

Trouble may spark student exodus, fear Darjeeling schools

The unrest in the Darjeeling Hills over a separate state of Gorkhaland is casting its shadow on the many schools here, including some of the best known in the country, with some students already beginning to leave this pretty hill town.

As the indefinite shutdown called by the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJM) entered the fourth day Thursday, bringing normal life to a standstill in the three hill divisions of Darjeeling district - Kalimpong, Kurseong and Darjeeling - schools began to fear for their future.

Educational institutions in the queen of hills, some of which are over a century old, are known for their academic excellence and attract students from all parts of India and abroad. Some of the more well known are St Paul's and St Joseph's. Besides, Kalimpong is home to renowned schools like St Augustine's and Mount Herman.

Nahian Islam of Bangladesh, a Class 11 student at St Joseph's that has students from the US, Nepal, Thailand, Bhutan, Japan, South Korea as well as some European nations, has been getting frequent calls from his parents who are anxious about the protests by political activists.

'The ongoing protest is definitely affecting the common man's life. Though the educational institutions in Darjeeling are not directly hit, they will suffer soon. My parents and those of my friends are worried about our safety,' Nahian told IANS.

While Nahian's parents are yet to pull him out, schools in the region say students have already started leaving.

Sister Teresa, the principal of Loreto Convent here, said: 'Three Class 11 students left our school last week because of the Gorkhaland agitation. They have taken admission in Siliguri.'

Loreto used to have boarding facilities, but the hostel had to be shut down after the Gorkhaland protests in 1988. But the school still has many out of town students who stay with local guardians.

'The protests send a wrong message and tarnish the reputation of Darjeeling schools. We will lose more students if the present situation persists,' Teresa said.

St. Joseph's rector-cum-principal Father Kinley Tshering shared her apprehension.

'If the shutdown continues and protests intensify further, there is a major possibility that students from foreign countries will leave,' Tshering told IANS.

'We are trying to keep all the parents posted on the situation here. We are sending them mails and talking to them over the phone,' he added.

'We are also in talks with GJM leaders to ensure that the schools are kept out of the purview of the indefinite shutdown.'

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