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Gorkhas' Recruitment into British Army: A Historical Overview

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Abstract

This article presents a historical overview and analysis of the Gorkhas' recruitment into the British Army over more than 200 years. The study examines the evolution of the recruitment process, highlighting key periods and changes: the era of the East India Company before 1886, the World War periods, and the present day. The research investigates how the bravery, dedication, and loyalty of Nepalese youths during the Anglo-Nepal Wars (1814-16) led to British authorities encouraging Gorkhali youths to join the British Army, aiming to leverage their skills for future wars and imperial expansion. Despite their valor, Gorkhas faced numerous challenges, and significant improvements in recruitment conditions did not occur until after 1886. Even then, parental consent was a significant barrier. It was not until the 1970s that Gorkha youths openly expressed a desire to join, but by then, the selection process had become much tougher due to decreased demand for their services. Employing a qualitative research approach, the article utilizes a variety of sources including books on Britain-Nepal military relations, journal articles, periodicals, and war history books from Nepal, Britain, and other relevant regions to provide a comprehensive analysis. The study's findings indicate that the recruitment process was particularly challenging before 1886 and during the World Wars, despite a

high demand for Gorkha soldiers. In the present day, while the recruitment process is more transparent, opportunities for Gorkhas have significantly diminished due to a reduced demand for their services.

Keywords: Anglo-Nepal Wars, war heroism, gallawals (recruiting agents), Recruiting Officers, British Camps

Introduction

The term 'Gorkhas' generally signifies all the Nepalese people. Wherever Nepalese go out of Nepal, they regard themselves as Gorkhas. They have pride upon being 'Gorkhas.' Those who know the history of Nepal "would call all Nepalese 'Gurkhas' regardless of their origin, tribe or social class" (Farwell 12). The word 'Gurkhas' is the "mispronounced British utterance of the word 'Gorkhas'" (T. I. Gurung 2). Now the question arises about why they are called Gorkhas. To satisfy the curiosity about the origin of the term 'Gorkhas,' one needs to go to the history of Nepal. Late King Prithvi Narayan Shah of 'Gorkha Rajya,' one of the many principalities of Nepal had a campaign of unifying all the small principalities to construct a big Nepal. He succeeded to expand his territory by defeating the principalities called Baise and Chaubise. His soldiers were known as Gorkhali soldiers all over Nepal. They were popular as 'brave' and 'loyal soldiers.' Later, foreign soldiers especially, the East India Company applied the term 'Gurkhas' "to refer to soldiers from Nepal" (Streets 175). The word 'Gorkhas' particularly indicates the Nepali soldiers serving the British authority.

The Gorkhali soldiers were a big challenge for the English soldiers under the English East India Company who were widening its imperial power in the South i.e. India. There was a little conflict in the southern border between Nepal and the East India Company. Later their conflict turned into a war i.e. Anglo-Nepal Wars (1814-16). The East India Company troops fought against Gorkhali soldiers in places like Khalanga, Malaun and Deuthal. Despite the "well trained and well equipped British forces" (Kalita 489), they had a great difficulty to defeat the Gorkhali soldiers who in Edward Smith's words would follow the motto "Better to die than be a coward" (175). Though the Gorkhali soldiers were in much fewer number than the East India Company soldiers, they were back supported by "women and even children" (Seddon 1). At the war of Khalanga, there was a huge loss of lives from both sides. The English troops could not easily dominate the Gorkhali warriors. However, Tim I. Gurung asserts, "the British eventually had to cut off their water supply to suffocate them" (9) into the fort. A lot of women and Gorkhali soldiers lost their lives due to extreme hunger and thirst. The commander Bir Bala Bhadra left the fort along with a few alive warriors.

At the wars of Malaun and Deuthal too, the Gorkhali troops got defeated. Their defeat at the war of Khalanga Fort affected their psychology. They did their best, but could not win the wars. As a result, they were compelled to sign the "Treaty of Segauli" on 4 March 1816 (Gould 67) with East India Company. The British authority was so much impressed by the "naturally spirited, fierce and brave" (Hasrat lxix) Gorkha soldiers. They decided to recruit the Gorkhalis into their army. According to Lionel Caplan, the Gorkhas

could help them “mainly in extending and defending the empire” (8). Nevertheless, the recruitment in the beginning phases and during the war periods was quite uncomfortable even though it was normal in later years and presently it is tough to be selected for the British Army. In addition, whatever books, research articles, and periodicals about Gorkhas have been written by now, they are mostly on the Gorkhas' bravery and loyalty, their contribution in wars for Britain, and their miseries. There is not much study on the area of Gorkhas' recruitment history into the British Army. So, this paper mainly studies on the recruitment of Gorkhas into the British Army then and now as a new issue.

Discomfort in the Recruitment in the Early Periods

Although the East India Company desired to enlist the Gorkhas into their army, Nepal Government did not allow them to do so. The defeat in the Anglo-Nepal Wars made Nepal Government feel humiliated. They also had fear of having their people used against Nepal. However, the Gorkhali youths had to remain unemployed. So, T. I. Gurung states, “They joined the British Indian Army by coming down from the hills illegally of their own choice” (162). The then Prime Minister Bhimsen Thapa (1806-37) was not ready to send the Gorkhas into English East India Company army, but “placed strict formal restrictions on Nepalis leaving the country; although never fully enforced” (Seddon 86). He was very conscious of the British authority's motive about which Caplan avers, “Indeed, the Nepalese *darbar*'s suspicions of just such British motives led to persistent resistance to the enlistment of its subjects” (28). So, he was not positive towards the British authority enrolling Gorkhas.

Despite the lack of legal process, the Gorkhas would leave home in hill and go to join the East India Company army secretly. They would walk days and nights to enter India and join the army. T. I. Gurung explains, “Youngmen from hillsides continued descending in groups, crossed the border quietly, and joined the newly formed Gurkha Army in the South” (164-65). Why would they bear such a risk then? The answer is no other than their dream to enrich their families economically by being the British army. It is said that there was bilateral agreement between Nepal and Britain for Gorkhalis' recruitment, but it is not mentioned in the Treaty as Orfeur Cavanaugh argues, “Although many writers on the Gurkhas attribute the right of the Company to recruit Nepalis to the Treaty of Sagauli, there is in fact no mention of recruitment in the Treaty” (7). The British Resident in Kathmandu, Hodgson did his best to legalize the Gorkhas' recruitment case, but he was not heard. After Bhimsen Thapa's death in 1837, some kind of political instability occurred and it continued until Jang Bahadur Rana came into power as he became the Prime Minister. However, he too was not ready to let the Gorkhas be in the East India Company army as “Jang Bahadur thus sought to restrict the flow of these men to India. Nepalis were legally unable to leave the country without the authority of the government” (Caplan 28-29). But the Gorkhas did not stop going to India for their admission in the army. There were some recruiting agents moving around Nepali villages, but they were captured and punished by Nepal Government (Rathaur 57). Nevertheless, the recruitment process continued steadily and secretly.

The recruitment of Gorkhas was already there in the army of Ranjit Singh at 'Lahore' now in Pakistan. This practice was there before the Anglo-Nepal Wars. The Gorkhas would fight for Ranjit Singh. They were known as *Lahure* in Nepali society. In further description of the word *Lahure*, Khushwant Singh writes, "The term most commonly used for a soldier who serves or has served in foreign armies is *Lahure*, a corruption of Lahore, the city in Punjab where, even before they took service with the British, many Nepalese were enlisted into the Sikh army of Ranjit Singh" (119). They would be called 'Lahure' from that time onwards. This culture still exists in Nepali society (T. I. Gurung 163). Those who are recruited in the British army, are called 'British Lahure' or 'UK Lahure,' those in Indian army are called 'Indian Lahure,' and those in Singapore police are known as 'Singapore Lahure.' They have their own respect in the society. Later, when Ranjit Singh's state went on in the hand of the East India Company, the Gorkhas turned to be East India Company army.

The British authority did not have an easy access in Gorkhas' enrolment. They did not have support for it from the Nepal Government as "The British had requested the enlistment of the Gurkhas into their army, but the humiliated government of Nepal was in no mood to entertain that request" (T. I. Gurung 162). The Gorkhas would follow their relatives such as fathers, uncles, or brothers who were already serving the authority. If they were fit for the recruitment, they would join the army. Otherwise, they would serve in kitchen or camp works. But they were not free to go back to Nepal. They would be punished for joining the British Indian Army. Kamal Raj Singh Rathaur reports that every house would be checked and adults' names would be noticed. If anyone known to have joined the British Army, their families would be mistreated (62). So, the British officials managed to let the Gorkhas and their families settle in India (Seddon 87-88). It was for their protection from facing various unnecessary inquiries, restrictions, and penalties from the Nepal government.

Recruitment after 1886 and during World Wars

Ranodip Singh became the Prime Minister of Nepal after Jang Bahadur's death. The British authority had a hope that Nepal Government would loosen the recruitment policy in their army. Ranodip Singh was not as strict as Jang Bahadur in this matter, but "Negotiations on recruitment with the Nepali government under Prime Minister Ranodip Singh proved difficult" (Seddon 88). Moreover, Ranodip was killed and Bir Shumsher had the premiership of Nepal in 1885. There were groups in the Ranas. The dissatisfied faction fled to India for shelter. Bir Shumsher himself sought British support to strengthen his rule and he "reluctantly gave in" (Rose and Fisher 147). It was an opportunity for the British authority to make the Nepal Government help them in recruitment. According to John Masters, Nepal government then "agreed to allow their Gurkha subjects to enlist ... in the East India Company's service" (225). The recruiting officers could enter Nepal and visit various places to select Gorkhali youths for enrolment. They began to recruit the Gorkhali youths directly. The number of Gorkhas serving the British East India Company dramatically increased. In addition, it became far higher during the World Wars.

The enrolment system totally became open to Gorkhas in the World War periods. The British authority had to gather as many Gorkhas as they could for wars in various parts of the world. It is said, "The demands of fighting men were so high that it depleted the numbers of youth and hardly a young man was to be found in the villages" (T. I. Gurung 167). The authority's main aim was to exploit the enemies and expand its imperial influence in the foreign countries. The number of battalions were also heightened then. They would collect the recruits from various centers. There would not be strict checking for their admission in their army about which Caplan states, "During both world wars selection criteria were considerably loosened, and many thousands of men who would not otherwise have been chosen were taken into the Indian army, only to be discharged immediately hostilities concluded" (50). If they looked physically fit, they would be enrolled and sent to the training center in India directly. After a few months' training, they would join the wars either in the Eastern or Western front. The Gorkhas either on leave or recent retirement were also called back soon to fight in wars. During the Second World War (1939-45), the number of Gorkha battalions, increased further as the demand of Gorkhas went up drastically. The number of Gorkha battalions grew much higher.

There was no caste bar for recruitment. It was made loose during the World Wars. Many Gorkhas died, got injured and went missing in the World Wars. There was a huge scarcity of youths from the required castes as T. I. Gurung argues, "During WW I and WW II, the Rana government made the whole nation and its resources available for Britain's disposal, and men from all the castes of Nepal were duly affected" (167). So, they would accept youths even from other castes such as Chhetri, Newar, Sarki, Damai, Kami, Sherpa, Tamang and so on. Otherwise, they usually chose only Magars and Gurungs from the Western Nepal and Rai and Limbu from the East. The British authority had a belief that Magar, Gurung, Rai, and Limbu people were loyal, brave, and dedicated to be soldiers (T. Gurung 528). They were observed as martial races. They would recruit one Brahmin in each regiment to perform religious activities.

Parents' Stand in Recruitment during and after World Wars

Parents would not be ready to send their sons to British Army during wars as they had fear of losing them in wars. Many of those who joined the British Army, would not return. Those who returned would be badly injured. Hundreds of them would remain unnoticed either died or went missing. In *Fearless Warriors*, a retired WO2 Hangsa Bahadur Darlami Magar recalls his father saying, "No-one in our family's ever joined the army before. Most of the relatives we have who were joined the army have been killed. You're not going to join the army, do you understand? If you do, you'll just get killed like all the others!" (K. N. Rai 37). However, Rana rulers would punish them if they did not allow their sons to join the army. To make the British authority happy and get support from them, the Ranas would force the youths to go to the East India Company army as D. B. Gurung argues, "The Rana rulers bartered the young –blooded citizens for their personal gains and security and sent them down the rivers to bleed and die on foreign soil" (317-18).

It was like sending the youths to die in wars. The Rana rulers knew this but for their material benefit, they would threaten to imprison those parents who did not admit their son in the British Army. So, they were compelled to let their sons join the British Army. Only after the end of Ranas' rule in 1950, they were freed to decide whether to send their sons into British Army or not.

Despite the end of the World Wars, there were wars, military operations, and confrontations in various parts of the world. Britain continued sending Gorkha soldiers to exploit them. So, the Gorkha soldiers could not escape the battles where Britain wanted to save their influence for a long time as John P. Cross claims, "The Gurkhas are always ready to do battle with any enemy of Britain" (120). Moreover, the parents still had a hangover of World Wars' devastation. So, they would stop their sons from going to the British Army. Nevertheless, recruiting agents or gallawals would try to convince them. Sometimes they would offer money to youths and make them go with them. Retired Lance Corporal Tika Bahadur Pun goes back to the past and says, "At that time, the gallas also used to give advance money but I didn't register for it" (K. N. Rai 59). There was no as high demand of warriors as there had been during World Wars, but British needed Gorkha warriors for other possible wars, such as Malaya Emergency, Borneo Confrontation, and Falklands War. Sometimes, the youths would run away from home and join the army without their parents' agreement. They would choose to be in the British Army for better economy and career of their families as ex-Sergeant Jasman Rai says, "I longed to get recruited myself because of the money of which I know I could send a large proportion to my family in the village and also because I wanted the chance to show that I was brave, which I regarded myself as being" (K. N. Rai 25). After late 1960s or early 1970s, attraction towards the British Army increased dramatically.

Wars and military operations were far less frequent and Gorkha soldiers' safe return home with good income would attract youths towards the British Army. Number of interested youths was tremendously high, but demand for them was low because there were not wars. Talking about the current situation about recruitment, T. I. Gurung argues, "As of now, only a few hundred recruits join the British Gurkhas" (176) from around Nepal. They are known as 'Lahure' such as 'Malayako Lahure,' 'Singapore Lahure,' or 'U.K. Lahure.' The stereotype 'Lahure' has a positive influence in the Nepali society. Parents would encourage them to join the British Army. The competition was very high and selection was tough. An Ex-British Gorkha soldier Driplal Rai explains, "Out of altogether eighty boys from two gallas, I think only thirty eight of us were selected" (K. N. Rai 163). They often gave more time for preparation to be British army leaving other jobs. Now, there is the same scenario in recruitment. They keep participating in the selection until they cross the age limit 21. The youths especially from Gurung, Magar, Rai, and Limbu communities give more priority to East India Company than others like civil services, Indian Army, Nepal Army, and abroad jobs. Shibaji Gurung writes, "Lahure practice has been transferred as a traditional profession from generation to generation. This traditional profession is considered as a prestigious profession in the community. So, some special values about it

have been developed within their community” (144). The residential facility for Gorkha soldiers and their children in the United Kingdom from the British government has added extra attraction.

Recruitment Procedures before and after 1886

It was quite hard to carry out the recruitment procedures inside Nepal before 1886. The recruiting agents would work secretly and take candidates usually their own close relatives to India and enroll them. Shrabani Basu adduces, “But the campaign for recruitment would continue and some of those in service were sent back to the villages to bring in fresh recruits” (90). They would not manage any tests either physical or any other else. Sometimes, the jobless youths would leave home and cross the Nepal-India border to join the British Indian Army. Nepal Government had a huge humiliation in their defeat to English East India Company as well as they did not still feel safe from the English authority as “Bhimsen Thapa was a wise and experienced leader. He fully understood the ulterior motives of the British and always wanted to keep them at an arm’s length” (T. I. Gurung 162). However, after 1886, there was a safe and open selection inside Nepal. The recruiting agents or gallawals would collect the youths and examine them individually and select all those who seemed to be fit in all ways to be British Army. The gallawals would note down the names of the youths selected primarily. Then there would be second phase selection tests which would be much tougher than the primary ones that Caplan argues, “But in peacetime the standards demanded were much higher and a young man would have to meet the army’s minimal qualifications of age, physical fitness, good health and, latterly, education” (50). The Recruiting Officers and Extra Assistant Recruiting Officers (EARO) would visit the selection centers and select the youths for final selection (T. I. Gurung 169). The Gorkha youths had to face various physical tests such as body stamina checking, eye test, load carry test, sports, and some educational tests. The selected candidates only would participate in the final selection tests.

All recruiting agents, the gallawals representing various districts or areas in the East would take the candidates to Dharan British Camp and to Paklihawa British camp in the West. For the final selection, there would be hundreds of candidates and from them only the limited numbers would be selected as “In addition, there were in any year limits on the numbers recruited (since the late 1960s the numbers have fallen steadily), so only a small proportion of hopeful candidates would be accepted” (Caplan 50). There would be medical test, eye test, running test, load carry test, and physical fitness tests. I myself had a chance of observing the primary and second phase selections when I was in village. My own brothers and cousin brothers tried for recruitment. My eldest brother passed the final selection in Dharan. My second elder brother failed it unfortunately though he was able to reach Dharan for the Final selection. My cousin brother was selected. Now, they are enjoying their retired lives in the United Kingdom. My friends tried too, but they could not pass the Second Phase selection. Nowadays, a high emphasis is given to candidates’ education along with their physical fitness. In the late 1970s, new British Camp was

established in Pokhara representing the West Nepal. The Paklihawa camp was closed gradually. Nowadays, there is only one British camp to finalize the recruit selection and it is Pokhara British camp (Seddon 188). From East and West Nepal, the Gorkha youths go to Pokhara for final selection. If they get selected, they directly fly to the United Kingdom.

Gorkha Recruitment at the Recent Time

As time passes, there is a huge change even in registration procedures and centers. This is all different from what it used to be in the past. The managing director of Classroom Academy, a pre-recruitment training center at Koteshwor, Kathmandu, Binod Rai says:

Gallawals visit different districts campaigning the recruitment, but candidates have to register their names online themselves. They need to mention details about their parents, too in the form. Then they are called for their first phase physical registration at the British Gorkhas Dharan for Eastern region, at the British Gorkhas Pokhara for Mid-Western region and at Area Welfare Center Surkhet for Far Western region. (In a Talk on 21 June 2024)

The selected ones can attend the Second Phase Initial Selection at the British Gorkhas Pokhara only. The succeeding candidates participate in the Final or Central Selection after a few months at British Gorkhas Pokhara. Gallawals also go there to assist the candidates and coordinate with the Recruiting Officers. The selected ones become the British Gorkha soldiers and fly to England. However, According to Himalaya Bikram Limbu, Co-Founder of Gurkha Action Pre-Military Academy and the General Secretary of Nepal Physical Training Association, “The number of vacancy for the British Gorkha recruits has gone far more down now than in the past decades. He states that about 300 Gorkhas are recruited in average per year” (In a Talk on 25 June 2024). This should be due to the less participation of Britain in wars as well as less war events there are nowadays than before.

The selection modality has also changed to some extent. The First Phase Regional Selection takes place at Dharan, Pokhara, and Surkhet from Eastern, Mid-Western, and Far Western Nepal respectively. According to Sahil Shrestha, the Executive Officer of British Gurkha Recruitment Institute and Training Centre at Gopikrishna, Chabahil in Kathmandu argues, “The First Phase Selection begins with a strict documentation checking. The authority checks the candidates’ photocopies and original copies of citizenship, passport, and academic qualification certificates along with their parents’ details” (In a Talk on 27 June 2024). Then candidates have to perform Over-Arm Heaving, Sit-Up, and other physical fitness activities. Likewise, they sit for a written test in Maths and English. Finally, they examine their teeth, hygiene, hands, or legs for medical test (<http://www.army.mod.uk/bgn/>). If they pass the First Phase Selection, they go to Pokhara for the Second Phase Initial Selection. Sudip Shrestha, 2019 Intake recruit from Okhaldhunga asserts, “The Second Phase Initial Selection is tougher than the First Phase. He says that there are additional tests like 800 Meter Running, Repeatedly Lift and Carry Short, Body Mass Index Test including Education Test, Medical Test, and documentation checking” (<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZSJdc7Guc/>). The selected ones attend the Final or Central Selection Test at Pokhara after a few months. There is Physical Test, Medical Test,

and Education Test as usual. Besides, there is 2 km Running, Jerry Can Carry, Doko Load Carry (15 kg), followed by Communication Skill Test. About racial barrier, Binod Rai, of Classroom Academy states, "There is no caste bar in recruitment like in the past" (A Talk on 21 June 2024). Any candidates from any castes can apply. The final selected candidates fly to London.

Conclusion

In about more than two hundred years' military service of Gorkhas in the British Army, the recruitment policy and procedures have come across experiences of different levels. It is affected by the political, economic, and social matters of Nepal and Nepalese people. From the time of Sugauli Treaty in 1816 to the year 1886, the recruitment was not open because Nepal Government did not have confidence that the East India Company would remain friendly to Nepal. So, Nepal Government did not allow the British authority to recruit Gorkhas openly. Though secret agents usually Ex-Gorkha soldiers or in-service Gorkha soldiers would take the interested ones to India and enroll them. After 1886, the British authority was allowed to enter Nepal and enlist the youths in their army. Parents were uninterested in admitting their sons in the British Army during the World Wars. However, Ranas would force them to join the army for some material benefit from British authority. Even after World Wars, parents disagreed to send their sons to the British Army. There were still wars, military operations, and confrontations taking place in Britain's involvement. Only after 1970s, the attraction towards British Army heightened as there were no such wars to be fought then. Competition became high and demand for Gorkha soldiers lowered. The selection system also have become much tougher now than there used to be. The attraction towards the British Army is still high nowadays.

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