

# Caste, military, migration: Nepali Gurkha communities in Britain

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## Abstract

The 200-year history of Gurkha service notwithstanding, Gurkha soldiers were forced to retire in their own country. The policy changes of 2004 and 2009 ended the age-old practice and paved the way for tens of thousands of retired soldiers and their dependants to migrate to the UK, many settling in the garrison towns of southern England. One of the fundamental changes to the Nepali diaspora in Britain since the mass arrival of these military migrants has been the extraordinary rise of caste associations, so much so that caste – ethnicised caste – has become a key marker of overseas Gurkha community and identity. This article seeks to understand the extent to which the policies and practices of the Brigade of Gurkhas, including pro-caste recruitment and organisation, have contributed to the rapid reproduction of caste abroad. Informed by Vron Ware's paradigm of military migration and multiculturalism, I demonstrate how caste has both strengthened the traditional social bonds and exacerbated inter-group intolerance and discrimination, particularly against the lower castes or Dalits. Using the military lens, my ethnographic and historic analysis adds a new dimension to the largely hidden but controversial problem of caste in the UK and beyond.

## Keywords

Gurkha Army, Gurkha migration to UK, caste and militarism, Britain, overseas caste, Nepali diaspora in England

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## Introduction

In April 2009, the British Parliament voted to grant residency to Gurkha veterans who had served a minimum of four years in the British Army. This landmark reform of a longstanding policy of keeping Gurkha soldiers off British shores following their retirement from their 15-year careers in the army, opened the doors for all retired Gurkhas to settle in the UK (Ware, 2012). In fact, post-1997 retirees had already been permitted UK residency in September 2004. Gordon Brown's Labour government implemented the changes according to a Parliamentary vote in May 2009, leading to the mass migration of ex-servicemen and their dependants. There are no data on the volumes of migration; Gurkha associations estimated that, as of September 2019, more than 90% of the veteran community – approximately 100,000 individuals – has made the UK, particularly southern England, their new home. The garrison towns familiar to Gurkhas, such as Aldershot and Farnborough in Hampshire, Ashford and Folkestone in Kent have become major Gurkha settlements.

This historic change in Gurkha immigration policy which paved the way for Gurkha mass migration was triggered by the Gurkha Justice Campaign led by actor (and daughter of an army major) Joanna Lumley, who effectively campaigned and lobbied politicians on behalf of the older Gurkhas wanting to settle in the UK (Carroll, 2012). After the success of her campaign, the UK media showered encomiums on Lumley. I was, however, struck by the exclusion of Gurkha voices in the media, even though they had fought for their settlement and other rights for much longer (Pariyar, 2016). This omission reflects the representation of the Gurkhas in the literature. Hundreds of books have been written, and many documentaries made, about these legendary soldiers – mostly authored by retired British officers who had commanded the men – which highlight Gurkha soldiers' extraordinary fighting skills and express deep admiration for their unflinching loyalty. However, these writings are laced with the authors' racist and patronising undertones (Bellamy, 2011; Caplan, 1995). And, the men's own voice is rarely heard.

The larger study on which this article is based (Pariyar, 2016) foregrounds the experiences of Gurkhas, either veterans who have settled in the UK or currently serving soldiers. In doing so, it represents a novel attempt to move beyond what the subtitle of the anthropologist Lionel Caplan's (1995) book calls the 'Western imagination' of the Gurkhas. Here, I will specifically focus on the reproduction of caste communities and identities in the diaspora, drawing on fieldwork carried out in Aldershot from 2012 to the present. This is an ethnographic study involving participant observation and open-ended, semi-structured interviews. As Koonings et al. (2019) demonstrate, ethnography can be a 'risky business' while studying violent places and sensitive subjects. Nonetheless, a long-term, immersive study is probably best suited to flesh out the realities of sensitive topics like caste. Between 2012 and 2013, I spent seven months in the town of Aldershot, the biggest Nepali settlement in Britain, for my doctoral study. Furthermore, since November 2018,

I have returned to the Gurkha communities in England, including the rural garrison town of Tidworth, South-west England. Born and brought up in a Gurkha village in western Nepal, and having lived among Gurkhas in England for several years, I have long known most of my research participants. These advantages notwithstanding, some Gurkhas tended to exclude me for at least two reasons. First, I was not a military man. Second, most important, I belonged to a so-called low-caste, or Dalit, family. I was therefore excluded and, often subtly, discriminated against, as they did to other Dalits. Thus, as a researcher, the distinction between the insider and outsider was rather complicated in my case (Crossley et al., 2016).

My ethnographic and historical analysis is informed by the British sociologist Vron Ware's (2012) paradigm of military migration. Documenting the experiences of Commonwealth soldiers and Gurkhas serving in the British Army from 2008 to 2011, Ware (2012) draws attention to the stark contradictions inherent in recruiting migrants to perform a highly symbolic type of work – dying and killing for the country – normally associated with patriotism and allegiance to a national flag. The concept highlights the uneven ways in which the colonial past is instrumentalised to provide the rationale for British recruitment practices in the present. In turn, this gives rise to the phenomenon of militarised multiculturalism, a concept that is able 'to sharpen the relationship between civil and military, revealing connections between domestic racism, cultural plurality, migration, social cohesion, national identity and foreign policy' (Ware, 2012: 263).

The studies of caste as a central problematic are rare among South Asian diasporas, particularly in Western countries. There was a greater interest in the subject during the 1950s and 1960s, wherein most scholars looked at caste among indentured Indian coolies and their descendants in former British plantation colonies such as Trinidad, Guyana, Mauritius, Fiji and South Africa (Jayawardena, 1971; Schwartz, 1967). And the common understanding among these scholars has been that caste, by and large, lost its steam after travelling across the 'black waters' (sea voyages considered polluting to Hindus) – and while labouring under the harsh conditions of the colonial plantations. The same theme continues to be reflected in the analysis of Hindu communities more widely (Singh, 2014).

An enduring caste debate in Britain among Indian communities has dismantled the popular assumption that caste cannot thrive in the secular environment of Western countries. Fed up with the ubiquitous problem of caste discrimination, overseas Indian Dalit activists have publicly spoken out about the hidden issues and have demanded legislation to redress them. Some academic and policy studies have validated Dalit claims: Dalits have been harassed and bullied, including in schools, colleges, doctors' surgeries, service delivery centres, temples and gurdwaras (Dhanda et al., 2014; Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010; Waughray and Dhanda, 2016). However, high-caste Hindu community leaders have vehemently opposed caste law, maintaining that caste has never been an issue in the diaspora (BBC, 2017). Indian scholar Shah (2015) wrote a polemical book attacking the Dalit call for caste law and blaming Christian missionaries and the politics of the Left for

allegedly trying to demoralise Indian and/or Hindu religion and culture. Thus far, the Government has not introduced legislative measures to protect the rights of overseas Dalits. Interestingly, neither Indian Dalit activists nor researchers have considered the situation of caste among other South Asian communities, including Nepalis. This study will thus add to the knowledge on caste in the diaspora and, hopefully, help expand the debate.

## The caste system and militarised castes

Caste is a complex subject. Half a century ago, prominent scholar of caste, Beteille (1969: 45) warned that 'it has been used to mean different things by different people in a variety of situations'. For low castes, or Dalits, it is a very unjust and oppressive system. In both India and Nepal, millions of them have been denied basic human rights; they suffer structural domination and daily humiliation and harassment – including psychological and physical violence (e.g. Cameron, 1998; Folmar, 2013; Jaffrelot, 2010; Jodhka, 2015; Pariyar and Lovett, 2016). But, in the eyes of the apex castes, caste is obviously a source of their in-born power and prestige (see Bennett, 1983 for high-caste Nepali communities). These privileged castes are likely to see caste as an essential system for maintaining social order through traditionally prescribed codes of conduct, for regulating important institutions like marriage and family – as well as for fulfilling vital economic needs of society through the traditional divisions of labour.

Scholars have long debated the question of why the system of caste has persisted in South Asia to this day. Earlier Western scholars, many of whom served as census officials for the East India Company, saw caste as a horizontal structure of Indian society. But, from the mid-twentieth century, village studies became more popular, wherein the everyday function of caste was closely observed – and now caste appeared to be much more of a vertical system. Foremost scholar in this line of thinking was the French anthropologist Dumont, who comprehensively analysed caste in Hindu India – *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980) – through the structural functionalist approach. Dumont (1980) argued that caste hierarchy retained its saliency in modern India due to, in the main, religious ideology. The notion of ritual purity and pollution is, according to the Dumontian understanding, the backbone of the caste system.

The practice of caste is not exclusive to Hindus, of course, but its fundamental concepts have been outlined in the Hindu scriptures. Ancient *Vedas* divide the Hindu world into four broad categories – known as the varnas – with the Brahman (priests) at the top and the Kshatriya (warriors) in the second rank. The Vaishya (business people) come below them followed by the lowest ranks, the Shudra (slaves and servants). In time, the varnas evolved into thousands of castes and sub-castes (jat or jati). The subsequent texts such as *Dharmasashtras*, particularly *Manusmriti*, developed intricate rules governing the caste system, which reduced the Shudra to slavery. Dumont (1980) argued that, despite its inherent inequality and injustice, Hindus of all ranks consent to caste as an article of faith.

His paradigm was appreciated and criticised; Marxist scholars particularly emphasised material conditions over religious ideology (e.g. Gough, 1989; Mencher, 1974).

Particularly relevant to my thesis here are the studies that have shone a light into the role of British colonialism in reinforcing and consolidating the caste system. Cohn (1996) shows, for example, how the British Empire discovered, collected and analysed information about Indian society, including the institution of caste, as a means of asserting its cultural hegemony and political control in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The anthropological historian Dirks (2001) further developed this idea by demonstrating the many ways in which colonial knowledge and categorisation – census data, archives and ethnographies – were used for strategic purposes. As a consequence of this long policy, Dirks argues that caste emerged as a principal marker of identity and community in modern India. Colonial army and police utilised ethnographic knowledge to label the castes as ‘martial’ or ‘criminal’, a pseudo-scientific categorisation aimed at military recruitment and organisation (Rand and Wagner, 2012: 35). Nepal was never colonised. And yet – I would argue – the British have strengthened its caste system remotely, through, in the main, their policies and the practices of the Gurkha Army.

### **Caste-ified Gurkha regiments**

Gurkha service has been highly caste-selective, right from the start of the recruitment in 1815. Except during the two Great Wars, when caste rules were relaxed to draw large numbers of fighters (Caplan, 1970: 114), only a handful of castes from specific regions of Nepali highlands have been selected. Until the mid-1990s, the Brigade of Gurkhas comprised four caste-specific infantry regiments: the second Gurkha Rifles (2 GR), 6 GR, 7 GR and 10 GR, respectively, recruited the Magar, Gurung, Rai and Limbu (Gellner, 2013). The Gurung and Magar originated in the mid-western hills whereas the Rai and Limbu hailed from the eastern highlands – and some from the adjoining Darjeeling area of West Bengal, India. Thus, for the Gurkha Army, caste has been more important than even nationality. In this section, I consider the following two important issues: (1) Why did the British favour just these four castes from over approximately 125 castes and/or ethnic groups of Nepal (Yadav, 2017: 37) and (2) How has caste been institutionalised in the army?

There are no official documents explaining the choice of castes for Gurkha regiments, but this can be discerned from the theory of martial race used to raise and maintain the colonial Indian Army. This is relevant because the Gurkhas were part of the Indian troops until the 1947 Indian Independence, and more or less the same principles have governed the British Gurkhas since (Caplan, 1995). The historian Streets (2004) and others have demonstrated that the British counted only select groups among the colonised peoples as capable of bearing arms. This was defined in biological and scientific terms: such as race (the Aryans or close to them), climate (inhabitants of cooler climates on higher altitudes) and personal traits (skin colour, colour of the eye, height, etc.). Equally important was the history of warfare. Overall, martial races were ‘those

who most closely resembled what the British thought themselves to be' (Metcalf, 1995: 127).

In what Dirks (2001) calls 'the ethnographic state' of India, caste was a key consideration for military recruitment. Until the mid-nineteenth century, high-caste Brahmins and Rajputs from Bihar and Oudh formed the bulk of the colonial troops (Rand and Wagner, 2012). These groups lost favour, however, after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. In the aftermath, the colonial authorities concluded that the violence, as well as many other troubles before it, was caused by the upper castes' 'superstitious beliefs and caste rules conflicting with the rules and laws enforced by the company' (Basham, 2008: 10). So, post-1857, high castes were purged from the Bengal and other arms of the Indian Army. Their places were taken by Sikhs and Gurkhas, whose regiments were expanded. They had proved their loyalty to the British by refraining from participating in the Mutiny and helping the British brutally crush the mutineers.

Not enough attention has been paid to the fact that the same sensitivities of caste reshaped Gurkha Regiments after the Mutiny. The Gurung and Magar were deemed suitable because they belonged to the middle ranks and were therefore perceived as less strict on caste rules (Vansittart, 1896: 63). As the Gurkha forces increased further, from the 1890s, similarly, middle-ranking Rais and Limbus were introduced into the Gurkha troops (Gould, 1999: 127). They, too, were seen as less rigid on Hindu caste customs; they took pork like the Magar, for example (which would seriously defile a high caste). High-caste Chhetri and Thakuri were recruited in small numbers, but their 9 GR was handed over to India during the sharing of Gurkha forces in 1947.

Particularly, since the mid-20th century, the recruiters followed stringent guidelines to retain the caste and cultural homogeneity of the Gurkha regiments. Unlike Commonwealth soldiers, Gurkha soldiers have been recruited in Nepal. The first phase of selection, known as 'hill selection', was carried out in targeted villages in the Himalayan foothills (Gould, 1999). Native recruiters called *galla wallas* scanned Gurkha heartlands in the hills to pick potential candidates. According to some retired recruiters, they were under strict instructions to select the fittest and most agile boys in their late teens – albeit only from the favoured castes. Village recruiters used their local knowledge of the villagers, candidates' citizenship certificates, their familial links to the army, etc. to determine the caste identities of the recruits. Likewise, British and native recruiting officers in the recruiting depots in the towns of Pokhara and Dharan vetted the social backgrounds of the new recruits.

Despite this strong policy of avoiding unwanted castes, some men from the ethnically and linguistically similar groups – such as the Tamang, Sherpa, Sunuwar, Thangmi and Thakali – tried to gain access to the Brigade of Gurkhas. There are many stories of some of the smartest boys being rejected in the final stages of selection after their true caste identities were discovered. A high-caste Chhetri ex-serviceman living in Aldershot recalled his final selection interview

with a British ARO (Area Recruiting Officer) in Pokhara in the late 1980s as follows:

The white officer stared at my face and asked what caste my surname indicated. When I told him that I was a Chhetri, he shook his head in disapproval and stated that the Chhetris were cowards. I assured him that I was not a coward as I was born in a Rai-dominated village and had grown up bullying Rai boys. Finally, he accepted me.

In recent years, the Ministry of Defence claims that Gurkha recruitment is open to all castes and regions; nonetheless, most of the new recruits belong to the same traditional castes (Pariyar, 2018). There are rumours galore on alleged malpractices including corruption and nepotism in what has now become an extremely competitive selection. According to most interviewees, connections of caste, sub-caste, village, kinship and family are paramount not only to be recruited, but to get promoted in the regiment as well.

### **Reinforcing caste hierarchy in the regiment**

Their hatred of the high castes notwithstanding, surprisingly, the British have long reinforced caste hierarchy through Gurkha traditions. Until recently, the soldiers were required to register as Hindus (with little regard to the fact that many men followed syncretic practices including Hinduism, Buddhism, Shamanism, Kirantism, etc.), and they were instructed to follow Brahmanic Hinduism in the camps. To date, every regiment has a Hindu temple supervised by high-caste Bahun priests; these chaplains obviously control the ritual sphere of the Gurkha Army. The traditional rituals and priests of respective castes – such as the phe-dangma of the Limbu and ghyabri of the Gurung – are still unavailable in the Gurkha Army. The soldiers have been ordered to show reverence to the high-caste chaplains and receive their blessings and listen to their chanting of Vedic mantras that no Gurkha understood. Religious conversion was not tolerated: I have met some ex-servicemen who lost their jobs because they turned to Christianity.

Moreover, the Brigade of Gurkhas has secretly preserved supposed ritual pollution associated with the lower castes (Pariyar, 2018). Many Dalit interviewees shared their terrible experiences of isolation and frustration of harassment and bullying at the hands of the soldiers and officers from the predominant, ‘clean’ castes. Until recently, every regiment recruited a section (15–20 men) of Dalit men in support roles to perform their hereditary – but socially segregated – roles: Damai tailors (making Gurkha hats, fitting the uniforms, etc.), Kami blacksmiths (repairing and maintaining guns) and Sarki shoemakers. Until the 1980s, many regiments officially segregated Dalits in the camps: they worked in their separate workshops well away from infantry and other support units. The Dalits were forbidden to enter into the mess kitchen, to dine with other soldiers and to touch others’ food and water. Also, Bahun chaplain did not let Dalits into the temple, nor did he perform the lifecycle rituals of Dalit children. Verbal abuse and

derogatory language were commonplace; they were physically attacked by their native officers for committing the slightest mistakes.

Thus, the policies and practices of the Gurkha regiments – which may well have been originally pushed by the high-caste Nepali state – have greatly reinforced the ritual superiority of the Bahun and emphasised ritual pollution associated with the lower castes. Many ethnically conscious Gurkha interviewees shared their deep frustrations and anger at being forced to follow Brahmanic Hinduism and respect the high castes in the army. And Dalits are still angry at the way they have been segregated and humiliated and harassed by Nepali men. Today, Gurkha officers emphasise the recent changes, including the avoidance of corporal punishment; however, to a degree, caste-based segregation and humiliation persist.

### **Regimented castes abroad**

The mass migration of retired Gurkha soldiers and their families after 2004 and 2009 has not only boosted the Nepali population in the UK, but transformed the community in many ways. Thanks to caste-selective recruitment, the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu have become the vast majority in the community. This is a big change to the demographic of Nepali population in the UK which was previously – as in most other developed countries – dominated by the high-caste Bahun, Chhetri and Newar. Another phenomenal change since the influx of the military migrants has been the proliferation of their associations and communities. Most of these groups are based on their original districts, towns, villages, professions, religions, etc. (Gellner, 2013: 144), and often, caste is the central axis of these communities.

Caste associations<sup>1</sup> have played a pivotal role in resurrecting overseas caste. In India, ‘caste associations carry out social, economic, educational and political functions’ (Shah, 2004: 15). Membership is acquired through birth (and women through inter-caste marriage), but modern caste associations tend to operate as voluntary organisations; similar to political parties and charity organisations, they are run by periodically elected officials. Caste associations have played a central role in the diaspora, too; for example, among Gujarati Hindus resident in Britain (Vertovec, 2000). Caste associations operate much the same way in Nepal and overseas. Most of the Gurkha caste associations have been registered as charitable organisations in England and Wales. They have played a major role in recreating and sustaining the bonds of caste – and, as I shall show, in projecting caste as a primary source of Gurkha identity and community overseas.

### ***Rising caste communities***

Since the mass arrival of military men and their families, the numbers and strengths of mainly Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu associations have grown exponentially. Initially, in the late 1990s, a few Gurung Gurkhas residing in London started celebrating their ethnic festival of Tamu Lhochhar. This small



gathering was the precursor to the Tamu Dhee UK (TDUK), which was officially launched in 2000. Likewise, the Magar, Rai and Limbu also opened their formal caste associations in English garrison towns, mainly Aldershot and Farnborough. As alluded to above, the start of caste associations in the diaspora in itself is nothing new; however, the rise of Gurkha caste associations in a very short period of time has been extraordinary. Gurkha caste associations – mainly the TDUK and Magar Association UK – have become the largest Nepali communities in the UK. And their power and influence in the community is growing, so much so that they have effectively overshadowed pan-Nepali associations.

Before the influx of the Gurkhas, all-inclusive associations were paramount in the diaspora community. In 1960, the pioneering Nepali Yeti Association was opened by Nepali students and residents of all castes and regions in England. Many other non-caste or ethnicity-based groups were subsequently formed, which not only brought diaspora Nepalis together, but also contributed to the development in Nepal (Gellner et al., 2014). Formed in 2003, and part of a global network, the Non-Resident Nepali Association UK has become a highly prestigious national group. It claims to represent the interests of the entire diaspora community, such as the issue of dual citizenship in Nepal. Its another important concern is to promote Nepal's development through external investment (Gellner and Adhikari, 2018). But, as I shall demonstrate later, the NRNUK as well as other pan-Nepali groups have lost ground in the face of powerful caste or ethnicity-based groups (Pariyar, 2018).

Significantly, Gurkha caste communities have been created in the image of the Gurkha Army. Similar to the four, caste-specific regiments of the Brigade of Gurkhas, the Gurkha diaspora has been divided into, by and large, four large caste communities: the TDUK of the Gurung, Magar Association of the Magar, Kirant Rai Yayokkha of the Rai and Kirant Yakthung Chumlung of the Limbu. These communities encompass all sub-castes or clans, regions, religious faiths, army ranks, etc. within a category. The Magar Association is, for example, an umbrella of various sub-castes such as the Pun, Purja, Ale, Gharti and Thapa and of religious faiths including Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism (Letizia, 2014: 298–299) and – in smaller numbers – Theravada Buddhism and Christianity. All major caste associations have regional branches across England and Wales and they boast thousands of members.

No doubt, these large Gurkha caste associations have also been inspired by their transnational ethnic politics. In India, caste has increasingly become a source of community and identity since the 1970s and 1980s (Gupta, 2004). Nepali underprivileged castes too have become ethnicised after the democratic changes of 1990 and a violent decade-long Maoist insurgency since 1996. In particular, middle-ranking castes, who self-identified as ethnic/indigenous groups, formed their caste associations, such as those seen among Gurkhas in the UK. And these activists reframed their histories and reinvented their religio-cultural traditions with the aim of asserting their cultural identities and political rights in the face of long-term domination of high-caste Hindus in Nepal (Hangen, 2010;

Hutt and Onta, 2017; Lawoti and Hangen, 2013). These cultural identities have been expressed through, among other things, large festivals held in towns (which used to be locally celebrated in the past), such as the Tamu Lhochhar of the Gurung, Buddha Purnima of the Magar and Udhauli of the Rai and Limbu. Gurkha caste associations in England follow their transnational ethnic calendars to celebrate many of these events and festivals as well as some games and festive gatherings unique to the diaspora (Pariyar, 2016).

Using their study of Scottish Highland Games run by Scot migrants in the USA, Flinn and Turner (2015) demonstrate three purposes served by the diaspora events: (a) offer a 'rallying pint' for migrants to celebrate their heritage; (b) serve as a platform for working towards shared purpose and meaning and (c) 'affirm and display their difference to the home identity' (Flinn and Turner, 2015: 103). Such festive occasions give the migrants their badge of pride in the face of the local dominant culture and society – and to create their identities distinct from other nationalities. I would argue that the festivals and events hosted by Gurkha caste associations serve similar purposes. These occasions not only create identities and solidarities among caste fellows but also widen the distance with other groups.

I have attended several Gurkha festivals held across England: including Tamu Lhochhar celebrations held by the TDUK in Reading and another smaller Gurung association in Folkestone in late December 2018. The standard formats of these festivals are basically the same. The celebration begins with the play of recorded national anthems of both Nepal and Britain, with everyone standing up silently. Then invited guests, including the representatives of the Nepali Government (the Nepali ambassador in London, visiting ministers, etc.) and of British authorities (an MP, local councillor, etc.), are honoured onstage with the garlanding of *khada*, a popular Tibetan ceremonial scarf. The organisers and guests then make lengthy speeches, highlighting the importance of preserving their own caste-specific religio-cultural traditions. In Reading, a leader of the TDUK vociferously stated the common refrain in Gurkha speeches: 'If we lose our money and property, we have lost something; if we lose our identity, we have lost everything'. After the speeches, songs and dances are performed. The participants enjoy the cultural shows as well as traditional foods – while bonding with their extended families, villagers, fellow soldiers and caste fellows.

The propensity of majority Gurkhas and their families to align themselves with their own castes is most visible in some of the popular events such as the annual Nepali Mela. Held in a large horse-racing stadium in a London suburb around July–August, the Mela attracts approximately 8000 Nepali men, women and children from across Britain. Starting with the usual speeches and honouring of guests, as above, cultural rallies are the highlights of the programme. Hundreds of people of all ages representing at least 30 or 35 different organisations – most of them associations of the Gurung and Magar – perform their traditional songs, dances and dramas in front of a large audience. The air is filled with the sounds of drums, cymbals and flutes; people sing their folk songs and dance enthusiastically. And flaunt their traditional attires. Many of these impressive performances occur

behind large banners of respective caste associations. In this way, the cultural life of the Gurkhas in the Himalayan foothills is brought to life in the celebrations (Pariyar, 2018). Cultural identities of the respective castes are affirmed and reinforced.

Even though Nepali Mela is touted as a national event – aimed at representing Nepal to the wider world – it is owned and run by a single Gurung group, the TDUK. Its executive committee takes every decision and controls the finances and mobilises the volunteers. During the festival, the caste flag flutters alongside the national flags of both Britain and Nepal. The banners, the posters highlight Gurung religio-cultural traditions. Participating groups likewise emphasise their own cultures and customs during the demonstrations.

Significantly, what is demonstrated is as meaningful as what is rejected from these celebrations. Some of the key performances and symbols of Nepal are absent, particularly those reflecting the cultures and customs of the dominant high castes. Unlike in Nepal, and in the Gurkha Army, the festival does not involve a Hindu puja. No Hindu gods are worshipped; there is no chanting of sacred Hindu texts. Images of popular Hindu deities, including Lord Pashupatinath (considered Nepal's national god), are not seen anywhere. Nor does one see the images of the Goddess Sita and of the holy cow (national animal). Hardly anybody wears the national dress, *daura suruwal*. In sum, Nepali Mela – as well as most other Gurkha celebrations – belie the fact that 80% of the population in Nepal practise Hinduism.

The Nepali Mela, and similar other festivals held in Britain, are starkly different from those held in other Nepali diasporas. I have participated in the bi-annual Nepali Mela celebrations in Sydney, Australia, and have witnessed similar occasions in the USA through social media. In these countries, where high-caste Bahun and Chhetri predominate, iconic Nepali functions are controlled by national organisations, such as the Non-Resident Nepalis Association (Pariyar, 2019). High-caste Hindu cultures and customs are paramount here. Ethnic cultures including those of the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu may be presented, albeit as minor functions, as tokens to show Nepal as multi-ethnic and multicultural.

### *Gurkhas' loyalty to their castes – A military analysis*

Building on Vron Ware's theory (2012) of military migration, I would argue that military culture and tradition have been critical to the rapid emergence of caste communities among Gurkha immigrants in Britain. First, – and most obvious – is the unique pattern of Gurkha migration due to their long-standing immigration policies. Kept away from British shores for so long, many ex-servicemen and their families flooded into England after the doors were opened in 2008. Because they were not refugees, the host country could not control who settled where. Thus, the newcomers were able to quickly concentrate in some of the garrison towns such as Aldershot, Farnborough and Ashford. And, due to the preponderance of four castes in the regiments, these Gurkha settlements turned into caste clusters.

Second, social networks of many Gurkha immigrants have remained strong right from the outset of migration. This is due to, in the main, recruitment practices targeted at specific castes, sub-castes, villages and towns (Pariyar, 2016). Therefore, many soldiers' family, kinship, village and caste networks have remained, by and large, unbroken. Research has shown that migrants spend a great deal of time and energy to reform their social networks through, among other things, the process of chain migration (Macdonald and MacDonald, 1964). People living abroad use their money and other resources to pave the way for their families and kin to move with them in time; these links are crucial for the processes of both migration and settlement. The networks provide the social capital needed to establish themselves in a new country (Odem and Lacy, 2009: 5). But many Gurkhas were fortunate in the sense that they did not need to work towards forging their transnational connections.

Third, the soldiers' long experience of living and associating with their own caste fellows in the army influenced their behaviour in the diaspora. In their recent study of the armed forces through the lens of gender, Woodward and Duncanson (2017: 2) note: 'militaries shape their members' behaviours through the construction and reproduction of norms, and the development of rules and policies governing individual activities'. As the only ethnically pure units of the British Army, every Gurkha regiment or company has been exclusive to a caste (under the supervision of a few white British). The soldiers were granted leave to visit their families in Nepal just once every three years. I would argue that these policies have made the Gurkha soldiers extremely loyal to their regiments. And, given caste-exclusive regiments, one's loyalty to the army translated into his loyalty to his caste.

Fourth, following the above, the segregation of Nepalis in the British Army seems to have limited their integration into wider British society. Many local whites in Aldershot, for example, blamed the elderly Gurkhas for their lack of English skills, for not dressing up properly, etc. The critics were oblivious to the fact that the army never taught most Gurkhas – many of whom hardly completed their high school education in Nepali-medium schools – any English. The orders were given in Nepali; basic reading and writing skills were taught in Roman Nepali. And, they were rarely introduced to the British way of life. Their messes were separate from those of the white officers. And, mostly serving from abroad – Malaya, Hong Kong, Brunei and Singapore – many pre-1997 retirees rarely set foot on British soil.

As a consequence, every regiment evolved as distinct cultural and/or caste enclaves, known as *Gurkhali kaida* in Gurkha parlance. As mentioned before, officially, Brahmanic Hindu customs and cultures have been given priority; however, given their large presence, the cultures and customs of the predominant castes became the norm in the army. A retired British officer who had commanded the Gurkhas said,

... every Gurkha regiment is culturally so distinct that I struggled to adjust when transferred from the 10 GR of the Rai to the 6 GR of the Gurung. For one thing, I

had begun to enjoy pork curry with the Limbu of the 10 GR, which was forbidden to the Gurung of the 6th.

Given this reality in the army, many Gurkhas have naturally associated with their own castes in the diaspora.

This is not to suggest, however, that Gurkha veterans lack a sense of belonging to Britain. This takes me to my fourth point about why Gurkha caste communities have evolved so rapidly in the diaspora. Of course, the formations of British citizenship are highly racialised and gendered, and they are strongly informed by neo/imperial militarism (Qureshi and Zeitlyn, 2012). As Ware (2010) has shown, issues of British citizenship and belonging, in the case of Gurkha and Commonwealth soldiers, have been coloured by postcolonial melancholia; whiteness continues to be privileged. To date, foreign and Commonwealth soldiers are disadvantaged by many technical difficulties, such as prohibitively expensive visas and immigration lawyers' fees, in their attempts to bring their spouses and children with them, not to mention the costs involved in applying for British citizenship. Many elderly Gurkhas continue to struggle to bring at least one of their adult sons or daughters as carers. Even though Britain thus continues to treat foreign soldiers as outsiders, I have found a strong sense of belonging to Britain among most Gurkha veterans – as evidenced by the following (typical) statement of a Gurkha resident in Farnborough:

We have blood ties with Britain. We have fought for this country, helped create and sustain the empire. More than 60,000 men and boys, most of them from our castes and communities, from our hills, have died fighting for Britain around the world. Many of us are still suffering from the wounds from the battlefields. So, although we were unjustly kept out of British soil for so long, we are entitled to live here and enjoy its facilities.

Gurkhas' sense of belonging to their host country is so strong that many Gurkhas would object to being addressed as 'immigrants'. Claiming their especial place in British society, separate from other Nepalis, many Gurkhas have refused to be identified as members of the Non-Resident Nepalis (NRN). The latter makes representations to the Nepali Government on behalf of overseas Nepalis in general, demanding dual citizenship for Nepalis residing outside the Indian Subcontinent (Gellner and Adhikari, 2018). But, Gurkhas insist that they deserve dual citizenship, not as NRNs, but as proud Gurkha soldiers. A former chair of the Magar Association UK explained their position as follows: 'We were recruited through an inter-governmental agreement; we served as Nepali citizens loyal to the British Crown. Thus, we always had dual allegiances; we are already dual citizens'.

The Gurkhas' proud history of service and sacrifice to Britain, and the consequent feeling of belonging to the UK, has greatly boosted their capability to quickly establish themselves there. This has given them the confidence to actively revive their cultural and religious traditions as well as their castes and communities.

So, their larger numbers alone are not the critical factor. In Australia, for example, the activists among the same castes often struggle to enlist new members (Pariyar, 2019). It has become even more difficult now that Nepal's ethnic – anti-caste hierarchy – movement has lost ground after the adoption of a new constitution in 2015. But, among the Gurkhas in Britain, there is no sign of caste communities losing their strength. This can be understood, as I have shown, through the prism of military tradition and culture. But this firming up of caste-based solidarities among majority Gurkha castes has had a negative impact upon minority groups; I briefly consider the experience of overseas Dalits in the remaining section.

### **Growing exclusion of Dalits**

Any ethnic identity movement 'recreates and reinforces group boundaries... by inhibiting the development of cross-cultural ties' (Wimmer, 2013: 72). The rise of Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu communities along the lines of caste and/or ethnicity may have greatly promoted their belonging and identity in the UK; but, on the flip-side, the same has caused growing exclusion and discrimination against the members of minority castes (Pariyar, 2016, 2018). Caste has inevitably undergone a significant change in a politically, economically and culturally different country like the UK. However, the 1500-strong Dalit community finds itself subjected to certain traditional forms of caste-based exclusion and oppression in the diaspora. Some of their key issues overseas now follow.

First, as in Nepal, marital relations with Dalits are strictly forbidden (Pariyar, 2018). Most marriages in the UK have happened with the same castes, with some exceptions between the ethnically and culturally similar groups – such as the Rai and Limbu from eastern Nepal, and the Gurung and Magar from the west. A union with a lower caste is perceived as hugely scandalous, as it would lead to the severe loss of family prestige and honour. A Gurkha in Aldershot explained the typical scenario:

I do not have faith in the caste system, but I cannot let my daughters marry other castes. Marrying another 'touchable' caste would be detrimental to our ethnic identity; cultures would be mixed and diluted. But a union with an untouchable would bring huge shame to our family. It would be against the grain of our cultural practice. How can we accept a Dalit as our relative when he is not even permitted into our homes or tea shops in Nepal and, to some degree, in the UK, too?

In a few cases of subversive marriages involving Dalits, non-Dalit partners have been excommunicated from their homes and family circles, as in Nepal (Bhattachan, 2003). Non-Dalit partners have either lived separately, with no contact with the upper-caste family, or, more often than not, with the family of the lower-caste partner. Moreover, they have been subjected to intimidation and threats of violence. Nepal frequently sees honour killings in response to inter-caste marriage involving the Dalit (Bishwakarma, 2019). Such incidents

have not been reported among Nepalis in the UK; however, young people of all castes are well aware of the potential dangers and avoid affairs with Dalits.

Second, Dalits face the acute problem of residential segregation in the overseas Nepali community. According to Dalit groups based in the town, approximately 80% of Nepali homes in Aldershot would not rent their rooms or flats to Dalits (Pariyar, 2018). I have seen and heard 'casteist' Nepali landlords screen out 'untouchable' tenants by first inquiring about their surnames and, if their caste identities are not clear, about their ancestral trades and original towns or villages. Some Dalit tenants concealed their castes – as in Gurkha towns in Nepal, such as Pokhara (Pariyar and Lovett, 2016) – to gain access to upper-caste properties. And, in some cases, they have been immediately evacuated from their rental properties once their true identities were discovered. Dalits often forestalled the pain and humiliation by sharing homes and flats with fellow Dalits – or by renting Indian and Pakistani properties.

Thus, the segregation and discrimination against Dalits in the Nepali/Gurkha diaspora community is more to do with the retention of the religious orthodoxies and cultural practices, instead of the assertion of ethnic identity. This takes me to my third arena of the domination and separation of Dalits on the basis of caste: domestic rituals. It is important to make the distinction here between the public and the private. As in Nepal, I have seen most Nepalis mix freely and share food and drinks with Dalits in public events. In fact, one of the popular curry houses in Aldershot is owned and run by a lower-caste Gurkha family. But caste strictures are observed much more rigidly in many homes and in the circle of extended family and kinship networks. It was difficult, of course, to ascertain the extent of segregation in individual homes; but, most households did not invite Dalits into their family rituals and functions, including their close neighbours and friends. And there have been cases of Dalit Gurkhas and their children being told to stay away from certain areas of the home, particularly kitchens and prayer rooms.

Many UK Dalits seem to uncritically accept these and many other forms of segregation and discrimination, as the unchanging character of Nepali culture. Unlike Indian Dalits, they have not publicly raised their voices against their persistent dominance. From the more private and intimate discussions, it emerged that they are most hurt by the widespread issue of verbal abuse. The situation seems similar to the experiences of Indian Dalits (Ghuman, 2011; Waughray and Dhanda, 2016). I have witnessed and heard anecdotes of the ubiquitous use of degrading language and hurtful caste slurs; often caste names – the Kami, Damai and Sarki – are used derogatorily. The Gurkhas have a peculiar derogatory term for the Dalit castes represented in the forces: the KDS (Kami, Damai and Sarki) – which is widely used to demean and humiliate Dalits.

The persistent plight of a small community of Dalits – the Kami, Damai and Sarki – in the UK is attributable to at least two factors: (a) The policies of the Gurkha Army, as described earlier, which either officially sanctioned caste discrimination and untouchability, or let the problem persist and (b) the growing sensitivities of caste as an inevitable consequence of increasing caste clustering

among the Gurkhas. As I have shown, most of the large events are organised by Gurkha caste associations, many of which are, by definition, specific to the respective castes. A few others may as well participate, but strictly as invited guests: otherness is made explicit. As caste-based organisations have increasingly monopolised the public space, members of small groups such as Dalits have been understandably cornered. Dalits too have opened at least three communities; but they are too small to make a mark in the community. Thus, the ascendancy of Gurkha caste associations, among other things, has further marginalised Dalits and stigmatised their identities abroad.

## Conclusion

I have shown that the largely unwritten – but well-known to Nepalis – pro-caste policy and practice of military recruitment and organisation is key to understanding the dynamics of overseas caste among contemporary Nepalis residing in the UK (Pariyar, 2018). Their large numbers certainly provided the Gurkhas an advantage in the diaspora; and, moreover, the long policies of caste clustering in the regiments have also augmented their loyalty to their castes. I have found that their military service has strongly shaped most men's thinking and attitude; they therefore behave like in the army. The senior ranks – majors, captains and lieutenants – continue to command awe and respect among the men post-retirement. Fellow soldiers, called *numberis*, have kin-like relationships. The Gurkhas tend not to easily mix with civilians. Thus, it is important to conceptualise Gurkhas as military migrants (Ware, 2012) to properly understand why they have been so efficacious in reproducing their caste-based communities and identities in their new homes in England.

A question may then arise: Why have these Gurkha migrants not rejected caste together with the Hindu religion? This may be explained in a number of ways. First of all, despite its provenance in the Hindu religion, caste is followed by virtually all religionists in South Asia. Furthermore, the apparent contradiction should be understood through the distinction between macro and micro-level practices (Kelle, 2005) – as well as between the public and the private. As part of their transnational ethnic movements, characterised by their large caste/ethnic associations, Gurkhas have rejected Hindu customs and cultures in public. But this is evidently not true in everyday practice. Gellner et al. (2014) have shown that most Gurkha households follow a mix of Hindu, Buddhist, Kiranti, shamanistic traditions. And, I would add, there is a small but growing population of Christian converts, too. There is no pattern of one caste or religion or region dominating and humiliating Dalits more than others. Much of the discrimination and oppression of Dalits overseas is concealed, as it occurs in the more intimate, private spheres such as homes, marriages and domestic rituals. Unlike in swathes of Nepal, they are not excluded from public spaces such the houses of worship, shops or restaurants. Nonetheless, in certain aspects of their lives, Nepalis of almost any faith are likely to honour the popular custom of excluding Dalits.



Through their caste-based clustering and ethnic activism, Gurkha migrants have actively challenged the traditional superiority of the upper castes while retaining, if not promoting, the inferiority of those considered lower than them.

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### Note

1. Here is a conceptual explanation between caste associations and ethnic groups in the Nepali context. Since the early 1990s, many politically organised communities including the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu have identified themselves as 'ethnic' and/or 'indigenous' groups. And, some Western and native scholars have used this vernacular categorisation uncritically (Hangen, 2010; Hutt and Onta, 2017; Lawoti and Hangen, 2013). I suggest that these communities can be alternatively viewed as caste associations or organisations, analogous to the ethnicization of castes in India (e.g. Gupta, 2004). Moreover, in Nepal, the distinction between caste and ethnicity is not always clear; it is often used alternatively in everyday communications. In any case, historically, the Hindu state categorised all tribes, ethnic groups and religionists into a singular caste hierarchy – through the 1854 Civil Code – which is widely practised as a cultural form to date.

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