

Role of Gorkha Soldiers in the Indian Independence Movement

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Abstract:

The role of the Gorkha soldiers in the Freedom Movement of India is one of the least researched topics in academia. In contrast to the general perception of the Gorkhas as loyal forces to the British Army, this article contends the opposite; the Gorkhas were not always loyal. From the Revolt of 1857 to India's independence in 1947, the Gorkhas—both civilians and the military, participated in several anti-British agitations. The Gorkhas of Assam, Darjeeling, Dehradun and Manipur among many took active participation in the different phases of India's Independence Movement. The role of the Gorkhas in the Indian National Army (INA) also remains unnoticed and unrecorded in history. This paper therefore, makes an attempt to explore the contributions of the Gorkhas soldiers in the different phases of India's Independence Movement.

Keywords: British, Gorkha, loyal, Indian Independence Movement.

Introduction:

The Gorkhas are one of the several indigenous tribal groups of India, mostly residing in Assam, Manipur, Darjeeling (West Bengal), Sikkim, and Dehradun (Uttarakhand) and so on. They are known to the world as loyal and brave soldiers, who had displayed their courage and bravery in different theaters of the World War I and World War II. They have also been extremely loyal to the Indian cause in the various wars fought by India after independence. However, during the colonial period, the patriotism of the Gorkhas was always under question, mainly due to the saga of the Gorkha loyalty circulated by the British authority. Contrary to the facts published in the regimental books and colonial writings, Gorkhas were not always loyal to the British Raj. In order to construct the brave and loyal image, British scholars and regimental historians, systematically omitted the anti-imperial activities of the Gorkhas.

Recent archival research has revealed that the Gorkhas revolted against the British during the Revolt of 1857, the regimental historians of which are almost silent. Later, during the first half of the 20th century, the Gorkhas participated in the several anti-British movements organized under the banner of Indian National Congress (INC). The sacrifice of the Gorkhas for the nation reached high watermarks with their participation in the Indian National Army (INA) or Azad Hind Fouz under the leadership of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. In this paper, an attempt is made to rewrite the history of the contribution of the Gorkhas in the freedom struggle of India from new light and perspective.

Literature Review:

There are plenty of literatures on the Gorkhas during the British rule. Most of the books written during the colonial period are written by the administrative or military officers from imperial perspective to

support the British interest in Indian subcontinent. Military handbook on Gorkhas are the most significant books written during this period. *Handbooks for the Indian Army: Gurkhas* (1915), written by Eden Vansittart and revised by B. U. Nicolay and *Handbooks for the Indian Army: Gurkhas* by C. J. Morris covers topics including geographical landscape, ruling dynasties, administrative and judicial systems of Nepal along with their ethnic composition, customs and social organizations, military structure, recruitment processes and so on. These books were specially designed as model guides for recruitment of the Gorkha soldiers in the British Indian Army.

Lionel Caplan came with completely different perspective in his book *Warrior Gentlemen: 'Gurkhas' in the Western Imagination*. The book makes a critical assessment of the complex historical identity of the Gorkha soldiers who have served in the British and Indian armies for around 200 years. Caplan highlighted that the popular image of the Gorkha as a "warrior gentleman" is a colonial fiction constructed by the British regimental officers. The loyalty and bravery of the Gorkhas were glamorized in order to suit their own narratives of colonial expansion. Caplan highlighted that initially, the Nepalese government opposed British recruitment, but later used these soldiers as diplomatic currency. The book also delves into the economic importance of the Gorkha service. Finally, Caplan highlights the disparity between the fictional martial identity found in Western texts and military literature and the severe socio-economic condition of the Gorkhas' lives in Nepal.

India's independence marked the beginning of a new trend of writing on the Gorkha history. Authors from both India and Nepal started writing on the Gorkhas from new perspective. Even poets and literary personalities started questioning the notion of the "Brave Gorkha". The poem "Haami" by Late Bhupi Serchan, the great Nepali poet is one of such narrative. Research institutes in Nepal such as "Martin Choutari" (founded in 1991) and "Social Science Baha" (founded in 2002) are making efforts to bring revolutionary changes by interrogating this construction of Gorkha masculinity. For instance, Sanjeev Upreti, in his *Masculinity and Mimicry: Ranas and Gurkhas*, an occasional paper published by the Social Science Baha makes a critical assessment of the masculine character of Gorkhas constructed by the British Military officer. Protyuosh Onta is another emerging social thinker and historian from Nepal, who is actively involved in rewriting the colonial understanding of the Gorkhas.

In India, academicians like A. C. Sinha, T. B. Subba, Rudraman Thapa, Tejimola Gurung and Bidhan Goley have made groundbreaking research on the history of Indian Gorkhas as well as the Nepalese diaspora. In *The Role of Gorkhas in the Making of Modern India* (2008), Gokul Sinha briefly discussed about role of Gorkhas in the Indian National Movement as well as their involvement in modernising India. Prakash Koirala, in his book *Bharatar Swadhinata Andolan aru Asomar Gorkha Muktijujarusakal* (2021), has explored the undocumented history of the Assamese Gorkhas and their contribution in India's Independence movement. Scholars in different universities of India have conducted research on the topics related with Gorkhas. Some prominent research undertaken in the recent periods are as follows:

1. In the thesis entitled *Gurkha regiment of British Indian Army 1816 1947*(2020), Dipak Bajgain has critically analysed the myth of Gorkha loyalty towards the British empire as well as factors responsible of Gorkha recruitment and their role in the protection of British interest in India as well as other parts of the empire. Bajgain has also discussed about role of Gorkha soldiers in the Indian freedom movement.

2. Bidhan Goley has made an extensive analysis of the identity issue and Gorkhaland movement in his doctoral thesis *Constructions of Gorkha Identity a Case Study of the Discourse on Nationality and Citizenship in India* (2022).
 3. Bishnu Kumari Gurung, in her PhD thesis entitled *Gurkhas in Colonial Expansion and Defence in Northeast India* (2023) has discussed about the factors responsible for Gorkha recruitment in the British Indian Army and role of the Gorkha soldier in the colonial expansion in Northeast India.
- Moreover, numerous research works are going on in different universities of India on the different aspect of Gorkha community.

The Myth of Gorkha Loyalty:

The Gorkhas have displayed immense bravery during the two World Wars. On the other hand, the loyalty of the Gorkhas towards the British had already been proven and established by the military historiographers through their writings. The question, however, is: Were the Gorkha soldiers always loyal to the British during the colonial period? The answer is absolutely not because even during the Revolt of 1857, Gorkha soldiers revolted against the British. The outbreak of Gorkha mutiny at Simla led by the Nasiri Battalion shocked the British. With the spread of the news in and around Simla, Europeans, who went there to avoid the hot summer of the plains, fled, abandoning their dependents, that is wives and kids.¹ The refusal of the Gorkha soldiers to give up charge of the treasury at Kasauli and Jutogh further alarmed the British.² The authority immediately addressed the Gorkha issue to control the mutiny; thereafter they used the Gorkha regiments to suppress the mutinies in several other places.³ In 1891, Niranjana Singh Chetry joined Yubraj Tekendrajit Singh of Manipur to fight against the British. Before joining the service of Tekendrajit, he was serving in the 34th Bengal Native Army of the British. After joining, he was appointed as Subedar of the Manipuri native force. Chetry played a significant role in the Manipur War of 1891. On 8th June, 1891, he was hanged by the British at Kangla after the war.⁴ During the Civil Disobedience Movement, Kharga Bahadur Singh Bista conducted a successful campaign among Gorkha civilians, retired soldiers and active soldiers, persuading some of them to join the movement as satyagrahis. Bista was arrested at Delhi Main Railway Station on 14th November 1930 on his way to Ahmedabad. After severe inquiry, the authority discovered that he was deeply involved in the propaganda against the Raj with the help of top leadership of Indian National Congress like Motilal Nehru. Bista himself wrote slogans and pamphlets in Nepali language to circulate the message of nationalism among the India Gorkhas. In most of his messages, he urged the Gorkhas to rectify the mistake committed during the Revolt of 1857 and the Jalianwala Bagh Massacre, 1919, by participating in the Indian National Movement. Through his messages, Bista was able to convince fellow Gorkhas that the fight against the British is their 'Raj Dharma' (rule of duty) and recruited dozens of Gorkhas as Satyagrahis, some of them are mentioned below⁵:

Gorkha Satyagrahis of the 1/9th Gurkha Rifles (Convinced by Kharga Bahadur as Congress Volunteer):

1. Sakti Parsad

¹Bellamy, Chris. *The Gurkhas: Special Force*, John Murray, London, 2011, P. 86.

² *Mutiny Records: Part I- Correspondence*, Punjab Government Press, Lahore, 1911, P. 36

³ *Mutiny Report, Part-I*, Punjab Government Press, Lahore, 1911, PP. 59-64.

⁴ Acharya Ghanashyam. Saheed Niranjana Singh Chhetri: A New Perspectives on Contribution and Historical Settlement of Gorkhas in Manipur, Bharatiya Gorkha Parisangha, Imphal, Manipur, 2019, PP. 28-29.

⁵ Home Political 1931, File No. 14/9, Indian National Archive.

2. Subedar Bhim Singh
3. Subedar Gorakh Bahadur
4. Subedar Karan Bahadur
5. Subedar Lal Bahadur
6. Subedar Major Jit Bahadur
7. Subedar Nur Bahadur
8. Subedar Tual Bahadur
9. Jamadar Hira Singh
10. Jamadar Jai Lal
11. Jamadar Jit Bahadur
12. Jamadar Lal Bahadur
13. Jamadar Mohan Singh
14. Jamadar Top Bahadur
15. L/ Naik Bher Bahadur
16. L/Naik Jand Bahadur
17. Battalion Havaldar Major Tika Nawaldur Bahadur
18. Battalion Quarter Master Havaldar Lok Bahadur
19. Havaldar Jungbir
20. Havaldar Pitambir
21. Jamadar Hari Singh

The list of 1st Battalion of Gorkha Satyagrahis arrested in Delhi as reported by the *Hindustan Times* on 01-11-1930 as under:

1. Dan Bahadur Thakuri, 9th Gurkha Rifles, Dehradun.
2. Bahadur Singh Chetry, Ex-soldier, 2/3rd Gurkha Rifles, Almora.
3. Ramlal Bhhetri, Ex-soldier, 2/9 Gurkha Rifles, Dehradun.
4. Puran Bahadur Khatri, Ex-soldier, 2/9th Gurkha Rifles, Dehradun.
5. Lal Bahadur Magar, Ex-soldier, 2/2nd Gurkha Rifles, Dehradun
6. Dahno Br. Gurung, Ex-soldier, 1/6th Gurkha Rifles, Abottabad.
7. Dhani Ram Thapa, ex-soldier, 2/5th Gurkha Rifles, Abottabad.

(Source: Home Political 1931, File No. 14/9)

Gorkha soldiers enlisted in the Indian National Army:

The Gorkhas made heroic sacrifices for the nation by serving in the Indian National Army (INA) or Azad Hind Fauz too. Gorkha soldiers, who were mainly prisoners of war, joined the INA obeying the appeal of Subhash Chandra Bose. Gakul Sinha, in his book *The Role of Gorkhas in the Making of Modern India* mentioned that the Gorkha prisoners of war from Frankenberg and Nymburg (250) were the first to enlist in the INA. He claimed that Shyambahadur Thapa was the first Gorkha martyr of the INA. Ram Singh Thakuri composed some nationalistic melodies for the Azad Hind Fauz such as “Azad Hind Ke Jawan”, “Kadam Kadam Badaye Ja”, and “Lahara Yeh Triranga Pyara” etc. Two others prominent Gorkha personalities of INA were Durga Malla and Purna Singh Thakur.⁶ Durga Malla, born on 1st July, 1913, is the most celebrated Gorkha freedom fighter in India. He joined the INA in 1942.

⁶Sinha Gakul, *the Role of Gorkhas in the Making of Modern India*, Bharatiya Gorkha Parishang, 2008, pp. 39-45.

Before that, he was serving in the Gorkha Rifles Regiment of the British Army. Initially, he was entrusted with the duty to mobilise the Gorkha soldiers of the INA but after the declaration of war by Subhash Chandra Bose he was posted in the intelligence branch. On 27th March, 1944, Malla was captured by the British from Kohima, when he was gathering enemy information for the INA. After trial, he was hanged on 25th August, 1944 in Delhi. Just before the execution of his death penalty, Durga Malla told following words to his wife Sharda:

“Sharda, I am sacrificing my life for the freedom of my motherland. You need not be worried and distressed. Crores of Hindustanis will be with you after my death. The Sacrifice I am offering, shall not go in vain. India shall be free. I am confident, this is only a matter of time.”⁷

The death anniversary of Durga Malla is celebrated as “Balidan Divas” by the Gorkhas in India. Gorkha soldiers from Nepal also joined the INA to fight for India’s independence. On 28th February, 1946, the *Hindustan Standard* reported that around 28 Gorkha soldiers of Azad Hind Fouz were transferred to Nepal under the leadership of Captain Dil Bahadur. Several other Gorkhas were under trail due to their active participation in the INA.⁸

Conclusion:

Gorkha soldiers were not always loyal to the British during the colonial period as depicted in the works by military officers and historian. ‘Gorkha loyalty’ was a myth created to support the colonial defense mechanism in India. On the other hand, Gorkha’s loyalty towards the British is nothing but an outcome of systematic censorship of anti-British activities. From the literature review it becomes clear that the primary focus of Gorkha literature written in Nepal and Britain is not anti-British activities of the Gorkhas but recruitment, bravery, loyalty, economic, and employments. The Gorkha Mutiny of Simla, though lasted for a short period of time, has raised question for the first time on this image constructed by the British. At the same time, they reveal the patriotic sentiment of the Gorkhas missing in the colonial literature. Further, the systematic nationalistic propaganda conducted by Kharga Bahadur Singh Bista completely destroyed the loyalist base of the British which resulted in the large-scale Gorkha recruitment in the Indian National Army during the World War II. It can THEREFORE, be said that Gorkha soldiers’ revolt against the British in several occasions; but the most significant was their participation in the INA.

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⁷ REMEMBER THE BRAVEHEART: Major Durga Malla of INA on his Birth Anniversary, Darjeeling Chronicle, 2nd May 2026, url: <https://thedarjeelingchronicle.com/remember-the-braveheart-major-durga-malla-of-ina-on-his-birth-anniversary/>, access date: 19/05/2026.

⁸*Hindustan Standard*, Vol. IX, No-147, Calcutta, Thursday, February 28th, 1946, P. 07. See also *The Sunday Hindustan Standard*, Vol. IX, No-150, Calcutta, March 3rd, 1946, P. 01.

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