

Construction of *Lahure* Culture in Nepali Literature

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Abstract

The Gurkha and lahure with identical sense has gained their name and fame in western discourse. After the Anglo-Gorkha war fought in 1814-16 A. D., the hill-people of Nepal joined in British and Indian army forces and were referred to as 'Gorkhas' or 'Goorkhali' or 'lahure'. The British rulers referred to them as 'Gurkhas' and British construction of lahure culture brought a division between lahure and non-lahure in Nepali society. It reveals that the practice of Gurkha as a product of western imperialism is still in use. The orientalist martial discourse dominates the historiography of Gurkhas. This article uses Lionel Caplan's theory that deals with the Gurkhas in the context of the western military imagination. The recruitment in military force accepted the Gurkha culture and turned their mythological character into reality to a considerable increase in Gurkha recruitment. The fact that Nepali writers and singers raised the different voices to accept and oppose the reality of lahure culture.

Keywords: *Gorkha, lahure, culture, oriental, literature, conventional, anti-sentimental*

Introduction

The word '*Lahure*' implies the people with gallant essence and unadulterated military habits to defend the nation-state. The words the '*Gurkha*' '*Gorkhali*' and '*Lahure*' give identical sense and signify the warlike qualities as the chivalrous traditions handed down to them is imbued with and cherishes the military spirit. In this article, the texts taken from "*Aamale Sodhlin ni...*" (Mother may Ask) a song by Jhalak Man Gandharva, "*Aage aage topaiko gola...*" a duet song by Danny Denzongpa and Asha Bhosle, "*Titara, Battai, Bhakku ko Rango ka Shantna haru patri...*" (To the Children of Quails, Partridges and Sacrificial Buffalo) a poem by Bhupi Sherchan and "*Babale Bhanthe ni...*" (Father used to Say) a song by Manjua. In addition, the story "*Sipahi*" by Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala and *Sirishko Phul* a novel by Parijat explore the British and Nepali military narratives to link with the specific historical and social context of construction of *Lahure* culture. Nepali literary writings like novels, short stories, poems and songs represent the hardship, separation and suffering of *lahures* and their family.

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The *lahures* represent the repercussion of Nepali youths, though the country Nepal has never remained as a colonial part of any powerful nation-state, after the Sugauli treaty East India government used Nepal as a remote-controlled country. The *lahure* inspired the British officers to carry out their battle strategy during the Anglo-Nepal battle (1814–1816). It gave the British Empire permission to enlist Nepalese soldiers, even those who were already held captive by the colonial army. Raffi Gregorian views, "military strategy in the Far East clearly shows that it was the period and place in which Britain's global strategy was tested, adjusted, and proven correct" (1). As identified as a martial race, Kaushik Roy similarly describes further a "genuine Gorkha" as:

...high cheek bones, broad Tartar features, small elongated eyes, and the absence of whisker or moustache, with the exception of a few straggling hairs on the upper lip. As a race, they are considerably below the average height of the natives of Hindustan, broad-chested bull-necked, with muscle of the thigh and leg so greatly developed as in some instances to appear unnatural (1317).

The first story "Ratan Singh Gurung *ko* outpost *ko* katha" (The Tale of Rana Singh Gurung at the Outpost) on Nepali *lahure* culture serving to other country had appeared in 1914 in Banaras. Similarly, Yog Bikram Jung Rana composed his ideas in "*Vajiristhanko Yatra*" (Travel of Vajiristhanko) published in 1918 is about the story of two Gorkha platoons working in Bombay, India. The story "Sipahi" (Soldier) by B. P. Koirala published in 1938 is about complete freedom and Koirala writes, "I've there for a long time, I've a wife, and she's sickly and good for nothing... I really hope that I would educate my little child. ... Wherever you go you should have what you want" (95).

Nepali *lahures* fought in different battlegrounds and proved their magnanimous power to control the enemies. Most of the time, they fought for British imperial nation-state, and served for Indian political powers. From outsiders' views, the texts composed in Nepali literature on *Lahure* glorify the history of Nepali youths who safeguarded the sovereignty of others' countries. Similarly, if we observe the sentiment of the family members from insiders' views, it is beyond the sense of nationalism, fraternity and humanity. If we borrow the ideas of Lione Caplan, who remarks, "...particular mode of orientalist discourse" (571), and Edward Said views on Orientalism as "a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient" (11). In E. D. Smith's words, Nepali youths from indigenous community were inspired with the saying, "Better to die than be a coward" (175) and Caplan observes that this account of *lahure* image has emphasized the banal perception of Gorkha people portraying their "toughness, strength, ferocity, courage and bravery" (585). Caplan further expands, "All 'militaria' and regimental histories are full of the fierce fighting qualities of the Gurkhas. They perform miraculous feats of daring. They fear no one, while their opponents are terrified of them. When they heard the war-cry '*Ayo Gurkhali*' the Japanese and Germans froze with fear" (585).

Caplan argues that the undercurrent of superiority of the Western writers have shown the relations with the Gurkha warriors as an integral facet of the transcendental ideology of nation and empire-building of the British power that creates discourse of *Lahure* culture in which he argues, "If orientalism means speaking for, producing authoritative knowledge about others, then these representations of the Gurkha are clearly part of an orientalist genre... and qualifies as orientalist" (594). Clifford Geertz (1973) argues that the aim of knowledge about constructing anything in society links to the meaning of local behaviour to reflect actions and attitudes consists of the structure of significance, frame of social interpretation and publicly established structures of meaning of anything. In this sense, he further states, the culture constructs their lives to live in the society.

J. Pemble views that the British narrative of the Gurkha soldiers depict, "the war like qualities of their forefathers...and is imbued with and cherishes the military spirit" (65). The recruitment of Nepali people in foreign army in a regular scale started after Anglo-Nepal war (1814-1816 A. D.), and C. Bellamy viewed that the British Government began to recruit the Nepali citizens as "*Gurkha*" (14) "for fighting not writing" (Gould 4) portrays the true image of the Gurkhas. Caplan is the prominent academic intellectual drew the bravery of Gurkhas into the Oriental discourse, and other scholars have discussed it from the same ground in their works. John Pemble (2009), Bidhan Golay (2006) and Ravina Aggarwal (1996) have reinterpreted the reputation of Gurkhas' bravery in their writings. Gurkhas indeed fought, not for the protection of their native land, in foreign land which constructed *Lahure* culture in Nepali society, and by and large it exercised personal domination of British rulers over the subjects of the discourse as Said argues, "...in each of these cases the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks" (48).

***Lahure* in Nepali Literature**

In response to the orientalist narrative, the *lahure* discourse still dominates the historiography of *Gurkhas*. Caplan (1995) has presented the theory that the Gurkha "only exists in the context of the western military imagination" (158). In the same ground, Parijat in her fiction *Shirish ko Phul (Blue Mimosa)* published in 1964 A. D. describes a life of *lahure* in foreign land. Suyog Bir Singh, a retired Gorkha soldier retells the story of battlefield. A female character Bari viewed war as a crime as many innocent people are killed in the battlefield. Suyog Bir accepts her saying and further says, "War is a crime, Shiva. The war we fought on somebody's command is a crime, one person has to perpetrate against another, a crime which every fighter should have to write on his forehead. The crime cannot be observed from outside" (25).

Pemble, an anthropologist, views that the tale of Britain's relationship with the "model soldiers and spiritual kin" of Nepal, linked to "mutual affection and esteem", is like a myth "what the British had discovered were pastoral, adaptable mountain peasants . . . driven by poverty and oppression to collaborate with British imperialism and mimic

its culture" (373-74). Hence, the death of soldiers throughout the human history has been unquestionable. Suyogbir's ideas are less public and more personal. Seeberg views the same as in the following ways, "[Suyogbir was] sexually and emotionally molested three Burmese women during world war campaign II in Burma. ... the novel depicts the Gurkhas' participation in the war on behalf of British as meaningless, but it also points to the general feeling of meaninglessness and alienation that he experiences" (63).

It is clearly documented that in the annals of British military history how the fighting prowess of the Gorkhas for many decades supported the many British expansionary efforts around the world and advanced its politico-diplomatic and military goals. Gorkhas have participated in more conflicts for the British than for themselves over the past two centuries, both on the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere in the world. Suyogbir, the main character, nevertheless, has lost all faith in humanity. The *lahure* feels isolation in the warring region which makes his sense vulnerable. For the sovereignty of the country, it is a part of special kind of death, the death is meaningless in another's country. As long as the countries struggle for power, they get involved for organized warfare as in the islands of Falklands. The fighters might have hope of victory and dreams of new life after war that gives a sense of life. Mosse "The common soldier was no longer thought of as a paid mercenary, and the idea of forced conscription was replaced by the image of more or less voluntary, highly patriotic men" (223).

In common understanding, the literary writings including poetry, lyrics, stories, dramas, etc. talk about humanity and political consciousness. We get pleasure from the experiences of writers and singers. Lyrical poetry brings the invisible feeling into reality. Unlike this, the pieces of writings about war have created human sentiment against war for other's sovereignty. Blacking opines "Because Music is humanly organized sound, it expresses aspects of the experience of individuals in society" (89).

Parijat talks about emotion and feeling that engage us with the on-going society and we think and care about life. She believes literature especially poetry is the most important part of society. Hutt (2007) writes that her famous poem "A Sick Lover's Letter to her Soldier" is about moral despair. In his observation, the poem contains, "Love does not die, you have to kill." The returning soldier is not certain and she says the 'love is a mirage'. It is like a longing to get something, but she is not getting anything as her lover is in the battlefield. The traditional belief of love, support and cooperation between two lovers is mutilated in the absence of the lover who is in the war trench. She concludes as in this way:

Life companion, much, much love,

I feel I might send you a heart,

I feel I might send you a love letter,

...

Love,
 love is a mirage,
 love is the greed of a goose,
 love is a lifeless truth, (Trans. by Hutt, 1-21)

Parijat in the above lines talks about the value of love in individual life. It becomes like a lifeless truth if the *Lahure* fail to understand the essence of love in life.

Sipahi (The Soldier) is a short story by Koirala describes an encounter between a student and a *lahuré*. The student at first has a fear due to the confident and powerful nature of the man, "I remembered the many things I had heard about the rough, cruel nature of military men" (197). This story reflects that the *lahuré* has no loyalty to anything and the soldier is devious and self-centred in Nepali village. Carter and McRae have observed the war was for liberal culture, "Poetry was written in order to express the sense of honour and to celebrate the glories of war" (331). However, the poetry on *Lahure* culture has created problems in Nepali context. In line with this, the following lines are from the poem of Agam Singh Giri. In his text –*Giri ko Bhavabhumi: Yuddha ra Yoddha*, he talks about moral aspect of love. War creates unfavourable situation in the society. It reflects the desolate reality of hot mud, blood, and dead bodies. If we talk about hot mud, blood, and dead bodies, they will definitely collapse the society. His quest of dreaming moments looks at the life of people as gloomy, nihilistic and meaningless. People who have experienced war and living with the memories of war always feel alienation and alone in the society. All the solid and significant things have gone away. The poet made the war the evil side of the society as in this ways:

Do not tinge the dreaming moments,
 Do not adorn the sacred memories
 Of the pure Himalaya's steep slopes
 With hot mud and blood
 Shed in vengeance and murder,
 With the stink of dead bodies.
 Your memories are bloody, polluted. (cited. By Hutt 2012, 21)

Bhupi Sherchan, a Nepali modern poet, who frequently opposed the recruitment of young Nepali youths into the Indian and British armies, delivers his views in a poem entitled "To the Children of Quails, Partridges and Sacrificial Buffalo" as:

Those who died
 in a German assault,
 in the siege of Burma,
 in a Malaya robber forest,
 in others' wars in NEFA and Ladakh,
 died death without purpose,
 without meaning
 useless (Trans. by Hutt, 2010, 1-8)

Hutt describes the theme of poetry "To the Children of Partridges, Quails and Sacrificial Oxen" characterises the migrant soldiers as sacrificial animals. The poet protests against war that has desolated the life of common people. He denounces to reveal his rejection of war, and appeals Nepali youths not to fight for losing life which for nothing. He says Nepali youths are brave but foolish as they sacrifice their lives for nothingness. The poet in his next poem "Always always in my Dream" states his poetic thought as:

Always always in my dream,
 countless young mothers come before me
 and sing this song as if insane,
 now my milk is worthless,
 my motherhood has no meaning,
 then, making sure that I see them,
 they suckle what seem to be ugly,
 ...
 And every corpse has a look of hatred.
 Ah, in my dreams I am loathed
 by the history of waking hours. (Trans. by Hutt, 2010, 1-43)

He states if the *Lahure* intends to sacrifice his life for the sovereignty of another country, he must learn in time of peace to live for him and his country. Only to spend life for money ruins the life and that never brings happiness. Even the family love becomes meaningless for useless purpose. These lines from "To the Children of Quails, Partridges and Sacrificial Buffalo" and "Always always in my Dream" bring the fragility of human life and intend to be human as the poet is not for war in next land. He loathes war, killing in war that makes

impossible to avoid it and maintain peace. The focal point of war poetry is beyond the humanity and brotherhood. The unwanted suffering of *Lahure* is a mourning approach to understand the complexities of fighting in the battlefield.

Dahal writes, “Nepali youth (male) used to go to different countries like India, Britain, Brunai, Singapore and so on to work as soldiers. These people joining for the security forces are *lahure* in local term” (698). He writes about the different songs. A song sung by Jhalak Man Gandharba is famous in Nepali which depicts the pathetic picture of battleground. The song “*He Barai*” (cliché of the song) – includes the situation of battlefield and the fighter appeals his family members including his wife to accept the death as he is killed in the battlefield. In this song, the death of a soldier/son in the warfare is a proof that the family members have brought him up to be a valorous and patriotic person. For this, the mother should have the sense of the ideal of sacrifice. The Vedic literature deals with the common understanding of the sacrificial ritual of the ancient Hindus, and it has deeply influenced the modern youths and they tend to be joining in security forces for employment.

The next popular song “Intu and Mintu are in London”, it’s a Nepali rhyme for kids in which “*lahures* and migrant workers seriously assert the absurdity of working abroad, the place which so often squashes their dreams” (cited by Dahal 698). A popular progressive singer Jivan Sharma has sung a song “Fighting on Falklands” in order to deliver the negative connotation of war in the society. The Falklands War was a 10-week undeclared war between Argentina and the United Kingdom in 1982 where Nepalese national serving to England had fought against Argentina. The central protagonist in this lyric remembers the deceased fellows who lost the life for the sovereignty of others.

Riccardi has observed that “Modern Nepali literature has received very little attention from scholars in the West” (1). Golway quotes from Mozumdar, “Three battalions of Gurkha regiments were raised as early as 1815” (32); and Hutt quotes the same from *The Times* as, “The first Gurkha regiment was formed in 1815 because the British, sent on a punitive expedition against rampaging Nepalese tribesmen, found the enemy so difficult to beat” (11). Rathaur projects “Between 1767 and 1816, British interest in Nepal was to safeguard and foster the customary trade between Bengal and Tibet through Nepal” (19), and the Anglo – Gurkha war (1814 – 1816), and the Sugauli Treaty of Sugauli restricted the expansion of the military power of Nepal. Rathaur “The Gurkha under the British flag saw actions in Malaya, the Indonesian confrontation, troubles in Borneo and Brunei, the Cypriot War, Britain's War with Argentina in 1982 for the Falkland Islands and during the recent Iraq War” (23). Historian John Whelpton writes:

Negotiations for a general settlement produced a draft which was initialled at Sagauli in Bihar in December 1815 and required Nepal to give up all territories west and east of its present-day borders, to surrender the entire Tarai and to accept a permanent British representative (or 'resident') in Kathmandu. The Nepalese government initially balked at these terms, but agreed to ratify them in March 1816... (42)

Agam Singh Giri talks about self-identity and his ideological framework is constructed on the basis of land and people. “The process of Gorkha identity formation was the product of the cultural renaissance in Darjeeling” (42) and he has shaped his views on the ground of *Lahure* culture of Nepali people. The war itself is not good and pollutes the society. From the nationalistic views, it always encourages the people. Mohan Himsasu Thapa, Nepali poet believes the ‘brother *Lahure*’ brings poison and ‘noxious gas’ (28) in the society. *Lahures* in battlefield always struggle for humanitarian values and survival. The song *Aage aage topaiko gola* (cannon balls in front me) portrays ‘*lahures*’ and gloriously describes Nepali people serving as soldiers in foreign armies. At present, the perception on *lahure* culture is changed in Nepali society.

The fact that the *Gorkhas* are subjected to working conditions and their dreadful, crippling conditions demonstrate how thoroughly they are exploited and oppressed. They are destined to suffer. As a result, both individually and collectively, they have resisted both the British and Nepalese governments in the past and in the present.

Conclusion

Historically the *Gorkhas* came under the orientalist scrutiny of colonial humanist are still a topic for discussion. From this vantage point, the disciplinary boundaries of conventional methods of social inquiry appear to be skewing and stifling the academic debate on the issue of the *Gurkhas*' position as it emerges from without. In order to theorize the entire process of how and why Nepalese people join the British Army as well as their hierarchical position within it. The conventional way of thinking on *lahure* culture still exists in Nepali society and needs to be transformed. In order to understand how the *Gurkha* is portrayed in Nepali literature, Michael Hutt has researched how the *Gurkha* soldier is portrayed in Nepali literature. The renowned songs by Gandarbha, Manjul, and the authors Giri, Koirala, Parijat, and Sherchan all depict a meeting between home and *lahuré* culture. The soldier in Koirala's story feels a sense of civic pride. Despite leading a privileged life, his idea does not necessarily reflect the voices of Nepali people.

Parijat's *Shirish Ko Phul* (The Blue Mimosa), and the poem "A Sick Lover's Letter to her Soldier" deal with the post-traumatic stress disorder. A woman named Sakambari, whom the *lahure* meets in a pub in Kathmandu and captures the man's interest. Earlier in the story, the veteran's favourite subject astounded him with a scathing critique. In a poem she asserts the anti-sentimental message about human life. Sherchan develops the negative perspective about *Gorkha* recruitment in foreign military. Similarly, the songs of Gandharba, Denzongpa, and Bhosle represent the social reality of Nepali society. Their song *Aage aage topaiko gola* (cannon balls in front me) portrays ‘*lahures*’ positively and the essence of it is fundamentally changed in Nepali society. It shows that how *Gorkhas* are portrayed in Nepali literature. Their discursive images, stereotypes and identities reflected in Nepali society are in the process of gradual change.

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