

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Settling the Gorkha issue

After two years of violence, calm has returned to a strategic area in India's northeast, at last.

The prospect of calm and unity returning to the lush green hills of Darjeeling has brightened with the signing of a tripartite accord between the central government, the West Bengal government, and the Gorkha leaders, promising an end to the two-year-old violent conflict that had taken hundreds of lives and made a shambles of the already weak economy.

Unfortunately, in the atmosphere of political holy war stirred up in Delhi by an opposition whose appetite has been whetted by scandals and blunders by the government, this achievement of the Rajiv Gandhi administration has not received its just due.

The "Memorandum of Settlement," signed in Calcutta on Aug. 22 by Union Home Minister Buta Singh, West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, and Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) chief Subhash Ghising, gave the Gorkhas what they sought most: their identity. The accord recognizes the Gorkhas who had settled in India before 1950 as Indian citizens, as distinct from those who migrated to India from Nepal under the Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1950. Those who came after 1950 will have to apply for Indian citizenship and sever all connections with Nepal.

The accord is a rational conclusion to the agitation which began in 1980 and became violent in 1986. In 1986, the Gorkhas demanded a new state called "Gorkhaland," carved out of West Bengal. The demand involved the hill districts bordering Nepal, Sikkim (a part of India), and Bhutan. In April 1986, the GNLF activists began to put pressure in the Darjeeling hill

district, which depends heavily on tourism-related business. Major clashes began between the Communist Party of India (Marxist) workers, who controlled the tea garden unions, and the GNLF. Local businessmen were not spared, and tourism virtually halted.

The violence hardened the stance of the government of West Bengal as well as New Delhi's. The demand for "Gorkhaland" was a non-starter. On July 27, 1987, during talks with Subhash Ghising, Prime Minister Gandhi made it clear that there would never be a division of West Bengal. Meanwhile, having ventured onto the path of violence, Ghising began to realize that the extremist elements were trying to take over the Gorkha movement and give it an anti-India bias. In mid-1987, the West Bengal government adopted the Terrorists Disruptive Activities Preventive Act, with the presumed aim of rounding up and detaining extremists.

The conflict had to be resolved politically. Even as violence rocked the hills in 1987 and early 1988, Ghising persisted in talks with the government in New Delhi, reiterating his faith in the Union and the democratic process. He managed to keep control over the leadership amid growing demands for more militancy within the Front, and dropped the "Gorkhaland" demand in favor of the concept of a Hill Council to administer the area on a semi-autonomous basis. At a July 10, 1988 convention in Darjeeling, Ghising won a mandate from his supporters to negotiate the demand for a Hill Council to a final agreement with New Delhi

and the West Bengal government.

For India's government, the violence in the Darjeeling hills was a matter of serious concern. The area runs along Nepal, and the borders are mostly unmanned. There have been regular reports of arms coming to the Gorkhaland fighters from Nepal, and of the extremists slipping into Nepal to avoid arrest. Since Nepal's entire northern extremity borders Tibet, there were hints that the People's Republic of China may begin fishing in these troubled waters. Although the Nepal government had always denied sheltering GNLF activists or supplying them arms, the rumors continued. Just before signing the accord, New Delhi sent Foreign Minister Natwar Singh on a special mission to Nepal.

In truth, the Gorkhas did not need a foreign hand to provoke them. The hills were neglected by Delhi, and in fact, little development had gone on there in the last 40 years, even though the area supplies one of India's major foreign exchange earners—fine Darjeeling tea. It still has very little agro-industry, for which it is well suited. There is no university, no engineering college, no medical or agricultural college—nor even a forestry research center, despite the area's rich endowment of forests.

Under the accord, a Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) has been set up, with jurisdiction beyond the Darjeeling Hill district proper. Its autonomous character is reflected in the clause which states that, subject to central and state laws, it has the powers pertaining to "allotment, occupation, or use or setting apart of land, other than any land which is a reserved forest, for the purpose of agriculture or grazing, or for residential or other non-agricultural purposes or for any purpose likely to promote the interest of the inhabitants of any village, locality, or town."