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### **History of Magar Community in Assam during 19<sup>th</sup> century**

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#### **Abstract**

*Northeast India has been an example of Cultural pluralism and diversity with different customs, traditions, cultures, languages, and castes belonging to numerous ethnic groups and tribes. The Nepalese or Nepalis have settled in and around the Northeast since the Colonial period in India, basically for military service. Nepal was united under King Prithvi Narayan Shah during the 18th century who built a strong kingdom known as the Gorkha Kingdom. The Nepalese were regarded as Gorkhas who were skillful warriors—during the late 18th century adopted the policy of territorial expansion which created a territorial dispute between British India and Nepal. The Gorkhas faced the mighty British army during 1814 which is known as the First Anglo-Nepalese War, which ended in 1816 with the treaty of Sugauli and ended their territorial disputes. During the war, the British admired the courage and skills of Gorkhas and decided to recruit them into the British military especially ethnic tribes like Magars and Gurungs. The Nepalese by the 19th century was divided into Martial and non-martial races the Martial race was regarded as Gorkha which largely consisted of ethnic tribes where whereas the non-Martial race was called Nepalis who were useful for working as laborers in British economic fields. Both Nepalis and Gorkhas were forced to settle in Northeast India for military service and to work in tea gardens, petroleum, coal mines, etc. The magar community is one of the oldest ethnic tribes of Nepal they were regarded as a Warrior tribe who were recruited into the Gorkha army of the Gorkha Kingdom and soon they impressed British Officials during the Anglo-Nepalese war which led them to become a part of the British Gorkha Regiment. Magars were not only recruited in British Military but they also served them by working in economic sectors in Northeast India during the 19th century. The Magars were not only categorized as a Martial race by the British but also as a Non-martial race which made them settle or migrate to serve in the British forces as well as work in different economic sectors, especially in Assam for Tea gardens, Coal mines and Agriculture etc.*

#### **Introduction**

During the 18th century, Gorkha was one of the 50 states of central Nepal and all the states were struggling against one another for control of land. The King Prithvi Narayan Shah of the

Gorkha state unified Nepal with the help of ethnic tribes like Magars<sup>1</sup>. Magars are one of the oldest ethnic tribes of Nepal, divided into different sub-clans like Ranas, Thapas, Aleys, etc. who lived in hilly areas of Nepal before the unification. The Magars were regarded as a warrior tribe who served not only in the military but also in Political administration during the reign of the Shah Dynasty in Nepal<sup>2</sup>. The Gorkhas were defeated by the mighty British force in the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814 but the British were so impressed by the Gorkhas that they decided to recruit them into the British military which later came to be known as the Gurkha or Gorkha Regiment. The Gorkhas were regarded as one of the Martial races by the British Empire in India, due to which they were recruited into the British military more than any other community. During mid mid-19th century, The British government settled Gorkhas in the Northeast region of India for military purposes and for working in different economic sectors. Gradually, the Gorkhas which largely consisted of ethnic tribes like Magars; became the backbone of the British Government. The demand for Gorkhas increased in the Northeast, especially in Assam for the military but after the British took control over the administration of Assam, there was a vacuum for labor and the Gorkhas were perfect for the British Empire as they were cheap, skillful, brave, and loyal<sup>3</sup>. The population of Gorkhas in Assam increased not only for military purposes but also for working in a coal mine, tea gardening petroleum, etc. during the late 19th and early 20th century.

## Methodology

The Secondary sources for the study of Magars in Nepal, Gorkhas, and the British military are taken from various journals and books found on the Internet and the State libraries of Assam. The Magars settlement in the Northeast Region of India during the colonial period is studied with the help of primary documents listed in State Secretariat records found in State archives Guwahati, Assam, State archive of Shillong, Meghalaya and the Bengal Judicial Proceeding found in the state Archives, Kolkata, West Bengal.

## History of Magars in British Regiments

Magar clans like Thapa and Rana played a significant role in the national building process under the Shah dynasty. In 1750, King Prithvi Narayan Shah was consolidating many petty kingdoms that were scattered across Nepal with the help of his army called Gorkhas which are known as war machines<sup>4</sup>. When Gorkhas fought with the British Army in the Anglo-Nepalese war, the numbers of ethnic tribes largely consisted of Magars who were recruited in the Gorkha army. Lieutenant Rose of the British army was impressed by Magars in 1815 due to which he proposed to form them into a battalion in the name of Nasiri Regiment which later became the first King George's Gurkha Rifles. British forced Nepal to sign the Treaty of Saguali in 1816, in which the British agreed not to colonize Nepal, and an imaginary line was drawn to separate territories between Nepal and India<sup>5</sup>. According to the Treaty, Nepal also agreed to supply Gorkha soldiers to the British for military and soon the British Government started to recruit Gorkhas especially ethnic tribes in British regiments which are known as Gurkha or Gorkha regiments. The Gurkhas are recruited every year at the British Gurkha camp at Pokhara in Nepal where a number of Magars largely took part. The camp enlists fresh recruits not only for the British Army but also for the counter-terror arm of the Singapore Police Force. British Army scouts roam the Nepalese countryside to identify potential recruits, who then undergo a

<sup>1</sup> Byron Farwell *The Gorkhas*, Norton, 1990

<sup>2</sup> Sir Francis Tuck, *Gurkha: The story of the Gurkhas of Nepal*, Pilgrim publication. 2009

<sup>3</sup> Chris Bellamy, *Gurkhas: Special force*, Hackett, 2011

<sup>4</sup> Tony Gould, *Imperial warriors, Britain and the Gurkhas*, Oxford, 2000

<sup>5</sup> Percival Landon, *Nepal*, Asian publishing service, 1982

rigorous training process before joining. About 5,000 men were recruited in British service during 1815 in which ethnic tribes, mostly Magars and Gurungs were recruited but the majority were of Himalayan tribes like Kumaonis and Garhwalis<sup>6</sup>. Another Battalions consisting of Gorkhas was created in the name of 2nd King Edward VII's Gurkha Rifle and 3rd Queen Alexandra's Gurkha Rifle in which the population of both Magars and Gurungs was higher than other communities. From 1885 to 1901 is termed as the period of friendly co-operation where the king of Nepal permitted to opening of Gorkha recruiting depots in India and in the year 1886, two more Gurkha regiments were added to the British army. The number of Gorkhas increased in the British Military and were formed into different military organizations due to the British theory about the warrior race called The Martial Race Theory<sup>7</sup>. According to *Martial Race theory*, "only certain clans have courage to bear arms and physical character as a warrior" This idea helped the British to understand the difference between the clans regarding their ability as soldiers whom they divided into Martial Race and Non-Martial Race". The Martial Race theory was first applied in India after 1857 after the mutiny revolt and the British found that the Martial Race could provide crucial support to the Colonial Government, not only as soldiers for the army but also as personnel in the police<sup>8</sup>. The British focused on understanding the different ethnic clans of Nepal and other British Colonial states, observing their ability as warriors. According to another theory related to Martial Race, the ethnic groups have more chances of being Martial race since they are experienced in wars and trained to survive harsh situations which makes them strong and brave. The British officers researched the ethnic tribes of the Gorkhas of Nepal who became one of the initial parts of the British military in India. The British Empire started to distinguish races between martial and non-martial races. The clans like Magars, Gurungs, and other ethnic tribes of Nepal were considered a Martial race with other major ethnic tribes<sup>9</sup>. By 1830, the Gorkhas were recruited more than 40% of the British Military because the British Empire needed soldiers not only for Europe and Asia<sup>10</sup>.

### **Magars settlement in Assam by British**

After the discovery of tea in Assam, the problems increased for the British East Company as tribes from the hills started to attack tea gardening areas and workers. In 1835, the Para Military force was called Cachar Levy by the British and was deployed in the areas of Assam where the British had control over tea gardens<sup>11</sup>. The initial strength was about 750 to protect the areas from tribal raids; gradually British needed more soldiers across Assam borders which led to reorganizing the militia into Frontier Force. The force grew stronger and became the right arm of the civil and the left arm of the military. The military force composed of different ethnic communities was converted into the Assam military, Police Battalions known as Lushai Hills, Lakimpur, and Naga Hills Battalions<sup>12</sup>. The Magars served loyally for the British during these years and soon they became one of the most efficient soldiers for the British Regime. During 1846, The Magar community in Nepal especially of western Hills was taken as Bondage instead of Interest due on loans supplied to their ancestors. The British Government found another valuable reason to recruit Magars not only in the Military but also in other fields, as now Magars were in debt on their land and required jobs. The British Government who was already impressed by the fighting skills of Magars didn't miss this opportunity and recruited large numbers of Magars in British Regiments. The Magars played very important roles in the 1st

<sup>6</sup> Bipan Chandra, *Essays in Colonialism*, New Delhi (1999), pp 34-59

<sup>7</sup> G.W Mac, *Ways and works in India* (London: Archibald Constable 1894)

<sup>8</sup> Bipan Chandra, *The stages of Colonialism*, Essay on Colonialism, Orient Longman, 2005, New Delhi, p 22-23

<sup>9</sup> Subhasish Ray, *The Nonmartial origin of the Martial Races: Ethnicity and Military service in the Ex British colonies*, in *Armed force and society*, 2012, p 510

<sup>10</sup> Reports from the Commitees: East India Company's Affair, season 5, December

<sup>11</sup> J.B.R Nicholson, *The Gurkha Rifles*, Bloomsbury, 1974

<sup>12</sup> L.W Shakespeare, *History of the Assam rifles*, Asian Publishing House. 1909

and 2nd Sikh wars and other revolts in India for the British Empire<sup>13</sup>. There was a need for additional soldiers before World War I and the fourth Battalion named Darang Battalion was raised from Assam Police Battalion. According to the report, more than 3000 soldiers from the Assam Police Battalion were sent to Europe and the Middle East in which 45% of soldiers were from the Magar community<sup>14</sup>. The Battalions fought bravely with Rifle Regiments of the Regular British Army and due to this the Assam force was renamed as Assam Rifles. During World War I, the Magars fought bravely and earned coveted Victoria Cross medals which are the most prestigious award of the British armed forces. The Magars soon replaced other ethnic tribes in the Assam Rifles and the demand for Gorkhas in the Assam Rifles slowly increased year after year. Magars were regarded as one of the most efficient Gorkha by the British and whenever there was a demand for Gorkhas the number of Magars will be more. By 1900, large numbers of Gorkhas were transferred to Assam for the military in which Magars were included the most<sup>15</sup>. The number of Magars was very high not only in the Gorkha Regiment but also in the Assam Rifle by 1912.

Number of Gorkhas in the Assam Rifles in 1912<sup>16</sup>

Assam Rifle	Gorkhas	Jharuas	Hill Tribes	Other
1 <sup>st</sup> battalion	762	48	39	3
2 <sup>nd</sup> battalion	647	137	1	9
3 <sup>rd</sup> battalion	592	166	35	38
4 <sup>th</sup> battalion	614	108	79	2
5 <sup>th</sup> battalion	552	200	38	3

The large number of Gorkhas in Assam Rifles in 1912 shows the importance of Gorkhas for the British not only regarding the Gorkha regiment but also for different military units organized for different purposes in India. The number of Gorkhas in Assam Rifle was higher than other communities in all the five battalions in which Magars were largely included.<sup>17</sup> The population of Gorkhas in Assam increased and those Gorkhas who were not eligible for the British army were transferred to different areas of Assam, especially in Tinsukia District due to Tea gardens, Coal mines, and Petroleum factories. The number of Magars was largely involved in the military rather than in British economic sectors as they were good in war but gradually, Magars migrated to Assam to work in tea gardens with other Nepali communities. The reasons behind Magars working in tea gardens was because, unlike other parts of India, there was no readily available labour market in Assam and many labourers of the northeast were not attracted to low-wage work. The British wanted ethnic tribes like Magars to settle in Assam as they wanted the population of ethnic tribes for the future military as well as for cheap labour which encouraged migration from the state of Gorkha into Assam. Like other Nepali communities, Magars worked in coal mines and tea gardening for the British during the late 19th century but the British, Assam State Government, and military later believed that the Gorkhas were better used in the armed force for which they were in need during European Crises. The Gorkhas were divided into labourers and soldiers according to an idea that emanated from the idea of biological determinism and martial race theory. The Magars, Khas, and Gurungs were largely recruited for the military instead of hiring them for the economic sectors of the British Empire. The occupational structure of the settled Magars and the Nepalis

<sup>13</sup> Edward Bishop, *Better to die than to be Coward: The story of the Gurkhas*, New English Library, 1976

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, Cambridge university Press, 2007, pp 20-21

<sup>15</sup> Assam Secretariat Financial, A proceeding, July 1901, No 115, Assam State Archive

<sup>16</sup> Assam Secretariat Financial, A proceeding, July 1915, No 21, Assam State Archive

<sup>17</sup> A.C Sinha, *Studying the various factors of Nepali Migration to India*, Nepalis in the Northeast, Indus Publishing house (2007) pp 22-25

in the Assam plains expanded to grazing and agriculture which led to the major settlement during the 20th century.

## **Conclusion**

As observed, the British Government was impressed by the Gorkha warriors of Nepal which largely consisted of ethnic tribes. The Magars were the largest ethnic tribes in the Gorkha army of Nepal who fought with the British in the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814. No doubt, Magars proved to be cheap labourers but very brave, skilful, and loyal which made efficient soldiers among other Gorkhas for the British. Magars were settled in the Northeast Region of India for the Gorkha Regiment but after the British took control over the economic administration of Assam, the Magars were transferred to Assam along with other ethnic tribes for other purposes. The British placed Gorkha especially ethnic clans like Magars in both the Gorkha Regiment as well as in Assam Rifles. Most probably the population of Magars increased in Assam due to the demand for soldiers<sup>18</sup>. The Gorkhas were settled in Assam not only for the military but also for working in British economic sectors like tea, coal, and Petroleum. Thus, the settlement of Magars in Assam was mainly because of the British Military agenda during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and those Magars who were not eligible for British Military service were also engaged in different works provided by the British in Assam. The British wanted Gorkhas to settle in Assam basically for two reasons; the first reason is that the British believed in Martial race and wanted to preserve them for future military proposes. The other reasons for settling Gorkhas in Assam were very valid; the Magars in Nepal needed money and could work for the British in very low wages. No doubt Magars were working in both military and economic sectors like tea gardens, coal mines etc. in Assam but during early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were more engaged in military. The Magars were settled in Assam for basically military proposes during Colonial Period, and some who failed as soldiers were settled down in Assam after 19<sup>th</sup> century for working in different British economic sectors.

## **Importance of the present work**

The purpose of the study is to highlight the history of Magars in Assam during the Colonial Period. The paper also focuses on Gorkhas, Assam Rifle and the importance of ethnic tribes for the British Empire for the Military proposes. The paper also aims to understand the different reasons behind the settlement of Magars in Assam during the Colonial Period.

## **Research gap**

The Magar clans like Thapas and Ranas are one the well-known Gorkhas or Nepalis with no proper historical sources to reconstruct their origin in Assam. The Secondary sources of the Gorkha regiment and Assam Rifle give reference to the Magars but there is a lack of analysis about the history of Magars in Assam during the Colonial Period.

## **Propose of the paper**

This paper will help understand the motivations behind the settlement of Magars and other ethnic groups in Assam by the British Government during the Colonial Period and the ideology behind the recruitment of Gorkhas in the British military. The paper also seeks to highlight the historical background of Magars in the Gorkha Regiment and Assam Rifles. It will be useful for other interested persons and researchers for further studies relating to the Assam Rifle, the Gorkhas, and the migration of ethnic tribes of Nepal to India.

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<sup>18</sup> Bengal Secret Letter covering G.H Fagan to Colonel Orchterlony, comd 3 div FD army, 18 November 1901 in Chris Bellamy, op-cit, p 12

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