

An Aspect of the Nepalese Recruitment from Bhutan to the Assam Rifles

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Until 1885 when the annexation of Upper Burma advanced the border further eastwards, Assam was the eastern most frontier Province of British Indian empire. Even this Frontier - its concept and location - had been shifting from the hills and valleys on the eastern border of Bengal Presidency to the Arakan, to the Patkoi hills, and ultimately, to the Eastern Himalayan ranges in the North. Thinly populated hills on the frontiers were considered to be costly locations for involving the regular military. But the occasional forage of the hill tribes to the settled districts needed to be guarded, a work which was beyond the normal duties and competence of the regular police force. Meanwhile Grange, appropriately known as "the father of the frontier police" raised the Cachar levy in 1835 at Nowgong for helping the civil administration. Similarly, Jorhat Militia, Surma Valley Frontier Police, Chittagong Frontier Police, Lakimpore Military Police Battalion, Naga Hills Frontier Police, Kuki Levy etc. were raised as and when the need arose. There was no strict recruitment policy and any body - tribal or non-tribal - who was found suitable was enrolled. As their involvement in the military police work gradually increased the recruitment and commands were entrusted to the regular military officer from that of the police officers.

In 1860's there used to be a recruitment depot at Sylhet to attract Cacharis, Shans and Jaruas (the plainsmen from Assam). However, Nepalese began to be recruited in an appreciable number around 1870.¹ Then efforts were made to enroll Mohamedans, Sikhs, Punjabis and Dogras. The Dogras, who proved to be the most tenacious, continued to be enlisted in the Naga Hills Military Police upto 1908. As the recruitment to the various units of the Assam Military Police interfered with the enrollment of the Gorkha Regiments, the Government of India prohibited their entry to the military police in 1887. However, this ban was lifted in 1891 by permitting recruitment of Rias, Limbus, Murmis, etc from the eastern Nepal. With a view to facilitating the recruitment, a depot was first established at Purneah and then it was shifted to Darjeeling. By the turn of the century the ethnic composition of the military police was that of 14 Companies of Gorkhas, 3 companies of Jaruas and 1 company of Cacharis and other local tribals. Dur-

ing the World War 1914-18 the Assam Military Police sent many drafts to the Gorkha Regiments. In recognition of its valient services in the War, the name of the force was changed from the Assam Military Police to the Rifles and it was offered affiliation to the Gorkha Regiment in 1925.

During the War the services of the Assam Rifles were utilized by the armed forces. Accordingly normal recruitment had increased and its traditional sources fell much shorter than requirement. New avenues for the recruitment were naturally sought and that is how the Government of Assam turned its attention to the northern hills of Bhutan for possible enlistment. The first efforts were made to recruit the Nepalese settlers in Bhutan in 1917,² an effort which could not succeed. The Government of Assam complained against the Nepalese settlers in Bhutan along the boundary of Goalpara district of trespassing and poaching in the British Territory. The Nepalese immigrants were warned³ and for some time no effort were made to enlist them in the Assam Rifles.

The Government of Assam renewed its efforts to secure recruits from Bhutan, but the Bhutan Durbar again declined at first to consider the proposal seriously. However, on persistent request,⁴ the Maharaja consented to receive an officer in Bhutan, who could investigate the possible recruitment of the Gorkhas in the Assam Rifles. The Durbar further desired that a experiment could be made of enlisting the immigrant Nepalese of Bhutan in the Indian army for a period of three years preferably in a Gorkha Regiment stationed at Shillong.

J. C. Morris, the Assistant Recruitment Officer for the *Gorkhas*, visited the southern districts of Bhutan adjoining the Indian borders in the cold season of 1932. His brief was to obtain information as to character and customs of the Nepalese settlers and the manpower available among them for the purpose of recruitment in the time of War.⁵ He prepared an extensive report,⁶ which has an emmence ethnographic value. Subsequently, 14 Bhutanese Nepalese boys were enlisted for military training with the 2nd/10th Gorkha Regimen stationed at Shillong at the cost of the Government of India.⁷ These Bhutanese recruits completed their two years course of military training and returned to Kalimpong on way to Bhutan. They joined the royal entourage at Kalimpong for homeward journey in February 1935.

Morris visited Chirang or the Eastern and Samchi (Chamurchi) or the western districts of Bhutan - specially *hats* (the weekly markets) and settlements. Though he worked out a figure of 60,000

Nepalese settlers in Bhutan, he was of the view that the actual number of the immigrant Nepalese was much higher. There were villages such as Suntale Gauri (Lapsibot), Lamidera and Dhaji, which boasted of 400,200 and 100 houses respectively belonging to the Nepalese. Each group of the villages were in-charge of a Nepalese official known as the *Mukhtiar*, assisted by the village headman (the *Mandal*). Through the Eastern district was closer to Shillong, he recommended a recruitment outpost for working on whole of Bhutan to be established at Jalpaiguri. He found Rais and Limbus predominant and larger number in Gamchi district. With a view to entertaining the recruits from the Western district, he suggested Jainti station on the Cooch Behar section of the Eastern Bengal Railways, as an ideal location.

The village life in Bhutan was carried on exactly as in Nepal and there was no supervision by the Bhutanese officials. The villagers lived a freer life than that of in Nepal, as "there was neither police, army nor in the Nepalese settlement any form of civil administration". Each house was assessed at a rate varying between six to nine rupees a year according to the number of the male occupants. Buffaloes were taxed at the rate of rupees two a year, cows at twelve annas, sheep at two annas and all other animals were free of tax. The rent of land under rice cultivation was rupees three per acre per annum, but ground under maize cultivation was free and the land was held in perpetuity. The *jhumming* was in practice. The Nepalese farmers were entitled to dispose of their land and houses to a Nepalese or a *Dukpa*. However, a Nepalese could not buy a *Dukpa's* land. The price for an acre of land varied from Rs. 20 to Rs. 400 depending on the quality of land. While the buyer of the land was to give ten percent of the purchase money to the government of Bhutan the seller was to part with five percent of the proceed of the sale to the village headman.

Dewan Hemraj Gurung, the Samchi Zompe (Jongpen-administrator) informed Morris that a large number of the Nepalese immigrants in the western district were political fugitives and criminals, who had runaway from eastern Nepal. However, a tendency was observed that immigrant Nepalese left their wives back in Nepal and came to Bhutan either alone or in the company of other men folk. Invariably they got married in their newly adopted land and meanwhile the original wives were brought in the picture as the conditions gradually settled in the immigrants' favour. Multiple wives with children proved to be an asset to the industrious immigrant Nepalese in a wild untamed and unexplored land. As a result

of this, the majority of the older settlers had several wives. Thus the families of the Nepalese in Bhutan were larger than that of their counterparts in Nepal.

Morris was of the opinion that the Bhutanese settlements would be capable of providing and keeping up to strength, the equivalent of two infantry battalions. He felt that Rai, Limbu, Magar, Gurung, Tamang and Chetri from Bhutan could be recruited to the Assam Rifles. As the Assam Rifles were not permitted to recruit in Nepal, they might turn their attention to the southern Bhutanese immigrant Nepalese. He strongly recommended that the area should be opened up for the recruitment as sufficient number of healthy and sturdy recruit was available. Assuming that the Assam Rifles formed a potential reserve for the regular Gorkha regiments, the enlistment of the Bhutanese Gorkhas in the Assam Rifles was felt to be the best means of getting a foothold in Bhutan.

The Government of Bhutan was reluctant to permit the Nepalese recruitment for the Indian armed forces for a number of reasons. Firstly, they realised that the *Dukpa* population was afflicted with a number of venereal, aismatic and other types ailments. They had the institution of monk and Nun celibates through a chain of lamaseris spread all over the country. Thus the over all fertility rate of the *Dukpa* child bearing potentiality was very low. To the extent that the Bhutanese official position in 1920's was that the indigenous population was on decline. Secondly, the Maharaja of Bhutan was not in favour of permitting his Nepalese subjects to serve in the Indian armed forces, as he was afraid of its consequences. It was feared that after the military training the trained soldiers on their return might prove unduly turbulent in the least policed state of Bhutan. Thirdly, the presence of a large number of trained soldiers of foreign nationality in a country possessing no army of its own was distasteful to the Bhutanese ruler, as the Nepalese immigrants in Bhutan remained in their sentiments and culture subjects of the King of Nepal.

In this context a number of other developments effecting the over-all British policy to Bhutan in 1930's are note worthy. Firstly, against the 150 years old consistent British efforts to bring Bhutan effectively within the operative orbit of the British Indian empire the British decided to separe the buffer states on the borders such as Burma, Bhutan, Nepal and Afghanistan away from India. Thus all efforts to integrate Bhutan with the Indian system of administration including that of the armed forces met a set-back. Secondly,

the alleged Link between the late Dharam Raja with that of Mahatma Gandhi in May, 1931 and subsequent mysterious death of the former in captivity⁸ forced the Bhutanese rulers to keep away from the populist and resurgent India. Thirdly, the long and controversial court case for extradition of Achal Singh Limbu, a disputed Bhutanese subject in the court of Bengal Presidency turned the simple Bhutanese all the more apprehensive of the intricate and complex British laws, the legal nuances of the Indian judicial system and the Nepalese duplicity. Thus Bhutan appears to completely ignore the cause of the Nepalese immigrants. Lastly, with the momentum of the Indian freedom movement, hardly two generations old Bhutanese monarchy was worried for the future course of Indo-Bhutanese relations. They began all the more zealously to pursue a policy of isolation in which external dealings were kept at the minimum. All these developments together combined to fail the valient efforts made by C. J. Morris for the Gorkha recruitment to the Assam Rifles from Bhutan.

References

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