

The GNLF Dilemma with Special Reference to Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Suchitra Awasthi

To start this paper by stating that India is a land of diversity will almost sound cliché. Nonetheless, it is one, and seeking unity in this diversity has always been the top priority of the nationalists. However, national integration cannot be accomplished easily in a country as diverse and divided like ours as various factions of people pledge their allegiance to a host of factors like religion, caste, ethnicity and the like rather than the concept of a unified nation. Ever since independence, most of the ethnic groups have been feeling that their ethnicity will be jeopardized at the cost of a homogeneous nation and, therefore, have been relentlessly launching movements to preserve their ethnicity. India has witnessed by a number of insurgent movements like the Khalistan rebellion in Punjab, the Naxalite- Maoist insurgency in Bengal, Orissa and Chattisgarh, the insurgencies in Kashmir and the North East, to name a few. In a country with so many dissenting groups who find it extremely difficult to find common grounds with others, national integration seems to be a Utopian notion. In order to consolidate the nation, time and again the Centre keeps adopting various strategies to rope in these various factions to the mainstream but the situation continues to remain complex and perplexing.

It is unfortunate that when at the negotiating table, peaceful dialogues between the dissenters and those in authority fail, the dissenters often resort to violence in order to achieve their demands. Very often the sporadic acts of violence take the shape of terrorism which is becoming a rampant global phenomenon today. Insurgency, ethnic cleansing, separatists movements are all synonyms under which terrorism stealthily functions. The word "terrorism" has several connotations. However, one of the most widespread forms of terrorism that functions today is political terrorism. Political terrorism can be termed as "the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property in order to coerce or intimidate a government or the civilian population in furtherance of political or social objectives." Today the media is rife with news on terrorism. Suicide bombers, jihadis, bioterrorism, chemical terrorism have become bywords of the modern day life. Terrorism looms large on our lives like never before and poses a threat to our national security. 9/11, 7/7, 26/11, are dates that send the alarm bells ringing in our ears. Terrorism has wide-ranging and far-reaching impacts; it affects us socially, economically, physically, psychologically and in many more ways. All these traumas that confront the modern day man have been captured poignantly and effectively by writers in their works. Be it the LTTE and the Sinhalese government deadlock, the Chechen wars or the Gaza crisis, writers from all over the globe have shown their sensitivity and concern for such monstrous and grueling phenomena. One such contemporary writer who captures the plight of a similar movement is Kiran Desai. In her Man Booker Prize winning novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* she takes up the sensitive issue of the Gorkhaland uprising and weaves it dexterously in her novel to tell a fascinating tale that "bounces between an insurgency in India and the immigrant experience..." -Time Out Mumbai.

Before we discuss how the Gorkha uprising is portrayed in *The Inheritance of Loss*, it

is imperative to understand the peculiar position of the three hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling, viz. Kalimpong, Kurseong and Darjeeling. The region of Darjeeling is strategically placed between Nepal and Bhutan and can be seen as a buffer zone in many respects. Before its acquisition by the East India Company, the region formed a part of Sikkim and Bhutan and briefly some parts of this region were also conquered by Nepal. Thus, it shares strong affinity of history, culture and heritage with these hilly regions rather than with Bengal.

With the coming of the Britishers, Darjeeling was soon annexed into the British empire as the Britishers were attracted to the region because of its strategic position, salubrious climate and immense commercial prospects. It is interesting to note here that the original inhabitants of this region were not Gorkhas from Nepal but the Lepchas, the Limbus and the Bhutias which were tribes of Tibeto-Burmese descent. However, with the passage of time, these tribes were outnumbered by the influx of the migrants from Nepal and gradually the Gorkhas formed the absolute majority in the entire Darjeeling District. This influx of the Nepalese was encouraged by the British for a myriad of reasons. Gradually these tribes which were culturally and linguistically different from the Gorkhas accepted Nepali as their lingua franca. Thus, homogenization on the basis of language gradually started taking place in the region.

When India gained independence in the year 1947, Darjeeling was merged into the state of West Bengal. However, the people of the hilly regions of Darjeeling did not find an affinity with the rest of the State in many respects. Here it would be appropriate to know that the people of Darjeeling had been demanding separation from Bengal since 1907 when the Hillman's Association which was an association of pro-British elitist Nepalese and aristocratic Tibetan and Bhutia families submitted a separation memorandum to the British Government. Thereafter, similar pleas were made by the association in the years 1930, 1931 and 1941. Similarly, in 1920, the educated Nepali middle-class of Darjeeling under the leadership of Parasmoni Pradhan demanded autonomy for the region within the province of Bengal. Shushil Chatterjee, a communist plainsman also fought for the cause of the Darjeeling proletariat and demanded autonomy for the Darjeeling region. The demand for autonomy reached its zenith during the last decade of the colonial rule when the Second World War had set in and the region was reeling under grave economic pressure. It was around this time that a new political party, the All-India Gorkha League led by Dambar Singh Gurung took centre stage and the aforementioned parties slowly waned out. Later in the year 1946 when elections for the Legislative Assembly in Bengal were held under the Government of India Act of 1935, Dambar Singh Gurung was elected from the Darjeeling general constituency. Dambar Singh Gurung along with Ratanlal Brahma, the young Communist leader of the District, sent a memorandum to the Constituent Assembly on April 6, 1947, stating the "demands for regional autonomy and projecting the issue of Nepali nationality in Darjeeling and in the adjacent areas in the context of the urgent socio-economic problems in the region..."

In the wake of partition, owing to several factors, the people of Darjeeling started raising demands for a separate state. This demand for separation gained further momentum in the early 1980s when Gorkhaland National Liberation Front, a militant organization spearheaded by Subhash Ghising came into the limelight. Ghising's fight

was for "his promised Gorkhaland" which included "all the hills and the Terai area of Darjeeling district which were ceded by Sikkim and Bhutan to the British between 1835 and 1865." With GNLF at the helm of affairs, Ghising sought the support of the King of Nepal and also sent petitions to some other allied countries and the United Nations seeking their help. From the very beginning the GNLF was a radical organization which had always been at loggerheads with the authority for Ghising believed that the only solution to all the ethnic problems of the Gorkhas was separate statehood. The GNLF movement gained momentum and emerged as an armed separatist movement from 1986-1988. During its heyday the GNLF with Subhash Ghising at the helm launched many bloody campaigns and indulged in many criminal and arson activities. As Asit Dasgupta in his paper "Ethnic Problems and Movements for Autonomy in Darjeeling" puts it:

It is clear from the seizure list of the West Bengal police that Subhash Ghising and his followers procured a considerable amount of unauthorized arms and ammunitions. After two years of confrontation (1986-88), they surrendered the following items: 6910 pipe guns, 101 SBBL, 66 DBBL, 5 rifles (.303), 12 revolvers (.22), 3 revolvers (.38), 5 stenguns, 54 SBML, 2 DBML, 554 imported pistols, 8 R/S pistols, 3 revolvers (.45), 58 hand grenades, 22 imported airguns, 63 imported canon, 1 rifle (.79), 1 rifle (7.62), 1 airpistol, 1 tear gas gun, 12 bore rifles, 38 special pistols and 38 MM grenade (7.16). They also surrendered the following items of ammunition: 45 artillery shells, 11,000 bombs and mines, 1000 detonators, 300 gelatin sticks and thousands of ammunitions for various types of firearm (54).

It is these turbulent times of the Gorkha uprising which forms the backdrop of Desai's novel. As the name of the novel suggests, the predominant theme of the novel is loss; loss as is experienced by the characters down the generations. In the course of the novel, all of Desai's characters experience some kind of a loss and this sense of loss keeps building up as the novel progresses entering into the culmination in the last few pages of the novel. All the major characters like the Judge, Sai, Gyan, the cook, Biju, Mutt, are vulnerable beings and embody the fragility of human spirit. Besides the above mentioned individuals, it is the land too that undergoes a feeling of loss as it is the North Bengal region of the mid eighties that forms the backdrop of Ms. Desai's novel.

The novel primarily traces the relationship between Sai, the orphaned granddaughter of a retired judge Jemubhai Patel who lived in Kalimpong, a small town in Darjeeling district, and her lover Gyan. As the novel progresses, the GNLF movement is shown reaching its peak. As the GNLF movement surges, life in the sleepy little town of Kalimpong starts falling apart. The movement takes a toll on the lives of the people and many unemployed youngsters of the region who had somehow been unsuccessful in engaging themselves creatively in life were eagerly drawn towards the movement probably with the hope that statehood would bring with itself better job prospects and thereby help the people of the region live a dignified life. One such youth is Gyan, one the protagonists of Desai's novel.

In the beginning of the novel Gyan is portrayed as a shy, soft-spoken young man from a lower middle-class family with whom Sai falls in love but as the movement builds up, Gyan is projected as a rebel who is embittered about being treated as a second-class citizen in his own land. As the movement escalates Gyan is shown getting torn between love and "the greater cause". All of a sudden he becomes conscious of his

identity as a Gorkha and is embittered seeing the plight of his fellow brothers and sisters. As he gets conscious of his identity as a Gorkha he starts hating everything anglophile. He is "shameful of tea-parties, queen cakes..." Even Christmas which had become an Indian festival over the years starts bothering him. This weird behavior of Gyan leaves Sai bewildered for she fails to understand Gyan's predicament.

Gyan was of Nepalese descent. His father had served in the British army and had died in the war of Burma. He himself was a graduate but as he was unable to find a decent job for himself, ended up being a tutor to Sai for a meager amount. Kalimpong, his native place, the land he grew up in, gave his youth to, is unable sustain him in any way. As a result of this, he is left disillusioned. Dejected at the sorry state of affairs in his hometown Kalimpong, he goes to Calcutta in order to find a job for himself where he has to face an interview. Gyan was in desperate need of a job and had all his hopes pinned on this job but as he enters the interview room, he was hit by delusion and is left groping in the dark for one more time. Desai captures Gyan's hopelessness in the following words:

Everyone looked hopeless, the men in the room and the interviewer who had finally turned the shuddering light off- "Voltage Low"-and conducted the interview in darkness. "Very good, we will let you know if you are successful." Gyan feeling his way out through the maze and stepping into the unforgiving summer light, knew he would never be hired. (159)

Here Gyan represents those typical marginalized youths who find themselves in a similar quandary and feel doubly jeopardized both by the outsiders who greedily devour their lands, jobs, environment, their everything! and also their own people and the authority who simply seem incapable of resisting such outside forces and suffer at their hands silently. As youths are susceptible to violence, they are often seen falling prey to it and the discontent that arises inside them in such situations eventually bursts forth in the form of revolts. The GNLFF movement was one such movement in which the embittered and enraged youths showed their resentment by organizing protest marches, delivering fiery speeches, burning effigies and organizing mock funerals. Desai encapsulates the wrath of the people when she depicts an angry protester clambering angrily up on a bench and remarking:

...At that time, in April of 1947, the Communist Party of India demanded a Gorkhasthan, but the request was ignored...We are labourers on the tea plantations, coolies dragging heavy loads, soldiers. And are we allowed to become doctors and government workers, owners of tea-plantations? We fought on the behalf of the British for two hundred years. We went to East Africa, to Egypt; to the Persian Gulf...We fought in World War Two. In Europe, Syria, Persia, Malaya and Burma. Where would we be without the courage of our people? We are soldiers, loyal, brave. India or England, they never had cause to doubt our loyalty...we are Gorkhas. We are soldiers. Our character has never been in doubt. And have we been rewarded?? Have been given compensation?? Are we given respect?? (158)

The step motherly treatment by the State government and the apathy on the part of the Centre set the disgruntled youths on fire and they go on a rampage, plundering tea-gardens, disrupting normal life and taking streets by storm. Throughout the movement there were violent armed confrontations between the State police force which sent terror waves in the region, thereby taking a toll in the lives of the people. The

novel captures this horror of the times in the following lines:

The incidents of horror grew, through the changing seasons, through winter and a flowery spring, summer, then rain and winter again. Roads were closed, there was curfew every night, and Kalimpong was trapped in its own madness. You couldn't leave the hillsides; nobody even left their houses if they could help it but stayed locked in and barricaded. If you were a Nepali reluctant to join in, it was bad... If you weren't Nepali it was worse. If you were Bengali, people who had known you your whole life wouldn't acknowledge you in the streets. (279)

In order to garner support from the masses, the Gorkha front demanded each family to send a member who could represent them in the protest march. Kiran Desai captures the anguish and apprehension of the masses towards the movement when she shows a majority of the people making excuses in order to avoid participation. For instance, when the GNLF supporters come to Gyan's house asking him to participate in the liberation march, his grandmother dismisses the protestors by cooking up an excuse saying that Gyan was suffering from dysentery. She does so in order to save him from joining the protest march. Similar indifference can be seen in the case of other people too who produced fake medical certificates so that they could escape the march. This lack of participation of the masses shows general indifference of the people towards the movement which hints at the idea that when it comes to the masses, all they need is a peaceful existence. As it is evident from the novel, the mid eighties was a horrific period in the history of Bengal. It was a period when in North Bengal people suspected each other for being a Nepali or a Bengali. Hatred bred inside them like never before. In the novel when Lola, a Bengali goes to the market to buy eggs the local shopkeeper Bholu shows his reluctance to sell eggs to her by saying that they have been "presold". Throughout the novel, it has been Ms Desai's endeavour to bring forth the loss experienced by the characters either in a direct or in an oblique manner. The outsiders are targeted for being intruders as is witnessed in the case of Lola and Noni who are publicly humiliated by Pradhan of GNLF when both the sisters go to complain against the encroachment in Mon Ami. Pradhan goes to the extent of sexually harassing Lola when he made the following statement-

'I am the Raja of Kalimpong. A raja must have many queens. He jerked his head back to the sounds of the kitchen that came through the curtained door. "I have four, but would you," he looked Lola up and down, ripped his chair back, head at the comical angle, a coy naughty expression catching his face, "dear aunty, would you like to be the fifth?" (244)

Similar harassment is also faced by Father Booty, an illegal Swiss immigrant who had been living in Kalimpong for forty-five years and was now being forced to flee the country. When Sai learns about the humiliation faced by Father Booty, her anger knew no bounds and an uncontrollable fury she landed at Gyan's house and assailed him verbally saying that Father Booty, although a foreigner, had done more for the people of the region than any local could have ever thought of doing.

She further reminded him of the lectures Father Booty had delivered to the locals on dairy farming and made demonstrations on how mini dairies on Swiss pattern could be created in Kalimpong as well.

Not only are the outsiders like Lola, Noni and Father Booty targeted by the GNLF

activists but even the Judge's cook's son, Biju, a local chap who is homeward bound after going through a hellish existence as an illegal immigrant in the ghettos of New York, is stripped off his clothes and belongings by the GNLF insurgents.

This episode epitomizes the fact that the GNLF movement which started as a movement for the formation of Gorkhaland deviated from its objectives and dwindled into mere anarchy and hooliganism. The novel is rife with examples that project the GNLF movement as a bloody and chaotic movement. The supporters of the movement are shown looting houses and creating terror among innocent people.

Be it the fault on the part of the faulty policy makers or apathy on the part of the government, the agitation hampered peace, tranquility and the economy of the region. The three Ts: Tea, Timber and Tourism which had been significant contributors to the economy of the region were seriously disrupted. Ms. Desai has shown her sensitivity towards such upheavals and links it with a sense of loss. She examines the trauma and the agony the movement and the toll it takes on the inhabitants and dexterously weaves it into her story of love, love lost and the immigrant experience. However, Kiran Desai has been lambasted by the residents and many critics for showing the seamy side of the movement and has also been labeled as "outsider...who made the whole town...strange." How far is Kiran Desai successful in portraying the GNLF movement objectively? I leave it to the reader to decide as it lies beyond the purview of this paper. Nonetheless, Hemali Sodhi, head of marketing for Penguin in India comes to Desai's defence when she says, "We see the book as pure fiction and these views are not an issue for us or Ms. Desai." Whatever Ms. Desai's contention are, but on a close examination of the novel one will find that she has tried to adhere to the theme of loss whether it be the loss of the natives, the outsiders.

In the course of the novel, Miss Desai also refers to some important historic events associated with the movement. For instance, she sheds light on the signing of the historic Indo-Nepal treaty between Mohan Shamsar Jung Bahadur and the Indian ambassador Chandreshwar Narayan Singh on July 31, 1950 which was later burned. The novel also has references of the referendum held in the region which was skillfully maneuvered by Indira Gandhi when all the Nepalese who had flooded Sikkim voted against the King. However, it seems that Desai is not merely giving us an account of these historic episodes but is making her stand clear when one of her characters LolaLola remarks, "This state making, -biggest mistake that fool Nehru made. Under his rule any group of idiots can stand up demanding a new state and get it, too...From fifteen we went to sixteen to seventeen, seventeen to twenty- two..."

She further remarks-

...Separatists movements here, separatists movements there, terrorists, guerillas, insurgents, rebels, agitators, instigators, and they all learn from one another, of course-the Neps have been encouraged by the Sikhs and their Khalistan, by ULFA, NEFA, PLA; Jharkhand, Bodoland, Gorkhaland, Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Kashmir, Punjab, Assam...(128 - 129)

With GNLF at the helm of affairs of the region, the region witnessed many political upheavals which subsequently led to the signing of the Darjeeling Hill Accord in 1988. According to this historic treaty, the GNLF would give up their demand for

Gorkhaland. Thereafter, Ghising wanted the hill council excluded from the national law on Panchayat Elections. His efforts were backed by the late PM Rajiv Gandhi who introduced a constitutional amendment the same year to exclude the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council along with several other North East hill states but it did not come into effect. The year 1992 saw the passing of the 73rd amendment “which seemed to show a newly serious commitment to the idea of local self-government by Panchayats.” The amendment excluded all the hill areas except Darjeeling. Ghising threatened to boycott the village Panchayat elections mandated by the amendment but a sizable portion of his party refused to boycott and split under the leadership of C. Sherpa to form the All India Gorkha League which won a sizeable number of Panchayat seats.

Since then the GNLF has witnessed many upheavals and has ramified into many other organizations. However, the fate of the GNLF movement like so many other insurgent movements around the globe is in flux. Be it the Naxalite movement or the Maoist movement, they all started as people’s movement. Full of high hopes and promises, they all seem to have gone wrong either at the inception or during their respective courses. The GNLF movement started with the objective of attaining a separate state for the Gorkhas but with the passage of time, as the demands of GNLF were not met, they adopted violent means in order to attain their goals and wreaked havoc on the lives of the innocent people including the natives, thereby disturbing the peace of the quiet hill region. Till date the GNLF dilemma looms large and the issues that confronted the region still remain unresolved.

As a matter of fact, the movement seems to have petered out in the twentieth century. The Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council elections that were to take place in 2004 were cancelled and Subhash Ghisingh was appointed as the sole caretaker of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council till the Sixth Schedule council was established. As a result of this move, the former councilors of DGHC like Bimal Gurung, who was once a trusted aide of Ghising and Prashant Tamang were left disgruntled. Bimal Gurung floated a new party the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha. After remaining silent for almost seven years, Ghising announced that his party would contest the West Bengal Legislative Assembly elections in 2011. However, all three of the GNLF candidates lost the elections held in April 2011.

Why did the GNLF movement fade out? Why did a movement that started out as a people’s movement get bogged down into a dirty political skirmish? What will of the dreams and aspirations of so many Gorkhas who saw Gorkhaland as a panacea become? Will Gorkhaland ever be created as a state in the political map of the country or will its fate be the same as the fate of the region as depicted in Kiran Desai’s *Inheritance of Loss*? These are some of the questions that demand an answer, an answer not in words but in action.

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