

From Indian Idol to Gorkhaland

Springsong Cooper

Abstract:

After spending my first two months in Kalimpong, watching the phenomenon that an Indian Idol contestant created in bringing Nepalis around the world together, I wanted to know why he was so successful in uniting the masses. In the following months a new Gorkhaland (Independent Nepali state within India) movement was birthed and I was curious if the national pride inspired by Indian Idol was the catalyst for the revived demand for Gorkhaland. Furthermore, I wanted to know if people voted for the Indian Idol contestant in hopes that if there was a Nepali victory the rest of India would acknowledge the Nepali presence in India and give them their own state, Gorkhaland. Then for those who do not need Gorkhaland, Nepal Nepalis and Sikkimese Nepalis, I wanted to know what their motivation was for voting.

Finally, as I began my project and political rallies and strikes in favor or against a new Gorkhaland party started happening regularly, I decided to explore people's perception of the new movement, their attitudes toward the 6th Schedule (a memorandum that would give Darjeeling a self-governing council, as well as prioritized status and provisions for scheduled castes,) which is currently waiting to be voted on in Parliament, and if people were hopeful of the new party's efforts to demand Gorkhaland. I found that not only was the unity Prashant garnered a catalyst for the revived Nepali identity but that the endorsement and backing of the new party leader, Bimal Gurung,

came from his participation in creating and leading the Darjeeling Prashant fan club. The people have grown disillusioned with Subash Ghisingh, the former Chairman and Chief Executive Councilor of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council because in the past 20 years the council has failed to accomplish anything for the people of Darjeeling. No development has taken place and Gorkhaland, a dream that people following Ghisingh's leadership sacrificed their lives, livelihood, and time for in the 1980s has been compromised and forgotten, leaving the people instead with a plate full of political corruption.

Consequently, it makes sense that Prashant became the light at the end of a dark tunnel, a son of the Darjeeling hills, representative of the Indian Nepalis, broadcast for all of India and the world to see. For the first time, the Indian Nepalis had something to be proud of, Prashant's win was their triumph over India, a sign that they too are Indian and deserve recognition. From this pride has come a renewed demand for Gorkhaland, a Nepali state within India so that the issues and needs of the hill regions will be prioritized and so that the Indian Nepalis of Darjeeling can enjoy the same opportunities as the rest of Indian citizens. Most people see the sixth schedule as an attempt to divide the people into tribals and non-tribals with special status given to the tribals and as a sell-out replacement for Gorkhaland, which is why there has been such a strong force of opposition. There is currently a divide between the parties and only the future will tell if the people can stay united in their demand for an independent state. The field of study my ISP falls under is Political Sociology.

Introduction:

I made Kalimpong my main field site as it was in Kalimpong that I had witnessed the hill people unite in a single cause, to ensure their Nepali contestant become the next Indian Idol. Interested in why the Sikkim support for Tamang was so strong, even endorsed by the chief minister, I spent ten days in a rural village and four days in Gangtok speaking to people about Indian Idol and Gorkha identity. In Kalimpong, I spoke with two Nepal Nepalis so that I could understand their motivation as well. In my research, I used the following questions:

- Prashant is not from Nepal or Sikkim so why did Nepalese Nepalis and Sikkimese Nepalis vote for him?
- Do you think before Prashant won Indian Idol, all Nepali people were unified?
- Before Prashant was Indian Idol, what was the perception of Nepalis in India?
- Why did all Nepalis support Prashant?
- Do you think after Prashant became Indian Idol, the perception of Nepalis in India has changed?
- Did you vote? How many times?
- Do you think money and time spent voting for Prashant was wasted?
- Do you think money spent voting for Prashant could have been used for a better purpose?
- What do you think about the comment the FM radio jockey made in reference to Prashant Tamang and Nepalis as watchmen? "Shopkeepers will now have to make their own security arrangements as Gorkhas have taken to singing". He made the remark on his new program, 'Khurafati Nitin', on Red FM in the wake of Tamang emerging as winner of the 'Indian Idol' television talent show.
- What do you think about the Siliguri jaggada (conflict) that took place after the FM radio comment was made?

- Do you think that because Prashant Tamang won Indian Idol, Gorkhaland is now possible?
- Do you think Gorkhaland is important for Indian Nepalis?
- Do you think Gorkhaland is important for all Nepalis?
- What do you think about the new Gorkhaland party?
- Do you think the 6th Schedule is good or bad for Indian Nepalis?

Important Terms

- DGHC: Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council formed 1988
- GNLF: Gorkha National Liberation Front formed in July 1988
- CPI: Communist Party of India
- Gorkha Janmukti Morcha: new party that Bimal Gurung formed when he was expelled from the GNLF, its main objective is Gorkhaland
- Sri Subash Ghisingh: former Chairman and Chief Executive Councilor, DGHC, presently Administrator
- Siliguri: the largest city in the Darjeeling district, located in the plains.
- Busty: village
- Bhandh: strike
- Ek thiyo: unity
- Crore: ten million
- Gorkhaland: an autonomous Indian state for the Nepali Darjeeling region

- Khukuri: traditional and religious weapon that is an inalienable part of Gorkha culture
- Sixth Schedule: a memorandum of Settlement between the government of India of West Bengal and Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council for creation of a new self-governing Council for the hill areas of Darjeeling District.

Research Methods

My research really began my first week in Kalimpong, as I experienced the Indian Idol phenomenon with the hill communities; I talked to people, observed or participated in the rallies, free voting booths, protests, and read relevant newspaper articles. Although I was limited by my inability to read Nepali newspapers, I made sure to read articles from various English newspapers so that I was reading a variety of opinions. I also had some of the Nepali articles translated to see if the sentiment was similar or different. I read the Nepali Times, The Telegraph: Sikkim and West Bengal, as well as the Times of India. When our Independent Study Period officially began, I started by meeting with Dr. Chettri (a professor at Cluny College in Pedong). I had wanted to study Prashant's win in light of the ongoing effort for Gorkhaland and he was very knowledgeable about the 1980's Gorkhaland movement.

Then, as my research went on and the new party formed and politics started heating up, I met with Dr. Chettri again and he informed me that he was traveling with the new party leader, Bimal Gurung, giving speeches throughout the hills. When I started I wanted to talk to Nepalis from Sikkim, Nepal, and Darjeeling to get different perspectives on the Nepali win as well as to understand while Nepalis from Nepal and Sikkim were so supportive of the Darjeeling Gorkha. I interviewed teachers, college professors, students, grandparents, and *dokaan* (store) owners who had offered free voting booths. I supplemented my research with books and articles written about Gorkha identity and the 1980's Gorkhaland agitation movement. I was getting similar answers from everyone that I spoke with so at the end I met with Dr. Dhakal, principle of Kalimpong College, for an intellectual perspective. He had given us a lecture on Gorkha identity earlier in the semester and I am quoting his paper, so he was a good resource and had an interesting take on the Prashant Tamang and Gorkha identity. Then, in the final days of my research I was referred to a Morcha party member that my friend had met at the hospital and he had a wealth of knowledge and ideas to share with me, starting with the history of Nepalis in Indian, all the way up to the current political situation.

Prashant Tamang: A Nepali Phenomenon

The Day of the Idol~ The voice that united hill people~ Frenzy spills on to streets~ Our identity crisis ~ Idol worship~ From music to mayhem in a matter of minutes~ Day of brick, baton, and bullet~ Shots and teargas to quell warring crowd~ Residents' plea for peace~ Fans call hill strike~ 'Hurt' sentiments hold Siliguri hostage~

What do these headlines share in common? Interestingly, they are all in reference to the aftermath of an Indian Idol finale, a popular televised music contest take-off from American Idol. Their connection will shed light on how a TV show contestant succeeded in uniting an ethnic group scattered around the globe. After arriving in Kalimpong, I saw a few posters and heard rumors that a Darjeeling contestant had made it to the top ten in Indian Idol. I had not known there was an Indian Idol show and found this take-off of American Idol to be quite humorous. Yet, it only took a few weeks before I too was enthralled and supportive of the humble Nepali contestant from Darjeeling, Prashant Tamang. Although, I would argue it was my interest in Nepali culture that led to my fervent interest. My family and almost every person I interacted with agreed with the sentiment, "because of Prashant Tamang, we [Nepali people] have been able to stamp our identity on the consciousness of India and the process has united our

people scattered across the globe¹,” as Tenzing Khanbachay, the president of Prashant Fan Club Darjeeling, stated.

Prashant’s Nepali ethnicity is important in light of the history of the Darjeeling region and the region’s century-old struggle to be recognized as an autonomous state. This demand has been around since pre-independent India but has yet to be granted. One of our lecturers, Ms. Sharda Mukhia, explains that after Independence India was divided into ethnic states and that Darjeeling was given to West Bengal even though it shares nothing in common with the rest of the state. The people have been frustrated because there has not been any development in the Darjeeling region and the people are suffering because of the lack of job opportunities. Mukhia hypothesizes, “Maybe we are neglected because we are different from Bengalis.”

These sentiments of neglect led to a mass movement in the Darjeeling hills during the 1980’s that culminated in a violent agitation. This movement, headed by Subash Ghisingh, called for an independent Nepali state, Gorkhaland. Darjeeling did not want to be separate from India they just wanted to have their own state because they believed if they had their own state then development would be prioritized and their aspirations would be fulfilled. Also, Gorkhaland would give Nepali-speaking Indians who are often dismissed as Nepali citizens their own

¹ The Telegraph: Vivek Chettri

identity. Mukhia described how Ghisingh was seen as a messiah who had come to save the Gorkhas and that in the Nepali dominated areas he received one hundred percent support from the people, as all walks of life joined together to demand Gorkhaland. Subash called for a seventy-two hour strike against the Government on May 12, 1986, which was a total success. In desperation, the Government tried suppressing the movement by deploying police forces, resulting in indiscriminate killing and intimidation tactics. Then on July 27, 1986, a massacre took place in the Kalimpong bazaar. This day is referred to as "Black Day," as the losses devastated the hill region.

In another attempt to get the Government's attention, Subash called a forty-day strike in February 1988. As life came to a stand still, closing of businesses, schools, and roads, people started to question whether the strike would be effective and if Gorkhaland was worth the sacrifice. The region had suffered economically and educationally, food was scarce, and many people died. After the strike ended, the Nepali people split into two groups and started fighting each other. The agitation culminated in a compromise that was made on August 22, 1988 between Subash Ghisingh and the government, resulting in the creation of the Gorkha Autonomous Hill Council, with Subash Ghisingh as "caretaker." Many Nepalis were not satisfied with this compromise

but after more than a year of strikes and violence they were willing to give the Hill Council a chance.

Indian Idol

The first two months of my semester in Kalimpong revolved around Prashant Tamang and Indian Idol. Three nights a week I would stay up past my usual nine p.m. bedtime to sit around our small black and white television with my family and neighbors to watch and cheer on our Nepali representative. Prashant was the topic of most conversations, and I wondered what people had talked about before him and what would happen if he lost. In the final four weeks of the contest, a phenomenon took place with Nepalis around the world uniting and showing their support by donating money for text messages to ensure a Nepali win. An article in the Nepali Times explains, "Prashant epitomizes the shared geography, shared history, shared lingua franca of Nepalis no matter what their passport."² The whole hill region of Darjeeling, as well as Sikkim, was plastered in posters urging people to vote for Prashant.

The Indian Idol winner is chosen "by the people" or by the number of Indian rupees the people are willing to pay. Each text message and land-line vote cost three rupees and voting was

unlimited. I worried that voting for Prashant was going to cripple the already struggling economy of the hill region of Darjeeling. For the final show, voting was opened for a week, and the Nepali people took on the challenge whole heartedly. Twenty-four hour voting booths were opened, schools collected money from the students, and contributions were sent from Nepal and abroad. Rajesh Ghatani describes the sentiment, "If only we could have voted from Nepal, we would have flooded India with text messages, instead people from Nepal came down to the Darjeeling hills in droves with money to buy recharge cards which they distributed among dedicated volunteers.³" In the final week alone, seven *crore* votes were received (a figure higher than the region's population), the equivalent of seventy million Indian rupees or approximately five million dollars. Afterwards, the president of the Prashant fan club in Darjeeling said, "we must dedicate this victory to those people who parted with their days earning and voted for Prashant."⁴ People joked that they may not have money for the upcoming holiday season but at least they had Prashant.

I watched the final show with fifty neighbors at the neighborhood *dokaan* (store) where everyone gathered around the large color television and quality speakers, sitting in chairs, on the hillsides and on the ground. In the final hours before the winner was

² The Telegraph

announced there was an excitement and unity in the air that I have never experienced. I felt part of the community as I held hands with my sisters in anxious anticipation. Then in classic Kalimpong style, the power went out fifteen minutes before the announcement was made. Cell phones were pulled out and those who had any money left made calls to friends and family. Everyone said Prashant had won. Firecrackers were going off in the bazaar (where the electricity had stayed on) but in our village we still did not know for sure. The electricity came back on at one a.m. and by early morning everyone was celebrating the Nepali victory.

Prashant sang "Gorkhali," the unofficial Gorkha anthem during the Indian Idol grand finale. By the next morning, those lyrics could be heard echoing throughout the hills.

Gorkhali ko choro ma... (I am a Gorkha son)
Gorkhe mero naam, (Gorkhe is my name)
aai lagnay satru ko ma garchu kaam ta maa (I will destroy the person who tries to destroy me)
Itihaas paltai hera (History is taking a turn, watch)
Ya purkah lai sodhha (Ancestors listen)
Jitay kai chaau sansar laii (My win is a win for the world)
Aaru ko jastai dukkha cha hamilaai (Others give us the same problem)
Nir dai ta hoinahami pani (We are not heartless)
Bir, bir, bir, gorkhali (brave, brave, brave, Gorkhali)

Nepalis in India are historically known as the brave Gorkha soldiers who fought in the British and Indian armies. They chose to be called

³ The Telegraph

⁴ The Telegraph

Gorkhas to differentiate their identity from the citizens of the state of Nepal. Prashant was able to use this famous military song to show that Gorkhas are not just military victors, but that Gorkhas are also cultured and capable of winning music competitions. When Prashant sang these words, his voice became the voice of every Gorkha. He proudly acknowledged the Gorkha triumph, an Indian Idol victor, for all of India to hear and see.

In honor of the win, Sikkim announced a two day holiday and Kalimpong a three day one. Sikkim and Darjeeling worked together to ensure a Prashant victory. "Indian Idol brought the Darjeeling hills and Sikkim together; it was if the Teesta and the Ragit, the two rivers that separate the regions had dried up,⁵" describes a local resident. This is important because there had been a rift between Sikkim and Darjeeling, in the sense that Sikkim has accomplished what Darjeeling has been unsuccessfully trying for over a century, statehood. Prabin Muktan writes in a short essay titled *Transferred Jealousy*, "That the people here [Darjeeling] saw their own lack of progress in relation to the fast forward momentum that statehood had imparted to the neighboring state of Sikkim." Sikkim is an independent Nepali state within India, which has enjoyed rapid development, a growing economy, and job opportunities, whereas in Darjeeling development is

⁵ The Telegraph

yet to take place, the economy is hurting, and to find jobs many people have to leave for the plains. Yet for Prashant Tamang, the two regions came together and instead of Darjeeling comparing itself to Sikkim they worked together for a common cause, a Nepali victory

Siliguri Jaggada

The Nepali pride and feelings of earned self-worth did not last long. It was spoiled a few days later by a FM radio jockey's comment that if Nepalis were becoming Indian Idols, who are going to be our watchmen? Nepalis are stereotyped as people who are soldiers, policemen, and watchmen, as if they are not capable of more skilled professions and arts. Nepalis were outraged at this insult and attempt to dampen their victory spirits, sparking a series of rallies and protests throughout the hills. In Siliguri, approximately five thousand people marched in a procession from Darjeeling More to the office of Siliguri subdivisional officer Smita Pandey, where a memorandum to Pandey in reference to the radio slander was submitted. Before long a riot broke out. Fifty people were injured, businesses ransacked, and Siliguri issued a curfew in efforts to create calm. The details of what actually happened vary from report to report. The North Bengal and Sikkim section of the Telegraph newspaper printed the following account:

"I was at my shop watching the rally go past peacefully when suddenly something seemed to go wrong badly said Sanjib Biswas. I saw a

scuffle break out and some boys and men from the locality attack those in the procession. People got beaten up as stones were thrown and then some in the rally went berserk in retaliation."

The Statesman told a different story:

"Trouble erupted after supporters of Prashant Tamang, who had brought out a rally in the town against offensive remarks passed by a radio announcer allegedly, heckled two women in front of the Siliguri hospital for walking through the rally to fetch medicine from a nearby shop. They also held up the movement of an ambulance carrying a serious patient to the hospital."

The Prashant Fan Club called a 12 hour general strike across the hills the next day to protest against the flare-up in Siliguri and Bimal Gurung, a GNLFF leader from the Singamari Tukvar area and an adviser to the fan club, said: "We protest against the incidents that took place in Siliguri. Strong action must be taken against the FM station, failing which we will take to the streets."⁶

The news of the clash even made an appearance in the New York

Times on October 1, 2007:

Violence ignited by a disc jockey's derogatory remark about the winner of the "Indian Idol" show led to a show of force by hundreds of Indian troops and the police in eastern Bengal. At least 30 people were hurt during clashes on Friday between the police and fans of a television contest winner, Prashant Tamang, 24, an ethnic Nepalese. Nearly 2,000 supporters marched in a procession to lodge an official protest after the unidentified disk jockey referred to Mr. Tamang as a "guard" one of the jobs frequently held by ethnic Nepalis who live in areas that were once part of Nepal and have emigrated to India.

I do not expect the New York Times to understand the century long identity crisis and demand for Gorkhaland but I found the article

flippant and misleading. First the clash was not just between the Prashant fans and the police, as there was Bengali public participation as well. Also, for Nepalis who have been living in this area for many generations and hold office jobs, business jobs, as well as police and guard jobs, it is an insult when a comment is made stereotyping all Indian Nepalis as guards.

I interviewed my daaju's (older brother) daughter who is currently a student in Siliguri. She told me that she watched the rally take place, and Nepali students from different schools and colleges had come to participate in or to watch the rally. All of a sudden, a scuffle between the public (Nepali and Bengali) and police broke out and people started running. Later, a curfew was enacted, enforced by the army. She mentioned that the army was using tear gas and that she was really scared. For two days after the clash, she said it was uncomfortable and unnerving for Nepalis living in Siliguri. She even noted that some Nepali students returned to Darjeeling, Kurseong, and Kalimpong in police escorts because they were scared to stay in Siliguri. Interestingly though, she did attribute the blame to the Nepalis for not moving from the road when an ambulance attempted to drive through. When I asked her about the Bengali attitude toward Nepalis in Siliguri, she explained that there is a divided opinion; half of

⁶ The Statesman: North Bengal and Sikkim

Bengalis have a positive image of Nepalis and the other half a negative image. Yet, at the same time she felt that the Bengali people agreed with the FM radio sentiment. Acknowledging Prashant's contribution to the Nepali image in India, she said, "now people know there are Nepalis in India, Nepalis are also here." For her Gorkhaland is now possible because of the newly recognized Nepali presence in India. She also made an interesting observation that Gorkhaland is now possible because of the unity Prashant created. The song Gorkhali that he sang on the Indian Idol finale instilled in the Nepali people a renewed hope for Gorkhaland. Therefore, now the Nepali people will work for Gorkhaland because they know "we need to do something. Nepaliharu aphno haat ahile" (Now it is in the hands of Nepalis). Her analysis of the situation contrasts the commonly held belief that Prashant's victory will make India grant Nepalis their own state. People think that now India can see what Nepalis are capable of achieving and contributing, whereas in her belief, Nepalis are now united and with a new consciousness they can work together to achieve Gorkhaland.

The Nepali Identity Crisis in India

What can Prashant's victory tell us about Gorkha and Nepali identity? How is it that he was successful in uniting Nepalis around the world? Let us begin by exploring a brief history of the Gorkha or Indian

Nepali. The Nepalis of India are called Nepalis because for ethnic groups like Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Magar, Tamang, Newar, ect...who were living and working together in tea plantations. There arose a need for a common language so that the workers and their families could communicate. "The collective consciousness that was germinating among the Nepalese in Darjeeling found its support in the Nepali language.⁷" Today, this collective consciousness makes the Indians of Darjeeling an inclusive ethnic group. "The terms 'Gorkha' and 'Nepali' are used synonymously to mean the nationality of those who are Indian citizens either by being indigenous peoples of the region or those who migrated to India and adopted Indian citizenship and nationality," Dr. Rajendra Dhakal explains in his essay, *The Urge to Belong: An Identity in the Waiting*. However, the India-Nepal treaty of Peace and Friendship signed in 1950 created a conflict for Indian Nepalis. Since the treaty allows Nepalis to freely travel to India to work and vice versa, assumptions are made that the Nepalis living in India come from Nepal and have migrated to India for work. In actuality, many Nepalis living in the Darjeeling region and their families have lived in this area since Darjeeling was annexed to Nepal in the 19th century. Therefore, though India is their home and they were a huge contribution to the Independence movement, as many

⁷ The Gorkhas: A glance at their culture and traditions Pg.11

Gorkha lives were lost in the fight for Independence, the Indian Nepalis or Gorkhas are not treated as Indians but as foreigners, as Nepalis. Consequently, the Nepalis in India identify with the word Gorkha as a way of differentiating themselves from Nepalese Nepalis. This identity crisis among the Indian Gorkhas has become one and the most important of the reasons for their current fight for a separate state of their own within the Indian Union.

Sikkim Votes for Prashant

From interviews I conducted with people from Nepal, Sikkim, and Darjeeling, it was apparent a large portion of Prashant's support came from the fact that he is a native Nepali speaker. For ten days of our semester, we stayed in a rural village in West Sikkim called Labdong. There are approximately 50 families in the village, one road, no doctors, four cars, and four or five televisions. I was convinced that Indian Idol and Prashant Tamang would not be found in this remote village, but I had miscalculated how far the Nepali support reached. By my second day in the village, my baabaa (Labdong host father) was walking around chanting Prashant Tamang, and even though he had not watched Indian Idol he supported the Nepali star. Curious, I started asking other people and found out that the four or five

televisions in Labdong had all aired Indian Idol. On Indian Idol nights people from all corners of Labdong would hike up to those houses and gather to watch. Since the trails are difficult to travel on during the day, let alone during the night, people would stay over at those houses or the neighbor's houses on Indian Idol nights and then return home in the morning. Also, there are a few cell phones in the busty, so people would pool money together and then use the available cell phones to vote. Therefore, even in the rural villages people found ways to show their support.

In Kalimpong and Darjeeling, there is the sentiment that people voted because Prashant was the newest hope for Gorkhaland but Sikkim is already an independent Nepali state so why were Sikkimese Nepalis so supportive? The answers I received from eight or nine residents were all similar, "because he's Nepali, he's a Nepali keta (boy), or he sings Nepali songs." I spoke with one boy in Labdong who was Bhutanese and had been living in a refuge camp in Nepal. He told me that he liked Prashant Tamang because they were "justai," the same. His last name was also Tamang, so even though he was from Bhutan he felt as though Prashant was his brother and went on to say "Indiako laagi Nepali Tamang jityo raamro chha," (For India a Nepali Tamang win is good). Most people that I spoke with told me I needed to talk to one of the other student's baabaa because he had spent

seventeen hundred rupiyaa voting, the equivalent of half a month of his salary. When I met with him, he elaborated that he voted for Prashant because his songs made him happy. He thought Prashant was important because Prashant's father had died and now he works as a security guard in Siliguri to support his family. Also, he acknowledged that Sikkim and Darjeeling are chimeki (neighbors) so it was important for Sikkim to support their neighbor. He concluded by saying that Nepalis have been living in India and finally now in India there is a big Nepali voice/singer. Labdong is a poor busty without much connection to the urban population but even so they contributed what little they could to support Prashant. One boy told me he had saved up so he could vote seven times, which would have cost thirteen rupiyaa. I knew although this was an insignificant amount in the scheme of seven million votes, for him this was a sacrifice and showed how important a Nepali representative was for the people.

The interviews I conducted in Gangtok with teachers, professors, young adults, and government employees shed light on the attitude of Sikkimese Nepalis and their relationship with Darjeeling Nepalis. Two teachers from the Master's School told me that they voted for Prashant because they identified with him and that Sikkimese Nepalis are not any different from the rest of Indian Nepalis. Then, they went on to say, "Well in some respects we are different but it was for the Nepali

sentiment that we voted.” They acknowledged that Prashant winning Indian Idol had changed the perceptions that Indians have of Indian Nepalis, pointing out that before Prashant the FM radio stereotype was the general perception of Indian Nepalis. One of the teachers commented, “They might be thinking Nepalis are quite backward but now after Prashant, they know what we are capable of accomplishing.” When I asked if they had voted, they both emphatically answered yes and then elaborating, they confided that every teacher in their school had donated three hundred rupiyaa from his or her monthly salary to fund voting. Also, the school had collected money from each student and donated the total sum to an organization that offered free voting. I do not understand how this region was able to part with twenty one crore (ten thousand) rupiyaa, so I asked if they felt voting for Prashant had financially hurt the hill region. Their response was that Sikkim was not financially hurt because they had not voted madly like Darjeeling. Also, when I asked if the money could have been better spent on something else, they said people voted from the emotional side so it was not a waste as it showed that Nepalis people are united at heart.

The most intriguing part of the interview was when I raised the subject of Gorkhaland. I asked if they felt Prashant had been more successful in uniting the people than Subash Ghisingh had been in the 1980’s and if Gorkhaland was now possible. The response I received

was, "about that political field (Ghisingh and the 1980's) we have no idea." Which they followed up by saying "we cannot express ourselves here (school). That political field is limited to the Darjeeling area and doesn't apply to Sikkim." They also said that whereas Gorkhaland is for the Darjeeling region, Prashant is idol for India as well as for all Nepali speaking people. They concluded the interview by saying that now because of Prashant; they feel connected to Nepal and Nepalese around the world.

The interview I had with a twenty-five year old Sikkimese Nepali, who is currently working in Bombay as a movie director and did not vote for Prashant Tamang, I found particularly interesting. When I asked him why Sikkim voted for Prashant, he replied that there is not a difference between Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Sikkim. The only difference is geographical boundaries. In response to "were Nepalis one before Prashant?" he answered they were not for one reason; Nepalis have their own work and are very individualistic. Yet, after Prashant, all Nepalis joined together, worked together, and now they are one. He also made an interesting point that Nepali people living in India are insecure and it was because of their own insecurity and inferiority complex that they voted so much, "Prashant's talent was a voice to people's insecurity." Yet, he went on to say in reference to the Nepali watchmen stereotype, "It is a profession like any other.

Biharians also have a certain kind of profession and are treated like this but Nepalis have this tendency to take it seriously so then we react like this." During the final months and weeks of Indian Idol he was working in Bombay. He explains this is why he did not vote, "I didn't know that Prashant was getting so much encouragement, so much popularity here because people here are going crazy and I didn't know anything about it. I didn't vote because I thought he was a normal singer, I didn't think he was extraordinary. I liked Amit more than him. I did have a feeling that he was Nepali and I should vote but I knew if he had to win he would win and my vote would not do anything." Even though he did not vote for Prashant, he did not think that the money spent by Nepalis had been wasted. He comes from a wealthy family, so I feel that his perspective could have been skewed but he said, "People have a lot of money, people are rich, so they can afford it, and if they are happy now then it is ok." I asked if he thought that the money could have been spent on a better cause and he made a good point saying, "Now, after he has won we can say that the money could have been spent elsewhere but if he had not won we would say that we should have voted more." He also said that it may have been wasted money but we can not complain because at that time people were going crazy and that it was not a mistake, people voted intentionally.

In regards to the Siliguri incident, he placed the blame on Nepalis saying that the Nepali people created such a ruckus and Prashant won so it was not necessary to do all those things (rallies) in Siliguri. He also went on to say that Siliguri is Bengali and not a Nepali territory, "Nepalis don't belong to Siliguri as much as Bengalis belong so they have no right- if someone comes from outside and creates something over here we will obviously complain so Bengalis have the right to do it." The new Gorkhaland party would disagree. At a rally on December 9, near Siliguri, they announced that they are extending their claim for Gorkhaland to include Siliguri and the Doars. Party leaders explained that Siliguri and the Doars had both historically been inhabited by Nepalis; therefore these areas were integral to their demand for a separate state⁸. The interviewee also went on to say, "Nepalis get too emotional, we get too emotional, all emotions and nothing else. After some time it will all die down and people will continue normally." As a Sikkimese Nepali, he did not understand or agree with the Nepali effort to be recognized by the state or Centre government.

I asked if he thought Gorkhaland was possible now that Prashant has won but he responded, "I don't understand...I don't understand this Gorkhaland concept. I am not aware of those politics." We started

⁸ The Statesman: North Bengal and Sikkim. December 9, 2007

talking about Gorkhaland and I explained that the Nepali people of Darjeeling also want their own state, like Sikkim, because their language and needs are different from the rest of West Bengal. Then, he went on to say that he thinks they have been asking for “this thing” for a long time but he did not know how it was working out. He did think that it would be better if they could get a state of their own, with their own Chief Minister, like Sikkim, because geographically Sikkim and the Darjeeling district are the same size so it is big enough to make it a state. I concluded the interview by asking him what the general consensus of Sikkimese Nepalis toward their neighbor’s (Darjeeling district) efforts for an independent state and if they supported them as they had supported Prashant. He responded honestly that he thinks people in Sikkim are too selfish to actually help people across the border with “this thing” because otherwise Darjeeling would have a lot of support. He goes on to say, “We could read it in the newspapers in Sikkim, stating we support Gorkhaland but I have never seen something like that, we are not ready to pronounce that we support Gorkhaland.” In the following weeks, Sikkim government officials did issue statements regarding Gorkhaland but there have not been any openly supportive remarks.

Nepalis Vote in India

The Nepalis that I interviewed are currently living in India, but one has only been here for a few months and the other a few years. When I asked them why they voted for Prashant, they responded that Prashant is a hill Nepali, which connects him to Nepal's hill Nepalese, that his relatives were Nepali, and that he sang Nepali songs. Therefore, it was as if he was their apnno (own) Nepali. They both acknowledged that before Indian Idol the Nepali people had not been unified but after Prashant Tamang Nepalis from abroad, Sikkim, Nepal, and India were one. One of my informers had been living in Nepal and it was only right before the final week of Indian Idol that he came to India. He said that he only started watching after Prashant had made it into the top ten because by that time all Nepalese Nepalis knew about and supported Prashant. He voted thirty or forty times that final week with his own money and two of his friends had sent three hundred rupiyaa from Nepal for him to vote. Yet, he clarified that he only found out at the last minute that he was coming to India and did not have time to tell all his friends or else they would have all sent him with money to vote- such was Nepal's support for Prashant.

Kalimpong Residents (The local perspective)

Although I knew the general feeling of Kalimpong residents regarding Indian Idol, I wanted to explore in depth so that I could really understand the motivation behind their support. I interviewed the two *dokaan* owners that offered free voting in my *busty*. One of the *dokaan* owners is a priest and I found it amusing that even the priests had been infected with Prashant fever. In Kalimpong, the local television station had aired a *puja* (a Hindu religious ceremony) that was performed for Prashant. The priest used a picture of Prashant to bless and even gave the picture a *tikkah* (a Hindu religious mark that is worn on the forehead). Although my *dokaan* priest did not perform a *puja* for Prashant, he was very supportive, talked about Prashant during breaks in his *Pujas*, and the final night danced and sang along to the four hour Indian Idol grand finale. As every person I interviewed said, the *dokaan* priest reiterated that the Nepali people had not been one before Indian Idol but after Prashant Tamang there was Nepali unity. When I asked why all the Nepalis had supported Prashant, he said it was because he is our blood and all Nepali people are one. His *dokaan* offered free voting, some of which was paid for by the Prashant fan club, and the rest, seventeen hundred rupees, came out of his own pocket. He did not think the money had been wasted. His view is that because Prashant is Indian Idol, Gorkhaland is now

possible since, "all the Nepali people are *ek thiyo* (one)." The other *dokaan* owner had twenty-three hundred rupees worth of votes come from his *dokaan* and house; twelve thousand from the booth and eleven thousand from his cell phone- fifteen thousand rupees of which was his own money. He also felt that the money had been worth it because "Prashant's win was our win." In addition this *dokaan* owner believed that Prashant's success led to the revived hope for a Nepali state in India.

Indu, a professor at Cluny College in Pedong, Darjeeling was not a regular viewer of Indian Idol. She did not even know there was a Nepali contestant on the show. Then, once Prashant made it into the top ten, she started voting because she wanted to support the contestant from her own "neighborhood." Also, Indu recognized that Prashant was inspiring a collective feeling among Nepalis. She explained that before Prashant each group of Nepalis were involved in their own works but supporting Prashant brought people together and showed the potential of Nepalis. Indu dismissed the FM radio comment as only representing the views of a few people, a mere misconception. She liked the way people came together for Indian Idol but regretted the aftermath that resulted in the Siliguri clash. In reference to the large sum of money that was spent on Indian Idol SMS voting, she said that since Prashant won the money was worth it. Indu concluded

that she is not a political person; rather she is more concerned about harmony. Also, she is not convinced that the hill region's problems would be solved if Gorkhaland became a state. Finally, she said she is supportive of moving forward if Gorkhaland did not have to come at the loss of education and life.

Bimal Gurung, Morcha party, and Sixth Schedule

An entire Independent Study could be done on the current political situation in the Darjeeling hills, yet I feel that Prashant Tamang and the Nepali unity he inspired was the catalyst for this new movement. Therefore, I am going to try and make the connection and shed light on the recent happenings without going to in-depth. I want to start with Bimal Gurung and his involvement with the Prashant fan club. He was one of the brains behind the club, as well as the club secretary. The Darjeeling Nepalis, for the most part, have become discouraged with the GNLF and its inability to accomplish anything for the people in the last twenty-one years. Bimal Gurung was aware of this discontent and when Prashant started gaining fame, he backed the movement and was both a creator and active member of the Darjeeling Prashant Fan Club. Subash Ghisingh, GNLF chairman and DGHC caretaker administrator, on the other hand did not utter one word of support for the Nepali candidate that was gaining popularity

daily. Informants that I spoke with said Ghisingh could not handle Prashant's popularity, as he was the first Nepali who was supported across party lines and geographical borders, a fame Subash had not yet himself enjoyed. People could not understand why even Sikkim's Chief Minister had endorsed Prashant but their own supposed leader of the Darjeeling Nepali people had not. Meanwhile, Bimal Gurung, who was currently a GNLFF leader, was gaining recognition as he led the Darjeeling effort to ensure Prashant's victory. Conveniently, he was expelled from the GNLFF for "anti-party" activities on October 4, 2007. Not long afterwards he used the support he had elicited from the Prashant fan club and floated a new party Gorkha Janmukti Morcha. The new party had one main objective; Gorkhaland. It was the revived sense of Gorkha identity that led Bimal to renew the demand for Gorkhaland, as stated in the following news article, "In the past few days, Gurung has reminded people that Prashant is synonymous with the identity of the hill people and that Ghisingh had never come out in his support."⁹ Yet, unlike many of the people I interviewed who said they believed Gorkhaland was now possible, "The hill opposition believes that a 'greater movement' than the one launched for Prashant Tamang- The Indian Idol 3 winner- is needed to achieve Gorkhaland.

⁹ <http://sikkimnews.blogspot.com/2007/10/bimal-gurung-forms-gorkha-janmukti.html>

It should be based on collective leadership.¹⁰ Unfortunately, at this time unity is far from actuality.

After Morcha was formed, other GNLFF opposition parties offered their support as the pro-Ghisingh and anti-Ghisingh divide was created. Morcha is adamantly opposing the sixth schedule, a Ghisingh creation that is a memorandum of Settlement between the government of India of West Bengal and Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council for creation of a new self-governing Council for the hill areas of Darjeeling District. On the other hand, the GNLFF is full-heartedly supporting the bill and trying to quickly introduce and pass the bill in Parliament. Morcha is arguing that the bill is a sell-out for Gorkhaland and that it will divide the Nepali people along tribal and non-tribal lines. A spokesman for the Morcha party, Madan Tamang described the "revolt" within the GNLFF as a "healthy sign" and urged people to unite saying "The Centre and the state are trying to play the Sixth Schedule card to disrupt the unity seen during the Indian Idol voting."¹¹ Also, opposition to the Sixth Schedule comes with the belief that the bill is not suitable for the Nepali people as it only applies to thirty-three percent of the population. The Telegraph in an article written on December 3, 2007 legitimizes this concern by stating "A sample check carried out in

¹⁰ The Times of Indian, Kolkata November 27, 2007

¹¹ <http://www.kalimpong.info/category/general/page/2>

October 2005 by the registrar general of India revealed that 31.4 per cent of the population residing in Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council areas are Scheduled Tribes." Ghisingh on the other hand is quoted as saying "The new demand for Gorkhaland that has come up is only an obstacle for the greater and better issue of Sixth Schedule. How can those who don't understand Sixth Schedule understand Gorkhaland?" He believes that the Sixth Schedule is "first-class and fittest (sic)" for the hill people¹²" and that instead of dividing the Nepali people it will unite them. Ghisingh himself happens to be a scheduled tribe so the Sixth Schedule would be beneficial to his career. Many members of Morcha are also members of scheduled classes but they do not support the Sixth Schedule as they feel it will divide the Nepali people and that the West Bengal and Centre governments are pushing the bill to assuage the people's demand for their own state. Finally, there is a clause in the bill that states the Sixth Schedule is the full and final settlement between the Darjeeling region and the Government of India, which many take to mean after the bill passes, the Government will refuse to entertain requests for Gorkhaland.

Dr. Chettri agreed whole heartedly that the new Gorkhaland party, Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, came out of the Nepali unity and publicity created by Prashant's Indian Idol win. He elaborated that

¹² The Times of India: November 26, 2007

Prashant inspired ethnic nationalism and that the Darjeeling community used Prashant as a weapon against Subash Ghisingh. Since Ghisingh did not support Prashant, they argued that he did not support the Nepali people. Dr. Chettri believed that Ghisingh did not support Prashant because he could not handle that Prashant was becoming more popular than him. Chettri is adamantly opposed to the Sixth Schedule; he believes that people who are not tribals will lose their property rights as the Sixth Schedule will impact the inheritance of property and business licenses. He also feels that the government moved the bill into Parliament, after Indian Idol, in an attempt to squelch the new Nepali unity because he insists the Sixth Schedule will create a divide between the tribals and non-tribals, the newly established haves and have-nots.

Dr. Dhakal offered a different perspective. He acknowledged that the Prashant Tamang phenomenon occurred because of the Indian Nepali identity crisis, stating that people are overly sensitive about identity. He attributed this to the fact that even today proper history of the region is unwritten, so people question whether they are immigrants or migrants. Dr. Dhakal believes both are true, sighting the Sugauli treaty of 1816 as the origin of the Indian Nepali identity confusion. In 1816 the British helped Sikkim defeat Nepal, a defeat that cost Nepal one third of their territory, including the Darjeeling

region. So, out of gratitude the King of Sikkim gifted Darjeeling to the British. Dhakal added that others argue the British usurped the land through trickery. Regardless, through this exchange of Darjeeling, many Nepalis share the belief that “we came along with the land.” Another component of the treaty was that it allowed Britain to recruit Nepali Gorkhas for military service, which brought many Nepalis to India. Then, after the British had control over Darjeeling and started planting tea gardens in 1835, an influx of Nepali immigrants came for work. Dhakal emphasizes that in the census of 1901 there was already a Nepali majority in Darjeeling. Yet, one hundred and fifty years later, Nepalis still have to prove that they belong to India. Dhakal blames the government, highlighting that there is always an emphasis on from the government to prove that the Nepali people of India are from Nepal. Nepal is a country where people speak Nepali and the Gorkha Indians speak Nepali, so they must be from Nepal.

Consequently, the question for Gorkhas has been, “how do we establish our identity?” Then, Prashant Tamang showed up on Indian Idol. No one expected a Nepali contestant and it soon appeared that a Nepali victory would be one of the easiest ways to establish their identity. Dhakal agreed that the revival of Gorkha identity was the catalyst for the new Gorkhaland party, as most people felt that the GNLF had betrayed them. Also, he felt that a new political scene was

arising because people who had been quiet before are now coming out and voicing their opinions. Throughout Darjeeling, there have been peace rallies and forums that are speaking out against strikes, a first for the region. Yet, in reference to the Sixth Schedule, he believed there have been a lot of misgivings and misunderstandings from both parties and did not think the bill would be detrimental to Nepali unity. His opinion was that if the bill was passed the effects would be neither a great advantage nor greatly harmful because he said there is enough protection for non-tribals. He continued by agreeing it will not fulfill Gorkhaland, but that if the Sixth Schedule is passed it does not mean that five years down the line, the people could not renew their request for Gorkhaland. Finally, he pointed out that the Sixth Schedule is only a bill and like all political settlements, it is not permanent. So, if there is political movement in the future, the government will have to respond, regardless of the status of the Sixth Schedule.

While discussing my Independent Study with my younger brother, a nineteen year old upper secondary student who is currently finishing Class twelve, he told me he did not like the topic of Gorkha politics. I asked him why and he told me that very few people know the facts associated with Gorkha politics, so it would be difficult to get any knowledgeable answers. I found this to be true, no one that I talked with besides Dr. Chettri had even read the Sixth Schedule, but I

was not as concerned with the concrete facts. I was more interested in people's feelings toward Gorkhaland politics and their own Gorkha identity. Another of his misgivings about my topic was that he felt people are afraid to discuss politics as they fear that statements made against the current ruling party could bring trouble to them and their families. After witnessing the air of tension and intimidation during the five day strike in Kalimpong, I understand his opinion. Vehicles that chose to drive during the strike had broken windows, clashes took place in the bazaar, sending many people to the hospital, and people would only talk in private places about party politics. Yet, once in private places, every person I talked to, regardless if they liked politics or not, had their own opinion and were willing to talk. I found this to be the case because in Darjeeling politics affect every individual's daily routine. Here in the United States, people are often apathetic about politics because they do not have a strong impact on their lives. In Darjeeling though, party politics can close roads, schools, and businesses so it is understandable that each person would be concerned about the political situation.

Conclusion

The people of Darjeeling have grown disillusioned with Subash Ghisingh, the former Chairman and Chief Executive Councilor of the

Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council. In the past twenty years, the council has failed to accomplish anything for the people. There has not been any development and Gorkhaland, a dream that people following Ghisingh's leadership sacrificed their lives, livelihood, and time for in the 1980s has been compromised and forgotten, leaving the people instead with a plate full of political corruption. Consequently, the third season of Indian Idol became a means to further a nationalistic goal. Prashant became a national symbol, the light at the end of a dark tunnel, a son of the Darjeeling hills, representative of the Indian Nepalis, broadcast for all of India and the world to see. For the first time, the Indian Nepalis had something to be proud of, Prashant's win was their triumphant over India, a sign that they too are Indian and deserve recognition. From this pride, came a renewed demand for Gorkhaland, a Nepali state within India, ensuring the prioritization of the issues and needs of the hill region. If these aspirations are fulfilled, the Indian Nepalis of Darjeeling will enjoy the same opportunities and recognition as the rest of Indian citizens. Most people see the Sixth Schedule as an attempt to divide the Nepali people into tribals and non-tribals with special status given to the tribals and as a sell-out replacement for Gorkhaland, which is why there has been such a strong force of opposition. Currently, the Sixth Schedule has been deferred to a standing committee, a mini triumph for the opposition

parties but the GNLF is still hopeful the bill will be passed in the coming session of Parliament. The current divide between the parties is destroying the unity that arose from Indian Idol and only the future will tell if the people can stay united in their demand for an independent state, Gorkhaland.

Springsong Cooper is a student at Pitzer College. This paper reflects experiences in the Pitzer in Darjeeling program in Fall 2007.