Gorkha Identity Through History: Narratives Of Courage, Resistance, And Change

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Abstract
A diverse, multifaceted, and dynamic social and political entity, the Gorkha identity is sometimes reduced to the stereotypical "martial race" From Nepal's unification in the 18th century to the current South Asian geopolitical situation in Darjeeling and northeastern India, this book captures its historical backdrop. It traces the development of Gorkhas as significant geopolitical actors and their subsequent marginalisation as subjects and political activists, challenging imperial valorisation and subaltern resistance as binary narratives. The study challenges the static colonial image, arguing that Gorkha identity is dynamic and dependent on location, politics, and history.
Historically, the warrior image of the Gorkhas, forged through recruitment practices inherited through British colonial rule, hid their different social, political, and cultural roles. The picture was global, but knowledge in Gorkha was restricted. The qualitative historical methods are used in the study of major historical events such as the unification of Nepal, colonial army recruitment, migration, anti-colonial movement, and modern political movements. Results indicate that Gorkha identity is not only military service; it includes social flexibility, political action, and cultural transformation. Hence, the study brings together the history of the Gorkhas with its study of identities to contribute to discussions related to ethnicity, nationalism, and belonging studies in South Asia, which is far away from colonial studies.

Keywords: Gorkha Identity, Martial Race, Resistance, Transnationalism, Colonialism, Migration, Martial Race

1. Introduction

The question of identity is a central theme of historical research, because communities are influenced by things such as geography and culture, but also experiences of power, conflict, movement, and memory. Identity is fluid (in many cases, not limited to physical entities), and it has been reconfigured by historical events and social encounters, although contemporary historiography sees it as dynamic in different political, cultural, and economic situations (Hall, 1996; Bhabha, 1994). In the history of South Asia, the Gorkhas represent a community that, as a group, has experienced many changes in identity over time. Their identity is not restricted just to military matters, but touches on state formation, migration, ethnicity, citizenship, and political assertion (Caplan, 2000; Subba, 1999). Even though they played fundamental roles in Nepal, India, and other South Asian countries, major stories have tended to be about their war-heroic capabilities and battlefield victories (Rose, 2003).
The term 'Gorkha' is based on modern-day Nepal's Kingdom of Gorkha that extended under the initiative of Prithvi Narayan Shah into a unification undertaking, providing the term greater political and cultural implications (Whelpton, 2005). Accordingly, the Gorkha identity is closely linked to political development and historical statehood, not only ethnicity. British accounts emphasised the military capabilities of Gorkha men during the Anglo–Nepal War (1814–1816). British colonial recruitment later institutionalised this image and encouraged the 'martial race' theory, in which particular communities are cast as inherently suited to warfare (Stiller, 1973; Barua, 2005).
Not only did the characterisation of a diverse community as a military cliché with cultural diversity contribute to breaking tradition, but the depiction of Gorkhas as strong, disciplined, faithful and courageous soldiers helped dispel prejudice and open doors to economic development and international recognition. Earlier research challenges such simplifications and claims that the Gorkha identity is a function of migration, settlement, labour power, communal adaptability, and political mobilisation. A lot of Gorkhas have moved from the borderlands to Darjeeling, Assam, Northeast India, Uttarakhand, Bhutan, and Myanmar to start a new social-cultural life (Mohan, 2004; Subba & Sinha, 2011). They were also cemented by other social-cultural exchanges.
In that regard, the questions raised today about the question of identity and postcoloniality as the original expression deriving from its place of origin and in India, for instance among the Gorkhas, have a broader range of dimensions surrounding citizenship, belonging, and identification. The Gorkhaland movement and other important political movements raised the conversation on representation and identity, including those related to dignity, cultural recognition, and political inclusion, not merely as an administrative issue (Sinha, 2013; Bhattachan, 2000). Contemporary scholarship emphasises looking at the identity of Gorkha as a history

formation in motion (and a dynamic and not static or homogenised condition) (Chhetri, 2012). This finding pertains to the attention given to different kinds of variegated experiences and settings when considering Gorkha's multidimensional identity. Against such a background, this study is to consider identity in Gorkha by narrating narratives of heroism, revolt and transformation intermingled. It seeks to disrupt this reduction of the understanding in a way that is more than a mere simplification, and develop a complete historical analysis by:

- Tracking the evolution of Gorkha identity
- Stories of imperial courage and of subaltern resistance
- Examining both colonial and postcolonial transformations
- Identifying the latest debates and gaps in academia
- Potentially enriches Gorkha history with new insights

This approach leads to a nuanced understanding of Gorkha identity; however, it is indeed much more nuanced in the way that it reveals Gorkha identity as a complicated and dynamic construction driven by historical forces and the context that surrounds it in contemporary reality.

LITERATURE CITED

Scholars from a whole variety of fields—history, anthropology, sociology, political science, and postcolonial studies—have had an influence over our analysis of Gorkha identity: a complex, multifaceted and nuanced understanding. These early colonial and historical writings tended to be very much inspired by British military narratives and civil administrative reports from the Anglo–Nepal War period (1814–1816). These narratives focused on the battlefield virtues of discipline, courage, and stamina and situated Gorkhas deeply in the colonial 'martial race' narrative that prioritized their assumed military characteristics over their other social, moral and even political concerns (Stiller, 1973; Barua, 2005).

The military historiography examines the social and institutional contexts that structured military identity construction, primarily via the experience of Gorkha soldiers, and how recruitment systems and colonial military systems created structures of masculinity, loyalty, and honour (Caplan, 2000). These studies bring awareness to how they were based on military practices as a key lens of the interpretative frame to military ways of doing things. Academic research in particular focused on ethnic and identity studies in the 20th century. T.B. Subba's work on the subject of Indian Gorkhas had social and political aspects, including ethnic assertion, citizenship, political representation, and regional aspirations, and a departure from military historiography to political sociology (Subba, 1999). A further examination of migration and diaspora studies was to open the way, as it was shown that the Gorkha identity was created through labour migration, settlement, linguistic assimilation, and cultural bargaining in Darjeeling, Assam, Northeast India, Bhutan and Myanmar (Hutt, 2003; Mohan, 2004). These studies challenged assumptions of territorial fixity and emphasised identity as a "fluid and negotiated process."

The establishment of Gorkhaland has reinvigorated the interest of the scholars in political identity, citizenship fight, and state acknowledgement in borderland environments (Chettri, 2013; Bhattachan, 2000). Postcolonial ways of thinking brought us critical analysis of colonial knowledge production, representation, and discourse construction (see Bhabha, 1994; Caplan, 2000), and challenged the 'martial race' concept by reframing it as a colonial construct as opposed to an empirical one. Recent interdisciplinary studies demonstrate a combination of history, anthropology, migration studies and political theory. For instance, Golay (2025) challenges the dominant colonial narratives, and Chetry and Reddy (2025) investigate migration and settlement in Assam on the theme of continuity and change.

Modern literature now addresses issues such as youth identity; digital communities; citizenship debates and transnational politics to point toward a challenge to multidimensional perspectives as opposed to the single story-based military narrative. However, despite these developments, existing literature shows striking gaps. For example, while a vast majority of studies do engage in the aforementioned themes and provide frameworks that do not fully amalgamate military, migration, and political experience, they replicate colonial preconceptions of martial honour, bravery, and identity. Yet there are few interdisciplinary frameworks synthesising historical, social, cultural and postcolonial perspectives, while younger generations of Gorkha have received relatively little attention, with changing perceptions largely unanalysed. The need to consider these discrepancies calls for an integrated way of approaching the concept of Gorkha identity, in which the concept is historically framed as a historically constructed and never-ending process in relation to many areas.

The creation of a Gorkha identity in itself can be understood within the context of five distinct historical steps: the Kingdom of Gorkha as a political basis; the unification campaigns for Prithvi Narayan Shah to bring together and develop a collectively of political consciousness; the British colonial military recruitment that restructured identity within state-organized imperial institutions; the relocation and settlement across South Asia that reconceptualized social and cultural parameters; and the mobilization following the colonial project in connecting identity to rights, representation and political assertion.

This layered history sequence gives a perspective of how the dynamic and shifting nature of Gorkha subjectivity responds to the political, social and cultural landscape in different ways. The identity of Gorkha, historically grounded in the story of courage and military valour, has also invited numerous political responses and social/cultural changes that mirror the wide-scale change of colonial and postcolonial South Asian dynamics.

However, in early British colonial texts, Gorkhas were also portrayed as a "martial race" for glory and the status of martial prowess, whilst their identity to serve alongside imperial military formations was instrumentalised (Caplan, 2000; Stiller, 1973). The construction of this was the result of a combination of natural martial competence and the foreign colonial discourse that was at work, in addition to the recruitment practices of Gorkha social groups to use and dominate them (Barua, 2005). The colonial images served to assert power, delimit and define the indigenous peoples as defined by the colonial state, and generate enduring stereotypical identities continuously manufactured (Bhabha, 1994). But defiance of these settled identities came out in different ways. The Gorkha communities negotiated (and contested) colonial categories while affirming their agency through anti-colonial struggles and local political mobilisation (Subba, 1999; Sinha, 2013). Like its own in relation to its identity politics, the Gorkhaland movement in India is indicative of how identity politics has informed the fight for cultural acknowledgement, territorial autonomy, and citizenship rights (Bhattachan, 2000; Chettri, 2013). Such political exercises teach us that identity is the locus of struggle and transformation where the historical bravery is recycled and reshaped so that it aligns with the current call for self-respect and personal autonomy.

The geography and migration movements associated with Gorkha identity have presented some challenges to the definition of a Gorkha identity as it has resulted in new social formations that have adapted to differing cultural and economic contexts beyond Nepal (Hutt, 2003; Mohan, 2004). This mobility undermined fixed concepts of identity, illustrating processes of cultural negotiation, learning from varied language environments, and interconnected communities (Subba & Sinha, 2011). A new interdisciplinary literature has situated Gorkha identity within postcolonial theory, ethnicity and nationalism and has recognised its fluidity and contested character (Bose, 2018; Golay, 2025). It critiques current militaristic narratives and encourages acknowledgement of the wide range of Gorkha labour patterns and politically active ways of participating and maintaining their own cultural resilience. What's more, contemporary understanding of citizenship and belonging constitute the political relations of the state to the Gorkha communities, and it always renegotiates identity in their interactions with the state and those it is meant to help to shape they have shown us that identity is not just a state but that identity is always the product; it is one of a continuum, constructed and constructed in the wake of historical impacts and the present-day struggle (Chhetri, 2012; Sinha, 2013).

The Gorkha identity is a history of courage linked to struggle, to processes that evolve and change: a mixed and complex history. It goes beyond military valour to political assertion, cultural change, and diasporic adaptation. Only it is through this acknowledgment that the South Asian is a highly complex phenomenon that I can comprehend an extended South Asian historiography together with making important comments about the relationship between ethnicity, nationalism, and postcolonial identity politics in that field.

Theoretical Framework

Through the interdisciplinary application of Subaltern Studies, Colonial Discourse Analysis, postcolonial theory, identity theory, and political sociology, the present study examines the evolution of Gorkha consciousness over time. Drawing from Edward Said's Orientalism and Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities, it explores the ways in which the British Raj created the 'martial Gorkha' image as well as how the community subsequently rediscovered this image to imagine a collective political future (Chettri, 2017).

One of the main focuses of postcolonial theorists was Homi K. Bhabha (1994), who argues that it is through the use of narrative elements to depict Gorkhas in imperial narratives of bravery and loyalty that colonial powers could construct the geopolitical agenda (Caplan, 2000; Barua, 2005). Undertaking identity as a site of negotiation, this framework allows subaltern voices to subvert the meanings being imposed from all ends. The understanding of Gorkha identity is based upon Stuart Hall's (1996) ideas on identity being fluid and contingent through a dynamic account of social interactions, migration, and political mobilization (Subba, 1999; Mohan, 2004).

As such, the Gorkhaland community embodies this collision in a negotiated identity that operates under the context of emancipation, cultural authenticity and political integration in postcoloniality (Bhattachan, 2000; Sinha, 2013; Chettri, 2013). Combined, this approach makes possible a richer examination of identity in the Gorkha community, as a double-sided story of valour, defiance and shift, and socio-political change against the backdrop of the discussion of identity vis-à-vis ethnicity, nationalism, citizenship, and diasporas.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, historically based methodology combining archival research, secondary literature review, and CDA to examine how Gorkha identity is formed and re-enacted since its birth. Archival studies review British colonial military records, administrative documents, and travel accounts of the Anglo–Nepal War period,

revealing colonial authority influenced the 'martial race' discourse (Stiller, 1973; Barua, 2005). An extensive survey of the interdisciplinary literature traces emergent scholarly perspectives on military history (Caplan, 2000), ethnicity and political identity (Subba, 1999; Bhattachan, 2000), migration and the diaspora (Hutt, 2003; Mohan, 2004), and contemporary political mobilization (Sinha, 2013; Chettri, 2013). CDA, based on Fairclough (1995) and Bhabha (1994), is engaged with colonial and contemporary texts to provide insights into the way narratives of courage, loyalty, and resistance are constructed and contested within patterns of power. Moreover, emerging work on digital groups and youth identity (Chetry and Reddy, 2025; Golay, 2025) extends the perspectives to current cultural resilience. This triangulated perspective offers a richer, historically rich understanding of Gorkha identity as complex and dynamic.

THE GENESIS OF THE "MARTIAL RACE" NARRATIVE: COURAGE AND CO-OPTATION

The Anglo-Gorkha War (1814–1816) served as the essential foundation of the Gorkha identity in world awareness. Impressed by the fierce resistance of the Gorkhali army commanded by the likes of Balbhadra Kunwar and Amar Singh Thapa, the British East India Company embarked on recruitment efforts that changed the demographics and sociology of the region (Pradhan, 1991).

Imperial Ethnography and Misrecognition

Since 1857, colonial British ethnologists and military officials have labeled particular South Asian races as "martial races." Gorkhas were stereotyped to be naturally loyal, with physical resilience, and politically docile—characteristics that appeared distinctly opposed to the politically active plains populations of India (Vansittart, 1890). "The Gurkha is a soldier of the highest order, brought up to look upon war as his natural element." Vansittart (1890).

This colonial appropriation resulted in a double consciousness: it generated a condition of economic mobility achieved through international military operations throughout World Wars I and II, yet simultaneously diminished a diverse group of separate ethnic groups (the Rais, Limbus, Magars, Gurungs, and Chettris) to a monolithic and apolitical military construct, resulting in a prolonged legacy of historical misrecognition (Subba, 1992).

COUNTER-NARRATIVES: RESISTANCE AND SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS

The Gorkha history is, as opposed to the colonial stereotype of passive loyalty, an exceptionally resistance-oriented arc. This resistance played out in the military apparatus but also within civil society.

Anti-colonial Participation

That the Gorkhas stayed away from the freedom struggle in India is a historical fiction. Gorkhas also engaged in anti-colonial struggle. Major Durga Malla of the Indian National Army (INA), for example, was hanged by the British in 1944 for treason, and his martyrdom continues to be a vital symbol of Gorkha patriotism toward the Indian nation (Chettri, 2017). In addition, throughout the Non-Cooperation Movement, people like Sabitri Devi (Helen Lepcha) and Dal Bahadur Giri rallied the masses in the Darjeeling hills and joined the local peoples with Mahatma Gandhi's national call.

b. Socio-Cultural Renaissance

Resistance also became a matter of ideas and literature. The formation of the Gorkha Samiti (1915) and the literary impact of originals such as Parasmani Pradhan, Dharanidhar Koirala, and Surya Vikram Gyawali (the Su-Dha-Si trio) used the Nepali language as a weapon (Pradhan, 1991). By standardising the language, they united a fragmented tribal diaspora under a singular linguistic identity, laying the fundamental foundation for today's cultural self-assertion within the colonial public sphere (Rethinking Gorkha Identity, 2006).

POST-COLONIAL REALITIES: THE IDENTITY CRISIS AND SPATIAL BELONGING

The partition of British India and the subsequent 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship inadvertently triggered an existential crisis of belonging for the Indian Gorkhas. Clause VII of the treaty, which allows free movement and property ownership for citizens of both countries, blurred the legal and social distinction between indigenous Indian Gorkhas and migrant Nepalese citizens (Ganguly, 2005).

a. The Stigma of the "Foreigner."

Despite generations of residence, Indian Gorkhas have frequently faced the threat of being labelled "foreigners" or "immigrants," particularly during ethnic cleansings and geopolitical shifts in Northeast India during the late 20th century (Subba, 2003). As a peripheral minority group, their citizenship has historically been questioned due to systemic ignorance of their distinct history (Subba, 2003).

Historical Era	Primary Identity Marker	Political/Socio-Economic Status
Pre-1816	Regional/Tribal (Magar, Gurung, etc.)	Subjects of expanding Himalayan kingdoms (Pradhan, 1991)
Colonial Era (1816–1947)	"Martial Race" / Soldier	Imperial subjects with high global mobility, romanticised as a

		military tool (Caplan, 1995; Vansittart, 1890)
Post-Colonial (1947–Present)	Ethno-Linguistic Minority	Indian citizens facing a crisis of peripheral belonging and statehood demands (Ganguly, 2005; Bagchi, 2012)

THE EVOLUTION OF CHANGE: FROM SUBSERVIENCE TO AUTONOMY (GORKHALAND)

Modern Gorkha identity is inseparable from the call for Gorkhaland—an Indian Union concept of a state carved from the northern districts of West Bengal (Bagchi, 2012).

The Shift in Rhetoric and Literary Reflection

The Gorkhaland movement—which intensified violently in 1986 under Subhash Ghisingh, and later revived in 2007 and 2017—is the definitive paradigm shift from showing courage for others to rising resistance for oneself (Chettri, 2017). What had been perceived as a tool of imperial defence—once the Khukuri was re-semoticized—was now a symbol of political defiance and self-determination. Subaltern literatures in recent decades, like Chuden Kabimo's Song of the Soil (originally called Fatsung), make the point that the political struggle was one that ordinary hillfolk internalised, attempting to reclaim their fractured identities from the erasure of their historical past (Kabimo, 2021). In the words of recent scholars, "the emergence of a separate state is not an automatic secessionist wish, but an institutional project to secure administrative recognition, validation of Indian citizenship, and to defend the cultural value of traditional culture under the Indian Constitution" (Subba, 1992; Ganguly, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The history of Gorkha is one of long adaptation and resilience. The Gorkhas, which an empire had weaponised as a "martial race," experienced radical changes in their identity to negotiate the post-colonial politics of the borderland. Courage stories also do not just remain on the battlefield — they have become the intellectual and political courage it takes to invoke structural change. Historians and policymakers are needed to escape the romanticised military loyalty paradigm to understand, instead, the Gorkhas as equal democratic stakeholders, entitled to their own geopolitical dignity and constitutional security within India for a lasting resolution to the anxieties of the Gorkha community.

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