The Nepal-Tibet War (1855-56): Operational Planning and Logistical Management

Udaya Bahadur Lamichhane
PhD/Scholar, Department of History
udaya.lamichhane2777@gmail.com

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Abstract

The Nepal-Tibet War of 1855–56 represents an important yet often overlooked episode in the military and diplomatic history of the Himalayan region. Sparked by longstanding grievances over trade rights, territorial encroachments, and political tensions, the conflict was initiated by Nepal at a time when both Tibet and the Qing Empire were beset by internal instability. This study explores the multifaceted causes of the war, including Nepal's efforts to reclaim lost privileges, deteriorating cross-border relations, and the influence of shifting regional power dynamics involving British India. Despite its relatively short duration, the war posed immense operational and logistical challenges due to the formidable Himalayan terrain, harsh climate, and limited infrastructure. Nepal's military success was made possible through strategic foresight, rigorous planning, and extensive resource mobilization, including the construction of decentralized supply depots, integration of local manpower, and the deployment of medical services along the frontlines. By analyzing the sequence of military campaigns, the leadership of key commanders, and the eventual signing of the Treaty of Thapathali, this paper argues that while Nepal secured notable tactical victories, the prolonged strain on resources necessitated a negotiated peace. The treaty granted Nepal certain trade and diplomatic concessions and reaffirmed its influence in Tibet, though it did not substantially disrupt the broader geopolitical balance. Drawing upon archival materials, historical correspondence, and recent historiographical interpretations, this paper positions the war as a defining moment in Nepal's assertion of autonomy, military modernisation, and evolving diplomatic posture vis-à-vis Tibet and the weakening Qing authority.

Key Words: *Logistics, Strategy, Treaty, Troops, War*

Introduction

The exact nature of Nepal's relations with Tibet during the prehistoric and protohistoric periods remains unclear due to the absence of definitive records. However, the interactions between the peoples of these two neighboring regions must have been frequent, open, and meaningful, as reflected in the ancient legends passed down through history (Upreti, 1980). The Nepal-Tibet War of 1855-56, though not widely known, provides a remarkable case study in military strategy, especially concerning operational and logistical preparation. The war stemmed from escalating disputes between the Kingdom of Nepal and Tibet, exacerbated by the influence of the Qing Empire over Tibet. Nepal, seeking to assert control over key border areas and trade routes, engaged in military action against Tibet. Given the mountainous geography and lack of advanced infrastructure, this conflict posed unique challenges in terms of troop movement, supply chains, and battlefield strategy. This article aims to investigate the operational and logistical preparation undertaken by Nepal to conduct military operations, demonstrating the complexities involved in such a conflict in a rugged and isolated region.

Method and Materials

This research adopts a qualitative historical methodology to explore the operational planning and logistical management of the Nepal-Tibet War (1855–56). It draws on both primary sources, like unpublished military archives, and secondary sources, including academic articles and historical books. The analysis is guided by a military-historical framework, emphasizing aspects like campaign strategy, leadership structures, geographic challenges, troop movements, and supply logistics. Gregorian (AD) and Bikram Sambat (BS) date systems are used in the main text of the article. However, as AD dates are not necessary for citation purposes, only the BS dates are included in the references.

Causes of the War

The causes of the Nepal-Tibet War of 1855-56 are deeply rooted in territorial, economic, and political tensions between the Kingdom of Nepal and Tibet, influenced by both regional and broader imperial dynamics. Key factors leading to the conflict include:

Revenge Against Tibet

Nepal had lost her commercial superiority in Tibet by the Betravati agreement of 1792. She lost the centuries-old right to mint Nepali coins for the land of the Lamas and also had to surrender

the trade facilities which she obtained through the Kerung Treaty of 1789. But Nepal quietly accepted the settlement without opposing any point of agreement, as the Tibetan authorities had done in the case of the Kerung treaty. The situation remained the same for more than half a century, and Nepal's trade in the land of the Lamas continued with great difficulties. Things, however, changed, when Jang Bahadur came to power in 1846. The Nepali Prime Minister realized that his country had been unfairly humiliated in 1792 by the Sino-Tibetan joint efforts. He was waiting for a suitable opportunity to strike, which was provided by the Nepali mission of 1852 (Manandhar & Rauthor, 2022). Nepal was not in a position to challenge the hegemony of the Chinese Emperor, but Jung Bahadur was determined to take revenge against the Tibetans. Indeed, he was keen to revive Nepal's prospective trade glory once again in the land of the Lamas by keeping the Chinese government in good humor.

Border Disputes Between Nepal and Tibet

There have been several boundary disputes in areas such as Kerung, Kuti, Atthara Saya Khola, and others. Nepali accounts claim that the residents of Atthara Saya Khola built cowsheds along the Nepal-Tibet border in exchange for rent from Tibetan officials. Reports indicate that on December 25, 1854, Tibetans launched an attack on Nepali cowherds, resulting in one death, four injuries, and the abduction of four individuals who were taken to Tibet and tortured (Basnyat, 2023). One of the primary causes of the war was the ongoing territorial dispute over key border regions between Nepal and Tibet, especially in the Kuti area (Sharma et al., 1992). The boundary dispute between Nepal and Tibet near the village of Khasa, which became acute towards the close of 1852, arose in this fashion. The Tibetan government had bought grazing rights over several ranges of hills south of Khasa from Nepal (Uprety, 1980). Tibetans began building villages and collecting annual rents of 2,000 to 4,000 rupees. Meanwhile, Chinese authorities in Khasa dug a deep ditch, 80 feet wide and one mile long, claiming the area was under Tibetan jurisdiction. In response, Nepal took two actions: first, it informed the Tibetan government of the illegality of constructing villages in Nepalese territory; and second, it sent collectors to assert its sovereignty and gather revenue from these villages.

Persecution of Nepali Traders in Lhasa:

The abuse of Nepalese traders in Tibet brought relations between the two countries to a crisis. For years, the Tibetan government had mistreated Nepalese merchants in Lhasa, leading to

frequent hostilities and innocent bloodshed. Both Nepalese residents and passing tourists were victims of these abuses (Rana, 1980). Nepali merchants who were engaged in trade in Lhasa, Tibet, were subjected to various forms of mistreatment or unfair treatment by the local Tibetans. These injustices, which may have included harassment, unfair practices, or even violence, were significant enough that the traders were compelled to report these issues. This ongoing issue likely played a role in the political tensions between the two countries (Panta & Thapa, 2079 BS).

Over time, these complaints reached Jung Bahadur Rana, highlighting the strained relationship between Nepali traders and the Tibetan authorities.

Expulsion of Nepali Delegates by Tibet:

To make matters worse, the Nepalese lawyer was expelled from Lhasa without any clear explanation, and Jang Bahadur was instructed to send a replacement. The seriousness of the Nepal-Tibet relations in Khaum, eastern Tibet is highlighted in a letter from the Chinese Amban in Lhasa to Nepal, in which he mentions that several Nepalese lives had been lost and that the local governor had failed to resolve the dispute or maintain control over the situation (Upreti, 1980). He became increasingly frustrated with Tibet and was eager to take the opportunity to teach them a lesson whenever it arose.

Tibetan Misconduct Towards the Quinquennial Mission

The system of sending a quinquennial mission to China by Nepal made its beginning in the year 1792 when the latter lost a war at the hands of the former (Manandhar & Mishra, 1986) According to the Betrawati Treaty of 1792 AD, Nepal had started to send a goodwill mission, along with a precious gifts to the Emperor of China. From 1792 until 1906, Nepal dispatched a total of 18 quinquennial missions to China. The Thirteenth Nepali mission to China sent in 1852, proved to be the most crucial. Kazi Gambhir Singh Adhikari and Sardar Samsher Thapa, the leader and deputy leader of the mission, respectively, passed away while returning home from Peking. Meanwhile, the remaining members of the mission were mistreated by the Tibetans, particularly the Khampas, during their journey back to Nepal. It is mentioned that all the members died due to the harsh treatment by the Tibetans, with the sole survivor, Lieutenant Bhimsen Rana, reaching Kathmandu on 22 May 1854 (Vaidhya et al., 1992), where he reported the incident to the Prime

Minister. Jung Bahadur became enraged with the Tibetan government and decided to teach them a lesson by planning an attack on Tibet.

Unfair Betrawati Agreement of 1792

Nepal and Tibet have had a long-standing relationship since ancient times. However, during Bahadur Shah's regency, two wars occurred between Nepal and Tibet, one in 1788-89 and another in 1791-1792 AD. After the second war, both countries signed an agreement known as the "Treaty of Betrawati." As per the agreement, Nepal and Tibet would coexist peacefully, both nations would acknowledge the Chinese Emperor, and every five years, Nepal would send a diplomatic delegation with tributes to the Chinese Emperor (Manandhar et al., 2077 BS) Furthermore, Nepal would no longer be permitted to mint currency and send it to Tibet (Manandhar & Rauthor, 2022). The Betrawati Agreement of 1792 was detrimental to Nepal, as it diminished Nepal's influence over Tibet and compelled it to recognise China's suzerainty over Tibet. Despite Nepal's military victory, the agreement ultimately benefited Chinese interests, restricting Nepal's ability to maintain its sovereignty and strategic independence.

Jung Bahadur's Interest

In the mid-19th century, China was entangled in internal conflicts arising from the Taiping Rebellion, while Britain was also preoccupied with the Crimean War against Russia. Tibet, too, was experiencing internal strife, with a struggle for power ongoing. In stark contrast, Nepal had a stable political situation, as the Rana regime, established by Jung Bahadur Rana in 1846, had become firmly entrenched by 1854. Bhimsen Thapa initiated the modernization and strengthening of the Nepalese army, and Jung Bahadur carried this effort forward, building a powerful military under his leadership. He sought to demonstrate the strength of his forces by engaging in battle with another nation, while also aiming to solidify his rule through military victories (Sharma et al, 1992). The battle between Tibet and Nepal started as a result of this situation.

Operational Perspective

War Preparation of Nepal

Prime Minister Jung Bahadur, resentful over Tibetan indifference, was preparing for war in full swing. The Prime Minister was relentless in his work, eating little sleeping less, and dedicating himself to his work for days and nights at a time, according to Padma Jang's account of his activities. He created a new army corps of 14000 feet, and 12000 cavalry and cast 80 light twelve-pounders, 24 six-pounders, and a large number of mortars and howitzers, adapted for mountain warfare. The whole Nepal Army was prepared for mobilization, and only 12000 were to be left at home to garrison the country (Rana, 1980). Jung Bahadur instructed the Eastern and Western districts to prepare a contingent of 5000 soldiers at their districts and engage sufficient workmen in the military factories to prepare ammunition, Knapsacks, gun carriages, boxes, tents, and other stores for the use of the army. In addition, the sufficient number of physicians, woodworkers, and other persons needed to support the army in war fronts were enlisted, and the rajas of autonomous districts were instructed to consolidate with the Nepal government in every possible way to wage a war against Tibet. To make the proper management of food grains in sufficient quantity for the invading army, Jang stopped the necessary food items from Nepal Terai to India. Instead, he managed to purchase food grains from the local people. The price of all the food grains was fixed, and the amount was immediately paid to the local people. The only condition imposed upon them was that they had to supply the food grains to the nearest place designated by the government. It was also announced that the government would offer a discount of twenty-five percent on the land revenue if the tenants paid the same in advance for the next year (Uprety, 1980).

Apart from the invading routes, special care was taken to defend the strategic points in the east and the west, against possible Tibetan attacks. Accordingly, the HimalDhoj Company was stationed at Wollangchung Gola in the East, and a Nepali force (regiment not mentioned) at Humla and Mustang areas under General Krishna Dhoj.

War Preparation of Tibet

Details regarding the war preparations in Tibet are not available to us. One source mentions that the Tibetan government had prepared an army of 50000 soldiers, including about 15000 cavalry. A large section of the army (about 40000) was stationed at Tingri Maidan and the rest

(8000 soldiers) at Digarcha. In response to Nepal's decision to launch an offensive against Tibet, the Tibetans quickly shifted into a defensive posture, organizing a significant military force to protect their territory. The Tibetans circulated the rumor that they had a vast army prepared for war, cleverly using propaganda to create this perception. In truth, their main concern was simply securing their defenses (Panta & Thapa, 2079 BS). It is important to note that in 1789 and 1793, the Chinese made significant military arrangements in Tibet, which was controlled by Chinese officials.

Logistical Perspectives

Overcoming Geographic Challenges The geographical challenges presented by the Himalayan region were monumental. Effective logistical management was crucial in ensuring that troops had the necessary supplies and equipment to operate in such a harsh environment.

Production and Storage of Explosives

To meet the demand for gunpowder during the war, various locations were assigned the responsibility of its production and storage, including Patan, Siloute in Bhadgaon, Thimi, Bhadgaon Garden, Barudkhana, Panidhiki, Bhandarkhal, Lainadda, Thapathali Chyagal, the Kathmandu Chebhdel Depot, Bishnumati Garden, Nagarjun Barudkhana, and others. These places spread across the Kathmandu Valley and surrounding areas were key to ensuring a continuous supply of this essential material for the war effort, with specific facilities like Barudkhana dedicated to the production and storage of gunpowder. The allocation of these various sites highlights the strategic approach taken to meet the logistical needs of the military during the conflict (Appendix 1).

Arrangement of Rations for Soldiers and Mules

During the war with Tibet, ensuring that the soldiers, porters, and other personnel had enough supplies was crucial for maintaining the army's strength and readiness. The authorities took measures to ensure that all those involved in the military effort were properly fed and equipped. The rations included basic staples like rice, flour, lentils, and spices like chili, as well as more essential items like ghee (clarified butter), tea, and tobacco, which would help to boost morale and provide comfort. Additionally, items such as firewood were included to allow for cooking and warmth, while meat was provided as a source of protein to sustain the troops. The

provisioning also extended to the animals that supported the army, such as horses and mules, which were crucial for transportation and carrying loads. The arrangements included supplying them with grains (like barley) for food and access to water, which were essential for their stamina and health during the war. The well-organized distribution of these provisions ensured that both human and animal participants in the war effort were adequately supported, enabling them to function effectively in the challenging conditions of the conflict (Appendix 2).

Supply Store and Transportation

To ensure a reliable and uninterrupted supply of essential materials and rations for the troops, the government took strategic measures by constructing a network of warehouses across different regions of the country. These warehouses were especially concentrated in the northern part of the country, which shares a border with Tibet. The government focused on this area due to its proximity to the conflict zone, building storage facilities from Mechi in the east to Mahakali in the west. This strategic placement allowed for the efficient distribution of supplies to the troops, ensuring they had the necessary resources during the war. These warehouses were specifically built to store essential items like food, ammunition, and other supplies required for the war effort. By having these storage facilities spread across the country, the authorities ensured that the army would have ready access to the resources needed for both immediate and long-term needs during the conflict. This careful logistical planning helped maintain the efficiency of the military and allowed for smooth operations during the war (Appendix 3).

Appeal to Support from Former Rulers

During the war with Tibet, Jang Bahadur appealed by sending a letter to the kings of the regions that existed before Nepal's unification, asking for their help in supplying vital resources and support. It is reported that Jang Bahadur assured these rulers that their titles would be reinstated if the war ended in victory. This promise motivated their involvement, and following the war, some of these rulers were able to regain their titles. These included soldiers, porters, and animals such as horses, mules, yaks, donkeys, sheep, and buffaloes, as well as other supplies necessary for the war. States like Mustang, Achham, Chalahari, Bajura, and others contributed based on their available resources and capacities. After the war, some of these rulers were granted their titles as promised upon the victory. This arrangement highlights the political and strategic alliances formed

during the conflict, with the promise of rewards motivating local rulers to support the war effort (Appendix 4).

Medical and Logistics Support

The extreme conditions also made medical support an essential component of the logistical preparation. Medical supplies were carried alongside troops, and field hospitals were set up at key locations to treat wounded soldiers. The wounded soldiers were promptly treated at the Health Centre at Khasa, where medical personnel provided crucial care to help them recover. The Nepali Army offered medical assistance to the wounded Tibetan soldiers as well. This act highlighted the Nepali Army's commitment to treating all individuals in need, regardless of the side they fought on (Manandhar & Rauthor, 2022).Despite the fierce battle, the injured Tibetan soldiers were given the same standard of care at the Nepali Health Centre, highlighting a sense of compassion and humanity during the war's turmoil.

Deployment of Troops and Commanders

The invading Nepali Military troops were mainly divided into two groups to launch an attack from different sectors against Tibet. The first group of troops should mount an attack against Tibet on the Kerung sector led by General Bam Bahadur Rana. His deputy was Colonel Kanak Singh Khatri. This group included: the Rifle Company, the Gorakh Nath Company, the Shreenath Company, the Devi Dutta Company, the Ganesh Dal Company, the Bhairab Nath Company, the Purano Gorakh Company, the Singh Nath Company, the Ram Dal Company, the Raj Dal Company and the Durga Baks Company of Nepali Army (Manandhar & Rauthor, 2022).The second group of troops, led by General Dhir Shamsher Rana, with his deputy Khadga Bahadur Kunwar, was assigned to launch an attack against Tibet in the Kuti sector.. However, there is no record available of the Nepali regiments that participated in the Kuti sector.It is said that Jung Bahadur supervised the war affairs by himself.

War Strategies Adopted by the Nepali Army

Deployment of Forces in a Strategic Point

Apart from the invading routes, special care was taken to defend the strategic points in the east and the west, against the possible Tibetan attacks. The third group consisting of the Himaldhoj Company was tasked to lunch attack against Tibetan area from Olangchukgola axis (Manandhar

et al., 2069 BS). The fourth group of soldiers was led by General Krishna Dhoj was assigned to attack in Tibetan areas from Humla and Mustang sector.

Taking Advantage of an Unfavorable Situation of the Enemy Country

Panchen Lama had died just a year before in Tibet when Dalai Lama was still a minor. The clash between the regent of the Dalai Lama and the Kalons made the situation still worse, and under such a situation, Jang Bahadur was sure that Tibet would not be in a position to open hostilities with Nepal (Manandhar & Rauthor, 2022). The situation in Tibet and China was favorable to Nepal, the administration was threatened by the Taiping rebellion and Jang Bahadur was hopeful that the Chinese Emperor would not be able to provide military assistance to Tibet against Nepal.

Policy of Encirclement

This was a major achievement on the part of the Nepali Army because it paved the way for the army's advancement to Jhunga, without any difficulty, which led to the encirclement of the Jhunga fort within a few days. Heavy fighting took place between the Nepali and Tibetan troops. The number of Tibetan troops was about 6000, who were defending the Jhunga fort. It was very difficult for the Nepali force to defeat the Tibetans inside the fort of Jhunga, but it was equally difficult for the Tibetans to drive the Nepali troops back. The fighting continued for nine days, and at last, the Tibetans could not resist the Nepali attack and were compelled to leave the fort, and they fled away to Tingri Maidan. Some 1000 Tibetans were taken as prisoners. There was a heavy loss on both sides. More than 1,700 Tibetan soldiers lost their lives, and on the Nepal side too the number of killed and wounded exceeded five hundred. Still, it was considered a major victory for Nepal, which boosted Nepali troops' morale to a maximum extent. When Jang Bahadur was told the news of this victory, he was overjoyed and reached Jhunga to greet his army.

Immediate Attack

On the contrary, the Nepali Army sent under Jagat Shamsher fought with the Tibetan forces at Gunta Garhi. The fort was under the protection of about 6500 well-armed Tibetans. The battle lasted for two days. The attack on Gunta Garhi was most difficult, as it was situated at the top of the hill. But it was extremely necessary to make an immediate attack on the fort because it would be very difficult to resist the attack made by the Tibetans from the top of the hill.

The Policy of Attacking from Multiple Axis

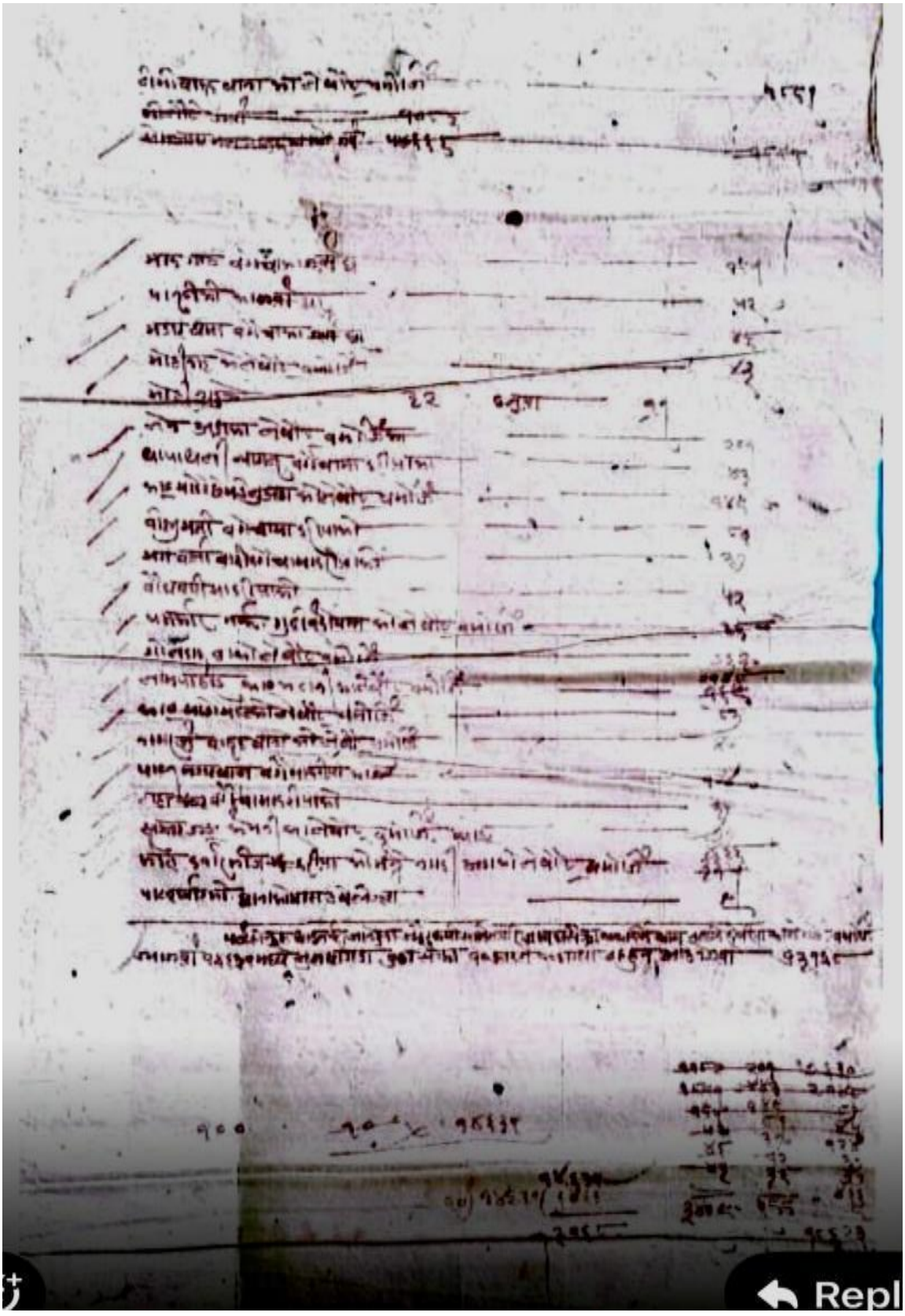
Despite the unfavorable climate, the Nepali force attacked the Tibetan force, climbing the hill to reach the fort. In the heavy fighting, though it lasted only for a few hours, both parties suffered a heavy loss. Padma Jang mentions that Nepal lost 232 soldiers with forty officers, but the Tibetans' loss was relatively low, about half of Nepal's loss. The fighting continued the next day. This time, the Tibetans made a sudden attack from the fort, but it was successfully resisted, and the Nepali forces drove them back. Thereafter, Jagat Shamsher divided his troops into two sections and attacked the Tibetan force from both sides. The Nepali commander's plan steadily succeeded. Apart from defeating the Tibetan soldiers, the Nepali Army could imprison about 600 of them, and the fort came under their control.

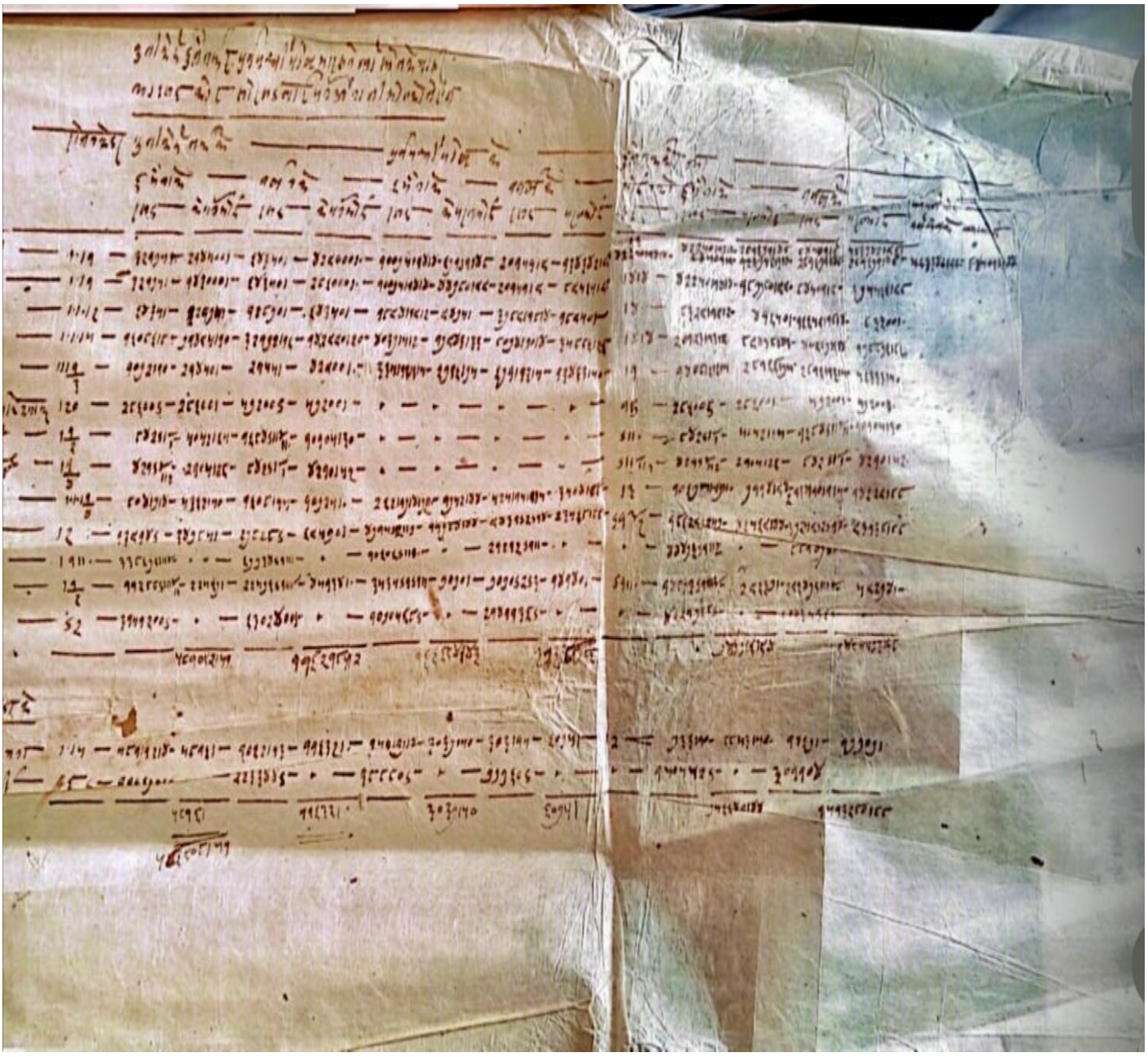
Conclusion

The Nepal-Tibet War of 1855-56 illustrates the critical role that operational and logistical preparation plays in military success, particularly in challenging environments like the Himalayan mountains. The conflict underscores how strategic planning, combined with effective logistical management, can mitigate the natural obstacles posed by geography and climate. Nepal’s success in the war was due in large part to the efficient mobilization of troops, the effective management of supplies, and the tactical flexibility of its forces. The war also provides important insights into the complexities of warfare in high-altitude regions, where terrain, logistics, and environmental factors are as influential as the military strategy itself. The lessons learned from Nepal’s operational and logistical preparation during the 1855-56 conflict remain relevant to military strategists and logisticians dealing with similar challenges today.

Appendix-1

Various Places of Production and Storage of Explosives.

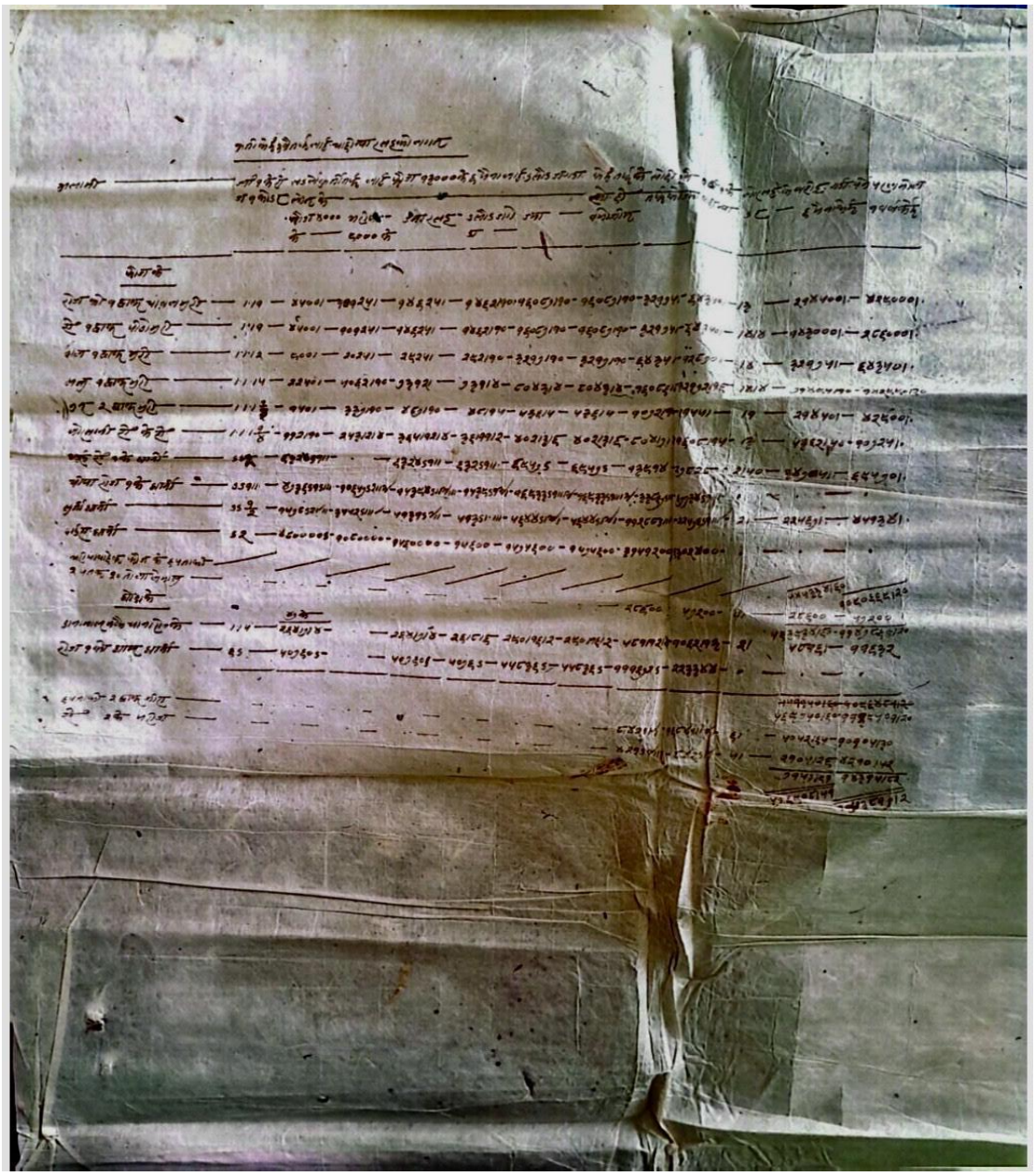




Source: Nepali Army Headquarters, Archive Section. Part 3, No. 5.

Appendix-2

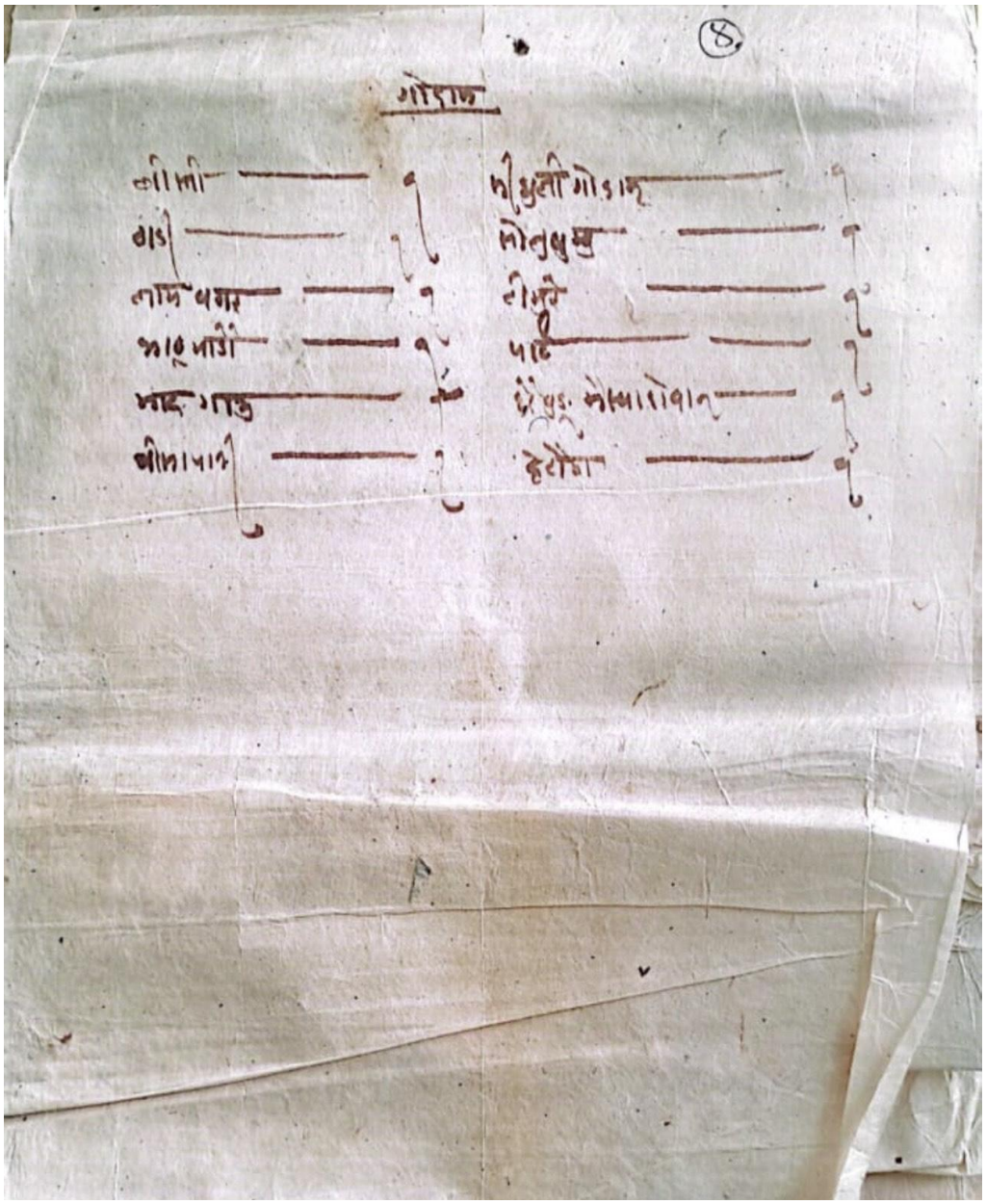
Arrangement of Ration for Soldiers and Mules.



Source: Nepali Army Headquarters, Archive Section. Part 3, No. 5.

Appendix-3

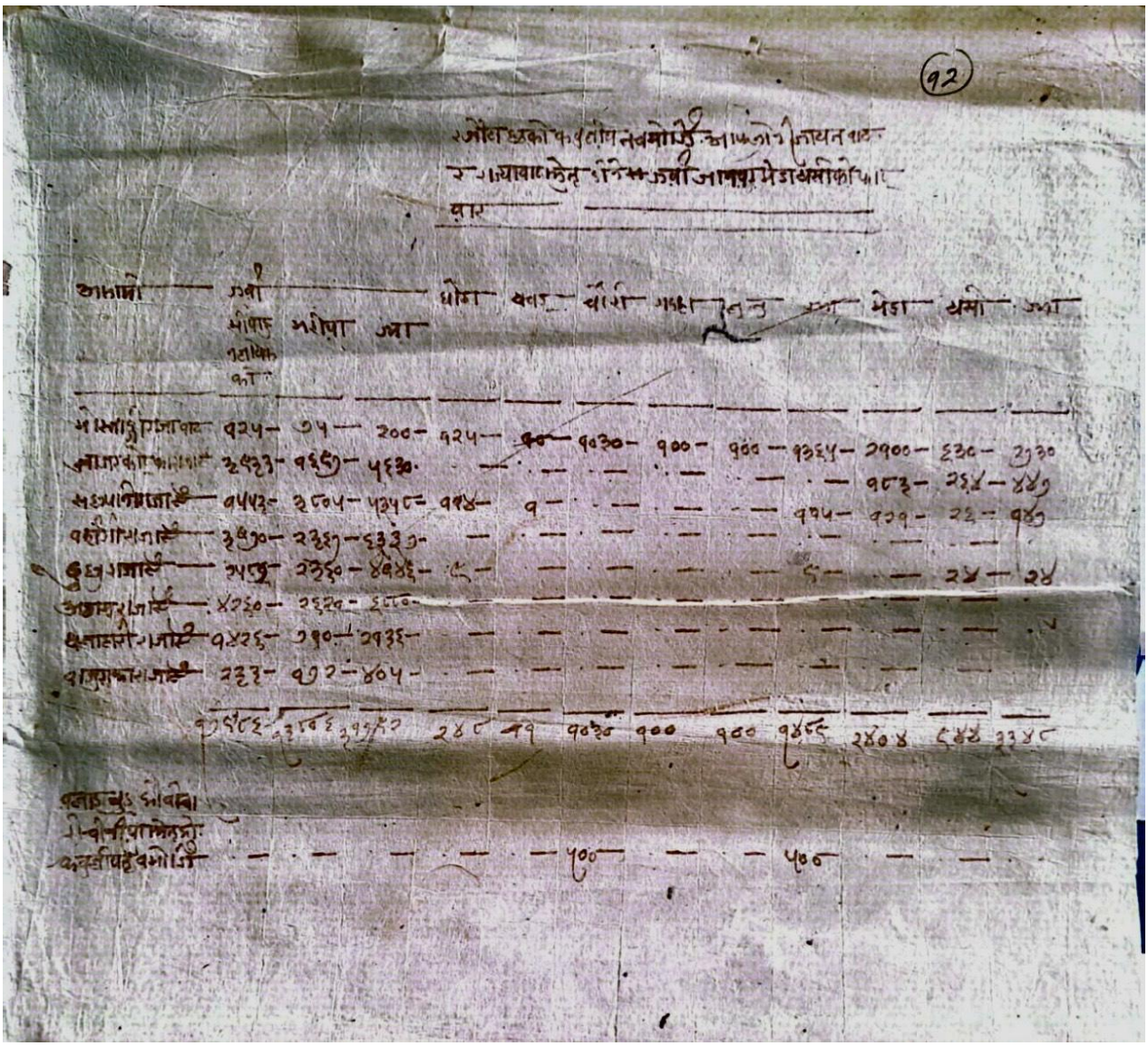
The Location of Warehouses Built for the Storage of Supplies.

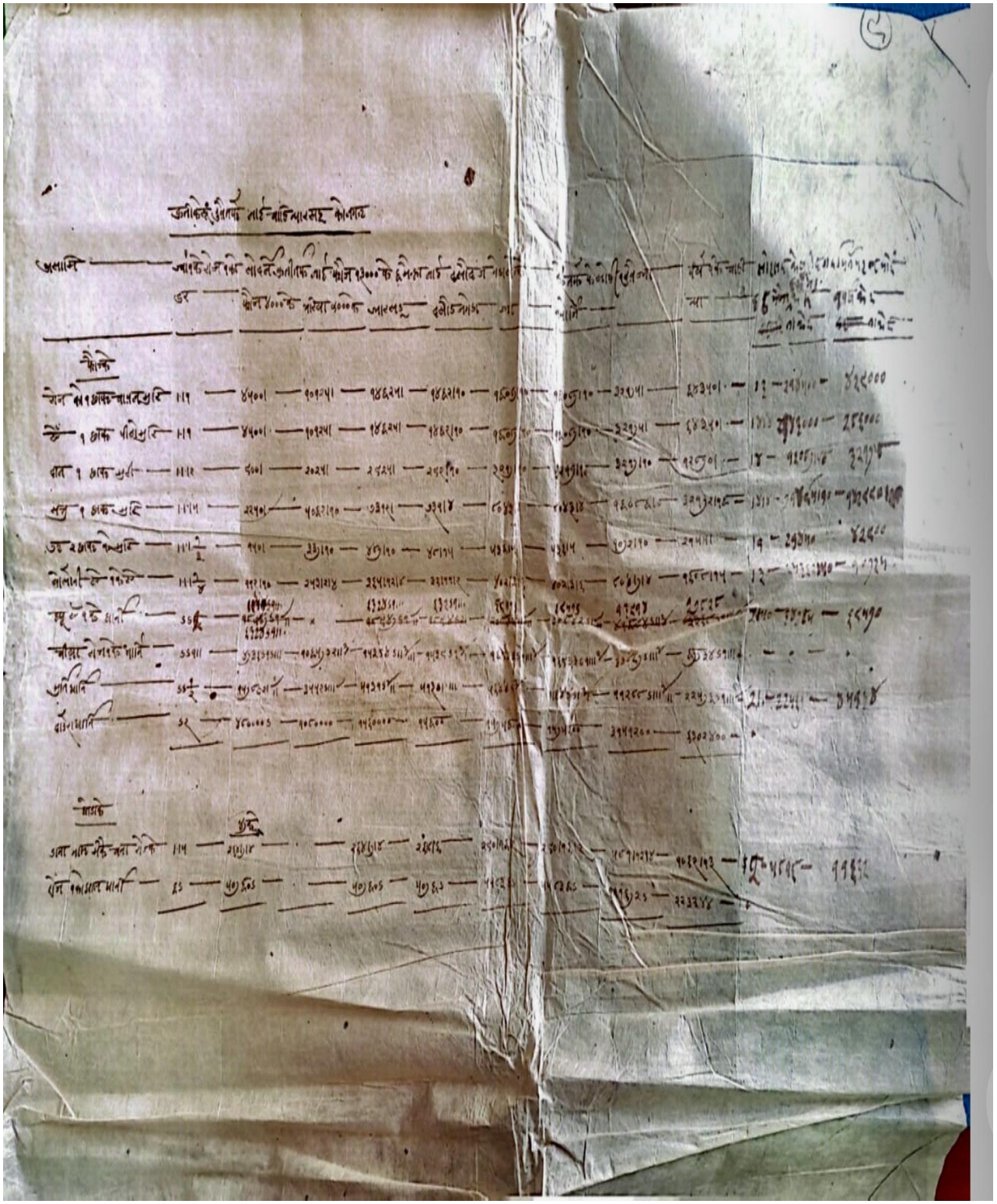


Source: Nepali Army Headquarters, Archive Section. Part 3, No. 5.

Appendix-4

Support Received from Former Rulers for the War





Source: Nepali Army Headquarters, Archive Section. Part 3, No. 5.

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