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The Conquest of Nuwakot: A Study in Military Excellence (1744 AD)

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Abstract

The victory over Nuwakot marked the first significant step in the unification campaign of Nepal. Strategy is a policy or plan utilized during wartime to get success in operations. Throughout history, kings and warriors have employed various strategies to get victory in warfare. In this context, King Prithvi Narayan Shah implemented several strategies to get victory over Nuwakot. Under his leadership, multiple strategies were executed to achieve this significant milestone. So, the problem statement of this paper is to analyze the military strategies adopted by Gorkhali Forces to ensure success in Nuwakot. Key strategies used during the attack on Nuwakot included launching assaults from multiple directions to disrupt and weaken the Malla forces. The soldiers disguised themselves as farmers to launch a surprise attack, which was strategically timed at first light during the rainy season. Prithvi Narayan Shah persuaded local fishermen to build boats by offering them land to cross the Trishuli River. After the first setback, the Gorkhali forces retreated, destroying the bridge and boats to hinder any subsequent counterattack. The objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the military strategies employed in the conquest of Nuwakot and to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies in achieving the intended goal. The study also aims to assess the impact of these strategies on the overall unification campaign of Nepal. Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative research approach. Primary and secondary sources are used to provide context and support the findings.

Keywords: Attack, military strategy, Nuwakot, unification campaign, victory

Introduction

In ancient times, although Nepal's size and boundaries changed over the years, multiple sources indicate that its territory was similar to what it is today (Manandhar and Others, 2021). The process of disintegration started in the last quarter of the ninth century AD, and three independent states emerged by the end of the eleventh century AD (Shah, 1992). But later on, these three independent states—Nepal Mandala at the center, Simrongarh in the southeastern region, and the Malla kingdom in the west—were further disintegrated into more than fifty

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principalities during the fifteenth century (Manandhar and Rathour, 2022). The unification of these states was initiated by Prithvi Narayan Shah, the king of Gorkha, in the first half of the eighteenth century (Manandhar and Others, 2021). The unification of Nepal under Prithvi Narayan Shah in the first half of the eighteenth century was a transformative event that shaped the future of the country. Before unification, Nepal was divided into many small, independent kingdoms and principalities. Prithvi Narayan Shah, the king of Gorkha, set out to unite these fragmented states into a single nation. The unification campaign of Prithvi Narayan Shah started in 1742. During that time, military instruments of power mostly dominated the political situation around the world. In Europe, King Frederick the Great started a war in 1740 by invading Silesia (Palmer, 1986). After that, he launched a series of campaigns against Austria, France, and Russia (Luvas, 1999). The American War of Independence was fought between 1775 and 1783. In European theatre, Napoleon launched a military campaign in 1796 in Italy, and by 1812, he invaded Russia (Sheehan, 2007).

In the modern history of Nepal, King Prithvi Narayan Shah is regarded as the founder of modern Nepal (Vaidya, 1993). He is recognized as a unifying force leader, the symbol of national unity, creator of brilliant history, and ample geography. King Prithvi Narayan Shah organized an army to unify Nepal, and the task it performed at various levels greatly supported his vision. It was raised neither to turn a profit nor associated with any personal gains or to achieve an objective in favor of allied powers. Its sole motto was 'service above self, directed only for the betterment of the country and its people (Thapa, 2016). Nuwakot was a strategically important place under the Kantipur state, located between the Gorkha kingdom and the Kathmandu Valley, which was a key target for unification. The victory over Nuwakot was not simply the result of a large military force; rather, it was the outcome of careful planning and the use of effective military strategies. Prithvi Narayan Shah and his forces employed a combination of tactics, including exploiting the geographical features of the region, using the right timing, and taking advantage of adverse weather conditions for attacks. This study aims to examine and analyze the military strategies that Prithvi Narayan Shah employed during his conquest of Nuwakot. By looking at historical accounts, studying the geographical and tactical aspects of Nuwakot, and conducting field visits, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the military decisions that led to this important victory. It also considers the broader implications of these strategies on Nepal's unification and the impact of Prithvi Narayan Shah's leadership in shaping the nation's future. Through this analysis, the study tries to shed light on the key factors driving the successful unification of Nepal and examines the role of military strategy in nation-building.

Prithvi Narayan Shah's military approach reflects the distinction between tactics and strategy, as famously articulated by Carl von Clausewitz: "Tactics teaches the use of armed forces in engagements, while strategy teaches the use of engagements to achieve the objectives of war (Skinner & Precision 2001). He skillfully employed tactics to secure immediate victories on the battlefield, such as precise strikes and efficient use of his forces during engagements. Simultaneously, his overarching strategy aimed at unifying Nepal, aligning individual battles with his ultimate objective. King Prithvi Narayan Shah prepared extensively before starting the campaign, mobilizing people to gather weapons and arrange supplies. The first aim of the attack is victory. For victory, it is necessary that there should be a battle between the enemy's

principal force and our own (Graham, 1956). He applied various strategies like "sam, dam, danda, bheda" to achieve victories in battles. Throughout history, kings, emperors, and warriors have used various strategies to win wars and expand their territories. These tactics, which are critical for success in battle, are commonly known as "strategy." King Prithvi Narayan Shah employed a range of strategic approaches in his mission to unify the fragmented states of Nepal into a single nation. Recognizing the strategic importance of Nuwakot, he focused on capturing it as a crucial first step toward the unification of Nepal. In 1744 AD, Prithvi Narayan Shah launched a carefully planned military operation to capture Nuwakot, a region under the control of the Kantipur state and strategically located between Gorkha and the Kathmandu Valley, valued for its geographic and economic significance. As stated in Sun Tzu's Art of War, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles" (Giles, 2015). Prithvi Narayan Shah applied this principle by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of both his own forces and those of his enemies, using a combination of diplomacy and military strategies to weaken Nuwakot's defenses. By selecting the right timing and taking advantage of adverse weather conditions, he launched attacks on Nuwakot that effectively weakened its defenses and reduced its ability to resist. This calculated approach led to his victory, which was not just a military win but also an important symbolic move in his broader mission to unify Nepal. This initial conquest of Nuwakot demonstrated Prithvi Narayan Shah's skillful use of military strategy, as he was able to turn a relatively small kingdom into a starting point for the larger goal of unifying Nepal into a single nation.

Review of Literature

In Manandhar (2012), The title of chapter one is 'Early form of Nepali army (1819-1862)'. The author of this chapter, Dineshraj Pant, has shed light on the nature of the Gorkhali army during the Lichchavi period, the medieval period, and from Dravya Shah to Narbhupal Shah. Similarly, in this chapter, how Prithvi Narayan Shah expanded the organization of the Nepali Army during unification has also been explained. Prithvi Narayan Shah has also informed us about the policies adopted by him to unify Nepal. In this sense, this chapter of the book seems useful for the presented research work.

Sharma, (1992)'s book is divided into ten chapters, including an epilogue. The second chapter discusses the policies implemented by Prithvi Narayan Shah for establishing the military organization, forming various platoons, setting up military posts, and more. In the third chapter, it briefly discusses how military policy and logistics were organized. It also offers further insights into strategy. Chapter three is relevant to this research, as it provides the key aspects and concepts that are essential for understanding the subject matter being explored.

Thapa, (2020)'s article explores the policies and military tactics Prithvi Narayan Shah employed during Nepal's unification, including battles against various states and foreign forces. Reviewed for its relevance to this research, the article describes how Gorkhali soldiers planned carefully before attacks, selecting favorable times, leveraging weather conditions, and using tactics like multi-directional attacks, guerrilla warfare, disguise, blockades, and espionage to exploit enemy weaknesses. These strategies were vital to Prithvi Narayan Shah's success.

Conceptual/ Theoretical Framework

Nation-Building Theory

Nation-building theory emphasizes the creation of a unified political and cultural identity within a geographical region. Prithvi Narayan Shah's victory at Nuwakot can be seen as a foundational act of nation-building because it provided him with a significant territorial base to expand his campaign. This victory was symbolic, too, as it inspired loyalty, unity, and a collective identity that helped consolidate the various small states under a single Nepali identity.

Economic Control Theory

Control over economically valuable regions is central to the economic control theory, as these regions provide resources, trade, and wealth essential for sustaining military campaigns and governance. Nuwakot was economically valuable, controlling trade routes between Tibet and the Kathmandu Valley. By capturing Nuwakot, Prithvi Narayan Shah gained access to resources that financed further conquests and provided a stable economic base for the emerging unified Nepal.

Objective

The objective of this study is to examine and analyze the military strategies adopted by Prithvi Narayan Shah that led to his victory over Nuwakot. This research seeks to achieve the following specific objectives:

Identify Key Military Strategies

Analyze the specific military strategies employed by Prithvi Narayan Shah and his forces to secure victory over Nuwakot, including preparation, planning, and execution.

Examine the Use of Terrain and Timing

Examine how Prithvi Narayan Shah exploited the geographical features of Nuwakot, carefully timed his attacks, and used the adverse weather conditions to gain a strategic advantage over the enemy.

Analyze Tactical Approaches

Evaluate tactical approaches such as multi-directional attacks, guerrilla warfare, surprise elements, and the disruption of enemy defenses that contributed to weakening Nuwakot's resistance.

Statement of the Problem

This study addresses the need to explore the military strategies used by Prithvi Narayan Shah that led to his victory over Nuwakot, a critical milestone in the unification of Nepal. While the importance of this victory is well recognized, there are limited detailed analyses of the specific military tactics, such as the strategic use of terrain, timing of attacks, and other military maneuvers that were key to overcoming Nuwakot's defenses. The research aims to fill this gap by examining how these strategies were devised, and executed and their effectiveness in ensuring victory, which played a vital role in the broader unification of Nepal.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology to explore the military strategies employed by Prithvi Narayan Shah in his victory over Nuwakot. Data was collected from secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and previous research on Nepal's unification and military tactics. The study also involved field visits to Nuwakot to observe the region's geography firsthand and assess its role in the military strategies used by Prithvi Narayan Shah.

Appointing a Competent Military Leader

The success of any military campaign depends heavily on the competence of the military leader. Prithvi Narayan Shah recognized the significance of this and understood that appointing the right commander was crucial to the success of his military campaigns. Initially, Shah had considered appointing Viraj Bakheta as the "Kaji" (a high-ranking official) and the commander of his forces. However, after consulting with his advisers and taking into account the opinions of the public and his soldiers, it became clear that the people preferred Kalu Pande for the role. Pande was seen as a more experienced and capable military leader. Respecting the will of the people and acknowledging Pande's leadership qualities, Prithvi Narayan Shah decided to appoint him as the "Kaji" and the commander of the Gorkhali forces. This decision proved to be pivotal. Under Kalu Pande's leadership, the Gorkhals launched a successful military operation against Nuwakot, overcoming its defenses and capturing the region. Pande's ability to inspire his troops, his tactical expertise, and his strong decision-making were instrumental in ensuring the success of the campaign and advancing Prithvi Narayan Shah's goal of unifying Nepal.

Recruitment, Acquisition of Weapons and Logistics arrangements

In 1743 AD, Prithvi Narayan Shah faced defeat during his initial attack on Nuwakot. There were multiple reasons for this failure, one among them being inadequate modern weapons, military organization, training, and adequate logistics arrangements. Acknowledging these shortcomings, he devised a plan to better prepare for another attack on Nuwakot. He raised significant funds from various sources to purchase modern weapons from Banaras. Once equipped, he recruited soldiers aged between fifteen and thirty from twelve thousand households (Acharya, & Yogi 2018), provided them with necessary training, and strengthened the military structure (Sharma, & Others (1992). Additionally, to ensure adequate rations, he organized food supplies from households across the region (Bista, 1963).

Ensuring Own Security Prior to Military Engagement

After preparing for the attack on Nuwakot, it was evident that sending most soldiers and commanders to battle could weaken the state's defenses. When one state attacks another, there is a high risk of a third state exploiting this vulnerability to launch a rear attack. At that time, there was enmity between the Gorkha and Lamjung kingdoms. If the Gorkhali forces attacked Nuwakot, Lamjung might seize the opportunity to attack Gorkha. Before launching an attack on another state, Uddhot Sen, the maternal uncle of Prithvi Narayan Shah and Prince of the Palpa state, advised, "Lamjung is like a Garuda (eagle), Gorkha is like a snake, and Nepal is like a frog. First, we must evade the eagle's gaze; only then can the snake swallow the frog (Acharya & Yogi 2018). Following the advice of Prince Uddhot Sen of Palpa, Prithvi Narayan Shah established a treaty with Lamjung ensuring neutrality between the two states (Sharma,

& Others, 1992). This secured Gorkha from Lamjung's attacks, allowing Shah to focus all resources on Nuwakot, leading to victory.

Disguising Soldiers as Farmers

In warfare, soldiers sometimes disguise themselves to avoid detection by the enemy. Similarly, to evade recognition by the Malla forces, the Gorkhali soldiers disguised themselves as farmers. During the rainy season, they pretended to be farmers engaged in agricultural activities in Khinchet, a location within Gorkha's territory across the Trishuli River. This guise allowed them to await the perfect opportunity to strike while preparing for their assault in secret (Pant, N. & Others, 1968). Although the Gorkhali soldiers disguised themselves as farmers and engaged in farming activities, they also conducted military exercises at appropriate times (Acharya, 1967). The plan was to attack Nuwakot, but the excuse was that they were cutting the canal and plowing the fields in Khinchet (Acharya, & Yogi 2018) as mentioned in Divya Upades. In this way, the Malla forces could not confirm that those disguised as farmers were actually Gorkhali soldiers and failed to make necessary preparations; they ended up being defeated.

Selecting Rainy Season and Unpredictable Time and Direction for Attack

Selecting an appropriate time is crucial to achieving victory in war. Considering this, Prithvi Narayan Shah employed strategic timing, using both the rainy season and unpredictable attack timing to his advantage. The Gorkhali forces launched their attack in September during the monsoon season when most military campaigns would be avoided due to the harsh weather. This timing caught the Nuwakot defenders off guard as they did not expect an attack during such conditions, so they remained relaxed. This lack of anticipation meant they were not prepared enough to fight the Gorkhali forces, which directly benefited the Gorkhali forces. Gorkhali forces carefully concealed their movements by disguising themselves as farmers, which made the impending attack less detectable.

The attack on Nuwakot occurred on the 12th of Ashwin, on the occasion of the Indra Jatra festival in Kantipur. On this particular day, the king, soldiers, and citizens of Kantipur were all fully engaged in the celebrations. Prithvi Narayan Shah, understanding this opportunity, carefully chose this timing for his attack. By doing so, he minimized the chances of receiving reinforcements from Kantipur, as the people were preoccupied with the festival, making it easier for the Gorkha forces to strike unexpectedly (Sharma & Others 1992). Due to these circumstances, the Malla forces in Nuwakot were neither fully prepared nor highly vigilant. This strategic advantage allowed the Gorkhali forces to succeed in their attack.

Alluring Policy

The Trishuli River lay between Gorkha and Nuwakot, making it essential for the Gorkhali forces to cross it in order to launch an attack on Nuwakot. During that time, boats were the primary means of crossing rivers. Recognizing this need, Prithvi Narayan Shah secretly reached out to Jalwa Majhi, the leader of the boatmen stationed along the riverbank. He persuaded Jalwa to secretly prepare a fleet of boats for the Gorkhali army, ensuring they could cross the river undetected and continue their assault on Nuwakot (Parajuli, 1963). Prithvi Narayan Shah used incentives, like land grants, to motivate local groups such as the boatmen to help in his military campaigns. He promised the Jaluwa Majhi (boatman) a land grant for his loyalty. This offer

was made to gain their support and ensure that they would provide the necessary boats for his forces to cross the Trishuli River without difficulty.

Multi-Directional Attack

A multi-directional attack involves launching attacks from more than one direction on a target simultaneously. When an attack is launched from multiple directions, the enemy is unable to focus its defenses on one point, making it harder for them to effectively counter the assault. Understanding this, Prithvi Narayan Shah directed Kaji Kalu Pandey to lead an offensive from the Gerku route towards Mahamandal (Parajuli, 1963). Chautariya Mohaddam Kirti Shah launched an attack from the Dharampani route. Prithvi Narayan Shah personally launched an attack through the Tindhare route. This was part of a coordinated strategy where different leaders, including Prithvi Narayan Shah himself, Kaji Kalu Pandey, and Chautariya Mohaddam Kirti Shah, attacked from separate routes to confuse and overwhelm the enemy forces. Each route was chosen to stretch the enemy's defenses and make it harder for them to concentrate on a single point of resistance. Additionally, Prithvi Narayan Shah adopted Sun Tzu's principle: "Attack where the enemy is unprepared and appear where you are least expected" (Giles, 2015). When the Gorkhali forces attacked Nuwakot from three directions, the Malla forces were unable to unite and were subsequently defeated.

Exploiting the Terrain and Natural Features

The Gorkhali forces, disguised as farmers, trained at Khinchet before crossing the Trishuli River at Shubghat, not visible from Nuwakot. After crossing the Trishuli River, the forces moved a forested route towards Nuwakot, which also remained out of sight of Nuwakot. The main Gorkhali fighting troops led by Kaji Kalu Pande used this route to approach Mahamandal from the north without encountering any opposition. This careful strategy of using concealed routes to launch their attack on Nuwakot unexpectedly, caught the enemy off guard and ensured the success of their mission. In the Divya Upadesh, Prithvi Narayan Shah referred to Mahamandal as the "co-wife" of Nuwakot (Ahacharya & Yogi 2018).

Neutralizing the Enemy's Commander

During Prithvi Narayan Shah's unification of Nepal, one of the key strategies involved targeting enemy commanders to weaken the opposition. His primary objective was to capture or neutralize the enemy commander (Sharma & Others 1992). When Prithvi Narayan Shah launched his attack on Nuwakot, his forces targeted Shankhamani Rana (son of Jayant Rana), who was responsible for Nuwakot's defense. After Shankhamani Rana's death, the Nuwakot forces became disorganized and were unable to set up a proper defense. The loss of their leader caused confusion, preventing them from responding effectively to the Gorkhali attack. As a result, Gorkhali forces gained control over Nuwakot, which played a significant role in the unification of Nepal. Prithvi Narayan Shah's success in this campaign was largely due to his ability to dismantle the enemy's leadership structure. So, Gorkhali forces did not hesitate to kill Shankhamani Rana. This is precisely what happened in Nuwakot, allowing the Gorkhali Forces to secure victory.

Attack during Leadership Gap

Understanding that success in battle is nearly impossible without effective leadership, Prithvi Narayan Shah attacked Nuwakot during the absence of its main commander, Jayant Rana. The absence of Jayant Rana significantly contributed to the Gorkhali forces's success during the attack. Jayant Rana had gone to Kantipur, leaving the responsibility for Nuwakot's defense in the hands of his son, Shankhamani Rana. This leadership change weakened the overall command structure, as Shankhamani lacked his father's experience and authority. Prithvi Narayan Shah and his forces took advantage of this leadership gap. During the attack, the Gorkhali strategy focused on targeting Shankhamani Rana, who was unprepared to handle the situation. His death during the attack caused further confusion and disorganization among the Nuwakot defenders. The quote, "He will win who, prepared himself, waits to take the enemy unprepared," (Giles, 2015) as mentioned in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, relates closely to the strategies employed by Prithvi Narayan Shah during the Victory at Nuwakot. Without strong leadership, the defenders were unable to coordinate an effective response. This weakened the command structure, leading to an easy victory for the Gorkhali forces. The Nuwakot forces, lacking confidence due to the absence of their experienced commander, could not withstand the well-led Gorkhali forces.

Continuous Surveillance

The continuous surveillance of the Gorkhali forces played a significant role in the planning and execution of the attack on Nuwakot. Prithvi Narayan Shah, known for his strategic brilliance, understood the importance of gathering intelligence on the movements and preparedness of his adversaries. By closely monitoring the Nuwakot, he was able to identify their weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and lapses in defense, particularly under the temporary leadership of Shankhamani Rana after Jayant Rana's departure to Kantipur. While disguised as farmers, the Gorkhali forces kept constant surveillance on the enemy, closely monitoring their movements and defenses. They gathered detailed information about the size of the enemy forces, their morale, weapons, and other provisions. This intelligence was crucial in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the Nuwakot forces. Since the Gorkhalis were stationed close to Nuwakot, they had ample opportunity to study the enemy in detail. This allowed them to create a carefully planned strategy, ensuring that they could exploit the vulnerabilities of the Nuwakot defenses and maximize their chances of success during the attack.

Use of Sand Model

The attack on Nuwakot from Mahamandal Hill, led by Kaji Kalu Pande, was successful because of the detailed sand model briefing. In military operations, creating a replica of the target area helps in planning and briefing troops. When made with sand, it is called a sand model; with mud, a mud model; and with cloth, a cloth model. These models provide a clear visual representation, ensuring that all commanders and troops fully understand their roles and responsibilities, making execution more efficient. Before their third attack on Nuwakot, the Gorkhali forces constructed a sand model on the Mahamandal hilltop and conducted a briefing for the attacking troops (Basnyat, 1996). They used this model to explain their plan to the troops in detail, preparing them effectively for the operation. The model helped the troops to understand the battlefield and their roles clearly. This careful planning allowed for better coordination during the attack, leading to a quick and effective victory.

Conclusion

During the attack on Nuwakot, the Gorkhali forces, led by Prithvi Narayan Shah himself and Kaji Kalu Pande, adopted a strategy of attacking from unexpected and surprising directions, leaving the enemy shocked and without a chance to counterattack. They aimed first and foremost to neutralize the main enemy leaders, either by capturing or killing them. The Gorkhali forces won the battle of Nuwakot through a well-planned strategy. They disguised themselves as farmers to approach the area without being noticed. They gathered important information about the enemy's strengths and weaknesses. The Gorkhali forces took advantage of the absence of Nuwakot's main commander, Jayanta Rana, who was in Kantipur. His son, Shankhamani Rana, was left in charge unprepared and lacked the experience to lead effectively. The Gorkhali Forces launched their attack from multiple directions during the Indra Jatra festival, taking advantage of the defender's distraction. When Shankhamani Rana was killed, the Nuwakot forces fell into confusion and disorganization. These factors combined to ensure the victory of Gorkhali forces, helping Prithvi Narayan Shah move forward with his plan to unify Nepal.

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