002; Sengupta and Datta, 2016). The GCPA mainly organized mass rallies and railway blockades in and around the town of Cooch Behar which adversely affected the lives of administrative personnel and civilians as well as the economy of the region. In 2016, a four day rail blockade was organized by the GCPA at New Cooch Behar station which stopped a number of major trains along that route and cut off northern West Bengal as well as Assam from the rest of the country (Mehta, 2016). This undoubtedly had grave consequences on the economies of several key urban centres like Siliguri, Guwahati and Jalpaiguri. Since these centres are major markets of north-eastern India, their economies heavily rely upon the timely distribution of different goods by the Indian railway which was delayed by the blockade (Sengupta and Datta, 2016). Nevertheless, it is to be noted that such incidents rarely affected the local Bengali residents of urban centres. Personal interviews with a number of Bengali inhabitants of Cooch Behar town indicated that while none of them were in favour of a separate state for the KR community, few were sympathetic towards their plight and most felt that the movement would ultimately bear no substantial result. One of the respondents disclosed, *“the local KR have been brainwashed by leaders of the movement into believing that a separate state for them is feasible but it is not. Their movement is not strong enough. I agree that the KR have suffered but the Bengali people did not steal their lands from them. The lands were bought”*. Incidentally, most of the interviewed urban KR commons seemed to be indifferent towards the movement as well. *“My family members and I have never attended any meeting or protest relating to the movement. I do not think a separate state is the solution to any problem. It is better if we all remain united”*, a KR resident of Cooch Behar revealed. Prolonged discussions with resource persons in the town of Cooch Behar revealed that thousands of KR supporters came to the urban centre during protest meetings and blockades, thereby indicating that most KR campaigners probably belonged to the rural areas.

The preceding discussion elucidates the difference in the impacts of the two on-going ethno-political conflicts

of northern West Bengal. While the Gorkhaland Movement entailed considerable brutal violence and had far-reaching spatial impacts, the effects of the KR sovereignty movement were milder in comparison (Fig. 4). Urban governance was critically impacted in the affected centres by both these movements. Government offices and infrastructure had been habitually vandalised by activists to impose challenges on the administration. Law enforcement officials had also lost their lives and suffered injuries during mass protests organized by the Gorkha as well as KR communities (Giri, 2017; Sengupta and Datta, 2016).

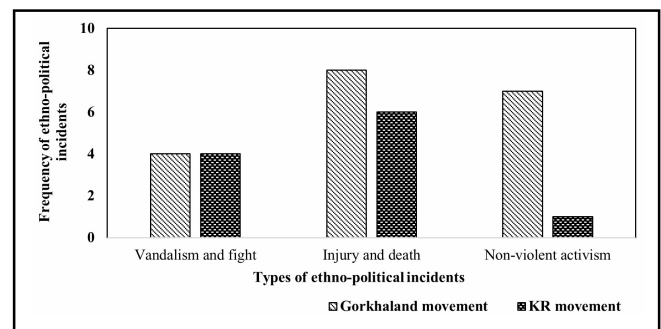


Fig. 4 : Urban ethno-political incidents and violence[#]
 ([#] The figures of 1986-1988 for the Gorkhaland Movement have been excluded from calculation because data on the frequencies of incidents that occurred during this time were unavailable)

Contextualising ethno-politics and urban spaces:

Since the advent of the Hindu Bengali immigrants or Bhatiya into the northern parts of West Bengal during and after partition, the predicament of other ethnic groups like the Nepalese or the Gorkha and the KR, began to increase progressively until their hostilities and misgivings were manifested in the form of ethno-political conflicts. The failure of the first post-independent governments, both at the centre and at the state to come up with efficient solutions for the refugee problem propelled these immigrants to acquire agricultural and residential lands from ethnic groups at nominal prices which eventually led to complete marginalization of the later (Banerjee and Stober, 2013; Nandi, 2002). After the erstwhile Leftist government came into power in West Bengal in 1977, the socio-economic and political positions of the Bengali populace were strengthened because several members of the new administration themselves belonged to this community. The interests of the affected ethnic groups were further neglected which naturally engendered

mistrust among them, not only towards the administration but also towards the Bengali population. Additionally, the marginal ethnic groups often faced severe socio-cultural stigmatization from the elite Bengali class. Consequently, separatist demands gathered momentum (Banerjee and Stober, 2013; Das, 2009).

Both these ethno-political conflicts had originated out of economic exploitation, socio-cultural marginalization and political subjugation. The issue of language was another common subject between the two separatist movements. Neither the Nepalese nor the KR communities were willing to accept the imposition of Bengali language upon them. This was also indicative of their antagonism towards the Bengali immigrants whom they considered responsible for their unfortunate socio-economic status (Das, 2009; Giri, 2017). Despite the apparent likeness of both movements, there were pronounced differences between the two since the very beginning. Firstly, while the Gorkhaland Movement was a struggle between two groups of immigrants, the KR sovereignty movement was a tussle between a set of indigenous communities and a group of immigrants. Ironically, it was the immigrant Nepalese community which had been far more vocal, violent and politically organized about its demands than the indigenous KR, Rabha and Mech who had been marginalized by outsiders in their own homeland (Das, 2009; Singh, 2017). This automatically highlights the other point of difference between the two conflicts. The Gorkhaland Movement had been able to successfully paralyse the functioning of almost the entire Darjiling and Kalimpong districts on several occasions (Giri, 2017). However, similar impacts could not be made by KR activists except during the four day rail blockade in New Cooch Behar station in 2016. Even then, mobility of the common people within the district had not been affected much (Ghosal, 2016). The duration of the event was much shorter than most blockades organized by the Gorkha activists and consequently the losses were of lesser extent. The impacts of the Gorkhaland Movement had been more perilous, blatant and pervasive as compared to those of the KR sovereignty movement which had not been able to make long-lasting influences upon the common people (Giri, 2017; Sengupta and Datta, 2016). Consequently, the Gorkha community had been successful in evoking both fear and noticeable anger among the Bengali as well as the Oraon, Santhal and Munda tribal communities who were being perturbed by the conflict (Singh, 2017).

Interestingly, although the KR community also held similar grievances against the Bengali population, it failed to elicit such strong sentiments from the later during the course of its struggle due to its inconsistent nature (Sengupta and Datta, 2016; Singh, 2017). Since the inception of the Gorkhaland demand, the Gorkha community had been extremely focussed in its goal of a separate state. It had been much better organized than the KR community and far more politically aware. Better political organization and astuteness of the Gorkha leaders were also reasons why the movement had always been mostly urban-centric. The Gorkha leaders had not only anticipated the importance of urban centres as platforms for the expression of grievances more effectively than their KR counterparts, but they also had better network, co-ordination and access to resources than them. The effects of KR sovereignty movement on urban areas were fewer and less impactful. The fact that KR activists failed to organize mass rallies in larger urban centres such as Siliguri owing to lack of resources and insufficient network ensured that they always got lesser media coverage than their Gorkha counterparts.

Conclusion :

Ethno-politics in northern West Bengal is a product of age-old socio-economic, cultural and political deprivations faced by the marginal ethnic groups of the region. The scars are deep and cannot be removed with hasty political decisions, appeasement or brute force. Mainstream political parties had sometimes been successful in making alliances with both the Gorkha and KR activists but most of these alliances did not hold up over a long period of time. This was possibly due to the fact that these associations often were made out of political aspirations rather than ideological ones. Sympathy towards the ethnic communities and an understanding of their grievances along with genuine efforts to integrate them into the mainstream society may yield desirable results. Generating educational awareness among ethnic groups, creation of job opportunities and intolerance towards ostracisation are necessary measures that need to be incorporated at the policy level by the state as well as Central governments at the earliest. Nonetheless, administrative efforts shall be insufficient in achieving peaceful solutions to the ethno-political problems of northern West Bengal unless mass awareness is spread among the residing communities. The mainstream sections of the local society must realize that discriminatory

behaviour towards ethnic groups have triggered such conflicts. Consequently, they need to adopt sympathetic attitudes towards the later. Additionally, the KR and Gorkha communities in particular must realize that violence and protests lead to economic losses as well as deaths not only among rival groups but also among themselves.

In conclusion, it must be mentioned that both these communities essentially want to augment their economic status and move up the social hierarchy. Internal rivalries among the different individuals as well as groups leading the movements over political ambitions have contributed to the persistence of a volatile ethno-political landscape throughout the study area since a long time. As a result, these conflicts are unlikely to attain a peaceful closure in the near future although they might undergo changes in their character.

The present paper has been mostly based on an analytical review of secondary information and personal interactions with respondents in the study area. Schedule-based surveys of the involved communities need to be undertaken to enhance the quality of research and relevant qualitative as well as quantitative analyses must be performed to obtain a better understanding of the ethno-political situation of northern West Bengal. Nevertheless, the relevance of the present paper must not be undermined since analytical reviews on the spatio-temporal distributive patterns of the ethno-political conflicts in northern West Bengal and their implications with respect to urban areas in particular have been rare.

Acknowledgement :

The authors acknowledge the assistance of the University Grants Commission, India for providing financial assistance to carry out this research under the scheme of UGC NET-Junior Research Fellowship [UGC-Ref.No.: 3248/(NET-JUNE 2015)].

REFERENCES

- Banerjee, B.K. and Stober, G. (2013). Gorkhaland Movement in India: A case of indigeneity and/or a struggle over space? *Geographien Südasiens*, 1 : 5-8.
- Baskota, P. (2017). 80 days of Gorkhaland Movement: Tourism down, schools shut, tea gardens inactive; spirits still up. *The Indian Express*. Retrieved from <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2017/sep/02/80-days-of-gorkhaland-movement-tourism-down-schools-shut-tea-gardens-inactive-spirits-still-up-1651658.html>.
- Bollens, S. (2000). *On narrow ground: Urban policy and ethnic conflict in Jerusalem and Belfast*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Burkholder, A. (2006). *Ethnic conflict in urban environments*. Retrieved from <http://www.terry.ubc.ca/2006/07/03/ethnic-conflict-in-urban-environments/>.
- Chanda, A. (2017). As Gorkhas lock up the hills, plains Bengalis threaten a siege. *The New Indian Express*. Retrieved from <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2017/jun/27/as-gorkhas-lock-up-the-hills-plains-bengalis-threaten-a-siege-1621543.html>.
- Chatterji, R. (2017). What lies behind the Gorkhaland protests in Darjeeling. *Huffpost*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/06/12/the-gorkhaland-protests-in-darjeeling-arise-from-an-ancient-sens_a_22137216/.
- Chattopadhyay, S.S. (2008). The Gorkhaland agitation in the Darjeeling hills of West Bengal shows signs of degenerating into an ethnic conflict. *Frontline*, 25(14): 5-18.
- Das, A. (2009). *Kamatapur and the Koch Rajbanshi imagination*. Guwahati: Arunima Deka.
- Das, T.K., Das Gupta, I., Haldar, S.K. and Mitra, S. (2015). Conflicts and socioeconomic consequences in northeast India. *Asian J. Humanities & Soc. Studies*, 3(1) : 79-84.
- Ellingsen, T. (2000). Colorful community or ethnic witches' brew? Multiethnicity and domestic conflict during and after the cold war. *J. Conflict Resolution*, 44(2) : 228-249. doi: 10.1177/0022002700044002004.
- Flanagin, J. (2015). *How white people created the conditions for anti-immigrant riots in South Africa?* Retrieved from <http://qz.com/384403/white-people-created-the-conditions-for-anti-immigrant-riots-in-south-africa/>.
- Ganguly, A. (2011). CM mum on tribal autonomy plea - Mamata plays development card. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from https://www.telegraphindia.com/1111013/jsp/siliguri/story_14618549.jsp.
- Gazmer, D. and Bhattacharya, P.P. (2010). Ethnic clash feared in Siliguri. *The Times of India*. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Ethnic-clash-feared-in-Siliguri/articleshow/5401312.cms>.
- Ghoshal, A. (2016). Simply put: What's behind the protests, rail roko in North Bengal. *The Indian Express*. Retrieved from <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/simply-put-whats-behind-the-protests-rail-roko-in-north-bengal/>.
- Giri, P. (2017). Fresh Darjeeling violence amid Gorkhaland

- protests: 10 things to know. *Hindustan Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/fresh-darjeeling-violence-amid-gorkhaland-protests-10-things-to-know/story-VdE3S3Pk7s6HKEstqJT7gN.html>.
- Government of India (2011). *Census of India*. New Delhi: Government of India.
- Haque, C.E. (1995). The dilemma of 'nationhood' and religion: A survey and critique of studies on population displacement resulting from the partition of the Indian subcontinent. *J. Refugee Studies*, **8**(2) :185-209. doi: 10.1093/jrs/8.2.185.
- Kurien, P. (2001). Religion, ethnicity and politics: Hindu and Muslim Indian immigrants in the United States. *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, **24**(2) : 263-293. doi: 10.1080/01419870020023445.
- Kymlicka, W. (1995). *Multicultural citizenship: A liberal theory of minority rights*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Mandal, A. (2015). Little rebellions: Demands, transgressions, and anomalies in the Kamtapur struggle. *Sanglap: J. Literary & Cultural Inquiry*, **1**(2) : 103-126.
- Mann, M. (1997). Has globalization ended the rise and rise of the nation-state? *Review of Internat. Political Econ.*, **4**(3) :472-496. doi: 10.1080/096922997347715.
- Mehta, P. (2016). Cooch Behar: Collector says protests withdrawn; 15 injured in clashes, death toll reaches 3. *Daily News and Analysis*. Retrieved from <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-cooch-behar-protesters-clash-with-police-following-removal-of-rail-blockade-2181282>.
- Merchant, R. (2015). *India's unloved seven sisters*. Retrieved from <http://diplomacist.com/2015/03/25/2015324indias-unloved-seven-sisters/>.
- Nandi, R. (2002). *Depletion of natural forest in a multi-ethnic setting: An analysis of ecology and social structure in the dooars region of West Bengal* (Doctoral Thesis), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
- Pradhan, P. (2017). *A demand for separate statehood: Gorkhaland*. Retrieved from <https://www.indiasopinon.in/demand-separate-statehood-gorkhaland/>.
- Sengupta, C. and Datta, D. (2016). Ethnic conflicts in urban spaces: Contested geographies of Koch-Rajbanshi identity politics in West Bengal and Assam. In M. Bardhan (Ed.), *Changing urban scenario and emerging conflicts in post globalisation India* (pp.15-26). Kolkata, India: Pakhir Akash Prokashani.
- Sevänen, E. (2000). The post-national condition: On the relationship between the state, nation and nationalist policy in the present-day western world. In J. Talvet (Ed.), *Interlitteraria* (pp. 15-36). Estonia: Tartu University Press.
- Singh, A. (2017). *Gorkhaland issue*. Retrieved from <https://www.clearias.com/gorkhaland/>.
- Singh, N.T. and Singh, T.J. (2010). India's look east policy and north-eastern states: An overview. *Journal of US-China Public Administration*, **7**(3) : 76-83.
