

Gurkha

By [Gajendra Singh](#)

Summary

This entry historicizes myths of the Gurkha in contemporary Britain, India and Nepal. It charts the invention of the Gurkha through British colonial fantasies of the martial race, the socio-economic reasons for migration and military service in Nepal, and the extent of Nepalese military service during the First World War.

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The Creation of the Gurkha

Gurkhas were one of a dozen or more “[martial races](#)” found to reside in [British India](#) by the colonial Indian Army. The creation of the unified Indian Army – from three Presidency Armies in 1902 – was presaged by the construction of official ethnologies of castes, ethnicities and religions eligible for military service. Various “Handbooks for the Indian Army” helped military recruiters to identify the right type of recruit: those who “had the physical courage necessary for the warrior,”¹ as opposed to the majority of Indians who had “neither moral aptitude nor physical courage [...] the courage we should talk of colloquially as ‘guts’.”² The Handbooks and their associated literature did not just divide South Asia between “martial” Indians and the “non-martial”; they divided those currently fit for recruitment from those who were previously so and hinted at those who would become sufficiently “martial” in the future. The idea of the *Gurkha* evolved through this process of entexting fantasies of colonial masculinity.

Gurkhas were defined against the perceived vices bedevilling the old imperial heartland, which had proven itself disloyal during the “Mutiny” of 1857. In keeping with all newly discovered “martial races” in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, *Gurkhas* were situated at the periphery of British India – reported to live or have familial connections to the *Gurkha* district in central Nepal – where they “knew little, and cared less, about the political changes

and evolutions” of Indian [nationalisms](#).³ The “cool and bracing climate” of Nepal made *Gurkhas* “physically far superior to the languid and enervated residents of Bengal”;⁴ they were celebrated for their “Protestant Hinduism” and their contempt for the “orthodox Brāhman of Benares”;⁵ and fashioned as Englishmen in miniature with lurid descriptions of muscular physiques and their “delight in all manly sports – shooting, fishing [...] putting the shot, playing quoits, or foot-ball”.⁶ But each confident assertion of *Gurkha* character, demeanour, and geographic and racial origins was haunted by a note of uncertainty: parts of the work “are undoubtedly incomplete, and perhaps in part incorrect”;⁷ “these large generalizations are vague and patronizing. It is impossible to give an idea of the Gurkha by such means [...]”.⁸ Numerous communities of Nepalis, which had no connection with the *Gurkha* district or even central Nepal, were yet to be regarded as *Gurkhas* (including, for a time, Garhwalis who were not even Nepali). Descriptions of the racial origins and features of *Gurkhas* varied from “Mongoloid”, “Caucasian” and “Indo-Tibetan”; the only constant being that were all wiry and strong, broad-headed and thick-skulled.⁹ Furthermore, no agreement could be made on precisely what caste the ideal Gurkha ought to be – ranging from the “aboriginal” Magars, Gurungs, Khambus and Limbus to the high-caste, Rajput Thakurs.

The Fiction of Gurkhas

The reason for this confusion is that *Gurkhas* were and are a fiction. In Nepal no group ever referred to itself, or was referred to by other Nepalis, as *Gurkhas*. The term most commonly used for a soldier serving in a foreign army was (and still is) *lahure* – the vernacular corruption of Lahori, which references the use of the pre-colonial South Asian labour market by Nepalis to secure service in the Lahore Court of [Ranjit Singh's \(1780-1839\)](#) Empire in Punjab. Increasing rural landlessness in 19th century Nepal provided the incentive to enlist in the Indian Army (and migrate to timber and tea plantations in Bengal, Assam and Burma). Yet even so the numbers of Nepalis recruited into the Indian Army remained modest until the 1940s. During the First World War, for instance, 55,589 Nepalis were recruited to replace and bolster the pre-war figure of 17,000 *Gurkhas* (recruited into thirty-two battalions of *Gurkha* Rifles and four battalions of the 70th Burma Rifles). Although the figure was significant, it was by no means extravagant when compared to other colonial armies or even other “martial classes” recruited by the Indian Army.¹⁰

Yet the First World War has played a crucial part in authenticating the fiction of what *Gurkhas* were and further obscuring the reality. The conflict has been reimagined as a space in which

Gurkhas were the largest recruited “martial class”,¹¹ in which the image of the savage, relentless *Gurkha* was (and is) packaged and sold in the imperial ephemera of the day (from the *Empire Annual for Boys* to later “Johnny Gurkha” action figures).¹² This obscures the political, economic and cultural realities through which Nepali soldiers actually lived. [Chandra Shamsheer \(1863-1929\)](#), the *Rana* or Prime Minister of Nepal, actively sent enslaved prisoners to fulfil British quotas (slavery was only abolished in Nepal in 1925). As Mary des Chenes has shown, village headmen and landlords would often send the poorest or most indebted villagers into the army in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the regime in Nepal. Nepali soldiers often returned embittered about their imperial military service: “What do the young men know? Nothing! We saw lots of rupees in these recruiters’ pockets and their nice warm ‘sweaters’. They told us we would eat rice every day, see new places. What did we know about war? Nothing! [...] The recruiters didn’t talk to us about war, only about pensions and food and clothing. They were very clever. When you are young and have always been with your mother and father what do you know of the sufferings of going to a foreign country? Nothing!”.¹³

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Notes

1. MacMunn, George Fletcher / Lovatt, Major A.C.: *The Armies of India*, Crécy 1988, p. 129. ↑
2. MacMunn, George, *The Martial Races of India*, London 1933, p. 2. ↑
3. Eden Vansittart / Nicolay, Bernhard U.: *Handbooks for the Indian Army. Gurkhas*, Calcutta 1915, p. 10. ↑
4. *Ibid.* ↑
5. *Ibid.* ↑
6. *Ibid.*, p. 58. ↑
7. *Ibid.*, Prefix. ↑
8. Masters, John: *Bugles and a Tiger. A Personal Adventure*, London 1956, p. 93. ↑
9. An observation originally made by Brian Houghton Hodgson – British Resident in Nepal in the 1830s and amateur phrenologist. B.H. Hodgson, Esq., *Essays on the Languages, Literature and Religion of Nepal and Tibet; Together with Further Papers on the Geography, Ethnology, and Commerce of those Countries*, London 1874. ↑
10. The figures for the total recruitment of the ten largest “martial classes” during the First World War (excluding Imperial Service Troops recruited from nominally independent Princely States) are as follows: 136,126 Punjabi Muslims, 88,925 Sikhs, 55,589 Gurkhas,

49,086 Rajputs, 40,272 Hindu Jats, 38,586 "Other Hindus" (mostly Garhwalis), 36,353 Hindustani Muslims, 27,857 Pathans, 23,491 Dogras, 20,382 Brahmans. India's Contribution to the Great War, Calcutta 1923. ↑

11. Even Lionel Caplan, in his otherwise excellent book *Warrior Gentlemen*, is under the impression that between "1914 and 1918 some 200,000 Nepalis are reported to have served in the Indian army". Caplan, Lionel: *Warrior Gentlemen*. "Gurkhas" in the *Western Imagination*, Providence, RI/Oxford 1995, p. 22. ↑
12. Dawson, H. Danvers: 'Who are the Gurkhas?'; Buckland, A.R. (ed.): *The Empire Annual for Boys*, London 1918, pp. 119-121. For the "Johnny Gurkha" action figure see <http://www.ekidult.com/1-6-wwii-johnny-gurkha-with-kurkri-knife-slouch-hat.html> or <http://www.plasticsoldierreview.com/review.aspx?id=507> (for the more mundane Airfix effort). ↑
13. Interview with Gurkha veteran from the Second World War. des Chenes, Mary: *Relics of Empire. A Cultural History of the Gurkhas, 1815-1987*, PhD. thesis, Stanford University 1991, pp. 287-288. ↑

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- [Vansittart, Eden, Nicolay, Bernhard U. \(ed.\): **Handbooks for the Indian army. Gurkhās**, Calcutta, 1915: Superintendent Government Printing, India.](#)

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[10.15463/ie1418.10026](#)

External Links

- [Dixit, Priya: Searching for Gurkhas in World War I, World War I in the Middle East and North Africa \(Georgetown University\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Website of the Gurkha Museum Winchester \(Article\)](#)

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