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Role of Nepali Army from Nation Formation to Nation Building: People's Perceptions

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Abstract

This paper has featured people's beliefs and perceptions of the roles the national army has played in the formation of Nepal and nation building ever since its establishment in the eighteenth century by King Prithvi Narayan Shah, the chief architect of modern Nepal. This study has investigated and reported how the Nepali Army has contributed to developing the nation through its involvement in various development and construction works including the national pride projects besides its primary duty of the safeguarding of freedom and territorial integrity of the country. This study is qualitative in nature guided by interpretivism. Both primary and secondary sources of data have been used in the study. The data for this study came from interviews with purposively selected participants and reviews of various policy documents, books, journal articles, reports and websites of relevant ministries and organizations. The results revealed that the Nepali Army played a significant role in unifying Nepal which helped collect the energy to fight against external forces. Eventually, Nepal has been a sovereign nation since time immemorial. The national army has played an instrumental role in the development of Nepal through

its involvement in the development works. It has ever helped citizenry coming to the front line at the times of crises. This paper argues that the Nepali Army needs to be more strategic for the safeguarding of the freedom and development of the country because of Nepal's unique situatedness between two Asian rising powers— China and India. The Nepali Army, an efficient apparatus of the Government of Nepal, can further strengthen foreign relations with neighboring countries and beyond through effective military diplomacy.

Keywords: unification, development works, nationalism, military diplomacy, sovereignty

Introduction

The current boundary of Nepal with a total area of 1,47,516 square kilometers was shaped after the Treaty of Sugauli that was signed on 2nd December 1815 and endorsed by 4th March 1816 between East India Company and the Kingdom of Nepal (Shrestha, 2005). Nepal is the 49th biggest country in terms of area in the world. It is characterized as a beautiful, peaceful and great nation, the land of valiant Gurkhas and a country that is sovereign from time immemorial. It has a unique identity in world politics in terms of culture, religious

tolerance and in the practice of foreign policy based on the principles of panchaseel, non-alignment, UN charter and world peace. Nepal is divided into three main geographical regions – the Himalayan region in the north, the Hilly region in the middle and the Terai region in the south. Nepal is surrounded by India from east, south and west and by Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China from the north. Nepal shares a 1,753 km open border with India and a 1,415 km border with the Tibet region of China (Jha, 2010). Unity in diversity, cultural and religious tolerance and harmony among inhabitants are the main social features of Nepal. Nepal is home to 125 ethnic communities and 131 languages (Rastriya Samachar Samiti, 2020, Dec. 27). Nepal is experiencing rapid and positive changes in various respects particularly after the establishment of democracy in 1990. There have been improvements and positive results in education, transportation, technology and communication. The gallant history of the Nepali Army (also known as the Gorkhali Army by foreigners), which has ever remained successful to maintain the freedom and dignity of the country, has further illuminated Nepal at the international stage. The Nepali Army has come a long way witnessing a unitary system of governance in the past to the current federal democratic republican system by fine-tuning itself with the changed socio-political situation. In this paper, an attempt has been made to explore the roles of the Nepali Army in the formation of Nepal and its contribution to developing the nation through its involvement in national pride projects and various construction and development works in remote areas in order to link them with the mainstream of development.

Nepali Army and the Unification of Nepal

There is an intertwined relationship between the formation of the Nepali Army and the unification of Nepal. The history of the formation of the Nepali army can be traced back to the history of the formation of modern Nepal in the leadership and guidance of Prithvi Narayan Shah, a visionary King of the then Gorkha principality. Between 1600 and 1847, the British Empire remained influential in India while the British directly ruled India from 1857 until the independence of India in 1947 (Judd, 2004). As the British Empire conquered the entire Indian territory and was unstopably marching ahead, Prithvi Narayan Shah envisaged an immediate need to strengthen Nepal through the unification of multiple principalities. Nepal was divided into various principalities before unification. Before the beginning of the modern age, due to the weaknesses of the rulers, the samantas outside the Kathmandu valley became free (Sharma, 2021). Eventually, the Khas State of Karnali was divided into twenty-two principalities and the Gandaki area was divided into 24 principalities in between fourteen and eighteen centuries. The Doy kingdom of the South was further divided into Makwanpur, Bijayapur and Chaudandi. The Central State was divided into Kantipur, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur. During the time of King Prithvi Narayan Shah, there were 54 principalities in Nepal (Adhikari, 2018). The number of principalities increased and decreased due to various reasons, for example, when a principality was divided amongst sons of a king or when invaded by another principality.

While Nepal was divided into multiple principalities, Nepal had no particular strategies to fight against external forces, whereas the East India Company, an imperial

power, was always looking for better opportunities to conquer Nepal. However, King Prithvi Narayan Shah, a farsighted King of the Gorkha principality unified the Kingdom of Nepal beginning the noble journey of unification by getting victory over Nuwakot and annexing it into Gorkha in 1744 AD (Directorate of Public Relations, 2014). He unified all the principalities located in the western part of Nepal. The Kingdom of Nepal became a powerful country after the unification. Historians, therefore, compare King Prithvi Narayan Shah with George Washington of the USA and Emperor William I and Otto Von Bismarck of Germany (Adhikari, 2018). While Nepal was already unified by 1768 AD, the western rulers are said to have been influenced by the unification process of King Prithvi Narayan Shah. The unification campaign would not have been possible without a highly motivated and strong army. Since the unification, the Nepali Army, with a strong sense of nationalism, is ready to face every challenge that comes upon the nation and has stood colossal in all the crises (Rayamajhi, 2019).

Glorious Past Leading to a Gallant Future

Despite Nepal's location between two huge countries and many wars with them in the past, the Nepali Army has ever been able to maintain territorial integrity, independence and dignity of the country. Brave soldiers and Nepali people fought against the British East India Company and Tibet sacrificing their life for the sake of the freedom of Nepal and Nepali people. Nepal's borders were extended up to the Tista river in the east and the Sutlej river in the west (Burghart, 1984; Regmi, 1975). The unification campaign of King Prithvi Narayan Shah continued even during the reign of Rana Bahadur Shah under the guidance of queen mother Rajendra

Laxmi and regent Bahadur Shah (Adhikari, 2018). There took place the first war between Nepal and Tibet from 1788 to 1789, the second war from 1791 to 1792 and the third war from 1855 to 1856 which remained quintessential to maintain the dignity of the country (Adhikari, 2018). Nepal has never been subjugated by any colonial power which is the most remarkable achievement of the Nepali Army (Nepali Army, 2021, August 21). The bravery shown by the Nepali Army during the Anglo-Nepal war is unforgettable. Impressed by the warfare of the Nepali Army and common people in Nalapani, the Britishers erected a monument to show their tribute on which they wrote "In honor of our brave enemy Balbhadra and his brave Gurkha people". This gallant history shows how powerful and successful the Nepali Army was and that this fact invigorates the entire Nepali people and soldiers even today. The Nepali Army is viewed as a symbol of unity within the country and is always in the favor of united Nepal (Rayamajhi, 2019, March 18). Nepal displayed a perfect example of civil military relation in the past. Whenever there were attacks from the external forces, common people assisted the national army for the protection of the freedom of the country. As a result, Nepal has maintained its dignity and independence throughout the history.

Nepal's diplomatic relations with many countries including our immediate neighbor countries, UN membership in 1955, SAARC membership in 1985 and participation and commitments in international forums have helped maintain bilateral and multilateral relations. Joint military training with various countries particularly with China, India, the UK and the USA for a long time have helped build military diplomacy with neighboring countries and beyond. Nepal's military

diplomacy is guided by the principles of non-alignment and neutrality, the major guiding principles of Nepal's foreign policy. Active participation of the Nepali Army in the UN peacekeeping operations for more than six decades has given Nepal an elevated position at the global stage. Since 1958, Nepal participated in 43 UN missions in which 68 personnel lost their lives and 66 became handicapped in the pursuit of maintaining peace in the world (Nepali Army, 2021, August 21). Nepal is the fifth largest human resource contributor in the UN peacekeeping missions (Rayamajhi, 2019, March 18). Compliance, loyalty, sacrifice and utmost discipline of the Nepali Army has made it more professional and efficient (Bhandari & Sharma, 2020). These virtues are believed to make the army even better and more successful in the future. The fifth amendment of the Interim Constitution 2007 has ensured the inclusive nature of armed forces in Nepal. The special provision of including Madhesi, indigenous ethnic group, women, Dalits and people from backward regions into the Nepali Army has given a national character to the Nepali Army after the major political change in 2006 (Government of Nepal, 2007). As a recognized national institution, the Nepali Army receives honour, trust and faith from citizenry (Bhandari & Sharma, 2020). The Nepali Army is believed to possess the highest standard of discipline and willingness to sacrifice for the country (Basnyat, 2017, April 11). The methodology of this study has been discussed in what follows.

Methodology of the study

This study is qualitative in nature guided by interpretivism. The study employed both primary and secondary sources of data. I have selected some participants purposively in order to interview them to elicit and include

their first-hand experiences and perceptions in the study. The interview guide that I had prepared in advance helped me elicit the required information from them during interviews. Moreover, interviews allowed them to be open to put forward their views. Each interview lasted for forty-five minutes. The interviews were conducted in the Nepali language. All the interviews were audio-recorded which I transcribed later at my convenient time. I collected and reviewed relevant policy documents and reports. I consulted several books, journal articles, archived documents, reports, newspaper articles, websites of relevant organizations and ministries which helped develop the context of this study and to broaden my knowledge in the research area. To maintain privacy and confidentiality, I have used pseudonyms of the participants and the organizations they are involved in. I have tried to avoid personal biases and have maintained a balanced position while reviewing literature and presenting the results. In the following section, I have presented the participants' perceptions of the roles of the Nepali Army in the formation of Nepal and in nation-building which is followed by the conclusion.

Perceptions of the Role of the Nepali Army in Nation Formation

In the interview, Sudarsan Sharma, a professor at the Tribhuvan University, recounted:

The Nepali Army, the oldest army in South Asia, has a proud and uninterrupted history. Nepal is among a few countries which were never colonized by any external forces. King Prithvi Narayan Shah's vision of making Nepal a unified nation-state would never have been materialized without the support of disciplined and

brave army. However, we should never destabilize the support of the citizenry. King Prithvi Narayan Shah used to take the advice of common people too. He followed the suggestion of *Bise Nagarchi*, a tailor, to take financial help from the people of the state as per their wish and capacity and this was helpful to collect a large amount to buy arms and ammunition needed for the army during unification.

His comment indicated that the formation of modern Nepal was materialized with the strong support of the Nepali Army. The unification process initiated by King Prithvi Narayan Shah, the founding father of modern Nepal, would never have come to fruition without strong and dedicated army. Similarly, the bravery shown by the national army during wars in Sindhuligadhi, Bhimphedigadhi, Amargadhi, Simraungadhi, Jitpurgadhi, Belkotgadhi and Nalapani is unforgettable. The national army was able to extend the borders of Nepal up to the Sutlej river in the west and the Tista river in the east (Regmi, 1975). Although Nepal could not maintain the extended borders of greater Nepal, the country was able to maintain its sovereignty, dignity and independence from the external forces. As a result, Nepal upholds an incessant history ever since time immemorial. The Nepali Army, therefore, is considered the oldest army in the South Asian region. Although Nepal's political instability sometimes tries to bring the national army into controversy, the national army has ever been able to prove that it is dedicated to the safeguarding of the freedom of Nepal and the Nepali people.

King Prithvi Narayan Shah was aware of the fact that only the trained, strong, skillful and determined army can defeat enemies in

wars. He started providing military education by inviting experts from India and which was given continuity by his successors too. Bhimsen Thapa, the first Prime Minister of Nepal, contributed to modernizing the national army. He brought into the use of various musical instruments in the army. He started providing training and education using modern methods and styles. He introduced the European ranks such as General, Colonel, Captain and Lieutenant in the army (Nepali, 1978). During the Rana regime, the national army was well organized by Jung Bahadur Rana, the first Rana Prime Minister, using the British Indian model (Right, 1990). Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana commanded a regiment of the Nepali Army to assist the British during the Indian soldiers' revolution between 1857 and 1858 shows how the Nepali Army was strategically significant to even the British empire (Bhattarai, 2020). The East India Company was happy with this support of Jung Bahadur Rana and returned the part of western Terai that currently includes four districts – Banke, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur. At present, the Nepali Army participates in several training programs and receives education from many institutes at home and abroad. Joint military training with our neighbouring countries and beyond has helped develop military diplomacy with many countries too.

In the interview, Debesh Shrestha, a Professor of History at the Tribhuvan University, expressed:

The Nepali Army did not present brutally with soldiers and people of the defeated states. [...] It had a strong sense of nationalism and national unity. Perhaps, they were instructed accordingly. The defeated armies were also included in the Nepali

Army which was the farsightedness of Prithvi Narayan Shah to form a strong army with high motivation. He did not interfere with the culture of the Kathmandu valley particularly the Newari culture. His unification process cannot be limited to the expansion of Gorkha principality. In those days, it was a common practice to divide the annexed principalities with kinsmen and courtiers. However, Prithvi Narayan Shah did not divide the country amongst his brothers.

His comment illustrated that unification is different from enlargement of a state and invasion. King Prithvi Narayan Shah's unification process cannot be called the enlargement of Gorkha principality. He unified the entire territory of Nepal with the help of a strong and dedicated army which helped collect energy to fight against the external forces and for the overall development of the country. He never underestimated the power of the defeated army of other principalities. He gave them space, without discrimination, in his military organization (Adhikari, 2018). In the interview, he further added, "Except few cases, for example, in Kirtipur, the Nepali Army slashed the noses of local youths who killed the soldiers of the Nepali Army while they were asleep. Although there is a rumor that King Prithvi Narayan Shah gave an order to slash noses and ears of the inhabitants of Kirtipur, there is no truth in such propaganda". Similarly, he shared, "In Bhaktapur, the war took place for two days and two nights. Since all the three kings of Kathmandu valley were in Bhaktapur during the attack, the war was prolonged. It is said that nearly two thousand soldiers and people were killed and some houses were burnt. It is common in war. When enemies

are strong, the war is extended and there is a chance of more losses." He further added that King Prithvi Narayan Shah, however, never took revenge on the people and army of the defeated states. He had a vision that the country becomes weak when it is divided into multiple principalities. He wanted to collect energy by forming a strong national army to protect the sovereignty of Nepal. The Nepali Army formed by King Prithvi Narayan Shah consisted of people from various castes, for example, Brahman, Khas, Magar, Gurung, and Thakuri (Pradhan, 1991; Vaidya, 1993). It shows that King Prithvi Narayan Shah included people from various castes in order to form a competitive army whose combined efforts contributed to the formation of the nation.

Nabina Thapa, a security expert, shared in the interview:

The Nepali Army was very powerful after the unification of Nepal. With the support of such a strong army, King Prithvi Narayan Shah, if he wished, could change the name of the country into Gorkha. However, he avoided personal interests. He devoted his entire life to the betterment of the country and people. He was firm in his decision to build a strong and sovereign nation. When his brother proposed to divide it, he rejected it flatly.

Her comment illustrates that King Prithvi Narayan Shah had a farsighted vision. He had understood that when a nation is fragmented, it becomes weak. Prithvi Narayan Shah had experienced conflicts amongst principalities. He never liked the idea of inviting foreigners in the conflict between two or more principalities within Nepal. He might have realized that when the external force is invited

for help, the foreigners know our weaknesses. This causes external threats to the security of the country. His great ideas are collected in the Dibya Upadesh (The Great Guidance). These advices are useful even today not only for the security of the country but also for its economic independence.

Perceptions of the Role of the Nepali Army in Nation Building

The Nepali Army, since its establishment, is with every pain and pleasure of the Nepali people. Besides its primary function of the safeguarding of sovereignty, territorial integrity, nationality and independence of the country, it supports the Government of Nepal through its participation in various infrastructure development, nature conservation, disaster management and welfare works. The Nepali Army has earned the trust of the people through the timely completion of construction works with quality. The relentless efforts of the army to connect hinterlands with the national mainstream receive high accolades. Construction of 232 km long Surkhet - Jumla road, 145 km long Musikot-Burtibang road, 112 km long Jajarkot - Dolpa road, 107 km long Chhinchu - Jajarkot road and 91 km long Nagma - Gamgadhi road are some of the examples of hard work, determination and responsibility of the national army towards Nepal and the Nepali people (Nepali Army, 2021, July 17). The Nepali Army has taken responsibility to construct the 81.8 km long Kathmandu - Terai/Madhes (Nijgadh) express highway, a national pride project. Although there are conflicting views about the involvement of the army in development and construction projects, people are often found satisfied with the work of the national army. Common people believe that the Nepali Army as an established institution is committed

to contributing to the nation through its engagement in national pride projects and projects in remote and geographically difficult areas where the civil contractors are seen reluctant to work. Gyawali (2021) argues that the involvement of the national army in development and construction works without compromising national security can be taken positively.

While Nepal was facing challenges to protect forests and their biodiversity, the Nepali Army has been deployed to preserve the flora and fauna since 1975. The national army is currently involved in nature conservation, massive afforestation and repair and renovation of health centers in buffer zones (Nepali Army, 2021, July 17). Nepal is one of the disaster-prone countries in the world. The search, rescue and evacuation operations of the army during disasters such as earthquakes, landslides, floods and fire have saved thousands of lives. The Nepali Army has always provided service at the time of crises coming to the front line which has helped develop positive civil-military relations and build trust towards the national army. During the devastating earthquake in 2015 April, 52,870 soldiers were deployed in 594 sites of 14 most affected districts that rescued 23,594 people (Nepali Army, 2015). The national army has been entrusted by the Government of Nepal to play a major role to prevent and control the outbreak of COVID-19. The army's efforts to help the passengers coming from foreign countries reach the quarantine safely, proper management of quarantines and treatment of the corona patients at Army Hospital in Kathmandu are highly appreciated. The Nepali Army took responsibility for the construction and management of many quarantines in coordination with federal and local governments, supply of the medical

stuff and disposal of the dead bodies of corona infected people when corona reached its peak in Nepal. In the beginning, when public institutions were not ready to undertake these responsibilities, the Nepali Army came to the forefront to combat the crisis caused by COVID-19.

Currently, the army runs departmental stores at various locations. Although some people are critical about the involvement of the national army in such works, the army does not have any intention to earn profit by operating such welfare works. According to Raman Adhikari, a retired army, “[...] schools/colleges and departmental stores are not conducted with a profit motive. The Nepali Army wishes to utilize its passive capital for the welfare of the dependent families of the organization. Its intention is not to earn profit. For example, goods are sold with a maximum of 1.5 to 2 per cent profit to cover merely the operation cost. If there remains any profit, that is used again for welfare activities”.

The Nepali Army has contributed to the education sector too. Education is considered a backbone for the development of any country. Education not only helps produce the required manpower in various sectors but also helps them become disciplined and patriotic. Intending to produce patriotic, disciplined and dedicated human resources, the Nepali Army is currently running an institute of health science, a college of medical polytechnic and nine Mahavidyalayas in different parts of Nepal. These schools and colleges are running under the aegis of the Nepali Army Welfare Fund. These institutions focus on developing good conduct, feelings of nationalism and discipline in students along with knowledge and skills. Guided by the divine motto “imparting knowledge is the greatest service”, through these schools and

colleges across Nepal, the Nepali Army is providing quality education to the children of both army personnel (retired and in-service) and civilians at a reasonable cost. Pangen (2014) argues that such welfare work has to be conducted by the government, however, the Nepali Army, an organ of the Government of Nepal has started such commendable work which needs to be welcomed and followed by other sectors too. Through the establishment and successful operation of many Mahavidyalayas and the Nepali Army Institute of Health Science, the Nepali Army has provided opportunities to many students from army families to receive quality education receiving scholarships to study at these institutes. Recently, these institutes have been the centre of attraction for civilian parents where their children can receive quality education at an affordable cost. In these institutes, 40 per cent quota is allotted for civil students and the rest is reserved for the students from army families.

Conclusion

The study found that the Nepali Army, since its establishment, has played a commendable role in nation formation and nation building. It has ever been dedicated to serving the nation and citizenry. As enshrined in article 267 of the Constitution of Nepal, the Nepali Army is taking the responsibility of safeguarding the freedom, sovereignty, territorial integrity, national unity, independence and dignity of Nepal. Beyond this primary duty, as mandated by the constitution, the national army has been deployed in development, construction, disaster management and national pride projects. The army has been able to construct roads in many hinterlands linking them to the mainstream of development. The humanitarian works such as rescue and relief operations performed by the national army

during natural and man-made disasters are remarkable through which the army has made a distinct place in the hearts of the Nepali people.

The study explored that there has been a congenial civil-military relation in Nepal. The Nepali Army has always assimilated with the changed socio-political situation of the country. People had a suspicion, especially during the major political changes, for example, in 1950, 1990 and 2006 that the army might take certain steps crossing the civil supremacy. However, the national army was committed to the safeguarding of Nepal and Nepali people. Even during the Maoist insurgency, the role played by the national army is exemplary. Roles played by the Government of Nepal and the Nepali Army to bring Maoists into the peace process and the adjustment of Maoist fighters, who met the criteria, into the Nepali Army have set an example of conflict settlement to the entire world. This shows that the Nepali army has always respected civil supremacy and is focused on national security and the promotion of nationalism and national unity.

After the major political change in 2006, the Nepali Army has displayed the national character through the inclusion of women, Dalits, indigenous people, Khas Arya, Madhesi, Tharu, people from backward class and region into the Nepali Army based on principles of equality and inclusion. This inclusive character of the army has made it strong both physically and psychologically. All the Nepali people irrespective of caste, gender, religion, culture and economic status have accepted the national army. This has helped develop a strong sense of ownership and belongingness towards the national army. The Nepali Army, as an established, technical, capable, dedicated and skilled force has played

crucial roles not only in promoting peace and security but also in national development in the multifaceted dimensions. It is also believed to develop and operate ingenious military diplomacy to safeguard the freedom and enhance the economic independence of the country through friendly relations with the military forces of the neighboring countries and beyond. Although the Nepali Army has not received sufficient economic support to develop its military capacity to the fullest, it has not compromised to prove itself an efficient army at the global stage. As a result, the forces of powerful countries are interested to conduct joint military training and practices with the Nepali Army. This has helped establish, extend and strengthen military diplomacy in neighboring countries and beyond.

Recommendations

Due to Nepal's unique geopolitical position and geostrategic importance, our immediate neighbors and other powerful countries are always looking for increasing their influence in Nepal through various means, for example, in the name of financial and logistic supports. Powerful countries might take advantage to use Nepali land for their benefit. Therefore, the Nepali Army, as well as the Government of Nepal, should be aware of this fact before accepting any aids and logistic supports. It should not accept any foreign supports in the form of monetary or logistic aids that may influence its autonomous decision which may jeopardize the national security interests. Both political and army leadership need to be cautious about the donor country or agency's conflicting and competing interests behind such aids. A sufficient amount of budget should be allocated to the national army in order to make it technologically and strategically sharp and sound.

The Nepali Army needs to be more strategic in practising its military diplomacy. It can play a mediating diplomatic role in maintaining balance in the hostile military relations of China and India. Joint military training can ease the hostile relation of our neighboring countries for which the Nepali Army can take initiation. Through this, Nepal can reap the benefit of its unique situatedness between the two rising powers.

Political and military leadership need to give priority to the country. We need to learn lessons from past mistakes. While taking decisions that have sustained effect on the security and independence of the country, a discursive discussion is needed among political and military leaders and experts. A common consensus among political parties and civil society has to be sought while taking such decisions. Military leadership needs to eliminate the gap that exists in the lifestyles of personnel belonging to upper and lower ranks. The lavish lifestyle of any political or military leadership is questionable. Our existence is inextricably linked to the existence and freedom of the country. Unless we make our country prosperous, our individual affluence is meaningless.

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