

## Sources of Nepali Army's military effectiveness during the Anglo-Nepal War

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### Abstract

*Military effectiveness is the process by which the military converts available material and political resources into military power. The organizational revolution that took place in Europe during the period, 1500-1700, multiplied the military effectiveness of the European states. This paper, however, aims to assess the military effectiveness of the Nepalese Army during the Anglo-Nepal War, 1814-16, in the context of the failure of many of the armies of South Asia to mount an effective resistance against the colonial onslaught. Further, it explores the sources of the Nepali Army's effectiveness in performance rooted in Prithvi Narayan Shah's national army in its formative phase. His concept of the nation-state, the creation of a permanent army and his policy of not limiting recruitment and promotions to the natives of Gorkha laid the foundation for a loyal, competent multi-ethnic army. Moreover, this paper states that the institutional stability provided by his successors during a period of political turbulence spared the army time to consolidate and pass its institutional memory to the following generation. War is a brutal business, and the military effectiveness of armies is tested in the battlefield in which weaknesses are severely punished after their exposures. Strong states fight to win, the weak to survive. The paper concludes that the Nepali Army proved its military effectiveness*

*during the Anglo-Nepal War by ensuring Nepal's continued survival as an independent, sovereign state ever.*

**Keywords:** Prithivi Narayan, military effectiveness, nation-state, Anglo-Nepal War, Nepali Army

### Background

To prosecute a war effectively a high degree of organization, training, leadership, discipline, morale, loyalty, obedience, sense of duty and esprit de corps are required. "Military effectiveness is the process by which armed forces convert resources into fighting power" (Millett, Murray & Watman, 1986, p. 37). The revolution in military organization and doctrine during the period 1500-1700 is based on these factors produced much more powerful, cohesive armies in Europe and multiplied their military effectiveness. "The creation of modern nation-state was based on organized and disciplined military power in the seventeenth century" (Sloan, 2002, p. 22). As a result, "during the first wave of British Imperialism groups of several thousand European soldiers repeatedly defeated Indian armies many times their size" (Rosen, 1996, p. 14). The poor battlefield performance cannot be explained in terms of material strength alone. India's economic power was formidable. "The Mogul emperor Aurungzeb had ten times the revenue of his contemporary Louis XIV, the richest monarch in Europe"

(Boot, 2006, p. 99). “Careful historical studies have shown the technological advantages enjoyed by the Europeans over the Indians at the middle and end of eighteenth century to have been marginal, if they existed at all” (Rosen, 1996, p. 165). It was Europe’s transition into a new organizational form, the national state and new European methods of military organizational techniques that gave them the decisive advantage. South Asia had to pay a heavy price for missing the organization revolution.

The string of decisive victories gave the colonial armies a sense of superiority and disdain for their enemies. Such a mindset was reflected in the thinking of the British who dismissed the military capabilities of the Nepalis on the eve of the Anglo-Nepal War in 1814. “Ochterlony anticipated little resistance from the Gorkhas, whom he disparaged as a body of ill-armed and undisciplined barbarians (Cross, 2004, p. 367).” “Hastings (Governor-General) even envisaged a possibility of submission so hastily as to prevent the actual commencement of hostilities” (Pemble, 2008, p. 133). The ensuing events, however, belied their expectations. This was the first war in which the Company had been involved in India in which they had three to one advantage over the enemy. However, instead of achieving a quick victory, the campaign became an extended, hard fought one and lasted eighteen long months. The British had to reduce their troops on their frontiers in order to commit more troops to the campaign. “By 1815, EIC deployed 48,000 troops against Nepal” (Marston & Sundaram, 2008, p. 12). This was the largest number of troops fielded in India until then. Of the five commanders deputed to lead the invasion of Nepal, one was killed in action and three were dismissed for incompetence. “When success was finally achieved, every

nerve was strained and every resource exploited” (Pemble, 2008, p. 356). “During the Victorian and Edwardian war times it was the only Indian war the British wanted to forget” (Pemble, 2009, p. 361). How was a small hill state able to generate such military power from the limited resources available and extract such a heavy price from the invader? What were the sources of Nepali Army’s military effectiveness?

### **Nation-state**

The political system in South Asia in the eighteenth and nineteenth century is often portrayed as being devoid of the concept of the territorial nation-state as being the source of legitimacy and focus of loyalty. However, “it is in fact arguable that more than other units in South Asia in the eighteenth century, Nepal was a nation-state in embryo with a distinct identity retained in territorial and cultural factors”. Although the modern concept of nation state had not yet fully developed in Nepal, Prithivi Narayan had an instinctive feeling for the fundamentals of this concept. In the course of his conquests, Prithivi Narayan evolved beyond traditional ways of thinking and gradually fleshed out a new concept of state that while adapting to local conditions was at variance with the then prevalent thinking. “Prithivi stated that the state was not a private property. After the fall of Kathmandu Valley PNS brothers demanded that they be given their share as was the practice. PNS replied that the ‘*dhungo*’ (state) cannot be divided” (Manandhar, 2015). “Prithivi Narayan had created an entity to be protected and preserved independently of allegiance to an individual” (Whelpton, 1991, p. 25).

The extent to which the concept of ‘*dhungo*’ was internalized by army leadership was

reflected in the Nepali Army commanders conduct during the Anglo-Nepal War. They rejected lucrative British enticements to change sides. “Bom Shah was offered the kingship of Doti by the British but he rejected it despite the threat to his life he faced from Bhimsen Thapa” (Panta, Interview, 2015). The British success in large parts of South Asia was due to its adroit use of political intrigue and bribery. In South Asia commanders and whole armies changed sides on a regular basis. In such a context the behavior of the commanders of the Nepali Army stands out. Their proverbial loyalty to the state was a major force multiplier in times of war.

### Permanent army

“The small Hill States did not have a standing, unified army. Similar was the case with Gorkha. When in AD 1763 Prithivi Narayan won the war with Makwanpur he realized that the Gorkhali Army would also have to deal with foreign forces. Immediately after the war he established four companies” (Manandhar, 2015). Prithivi Narayan thus adopted a new system of military organization that would have profound implications for Nepal’s future war-making potential. He started the process of transforming a feudal, militia-based seasonal army into a centralized permanent army that would monopolize military power within the territorial state and lessen dependence on forces and revenue controlled by the *umrao*. The permanent army would henceforth be loyal only to the state and not to the local leaders and be totally focused on training and preparing for and fighting the nation’s wars.

The standing army offered an important means of employment and the only channel of social mobility for the peasants. Meritorious performance would be rewarded with status

and honor. But such total commitment also requires financial security. Since military finance was closely related to land during this period, Prithivi Narayan assigned revenues of the allocated land to individual soldiers in the form of *jagir*. But it was not his intention that the officers wallow in wealth and lead a decadent, sedentary life. He was well aware that the quest for luxury would lead to the erosion of fighting skills. “Do not let the *Bhardars* grow rich because the wealthy cannot kill or be killed and the enemy will prevail” (Panta, 2015). Although the ideal had been diluted to some extent by the time of Anglo-Nepal War and some elements in the leadership began to focus more on corporate self-interest and individual gain than service to the state, the field army remained a formidable fighting machine.

Prithivi Narayan understood the forces under his command. “In his *Dibya Upadesh* Prithivi Narayan set down the directive that the children of those soldiers who had fallen in battle be provided for” (Stiller, 1995, p. 244). Such a sense of accountability from the part of the head of the state addressed a major area of concern of the ordinary soldier and freed them to totally focus on the task at hand. In return, PNS demanded complete loyalty and commitment. The effort to create and sustain a viable and cohesive professional military slowly began to take shape. Eventually Prithivi Narayan left behind a formidable military establishment.

### Institutional stability

In patrimonial armies’ troops owe primary allegiance to an individual rather than to a dynasty or an office. “Mughal military units were based on the principle of loyalty to individual chiefs, the deaths of those chiefs in battle often lead to the disintegration of

those units” (Rosen, p. 149). However, the bitter political infighting between Rajendra Laxmi and Bahadur Shah did not affect the military campaigns. “Rajendra Laxmi had spent eight years in conquering the eastern *Chaubisi*. In nine years, Bahadur Shah conquered the whole of western Nepal and Kumaon as well” (Stiller, 1995, p. 149). They largely avoided politicizing the army which would have led to the breakdown in the efficient functioning of its military role. The successors of Prithivi Narayan thus managed to provide institutional stability at a time when only a few countries in South Asia enjoyed it. This enabled Nepal to create a stable military organization. “During Bahadur Shah’s *mukhtiyari* the size of the Nepali army expanded from 3,000 to more than 10,000” (Stiller, 1993, p. 29). Organizational stability freed the army from having to depend on the fate of a single individual and provided the time to develop professionalism and transition to a professional army composed of disciplined units not individual warriors. The core of the army came to be based on full-time, long-service professionals who were able to transfer their sense of duty, discipline, knowledge, experience and tactical expertise to the next generation.

### **Multi-ethnic armies and meritocracy**

In divided societies, there exists a lack of trust between those belonging to different groups. Under the pressure and heat of battle armies belonging to such societies can fragment. “Hindu and Muslim troops serving together in the Mughal army did not trust each other, killing each other on the battlefield” (Rosen, p. 151). However, in the context of Nepal different ethnic groups came together and fought as a cohesive unit. How did this become possible?

“There was difference in the administrative and military policy of Prithivi Narayan. The administrative posts were filled by family members of trusted courtiers. Kalu Pandey’s family were given responsibility for India and the family of Shivaram Singh Basnet were assigned responsibility for Tibet and China. In the military field Prithivi Narayan did not discriminate, it was a field open to talent” (Manandhar, 2015). Traditional ties were not promoted over competence. In the early days of his career the indomitable Bhakti Thapa was a *sardar* of Lamjung state. “The greater part of the Gorkha field army consisted of local troops” (Pemble, 2008, p. 28.) “Recruiting men of the fighting castes throughout Greater Nepal made the growth of the Gurkha army possible” (Stiller, 1995, p. 126). This also provided the basis for creating a truly national institution, a supra-ethnic national army led by an effective command structure.

“Prithivi Narayan Shah believed in giving equal importance to those who fight and those who play the supporting role while recruiting. To make the army strong it was not possible to depend on imported arms alone. That is why PNS invited the Muslims to Nepal to manufacture arms. Bahadur Shah also continued this practice” (Manandhar, 2015).

Leadership is crucial for military effectiveness. In professional armies engaged in war the main basis for promotion is performance in the field of battle. If such criteria are strictly adhered to, it will enhance the morale and cohesion of the army and create an effective command element. The Gorkhali army was composed of different ethnic groups but the leadership was selected on the basis of experience and the ability to provide leadership in the field of battle. “By

continual reliance on officers who showed ability he (Prithivi Narayan) developed a solid cadre of seasoned and capable officers who were to form the hard core of Gorkha's now professional army" (Stiller, 1995, p. 106). Sardar Jhagal Gurung, one of the commanders during the battle of Sindhuli Gadi, was a product of this system. These commanders showed initiative, aggressiveness and knack for improvisation such as the use of nettles and mud balls containing wasps.

The army slowly developed as a meeting ground of different ethnic group. The Nepali garrison at Nalapani fort was composed of different ethnic groups. One of the units, *Purano Gorakh*, was a Magar *paltan*. Even while desperately defending a fixed position under extremely adverse conditions, the troops composed of young men from diverse ethnic backgrounds retained their unit cohesion and commitment. Performance at both the command level under Captain Balbhadra Kuwar as well as at the rank and file level was impressive as they were active even while on the defense. What is remarkable is not that some deserted, during the latter phase of the battle but that most stood their ground. Most armies would have disintegrated long before. The meritocratic system ensured that diverse ethnic groups came together and fought as a united unit and the bonds that held it together did not break. The challenges of ethnic loyalties were thus to a considerable extent overcome.

## Conclusion

Besides material factors such as technology, economic strength and manpower the outcome of war is also influenced by such factors as morale, national unity and the readiness to sacrifice. The weaker side while fighting with the materially superior side

must compensate for its weakness by relying more on the intangible factors. The military effectiveness of an army is judged on the basis of military outcomes in battles, not intentions. The four factors elaborated above enabled Nepal to generate combat power out of proportion to its material resources and achieve high levels of military effectiveness. Even in the face of defeat the Nepali army did not disintegrate as countless other South Asian armies had in similar circumstances and proved to be a resilient and formidable adversary, a key characteristic of a competent professional army.

Although Nepal ended up losing a large chunk of her territory, the resolute defense put up by her convinced the British that the cost of annexing Nepal would be out of proportion to the gains to be derived from it. The army that Prithivi Narayan had so painstakingly built year by year, generation after generation, proved its military effectiveness in the crucible of war against an aspiring hegemonic power and ensured the survival of the '*dhungo*'. The very fact that '*asali*' Nepal continues to stand tall even today as an independent and sovereign state attests to this assertion.

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