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Time to End Gurkha Recruitment in the British Army

by Roshan Kissoon / July 21st, 2015

The recent celebration of two hundred years of Gurkha recruitment into the British Army in London, at the Royal Chelsea Hospital on the 11th of June, attended by the Queen and various dignitaries and celebrities, was not really a cause of celebration. In fact, it is disgraceful and should be a source of shame for the British, the Nepalese, the Indians, and any country that has ever been invaded by the British Army and was ever part of the British Empire. Its time to call for an end to this outdated colonial practice.

The Gurkhas were first recruited by the British two hundred years ago as part of the army of the growing East India company, which collided with an expanding Gurkha state over the decaying corpse of a declining Mughal Empire.

The defeat of the Nepali by the British forced the signing of the humiliating Sugauli treaty of 1815, which ceded Nepali territory to the British. Some of these territories are now part of the modern Indian state. Nepal was able to stay formally independent of Britain and Gurkhas 'were permitted to volunteer for service in the East India Company's Army'.

The first Indian War of Independence, also called the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, depending on your point of view, was brutally suppressed by the British with help from the Gurkhas – and also from the autocratic ruler of Nepal, Jung Bahadur Rana, who hoped that the deployment of the Nepali Army in support of the British would help buttress his regime and maintain Nepal's formal independence. After this, Whitehall took over the running of India from the East India Company. The once glorious Mughal Empire was formally ended, the Mughal aristocracy shot, the last Mughal Emperor exiled to Burma and the British Raj established.



Men from Nepal were used in this way to help the British Empire establish itself and control India, and the Gurkhas became a unique entity within the British Army. They were used to put down colonial rebellions all over the world, even after India gained its independence and the Gurkhas were divided between India and Britain. There are literally too many to mention in a short article, but the Amritsar massacre (1919) and the counterinsurgency in colonial Malaya (1948-1960) against Marxist-Leninist guerrillas are worth noting, as well as more recent wars against Argentina (the Falklands War), Afghanistan, and Iraq.

This cannot be said to be honourable, as there is no honour in helping the subjugation of another people who are not in any way your enemy. Consider Afghanistan – mountain folk from one side of South Asia being used to fight mountain folk on the other side of South Asia – Nepali killing and dying for the British crown as part of Western intervention in Afghanistan. There is nothing to truly honour in the role the Gurkhas have played historically and continue to perform or of their

legendary loyalty to the British Crown. It is much like the respect a brave and fearless gangster may command, who will carry out any brutal criminal act with great courage, yet always remain loyal to the Mafia Don and his family.

There are parallels between the Gurkhas and the ‘Buffalo Soldiers’, the African Americans who, after the American Civil War, fought for the US army as it expanded westwards, depriving the Indigenous peoples of their land and forcing them onto reservations: One oppressed people fighting another for the benefit of imperialism.

The Gurkhas are in the British Army to do the hardest, most dangerous, and also morally dubious tasks, those things which conventional British Army soldiers tend not to do so as not to break international law or appear as brutal occupiers.¹ The beheading of an Afghan Taliban fighter by a British Gurkha in 2010 is rarely mentioned, but only tedious tales of Gurkha bravery and loyalty.²

Poverty and prestige are the main reasons that Nepalis join the British Army, as Gurkhas get better pay than average Nepali workers and peasants. It is obviously getting more expensive to keep the Gurkha Brigade, as the Gurkhas have eventually achieved equal pay and the right to reside in the UK. Already, the size of the Gurkha contingent in the British army has been substantially reduced through various ‘defence spending reviews’ to the point where it numbers only around 3,600. The right to reside in the UK means that, like other immigrant communities, they will bring their families and there should therefore be a slowly growing Nepali population in the UK. It may be that Gurkha recruitment will come to an end when it is considered too expensive



for the British Army, which occasional articles in the mainstream British media suggest.³ However, Gurkha recruitment has not ended yet, and the British government continues to spend around 2% of GDP on expensive hi-tech equipment, nuclear weapons, and foreign wars.

In Britain, Joanna Lumley, an admittedly talented actress and sincere campaigner, has been the figurehead of a campaign to get better rights for the Gurkhas. However, what is morally wrong does not become right just because the exploited party gets an increase in pay and the right to live in the UK. What is dishonourable does not become honourable, what is bad does not become good just because of medals, balls, ceremonies and speeches attended by the Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh, and Prince Harry. Military awards and decorations, Victoria Crosses and Conspicuous Gallantry Crosses and other baubles and trinkets cannot disguise the morally repugnant and essentially patronising nature of the Gurkha/British Army relationship.

Consider the crass and ridiculous [statement](#) given by TV historian and British Empire apologist Dan Snow to the London *Evening Standard*:

“Everyone talks about America or France but there are no closer allies than the soldiers of Nepal who fought for the British Army.”

The utter falsehood of this should be clear. The Gurkhas are not ‘allies’, they are mercenary regiments in the British Army, and their loyalty and friendship are bought. The US and France are powerful independent countries with imperial histories of their own, whose national interests coincide and intertwine with those of Great Britain. France has its own mercenary French Foreign Legion and a bloody colonial history to match that of Britain — although even here, the British are currently preparing to celebrate the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo as part of a year of celebrations of British victories, including those of WWI and WWII!

There can, however, be no comparison between Britain’s relationship with the powerful and wealthy American and French states and the long subordinated and peripheral Nepali state. Nepal should be seen alongside countries such as Britain’s other former colonies or countries such as Afghanistan or Bhutan to get a more realistic

perspective of how things really stand. Dan Snow continues:

For 200 years these people have volunteered to fight under no compunction, they didn't have to, and they have volunteered to come and fight for us in a dizzying array of wars and conflicts.

More distortion and propaganda. Gurkha recruitment started with a military defeat and the desperate ploys of the autocratic and semi-feudal rulers of Nepal (who clung onto power until as late as 1951) to retain formal independence while remaining in effect a peripheral appendage to India. The terms of the Sugauli treaty of 1816 are still a controversial topic in Nepalese politics, and there are demands to renegotiate the humiliating conditions of this treaty. Significantly, the Sugauli treaty was not annulled by an independent India, and there are Gurkha regiments in the Indian army, that serve mainly in Kashmir and on the Indian-Pakistani border – this time serving India's sub-imperial interests. In fact, there are far more (about 30,000) Gurkhas in the Indian army in comparison to British Gurkhas (about 3600).

The British, however, get the pick of the best soldiers, and then encourage them to adopt a unique combination of subordination to and imitation of the British officer class. For nearly two centuries, commissioned officers within the Gurkha regiments held a Viceroy's Commission, which was distinct from the King's or Queen's Commission that British officers serving with a Gurkha regiment held. Any Gurkha holding a commission was technically subordinate to any British officer, regardless of rank. Yet, Dan Snow also tells us how he loves:

... seeing these older Nepalese gentlemen in their tweed jackets and corduroy trousers walking around like they are born and raised in Buckinghamshire. It's unique. There's no other unit like this in the world.

One well known British anthropologist, Lionel Caplan, who worked for many years in Nepal, and taught at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, even wrote a historical and anthropological book on the Gurkhas entitled *Warrior Gentlemen: 'Gurkhas' in the Western Imagination*. One suspects that this kind of romantic image is ideal for efforts to justify Nepali immigration to right wing conservatives who may have problems with 'more immigration'. They can hardly challenge the 'fair dos' for "older Nepalese gentleman in their tweed jackets and corduroy trousers". We have no particular problem with immigration, but it is important to point out the fantastic hybrid being produced here – the fearless fighter and the squire. It seems doubtful, however, that second generation Nepali-British born in the UK will walk around in tweed jackets and corduroy trousers in imitation of the British upper classes and agree to be a 'toady' or fodder for a fading British imperialism.

Admittedly, migration to work abroad – whether in the military or in civilian occupations – is increasingly commonplace and Nepalis are no exceptions. There are difficult economic conditions for most Nepali people in their home country, which the recent earthquake has made worse. Most of the Nepali youth now seek work in India or the Middle East, where they are often abused, cheated, mistreated, and with few rights. For some, joining the British Army with the possibility of UK residence afterwards might seem a relatively attractive option. One cannot say they are wrong entirely, any more than it is entirely wrong for Afghan poppy farmers to make money from selling their produce which is then converted into heroin destined for the western market, or for Thailand to prop up its economy through prostitution and the sex trade. But neither are these things in any way right or good in the long run.

At least, the Maoist People's Liberation Army fought for the liberation and dignity of their own people and their own country in the Peoples War (1996-2006).

It is no good for Nepali politicians to talk about nationalism, patriotism, and aim all their vitriol at India while ignoring the fact that hundreds of thousands of Nepalis work in India, in the public as well as the private sector, in the army as well as in the police and the bureaucracy. It is no good talking about the Buddha supposedly being Nepali and making his birthplace in Lumbini a 'world centre for peace and unity,' while Nepali soldiers fight for other countries to maintain their imperial and sub-imperial interests. It is no good for allegedly 'Communist'

leaders to pose as anti-imperialists while ignoring the role of their countrymen as enforcers of imperialism. No other sovereign nation allows its citizens to fight and swear allegiance to a foreign power.

The demand to shut down Gurkha recruitment centres was first made by the Nepali Maoists during the Peoples War, which, in official party statements, termed such recruitment as 'dishonourable.' The Maoists joined the UN-administered peace process, and won the first Constituency Assembly elections in April 2008. However, the demand to end Gurkha recruitment was quietly dropped. There was a meeting between newly elected Prime Minister and Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal, and Dr. Andrew Hall, then British Ambassador. The Maoist leadership was either bought off or coerced into dropping one of their fundamental demands.

Whenever the demand to end Gurkha recruitment is brought up in the Nepali Constituent Assembly, as it does now and again, there is always a response from some British official, such as this [statement](#) by Colonel Andrew Mills, Britain's defence attaché in Kathmandu 2012: "We bring a lot of benefits without which the place would grind to a standstill."

And British ambassador to Nepal John Tucknott in 2012 [said](#): "Whether this happens in our lifetime is another matter."

Gurkha recruitment into the British Army is unlikely to end until Britain makes a realistic decision to abandon the pretensions of imperial 'reach' and influence, rather than because of the financial benefits that it brings to Nepal. The same is probably the case with respect to recruitment into the Indian Army. The flow of remittances and pensions from the 35,000 or so Gurkhas serving in foreign armies (there are also Gurkhas serving the Sultan of Brunei and a Gurkha contingent in the Singapore Police Force) is too important to abandon.

Would Nepal really 'grind to a standstill' without Gurkha recruitment? Statements like this by British military officials and diplomats give the impression that the British still control Nepal, and without them, it would collapse. India, on the other hand, remains a dominant force in Nepal's economic and political strategy, and ties between the Indian army and the Nepali army are strong. There is a big difference between 30,000 Gurkhas in the Indian Army and some 3,600 in the British Army; and while British imperial power is declining, that of India is not – on the contrary, its economy is growing rapidly and its foreign policy ambitions remain considerable.

There are, however, still powerful Maoist factions and sincere Nepali nationalist and patriotic leaders that oppose Gurkha recruitment into the British Army and Indian Army. The demand for ending Gurkha recruitment will emerge again sooner or later. The main thing that stops Nepali political leaders ending Gurkha recruitment is the lack of alternative employment. However, difficult economic conditions are not unique to Nepal, and the citizens of many other countries such as Bangladesh or Botswana do not lend or sell their citizens to fight for foreign powers.

If there is really no realistic alternative to military service for many young Nepali men, then it would be surely better to simply expand the Nepal Army's service with the UN in peacekeeping missions. These have at least some kind of validity in terms of international law, and can claim some kind of moral ground. The Nepalese Army, which at 90,000 or so in active service is quite large for a small country, serves in many places around the world under the UN peacekeeping banner. We need not foster any illusions about the UN, however, it would be simply be more consistent, dignified, and in step with the 21st century.

It is not only the employment of Nepalis in foreign armies that raises issues but also ex-Gurkhas working for private security agencies. There are ex-Gurkhas working as security guards in many countries, including India, Israel, Iraq, and South Africa. There are many openly mercenary and security firms around the world that recruit ex-soldiers from Nepal, and there are plenty of adverts for security firm work in mainstream Nepali media and on Nepali TV, as well as job fairs in Kathmandu. South Africa and Iraq seem to be particularly popular destinations for Nepalis hired by private security firms.⁴ The human rights abuses carried out by private security firms in Iraq have been documented, as well as the ambiguity about legal and moral responsibility. Afghan Maoists highlighted this issue:

(Previously), Nepalis in Afghanistan worked only with the American private security companies,” the protest letter said. “Now, in Shindand Airport (in western Afghanistan) they are under the direct command of US `Special Forces`. In Kandahar, they `work` with Canadian forces, at the Provincial Reconstruction Team headquarters, in Ghazni they are associated with Polish forces, in Kabul and other regions they are linked with American private security companies.⁵

Since the end of the monarchy and the establishment of a multi party republic in 2008 in Nepal, there has been a prolonged attempt to write a constitution for what will supposedly be a ‘New Nepal.’ How can a supposedly progressive and republican constitution allow its citizens to serve in a foreign army and swear allegiance to a foreign monarch or Prime Minister? There cannot be a real and lasting constitution until this and other hard issues are addressed. The time for the inevitable break between the Gurkhas and the British Army must come sooner or later, and the contradictions and problems must be faced at some time; the same argument applies to the Indian Army, although it may prove more difficult to achieve the aim of no recruitment to or service in foreign armies.

If there needs to be pressure applied in Nepal, it is also the case that the argument can be made effectively in Britain also. There are many good reasons why the British Left should oppose Gurkha recruitment and make it a political issue, even aside from internal considerations. The demand to end Gurkha recruitment should be raised as an issue by progressives, anti-militarists and anti war activists, and made into an issue the same way the Trident nuclear missiles have been made an issue.

The end of Gurkha recruitment would be a powerful and yet non-violent blow against imperialism, and would weaken, if only in a small way, the ability of the British Army to invade other countries.

If this demand were coordinated with progressive forces in Nepal, it would have a real chance of success and would be a real expression of the friendship between the peoples of Britain and Nepal. This would be the best thing to happen, for Gurkha recruitment in the British Army to end peacefully.

It would also be better for the people of the British Isles to let go finally of one of the last vestiges of the Empire. After two hundred years, it is time to accept that the sun has set on the British Empire, and it will never rise again. There are better ways for Britain to exert influence in the world. The British establishment celebrated two hundred years of shame and humiliation at the Royal Chelsea Hospital on the 11th of June, 2015, not two centuries of glory and pride. It is time for Gurkha recruitment to end.

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1. Private conversations with members of GAESO, an ex Gurkha organisation, who are also a supporters of the Maoist party has made this quite clear. They said that Nepali Gurkhas are ordered to do things which break international law. Perhaps someday there will be a proper investigation on this issue. [🔗]
 2. “[Gurkha who beheaded Taliban soldier in Afghanistan battle cleared to return to duty.](#)” [🔗]
 3. “[Gurkhas: the beginning of the end?](#)” [🔗]
 4. See the [report](#) by US based Human Rights First, which commissioned a report entitled “Private Security Contractors at War – Ending the Culture of Impunity”. It highlights the moral and legal ambiguities of mercenary recruitment. [🔗]
 5. “[Nepal’s nod to Gurkha recruitment angers other Maoists.](#)” The Afghan Maoists raised a complain against the Nepali Maoist led government dropping this issue in 2009, through the RIM and CCOMPSA fraternal organisations. The RIM is now defunct. [🔗]
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