

Colonial Recruitment Policy in Assam

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ABSTRACT

Colonial period witnessed greater movement of human population across the Border. Assam, located in the base of the Eastern Himalayan experienced various Migratory groups, who later on permanently settled and made it their motherland, Gurkha recruitment in Indian Army was conditioned by the colonial interests. The Gurkhas, generic terms to Nepalis serving in colonial army was the creation of Anglo-Gurkha war of 1815-16. David Ochterlony, who commanded the Anglo-Nepal war was highly impressed by the bravery and fighting spirit and made a plan of enlisting Gurkhas prisoners of war even before the end of the war in 1815. First Anglo-Burmese war 1824-26 was the starting point of Nepali migration and settlement in Assam. After the Treaty of Sagauli in 1816, colonial govt. had begun experiment with the legendary Gorkha soldiers. The earliest contact of the Nepalis with the Northeast India was in 1817 when 1000 Hindustanis and Gurkhas took part in Sylhet expedition as a part of the Cuttack Legion later known as the Assam Light Infantry, when David Scott's recommendation got immediate approval in favour of Gurkhas recruitment for the defence of Northeast Frontier, the company began to recruit the Gorkha soldier in large number in the infantry battalion.

KEYWORD: Assam, Gurkha, Indian Army, Nepalis, Anglo-Gurkha war, David Ochterlony, David Ochterlony, Treaty of Sagauli, Assam Light Infantry

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I. INTRODUCTION

The much needed Gurkhas were not readily available for the services of the company in the Northeast Frontier and contacts with the main recruitment areas on the Nepal border were few. The ALI recruits from Orissa, Bihar and Bengal sought discharge from service. Under the circumstances it caught immediate attention of the company's official to colonize the Gurkhas to get uninterrupted supply of recruits of the Gurkhas in the services of the Company. The devastation caused by Moamarias, the Burmese and the Singphos had created chaos and difficulty prevailed in the development of the Company's new acquisitions. The joint report of Jenkins and Pemberton of August 1832 had emphasized for colonization of barren province by Manipuris and Gurkhas¹³. However, before this development David Scott had authorized Captain Neufville to grant to his Gurkhas who had brought their families with them lands at very moderate rate of eight *annas* per *pura* annually¹⁴. The Gurkhas availed this offer and later on Magistrate reported that "there was an extensive village of Gurkhas established with a flourishing crop *dhan* (paddy) on a spot which before was a jungle¹⁵. Captain Jenkins was interested in settling Gurkha colonies in Cachar's northern hills which in turn further encourage in future colonization by these regiments. Jenkins saw the possibility of future colonization by the Europeans if the Gurkhas prepared the way for such settlements in these hills, which in turn exposed the British to a situation of great diversity and proximity of markets¹⁶. Jenkins also saw the possibility of raising militia from the settlers for the defence of North Cachar's troubled frontiers and recommended that instead of pensions the ex-soldiers of the local crops should be given grants of land. The same opinion was also put forwarded by Captain Frederick Lister in Dec. 1831 that the Gurkhas can be induced on retiring from it to settle in the fertile but thinly populated country of Cachar¹⁷. With the passage of time, British recruitment policy underwent sea change because it has already argued that the Gurkha settlement in Assam was conditioned by the British interest. Whenever, the British interest was hurt by any issues it immediately caught the attention of the British Government from 1830 onwards, colonial recruitment policy in the Northeast was changed. Raja Gambhir Singha of Manipur was strongly suspected to be involved in the murder of Raja Govinde Chandra of Manipur. It resulted doubt in the loyalty of the Manipuris in the Sylhet Battalion. Captain Lister thought it prudent to replace Manipuris by two hundred Gurkhas. The Gurkha recruitment in British army was augmented by two important events that had taken place in the North Eastern part of India. Annexation of Cachar in 1832 and Khasi insurrection of U. Tirhut Sing in 1824-34 invited the daring Gurkhas to cope up with the situation in these places. The increasing strength of SALI & ALI proved inadequate to maintain the situation either to hold Cachar or to undertake operation against the revolt of U. Tirhut Sing, under the situation, for the protection of colonial empire in the Northeast Fort William decided to enlist Gurkhas.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study is descriptive in nature and it was based on various secondary sources like Books, Magazines, Journals and internet.

III. DISCUSSION

After 1830, the British administration in the Northeast underwent great change, which was necessitated for managing the hill-tribes of Assam. Since these tribes lived in unhealthy *terai* or *duars*, it needed rough and ready irregulars to garrison them. Sebundy Corps was first raised in the close of eighteenth century for the security of the Garo marches, Served David Scott in his petty frontier expeditions. In 1830 another Sebundy Corps was raised in Guwahati²³. Assam

Sebundy crops was organized in early 1835, from the disconnected Jharua and Kachari companies for service in lowar Assam, especially for the malarial Bhutan *duars*²⁴. The Upper Assam or Second Sebundy crops, recruited from Doanneah and Matakas, was raised for the security of the new tea tract²⁵. At the sometime Assam Militia was also raised out of the Hindustani which consisted of 500 strong Militia. By 1843 men outside Upper Assam came to be freely enlisted and there were 84 Hindustani and Gurkhas in the second Sebundy corps. Since the Doanneahs and Matakas as well as Jharuas were little attached to the service 1/4th of its strength was fixed for Gurkhas and Hindustanis. It is to be noted that discrimination too was existed during that time in the Military policy of the E.I.C. Unlike their countrymen in the local crops these men did not enjoy any furlough privileges, and hence once admitted in the regiment they had little chance of revisiting their homes. The soldiers therefore, they frequently discharge themselves and fresh recruits were also not forthcoming. Capt. Thomas Fisher, the commandant of the crops bitterly complained that in such situation it was impossible for him to maintain the desired proportion of Gurkhas and Hindustanis in his battalion²⁶. In August 1843 the Govt. of British India extended furlough regulations to both the Sebundy regiments to facilitate the recruitment of Hindustani and Gurkhas²⁷. In 1843, the second Sebundy regiment was completely broke down due to Singpho rebellion and in the same year it was disbanded. Out

of this disbanded soldiers a small body of 104 men and 14 native officers, were retained for armed police duty as the Lakhimpur Police Militia²⁸. Another groups of 17 ex-Sebundies moved to Dimapur and the North Cachar hills to be enlisted with the Shan Sepoys. The majority of the second batch was Gurkhas. In 1846, Capt. John Butler reorganized these elements in one single unit as the Nowgong Police Militia with dark green uniform and standard rate of pay²⁹. Captain Charles Holroyd added a third, Sibsagar Police Militia from the remnants of the old Assam

Militia Holroyd raised the pay of soldiers from Rs. 4 to Rs. 514 per month. However it was not an easy task to enlist Gurkhas in the Indian army since Nepal Durbar was reluctance to allow its subjects under the British. It was only after 1885, when Ranodip Singh became prime minister, the relation between Nepal and the British improved, which made possible the recruitment of Gurkhas in the regiment of Assam. These recruits well made available from Gorkhpur depot from 1880. Further Britain and Russia were about to be clashed due to Panjdeh incident

in Afghanistan. This made possible to add a second battalion to each of the Gurkha regiments of 42nd, 43rd and 44th regiments and its title was changed to Gurkha Light Infantry. Thus about six thousand Gurkhas were inducted in Indian army and converted the old Assam Local corps into Gurkha regiments.

Gurkhas in Assam Rifles

Assam Rifles in Assam was predominantly manned by the Gurkhas which guarded the Northeast Frontier of British India and used against turbulent tribes of the hills. The 2nd half of the 20th century needed greater attention of internal security with the creation of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. With such expansion of the British Empire this regiment gained greater attention in Assam and finally it was made Assam Rifles, Second only to Indian Army in terms of rank. Cachar Levy, raised in 1835 can be termed as the seed from which Assam Rifles grew up to present status having 50,000 men. Gurkhas gained importance in Assam Rifles as the strength of Gurkhas was always more than 50%. No doubt that there were Cacharis, Jharuas and other tribes of Assam but their total strength was always less than 50%. The Assam Rifles was raised out of the Cachar Levy, Assam Frontier Police, Assam Light Infantry, Assam Military Police etc. and by 1875 the Gurkhas began to dominate the regiment due to British policy to tighten their hold over the Northeast India. They also started to eliminate other tribe protecting the Gurkhas in Assam Rifles. From 1850's at the initiative of Buttler, men from Bengal were eliminated from Assam Rifles they were not found suitable for the task. With the division of Cachar Levy into two divisions in 1815, one portion was posted in North-Cachar Hills and the other in Nowgong which came to be known as the Frontier Police of North Cachar Hills and the Frontier Police of Nowgong.

IV. CONCLUSION

The numbers of Gurkhas serving in all five battalions of the Assam Rifles were more than 3000. In spite of restriction imposed on the recruitment of Gurkhas from Nepal, practically enlistment continued. The Nepalis already settled in Assam were enlisted in large scale due to the restrictions imposed to recruit from Nepal and Darjeeling especially between 1919 and 1928⁵³. The govt. of India advised to look for new classes of men to take place of Gurkhas in the Assam Rifles. This resulted the opening of recruiting fields in Almora, Kalimpong and Darjeeling⁵⁴. The Assam Rifles recruited mostly Gurkhas to serve in the remote areas of Assam for the protection of the border of India. They remained loyal to the British and worked to fulfill colonial interest in India, Hence the Gurkhas remained in most reliable element in Indian Army. One of the reason of Assam reluctance to recruit permanent settlers of Assam was that the

Growth of political consciousness in the community especially in an around Tezpur. The Nepalis growing connection with Assamese leadership in the resistance movement against the colonial govt. had created indignation to the British. This clearly reflects the emergence of consciousness in the community and taking part in the nationalist movement shattered the British myth of loyal Gurkhas in the aggrandizement of colonial interest especially in Northeast Frontier of India.

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