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ESSAY: The Legend of Gurkha

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(<http://himalayanwatch.blogspot.com/2009/12/essay-legend-of-gurkha-from.html>)

Gurkha, also spelt as Gorkha, are people from Nepal who take their name from the eighth century Hindu warrior-saint Guru Gorakhnath. His disciple Bappa Rawal, born Prince Kalbhoj, founded the house of Mewar. Later descendants of Bappa Rawal moved further east to found the house of Gorkha, which in turn founded the Kingdom of Nepal. Gurkhas are most well-known for their history of service as foreign soldiers in the British Army and the Indian Army.

Gurkha - History

Gurkhas claim descent from the Hindu Rajputs and Brahmins of Northern India, who entered modern Nepal from the west. Guru Gorkhanath had a Rajput Prince-disciple, the legendary Bappa Rawal, born Prince Kalbhoj, founder of the house of Mewar, who became the first Gurkha and is said to be the ancestor of the present Royal family of Nepal as well as the Rana dynasty of Nepal.

The legend states that Bappa Rawal was a teenager in hiding, when he came upon the warrior saint while on a hunting expedition with friends in the jungles of Rajasthan. Bappa Rawal chose to stay behind, and care for the warrior saint, who was in deep meditation. When Guru Gorkhanath awoke, he was pleased with the devotion of Bappa Rawal. The Guru gave him the Khukri sword, the famous curved dagger of the present day Gurkhas. The legend continues that he told Bappa that he and his people would henceforth be called Gurkhas, the disciples of the Guru Gorkhanath, and their bravery would become world famous. He then instructed Bappa Rawal, and his Gorkhas to stop the advance of the Muslims, who were invading Afghanistan (which at that time was a Hindu/Buddhist nation), and converting the masses at the edge of the sword to their religion, slaughtering those who refused to convert and destroying many Hindu/Buddhist temples and

shrines. Bappa Rawal took his Gurkhas and liberated Afghanistan - originally named Ghandhar, from which the present day Kandahar derives its name. He and his Gorkhas stopped the initial Islamic advance of the 8th century in the Indian subcontinent for the time being.

There are legends that Bappa Rawal (Kalbhøj) went further conquering Iran and Iraq before he retired as an ascetic at the feet of Mt. Meru, having conquered all invaders and enemies of his faith.

It is a misconception that the Gurkhas took their name from the Gorkha region of Nepal. The region was given its name after the Gurkhas had established their control of these areas. In the early 1500s some of Bappa Rawal's descendants went further east, and conquered a small state in present-day Nepal, which they named Gorkha in honour of their patron saint. By 1769, through the leadership of Maharaj Dhiraj Prithvi Narayan Shahdev (1769-1775), the Gorkha dynasty had taken over the area of modern Nepal. They made Hinduism the state religion, although with distinct Rajput warrior and Gorkhanath influences.

In the Gurkha War (1814-1816) they waged war against the British East India Company army. The British were impressed by the Gurkha soldiers and after defeating the ghurkas and making Nepal a protectorate they were granted the right to hire them as mercenaries organised in Gurkha regiments in the East India Company army with the permission of then prime minister, Shree Teen (3) Maharaja (Maharana) Jung Bahadur Rana, the first Rana Prime-minister and "Father" of modern Nepal.

The "original" Gurkhas who were descended from the Rajputs refused to enter as mere soldiers and were instead given positions as officers in the British-Indian armed forces. The Indo-Tibeto-Mongolian Gurkhas entered as soldiers. The Thakur/Rajput Gurkhas were entered as officers, one of whom, (retired) General Narendra Bir Singh, Gurkha Rifles, rose to become aide-de-camp (A.D.C.) to Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India. After the British left India Gorkhals continued seeking employment in British and Indian forces, as officers and soldiers. However, it should be noted that due to the mixing of blood over the centuries many Thakurs/Rajputs of Nepal may have Mongolian features and not appear Indian, while many Indo-Tibeto-Mongolian Gurkhas may have Rajput blood,

an example of this being the surname Thapa.

Under international law present-day British Gurkhas are not treated as mercenaries but are fully integrated soldiers of the British Army, operate in formed units of the Brigade of Gurkhas, and abide by the rules and regulations under which all British soldiers serve. Similar rules apply for Gurkhas serving in the Indian Army.

Gurkha - East India Company army

Gurkhas served as troops under contract to the East India Company in the Pindaree War of 1817, in Bhurtbore (Present day Bharatpur) in 1826 and the First and Second Sikh Wars in 1846 and 1848. During the Indian Mutiny in 1857, Gurkhas fought on the British side, and became part of the British Indian Army on its formation. The 2nd Gurkha Rifles (The Sirmoor Rifles) defended Hindu Rao's house for over three months, losing 327 out of 490 men. The 60th Rifles (later the Royal Green Jackets) fought alongside the Sirmoor Rifles and were so impressed that following the mutiny they insisted 2nd Gurkhas be awarded the honours of adopting their distinctive rifle green uniforms with scarlet edgings and rifle regiment traditions and that they should hold the title of riflemen rather than sepoys. Twelve Nepalese regiments also took part in the relief of Lucknow under the command of Shri Teen (3) Maharaja Maharana Jung Bahadur of Nepal.

Gurkha - British Indian Army

From the end of the Indian Mutiny until the start of the First World War the Gurkha Regiments saw active service in Burma, Afghanistan, the North-East and the North-West Frontiers of India, Malta (the Russo-Turkish War, 1877-78), Cyprus, Malaya, China (the Boxer Rebellion of 1900) and Tibet (Younghusband's Expedition of 1903).

Between 1901 and 1906, the Gurkha regiments were renumbered from the 1st to the 11th and redesignated as Gurkha Rifles. One hundred thousand Gurkhas fought in the First World War. They served in the battlefields of France in the Loos, Givenchy, Neuve Chapelle and Ypres; in Mesopotamia, Persia, Suez Canal and Palestine against Turkish advance, Gallipoli and Salonika. One detachment served

with Lawrence of Arabia.

During the Battle of Loos the 8th Gurkhas fought to the last, and in the words of the Indian Corps Commander, “found its Valhalla”. During the Gallipoli Campaign the 6th Gurkhas captured a feature later known as “Gurkha Bluff”. At Sari Bair they were the only troops in the whole campaign to reach and hold the crest line and look down on the Straits which was the ultimate objective. Second Battalion of the 3rd Gurkha Rifles was involved in the conquest of Baghdad.

In the interwar years, Gurkhas fought in the Third Afghan War in 1919 followed by numerous campaigns on the North-West Frontier, particularly in Waziristan.

During World War II, the Nepalese crown let the British recruit 20 extra battalions – 40 in total – and let them serve everywhere in the world. In addition to keeping peace in India, Gurkhas fought in Syria, North Africa, Italy, Greece and against the Japanese in Singapore and in the jungles of Burma. The 4th battalion of the 10th Gurkha Rifles became a nucleus for the Chindits. They fought in the Battle of Imphal.

Gurkha - Gurkha military rank system in the British Indian Army

British Indian Army and Current Indian Army /Current British Army Equivalence

Subedar Major/ Major (Queen’s Gurkha Officer)

Subedar/ Captain (Queen’s Gurkha Officer)

Jemadar (now Naib Subedar)/ Lieutenant (Queen’s Gurkha Officer)

Company Havildar Major/ Company Sergeant Major

Company Quartermaster Havildar/ Company Quartermaster Sergeant

Havildar/ Sergeant

Naik/ Corporal

Lance Naik/ Lance Corporal

Rifleman

Note:

As opposed to British army officers who received regular Queen's or King's Commissions, Gurkha officers in this system would receive the Viceroy's Commission. After Indian Independence, Gurkha officers in those regiments which became part of the British Army were known as King's Gurkha Officers and later Queen's Gurkha Officers (QGOs), receiving the King's and later Queen's Gurkha Commission. This distinction implied that Gurkha officers had no authority to command troops of British regiments.

The equivalent ranks in the post 1947 Indian Army were (and are) known as Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs). They retained the traditional rank titles used in the British Indian Army - Jemadar (later Naib Subedar), Subedar and Subedar Major.

While in principle any British subject may apply for a commission without having served in the ranks previously, the same cannot be said about Gurkha officers. It was customary for a Gurkha soldier to rise through the ranks and prove his ability before his regiment would consider offering him a commission.

From the 1920s, Gurkhas could also receive King's Indian Commissions, and later full King's or Queen's Commissions, which put them on a par with British officers. This was rare until after the Second World War.

Gurkha - Gurkha Rifle Regiments ca.1800-1946

1st King George V's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Malaun Regiment) (raised 1815, allocated to Indian Army at independence in 1947)

2nd King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Sirmoor Rifles) (raised 1815, allocated to British Army in 1948)

3rd Queen Alexandra's Own Gurkha Rifles (raised 1815, allocated to Indian Army at independence in 1947)

4th Prince of Wales's Own Gurkha Rifles (raised 1857, allocated to Indian Army at independence in 1947)

5th Royal Gurkha Rifles (Frontier Force) (raised 1858, allocated to Indian Army at independence in 1947)

6th Gurkha Rifles, renamed 6th Queen Elizabeth's Own Gurkha Rifles in 1959 (raised 1817, allocated to British Army in 1948)

7th Gurkha Rifles, renamed 7th Duke of Edinburgh's Own Gurkha Rifles in 1959 (raised 1902, allocated to British Army in 1948)

8th Gurkha Rifles (raised 1824, allocated to Indian Army at independence in 1947)

9th Gurkha Rifles (raised 1817, allocated to Indian Army at independence in 1947)

10th Princess Mary's Own Gurkha Rifles (raised 1890, allocated to British Army in 1948)

11th Gorkha Rifles (1918-1922; raised again by India following independence in 1947)

14th Gurkha Rifles (1942-1946)

25th Gurkha Rifles (1942-1946)

26th Gurkha Rifles (1943-1946)

29th Gurkha Rifles (1943-1946)

38th Gurkha Rifles (1943-1946)

42nd Gurkha Rifles (raised 1817 as the Cuttack Legion, renamed 6th Gurkha Rifles

in 1903)

44th Gurkha Rifles (raised 1824 as the 16th (Sylhet) Local Battalion, renamed 8th Gorkha Rifles in 1903)

56th Gurkha Rifles (1943-1946)

710th Gurkha Rifles (1943-1946)

Gurkha - Post independence

After Indian independence - and partition - in 1947 and under the Tripartite Agreement, six Gurkha regiments joined the post-independence India Army. Four Gurkha regiments joined the British Army.

Gurkha - British Army Gurkhas

Four Gurkha regiments joined the British Army on January 1 1948:

2nd King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Sirmoor Rifles)

6th Queen Elizabeth's Own Gurkha Rifles

7th Duke of Edinburgh's Own Gurkha Rifles

10th Princess Mary's Own Gurkha Rifles

They formed the Brigade of Gurkhas and were initially stationed in Malaya. See the Brigade of Gurkhas for details of British Gurkha activities since 1948.

Gurkha - Indian Army Gorkhas

Following Indian independence in 1947, six Gurkha regiments remained with the Indian Army:

1st King George V's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Malaun Regiment)

3rd Queen Alexandra's Own Gurkha Rifles

4th Prince of Wales's Own Gurkha Rifles

5th Royal Gurkha Rifles (Frontier Force)

8th Gurkha Rifles

9th Gurkha Rifles

Upon independence, the spelling was changed to Gorkha. In addition, a further regiment, 11th Gorkha Rifles, was raised. Upon India becoming a republic in 1950, all royal titles were dropped.

The 1st Battalion of the 11th Gorkha Regiment fought in the 1999 Kargil Conflict for India. In 1999 5/8 Gorkha Rifles were sent as part of the Indian Army UN contingent of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) to secure the diamond fields against the Revolutionary United Front.

Gurkha - Singapore Gurkhas Contingent

The Gurkha Contingent (GC) of the Singapore Police Force was formed on 9th April 1949 from selected ex-British Army Gurkhas. It was raised to replace a Sikh unit which had disintegrated during the Second World War and is an integral part of the Police Force.

The GC is a well trained, dedicated and disciplined body whose principal role is as a specialist guard force. In time of crisis it can be deployed as an impartial reaction force. During the turbulent years before and after independence the GC acquitted itself well a number of times during outbreaks of civil disorder. The Gurkhas displayed the courage, self restraint and professionalism for which they are famous and earned the respect of the society at large.

The picture shows troopers of the Gurkha Contingent, guarding a car park entrance to Raffles City where the 117th IOC Session was held in Singapore in July 2005.

Dressed in the combat uniform, but with elements borrowed from the no. 3 dress, the officer in the foreground was armed with a shotgun while the other handles a Heckler & Koch MP5.

After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the GC can be seen patrolling the streets and replacing local policemen to guard key installations. Before the incident, they were seldom seen in public.

Gurkha - Other

Gurkha soldiers have won 13 Victoria Crosses, all but one (Rambahadur Limbu) were won when all Gurkha regiments were still part of the Indian Army. An additional 13 VCs have been awarded to British Officers in Gurkha regiments. Since Indian independence, Gurkhas have also won 3 Param Vir Chakras.

Ethnically, Gurkhas who are presently serving in the British armed forces are Indo-Tibeto-Mongolians. Gurkhas serving in the Indian Armed Forces are of both groups, Indo-Tibeto-Mongolian and Rajput stock. Gurkhas of Indo-Tibeto-Mongolian origin mostly belong to the Gurung, Magar, Tamang, Khasa and Kiranti origin, many of whom are adherents of Tibetan Buddhism and Shamanism. [1]

Since the original Gurkhas were Rajput warriors from Rajasthan, all gurkhas, regardless of ethnic origin, speak a Rajasthani dialect. They are also famous for their large knife called the kukri.

In the mid 1980s some Nepali speaking groups in West Bengal began to organize under the Gorkhaland National Liberation Front, calling for their own Gurkha state. In 1988 they were given broader autonomy as the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council.

The treatment of Gurkhas and their families has been the subject of controversy in the United Kingdom following revelations that Gurkhas receive smaller pensions than their British equivalents.

The nationality status of Gurkhas and their families has also been in dispute, with claims that some ex-army Nepalese families are being denied residency and forced

to leave Britain.

(Source: <http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/Gurkha/id/1895301>; image: <http://theselvedgeyard.files.wordpress.com/2009/02/c2.jpeg>)

courtesy: Barun Roy