

British Gurkha, Identity Crisis, and Kangmang Naresh Rai's *Yuddha Bokeko Sitang*

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ABSTRACT

*Man Bahadur joined the British army because he was forced to do so by the then Rana rulers as it was the time of the Second World War and the Ranas were supporting the British government by sending the Nepali youths especially from the indigenous races like Newar, Rai, Limbu, Magar, Gurung, Tamang, Lama, etc. to be recruited in their army. So, Man Bahadur, the main narrator as well as the character of the novel *Yuddha Bokeko Sitang* by Kangmang Naresh Rai, represents all those who joined the British army during the Second World War. Their identity changed when they became the British Gurkha soldiers. They were involved in different wars along with the First and Second World Wars. They fought on behalf of the British government. Britain had a certain interest of having the world power by defeating other countries. Thousands of the British Gurkha soldiers lost their lives in the First and Second World Wars. Many of them got seriously injured and had to live a disabled life. Some war survivors were honored with medals like Victoria Cross and others. They were offered pension, but some of them were sent back without being offered any compensation. They would regret joining the British army for losing everything for Britain and getting nothing in return except their disabled bodies. They would question for whom and where they were fighting. In fact, they were questioning upon security of their identity while fighting for Britain's identity.*

KEYWORDS: Identity crisis, Rana rulers, Gurkha soldiers, Victoria Cross

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INTRODUCTION

Every day if we observe people in our society, we find them being entangled to some kind of work. They have got certain purpose of performing a work. They want to accomplish something important in their lives. That achievement makes people different from each other and it is their identity. One's identity establishes a way of knowing what and who he or she is. According to Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary, identity means: "Who or what sb/sth is" (Hornby, p. 770). One's identity shows his or her position in a society. David & Julia Jary (2000) take identity "as the sense, and continuity, of self that develops first as the child differentiates from parents and family and takes place in society (p. 285). In the meantime, a person's occupation, race, culture, language, religion, and nationality can also be his or her identity. All of these things with which people are known are their identities.

Similarly, conflict between people of different races, religions, cultures, languages, and political ideologies take place just for establishing their own identity. Wars between countries happen because they want to strengthen their national identity. Rich and powerful countries try to keep small and weak countries under their control either for properties or power but after all, that is for their national identity. In this process, countries make their

alliance and even a simple conflict turns into wars claiming a lot of loss of life, properties, territories, faith, etc. as wars are always “terrorizing, horrific, and painful” (English, 2013, p. 67). That is why the world was compelled to face two world wars. Rai’s *Yuddha Bokeko Sitang* is actually a picture of the Second World War and especially the war that took place between Japan and Britain in Burma where the British Gurkha soldiers fought on behalf of British rulers. Many of them had to lose their lives in the war and the survivors were questioning themselves why and for whom they were making such a huge sacrifice. This paper aims to study how and why the Gurkhas joined the British army and what they felt about their own identity while fighting for the identity of Britain during the war.

Despite the defeat of Nepal in the various wars that took place between British soldiers and Nepali soldiers in the history, British government was highly impressed by the bravery of Nepali soldiers. The courage and dedication the Nepali soldiers and people exhibited during the war with British soldiers was actually for the defence of their motherland, Nepal. For such an identity of bravery, the British government proposed to recruit Nepali youths in their army. This helped the Nepali people to maintain their economical status in the society. Their exposure to British soldiers and people gave Nepali youths a new kind of learning about the outside world.

WHY WAR IS WAR?

Sometimes war is needed in order to maintain peace in the world but war is war. It is like a game, but there “is no pleasure in the game” (Rai, 2015, p. 28). It does not end without making some kind of destruction such as life, properties, tradition, etc. War always invites a great loss. In *Yuddha Bokeko Sitang*, Man Bahadur himself was uninterested in joining the British army despite the fact that he had little desire of being a British Gurkha soldier before. His father would not let him do so because the Second World War was just going to start. In order to make the British government happy, the Rana rulers were forcing the Nepali youths to get admitted to the British army and support Britain in war. Otherwise, they would be punished. Rana rulers arrested Man Bahadur’s father as his father had sent him away in order to save him from being a British soldier. Man Bahadur remembers his mother say,

Khai,aba tan bharti nagai ti papiharule dhar nadine vaye. Voli jilla gayera Rana hakim lai vetnu ani ma varti jana tayar chhu vannu. Tespachhi baba lai chhodi dinchhan ki! (Rai, 2011, p. 3)

I think the evil Ranas would not consider us unless you accept them by joining the British army. You go to the center tomorrow and tell them that you are ready to go to the army. After that they might free your father. (English translation)

Because of the threat from the Rana rulers, Man Bahadur was ready to go to the British army. Moreover, Britain needed to train youths to send them in wars.

It was not tough for the youths to be in the British army at that time. They did not have to show any physical as well as mental perfection. Neither they were checked for their physical fitness nor tested for their intelligence as the narrator argues,

Ahile yeso bujhda pashuhat ma kharite le khasiboka ra gaigoru herejhai goraharule yeso here jasto matra garera tetikai bharti liye. Matra tan kahile janmiyeko? Kati barsha pugis? Vanera sodhe. (Rai, 2011, p. 7)

Now, I think British people admitted us to the army just by looking at us lightly like the animal salesmen do to cattle in the animal market. (English translation)

Man Bahadur and his companions were taken to Betia Camp of Darbhanga in Bihar, India. He was not happy to be a British soldier, but he did not have any choice. He missed his family, home and animals that

Bharti vaye pachhi ghar ra gothko achakli yad auna thalyo. Khatma sutiraheki birami bahini, ma hidne belama malin anuhar liyera angan ma uvinuvayeki ama, dukhi baba ani mitho dudh dine gaiharu, mayalu bachchhaharu. (Rai, 2011, p. 7)

After joining the army, I started missing home and cattle a lot. I missed my sick sister lying in the bed, my mother standing on the yard sadly while I was leaving, and my poor father and cows giving sweet milk along with lovely calves. (English translation)

After a year-long training, he was appointed as a trainer since he was active and skillful. After eleven years of it, he was sent to the battlefield as the Second World War began at that time. He was leading his team. It was the war between Britain and Japan.

Fear, stress, hunger, and tiredness always haunted the warriors during the wars. There was no calmness in their mind and heart. Gaze (2005) argues that war is “a record of toil and sacrifice” (p. 46). The British Gurkha soldiers’ team led by the narrator also did have the similar experience at the moment. They had been close to the river Sitang. They were hungry and tired after a walk of many days,

Aliali vayeko taran pani sakiye jasto lagdaichha guruji! Aba, kehi garna sakdina jasto chha. Lalyakluluk vaisaken. Aja ratvarima rasan pani ayena vane ta mariyela jasto vaiyo hau. (Rai, 2011, p. 11)

Sir, I feel that a little left energy also has finished. Now, I feel I cannot do anything. I feel very weak. I might die if foods do not come by the night time. (English translation)

The Bridge of Sitang River had already been destroyed by the Japanese soldiers as they were blocking the way of the British Gurkha soldiers from all around. There was a huge clash between them. According to Callahan et al. (2006), war is always behaving “more like the so-called savages whom they had been sent to fight, the colonists engaged in a bloody campaign that showed no mercy” (p. 556). The British Gurkha soldiers bore a great loss in that clash. Hundreds of them lost their lives. Subedar Bhawani Rai died. Norbu, who was sick but was forced to join the war also got killed. The Commanding Officer got injured. The scenery was intolerable. There were dead bodies here and there as they were walking on them.

During wars, the main focus of the soldiers was on weakening the power of the enemy soldiers. It is done either by killing them or by destroying the structures and shelters of them. English (2013) states that war is “awful, baneful, devastating, and horrific brutality” (p. 59). Since the bridge was completely destroyed by Japanese soldiers, the British Gurkha soldiers had to swim across the Sitang River. There was no another option. A heavy attack was faced by the British Gurkha soldiers at that moment as well. Many had to lose their lives there. It is true that “At war you either kill or get killed (Rai, 2015, p. 16). Along with Man Bahadur, only a few survived. The dead bodies of the British Gurkha soldiers were floating on the bloody water of Sitang River. Ram Bahadur was shot dead just when he swam across it. In the last breath, he was saying,

Malai san...gai laijanu.Yeha na..chhod...nu, chhora ra shreemati lai vetnu chha. (Rai, 2011, p. 16)

Take me with you. Do not leave me here. I have to see my son and wife. (English translation)

The moment was so heart touching that all wept but nothing was there they could do except leaving his dead body helplessly there on the pile of the rocks. In fact, the lives of soldiers become the most victimized objects during the war period. In one of the poems, Rai (2015) makes his persona as a soldier speak to his commander “Sir! I’m living a dead life/ Do you call it a life at all?” (p. 3). They are made to follow only the seniors’ cruel order. They have no contact with family and home. In a short tensed rest, they miss home. In the novel, the dry,

dusty and war suffering hills of Baishakh month in Burma would make Man Bahadur remember his home town.

Gyabula, another British Gurkha soldier, looked very upset as he got a letter from village about his mother's death in seven months. He remembered his mother, saying,

Ma gharbata bato lagda meri ama nikai runuvayeko thiyo. Malai chhadera naja chhora vandai hunuhunthyo. (Rai, 2011, p. 28)

My mother had cried a lot while I was leaving home. She was telling me not to go leaving her alone. (English translation)

Similarly, the narrator Man Bahadur remembers his team member Mani, complaining his fate of joining the British army:

Kaha ma janmiyen? Kaha hurkiyen? Kun thauko matoma jagir gariraheko chhu? Kun thauko mato ko lagi afno jyan baji thapera hami ladiraheka chhau? (Rai, 2011, p. 28)

Where were I born? Where did I grow up? Which place am I working in? For which place are we fighting keeping our lives in risk? (English translation)

Every moment in war is painful for soldiers. They seem to be very helpless during the war period. They are out of contact with the outside world. Anytime they can be killed by the enemy soldiers as "Ambushes and traps are awaiting/Here, there and everywhere" (Rai, 2015, p. 9). They have only two things to do either kill others or be killed by enemies. This is only the motto of the war. This is the moment when they happen to ask themselves who and why they are there.

A lot of British Gurkha soldiers sacrificed their lives in the Second World War. Man Bahadur says,

Ladai ma kalle ganne ra! Hamile suneko kura 60 hajar vanda dherai Gurkhaliharunai mare vanthe. Malai ta ajhai mare jasto lagchha. (Rai, 2011, p. 36)

Who counts in war! We had heard that more than 60 thousand Gurkhalis died. But I feel more Gurkhalis died than that. (English translation)

He further argues that the British Gurkha soldiers did not only sacrifice their blood, sweat and youth but also their lives. A lot of British Gurkha soldiers sacrificed their lives for the security of Britain. Because of their contribution, Britain was able to win many wars and save their identity as a powerful nation in the world. Man Bahadur says,

Gurkhaliharule afno ragat, pasina, bainsmatra samarpit garenan, dheraile jyanko balidan samet diye. Barmako jamin nai Gurkhali yoddhaka lasharule dhakiyeko thiyo. Tesko praman ho Belayetko Buckingham darbarmathi garbale farfariraheko Union Jyak. (Rai, 2011, p. 35)

Gurkhalis did not only contribute their blood, sweat, youth, but many of them sacrificed their lives as well. The ground of Burma was covered with the dead bodies of Gurkhalis. The proof is that the Union Jack is fluttering proudly on the roof of the Buckingham palace of England. (English translation)

The story of the British Gurkha soldiers is full of miseries. They suffered from the "horrific viciousness of war" (English, 2013, p. 61). It does never bring peace in mind whoever hears it. War is violent all the time. During the time of the world wars, the Rana rulers would not have patience to hear the interest of the youths but they had to get into British army. Man Bahadur claims:

Testo jahaniya shasanko urdi le hajarau hajar adibasi janajatika chhoraharu pahilo bishwoyuddhama homiyeka thiye. Parai matoko lagi, parai bhumima jyanko balidan didai ladiyo. (Rai, 2011, p. 36)

Because of the forceful call of the family rule, thousands of indigenous youths had got involved in the *First World War*. We fought in foreign land for the foreign land sacrificing our lives. (English translation)

Now Man Bahadur raises a question about what the British Gurkha soldiers have got after the sacrifices of lives, sweat, families, relatives, etc. for the British government.

While thinking about the context and time period of two world wars, it was like abandoning home, family, and relatives in order to get admitted into the British army. Their requests about not joining the British army for their family and home would not be considered as if they were born not for their family, home and their society but only for the Rana rulers and the British government. So, Rai (2015) asks: “Where’re my family left/ Where have my well-wishers disappeared?” (p. 3). For all this, Man Bahadur concludes his view in the following lines:

Hami badhya vayera Gurkha bharti lagiyo pahile. Afnai deshbata lakhetiye jasto vai parai bhumima afno pahichan banauna safal vayun. Pahilo bishwoyuddha ma pani dherai Gurkhaliharule balidan didai kahilai namarne itihās banaye. (Rai, 2011, p. 38)

We were compelled to join the British army. We came to be in the foreign land as if we were chased away from our own country and succeeded to establish our identity. In the *First World War*, many British Gurkha soldiers sacrificed their lives and created an immortal history. (English translation)

There were some awards for some of the British Gurkha soldiers. Some survivor British Gurkha soldiers were rewarded with medals and few were honoured with a very high level of medal that was the Victoria Cross. Kulbir Thapa Magar who fought the First World War was the first British Gurkha soldier to achieve the honour of the Victoria Cross medal. They spent their high time of life in the land and for the land that does not belong to them. So, there is always a question whether Britain can make a perfect recovery to the loss the British Gurkha soldiers and their families have suffered from.

REGRETS OF MAN BAHADUR

Man Bahadur regrets joining the British army. He thinks that he has lost more than he has achieved by being in the British army as Rai (2015) expresses with surprise: “Alas! I’ve retired barefoot” (p. 4). He has an experience of having a bitter truth that

Umerjati yuddhama sakiyo, bahaduri kamayepani Gurkhaliharu kaska lagi lade? Kun batoko yatra gare? Kasle ladna pathayo yuddhama? Prashna mathi prashna khaptirahanchha. (Rai, 2011, p. 42)

We spent all our life in the war. For whom the Gurkha soldiers fought even if they earned bravery. Which way did they travel? Who sent them to fight the war? There are questions in questions. (English translation)

Thinking about the loss born by the British Gurkha soldiers in the First World War, he further explains that twenty thousand British Gurkha soldiers lost their lives. Britain has a missing report of about only one thousand four hundred and forty one British Gurkha soldiers. But there might have been more number of missing Gurkha soldiers than that. According to Kipling in his story, *The Gardener*, “Missing *always* means dead” (p. 172). So, their condition was not discovered at all. Moreover, Britain has not done anything to those families from which the Gurkha soldiers are missing and those who have lost their lives. Their condition is poorer than it was before when they were made to join the British army. Man Bahadur has an example of such a family that

Ahilesamma Cholantiko boju barpipalko rukhmuni yeklai chiya ra jand bechdai baschha ni, usko logne second warma harayeko ho. Umermai logne maryo. Arko bihe garena. ‘Mero logne juidai chha’ vanchha bichari! (Rai, 2011, p. 92)

The grandma from Cholanti is still selling tea and beer alone under the trees *Bar Pipal*. Her husband disappeared in the *Second World War*. In her young

age, her husband died. She did not marry again. The poor grandma says, “My husband is still alive.” (English translation)

Further injustices have been born even by those survivors of the First World War who got their medals seized by the British government. Karna Bahadur Rana who was honoured with several medals including the Victoria Cross but later all the medals were taken back. The narrator criticizes the British government that there is nothing to seize from one more than that (Rai, 2011, p. 43). It is a matter of shame for the British government.

The families and relatives of the British Gurkha soldiers who were in wars do have a similar misery as well. They have no peace in mind. No one can guarantee about what it may happen in war. War is always cruel, violent, and barbaric as one of the characters in *A Farewell to Arms* observes: “There is nothing worse than war” (English, 2013, p. 69). Man Bahadur did not know about the birth of his son at home. His wife Kumari was also worried about him and would think:

Lahureko shreemati bhayera jivan bitaunu sahrari gahro hundorahechha. Yo umer, yo samaya! Yeti dherai samayasamma vet huna napaunu. (Rai, 2011, p.53)

Living as a wife of a British Gurkha soldier is very difficult. This youth period, this time! Not to have a chance to see him for this much a long time is quite hard. (English translation)

Some of those who survived the war but got injured were in hospital. Some had lost their legs, and some had lost their hands. They were undergoing treatment. They were happy to have been safe but at the same time, they would regret coming to the British army. Gaje Ghale, a Victoria Cross receiver, fell in depth of his thought while talking to another injured one:

Yestai rahechha jindagi. Gorkhako Barpak gaunma janmiyen, hurkiyen ra nokariko khojima yesto thauma aipunge. Goli khayera pani banchiyo yar. (Rai, 2011, p. 85)

The life is like this. I was born and grew up in Barpak village of Gorkha and arrived in a place like this in search of a job. Friend, we remained alive even being shot. (English translation)

Though they were not in warfare now, they had no contact with home for a long time. So, they were unable to share troubles and happiness with family members. They were totally unknown about each other.

Dipak Gurung, another injured British Gurkha warrior, became shocked when he received a letter from home quite after a long time. His younger brother wrote:

Yeha bau sarai dukheko chha. Tapailai khoji rahanchha. Bachdaina vanachha dhami lamale poni. Guhu-mut yekai thamma va'ko chha. Tin bisa bhayo ama khaseko poni. Ama khasda poni tapai auna vayena. Chhuti milo vone aunuhola. Ama poni timilai dekhna napoi maro. Timilai sodhi rahantho. Bau ta herera marachhu vanachha. (Rai, 2011, pp. 96-97)

Our father is very sick here. He is asking for you. The witch doctor Lama also says that he cannot live for a long time. He cannot go for toilet. It is sixty days that our mother died. You did not come when she died. If you get a leave, you come. The mother also died without seeing you again. She would keep asking for you. The father says that he will die only after seeing you again. (English translation)

Dipak could not remain calm. He wept a lot. He had lost his mother. He remembered his mother's cooking. Now onwards, there would be no cooking from his mother any longer. He remembered his old and unlucky father, who had fought in the First World War and was injured badly but sent back home without being offered any compensation, not even his pension. He felt helpless a lot.

CONCLUSION

British Gurkha soldiers are loyal to their duty. They worship their work. They believe in action rather in words. They are brave and do not like to show their back to their enemies. So, they are able to preserve the identity of Britain as a powerful country in the world that is not their own native land. However, a question always strikes their mind whether their honesty, dedication, selflessness, bravery, and contribution are paid back or honored by the concerned sides. For Britain, they have suffered a lot. They have sacrificed their sweat and blood for Britain's security, name and fame. They have fought many wars and earned victory for Britain. But the question is whether the British Gurkha soldiers enjoy heartily the victory while Britain is celebrating it. Can British Gurkha soldiers discover their identity in the identity earned by them for Britain and the British? In fact, there cannot be any greater sacrifice than the ones made by the British Gurkha soldiers on behalf of Britain during the two world wars along with other many wars they were in. Without thinking even a little about their home, family, and relatives, they fought for Britain. Their contribution for Britain needs to be honored. They need to be paid justice appropriately.

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