

# GURKHA STORY IN LAYERS AND TEXTURES

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## Abstract

**Who are the Gurkhas? The Gurkha Memorial Museum in Pokhara starts out their exhibition of the “Gurkha Story” by exploring this question. The narrative approach connects the Gurkha origin to the events of the 19th century Nepal. In a chronological order, the story unfolds, as we see the Gurkha involve in the two world wars and to the present time. Several mediums have been integrated to express the lives and contributions of the Gurkhas, and through these depictions we see them in a familiar and unfamiliar light, some that are widely recognized and a few that are not so easily seen.**

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In the '90s, during many of the load-shedding days when the power went out and the candles appeared to provide visibility to those in the kitchen, the chief female of the household would carry on with her culinary adventures in the dimly lit kitchen corner. Meanwhile, on the table that stretched from the middle of the room to the wide windowpanes that opened to a verandah, stories were narrated of ordinary professional men caught up in the world events.

Gurkha Memorial Museum in Pokhara captures these events and presents the stories in an engaging way through their extensive holdings of records. The stories are spread out throughout the three layers of the building yet they are contained within one physical space i.e. the museum building. By bringing these stories in one single physical space, the viewer is provided with a coherent picture of the Gurkha story in a historical and contemporary context.

At the core of the collection are the personal stories of the Gurkhas. In trying to convey these stories, different mediums have been integrated to give a broad landscape of the Gurkha story. The narrative approach invites the viewer through mediums such as texts, paintings, photographs, audios, videos and uniforms worn by the Gurkhas. These stories and mediums through which they are expressed are interwoven seamlessly to incorporate the role of Gurkhas from Nepal, India, Singapore and Britain. While a large segment of the exhibition certainly concentrate on the lives of the British Gurkha, the role of the rest of the Gurkhas has not been excluded. Like the branches of a spring tree developing new shoots, the stories of the Gurkhas also branch out in the large extended space of the first and second floor. It narrates the stories of the Gurkhas stationed in India and Singapore. Then, there are the other stories that go right to its roots such as the story of the Nepalese Gurkha or the Royal Nepalese Army



Gurkha Memorial Museum, Pokhara

as addressed in the museum space. Their story is connected to illuminate the origin of the British Gurkha.

Within this origin, the treaty of Segauli can be seen to express the early beginnings of the British Gurkha. The narration of this key historical moment is represented through textual and visual records. One such record that stood out was an artist's impression of it in a painting. In the preparatory scene of the treaty, the active participants of the event are juxtaposed against a rural setting where the local villagers are seen to continue on with their daily chores. The scene is depicted against a mountainous landscape with a Nepali-styled house with a thatched

roof and wooden beams holding the roof. Against this backdrop, horses stroll in the front yard, while a few locals are seen to be carrying on with what looks like a post-harvesting activity on the verandah of the house. Similarly, a local man is depicted carrying a doko and in conversation with another person close to the house. It is interesting to take note of these activities whilst a preparation for a major historical event is underway.

On the foreground, the troops are portrayed in a line formation facing each other. They are dressed in white trousers and red coats, with one troop in a white headgear and the other in black. The troop on the right

has been identified as the Gorkha troops of Bhimsen Thapa, yet they are dressed in an identical uniform as the other troop, most likely the British. The men, women and children who gather around the troops curious to witness the event appear almost nonchalant to its significance. This adds to a very casual air in the painting. The depiction of the event is revealing in many ways yet it also raises some interesting questions for the viewer. Could this be a realistic representation? Even if it is only an idealized and imagined portrayal, the technique to juxtapose the local community against the treaty-signing participants is an interesting way to depict the event.

Then, there are the uniforms of the Gurkhas that add another layer to the story. As the viewer passes through the diorama of the folk musical instruments, a series of costumes come into visibility. The first piece that the viewer encounters on entering the exhibition space is a heavily embellished uniform of the Royal Nepalese Army officer. It is a forest green ceremonial dress, decorated with details, most likely awarded to the wearer. A parawing hangs above the medals, signaling that the wearer is possibly connected to operate in air-borne missions. On the collars of the uniform, a Nepalese motif of rhododendron is embroidered in a golden thread. There are other details in the uniform that inform the viewer of the wearer's rank and position but the insignia on the buttons is perhaps the most revealing. It indicates to us about Nepali's political transformation. The insignia

brings to the forefront the abolition of monarchy system in 2008, and the hexagon embedded in the golden button reflects and represents that change in our political system.

Further ahead, more attires and accessories worn by the British Gurkhas are introduced. All the uniforms carry some detail about the wearer and the time period when it was likely worn, which makes it easy for the viewer to develop a context. In terms of style, the uniforms are very similar in design and color, yet their diversity varies in function and purpose. My brother, who is passionate and involved in menswear design in Kathmandu, has been a rich source of repository in this regard. He points out some details, and provides historical context to the British uniform. According to him, in the olden days not anyone could produce uniforms for the officers of the British Army and the Royal Divisions, and that a tailor appointed to these divisions had to hold a royal warrant. The Royal Warrant was a mark of recognition presented by a senior member of the British Royal Family to those supplying goods and services connected to them. Therefore, within this context Ajay introduces Gieves and Hawkes, a British company founded in 1771 and he tells me that they have been producing the uniforms for the officers of the Royal Navy and the British Army.

Inside the museum space, the uniforms on display take the viewer to a visual journey, giving insight about the design and the types of uniform worn by the Gurkhas. Inspired by the "safari jacket" they are very utilitarian

in style with flap pockets, and perhaps this is to make it easier for the wearer to carry necessary items such as diary, torch, pen, maps and so on. Although they are driven by utilitarian uses, they are also elegant in its simplicity. The outdoor uniforms such as the Dress Officer with Red Beret, Great Coat, and Tropical Dress are muted with earthy tones. In Ajay's view, this is possibly to protect the wearer from enemy visibility and to help the wearer adapt to the natural landscape. The Summer Mess Dress is another example that looks like it has been designed by such aims. The textual description mentions that it is designed for hot climates, and for formal evening events. It is a lightweight jacket, with a mandarin inspired collar. On the shoulder, black braided epaulets decorate on the both sides with a red piping on the neck. Another uniform designed for a colder climate is a heavy woolly coat called as the Great Coat. This double-breasted coat with two flap pockets is light khaki in color. Historically, this garment was worn by sailors of the European and American navies, and known as a Pea Coat, it was designed to provide warmth and protect the wearer from the harsh winter conditions.

In the minds of the contemporary public both at home and abroad, the word Gurkha has captured a certain image and it is a popular image driven by their positive qualities of courage, loyalty and fierceness. It seems that this view popularized in the contemporary scene is not a new representation. As demonstrated by the records such as the photograph



A photograph taken in Nalapani

taken in Nalapani and through other narrative accounts within the holdings, the actions of the Gurkhas were clearly driven by a set of qualities that distinguished them. They were also admired by the British officers against whom they fought in the early days and then alongside during the world wars, and the events following those wars. There are ample accounts within the museum that confirm this view.

In my view, the personal stories of these ordinary men who acted extraordinarily under critical social and political conditions tell us something about their nature. But, it is not only their courage and



bravery in wartime conditions that we see; the stories of these larger than life personalities whose image is so dominated with awe-inspiring accounts also feel relatable to us. As the viewer delves deeper into the museum, a glimpse of their families and their social lives come into visibility. This element seemed interesting, and it would have been interesting to see more of these areas on display. Perhaps this segment could have been expanded upon? However, in stating that, there are also evidences where we see the Gurkhas express their love and longings for their families and communities whom they have left behind in their home country. Most importantly, the Gurkha story is represented not just in a one-dimensional story of glory and achievement. Just as there are many ways to experience the world in layered meanings, the Gurkha story is also narrated in multiple layers and meaningful textures like that of their uniforms which bring to light their untold stories. And, the museum does a wonderful job by bringing this into the public domain because by doing so we can see the lives of the Gurkhas in various shades of humanity at an individual and collective level.

## Reference

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