

## Book Review

# A Sensitive Account of the Brave Gurkhas

Arvind Gupta

*Ayo Gorkhali: A History of the Gorkhas*  
by Tim I. Gurung  
Westlands Publications Private Limited, 2020

The Gurkhas are known for their bravery, loyalty, tenacity and simplicity. They have been part of the British Army since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Indian Army also has nearly 32,000 Gurkha troops in 40 battalions and seven regiments. Approximately, 3,500 Gurkhas serve in the British army. Collectively, Gurkhas in the British army are known as the Brigade of Gurkhas. Although they have been in the British army for 200 years not much is known about the history of Gurkhas, and how they became an integral part of the British and Indian armies.

Gurkha history is intimately connected with that of the colonial era British East India Company, the British Empire, India and Nepal. They have been parts of many famous global campaigns and expeditions undertaken by the British. Many books have been written on the Gurkhas by British authors. *Ayo Gorkhali*, written by a Gurkha himself, provides a Gurkha's perspective on the history of the Gurkhas. The picture of the Gurkhas that emerges is quite different from that portrayed in the standard books on the subject.

The author Tim Gurung hails from a small village near Pokhara in midwestern Nepal. The region is a traditional source of recruitment of Gurkhas for British and Indian armies. Gurung says that the life ambition of every Gurkha from the region is to join the British army, failing which the Indian army. Most Gurkhas belong to the four tribes – Magars, Gurungs in west Nepal, and, Rais and Limbus in eastern Nepal. The author served in the British army from 1980 until 1993. Realising that he was a misfit in the army, he left it after 13 years when he was a Corporal. Thereafter, he became a businessman and he is now a writer. He lives in Hong Kong. This is his first book.

---

Dr. Arvind Gupta is the Director of the Vivekananda International Foundation. He served as the Deputy National Security Advisor, Government of India from 2014 to 2017 and is also former Director of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Gurung delves deep into the history of the 'Gurkha' regiments. (Note: The author uses the spelling 'Gurkha' for those who join the British army and "Gorkhas' for those in the Indian Army). In writing the book he consulted a wide variety of original and secondary sources and conducted a large number of interviews with retired Gurkhas who had served in the British army. The well-researched book brings out relatively unknown facets of the Gurkhas and their relations with the British over the last 200 years. Many personal stories have been recounted in the book. The book provides a rare glimpse into the lives of ordinary Gurkhas. It is a non-academic work, the narrative flows easily and the author's sympathy for his kins comes out clearly.

The author was motivated to write the book because most Western accounts of the Gurkhas are biased and condescending. They caricature and belittle the Gurkhas while perpetuating certain myths. Western authors have been patronising towards the Gurkhas and give credit to the British for making the Gurkhas world famous. Ignoring the role of the Gurkhas in maintaining the British empire, the western accounts instead make fun of the Gurkha culture and traditions. The author wanted to give the "other side of the story". That is why he wrote the book.

Running into 27 chapters and several annexures, the book largely dwells upon the Gurkhas in the British Army. There is a passing reference to the 'Gorkhas' in the Indian army and Nepal armies but the author's focus remains on the British.

Four intertwined themes run through the book. First, the history of the Gurkhas, starting from the Anglo-Gurkha wars of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Second, the evolution of Gurkhas regiments in the British Indian and British armies and their participation in numerous campaigns. Third, the relationship between the Gurkhas and the British Army, characterized by discrimination, indifference and neglect. Fourth, the culture and traditions of the Gurkhas. There are several sub-themes and welcome digressions like the portrayal of the Gurkhas in literature, the contribution of Gurkha women, the preferences of the present generation of Gurkhas and the author's own career as a Gurkha in the British army. Many Gurkha veterans recount their stories. Such narratives and episodes make the book informative and also interesting to read.

### **Historical Narrative**

The book is particularly strong on its historical narrative. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Nepal was fragmented into several small states. Prithvi Narain Shah consolidated these kingdoms into a powerful 'Gorkha' state whose borders stretched from Kangra in the west to Sikkim in the east. He had raised a strong 'Gorkhali' army of his own. The British East

India Company, after subduing Bengal, launched its own expansionist drive and came face to face with the powerful Gorkha state. The result was the Anglo-Gorkha wars of 1814-16 in which a 100-gun, 50,000 strong Company army prevailed over the 12,000-14,000 strong Gorkha army. The two-phase war ended in 1816 with the signing of the Treaty of Sugauli, which is regarded by the Nepalis as a humiliating treaty. The Gorkha state lost all the conquered territory between the Mahakali and Rapti rivers to the Company.

Interestingly, a secret understanding was reached between the Nepali general Amar Singh Thapa and the Company that the latter would be allowed to recruit the Gorkhas into the British army. The agreement was not part of the treaty but the British started recruiting the Gorkhas even without the permissions of the Nepal Durbar. Three Gurkha battalions were raised from the irregulars. They were called Nasiri battalion (presently 1<sup>st</sup> Gorkhas in the Indian army), Sirmoor battalion (2<sup>nd</sup> GR now with the British army), and the Kumaon battalion (3<sup>rd</sup> Gorkha with the Indian army). According to the author, Nepal not only lost the territories but also its youth in the service of the British forever. The costs to Nepal have been stupendous.

In 1823, the Sirmoor battalion was used to quell the dacoity menace. The newly raised Gurkha battalions were used as a part of 27,000 forces in the Siege of Bharatpur (1824-26) against the Jats. The Nasiri and Sirmoor battalions were also used in the Anglo-Sikh wars of 1845-1846. In India's First War of Independence (1857), the British were on the back foot. They used the Gurkhas to suppress native uprisings in several parts of the country. A grateful Lord Canning returned the Terai region to the Nepali kings and raised more battalions. Nepali rulers began to cooperate with the British more closely. The book has many stories narrating how British influence in Nepal grew. The British were careful not to turn Nepal into a colony but converted it into a protectorate. They also took sides in the feuds of the Nepali political elite. Nepali rulers needed British help against the threat from Tibet in the North.

Nepali strongman Jang Bahadur Rana, the founder of the Rana rule in Nepal, visited London and met Queen Victoria in 1850. He was greatly impressed by the British and suggested a direct relationship between London and Kathmandu. While his request was rejected, the closeness between Nepal Durbar and the British resident in Kathmandu grew. British resident openly interfered in Nepal's internal affairs.

The 'Gurkhas' were used in numerous British campaigns including in the Anglo-Afghan wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in quelling Meshud insurgency in the Frontier area and Hazarajat. They also took part in wars against Chins and Lushais in Burma. The Gorkhas became the preferred instrument of British imperialism. They were used in the Anglo-

Afghan wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century quite liberally. The Gurkhas made their first overseas trip at the time of the Russo-Turkish war of 1878.

The British made intensive use of the 'Gurkha Brigade'. By the first world war, the British army had 26,000 Gurkha Soldiers in ten regiments with two battalions each. By the Second World War, 26 Gurkha battalions had been raised. Nearly half a million Gurkhas participated in these two wars and many lost their lives. A large number were wounded. They took part in almost all theatres of the war. The book has a detailed account of Gurkha participation in the major theatres of the two wars.

### **Unrecognised Contribution, Racism**

After the Second World War came the heartbreak when most of these battalions were demobilised and the Gorkhas soldiers were made to return to Nepal almost emptyhanded. The author strongly feels that the Gurkhas were shortchanged and cheated by the British. Those who had fought alongside the British were sent back home without any compensation. This rankles with the good because to this day.

On the partition of India, six Gurkha regiments (1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup>) were assigned to India and four (2<sup>nd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup>) to the British. The British used the Gurkhas in Malaysia, Borneo, Singapore, Falkland and Hong Kong. The Gurkha strength in the British Army was depleted in 1969 at the end of the Malaya insurgency and again in 1997 when the British handed over Hongkong to China. Some units were kept in Borneo and Singapore for which the recipient countries paid. This paid for the Gurkhas in the British army. The author holds that the Gurkhas were once again treated unfairly by the British. He blames the tripartite agreement between the government of Britain, India and Nepal in 1947, according to which the pay scales and allowances were fixed for the Gurkhas. This is a cause of major heartburn for the British Gurkhas.

### **Soldiers of the Empire**

Gurkhas were the soldiers of the British empire. The author feels that had the Gurkhas not helped the British in suppressing the first war of Indian independence in 1857, there would have been no British Empire. Likewise, many Gurkhas died unnecessarily in the first half of the Second World War due to the mistakes of the British generals in campaigns such as that of Gallipoli and Mesopotamia. While the bravery of Gurkhas was recognised in the various awards that were given to them, they were sent home without adequate compensation when the war ended. This is a historical wrong which the Gurkhas want to set right. Even after 200 years of selfless service, the stigma of being regarded as mercenaries has not gone away. This hurts the Gurkha conscience.

The author points to the rampant existence of racialism in the British Army. This led to resentment and the emergence of the various Gurkha Justice Campaigns. Many British politicians supported these groups. Until 2004 Gurkhas were not allowed to settle in the United Kingdom. As a result of various campaigns, Tony Blair's Labour Government made required changes in the rules so that the ex-Gurkhas who had continued to serve in the British army after 1997 were given the right to settle in UK that year. However, Gurkha veterans who retired before 1997 were given these settlement rights only under circumstances that were exceptional. The 'Gurkha Justice Campaign' demanded equal settlement rights for all Gurkha soldiers. This was followed by an extraordinary and successful campaign in 2008 by actress Joanna Lumley (whose father served in the 6<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles), demanding the settlement rights in UK for all the Gurkha veterans who served in the British Army before 1997. Jacqui Smith, the home secretary, finally informed that the rules shall be amended to grant citizenship to Gurkha veterans who had retired from British regiment before 1997, provided they had served with the British army for at least four years. Eventually, in 2009, all Gurkhas and their families were given the right to residence. This was a major victory for the Gurkha campaigns spearheaded by such organisations as Gurkha Army Ex-Servicemen Organisation (GAESO), British Gurkha Welfare Society and others. Since 2009, many Gurkhas and their families have settled in the UK. Now the Gurkhas are fighting for dignity and recognition of their contribution to the British empire.

The author does not spare Nepali rulers for their neglect of the Gurkhas. He accuses them of not taking up the Gurkha cause forcefully and effectively with the British government. Instead, the rulers used the Gurkha sacrifices to fill their own coffers. They did not keep a record of the Gurkhas who left Nepal to join the British Army. In the absence of records, the government cannot fight effectively for the Gurkha cause. The author also resents the harassment of the Gurkhas in the Nepali society, particularly by customs officials, when they return from their postings. Their wealth is resented.

## **Conclusion**

For those who are interested in military history, the book is a treat as it describes how the Gurkha battalions came to be raised at different times in different circumstances. Most of them have a long history. Many campaigns of the First and Second World Wars have been described at great length. There is a whole chapter on the famous Gurkha *khukri*, which is inseparable from the popular Gurkha image. The chapter on the depiction of the Gurkhas in literature and the hardships of the Gurkha women provides an intimate glimpse of Gurkha life. Even before the Gurkhas were taken into the British Army, there was a tradition of them serving in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army in Lahore. Interestingly,

the Gurkhas who work in the British and Indian armies were called 'Lahure', i.e., those who went to Lahore to serve in the Maharaja's army. 'Malayako Lahure' means those egging to serve in Malaya.

What emerges is a sensitive account of the Gurkhas' 200 year-long interaction with the British Army. The author's contention is not just to highlight the Gurkha bravery. That is there for everyone to see. His main argument is that the Gurkhas have been shortchanged, discriminated against and ill-treated by the British. The mercenary tag hurts. The Gurkhas helped the British Empire and later the British government. They worked selflessly. But they were treated unequally. The wrongs done to them must be corrected. Until that happens, the Gurkhas will continue to struggle for their rights peacefully. He concludes the book with this remark, "The debt of honour that Britain and Nepal owe to the Gurkhas will probably never be paid back... But..we can certainly do one thing...and that is to start respecting them".