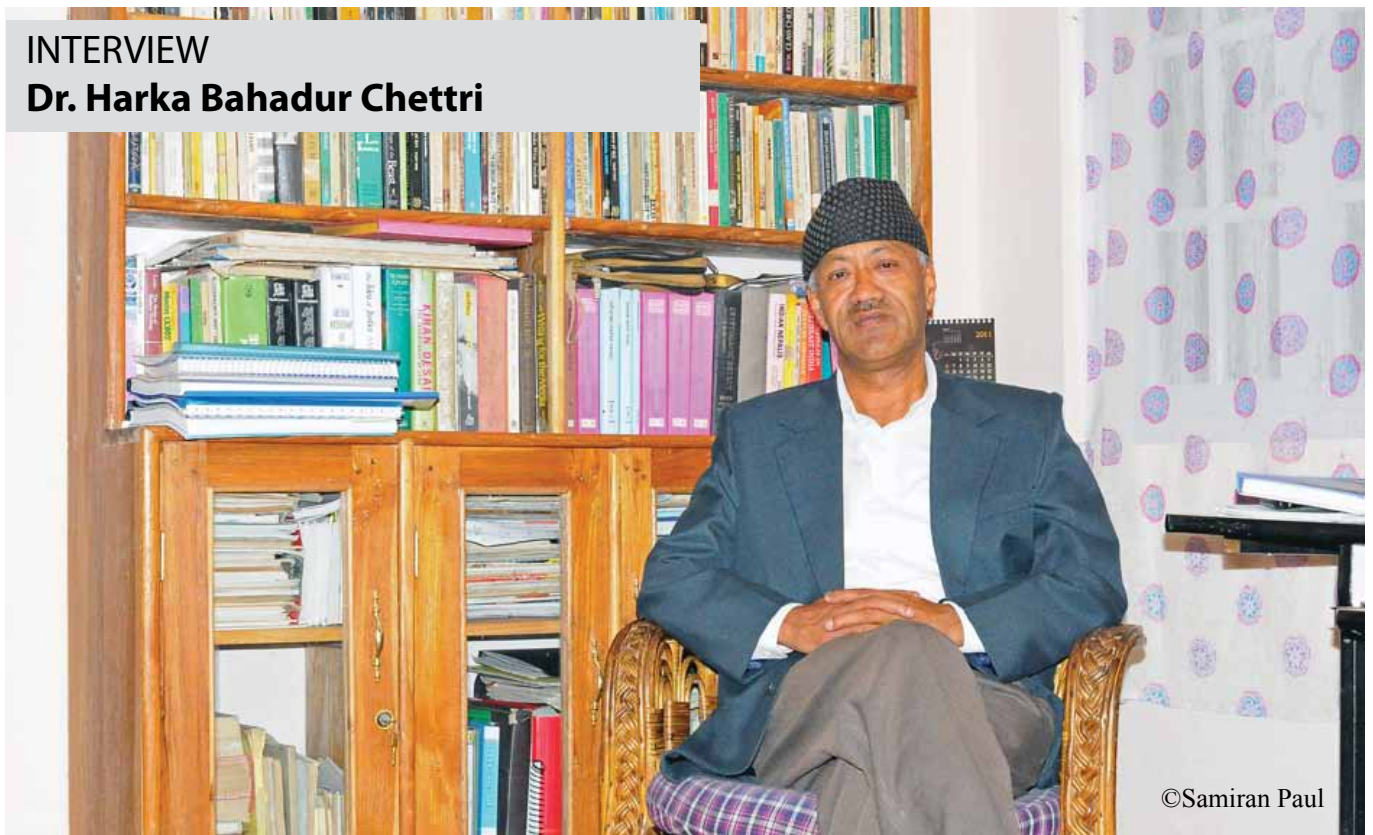


**INTERVIEW**  
**Dr. Harka Bahadur Chettri**



**Media secretary, spokesman and most likely the new GJMM MLA from Kalimpong, Dr. Harka Bahadur Chettri is the intellectual face of the GL2 movement. Prabin Moktan, fellow alumnus of FLATFILE, the literary journal from Kalimpong, met up with Dr. Chettri and spoke to him on a variety of issues**

**One accusation leveled against you, given the history of your political involvement, is that you are a kind of a party-hopper. But we know you have a ready explanation for that. Could you care to enlighten our readers?**

There are two kinds of people who make that comment. My traditional detractors who need something to talk about me or against me. And there are those who are politically not conscious or concerned, who just hear what people have to say and form their opinion on the basis of that. But whoever has seriously followed my career in politics will realize that I joined a party for an issue. I never compromised with the issue, so there is this consistency about the issue with me. Whenever I left a party, it was because I felt the issue could not be reached by my being there in the party, that is why I left it.

**People who know you appreciate you for walking the talk. There are those who complain about the system but don't go beyond that. You have however fought elections even though you knew you didn't stand a chance of winning. That was probably to score a symbolic point. But now that you will be making it to the assembly do you feel that there is a danger of your representation still being symbolic, especially with that talk of resigning etc?**

I don't think so. Because you see this is for the first time that we

will be talking at a place where it matters you know. Resigning, that was one position which we had taken but only in case if we were not allowed to raise the issue. If we feel that this place is not meant for us, if we feel that our being here is not going to further the cause in that case there is no point unnecessarily just being in the chair. This kind of thought had never been in the minds of those elected in the past. People made lot of promises but they forgot the issue and spent their term quietly, doing you know their own work or whatever. But that kind of a stance never went in favor of the people. What we have decided is that if we fail to make a mark or leave a mark or further our issues ...there is a movement side by side...we will come back and join the movement...and leave the chair.

**Why do you think did your party decide to contest the WB elections? For a party spearheading a movement to carve out a separate state, won't that at some level send out the message that there is no escaping (please pardon that turn of phrase) from West Bengal?**

On the contrary what I would like to tell you is that what if we had remained outside elections, what would have happened? The other parties would have participated for whatever number of votes they could get. Remember there is no minimum in a democracy. Even with 1% vote we have seen Mohan Dukhun

being elected. So we would be sending two different signals. On the one hand we are spearheading the movement and on the other hand the legitimate voice...by whatever percentage the guy would have been voted in, would have been that of someone else. So even the government would have told us you are not the legitimate voice, somebody else represents the people of the region so you don't have that right, you don't have that mandate so you cannot represent those people. In which case I think the agitation would have become very weak. That's the reason why we called for an all party meeting. There we realized that everyone was ambitious, regardless of whether they had popular support or not. Nobody came with an open mind. No one said that since you are spearheading the movement, since you enjoy the support of the majority so someone from your side should be there. Nobody came up with that suggestion. Everyone seemed ambitious you know. Everyone was expecting that his or her party would get that candidature. Then we realized that this was not on. The whole consultation thing was a mistake so that's the reason why we decided to fight our own election. And then we consulted our people also and after interviewing a cross section of the people, the unanimous decision was, since Morcha is leading the movement, Morcha should send its representatives.

**Keeping political rhetoric aside, do you think there is any merit or honesty in Ghising's pronouncements that GL is not possible given the current reality of the Indian body politic and that the hills are better off with the sixth schedule status, which at least has a constitutional guarantee? How is the alternative that your party envisages more viable, better?**

Well so far Ghising is concerned I should not be so rude on him, but judging by his track record he is better explained or better described as a political joker and nothing above that. The Sixth Schedule chapter was closed immediately after the 13th Lok Sabha was dissolved. In the third tripartite GK Pillai the present home secretary categorically said that the issue of the Sixth Schedule is shelved. That was the statement of the Government of India, he had the mandate of the GOI. Now Sixth Schedule is meant for a specific region for a specific category of people. It has never traveled this side of the Brahmaputra. In our case it was like giving unequal treatment to equal kind of people. There are other anomalies there. I am not going into those details. But so far as the question of constitutional guarantee is concerned, it is just to mislead the layman. Even the interim which was a temporary setup had legislative power and until and unless you have constitutional guarantee where do you derive your legislative power from? So compared to the 45 departments in the 6th schedule, the interim had 84 departments with power to create jobs, with power to appoint, which was not there in the 6th schedule. And the most dangerous thing in the Sixth Schedule was the leader would have been chosen either by succession or by nomination. There was no question of you know, democratically electing the leader. So how can a civilized society accept that kind of formulation where your democratic right goes for a six?

**Do you think the demand for GL has a sell-by date? Or will it forever remain an emotional issue that political parties will cash in? Between identity and livelihood which do you think will the people ultimately choose, especially in case of prolonged attrition?**

I agree with you. And what is identity after all? How does this question arise...you know...why people support the cause of identity? There are a number of factors which contribute towards creating an identity. What Morcha is trying to do is, during the 11th round of talks we tried to include everything that a State controls in the interim. We tried to snap every tie that this region had with the State. The only contact was the governor. Otherwise the financial freedom, the administrative powers, the legislative power, everything, lock stock and barrel we managed to get. And remember that this was only the interim...our aim was...that when we settle for the final thing it should be one step above what was agreed in the interim. Also the home minister, minister of state for home, our MP himself, they were unanimous in the idea that the Union Government must contemplate on a Union Territory status for the hills. So to begin with this interim thing was not a bad thing after all. The Morcha's effort was to create a boundary separate from Bengal and in a sense a boundary creates identity. Regarding this boundary, we have made the GOI agree to send a joint verification team to verify Gorkha majority areas in the Terai and Doars. There is a precedent for that - 95 Bodo majority villages in Assam have been included in the Bodo Territorial Council. Even Mamta Banerjee recently in an interview talked about Greater Darjeeling to include Doars and Terai. The sixth schedule that Ghising is harping on would have put a seal on the boundary issue and Siliguri and Doars would have been excluded. We are forcing a rethink on the territory and that I think is a victory of the Morcha.

**There are some who feel that had the DGHC been an island of good governance in the chaos of West Bengal, that itself would have strengthened the case for GL? Another point of view is that even WB had a very big hand in maintaining a colonial relationship with the hills, especially with the help of their compradors in power here. Be that as it may, why is it that good governance has always eluded the hills?**

This is a serious question. This is a serious question and in fact in my recent speeches I have been very rude at places where I have told that after 21 years of DGHC look at the pipe lines. The water supply system is in chaos. You have failed even to properly supply water and you claim that you can run a separate state. So this work culture should return. I am certain that DGHC could have done a lot with proper governance, but look at the kind of people he selected. This is where our whole difference with Subhas Ghising and GNLFF lies. He selected the most inefficient, the most inept and corrupt people. This was because he did not have good intentions. He wanted the people to suffer. He wanted the people to be always running after him for something or the other. The logic was, don't solve all their problems and then they will come to you. Look at the Asthaya Karmacharis, he could have made them permanent.

But once a person gets a permanent job, then he wouldn't run after the party. He would have less time and less reason also. Ghising with that kind of a policy wanted to remain in power till eternity. But good governance is the most important thing right now and if Morcha fails in this, I think the whole movement will fail.

**When the GJMM swept the hills the support it garnered was as much for the GL demand as it was a sigh against the excesses of the previous dispensation. There was some talk of holding people accountable for misappropriation of funds etc. That initial zeal soon vanished and was replaced by what some would feel as status quo. What went wrong?**

That's true. Initially when Morcha started in Kalimpong we brought forth charges against eight councilors. We investigated their cases, filed FIRs though nothing concrete was done. We enjoyed 100% support of the people. Gradually, I won't deny the fact, that at some local levels, you know local leadership level; there has been dissatisfaction amongst the people. Old mistakes were being repeated. So when people express their discontentment, its not without reason but that is not to the extent where its menacing or its dangerous. Nevertheless it needs to be checked. There are couple of places where we have come across complaints, seen ourselves and we have taken action wherever or whenever we could have. But we are not yet an official power. It's just a revolutionary power that is running the show so far. But if the administration is strong, the departments are working properly then this local level leadership could do nothing. Once we come with legitimate power in whatever formulation we manage to achieve, there we would be accounted for everything that we do and we are conscious of that.

**Do you think the GJMM leadership should be more vocal about their disapproval of violence instead of blaming it now and then on the 'public'?**

Well to be frank, this is not serious an issue because GJMM directly has never indulged in any violence. So far, whenever there has been violence it has been from some other side. Imagine more than 2000 people killed during the 28 months movement under the GNLF. Compared to that, this is one movement where not only in slogans is it non-violent but even in deed it is non-violent. So what more one can expect from the leadership? The State Government though tried to malign Morcha's image by raising the issue that the place is still unstable, violent and elections cannot be held. And then the election commission, after returning passed the remark that the most peaceful polls had taken place here. So how does this observation stack up against the charge that we are leading a violent movement.

**The manifesto of GJMM when talking about the credentials of its candidates spoke of the fact that it was now time to show Bengal that we too have 'word class intellectuals'. Do you think the word 'intellectual' is used a little too loosely in the hills? Doesn't it betray a kind of an inferiority complex?**



You are absolutely right. In the first place we don't even know what the duties of intellectual are or what makes an intellectual. In the hills whoever is a graduate becomes an intellectual, if he is a postgraduate he becomes a super intellectual. What we need though are organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense. But I don't think most here can distinguish between an ordinary intellectual and an organic intellectual. So far, people who have gone to represent this region didn't even have the minimum command over the language to express what they already knew. They gave the impression of being ignorant people, dull people who knew nothing about the issues. Being represented by ignorants portrayed a very poor image of the region. But at least this time around I feel we have team which can engage in a political dialogue with our counterparts. We can manage to put across our ideas, articulate our concerns, convince them. By that token if you look at this team and use the term intellectual I think it is justified. But in an academic sense none of us are intellectuals.

**I remember when writing an op-ed piece in a local Nepali**



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**daily, you said ‘andolan ma bipakcha chandaina’. Now that GJMM is another political party do you still hold that view? Were you talking about inter-party opposition or did it also hint at a lack of internal democracy within the structure of your own party? And why shouldn’t there be an opposition? Coming from the principal dissenter in the hills that sounded quite contrary to the stance that you had taken earlier?**

You see there are a number of reasons for taking this stance. I agree that GJMM is another political party. But don’t lose sight of the fact that it is still in the movement and anytime we feel that our being there in the assembly is not going to serve our purpose we are going to resign and come back. Well in a movement if there is opposition, we have seen that the state govt. sees a political opportunity and uses these opposition parties to weaken the movement. We have seen this happen. My stance was in the light of those observations. But once a settlement is reached, I will be the first one to tell, I will be the first one to declare that now with just one party, democracy will die. We have to have an opposition party. or parties. But so

long as the movement is there...till we have reached the final solution we have to be in one voice

Also you know political parties mean what? A political party survives on the basis of its programs and the other political parties here, what program have they had so far? Except you know, holding press conferences. They don’t have any political program so far. This is because they don’t have any support base. So what is the use of such political parties where they have only leaders and enjoy no popular support? These are the kind of the people who can be used by the state govt. which wants status quo in the region and sadly some of our friends are willi-nilly playing to their design. Otherwise to say that we don’t need an opposition is very undemocratic, but that is undemocratic in a stable political atmosphere. But now you don’t have a proper place to play politics. We are fighting to carve out that place.

**Much of the politics of the hills till date is still personality driven. Do you think that has to do with the charisma of the leaders, the political naiveté or the lack of avenues in which political leadership could be tested out?**

I think all the three have their role to play. In a backward community they need a hero. So the hero worship thing is there and one leads to other. That’s because of political naiveté... and there are other very few avenues where a leader is tested so when one person manages to make a mark, by whatever means, it takes quite some time for the other to uproot that. But what Morcha is trying to do is that along with this agitation, we are trying to uplift the overall social standard also. Even in the political speeches also, we sort of try to disseminate whatever information we can about the place. You know, rouse some interest in their own people, teach them history in the proper perspective. Particularly we want to revamp the education system, later on when an agreement is reached. We are looking at education seriously. So this will happen gradually...the more you manage to make people reasonable and rational, such things will gradually become weak and vanish someday. Hopefully.

**Do you think this current surge in the demand for GL, which some call GL2 is a movement or an agitation?**

Well I am not qualified to distinguish between what makes and agitation and what makes a movement. But definitely a movement is more dynamic and has a larger perspective I feel. So in that sense, looking at the time, the Morcha initially came into being, it was a movement. Definitely at places now you see it degenerating into an agitation...nevertheless it was a movement and we are trying to restore it to that position, you know.

**How much of this movement/agitation for GL do you think should spill over from the political sphere and enter into the cultural domain, with demands being made on what people should wear, believe etc?**

Well no movement becomes successful if it doesn’t spill into culture. But having said that I must add that one should not pass

judgment on what people should eat, what people should wear. But there is a paradox you know. If you look at our writers, our musicians, they have always made it an issue to write about the traditional dress and instruments without wearing or playing it themselves. They would sing about madal in a drum. They would talk about the machunga in a guitar. Likewise they would give lengthy discourses, write about vanishing daura and suruwal etc. But when someone says that if you love it so much it is not something to be just written about, it is to be actually worn by the people, then they raise a hue and cry and say how can you pass such a diktat. We are a very hypocritical lot in that sense. On the one hand our artists are singing about the demise or loss of something...and if an attempt is made to reinstate that lost thing, there is resentment. How do you explain this?

**Do you think the GJMM should make some specific commitments to the minorities, who as the recent episode with the Lepchas have shown, seem to be betraying some kind of insecurity?**

I don't know. Every one is a minority here. Who is a majority? In a population of over 9 crore how many of us here? A little over eight lakhs according to the latest census? Now suddenly to feel that we are minority and that we are insecure, what is the basis for that kind of thinking? What has suddenly happened, which has made them think in the way they are thinking? Its amazing. Even in the minority, within the Lepchas we have friends like Paul Simmick and Eno Panlook who came out openly and said nothing doing we are going to support this, we are going to vote. So even though I don't have enough proof to say who is playing that game, but there is somebody somewhere, who is playing the game and pulling the strings. They are doing this not for the Lepcha community but to break this agitation. And to create some kind of a rift between different communities. This time some Lepchas have been deployed as weapons, I am sure.

**This involvement in politics, has it adversely affected your reading and your writing? After all a speech or a**

**TV discussion is for the moment and need not necessarily be 'deep'. When can we expect another book from the prolific pen of Dr. Harka?**

It has affected. It does take a toll. It's a different area. It's a different experience. One advantage is that you actually get to reach those places which otherwise you would have never been, meet people whom you would have never met. That way you have more material to write about. But again writing requires leisure. Right now I don't have that leisure. But nevertheless I am gathering material and one fine day after this tenure of this assembly I can get back to my writing. It has affected my reading also. Though I have not stopped doing so. I manage to read a few pages everyday, but the kind of concentration it requires I have not been able to give it.

**Can FLATFILE fans finally look forward to a fresh infusion of MLA funds to resuscitate it?**

Well the pleasing thought that came to mind on being nominated for the ticket was this. These are the areas that have been neglected by our predecessors because they came from a different background and gave it minimum value. Whereas if I can do something ...if we can launch Flatfile sometime in Calcutta and maybe, you know, have the speaker of the Legislative Assembly release the new issue of Flatfile. That would be great. In any case I will try to cultivate the reading circle in Calcutta, make use of this opportunity to further the cause of Hill literature.

**How significant do you think is the recent resolution made in the Sikkim Assembly?**

First of all we would like to thank the Sikkim Chief Minister for the resolution. It is for the first time that an Assembly of a State of India has given Gorkhaland that kind of legitimacy. It has not just been passed but the matter has been put on record too. It has a lot of symbolic importance too. After all much of the domain under the Gorkhaland demand had been part of Sikkim. Now the original owners of the land have spoken and told what their stand is. We are definitely going to bring this matter up in the next round of tripartite talks.



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