

# The Role of the State in Exacerbating Violence Among Ethnic Groups: A Retrospective Study of Gorkhaland Movement

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the various contours of interplay between power and legitimacy of the state. It deals with the violence used by states to its minorities but the core context of this article revolves around the violence inflicted upon the Gorkha Community of India. This article is divided into 5 parts first part deals with the state and dichotomy in violence, secondly it introduces the construction of political demand of the Gorkhas, thirdly the article has delved into cases related to the systemic violence orchestrated by state, fourthly it highlights the impunity of state forces and use of unethical methods, and lastly the article has focused on the intangible elements of violence.

**Keywords:** State, Violence, Legitimacy, Ethnicity, State Forces, Gorkhas

## Definition Of State

Max Weber's idea of monopoly on use of physical force is at the core of the definition of modern state by him. To Weber, the state is a community of humans who successfully annex the monopoly of legitimate violence over some territorial boundary. This monopoly is not merely a control of force but it denotes the state's sole purpose to validate and govern the use of it hence validating its power and its supremacy over other forms of political organization.

Although people or non-state actors may carry out acts of violence, any such acts are only legal when approved by the state. And the police and military act as institutional means that the state uses to do this in order to maintain law, and preserve the territorial integrity. This does not, however, nullify democratic dogma but validates the state as the ultimate decision on legal and political authority.

Weber compares modern state with the pre-modern or feudal system, where a number of actors (e.g. lords, local rules) could rightfully use coercive powers. The consolidation of the modern state was a historical consolidation of this authority, that centralized the means of violence and institutionalised its legitimacy over a period. Although non-state actors such as the insurgent groups or the criminal organizations may interfere with this monopoly, they are not legally legitimized to become states. Therefore, in weberian theory, monopoly on legitimate violence is not just the thing that accompanies statehood, it is what defines the modern state and its existence and recognition.

## Defining The Gorkhas And Its Construction

The Gorkhas are a heterogeneous ethnic group predominantly inhabiting the Darjeeling hills, Sikkim and various parts of Northeast India. The ethnic group comprises various castes including the Hill Brahmins as well as Sino-Tibetan tribes that speak Nepali as the lingua-franca among themselves.

The construction of political demand for an autonomous body for the Gorkhas in the Darjeeling hills start

ed way before the independence of India or the consolidation of Indian Union in its present form. Various educated markees like Parasmani Pradhan, Damber Singh Gurung and Ari Bahadur Gurung have played a pivotal role in constructing the political demand for autonomy of the Gorkhas in India. The advent of Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League paved the way for the mass mobilization of the Gorkhas regarding the democratic rights and aspiration for autonomy within the framework of the Indian Constitution. The protracted negligence and lackadaisical attitude of the Indian government towards the Gorkhas and the issues concerning them gave an impetus to the demand of separate statehood for the Gorkhas. The period post 1986 mass agitation saw an upsurge in the increase of violence orchestrated by the state against the Gorkha people whereas the period prior to 1986 was replete with trivial strifes and feuds. The aftermath of the 1986 agitation led to major repercussions which culminated in fiscal depreciation, academic and scholarship backwardness and the halt in the works of tea plantation workers whose livelihood depended on this source of income. The agitations hitherto taken place has left an indelible impact on the minds of the Gorkhas which has made them more firm on their envision of a separate state for them. The inert efforts of the non-Gorkhas to distort the history and culture of the Gorkhas has aggravated the resentment among the Gorkhas encompassing the treatment of Gorkhas as an interloper and limiting the depiction of Gorkhas within the caricature as a soldier with a khukuri. However, their seminal contributions transcend mere martial or military domain extending to the formation of the Indian state in various domains often remain behind the veil.

### **Ethnic Strifes Around The World Exacerbated By The State**

State orchestrated ethnic strife and schism has been some of the imperative incidents of Human Rights violation around the world. The state as a machinery with pretension over legitimate use of violence has always been a perennial perpetrator of violence under the pretense of maintaining law and order and securitization as per the Copenhagen school.

### **Rwandan Genocide**

The Rwandan Genocide that occurred in 1994 was a planned gory campaign of mass murder in Rwanda that took place for about 100 days between April-July 1994. In about 100 days, over one million Tutsis were systematically exterminated by extremist Hutu militias alongside the murder of even the moderate Hutus who defied the Genocide. About 200, 000 of Hutu population ignited by news Media participated in the extermination. The relationship among the Hutus and the Tutsis was that of a patron-client relation. The Tutsis were basically engaged in pastoralist tradition and the Hutus were primarily agriculturalists due to which the Tutsis gained a degree of political primacy over the majority Hutus. However, regarding the appearances of the Hutus and the Tutsis, stereotypes did prevail as the Tutsis were envisaged to be fair and tall whereas the Hutus dark-skinned and short. Many explanations of the Rwandan genocide wrongly portray it as the inevitable outcome of long-standing ethnic animosity between Hutus and Tutsis. But in reality, Hutu and Tutsi identities were historically more fluid based on socio-economic roles. Even intermarriage and shared language and culture were common before colonial interference. German and Belgian colonial rulers institutionalized racial hierarchies favoring Tutsis over Hutus based on pseudoscientific racism. Identity cards introduced by the Belgian colonial rulers in the 1930s rigidly codified Hutu and Tutsi as fixed immutable ethnic groups making divisions official and immutable. Colonial administrators privileged Tutsis in education, government and power exacerbating resentment among the Hutu majority. The assassination of Hutu president Habyarimana became the trigger, but the

groundwork had been laid by decades of systematic discrimination and hate speech.

### **Rohingya Genocide**

The Rohingya genocide is the Myanmar's military which is known as Tatmadaw's deliberate killing and systematic campaign of mass killings, sexual violence, arson and forced displacement against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine State. It has been recognized by the UN as a "*textbook example of ethnic cleansing*" and investigated as genocide by international courts, the atrocities have forced an exodus of over 1 million Rohingyas since 2017, giving rise to one of the world's worst refugee crises. The 1982 Myanmar Citizenship law deprived the Rohingyas of the citizenship status, leaving them stateless and subject to severe restrictions on movement, education and marriage. The Citizenship law divided the citizenship into three types- full citizenship, associate citizenship and naturalized citizenship with color coded Citizenship Scrutiny Cards reflecting each status. The Rohingya population had to go through forced labor, land confiscation, strictures on childbirth and many more such atrocities that exacerbated their marginalization. The state media and Buddhist nationalists labeled the Rohingyas as "illegal Bengali immigrants" and "vermin". The situation in Myanmar escalated when the Myanmar military Tatmadaw launched the "clearance operations" in 2017. These operations which came in response to the attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, quickly escalated into a full-scale genocide characterized by mass killings, sexual violence and the wholesale destruction of Rohingya villages. Within just the first month, over 6,700 Rohingya Muslims were exterminated, including more than 730 children, while enormous number of women and girls suffered rape and sexual violence through the hands of the military personnel. Entire villages were burned to the ground with satellite imagery revealing the targeted nature of these attacks as Buddhist villages remained untouched while Rohingya communities were reduced to ashes. The intention behind this genocide was rooted in decades of state-sponsored dehumanization of the Rohingya Muslims. The Rohingyas had been rendered stateless by Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship law. The narratives accentuating them as "illegal Bengali immigrants" reached a fever pitch in 2017 with military commanders issuing edicts such as "kill all you see". This violence forced over 740,000 Rohingyas to flee to neighboring Bangladesh where they joined earlier refugees in what has become one of the world's largest refugee camps at Kutupalong. Despite international condemnation and legal actions at the International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court, justice has remained elusive. Myanmar's military junta, which got hold of power in the 2021 coup, has shown no desire to solve these crimes. Instead continuing to confine Rohingyas to conditions similar to the apartheid. Today, a vast number of Rohingyas remain confined within squalid refugee camps in Bangladesh with no or little chance for repatriation or citizenship. Kutupalong along with Nayapara are refugee camps with the largest number of Rohingya Muslim refugees.

### **Lhotsampa Ethnic cleansing**

Lhotsampa are a heterogeneous group of people of Nepalese descent. These people settled in the uninhabited regions of Southern Bhutan. The Bhutanese monarchy and ruling elite viewed their cultural distinctiveness and growing number as an imminent threat to national unity. Bhutan introduced strict citizenship laws including the 1985 Citizenship Act which required corroboration of residence before 1958. The Lhotsampa term's literal meaning is the Southern dwellers. The state also used the medium of cultural assimilation and forced assimilation. For instance, one nation one people policy made compulsory the adoption of Northern Bhutanese culture. In order to adhere to the Bhutanese culture common dress

code was implemented with fines imposed on non-compliance of the edict and also the common language of the Lhotsampas, Nepali was removed as a language of instruction in schools, replaced by Dzongkha which many Lhotsanpas were not well versed with.

### **Impunity Of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) And Rapid Action Force (RAF) And Their Involvement In Violence In The Region.**

The Gorkhaland agitation is a long standing demand of the Nepali speaking Gorkha community to get a state of its own within the Indian union and this has been desecrated by cycles of viciously brutal state violence. At the center has been the impunity that CRPF and RAF have enjoyed that were repeatedly used in Darjeeling hills. Rather than promoting peace, these forces have only too often fueled violence and left behind a blood trail of trauma and mistrust.

The most violent agitation started in 1986, when Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) led by Subhash Ghising started a mass movement. During this period, more than 1,200 civilians were killed, not only as a result of high handedness by CRPF. Following the order of the state and central governments and specially under the decree of DIG R.K. Handa, CRPF had carried out extensive atrocities. People's houses were raided at night, unarmed protestors shot, and countless people were tortured. Handa's notorious "shoot-on-sight" instruction in the midst of the agitation, specially in Kalimpong and Kurseong, resulted in many extrajudicial killings both male and female, and even childrens were not spared. Eyewitnesses and human rights groups of the period talk about the streets awash in blood and bodies left there for hours as a warning to others. Meanwhile, the state was mum and gave the CRPF unlimited authority, which was synonymous to targeted violence.

In 2007, when the resurrection of the demand started after the spoiling of Gorkha-Gurkha Corridor issue, the cycle of impunity resumed with the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) mounted by Bimal Gurung. Though the protests turned out to be mostly democratic, the RAF was deployed again under the decree of DIG Ranveer Kumar. There were a number of injuries and deaths not recorded because the state narrative superiorly referred to the casualties as "collateral damage". Central authorities did not hold people into account for the widespread use of excessive force.

In 2013, as the UPA government announced Telangana as the 29th state of Indian union, the Gorkhaland movement was revitalized. The CRPF was deployed afresh, the paramilitary forces fired guns at them, more than 8 civilians were killed in Singamari, one of them being a 14 year old student. Instead of any underlying political and constitutional causes of unrest, the state would put aside the unrest as a law-and-order issue and justify the use of force.

2017, After the West Bengal government's decision to introduce Bengali language in schools, protests broke out. Once it started, the movement developed into a resurgent need for Gorkhaland. The CRPF and RAF were used in huge numbers, and again more than 12 civilians were killed. Reports from the local journalists and human rights activists alleged that the security forces used guns to shoot at unarmed demonstrators in Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Mirik. Not even ambulances were safe and cases of raiding of homes and beating up family members were recorded. These operations were justified by the government under the purview of maintaining the law and order, but in reality, this criminalized a legitimate political demand.

From one decade to another, different governments at the centre as well as those at the state level have viewed Gorkhaland as a threat and not a democratic claim. CRPF and RAF with impunity with the support of such an order as given by DIG Handa in 1986 and other DIGs from 2007-2017, resulted in the loss of

thousands of Gorkha lives. The state purported this as an act of law enforcement but in ground reality the Gorkhas were on the receiving end of this violence perpetrated by the state through the apparatus of CRPF and RAF.

## CONCLUSION

### Dynamics Of Violence

The violence is often seen as physical force used by individuals, groups, State and Non-state actors over some other groups or individuals to achieve certain goals. The violence used by individuals and Non state actors is often illegitimate in nature, which is confined within a certain vicinity thus, it cannot transcend the boundary of illegitimacy. However, in the context of a State it is different to that of individuals and Non state actor's use of physical force. Max Weber defines the State as “ a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” While many groups may use force, only the state can claim a legal right to do so, thus making coercion legitimate, a defining feature of political authority.

The implementation of coercive force has been gradually reducing since 1986 violent agitation for a separate state Gorkhaland, after that agitation, another took place in 2007 under the leadership of Gurung and the recent 2017 agitation which started with the imposition of Bengali language and ended with Gurung's downfall. Analysing these agitations , one imperative aspect to notice is the reduction in the use of brute force . Micheal Foucault in '*Discipline and punish*' traces how punishment shifts from spectacular physical violence to systemic, institutionalised control. Foucault highlights how the prisons, schools, hospitals use architecture, routines to normalise behaviour, in this process violence become less visible but more pervasive, embedded in institutions. Foucault redefines violence not as direct coercion, instead he emphasises the role of bureaucrats, institutions, and policies in maintaining societies through normalisation rather than violence. The 2017 agitation exemplifies this dynamic for instance when the movement started there was a strict protocol by the state of West Bengal that no employees were allowed to conjoin the movement nor can they disobey the rules. There was a word which became trending during 2017 movement “Gorkhaland Sympathisers” if government employees disobeyed the protocols they were seen as Sympathisers and put under scrutiny or one can say surveillance. The “Gorkhaland Sympathisers” were also transferred to the remote areas in the plains of West Bengal. Another retrospection of the movement of 2017 underscores the structured way taken up by the state in dealing with the violence perpetrated by the masses, where the people in police and armed forces from Nepali/Gorkha community were put in the front line so that the masses could not pelt stones at the police forces. Hence the state was successful in minimising the violence without the use of physical force.

There is also an ongoing discourse about the rights of the tea plantation workers in terms of minimum wages and land rights. A scheme “*Nijo-griha Nijo- Bhumi*” was launched on 18th October, 2011 by chief minister of West Bengal, the objective of this scheme was the emancipation of landless people by providing them 5 decimal land, henceforth, within the contour of the scheme an attempt was made to implement it in the GTA area (Gorkhaland Territorial Administration) in 2025 which is an autonomous body. K.N Subba (Ex-Councillor DGHC) condemns the attempt of implementation of this policy in the hills-dooars region. Regarding this issue Subba avers “the moment we accept the offer of 5 decimal land by government the whole history of Gorkhaland demand will be pointless because refugees are landless and by acquiescing the offer somehow we are also perpetuating misinterpreted history, we own this land our forefather build this place and planted teas or was there anyone else apart from Nepali community wh



o planted and build Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills?.”

Today almost every information is accessible through the internet, and with the gradual advancement in technology the state has also utilised technology in full capacity. If someone googled ‘People of Darjeeling’ in internet there will be very controversial results by internet, it makes a dichotomy between ethnicities and denotes Nepali(Gorkha) as a threat to the distinct identity and features to indigenous groups, such as Limbus, and Lepchas this is a clear attempt to spread communal schism among the people of hills. Ethnic politics is one of the most successful apparatus of the state as a catalyst for divide and rule, the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 exemplifies this dynamic. During the colonial era, Germany and later Belgium made distinction between Hutu and Tutsis in terms of physical characteristics (Tutsis were generally presumed to be light-skinned and tall, Hutu dark skinned and short) which gradually exacerbated ethnic tensions, resentful of each other and eventually resulted in an attempt of annihilation of Tutsis. State also exercises a degree of monopolised control over the technological facets of an individual life such as the internet and mobile networks. India can be characterised by a unique incident of shutting down the internet the most number of times, second after Myanmar which underscores the Indian state’s unrestricted control over putting stricture on the internet’s usage by its citizens. For instance, during the 2017 uprising in the Darjeeling hills the internet was shut down for over 2 months. Its ramifications resulted in academic loss for students as they could not access the internet for a protracted time which can also be deciphered as a form of intangible violence suppressing basic human rights related to right to information.

Through these movements one can look at violence from a different perspective, as a layman understanding of violence is confined only within the tangible form but various facets related to this movement accentuate about the various non tangible forms of violence orchestrated by the state against its very own citizens under the pretense of maintaining law and order.

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