

## **The Gorkhas-Sons of the Soil, pride of the Nation**

*Nanda Kirati Dewan, a journalist from Assam traces the origin of the Gorkhas in India.*

*(Source: [www.sikhim.blogspot.com](http://www.sikhim.blogspot.com))*



Many people have a misconception about the Gorkhas in India - that they are foreigners and have migrated from Nepal. There could not be a greater mistake than this. The Gorkhas are in fact the aborigines of India and they can trace their history back to ancient times. The Gorkha community is the product of Indo-Aryan and Mongoloid assimilation from ages past. As a linguistic group they can trace their origin back to Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman beginnings. In fact the Gorkhas consist of both Indo-Aryan and Mongoloid racial groups.

In the Mahabharata and Manusmriti names of Khasa are mentioned. They are in fact the Gorkhas. The Gorkhas spoke the language then known as Khaskura Khasas as a community existed in Nepal which it later changed to another ethnic name. The Lichchhavis, one of the aboriginal tribes of India originally lived in the plains of present Nepal. During the early centuries, the Gorkhas, the aboriginal tribe in India, migrated to Nepal and established themselves there. Other groups from India also migrated to Nepal which comprised high caste Hindus.

During the Muslim invasion of India in which they occupied part of North India from the eleventh century to the sixteenth century, many Indian tribes from the plains of India migrated to Nepal for the security and safety of their religion and culture. These migrants to Nepal were mainly of high castes and powerful groups, and they themselves established their kingdoms and principalities. You can safely deduce that the major part of the population of Nepal came from India who later came to be known as Gorkhas. In fact, the Shah dynasty which ruled Nepal for almost 240 years was from Rajasthan.

Besides this, there were the Kiratas or Mongoloid Gorkhas also, who were invited by the Mughal kings to be enlisted in the Mughal army. They were called Muglane. Later, this word became synonymous for any one who left India and went to India. Those Gorkhas who joined the army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Lahore were known as the Lahure. These terms are still in use in army circles.

In Nepal, during the eighteenth century, the king of Gorkha district (one principality was known by this name) became very powerful and its ruler, Prithvi Narayan Shah, began expanding the Gorkha kingdom. He conquered many small principalities such as the Baise Rajyas and Chaubisiya Rajyas. Prithvi Narayan became very powerful and he looked towards the east to establish his hegemony. He invaded the Kathmandu valley and annexed it. He moved his capital from Gorkha to Kathmandu and called his dynasty the Shah dynasty. This was in 1768. The conquest of the Kathmandu valley increased his thirst for more and he invaded the kingdoms of east Nepal. He conquered them in 1789 and annexed part of eastern Sikkim. He looked west and he had very brilliant generals who added the kingdoms in the west including the areas of present Uttaranchal, part of Himachal Pradesh and some parts of Kashmir too.

In the meantime, the British East India Company had conquered Bengal in 1788. Instead of focusing on trade, they began to conquer kingdoms and were advancing towards northern India and were finding the expansion of Nepal in conflict with their interests. The British were looking for a trade route to do business with Tibet and Nepal was a hindrance to their plan. It also posed a hurdle in their plans of annexing Punjab where Ranjit Singh was ruling. A war broke out between the East India Company and Nepal which lasted for three years (1812-1815). Although the Gorkhas showed great bravery, they could not withstand a larger and better trained army with modern weapons. In the battle of Khalanga, near Dehradun, a British general was killed in the battle, and the British were very impressed by the bravery displayed by the Gorkhas. Along with a memorial for the brave dead general, they also left a plaque of appreciation of the commander and the army of the fort which had resisted the advance of the British. They left a moving tribute to the gallant Gorkhas and their leader Balabhadra Kunwar. The British also sent an expeditionary force to Kathmandu to bring the brave Gorkhas to their knees. The politics of the durbar was such that Nepal accepted defeat though the Nepali generals were not ready to surrender. This resulted in the Treaty of Sugauli in 1815 through which Nepal lost almost a third of its territory. All its western

territories were taken over by the Company and in the east, the area Nepal had conquered from Sikkim was also ceded to the British.



While the negotiations were going on and the text of the treaty was being prepared, some British officers thought out a plan whereby the Gorkhas were to be recruited into the Company army which would be a great gain for the Company as they had been greatly impressed by Gorkha bravery. Moreover, the vanquished Gorkhas were in the conquered land. So they could be enlisted in the army without any hitch. The soldiers were called by the British officers and asked to join the British army while wearing their own Gorkha colours. The Gorkha soldiers met the vanquished Nepali general Amar Singh Thapa and asked as to what should be done. Amar Singh Thapa told the soldiers that they were now under Company land and they could join the British army. This happened before the Sugauli Treaty was signed in 1815. Thus the Gorkha soldiers became part of the Company's Indian army from 1815. However, the vanquished soldiers of

the fort of Khalanga, with its leader Balabhadra Kunwar went to Lahore to join the army of Maharaj Ranjit Singh and, as was expected, waited for the British to wreak vengeance on them when the British attacked the Punjab. Balabhadra and his compatriots died fighting the Afghans when Ranjit Singh ordered them to fight Afghanistan. Gorkhas have insisted that they are not migrants to India. They say that they came to India along with their land, skills and culture. When one-third of Nepal was annexed by the British after the Anglo-Nepal War in 1815, the residents of that territory became subjects of the British East India Company. In 1857, when the crown took over India from the East India Company, the Gorkhas became citizens of British India and when India became Independent in 1947, they automatically became Indian citizens.

The British raised the Gorkha army, the 1st Gorkha Rifles in 1815, the 2nd Gorkha Rifles on the same day and year, and the 3rd and 4th Gorkha Rifles were raised in 1857. The 5th Gorkha Rifles was raised some time later. In 1902, the 6th and 7th Gorkha Rifles were raised, and in 1903, the 8th Gorkha Rifles was raised. The 9th Gorkha Rifles was born in

1817 and the 10th Gorkha Rifles was raised in 1901. The Gorkha Regiment, the 11th Gorkha Rifles, was raised during World War I but was later disbanded. It was raised again by free India during the Indo-Pakistan war. During the time that the British quit India, the government of Britain and Jawaharlal Nehru's new government agreed to split the Gorkha regiments. While India retained four regiments, Britain took the 2nd, 6th, 7th and 10th Gorkha Rifles to deploy them across its various colonies.

The East India Company returned the land conquered by Nepal from Sikkim in 1789 to the original Raja in 1817 under a special treaty of friendship concluded at Titalya. A decade later, the British found that Darjeeling, which constituted the area returned by the British to Sikkim in 1817, was very important in view of its weather and strategic location. So they got the Sikkim raja to cede this land to them. Later, the British added to this by taking over some territory as punitive measures against a reciltrant Raja. In 1865, Kalimpong was annexed by the Company from Bhutan and so a district was made. Since the climate of this District of Darjeeling was akin to England also. They made Darjeeling their summer town to escape from the respite of the cruel heat of the plains. A sizable population was already there but they were not enough. So the British brought native workers from Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal and the plains of India to work their tea gardens, run shops, fill the secretariat of the district and the municipalities and provide a good quantity of labour. The population grew in no time and the Gorkhas were in majority. A population of 10,000 in 1850 grew to almost two and half lakhs by the end of the century. Schools were opened, trade developed and Darjeeling became a health resort town. Most of the Siliguri area had also been part of Sikkim. The present population of Darjeeling is around 10 lakh of which vast majorities are Gorkhas.

The Northeast: The Nepalese had relations with the people of India's Northeast from ancient times. And after the Sugauli Sandhi of 1815, Gorkhas were recruited for Assam Light infantry which was formed in 1817 in Cuttack. The Gorkhas were brought to Assam and north-east regions to man the security forces, and after retirement the soldiers preferred to settle down there. In this way Gorkhas made the Northeast their home centuries ago. Migration for trade and employment also brought more Gorkhas to the region. At present, it is estimated that there are 52 lakh Gorkhas in the whole of the Northeast. The British gave the Gorkhas many amenities in these areas. The Gorkhas cultivated lands, tended cows for milk supply, cleared forest for agriculture and road making, established towns and bazaars. Besides, tea gardens developed in the Assam area and for these labourers were required in large number to run

the factories going. The British did everything to lure the Gorkhas to new and pioneering areas of development in the North-East.

In this way, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya were populated by the Gorkhas and played substantive part of developing the area with the selfless service. Shillong became an army cantonment in the 1860s and the Gorkhas were stationed there. The presence of the Gorkhas there is evidenced by the establishment of the Gorkha Association in 1886. Furthermore presence of Gorkha Panchayat in 1932 at Gorkha Thakurbari Paltan Bazar Guwahati under the able leadership of Pahad Singh Gurung in today's Nepali Mandir (AAGSU's head office) establishes a fact Gorkhas were in majority in the virtual capital of North East since time immemorial. However due to continuous inflow of Nepali nationals from Nepal abiding Indo-Nepal Friendship treaty of 1950 strategically Gorkha Thakurbari came to known as Nepali Mandir after setting up of a Shiva Temple and the then Gorkha Panchayat was transformed into Nepali Mandir Prabhandhak Samitee. Today Radha Krishna Temple stands as Nepali Mandir the Gorkha Thakurbari area is known as Nepali Mandir.

Having been a part of Northeast society, many Gorkhas joined politics and many of them participated in the Freedom Struggle. Later many Gorkhas became members of the state assemblies too. Many good writers were born, fine poets composed their poems and many social leaders were produced by the North-East. To name a few Chabilal Upadhyay who had chaired the historic session of the then Assam Association in 1921 that gave birth to Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC), Dalbeer Singh Lohar, Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan and Prasad Singh Subba were prominent freedom fighters of Assam. Today All Assam Gorkha Students' Union (AAGSU) a major democratic Gorkha force which has been serving its fellow community men as federal army since 1976 is battling to establish these great patriots to create Gorkha identity politically and constitutionally in Assam. Thanks to the mainstream composite Assamese population for accepting Gorkhas as son of the soil, pride of the nation. The demand for Gorkha Autonomous Council (GAC) by giving birth to a political banner Gorkha Autonomous Council Demand Committee (GACDC) within the territory of Assam is a huge lift taken by AAGSU and supported by 28 other democratic community and students' organizations is a giant leap

Other parts of India: Gorkhas have been residents in other parts of India for long periods. The fact that there is a Gorkha Welfare Association in Bangalore, Karnataka that was established in 1936 proves that Gorkhas were settled in south and west India much before

Independence. Mumbai is home to a big number of Gorkhas. Even a city like Nagpur has a sizeable number of Gorkhas, who for decades, have been running the successful Gorkha Cooperative Society. The presence of Gorkhas in Jammu and Kashmir is established by the existence of the Gorkhanagar locality there. Punjab has a thriving Gorkha community, a throw back to the times when Sikh leader Ranjit Singh recruited them in large numbers in his army.

The district of Jalpaiguri was originally the part of the area taken over from Bhutan by the British in 1865. It was a suitable area for tea cultivation. Since labourers were required for this industry workers from Darjeeling, Sikkim and Bhutan and other parts of tribal area, mainly Bihar, congregated to fill the need of the labourers. Today too, there is a substantial Gorkha population in this district. This is one reason the demand for Gorkhaland includes the part that was originally a part of Bhutan.

**Sikkim:** The 1898 official Gazetteer of Sikkim records that there was substantial population of the Gorkhas in Sikkim. One of the Chhogyal had married a Limbu princess from Eastern Nepal and the princess had brought along with her as part of the dowry a quite a number of Limbu families. In time these Limbu families grew in number of sizable population. The Limbus are considered as one of the original inhabitants of Sikkim alongwith the Lepchas and the people of Tibetan origin. The Limbus are a group of the caste from Kirata clan and are included in the genus of the Gorkhas. The kings were not cruel as has been made to, comparatively, and the subjects not unhappily. However, the king had to abdicate in favour of



the people opting for joining India in the seventies of the last century. At present it is the Gorkhas (they prefer to call themselves Sikkimese) form the majority of the population, and it has been Nepali leaders who have been chief ministers for sometime. The story of Sikkim is encouraging. The people gradually rose from the feudal system to a responsible government system now being citizens of India, and have been dedicated to the development of their

state. Sikkim has produced some good political leaders, social leaders, litterateurs and experts in many fields. With the opening of many new colleges, high schools and now with a central Sikkim University, Sikkim has a bright future for accelerating development forward like the advanced state like Goa.

**Darjeeling:** The Gorkhas in Darjeeling, among all Gorkhas in India, have been perhaps the most vocal about their demands for long. Since 1907 the Gorkhas have felt their yoking together with Bengal was not appropriate. Various groups and political formations petitioned the government of the day in 1907, 1917, 1930, 1934, 1942, 1947 and 1952 seeking the divorce of Darjeeling and Dooars from Bengal and the creation of a separate state comprising Darjeeling district and parts of the Jalpaiguri district, even of Assam. The Gorkhas of Darjeeling led a massive all-India movement for the national recognition of the Nepali language in the 8th schedule of the Indian Constitution, a demand that first arose in 1956 in Dehradun but was taken on a national level by the Darjeeling-based All India Nepali Bhasa Samiti formed in 1972. The objective was achieved in 1992, but the Gorkhas had to struggle for forty years to achieve it. Different political parties since 1950 asked for a creation of state for the Gorkhas, and the movement for the state was quite intense. But unfortunately, only a local autonomy hill council calling it Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council was given in place of Gorkhaland. This Council had no power even to appoint a chowkidar, and every decision had to be approved by Calcutta. This did not fulfil the aspirations of the Gorkhas of Darjeeling and now a more intense movement for the creation of Gorkhaland has been going on with the support all the Gorkhas residing in other parts of India.

The other hub of the Gorkhas is the region straddling Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Dehradun is a cantonment area but there are 10 lakh Gorkhas who now live in the state of Uttarakhand, of which Dehradun is the capital. Musician, litterateurs, social workers and others have emerged from the region. Mitrasen Thapa was a musician par excellence and his achievements have been noted by the Indian Post and Telegraphs Department, which issued a commemorative postage stamp in his honour. Many INA soldiers were from this area, and two famous sons of India, Major Durga Malla and Dal Bahadur Thapa were executed by the British after the surrender of the INA in 1945. Durga Malla was the first martyr who embraced the noose like a garland and said that it was better to die than be a coward. The British tried to entice Durga Malla to urging him to admit that he had been forced to join the INA by pro-independence leaders. But he resolutely refused to say so. The Government of India has installed a statue of Durga Malla on the premises of Parliament

House in New Delhi. Another great son of the region was Captain Ram Singh Thakur. Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose had appointed him the official musician of the India National Army. Thakur composed many patriotic and popular songs. At the behest of the Netaji, he composed a song for the INA with the words Jana Gana Mana in Hindi. Later this music was used for Rabindra Nath Tagore's Jana Gana Mana, adopted as the national anthem of India. It was Anand Singh Thapa of Dehradun who in 1956 wrote to the Government of India explaining and requesting the need and right of the nepali to find its place in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution.

Aribahadur Gurung, who was a leader of the Gorkha League in Darjeeling, was the representative of the Gorkhas in the Constituent Assembly in 1946. He was also a member of the drafting committee of the Indian Constitution. His signature graces the copy of the Indian Constitution which came into force in 1950. Gorkhas has been living in India as true patriots and they have served faithfully in the army, security forces of varieties and other services.

It is estimated that there are ten million (one crore) Gorkhas in India who are the citizens of the country. They speak Nepali as their mother language. Nepali was recognised as a national language in 1992, while the Sahitya Akademi recognised Nepali as an advanced literary language of India as far back as 1974. Gorkhas have done the country proud as bureaucrats, litterateurs, sportsmen, film directors, politicians and social workers. And who can discount the vital role they play in protecting the country's territory as the most valourous of Indian Armed Forces personnel? Yet they are looked upon often by the people and termed as foreigners. So the Gorkhas have risen up with a demand for a political identity which consists of a separate state of Gorkhaland and the need to participate in the process of nation building.

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