

Gorkha Women as Forgotten Heroes in the Gorkha War Narratives

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Abstract

This paper aims to focus on how Gorkha women are left behind the curtain in terms of their role in the war history where their male Gorkhas' bravery only is prioritized. When we turn the pages of the Anglo-Nepal Wars (1814-1816), the writers confidently say that the Gorkha warriors are back supported by women as well as children. However, they are shadowed by the description of the ferocious war performance of male Gorkha warriors such as Bir Bala Bhadra Kunwar, Amar Singh Thapa, Bhakti Thapa and so on. The only question is who the women warriors there are to support them attacking the English troops. Similarly, the Gorkhas serve the British Army and fight for Britain. For a long period during wars, they do not return home. During their service period, their wives remain at home to run all the family affairs such as raising children, caring the old parents, and cultivating land. The wives of those who die, get injured, and go missing have a burden of running family economy. They are compelled to keep all things well in the family. So, are not the Gorkha women as heroes as their male folks? The answer is sure to be- 'Yes, they are'. This paper will certainly help future researchers in the area and also the government to manage new rules and concepts regarding Gorkha issues.

Keywords: Gorkha warriors, Gorkha women, Anglo-Nepal Wars, World Wars, redundancy, obstacles

Introduction

The Anglo-Nepal Wars (1814-1816) became a huge platform for the Gorkhas to introduce their courage, dedication, and loyalty to the world outside Nepal i.e. the East India Company. The Gorkhas never liked to show their back to the well-equipped and well-trained English forces. They were “exceedingly brave” (Farwell 39) and fought with “limitless confidence in their fighting prowess” (Gould 44) at the wars of Khalanga, Malaun, and Jaithak. Though the Gorkhas were in much less number, the English troops could not dominate them so easily. Moreover, they were “accompanied by their wives and children” (Seddon 12). It was a big surprise to the Company that the Gorkha women are also brave. Bir Bala Bhadra commanded the war of Khalanga. Amar Singh Thapa was at Malaun and Bhakti Thapa led the war of Jaithak. Both sides bore a huge loss as Byron Farwell asserts that the war at “Khalunga was a bloody affair, and the British suffered greater

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casualties than the Gurkhas” (31). However, the Gorkhas were defeated eventually. Later, they got recruited in to the British Army, but they were only the male Gorkhas. They left their wives, and children back home while they served Britain. How did the Gorkhas join wars if their wives were not there to take care of children, parents, and fields? The patience of the women has been undervalued. For Tim I. Gurung, “Whereas Gurkha men are world-renowned for bravery, we almost hear nothing much about the women” (191). Whatever Gorkha war texts are written, they have not given space to the Gorkha women’s role in fighting and family dealings. This paper mainly studies how Gorkha women’s hardships are ignored in the various Gorkha war narratives.

Gorkha Women’s Bravery in the Anglo-Nepal Wars

The Gorkha women’s presence at the Khalanga war did find some mention in some war texts related to the Gorkha war history. Mainly, at the Khalanga war, “women were seen hurling stones and undauntedly exposing themselves; and several of their dead bodies and four wounded were subsequently found amidst ruins of the fort” (Kennedy, Vansittart and Fraser qtd. in Khanduri 91). The Gorkha women did not stay home and watch their husbands fighting with the enemies. They were as gallant as their male folks, but the male guided and male written war narratives do not show interest to bring their identity in light as David Seddon argues, “...their stories have remained untold and their experiences have been largely unexplained” (Preface ix). However, the Gorkha troops could not win the wars even though they fought their best until the last. The English troops with defeated mentality damaged the water pipes that went into the fort (Tim I. Gurung 9). Due to extreme thirst, hunger, and tiredness, many Gorkha women died along with their husbands and children. Vijaya Kumar Tiwary describes it as “a bloody war with heavy casualties on both sides” (802). The Gorkha women warriors accepted their death even for their nation and families. But the query is that why their names are not recorded in the war history of Nepal. This all happen only because of patriarchy. However, their contribution will remain heroic in the war history of Nepal and even of Britain.

The Gorkha forces were supported by the Gorkha women and children not only at the war of Khalanga, but also at Malaun. They were also brave to help the Gorkha troops and make powerful attacks over the English forces. In this regard, Chandra B. Khanduri advocates, “Perhaps the first example of women joining the men in fighting a modern enemy is found in this war (against the British)” (91). They camp-followed the Gorkha troops in order to empower and encourage them. It was their enthusiasm to defeat the enemies. Their dedication and worries towards their society was not an easy task. They were skillful as male Gorkhas that “The British were impressed, early on in the war, not only by the qualities of the fighting men of the hills, but also by those of their women folk in defence of their homeland”(Seddon 14). Gorkha women had double roles to play. At a war, they participated themselves as warriors, but at the same time, they looked after their family with “a record of toil and sacrifice” (Gaze 46). The Gorkha women’s devotion

was double that means they were devoted to house work as well as to the security of their nation, Nepal. That is why they cannot be accounted less courageous than their men folks i.e., the Gorkha warriors. After the Anglo-Nepal wars were over, the Gorkha women were never heard of to have been enrolled in the East India Company army. They remained at home in Nepal while their husbands fought for Britain and there was a big gap in meeting as an ex- Sergeant Jasman Rai in *Fearless Warriors* speaks, “For four years I didn’t know about my wife, whether she was fine or sick. Fortunately, she was alive when I returned to my village” (33). They bore all the responsibilities at home though they did not have to get involved in wars. Their role at home was also a big struggle in their lives and they cannot be undervalued.

Gorkha Women as Great Mothers

On the basis of the role of Gorkha women as mothers, they will get justice only if we respect them and acknowledge them as brave mothers. To let their husbands go to the wars for Britain itself is courage and dare. They kept patience and stayed at home caring their children. A Gorkha woman Lila Seling Mabo states, “My first priority is for the children’s healthcare and education” (5). In the absence of their father in the family, children sometimes take a wrong way in life, but their mothers are always with them to guide them towards the right path. In about fifteen years of their service to British Army, the Gorkhas lived with their families just for about five years. They remained like guests to their wives and children at home when they had a leave on occasions. John Parker notes Gorkha soldiers’ words of pain: “When we come home on leave and then have to return, leaving our wives, our children, our mothers at home, we are full of tears” (309-310). The children were under the care of their mothers mostly. Rearing children has never been a simple task. There came a lot of obstacles as “the British Army policy separated Gurkha soldiers from their families for a long time during their tenure of their service” (D. B. Gurung 306). The Gorkha mothers were always ready to face them boldly. When they fell ill, the mothers took them to hospitals if available, otherwise they took care of them themselves depending on God’s mercy. Feeding and sending them to school was another challenge, but they faced every obstacle praying for their Gorkha soldier husbands’ “safe return” (Ganesh Rai 55) from the battlefields. They bought clothes, books, and other necessary materials for their children. If the mothers were rich enough to manage all these, it would not be much of a problem, otherwise, it was a hard task.

The Gorkha women sought their husbands’ hand in every task related to their children, families, and works at home. They could not replace their husbands’ love and care to their children. For Tim I. Gurung, “Growing up without their fathers was like competing in a cockfight with a hand and leg tied to their back, and the disadvantages those unfortunate children faced in life were massive” (197). Sometimes, they felt lonely and wished their husbands were with them, but they were alone in reality. In *Yuddha Bokeko Sittang* by Kangmang Naresh Rai, a Gorkha woman, “Kumari happens to get awake weeping from

the dream about her Gorkha soldier husband, Man Bahadur. She wipes her welled up eyes with her right hand. She finds her baby son asleep well. She becomes happy a little and falls asleep keeping him in her chest” (My trans. 50). One big problem was when they themselves became sick, nobody was there to help them. If they were with other family members at home, they could share their trouble to some extent. Besides, when they were pregnant and husbands were away in service, it would be a huge challenge as they could not share emotion with them (Shrestha and Conway 157). Whom to share their every ups and downs with? Some troubles cannot be shared with others than husbands. They had to go through every hurdle themselves. However, they maintained patience and gave birth to their children. What can be more bravery than this? For Seddon, “most women spent months and even years without their menfolk” (151). Sometimes, children did not recognize their fathers as they got birth when they were away in the British Army. During wars, they remained away as their leave schedule was disturbed. As a Gorkha woman, Mabo explicates, “I had to be on my own after we got married, which is very strange, frustrating, and emotional” (10). They really had a lot of sufferings.

Gorkha Women as Humble House Runners

The house running skill of the Gorkha women can also not be secondary to their raising children as well as fighting in the war-fields. Their role of carrying out household works was equally remarkable and praiseworthy to others. According to Tim I. Gurung, “It doesn’t necessarily mean the Gurkha women have no stories to tell. Their contribution, suffering and sacrifices are as significant as the one made by their men” (192). The Gorkha soldiers would marry and leave their wives with parents and other family members. It was their first responsibility to be able to adjust themselves in the family. Next duty was to cooperate and create harmony among all the family members. It was quite hard to maintain all these, but they did them as they always had “a life of struggle and of hard work” (Acharya and Bennett 7). They looked after the parents-in-law. If they were old, it was a hard task to support them, but they did as they were responsible for it. Most Gorkhas are from hills where agriculture is the most important occupation, but “for the most part, the women remained while their menfolk were off soldiering” (Seddon viii). Even if they could not plough the field, they hired villagers and got the work done. They grew crops, planted trees, and kept animals like cows, oxen, birds, and so on. They had “duties of taking care of the elders and children, tending fields and domestic animals, and finishing off the household chores before bed” (Tim I. Gurung 196). Their hard work was really appreciable and it can not be undervalued.

Running a house is not limited to taking care of old parents-in-law and farming, but also it maintains social relations. Sometimes, Gorkha women visited different places or attended meetings as representatives of their families. In the absence of their husbands, they were compelled to participate in the social events such as marriage celebration, cultural programs, and political gatherings as “They had proven to the entire world that

Gurkha women were/are as capable and reliable as their men” (Tim I. Gurung 195). They took care of their children, supported old members, did farming as well as conducted some sorts of social works. Seddon considers, “They remained at home to bear the burden and the responsibility” (Preface viii) for the betterment of their family as well as community. They would extend relation among people in the neighborhood or community. If male members were not able to perform such works, the Gorkha women would attend such social activities. However, they were compelled to face troubles caused by some evil intensions of people upon them. Tim I. Gurung observes, “Men looked at them with lusty eyes” (196). In addition, people sometimes suspected their faithfulness unnecessarily, but they were innocent. They had patience to wait for their husbands’ return one day. In *Yuddha Bokeko Sittang*, the narrator asserts, “Cholanti’s grandmother lives selling tea and alcohol in the street. Her husband went missing in the Second World War. She was young, but she did not get married again. Poor grandmother says that her husband is still alive” (My trans. 42). Their friendliness with people was not seen positively sometimes though they were fair or innocent in relation. After all, Gorkha women are brave enough to run families and maintain social relationship in community successfully.

Gorkha Women as Patient Warriors

The impact of war upon Gorkha women was unbearable, but they managed to keep their heart strong and face the unpleasant results brought to them. They would pray to God for their husbands’ safety and victory in wars. In *Fearless Warriors*, Kangmang Naresh Rai writes, “The families of Gurkhas used to visit the camp in Nepal and cry all day long” (43). However, one truth about war is that it is always “terrorizing, horrific, and painful” (English 67). There is injuries, deaths, and missing in every war. The Gorkha women were compelled to bear all troubles caused by wars. A Gorkha woman laments on the death of her husband in war:

This photo over the threshold

Is my *lahure*

That takes me back to the golden past. (*Poet in ...* 33)

It was a huge loss in Gorkha women’s lives when their husbands got wounded, died or went missing in wars. The badly wounded husbands got disabled all their lives and they needed to be cared. Tim I. Gurung argues, “The other group of women whose lives were also ruined by the war were those whose men had returned alive but with crippled limbs. These women spent their lives taking care of these helpless and broken men” (197). The dead Gorkha soldiers’ families lost their husbands who were the only one source of economy at home. Who would earn for their children’s education, foods, health, and clothes then? Seddon states, “...hundreds of thousands of women were left behind, to bear the main burden of maintaining the family and the household” (178). The Gorkha women only were

there to labour hard for the good future of their small children. There were a lot of cases that the injured ones were sent back home without salaries, pensions, and compensations as a retired lieutenant Bhagat Bahadur Gurung explains, “We were sent back home empty-handed” (*Fearless Warriors* 116). The dead and missing Gorkha soldiers’ families also never got any compensations. When the warriors got wounded, dead, or missing in wars, along with their wound, death, and missing, they would lose their “hope and dreams to provide a reasonably comfortably living for their families, or possibly improve their living conditions and educate their children” (D. B. Gurung 320-321). Same thing happened to the lives of the Gorkha women as well.

The Gorkha women were to suffer from the ‘Redundancy Policy’ imposed upon their humble husbands, the Gorkha soldiers by the British authority. Though their husbands remained safe in wars i.e. World Wars and other big wars, their service to the British Army was cut off and they were returned to their home without any pensions at all (*Fearless Warriors* 23). How could they manage money for their wives and children then? The Gorkha women maintained patience and faced such troubles with courage. They did not have any options other than being patient and letting the things happen. They fought fearlessly and won wars for Britain, but the same nation said it did not need the existing number of Gorkha soldiers when the wars were over. Farwell avers, “Many were forced to retire before they wished, and before they had earned an adequate pension” (278). The direct effect of the unwise and unkind ‘Redundancy Policy’ of Britain went upon the Gorkha women. Why did not the concerned authority consider the families of the Gorkha soldiers? What did the children, wives, and other family members of the Gorkha soldiers eat then? So, the redundancy and it was without any payment and pensions was quite an unfair action of the British authority about which D. B. Gurung argues, “But more than “sympathy” what they deserve is justice and legitimate treatment” (299). There was a heavy misuse of the Gorkha soldiers’ productive age. However, the Gorkha women had no another option than accepting such an unjust from Britain.

Conclusion

To sum up, the Gorkha women’s participation in the Anglo-Nepal wars, their role of successful management at home, and their patience to bear all burdens in their families prove that they were also brave, but their courage, bravery, and devotion was not given emphasis much. Their role in patriotism and family matters is heroic. However, whatever literary texts about Gorkhas are written and available in the market do not majorly shed light upon the Gorkha women’s heroic performance in the wars and their heroic management in their families. They only idealise male Gorkha soldiers’ gallantry. There is partiality even in the British authority. The Gorkha women play a great role at the war of Khalanga fort and attack the enemies, the English forces. However, the questions still unanswered are who they are; why their names are not mentioned even in the Golden war history of Nepal, East India Company and so on; and what happens if Gorkha women’s role in

the British army is widely brought into the public notice. It is quite impossible for the Gorkhas' success without the Gorkha women i.e. their wives' support. So, to appreciate the Gorkha women's bravery is to honour their heroic role. Writers need to provide a space to the Gorkha women, and acknowledge their bravery by highlighting their compulsions and hardships.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the University Grants Commission Nepal for the PhD Fellowship 2076. I am also highly indebted to my supervisor Prof. Dr. Anand Sharma and Co-Supervisor Prof. Dr. Min Pun for their constructive supports in each step of my study.

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