Understanding the Martial race theory and its effect on Social life
with special reference to Nepali community

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Abstract:

By the end of Anglo- Nepalese war of 1814, the British officials admired the courage and braveness of Nepalese and decided to recruit them into British force. Nepalese who were regarded as Gorkhas were recruited in British military and by the end of 1850; many Gurkha Battalions were created in India. When Indian soldiers revolted against the British East Company during 1857, a new recruitment ideology was adopted by the British Officials called the Martial Race. In late 19th century, Martial race theory became one the most important criteria for recruiting soldiers in British military. The theory was based on physical characteristics and traditional racial prejudices. Though theory was racial but it was also a diplomatic strategy of British in India which created a division of races into two, warrior and non-warrior races. The Gorkhas was categorized into Martial race and the numbers of Gorkhas were recruited in British military not only in India but also for British Empire. Gorkhas of Nepal became important soldiers for the British even in European wars but the community of Nepalese were divided into two due to Martial race. Some few ethnic clans of Nepalese were regarded as warrior tribes and were listed as Martial race whereas Non martial race were those who were unfit for wars were and were regarded as Nepalis by the British. This paper is by no means an exhaustive or conclusive study rather it serves analyses on martial race theory and its effect on social life of Nepali community.

Keywords: Ethnic, Martial Race, Gorkha, Nepali and British

Introduction

Originally, the theory of Martial race was note purely a British invention but have several points of origin within both Indian society and British biases. Martial race was considered those ethnic, caste or Communities who were brave, strong and have skills in war or battles but most importantly loyal where as those who were regarded unfit for wars as soldier were considered as non- martial race by the British. After 1857, the British started to recruit large numbers of soldiers from those caste or community who were categorized as martial race by the British Officials. At first only few clans of Gorkhas of Nepal were regarded as Martial race but gradually few more clans were added and the British in India created numbers of Gorkha battalions by the end of 19th century. Gradually, British divided the recruitment processes into two, one in which only martial race was recruited and another in which mixed races were recruited; no doubt the martial soldiers were given more importance. The modern historians believe that the theory was designed to avoid the intellectual and nationalist soldiers from

recruitment and based on those who remains loyal towards the Government[1]. The Martial race theory was originated in India during 1857 and by the end of 19th century it became one of the most important criteria for recruitment of soldiers in British military but the concept of Martial race is not a constant one but it evolved though the time[2]. The basis of the theory is often ascribed to a notion that was summarized in a statement given by General George Macmunn "One of the essential differences between East and West is that, in East with certain exceptions only certain clans and classes bear arms". His statements gave an idea of creating difference between the clans, caste or tribe and community regarding warriors and non-warriors. Soon the concept emerged as in the name of Martial race which had a profound impact in military recruitment processes during the Colonial period, the groups that were identified as martial race were regarded as warrior clans[3]. From the colonial powers perspective, the groups which were identified as martial race dud provided the crucial support to the colonial government, not just as a soldier in the army but also in different military and civil departments. In post-colonial era, India continued with limiting the recruitment to few selected groups identified as martial race like the Gorkhas, Rajputs, Sikhs, Punjabi, Marathas and Jats. The British were much more focused on Gorkhas of Nepal generally not only because they were strong or skilful but because they were loyal, and after the mutiny of 1857, they British wanted to change their strategy. The British not only focused on recruiting Gorkhas into British military but they also wanted to recruit other Nepali communities for working in different economic sectors specially in Northeast India since they were skilful and hardworking labours. Another reason for recruiting Nepalese in economic sectors was that they were cheap labours just like the Gorkhas. The British not only divided the Nepali communities into two but they also created a large social gap between the ethnic and non-ethnic clans of Nepal.

Methodology

The study is based on secondary sources like published literature like books, journals and research papers. The sources from unpublished works are also used for analyses purposes only like local books and articles.

Objectives

This research paper aims to find out the concept of Martial race and its importance in military recruitment, also tries to understand the social effect of martial race theory on Nepali communities which was created by the British in India. This paper is beneficial for researchers and scholars for understanding the Martial race theory and history of Gorkhas in India.

Gorkhas as a Martial race

The term Gorkha have different origins and still a debatable topic among the historians, some believes the word Gorkha was the of a principality located in Nepal where as some contemporary scholars gives reference to the unification of Nepal under the command of King Prithvi Narayan Shah who regarded as Gorkha king of Gorkha Kingdom and his soldiers were known as Gorkhas[4]. During the 18th century, the kingdom of Nepal adopted the policy of

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[1] Cardew, F. G. (1903). *A stetch of the service of the Bengal native infantry* (p. 139). Office of the Superintendent of Govt Printing, Calcutta.
[2] Captain W.J. M. Spaight, 'The History of Gurkha Recruiting', Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. LXX
[3] Caplan, Lionel (2000). Land and Social Change in Eastern Nepal of Hindu-Tribal Relation. Lalitpur: Himal Books
[4] Bista, D.B. (2000). People of Nepal. Kathmandu: Ratna pustakBhandar K. (2076 B.S.). Pararastrakaapaatra, Kathmandu: Kitab Publishers.

extending the territories and gradually they created a territorial dispute with British India when they reached Kangra region[5]. The British East India Company of India declared war against Nepal on 1st November 1814 which is known as The Anglo-Nepalese war and by 1816, Nepal was defeated by the British force and the war ended up the Treaty of Sugauli. The treaty was aimed at putting a limit to expansion and restraining the Gorkhas military in power in Nepal. During the war, British officials were impressed by the bravery and brilliant fight skills of Gorkhas and due to which a requested was placed before the Gorkha Kingdom regarding the recruitment of Gorkhas into the British military. Gorkhas in British Military was significant and the British pronounced them as Gurkhas who were largely consist of ethnic tribes like Magar and Gurung of Nepal. After British adopted the theory of Martial race in military recruitment, they divided the communities of Nepal into two categories in which tribes who were warrior in nature was regarded as Martial race and other tribes of Nepal were regarded as Non- Martial race. The tribes listed as martial race were called Gorkhas who were largely recruited in British military whereas tribes listed as non-martial race were called Nepalis and were employed in British economic sectors such as coal mines, tea gardening and working as coolies or labors. By 1885 to 1901, Gorkha recruiting depots were established in India and numbers of Gurkha Regiments were added to British military[6]. The numbers of Gorkhas were largely of ethnic tribes of Nepal at the beginning but gradually few more tribes were added in Gorkha regiments. Before Indian Independence, there were more than 55 battalions of Gorkha regiments and the Gorkhas were not only for India but were also forced to work oversea during which more than 10,000 Gorkha soldiers were dead in world wars[7]. In 1947, Nepal government signed tripartite agreement with the British and Independent India according to which the recruitment of Gorkhas from Nepal will be divided between India and Britain in which four Gorkha regiments will stay with British and six number of Gorkha Regiment will stay with India.

The division in Nepali Community due to Martial race

The British created differences within Nepali community by the end of 19th century, that tribe who were listed as Martial race was called Gorkhas and other tribes were regarded as Nepali. The Gorkhas were mostly consist of ethnic tribes such as Magars, Gurungs and Newars where as other Nepali communities like Bauns, Sarki, Sonars etc were regarded as Nepali. No doubt, the Gorkhas were very skilful, strong and brave warriors but they also proved to be very loyal towards the British government due to which the demand for Gorkhas increased day after day. By 20th century, some new tribes from Nepali community were added in Martial race like Limbu, Rai and Chhetry and in other hand tribes who were categorized as non-martial race of Nepal was hired for working in economic sectors[8]. The non-martial races of Nepal were also beneficial for the British government in India since they were skilful labours but most importantly cheap and loyal. British forced both Gorkhas and other Nepalese community to settle in Northeast India during the early 20th century and created job opportunities in different economic sectors like coal mines, working in tea gardens, Petroleum etc. for Nepalese and for Gorkhas, they created battalions. The Nepalese were also hired for working in construction sites and household where as Gorkhas were working overseas like in Europe and Africa for British military purposes. The ethnic tribes who were listed as martial race became more important for British during world wars and this also created a huge social gap between the

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[6] Bellamy, C. (2010). *Gorkhas special force* (pp. 45-48). John Murray London.
[7] Rajit K. Mazumder, The Indian Army and the Making of Punjab (New Delhi: Permanent B
[8] Banskota , P. (1944). The Gorkha connection, a history of the Gorkha recruitment in the British Indian army (pp. 30-35). Cambridge University Press.

communities of Nepal. The ancient caste system of Nepal which was largely based on Hindu Varna system changed into martial and non-martial race. The difference between Gorkhas and other Nepali communities increased year after year since both were going through socialization, adopting new culture and traditions since they were living in different parts of India. The traditional dresses and languages of ethnic tribes were different than the other Nepali communities since ancient time but after they were divided by the British according to martial race theory, the difference gave a pure picture where one can differentiate martial and non-martial community[9]. The Nepali communities including ethnic tribes like Magars and Gurungs were once under the same nationality and same system but their cultural behaviours changed since settling in India for different purposes as ethnics were more into living as a warrior life[10]. A large number of Nepalese settled in India during the 20th century and after Indian Independence, there was still a social division between martial race and non-martial race. The ancient living conditions of Nepalese changed since they were living under the commands of British even their infrastructure of houses, and food habits changed according to settlement. Even after Indian Independence, Nepalese in India are still divided into Gorkha and Nepali but since all the Nepalese regard themselves as Gorkha as they belonged to Gorkha land of Nepal, other Indians still believes that the martial races are the only Gorkhas whereas Nepalese are results of Migrations and British Settlements.

Conclusion

As observed traditionally, Martial race theory which was adopted by the British officials after the mutiny revolt of 1857 in India and became the most initial part of British military system. British divided the communities on the basis of Martial and Non Martial race due to which many communities were divided into two. The Gorkhas were categorized as martial races who were generally strong, skilful and loyal warriors like Magar, Gurung, Rai, Limbu and Newars where as non- martial races were unfit for battles and wars like Bauns, Sarki, Sonars etc. according to British. The division of communities created a huge social effect on Nepali communities who were originally from Nepal. Both martial and non-martial race from Nepali communities were settled down in India for British beneficial in military and in economic sectors. The culture and traditions of both the communities of Nepali changed gradually after the settlements and became different from each other from one way to another. Even after Indian Independence, Nepalese who were settled in India didn't understand that both the ethnic tribes who were regarded as Gorkhas and Nepali belong to same community. Many Nepalese in India proclaim themselves as Gorkha since they belong to same ancestral land which was called Gorkha or Gorkha kingdom but for other Indians, only the soldiers of Gorkha regiments are termed as Gorkha due to which Nepalese lost their real Identity in India since they are regarded as outsiders who were migrated and settled by the British.

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[10] Macfarlane Alan (1976). Resources and Population: A Study of Gurungs of Nepal. Cambridge: Cambridge university press