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MISERIES BEHIND HEROISM: A SHADOWED PART OF THE GURKHAS IN FARWELL'S *THE GURKHAS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores and analyzes the miseries, anguish, and hardships experienced by the Gurkhas and their families that are masked by their worldwide name and fame of their bravery in Byron Farwell's *The Gurkhas*. The writer presents the bravery, dedication and loyalty exhibited by the Gurkhas in the Anglo-Nepal War (1814-16) that attracts the British administration. Despite the defeat of the Gurkhas, the British institution begins to enroll them into their army. Their heroic combat experiences play an important role in the success of Britain's imperial movement around the world. They fought and got victory in many wars for Britain along with the First (1914-18) and Second (1939-45) World Wars. Moreover, the writer also discusses the discomforts, sufferings and agonies that the Gurkhas and their families went through before, during and after the wars. As this study is based on the qualitative research method, the researcher has consulted library for the related books, journal articles and internet support extensively. Some historians as well as the ex-British Gurkhas, who had been in wars for Britain, also have been consulted for further ideas. The research study is significant because it educates people about various problems faced by the Gurkhas and their families hidden behind the myth of their heroism.

Keywords: Anglo-Nepal Wars - Gurkhas - heroism- World Wars - disparity-miseries.

INTRODUCTION

From the history of Anglo-Nepal War (1814-16), Gurkhas have been popular for their exceptional courage, sincere dedication to the institution, and unconditional loyalty to the authority. Though they lost the war against the British institution, they began to be recruited in the British

Army. The British authority was impressed by “the courage, tenacity and fighting spirit of the Gurkhas” (Gurung 2020) shown during the Anglo-Nepal War. Since then, either in maintaining peace and order in colonial societies internally or keeping the mutinies under control, the Gurkhas worked with high courage. What is more, David Bolt (1967) claims that they are “above all a martial race” (p.87) and have fought wars in various countries and continents for England during the World Wars. Even after the Second World War, they have been in wars and confrontations as “The Gurkhas are always ready to do battle with any enemy of Britain” (Cross 1986, p.16). In most wars, the Gurkhas have shown their heroic performance to support Britain in her imperial campaign. As a result, according to D. B. Gurung (2008), they have been rewarded with altogether 13 Victoria Cross (VCs), 2 George Cross Medals and 6,500 decorations (p.322). However, despite the celebrations of the victories earned by the Gurkhas for Britain, the hardships, miseries and sufferings borne by them during and after the wars have remained unread and unheard by many of us without which the study on the Gurkhas is always incomplete.

Byron Farwell’s *The Gurkhas* describes the wars from Anglo-Nepal War to the present with the two World Wars fought by the Gurkhas and the agony borne by them due to several reasons. The bravery, loyalty, dedication and discipline produced by the Gurkhas in the Anglo-Nepal War attracted the British power because of which they were allowed to be recruited to the British Army after the Sugauli Treaty in 1816 between the British East India Company and Nepal. Initially, the Gurkhas were involved in suppressing the robberies, internal conflicts, and mutinies all around India. Then only they were sent to the wars on behalf of Britain. They won numerous wars in many places of the world. For their victory, they received Victoria Crosses and other gallantry medals. Despite their victory over the enemies for Britain’s imperial movement, they bore a lot of pain and sufferings caused by the injuries as well as deaths and missing co-warriors in the wars. Farwell also discusses the discomforts and injustice experienced by the Gurkhas and their families due to the discriminatory treatment of the British institution. Therefore, the major focus of this research paper is to analyze the miseries inside the heroic deeds of the Gurkhas for Britain as represented in *The Gurkhas*.

THE CONCEPT OF HEROISM

The idea of heroism is connected with the living way of ancient people who would live on hunting animals and birds. They did not have

houses and clothes but would live in jungles and wear leaves and barks of the trees. They would be in groups and sometimes fight for their groups (Tooby & Cosmides 2010). To succeed in defeating anti-groups and protect their groups would be their 'heroism.' Such an approach of 'heroism' has links with the combat of people for their race, community, and country. This is natural that everyone is battling in the side of their own tribe, society, and nation. They are ready to risk their lives in order to secure their place, people, and position in the globe. If they succeed to do so, they are the real 'heroes' and their performance is 'heroism.' According to the British naturalist, Charles Darwin (1871), people exhibit courage and bear hardships in wars in order "to give aid to each other and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes" (p. 166). In fact, people do not hesitate to lose their lives in battles for the benefit of their own groups, or tribes. There is the matter of security as well as group identity.

The approach of 'heroic performance' and its purpose is applicable to the Gurkhas' 'heroism in wars.' They did not care about their lives, families, and personal luxuries while fighting against the British soldiers in the Anglo-Nepal War. They became ready to risk their lives just for their land, Nepal and the people in Nepal. Many of them lost their lives, and got wounded in order not to let their territory be in the hands of their enemies. It was the matter of their national identity as well. They exhibited their extreme courage and dedication while fighting for British authority as they were enrolled in the British East India Company army later. They were fully committed to overcome the enemies of Britain for the expansion of her imperial power over the countries in the world. The Gurkhas were the real 'heroes' and their performance in the wars was their 'heroism' for their own native land during the Anglo-Nepal War and later on for England after they joined the British army. The ideas produced by the psychologists John Tooby and Leda Cosmides as well as the naturalist Charles Darwin about people's fighting and sacrificing for their groups and tribes can be vividly traced even in the warriorship of the Gurkhas presented in *The Gurkhas*. In this sense, the Gurkhas are 'heroes' and their action is 'heroic' even though they have their own experiences of pain and hardships in themselves, their families, and communities.

HEROISM OF THE GURKHAS IN WARS

During the Anglo-Nepal War, the Gurkha soldiers despite the lack of war trainings and equipment, they fought against the "well-trained and

well-equipped British forces (Kalita 1990). They had stones, sticks, logs and khukuris to fight against the guns, artilleries and other modern war weapons. The Khalanga fort “held about 600 men and women, mostly Magars and Gurungs, under the command of a Gurkha named Balbahadur” (Farwell 1990) to fight against the British soldiers. In this war, both sides had a great loss of lives as Farwell (1990) writes, “Balbahadur lost about 520; the British lost 31 officers and 750 other ranks” (p.31). The name ‘Balbahadur’ is no other than “the famous Nepali General Kaaji Balbhadra Kunwor” (Gurung 2020). This is the misspelling of the name of the brave Gurkha warrior ‘Balbhadra.’ The reality is that the war whatever is always destructive. The British soldiers commanded by Ochterlony conquered the wars at Jaithak and Malaun. Though Nepalese Gurkhas courageously did their best to win over the British soldiers, Farwell (1990) argues, “Ochterlony defeated the Gurkha General Amar Singh at Jaithak and again in a decisive battle at Malaun” (p.31). However, it was not easy for them to get victory over Gurkhas with all “martial masculinity” (Uprety 2011). It was a big challenge for them. According to Tony Gould (1999), Ochterlony had a high praise upon the infantry skill of the Gurkhas. He claimed that the Gurkhas were much better in fighting in encounters with the enemies than the Bengal Sepoys. The Gurkhas had a real martial quality to fight in hills. In his memoir, John Ship appreciates the Gurkhas, “I never saw more steadiness or bravery exhibited in my life. Run they would not, and of death they seemed to have no fear...” (Farwell 1990). Due to their strong attraction towards the “martiality and loyalty” (Caplan 1991) of Gurkhas, the British institution started their admission in the British army after the Sugauli Treaty.

Initially, the Gurkhas’ responsibility was to work for social security rather than joining any wars. Their “warlike qualities” (Northey 1938) succeeded to undermine the dacoits and mutinies. Farwell (1990) claims, “In the first thirty years of their existence consisted in chasing bandits, a hard and bloody business” (p.35). After only being able to suppress banditry, conflicts and mutinies, they were sent to the regular wars as “It was only after the mutiny that the British began to take a serious and studied view of the Gurkhas, to regard them as something more than good ‘native infantry,’ as something special” (Farwell 1990). They fought the First World War for Britain heroically. Gould (1999) articulates that the Gurkhas were involved in wars of many places “from the fields of Flanders to the hills of Gallipoli and the deserts of Mesopotamia and Palestine” (p.176). They never showed

their back to the enemies while fighting “in all parts of the world the British have fought” (Limbu 2015). A Gurkha rifleman, Motilal Thapa was badly wounded. His arm was miserably ruined, but he was uttering words in a small voice as “I must not cry out. I am a Gurkha” (Farwell 1990). They had a rooted psychology that Gurkhas should not feel weak in war. Another rifleman, Kulbir Thapa rescued his wounded co-warriors to the safety defeating the enemies. He did not care about his life while being in the battlefield. For his devotion, he was honoured with Victoria Cross as he was the first Gurkha to receive Victoria Cross (Farwell 1990). He became the pride of all Gurkhas for being the first Gurkha warrior to win Victoria Cross.

During the Second World War as well, the Gurkhas were the major force to defeat enemies for Britain’s imperialism. They fought fearlessly in places like Burma, Persia, Italy, Greece, Malaya, North Africa, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and so on (Farwell 1990). Subedar Lal Bahadur Thapa succeeded to kill enemies with his khukuri and pistol. Farwell (1990) states, “Although a perfect sheet of bullets swept down the ravine, he raced to a second sangar and killed its four machine gunners single handed; two with his pistol and two with his *kukris*” (p.189). Ganju Lama, a rifleman, won a war medal along with a Victoria Cross. For Maurice Biggs (2006), having “a complete disregard for his own personal safety” (p.57), he kept fighting despite his serious injuries. While fighting against Japanese soldiers in Burma, he weakened the enemy positions by knocking out the enemy tanks (Gould 1999). He too killed enemies with full courage. Lachhiman Gurung, despite his bad injuries, alone killed a lot of enemies. In the huge bomb-attack of the Japanese soldiers, Gould (1999) states, “Lachhiman picked up these time-bombs and hurled them back at the enemy, but the third time he was not so lucky; the grenade exploded in his hand and shattered his arm, also wounding his face, body and right leg” (p.268). For his high courage, he was rewarded Victoria Cross.

The British Gurkhas continued joining wars and confrontations after the Second World War as well. They never let their high image of “unmatched martial qualities” (Tiwary 2010) down in any wars. Lance Corporal Ram Bahadur Limbu won the thirteenth Victoria Cross as a Gurkha in the war of Borneo in 1965. When he saw his co-warriors meeting death in the war, he could not stay back, but he thought that only enemies’ death would let him be in peace (Farwell 1990). His wounded co-warriors were dying helplessly. Getting extremely enraged Ram Bahadur attacked

the enemies with a grenade and killed them (Gould 1999). His companions' deaths made him be ferocious to attack and kill the enemies. According to Biggs (2006), "At least twenty four enemies are known to have died at cost to the attacking force of three killed and two wounded" (p.76). His victory was miraculous because he did not get any injuries in his body. Likewise, the British Gurkhas won the Falklands War as well in 1982. "A battalion of Gurkhas" (Farwell 1990) was sent to the war at that time. They did not have to face a big loss in the Falklands War. The Argentinian soldiers had already heard about the war skill, bravery and dedication of the British Gurkhas. So, they surrendered in a few days' cross-fighting with the Gurkhas as Farwell (1990) writes, "The Argentinians fled when they realized that they were being outflanked" by the Gurkhas. The British Gurkhas were heavily honoured with celebrations and medals of gallantry in London for their victory.

GURKHAS' AGONY AND HARDSHIPS IN WARS

In the period of the Anglo-Nepal War, the Gurkhas did their best to save their territories from the British soldiers, who were trained with modern weapons of that time. What is more, the fewer number of Nepalese soldiers were in support of even women and children. We may remember the story of 'Nalapani Fort' or 'Khalanga Fort' we read in school when they attacked back the British soldiers with just stones, sticks and khukuris. The fort was "defended by a mere 600 Gurkha troops" (Gould 1999). The most pathetic scene was when the British soldiers disconnected the water supply into the fort and the children and women died of thirst and hunger helplessly. It was their "self-sacrifice" (Cook 2002) for the nation. The war caused a lot of deaths from both sides. Farwell (1990) calls it "a bloody affair" (p.31). The scenery of the loss of lives in the 'Khalanga Fort' was equally heart-rending. James Fraser tributes, "the dismal spectacle of their slaughtered comrades, the sufferings of their women and children" (Gould 1999). Similar scenes, sights and sounds of war took place even at Jaithak and Malaun. Nepalese soldiers fought for their motherland fiercely with a lot of deadly pain, hardships and injuries.

In the First World War, a Gurkha rifleman Motilal Thapa was seriously wounded. He had his arm totally destroyed (Farwell 1990). He was still trying his best to support his co-warriors. However, he was unable to do so and sometime later "died before reaching an aid station (Farwell 1990). Dying for another country while fighting in an unknown land is

quite painful itself. In fact, war causes what Haruko Taya Cook (2002) views it as “grim horror and terrible futility” (p.28). Another rifleman Kulbir Thapa fought against German soldiers. Though he was successful to receive Victoria Cross, he also had a lot of discomfort. Farwell (1990) asserts, “Rifleman Kulbir Thapa of the 2/3rd suddenly found himself alone and wounded” (p.93). However, he did not care about his wound anymore. He brought two other wounded Gurkhas and one Leicestershire soldier to the safety. The pain he experienced cannot be expressed in words. One true thing is as Gould (1999) states, “war might be a grim business, a matter of kill or be killed (or maimed)” (p.114). Meeting death or getting injured in wars is natural, but the pain the soldiers bear either physically or mentally is really hard to tolerate. For Rupert Gaze (2005), war is “a record of toil and sacrifice” (p.46). For every warrior, there is always a terror that anything may happen to his life anytime during the war period. Many other Gurkhas got injured; lost their lives in the foreign land and went missing in the First World War.

Thousands of Gurkha soldiers suffered in the Second World War, too. Lance-Naik Jit Bahadur Rai killed two large Germans with his Khukuri in the Arno Valley, but their bodies fell on him and he was pinned under them. He could not come out from the bodies, but only after a frantic effort he freed himself from them (Farwell 1990). This event seems to create a laughter, but it was quite agonizing for Jit Bahadur as Richard English (2013) argues that war is always “terrorizing, horrific and painful” (p.67). Another Gurkha warrior Ganju Lama got severely injured in Burma war. “He was wounded in the arm and leg, and his left wrist was broken. Nevertheless, he crawled on through slick mud, bleeding profusely, dragging his weapon and ammunition” (Farwell 1990). Victory becomes the main target for warriors in a war. Ganju also kept fighting with “complete disregard for his own safety” (Biggs 2006). Lachhiman Gurung, while throwing back the enemies’ grenade, got his right arm mutilated and left eye damaged helplessly as the third grenade “exploded in his hand, blowing off his fingers, shattering his right arm and severely wounding him in the face, body and legs” (Farwell 1990). He had a lot of difficulties in his life.

In the Borneo war in 1965, a Gurkha soldier Bijuli Prasad Rai got injured badly. Seeing him severely wounded, Lance-Corporal Ram Bahadur Limbu made a counter-attack fiercely killing many enemies. In his words: “I swore that the enemy would pay for this with their blood. Blood for blood and nothing but blood would settle this account” (Farwell 1990).

The torture brought ego in him and he got power to defeat his enemies. The Falklands War in 1982 was also frightening. The Gurkhas were worried much about what would happen to them in the war. They remembered their wives, children, parents and other relatives in Nepal. Gary Yia Lee (2002) asserts, "Relocation to other countries, especially when forced, often leads to nostalgia" (p.132). Luckily, they did not have to lose lives in the cross-attack with the enemies. After the battle was over, Lance Corporal Buddha Prasad Limbu was killed while removing mines laid by the Argentinian soldiers (Farwell 1990). Despite their victory in the Falklands War, the unfortunate death of their co-warrior Buddha Prasad Limbu shocked them a lot.

DISPARITY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE GURKHAS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Disparity in the redundancy in the number of Gurkhas left a big problem in the lives of the Gurkhas and their families. During the World Wars, a lot of Gurkhas were recruited because Britain needed a lot of soldiers for the wars. During the Rana period, Gurung (2008) notes that the rulers "bartered the young-blooded citizens for their personal gains and security" (p.328). They were put on the front line in the battlefields and helplessly killed as Sir Claude Auchinlack commented it as "high wastage roles" (Farwell 1990). In the World Wars, thousands of Gurkhas lost their lives. A lot of them got injured and many of them went missing. Their families did not get compensated well. The missing Gurkhas' families did never know their whereabouts. Their hope of getting them back never got fulfilled. The injured ones were helplessly sent back home with no or only little money. After the wars got over, many of them had to get dismissed from the army despite being physically fit. Christopher Bullock (1994) comments, "Many of our splendid soldiers had soon to leave as the brigade of Gurkhas was cut by over-half once confrontation had ended" (p.177). The number of the Gurkha soldiers was reduced because they were not needed after that. According to Farwell (1990), "Many were forced to retire before they wished, and before they had earned adequate pension" (p.278). Moreover, they were also not paid well. The "honest and incorruptible" (Tuker 1957) Gurkhas had problem in themselves and their families. Raksha Rai (2015) comments that they "were retired barefoot" (p.4). The greater problem was with the families of the injured and the missing Gurkhas.

In the matter of payment, pension, promotion and other facilities, the Gurkhas were treated differently. Their salary and pension amount were “meagre by British standards” (Farwell 1990). They were paid both much lower than that of their British counterparts. They did not get promoted higher than the rank of a major. It was quite an unfair treatment towards “those who die do so for the British Empire” (Bishop 1976). The Gurkhas were discriminated even in facilities such as accommodation, leave and family visit. They had accommodation of low standard. Gould (1999) criticizes, “The rooms were poky and uncomfortable; the entrance smelt of drains. Indeed, the whole camp had long since been condemned and the Gurkhas were due to move out eventually that no British unit would have been expected to put up with conditions the Gurkha battalions had endured uncomplainingly for years” (p.402). They did not have well-furnished rooms provided. About leave, they got only a six-month leave in three years. They could not bring their wives and children to the United Kingdom (UK) for more than three years. Tim I. Gurung (2020) writes, “In a span of fifteen years, a Gurkha soldier would stay with his family for five years at the maximum and the rest of the period they had to live separately (p.195). So, they were compelled to live away from their families for a long time, but on the contrary their British counterparts had nice rooms to stay. They could also go out for weekends with families.

Despite having an opportunity to earn a little money, the Gurkhas’ families had lots of miseries. As soldiers, they could be sent to wars at any time. For Gurung (2008), they were “sent down the rivers to bleed and die on foreign soil” (p.318). In wars, there was no guarantee of their lives’ security because war is “awful, baneful, devastating, and horrific brutality (English 2013). So, the families would always be in worries about them in wars. If they died in wars, its direct effect would go to their families as Farwell (1990) argues, “Gurkhas were in every sense men with responsibility for their families and concern for their careers” (p.251). The main problem would be of the economy. In the World Wars, “Many mothers lost their sons, many wives became widows, and many children were orphaned” (Gurung 2020). The families of injured and missing ones also had to face similar and sometimes greater problems. They had to take care of the wounded husbands or members. The families of the missing Gurkhas had to remain in hope of having them back all the time. It was a big torture for them. Likewise, the issue of family responsibilities was also crucial. Since the British Gurkhas were away from “mountain villages”

(Farwell 1990), their wives had to take care of the elders and children, tend fields and domestic animals, and maintain household chores (Gurung 2020). The children would not get fatherly love and care about which Gould (1999) states, "...most Gurkhas are separated from their families for twelve out of fifteen years' service, their children are deprived of a father figure" (p.389). In the absence of the husbands, their wives would face social and psychological problems as well.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the wide-spread fame regarding their heroic performances in wars that supported the expansion of Britain's imperialism, the Gurkhas had a lot of difficulties and miseries in them and their families. In almost every war along with the two World Wars, they combatted fearlessly keeping their lives on risk. They did not care about their families, either. As a result, they won multiple wars. However, it would not be a justice for them by knowing only about their bravery. Many things remain unread and unheard behind their heroism. The families of dead, injured and missing Gurkhas had never had happy days. They had economic, social as well as psychological problems. The discriminatory treatment of the British government towards the Gurkhas in terms of their payment, pension, promotion and other facilities created other problems in them and their families. Because of their long time separation from their families, the children never got sufficient care from their father. The wives also did not have their husbands' share in their problems. This is all caused by the unfair dealing of the British administration towards the Gurkhas. For some years, GAESO (Gurkha Army Ex-Servicemen's Organisation) has been raising their voice for the make-up in their payment, pension, promotion and other facilities. GAESO is seeking full support from Nepal Government for raising voice to pressurize the concerned authority to address their demand as soon as possible.

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