

## Unification Trails and Heritage Tourism Potential in Nepal

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### Abstract

*By the end of the eighteenth and early twentieth century, Shah Kings of Nepal succeeded in bringing together several small kingdoms under the Gorkha rule. King Prithvi Narayan Shah and his successors—led Gorkhali troops fought wars and travelled through several routes and trails across the Trans–Himalayas to expand the vast geography from Gorkha to Tista River in the east and Kangra fort in the west. In this background, this paper examines the importance of the unification trails, the routes used by Gorkhali troops, to unify neighboring principalities that eventually developed into modern Nepal. The unification trails are less explored issues in Nepal. In recent years, they have become popular historical sites for trekkers, visitors, researchers and historians to explore how Gorkhali soldiers skillfully expanded the territory. This is a descriptive and exploratory study based on historical facts and secondary resources. This paper concludes that the unification trails have historical and contemporary relevance for research as well as tourism potential. As one of the crucial forces to revitalize these trails, Nepali Army has constantly engaged with local people, and thus, promoting tourism activities. It offers the local communities the pathways of connection, avenues for*

*development, basis for serving the daily livelihood and increase of income for the medium and small size entrepreneurs, workers, and other disadvantaged groups located along these trails.*

**Keywords:** Unification trail, heritage tourism, Nepal Army, tourism development, war memory

### Introduction

In recent years, there is a growing interest in preserving, revitalizing and maintaining historical trails and routes in many countries. Historical trails are valued due to their contributions to the establishment and development of modern nation-states and their integration. They are often considered the symbols of bravery with their unique identities as sovereign people and independent nations. Historical trails are also important aspects in terms of natural and cultural landscape of any country. Throughout the history, trails have been important aspects that have shaped human mobility patterns. In the past, new trails were either constructed or the rulers used existing trails for strategic purpose to expand, protect and defend territories and unite people. Trails are also used by people for a number of purposes, such as sports activities, self-renewal, relaxation, wildlife observation, cultural artifacts, and

scenic purposes (Godtman, Fredman and Wall-Reinius, 2017, p. 489). In contemporary societies trails and ancient pathways have often been viewed as important sites for research and educational purposes too.

Trails are often classified and managed according to the type of activity as used or by their geographical location. Moore and Ross (1998, p. 23) identified five categories of trails, traditional backcountry trails, recreational greenways (particularly located in urban areas), multiple-use recreation trails, rails-trails and water trails. Timothy and Boyd (2015, p. 18) have identified trails in multiple settings, national parks, rainforest walks, wilderness tracks and desert trails. The extend idea of natural trail that include wilderness tracks, ski and snowmobile trails, forest canopy walks, geology trails and long distance, multi-day trails. All trails in some way or the other reflect a cultural expression of some kind (Godtman, Fredman and Wall-Reinius, 2017, p. 489).

In Nepal, most of the historical trails spread across vast geography along the hills and mountains and plains. These trails have been built and maintained manually since generations. In recent years, these trails have received attention due to its historical importance as well as for promotion of tourist activities. The unification trails, particular focus of this study, utilizes secondary literature and published sources, media accounts, along with existing conceptual literature in Asian and European context to understand the importance of historical trails. It then deals with the wars and heritage trails in Nepal and the case of unification trail and its importance in tourism in Nepal. It also highlights the role of Nepali Army in constructing, revitalizing and maintaining those trails in promoting tourism, involvement of local communities

along those trails and uplifting their living standard.

### **Heritage Trails and Public Memory Making**

Public engagement with the wars has been expressed through a strong ‘memory culture’ which has burgeoned since the late 1980s and has been intensified by the passing of the ‘war generation’ in the late 2000s (Miles, 2017, p. 441). The disappearance of ‘true’ living memory – as in folk cultures – a constructed form of memory exists in ‘sites of memory’ such as places (archives, museums and memorials), concepts (commemorations and rituals) and objects (property, tests and symbols) (Nora, 1989, pp. 77-84). Countries have built cemeteries, memorials and fortifications that triggers for memory and it provide emotional focus through commemorative rituals. These sites in recent years have been important for tourism and pilgrimage and continue providing dynamic focus for ‘memory making’ (Iles, 2008, pp. 162-163, Winter, 2009, p. 609). Heritage routes and trails in contemporary period are quite useful in the development of tourism. It stimulates local economy, helps diverse visitors to spend money, which can contribute to the economic opportunities in the rural areas. In recent years there has been an enormous increase in the number of tourists in different routes catering for many different modes of travel, cars, bicycles and on foot.

In the European context, Germany has been active in commemorating the Centenary and with time people’s attitudes to the wars are changing. There are anecdotal evidences that highlight that increasing numbers of Germans have started to travel to the Western Front. This is reflected in the construction of ‘Remembrance Trails’ tailored to the German war narrative. The key aspect that

distinguishes Remembrance Trails from others is that they have been devised with a tightly defined purpose, to stimulate memory and foster a deeper appreciation of the events of war. The Remembrance Trails stand out from other types of trails as they encourage interaction with sites and people that carry profound meaning and a narrative of suffering and morality. In contrast this is not found in other types of routes such as wine routes, or industrial and literary trails. People travel there not for the scenery but for the memory. These routes are utilized to further understanding and to elicit a deep sense of respect for the past generations and the sufferings of those who fought (Miles, 2017, p. 448).

Trails guide the user between sites with a plurality of different identities and meanings, which include not only cemeteries and memorials but also constitutes important past 'heritage'. For instance, the Canadian National Memorial at Vimy, France, is one of the key sites on the Front trail with a vital commemorative function (Ibid, 2017, p. 443). Nevertheless, it is visited in tandem with the preserved 'battle-scape' of shell craters, trenches and tunnels and the adjacent Memorial Park where heritage is also presented as commemoration. Remembrance Trails are thus 'heritage trails' with a deeper and more far-reaching function. Timothy and Boyd (2015, p. 422) categorized 'heritage trails' between organically evolved and positive routes, a model that has been adapted to the Western Front. Few modern Remembrance Trails follow routes originally used by the armies or supply columns of the war and most have been designed for an active 'remembrance tourism' industry. Examples of organic routes that owe their existence to wars are the Joffre and Ridge routes in Alsace used to supply French forces in the Vosges mountain region.

In Vietnam, the North Vietnamese in their defeat of the Americans has often portrayed the Ho Chi Minh Trail as one of the keys to success during the Vietnam War (Prados, 1998, p. 32). North Vietnamese soldiers built and expanded the network of paths that made up the trail and worked hard to gain the support of the local population along the way. A large number of sympathetic lowland Vietnamese peasant households were moved to farm around the strategic entry points to the trail (McElwee, 2005, p. 43).

### **Heritage Trails and Tourism Potential**

In recent years, a growing body of literature deals with the importance of ancient trail and its role in tourism development potential and their role in heritage interpretation and the environmental impacts of trail recreationists (Marschall, 2012, pp. 722-723). The ancient trails provide visitors and tourists a purposeful route with natural landscape and scenery. Some have indicated that trail visitors have different characteristics from other tourists who travel for leisurely activities. Compared to other tourism activities, most trail visitors pursue destination for natural environment and landscape that would also support for nature conservation (Kollins and Klot, 2000, p. 55).

Similarly, scholars have also engaged with the issue of space/place in attachments not only to physical tourist landscapes but also to the imaginary and symbolic spaces that frame tourism experiences Ancient trails are explored not only from the natural scenery point of view but also from humanistic perspective. This has multi-dimensional importance that ancient trails can offer visitors historical and ecological knowledge about the trail, as well as environmental education purposes (Macleod, 2004, pp. 61-63).

One of the most prominent examples of heritage trail that attract a large number of visitors from all over the world is the Great Wall of China. It consists of a series of walls and fortifications of more than 13,000 miles in length located in Northern China. The emperors to prevent incursions from enemies built the wall. Although Emperor Qin Shi Huang conceived the Great Wall long ago in the third century B.C. most recent popular section of the Wall was built from 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries AD during Ming dynasty. In contemporary period the Great Wall is taken as a powerful symbol of Chinese civilization and its strength.<sup>1</sup>

### **Unification Trails in Nepal and Historical Events Associated with it**

During the reign King Prithvi Narayan Shah who ascended to the throne of Gorkha Kingdom on April 3, 1743, Nepal was divided into several principalities popularly known as Baisi and Chaubisi *rajyas* in the east and the west along with three powerful kingdoms in the Kathmandu valley. Prithvi Narayan Shah initiated his unification campaign with the Gorkha Army's attack over Nuwakot, a region between Kathmandu and Gorkha. After the successful takeover of Nuwakot, the Gorkha troops led by Prithvi Narayan Shah fortified positions around various key entry points surrounding the Kathmandu Valley. March towards Kathmandu Valley began by successful capture of Kirtipur. Thereafter, on the day of Indra Jatra in the year 1768, when the people of Kathmandu Valley were celebrating the festival, Gorkhali troops marched towards Kathmandu and successfully annexed it to the Gorkha Kingdom. Within a few weeks, Gorkhali troops moved further and took control of Patan and Bhaktapur. The capital

of the Kingdom was shifted to Kathmandu in 1769 after it was successfully conquered by the Gorkhali troops in 1768. Although primary credit for laying foundation of Nepal as a modern nation state, is primarily given to the King Prithvi Narayan Shah, the Gorkhali troops supporting the unification drive were a diverse set of people from different linguistic and ethnic background living around different regions and strategic locations along these unification trails. Without their support the unification drive would not have been possible. From a small and politically weak Gorkha Kingdom Prithvi Narayan Shah created a history in the memory and minds of Nepali people to form modern Nepal.

### **The Key Locations of the Unification Battles**

There are several key locations where Gorkhali troops traveled on foot in their unification drive across the eastern and western part of Nepal. In the early years of unification drive; Nuwakot was one of the key strategic locations located in the northwest of Kathmandu valley. Before Prithvi Narayan Shah, his father king Narabhupal Shah had also led a failed attempt to annex Nuwakot. Troops led by Prithvi Narayan also failed to seize Nuwakot a couple of times. After multiple unsuccessful attempts, the Gorkhali forces launched an attack from a strategic point at Mahamandal of Nuwakot. Another group from Dharampani eventually capturing the area also supported the Gorkhali troops. The third group of Gorkhali troops led by Prithvi Narayan Shah himself from the Nuwakot Gadhi area marched further eventually capturing Nuwakot. This marks the first attempt of Prithvi Narayan Shah's drive to unify several small kingdoms in the erstwhile Kingdom of Gorkha.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-china/great-wall-of-china>

Similarly, the success of annexing Nuwakot encouraged the Gorkhali troops towards annexing other kingdoms of Kathmandu valley. Over the next few years, Gorkhali troops occupied key strategic positions surrounding the Kathmandu Valley. The Gorkhali troops failed to capture the Kathmandu Valley twice. Gorkhali troops secured positions in Kirtipur after their continuous efforts for more than six months. They adopted strategies of seizures and blockades surrounding the Kathmandu Valley. Gorkhali troops also marched to the southern region towards Makwanpur. Encircling the entire region, Gorkhali troops eventually captured Makwanpur fort (*Gadhi*). After the successful capture of Makwanpur Gadhi, the Gorkhali troops marched towards Hariharpur Gadhi, a strategic fort located at a mountain range, controlling access route, towards the south of Kathmandu.

Prithvi Narayan Shah led the unification campaign until his death in 1775. His descendants, the Shah Kings, continued the unification force and succeeded extending the Kingdom of Gorkha till Kangra fort in the western region currently in the Himachal Pradesh of India. In the next few years fierce battle occurred with the Sikh soldiers of Punjab led by Ranjit Singh at Kangra fort, Ganesh Valley, and the Gorkhali troops had to retreat with a loss. In the year 1809, August 24, with a signing of peace treaty, Gorkhali troops had to fall back to Sutluj River. The battle of Kangra was one of the last efforts of the unification except for the annexation of Palpa.

### **Development and Promotion of Heritage Trail Tourism and The Nepal Army**

Nepal Army carries an important legacy of the Gorkha soldiers who contributed to the unification of Nepal under the leadership

of the Shah dynasty. As stated above, the Gorkhali troops marched several regions to annex neighboring principalities of Nuwakot, Dhading, Tanahun, Kirtipur and eventually Kathmandu Valley. Prithvi Narayan Shah himself led Gorkhali troops and traveled from places including Dharampani, Barbandi, Dhaturale and Kakani in his march to expand Gorkha kingdom. The main route starts from Gorkha Palace to Kathmandu that has been envisioned to develop to promote heritage trail to attract tourists in the last couple of years.

Successive generations of Shah Kings led Gorkhali troops to many other routes to unify Nepal. These routes also constitute important part of heritage trails in recent years, which have been largely neglected since many years. Nepal Army seems to be playing key role in developing these trails. With the key initiatives from Nepal Army, many other historical routes and unification trails are in the process of development. One of these trails is a 75 kilometers long trekking route from Makwanpur to Sindhuli, which is being upgraded recently. The Sindhuli fort marks important place in Nepali history where Gorkhali soldiers had successfully defeated the British troops marching further toward Kathmandu. According to an official of the Nepal Army, the Nepal Army has been playing a key role in upgrading, branding and popularizing these historical trails as “Unification Trails” that connects various other trail routes used during the time of King Prithvi Narayan Shah.<sup>2</sup> The recent inauguration of the Unification Trail Program by Nepal Army marks an important

2 Anil Bhandari, <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/75-km-trail-connecting-two-historic-ports-ready/#:~:text=The%20Hariharpur%20fort%20was%20built,time%20of%20Prithvi%20Narayan%20Shah.>



starting point in promoting historical tourism potential in Nepal. Similarly, the “Military Civilian Landmark Project” of Nepal Army appears to be an important initiative for the development of the unification trails connecting the Mahabharat ranges linking the stories of local communities along the trails who contributed in unification drive led by the Shah Kings.

Involvement of Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) in promotion of touristic activities in these heritage trails will be important. NTB in coordination with various other private sectors can play an important role in taking ownership and promotion of these historical trails. The initiative taken by the NTB for a feasibility study, trail development and promotional plans is an important beginning. The promotional drives organized by the Nepal Army in different historical locations in places Panauti, Gorakhnath, Sharadakot, Kavrekot and Dhulikhel can become important means to connect with local communities and outsiders. In recent years, Nepal Army has been organizing various programs and activities organized by Nepal Army for trekkers and visitors. These programs aim to inform about ancient forts, display of warfare equipment and uniforms used by Gorkhali Army, its warfare methods. It will help to promote unification trail tourism and inform visitors about the memory of of place and people and contribute in the development and promotion of the heritage trail tourism in Nepal.

### **Involving Local Communities, Boosting Local Economy**

Gorkhali troops in the battles and events associated with the unification drive were composed of and were supported by various diverse communities. The Gorkhali troops

marched to the East and West of Gorkha annexing diverse territories and regions. These sites and routes constitute interesting historical and cultural spaces with a potential tourism activity. It can also constitute an adventure tourism activity in the Nepali Himalayas. It can also successfully integrate with different forms of other tourism activities such as cultural tourism, heritage tourism, religious or pilgrimage purpose, rural or village tourism, ecotourism, and promotion of homestays. It can successfully integrate with nature-based tourism and local culture. As Novelli (2005, p. 53) suggests contributes to the development of niche products to a wider structural process of diversification that tourism industry seeks to explore and capture new markets. It can successfully integrate active and passive visitors, experiential and adventurous, creative and intellectuals etc.

Another important aspect of heritage trail tourism is to involve local communities, which potentially contribute in uplifting their life and living standard by increasing disposable income. Studies have indicated that there is a significant economic benefit of heritage trails in uplifting the lives of the local people. For instance, the Tamang Heritage Trail is one such project in the Himalayan region in Rasuwa, near to the Langtang trekking destination (Kunwar and Pandey, 2016, p. 2). Heritage trail concept is therefore not new to Nepal as it has been introduced in several other touristic destinations. It is important to recognize interdependence in tangible and intangible heritages in which people attach their memory, cultural knowledge and performances. The memory, cultural knowledge and performances are grounded and embedded in both tangible and intangible heritages. While intangible heritages are related to evoking the spiritual and symbolic aspects of sites or places, on the

other hand tangible heritages are linked with the symbolic foundations in which intangible qualities exist (Park, 2014, p. 17).

Heritage trails can be also successfully integrated with nature-based adventure tourism. Adventure tourism is often viewed as a commercial activity “categorized by the deliberate seeking of risk and danger” (Hall, 1992, p. 142). Adventure tourism is “a broad spectrum of outdoor touristic activities, often commercialized and involving an interaction with natural environment away from the participant’s home range containing element of risk, in which the outcome is influenced by the participant, setting, and management of the touristic experience” (Hall 1992, p. 143). Tourism generally involves three sets of actors, the tourists, the locals, and the intermediaries including government institutions, travel agents and tourism promotion boards. Developing tourism sectors in new areas with the lack of established flows is likely to be difficult and needs some strategies in marketing and popularizing it to the outer world. This is especially important in Nepal where Nepal’s geography has limited touristic patterns, and less income from adventure tourism. Once touristic activities are popularized in new routes with the development and promotion of trails, it benefits local communities in terms of increasing income and promotion and utilization of local resources.

## Conclusion

The unification trails in Nepal have great historical and contemporary importance for research as well as tourism potential. Until recently, it appears that these trails were largely neglected. Diverse communities and local people along the unification trails constitute important cultural mosaic that supported the Gorkhali troops and contributed

in nation building. Gorkhali troops utilized diverse resources, strategic locations, and forts crisscrossing diverse geography encountering social groups across the current territory of Nepal and beyond which can constitute the unification trail. The recent idea of discovering the unification trails and promotion of tourism activities by Nepal Army by developing historical routes, trails and forts used by Gorkha troops is potential to open new opportunities and avenues for unification trails tourism in Nepal. These trails and routes although closely related with wars and battles in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century, are also rich mix of social, cultural and environmental resources. These trails and routes can cater and meet the diverse interest of historians, potential tourists and learners.

Apart from limited historical accounts, there appears a dearth of literature and need for a greater level of engagement and research to unearth, wide range of memories to contribute to the understanding of historical trails, routes and its tourism potential. Nepal Army has carried out the history and legacy of the Gorkha troops can potentially contribute in the systematic investigation and research by adopting qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the experiences of wide range of local people, stakeholders as much as possible. The tourism potential these unification trails provide would not only be limited on the ground but also in the national memory, which has greater tangible and intangible value in contributing and real unity in Nepal. It also offers the local communities the pathways of connection, avenues for development, basis for serving the daily livelihood and increase of income for the medium and small size entrepreneurs, workers, and other disadvantaged groups located along these trails.

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