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## **A Military Assessment of Prithvi Narayan Shah's Strategy and Operational Approaches in the Conquest of the Kathmandu Valley**

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### **Abstract**

King Prithvi Narayan Shah of the Gorkha Kingdom pursued the unification of Nepal through a conscious integration of strategic vision, operational planning, and administrative foresight. He knew that success in warfare does not lie in mere numbers but in intelligence superiority, careful strategy, containment principles, tactical flexibility, and iron-fisted leadership. His campaigns epitomized the classical principles of Saam, Daam, Danda, and Bhed in a unified grand strategy that combines diplomacy, coercion, deception, and force. Notwithstanding Gorkha's relative inferiority in resources as compared to the Baisi, Chaubisi, Sen, and Malla states, Shah turned it into the driving force of unification through systematic policies, detailed campaign planning, and strong administrative structures. Military operations were integrated with intelligence gathering, logistic preparation, psychological pressure, and pre-emptive maneuvering, which provided the basis for operational continuity with minimum resistance. No less important was Shah's ability to generate loyalty and morale among soldiers and civilians in protracted campaigns. This paper examines the strategic, operational, and administrative dimensions of Shah's conquest of the Kathmandu Valley, demonstrating how disciplined leadership, integrated planning, and coordinated use of multiple instruments of power enabled a small state to achieve decisive victories and lay the foundation for a unified Nepal. This paper is qualitative in nature and is based on descriptive and analytical methods of study, focusing mainly on secondary sources of data.

### **Keywords**

Blockade, Conquest, Logistics, Policy, Strategy, unification

## **Introduction**

The founder of modern Nepal, King Prithvi Narayan Shah, proved himself an exceptional military leader and military strategist in his battles fought against other princely states and foreign invaders. His bravery in battles, military maneuvers, and the efficient command and control exercised by him proved him an excellent military leader. King Prithvi Shah also lived an ideal life in terms of receiving an excellent educational upbringing since very early in life as a military strategist and in military science. He was born on 11 January 1723, the eldest son of King Nara Bhupal Shah and Queen Kaushalyavati Devi of the Shah dynasty in Gorkha Palace. His early education and character formation were overseen by his stepmother, Queen Chandraprabhavati, who taught him religious texts such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as well as diplomacy and politics (Sharma, 1949 B.S.). From a young age he showed intelligence and courage, and he received training in horse riding, archery, and swordsmanship, preparing him for future military leadership.

In addition, he also learned Arthashastra and Shukra Niti-Political realism. Prior to launching the attack, he sent out reconnaissance teams, which gathered important feedback on aspects such as terrain, politics, timing, and tactics. Shah's emphasis on key areas is clearly demonstrated in the successful attacks of Nuwakot and Makwanpur. Nuwakot gave Shah a strategic advantage due to its elevated northwest location, which gave a clear view of the area. Conversely, the location of Makwanpur provided Shah with an advantage in the southern area, which he exploited by effectively blocking off the Valley of Kathmandu. Shah collected crucial information by sending emissaries to spend a longer period in Bhaktapur. Similarly, he utilized individuals in Kantipur. Diversion attacks in Nuwakot, Kirtipur, and Kantipur, which included the main and auxiliary attacks, happened simultaneously. Thus, Shah's incorporation of a policy of containment, planning, executing, and administering a war was a clear manifestation of Shah's expansive military strategies. Thus, Shah's unification of the Kathmandu valley was a clear manifestation of a successful war. This paper raises relevant questions to explain the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley from a military perspective.

## **Research Methodology and Materials**

The methods used by this particular study for assessing its subject include descriptive methods and analysis. The significance of the events will then be assessed based on their tactical, operative, and strategic aspects. The information for this paper will be obtained from secondary sources to a larger extent. The secondary sources include scholarly

published books, peer-reviewed journals, chronicles of events, military records and other relevant material. The sources will include both Nepali and English writings. The sources will include Bikram Sambat (B.S.) dating for Nepali publications but will exclude A.D. dating for Gregorian publications. The specific question for undertaking this particular research lies in understanding what specific strategic operators led to the success of Prithvi Narayan Shah in Kathmandu Valley.

### **Review of Literature**

A literature review collects and summarizes information from previous research on a topic. It critically analyzes this information to find patterns, trends, and gaps in current knowledge. A systematic search was conducted to identify relevant literature, including books and journal articles. Although many sources are used in this article, only a few are reviewed here as examples.

Hamilton, F. B. (1819). *An account of the kingdom of Nepal*. Archibald Constable.

This book provides one of the earliest Western perspectives on Nepal's unification under the Gorkhali rulers. He outlines how multiple small kingdoms were brought together into a single state, highlighting the effective military leadership of Prithvi Narayan Shah. Hamilton also emphasizes Nepal's strategic location amidst neighboring powers such as Tibet, Bhutan, and British India, which shaped the unification process through both conflict and diplomacy.

Shrestha, D. (Ed.). (2019). *Bhaktapur ma Gorkhali Hamala* [Gorkhali attack on Bhaktapur] (In memory of Garud Narayan Gongal). Jagadamba Prakashan. (Original work published 1826 B.S.).

This book is a critical historical account based on the eyewitness notes of Garud Narayan Gongal, who observed the Gorkhali army's attack on Bhaktapur during Nepal's unification campaign. Edited by Devichandra Shrestha, the book provides detailed descriptions of military strategies, including the use of elevated positions and siege tactics which are particularly valuable for understanding how the Gorkhali forces navigated and overcame the fortified palace defenses. This source is useful for research on military strategy, historical conflict in the Kathmandu Valley, and the broader context of Nepal's political unification.

Thapa, B. (2076 B.S.). Prithvi Narayan Shahko sainik tatha yuddha rananeeti [Military strategy of Prithvi Narayan Shah]. *Sipahi*, 52(53), 47-54. Sainik Suchana tatha Janasamparka Nirdeshanalaya, Jangi Adda.

This article analyzes the military strategies and tactics used by Prithvi Narayan Shah during Nepal's unification. The article highlights his calculated use of guerrilla tactics, surprise attacks, blockades, espionage, and manipulation of enemy alliances to gain military advantage. While the piece offers valuable insights into Shah's strategic mindset, it focuses solely on his period and omits policies from later phases of unification and other major wars. Additionally, it lacks detail on wartime logistics gaps this research aims to explore more comprehensively.

### **Exploiting Unusual Circumstances**

Most notably, the Gorkhali forces would frequently take advantage of unusual timing, for example, by conducting attacks during festivals or at night. For example, during the invasion of Lutikot, the Gorkhali forces launched an attack at night, after which they had a decisive victory (Yogi, 2021 B.S.). Other nighttime attacks were also launched. Kirtipur and Kantipur were seized by the Gorkhalis during the night, and so the public became informed the next morning that they were under the jurisdiction of the Gorkhali king.

Likewise, Prithvi Narayan Shah used another opportunity at a festival to his advantage. Speaking of this, it is recorded: On Indra jatra day at Kantipur, in the year 1768, Shah himself started a fight while all were completely occupied by the celebrations, and all Malla soldiers were in a drunken state. Shah's army got a chance to win this battle with little or relatively less resistance by attacking at this critical time. (Samshodhan Mandal, n.d.). From this discussion, it may be understood that Prithvi Narayan Shah employed various opportunities to his advantage to ensure his military success.

### **Espionage and Intelligence Gathering**

In his drive towards unification, Prithvi Narayan Shah utilized his army as well as an impressive intelligence gathering and espionage organization to keep tabs on the activities of his rivals' kingdom. He took considerable steps to solidify his intelligence gathering operations by employing spies to monitor the activities of the Chaubisi countries as well as the Malla countries. After conquering Nuwakot, Shah enlisted Parashuram Thapa, brother to Kashiram Thapa, on Gorkhalis' side. Parashuram, on his part, sought to stir up rebellion while dispatching his brother to fight Gorkhalis. This threat was halted when Shah, disguised as Jhagal, eliminated Parashuram alone while fighting for Gorkhalis an act that saved Gorkhalis from Parashuram's treachery (Acharya, 2025 B.S.). In one case, when Captain Kinloch was moving to Sindhuli Gadhi, Shah

stationed professional spies on all important passes from Janakpur to Sindhuli, who also ensured that resources did not fall into the hands of foes.

Furthermore, Shah used diplomatic teams for espionage purposes. Important individuals, including Tularam Pande, would be deputed to Kantipur for data collection and, to some extent, would try to convince officials to turn against the king, Jayaprakash Malla. These efforts proved to be extremely important for strategizing further moves and invasions, with Gorkhalis making sure to rely on precise information gathered from espionage teams for successful invasions (Vaidya, 1973). Moreover, the main idea behind Prithvi Narayan Shah's creation of a special buddy (meet) relation with both the crown prince of Bhaktapur, Bir Nar Singh, and Jayaprakash Malla, king of Kantipur, was for an overthrowing mission.

### **Management of Arms and Ammunition**

Prithvi Narayan Shah had stressed the need for well-armed soldiers since the initiation of the unification campaign. The fact that the Gorkhas were beaten twice by Nuwakot forces signaled a severe shortage of arms among the Gorkhalis. This had been seen as one of the main causes of their failure. His attending personally at Banaras for buying firearms and gunpowder shows great foresight and strategic thinking (Acharya, 2022 B.S.). His initiation of firearms into the Nepalese army dates back to 1744. His victory had also been ascribed to the skillful employment of firearms (Hamilton, 1971). The Gorkhalis had also been seen employing explosives during some of their battles, including the invasion of Nuwakot fort (Bajracharya & Shrestha, 2037 B.S.).

### **Incentivized Recruitment of Enemy Soldiers and Local People**

In his process of unifying Nepal, Prithvi Narayan Shah made use of a strategy of incentivized recruitment by earning and assimilating the enemies into his forces through the provision of opportunities and encouragements, which resulted in the defection into his side. By this approach, his power was not only enlarged by this increase of manpower, so were his fighting capabilities expanded. Furthermore, Prithvi Narayan Shah wrote a letter to request Parashuram Thapa, brother of Kashiram Thapa, into Gorkha kingdom by promising the safety of his life and property and giving him opportunities to be granted pieces of rent-yielding lands (Tiwari, 2021 B.S.). Jayanta Rana, a military commander of Jayaprakash Malla, was also written a letter requesting his entry into his kingdom, though this one turned out to be reluctant to assimilate into Gorkha state.

## **Mobilization of Local Resources and Securing Popular Support**

In the campaign of unifying Nepal, Prithvi Narayan Shah depended largely upon the support and assistance of the citizenry. Every family had to contribute one soldier towards creating an army for him. The supplies, food, clothes, medication, and other necessary items were also sourced. Furthermore, the Mahajans of every caste, including traders and financiers, provided their financial support as well (Parajuli, 2020 B.S.). The logistic support for water management and supplies around the Trishuli river included the coordination and support of leaders such as Kalyan Rimal of Firkyap (Acharya, 2024 B.S.). Apart from the elites, Shah also encouraged individual members of society to contribute as they were capable. The ones who were not capable of offering soldiers contributed money, while the poor contributed food items (Regmi, 2007). This collective effort gave the Gorkhalis unity, high morale, and a common goal. By effectively mobilizing manpower, resources, and public support, Shah was able to turn a small state into a most disciplined and motivated force, capable of defeating larger and better-equipped adversaries and laying the bases for unified Nepal.

## **Policy of Saam, Daam, Danda, Bhed (Appeasement, Incentives, Coercion, and Division)**

Prithvi Narayan Shah applied the classical strategic doctrine of Saam, Daam, Danda, Bhed skillfully to bring enemy commanders and influential figures under Gorkha control. As has already been noted, he sought to strengthen Gorkha's position by inviting Parashuram Thapa into Gorkha service and cultivating support from Sworupsingh of Khotang, the mother of King Jayaprakash Malla, Harinandan Pokhrel and others. Similarly, he corresponded with officials in league with Kantipur; cultivating political loyalty, he expressed personal allegiance by addressing them as "my foreign allies" (Bajracharya & Nepal, 2014 B.S.).

These actions demonstrated Shah's systematized process of neutralization or co-option of the key enemy leaders before direct engagement, which was to weaken adversary cohesion and morale. While appeasement, strategic incentives, selective coercion, and targeted diplomacy have formed a core part of all operational capabilities, resistance from adversaries will be minimal.

## **Determining Auspicious Timing (*Saait*)**

Presently, the operation commander decides the date, day, and precise timing of an attack or any military operations as H- Hour. Prithvi Narayan Shah would seek astrologers' advice to finalize a Saait (auspicious time) before he launched the attack

against any selected enemy targets. However, despite caution from the royal astrologer, Kulananda Dhakal, and high-ranking advisors like Kaji Bansharaj Pandey and Haribansh Upadhyay that the timing was inauspicious, he made the attack in Kirtipur. However, Daljit Shah and Shreeharsha Pant favored the attack, and the astrologer Balkrishna Joshi agreed to finalize the required auspicious time. Once the saait (auspicious time) was fixed, the soldiers then moved into the battlefield with musical instrument's sound, while the regimental battle standard (nishan) was taken upfront in the formation. Before the king or the high ranking commanders moved into the combat zone, women used to perform ritual send-offs showering with flowers, akshata, sacred rice, dubo, grass, jamara, and curd symbols meant to shower the blessings and ensure success. After offering prayer to the deities, and consecrating the military standard, they moved forward, beating traditional drums and music. The above rituals enhanced the confidence, mutual bonding, and combat potency of the Gorkhali warriors that helped them win battles again and again.

### **Multi-Directional Attack**

The attacks on Nuwakot, Kirtipur, Kantipur, and Bhaktapur were conducted in multidirectional fashion. When the Indra Jatra Festival was being celebrated in Kantipur, the Gorkhalis attacked in three directions along Bhimsensthan, Nardevi, and Tundikhel towards King's palace. Prithvi Narayan Shah led his army personally along Nardevi route, encouraging his soldiers with his own presence. After short but strong confrontation of forces, the Kantipur valley was captured by the Gorkhalis, with King Jayaprakash Malla fleeing his own kingdom in desperation. When the Gorkhalis attacked in the direction of Taleju Temple, they were repulsed with several soldiers getting killed or injured, with prominent one of them being Tularam Pandey, as recorded in "Pant & others, 2025 B.S." In exactly similar fashion, attacks were launched in every direction towards Kirtipur, and Bhaktapur was attacked in similar fashion from several directions, leading to victory itself. With attacks launched in multiple directions, the Gorkhalis got their enemies divided, unable to direct their strength in any one particular place, thereby guaranteeing success in war itself!

### **Economy of Effort**

Being one of the poorer states of the Chaubise states, a deliberate policy was followed by Prithvi Narayan Shah in unification, which was clearly aimed at incurring lower destruction and minimum casualties, both within his own ranks and among the adversary's forces. One of the most explicit examples of such a policy of minimum destruction is captured by the maxim 'Jai katak nagarnu, jhiki katak garnu' – do not attack

needlessly, but do engage in a defensive struggle if need be. As such, he generally chose not to engage in direct confrontation when the costs of such a confrontation in terms of possible loss of lives and destruction of settlements appeared too high. Instead, he relied on a series of strategic measures such as direct negotiation, diplomacy, and alliance building in order to achieve victory without having to go into an economically costly war scenario. Thus, by following such a policy of careful calculation, non-confrontation, and denial, Prithvi Narayan Shah managed to extend the unification of Nepal.

### **Economic Blockade**

One of the techniques used by King Prithvi Narayan Shah during Unification in Nepal was the blockade, which was critical in his bid to unify Nepal. Such blockades were also used in rivalries and other inter-state wars, especially by Kantipur, Patan, and Bhaktapur. Seizure of nearby regions and trade by King Shah was used to restrict movements into and out of Kantipur, Patan, and Bhaktapur, with the aim of creating scarcity in essential commodities so that trade activities could be undermined in regions within Nepal. The blockade was executed with such strictness that violators were executed, and to worsen matters, King Jaya Prakash Malla, who could not contain the situation in Kantipur, was forced to sell ornaments to keep his kingdom running (Vaidya & Mishra, 2042 B.S). Even efforts to smuggle salt into these regions, such as covering them in fake corpses to evade capture, were futile (Nepal, 2039 B.S).

Generally, during that time, trade was taking place by means of bartering. Patan or Lalitpur faced revolts because of the blockade and so its ministers requested Prithvi Narayan Shah to take over the throne. In Kantipur Kingdom, Jaya Prakash Malla debased the value of its silver coins in exchange with the Tibetans and had to spend the funds from Pashupatinath Temple in its place, hence the resentment from the citizens. Economic blockade by Shah proved an effective military strategy compared to Napoleon's failed economic war strategy.

### **Encirclement**

From among different military strategies that Prithvi Narayan Shah adopted, one of major emphasis was placed on using siege tactics in his military strategy. There are chances that instead of direct attacks on the forces of enemies, Prithvi Narayan Shah would opt more for encirclement tactics, i.e., kind of blockade of forces of enemies. Military history shows that whenever there are forces that are low on moral strength and determination, they would never succeed in war, irrespective of their strength and fortification of positions, as demonstrated in (Thapa, 2076 B.S.).

The application of siege in battles is obviously visible in the case of the third battle in Kirtipur, as the Gorkhali forces literally besieged the whole Kathmandu Valley by encircling it in order to hinder its progress as well as its supplies (Basnyat, 2053 B.S.). It is also very obvious that after failing to overcome the city in the first two frontal attacks by the Gorkhali forces, in which not only did the forces fail to win the battle but also suffered considerably in terms of lives lost, Prithvi Narayan Shah decided to besiege the whole town in order to eventually force it to surrender. Not only did the siege lead to the surrender of Kirtipur, but it also proved to be an important step in the encircling and eventually defeating the whole Kathmandu Valley. The idea behind siege is very clear, as it is intended to hinder the progress as well as the resources of the enemy in order to force them to surrender (Thapa, 2076 B.S.).

### **Use of subversion**

King Prithvi Narayan Shah proved to be a politically astute leader and thus emerged as an extremely successful statesman. Similar to Bismarck's approach in Germany, Prithvi Narayan Shah successfully created rivalries amongst the Valley kings and exploit the resultant tensions for the furtherance of his unification campaign (Basnyat, 2053 B.S.). Prithvi Narayan Shah also resorted to the political destabilization of the hostile states to weaken them before giving a frontal attack on that state. He issued certain secret letters addressed to high-ranking courtiers in the palace of King Jaya Prakash Malla. The contents of these letters were so designed that they created the impression among the people that those officials had a very close and secret relationship with Prithvi Narayan Shah and this created suspicion in the Kantipur court.

In some situations, he also wrote letters intended for the mother of King Jaya Prakash Malla. These letters, too, were so written that ultimately, they would be delivered to King Jaya Prakash Malla. The strategy worked, since because of these letters, out of sheer mistrust, 'King Jaya Prakash Mall punished some of his courtiers and put his own mother under house arrest (Vaidya, 1973). These types of maneuvers can also be described as Psychological Warfare wherein an opponent's solidarity is destroyed prior to military confrontation.

### **Intimidation and Coercion Against the Enemy**

After failing to capture Nuwakot during King Narabhupal Shah's reign when Gorkhali forces assaulted it, commander Jayanta Rana joined King Jaya Prakash Malla but was appointed military commander at Nuwakot. However, Jayanta Rana was not ready to join Prithvi Narayan Shah when Prithvi Narayan Shah asked him to return to

Gorkha. Prithvi Narayan Shah explained to him that having eaten the salt did not mean one was to betray him but to loyally stand by him. Prithvi Narayan Shah then punished Jayanta Rana after capturing Nuwakot for trying to defect to the other side. The aim of such an execution was to ensure that no Gorkhali soldier was to betray his duty to betray the other side. In society too, those who lacked dignity but abandoned their posts to betray people paid for their actions by having their hair removed from four corners among other punishments.

### **Holding / Seizing the High Ground and Position**

Clearly, the establishment of camps on dominating terrain at Naldum, Mahadevpokhari, Shivapuri, Dhahchok, and Kirtipur was tactically advantageous. During the Bhaktapur campaign, the forces also occupied high structures such as rooftops and multi-story buildings, thereby increasing observation and fire superiority and promoting operational success. After the Gorkhali forces entered Bhaktapur through the eastern and western gates of the city, the palace complex soon became a hostile battlefield. Because the Bhaktapur Palace had perimeter defensive walls with only a few restricted entry points, it was hard to execute an effective assault operation against it. To establish high-ground dominance, the Gorkhali troops occupied the rooftops of tall buildings located north of Hittichok, outside the outer periphery of the palace. From these upper firing positions, their lines-of-sight reached into the palace courtyards. Thereafter, the Gorkhali soldiers conducted direct fire against the Bhaktapur defenders inside the courtyards (Shrestha, 2076 B.S.). Thus, during the unification campaigns, the Gorkhali military always relied on the principle of securing and retaining high ground to achieve tactical and operational advantage over enemy forces.

### **Conclusion**

The unification of Nepal by Prithvi Narayan Shah illustrates an effective strategy of an integrated war with considerations for the psychological, economical, and political aspects of war, which is well described in the chapter dealing with the military affairs in the Divyopadesh text material. Among the strategies of warfare adopted by Prithvi Narayan Shah in the unification of Nepal was the strategy of siege warfare. Prithvi Narayan Shah soon realized the risks of frontal warfare following the unsuccessful attack on Kirtipur on 4 December 1757, which resulted in heavy Gorkhali casualties, including the death of Kaji Kalu Pandey. This led to Prithvi Narayan Shah delaying warfare for two consecutive years to focus on the economical siege strategy by breaking the political cohesion of the enemy.

In Kirtipur, encircling tactics were complemented by incentives and coercion leading to defection and surrender. Sanctions like maiming opponents contributed to internal discipline within his army while inspiring greater fear among opponents. In Lalitpur and Dolakha, other strategies resembled those used at Kirtipur in reliance upon mental pressure and minimal violence to resolve conflicts effectively. All these strategies portrayed Shah's goal of success. To complement this, Shah extensively used broad-based economic blockade strategies to restrict the enemy's access to basic amenities, which resulted in scarcity, inflation, and civil disturbance. Political subversion was yet another factor that sowed dissent among the enemy ranks by creating distrust between the kings and the courtiers. This series of actions and strategies illustrates a "holistic strategy" wherein force, strategy, deception, and coordination allowed the weaker Gorkhalis to unify the Kathmandu Valley with the help of military success factors like planning, psychological warfare, strategy, deception, and coordination.

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