



## Short Research Report

# The fearless Gorkhas: Historical bravery, anti-colonial resistance, and post-colonial identity

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**Abstract** - The Gorkhas, originating from Nepal’s mountainous regions and numbering approximately 3.2 million domestically with significant diasporas in India (1.5 million), the UK (25,000), and Southeast Asia, have been globally valorized for their martial traditions. Approximately 30,000 serve in institutionalized military and paramilitary roles, including the British Army (4,000), Indian Army (32,000), and Singapore Police Force’s Gurkha Contingent (2,000). This study critically interrogates the historical, cultural, and socio-political construction of Gorkha identity, challenging reductive “martial race” paradigms to instead foreground their exploitation within colonial and post-colonial power structures. Through a decolonial lens, it analyzes the Anglo-Nepal War (1814–1816), the Treaty of Sugauli (1816), and post-1947 ethnopolitical movements—notably India’s suppression of the Gorkhaland agitation and Singapore’s retention of the Gurkha Contingent—to expose how Gorkha bravery was commodified to serve imperial and nationalist agendas. Employing Frantz Fanon’s anti-colonial theory and Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of “invented tradition,” the research deconstructs colonial narratives of Gorkha “savagery” and “loyalty,” revealing their strategic agency in resisting subjugation. The Singapore case study exemplifies the repurposing of colonial militarization for multicultural governance, where Gurkhas remain excluded from citizenship despite their role as “neutral” enforcers. Synthesizing colonial-era accounts with post-colonial critiques, this study contributes to decolonial scholarship by (1) unmasking structural exploitation of Gorkha labor across regimes, (2) revealing continuities of colonial racial hierarchies in post-colonial statecraft, and (3) advancing a framework to analyze subaltern resistance in marginalized communities. By recentring Gorkha agency and contestation, this work reconfigures historical narratives and informs contemporary debates on ethnonationalism, militarization, and the coloniality of power.

**Keywords:** Anti-colonialism, ethnopolitics, Gorkhas, martial race, nationalism

## Introduction

The Gorkhas, hailing from the rugged terrains of Nepal, have carved a unique niche in military history with their unparalleled bravery and combat prowess. The Gorkhas, numbering approximately 3.2 million in Nepal ([Central Intelligence Agency \[CIA\], 2023](#)), with significant diasporas in India (1.5 million), the UK (25,000), and Southeast Asia, occupy a paradoxical position in global military history. While celebrated as elite warriors in institutions like the British Army (4,000 personnel), Indian Army (32,000), and Singapore Police Force (2,000), their socio-political narratives remain marginalized ([Chettri 2013](#); [Golay 2021](#)). This dichotomy underscores their valorized yet exploited status, rooted in colonial coercion and post-colonial ethnopolitical dynamics.

The institutionalization of Gorkha identity as a "martial race" emerged from British colonial strategies during the Anglo-Nepal War (1814–1816), which culminated in the Treaty of Sugauli (1816) and formalized Gorkha recruitment into imperial armies ([Hamilton 1819](#); [Crews 2018](#)). This conflict was pivotal in establishing the Gorkhas' status as formidable warriors. Key figures such as Balbhadra Kunwar and Bhakti Thapa emerged as iconic heroes during this period. Balbhadra Kunwar's defense of the fort at Nalapani, despite being heavily outnumbered and outgunned, became a symbol of Gurkha valor. Similarly, Bhakti Thapa's leadership in the Battle of Jaithak exemplified the strategic acumen and indomitable spirit of the Gorkhas ([Regmi 1975](#)). Post-1947, this legacy persisted through India's co-option of Gorkha loyalty to suppress subnational movements like the Gorkhaland agitation (1986–1988), while Singapore repurposed colonial militarization via its Gurkha Contingent to enforce "neutral" governance in a multicultural state ([Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore, 2020](#)).

Prior scholarship has fragmented Gorkha history into militaristic or regional analyses. For instance, [Hamilton's \(1819\)](#) colonial-era account of Gorkha militarization emphasized Eurocentric valorization of their combat prowess, while [Ganguly \(2005\)](#) narrowly framed the Gorkhaland movement as a subnationalist struggle. This study bridges these gaps by applying Frantz Fanon's anti-colonial theory to critique the commodification of Gorkha labor and Eric Hobsbawm's concept of "invented tradition" to deconstruct the "fearless Gurkha" myth. These frameworks reveal how colonial

narratives of Gorkha bravery were weaponized to serve British imperialism and post-1947 nation-building projects (Crews 2018; Golay 2021).

The inclusion of Singapore's Gurkha Contingent—a colonial relic retained post-1965 independence—exposes unresolved tensions between multiculturalism and militarized governance. By deploying Nepali Gurkhas as "neutral" enforcers, Singapore perpetuated colonial racial hierarchies, excluding them from citizenship while valorizing their service (Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore, 2020). This case study offers a novel critique of post-colonial statecraft, highlighting how colonial institutions are repurposed to manage ethnic diversity.

### Significance of the Study

This research holds critical academic and socio-political relevance by challenging apolitical "martial race" narratives that reductively frame Gorkhas as innate warriors, instead centering their agency within anti-colonial resistance and post-colonial ethnopolitical struggles. It advances decolonial scholarship through three key contributions: first, it exposes the systemic exploitation of Gorkha labor under colonial and post-colonial regimes, interrogating how British "martial race" ideologies and post-1947 Indian nation-building instrumentalized Gorkha identity to suppress dissent and extract militarized labor. Second, it reveals how ostensibly progressive multicultural governance in post-colonial states like Singapore remains contingent on colonial militarization, as evidenced by the Gurkha Contingent's retention as "neutral" enforcers excluded from citizenship. Third, it provides an analytical framework for understanding subaltern resistance in marginalized communities, synthesizing anti-colonial theory, subaltern studies, and memory politics to illuminate how Gorkhas navigated and contested hegemonic power structures. By reframing Gorkha history as a site of both coercion and agency, this study not only reconfigures historical narratives but also informs contemporary debates on ethnonationalism, militarization, and post-colonial statecraft, offering broader implications for scholarship on marginalized groups in South and Southeast Asia.

### Objective of the study

- i. To analyze Colonial Roots: Investigate the Anglo-Nepal War and Treaty of Sugauli as foundational to the commodification of Gorkha identity (Hamilton 1819; Crews 2018).

- ii. To examine Post-Colonial Ethnopolitics: Critique India's suppression of the Gorkhaland movement and Singapore's use of the Gurkha Contingent as tools of state control ([Ganguly 2005](#); [Chettri 2013](#)).
- iii. To decolonize Gorkha Narratives: Apply Fanonian and Hobsbawmian frameworks to recover subaltern voices and deconstruct militarized myths ([Fanon 1963](#); [Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983](#))

## Literature Review

### Colonial Constructs and Gorkha Militarization

[Hamilton's \(1819\)](#) *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal* provides a foundational yet Orientalist portrayal of Gorkha expansion, framing their resistance to British colonialism as "savage" valor. His Eurocentric narrative obscures Gorkha strategic agency, reducing their resistance to primal ferocity. This study critiques Hamilton's omissions, instead highlighting deliberate anti-colonial tactics during the Anglo-Nepal War, exemplified by Balbhadra Kunwar's defense of Nalapani ([Pradhan 1991](#)). Kunwar's tactical withdrawal—misrepresented as defeat in British accounts—enabled Gorkhas to retain sovereignty over Kathmandu, challenging colonial narratives of indigenous submission. The Anglo-Nepal War marked a significant conflict where the British deployed a large force of 20,000 soldiers across four fronts against the Gorkhas, who, despite being outnumbered, demonstrated remarkable military effectiveness ([Bhakuni 2024](#)).

The cultural and religious backgrounds of the Gorkhas play a significant role in shaping their warrior ethos. Predominantly adherents of Hinduism and Buddhism, Gorkhas are deeply influenced by the principles of dharma (duty) and karma (moral law). These beliefs instill a sense of duty and fearlessness in battle, as dying for a righteous cause is considered honorable ([Michaels 2004](#)). The concept of "Bir Gorkhali" (Brave Gurkha) is deeply embedded in their cultural identity, promoting virtues such as bravery, loyalty, and sacrifice ([Rai 2021](#)).

From a psychological standpoint, the rigorous training and selection process that Gorkhas undergo contribute significantly to their resilience and combat effectiveness. Studies have shown that the mental and physical toughness required to become a Gurkha instills a high level of confidence and fearlessness. Sociologically, the communal culture of the Gorkhas, which emphasizes collective honor and pride, reinforces their commitment to bravery and loyalty ([Humburg 2020](#)).

The Gorkhas' military prowess was not merely a product of their cultural heritage but was also strategically cultivated by the British to serve imperial interests. The recruitment of Gorkhas into the British Army was a deliberate attempt to co-opt their military skills for colonial expansion, often framing their bravery as a justification for their recruitment and deployment in various colonial conflicts (Golay 2021). This militarization of Gorkha identity was further solidified by the establishment of the first Gurkha battalion in 1815, following the capture of the Malaun fort by Major General Ochterlony (Bhakuni 2024).

### **Post-Colonial Ethnopolitics**

Post-1947 scholarship reframes Gorkha identity beyond militarism. Ganguly (2005) analyzes the 1986–1988 Gorkhaland agitation, demonstrating how India weaponized Gorkha “loyalty” to suppress subnationalist demands. Chettri’s (2013) ethnography in Darjeeling critiques “martial race” recruitment for privileging Bahun-Chhetri elites, exacerbating intra-Gorkha class divides. This article synthesizes their work, arguing that Gorkha identity remains a contested site of colonial legacy and subaltern resistance, shaped by both state coercion and grassroots mobilization (Ganguly 2005; Chettri 2013). The Gorkhaland movement highlights the complex interplay between Gorkha identity and post-colonial nationalism, where the Indian government exploited Gorkha military service to maintain national unity at the expense of regional autonomy (Golay 2021).

The colonial construction of Gorkha identity as a "martial race" has had lasting impacts on their socio-political status. The British recruitment of Gorkhas was part of a broader strategy to dominate the Indian subcontinent by leveraging local military prowess, which also involved stereotyping other groups as less martial (Caplan 1995). This discourse on martial races collapsed multiple identities into a singular martial identity, disrupting the social and conceptual world of the Gorkhas (Golay 2021).

### **Singapore’s Gurkha Contingent: Colonial Continuities**

Scholarship on Singapore’s Gurkhas (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020) often overlooks their role in suppressing labor strikes under British rule and their post-independence deployment as “neutral” enforcers in a Chinese-majority state. This study repositions the Contingent as a manifestation of colonial “divide and rule” tactics, repurposed to uphold multicultural governance while excluding Gurkhas from citizenship—a paradox of valorization and marginalization. The retention of the Gurkha Contingent post-1965

independence reflects Singapore's reliance on colonial militarization to manage ethnic diversity, perpetuating racial hierarchies by deploying Nepali Gurkhas as apolitical enforcers (Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore, 2020).

The use of Gurkhas in Singapore exemplifies how colonial legacies continue to shape post-colonial governance. The deployment of Gurkhas as a neutral force in a multicultural society underscores the enduring influence of colonial strategies in managing ethnic diversity (Chisholm 2014). This practice reinforces colonial racial hierarchies, excluding Gurkhas from citizenship while valorizing their service, highlighting unresolved tensions between multiculturalism and militarized governance (Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore, 2020).

### **Research Gap**

Despite extensive research on Gorkha militarization and post-colonial ethnopolitics, there remains a significant gap in understanding how Gorkha identity is shaped by both colonial legacies and contemporary socio-political dynamics. Current literature often focuses on either the historical context of Gorkha militarization or the post-colonial implications of their identity without fully integrating these perspectives. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the interplay between colonial constructs, post-colonial ethnopolitics, and the ongoing role of Gorkhas in multicultural governance, particularly through the lens of Singapore's Gurkha Contingent. By synthesizing historical accounts with contemporary critiques, this research provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex dynamics of Gorkha identity and its implications for decolonial scholarship.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a multidisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis, ethnopolitical critique, and decolonial theory to examine the complex dynamics of Gorkha identity. The methodology was structured around three key components: theoretical framework, data collection, and data analysis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The research drew on Frantz Fanon's anti-colonial theory to critique the commodification of Gorkha labor and highlight the exploitative nature of colonial recruitment practices (Fanon 1963). Additionally, Eric Hobsbawm's concept of "invented tradition" was used

to deconstruct the "fearless Gurkha" myth and explore how historical narratives had been constructed and contested over time (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). Subaltern studies, particularly the work of Guha (1982), were employed to recover marginalized voices, including those of Gorkha women and other subaltern groups.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection involved both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included colonial-era accounts such as Hamilton's (1819) *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal*, as well as contemporary interviews with Gorkha veterans and community leaders.

Secondary sources encompassed a wide range of scholarly articles, books, and government reports, including Ganguly's (2005) analysis of the Gorkhaland movement and Chettri's (2013) ethnography in Darjeeling.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was qualitative and interpretive, focusing on thematic coding and critical discourse analysis. The study identified and critiqued dominant narratives surrounding Gorkha identity, examining how these narratives had been constructed and contested over time. Particular attention was paid to the ways in which colonial legacies continued to shape post-colonial ethnopolitics, especially in the context of Singapore's Gurkha Contingent.

### **Case Study: Singapore's Gurkha Contingent**

The Singapore Gurkha Contingent served as a case study to explore how colonial militarization had been repurposed in multicultural governance. This involved analyzing official reports from the *Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore* (2020), as well as scholarly critiques of multiculturalism and militarized governance in post-colonial states (Chisholm 2014).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were paramount, particularly in the collection and representation of subaltern voices. The study adhered to principles of cultural sensitivity and respect for the communities involved.

## Findings and Discussion

This study aimed to critically examine the historical, cultural, and socio-political factors shaping Gorkha identity, moving beyond celebratory "martial race" narratives to interrogate their role in colonial and post-colonial power structures. The findings reveal a complex interplay between colonial legacies, post-colonial ethnopolitics, and multicultural governance, highlighting the contested nature of Gorkha identity.

### Historical Accounts of Gurkha Bravery

The defense of [Nalapani \(1814\)](#) stands as a cornerstone in the narrative of Gurkha bravery. Led by Balbhadra Kunwar, a young commander of just 25 years, the Gorkhas held the fort against overwhelming British forces for a month. Despite severe casualties and a lack of resources, Kunwar and his men displayed extraordinary resilience. The British, impressed by their tenacity, allowed Kunwar and his surviving men to withdraw with honors after the fort was captured ([Pradhan 1991](#)).

[Hamilton's \(1819\)](#) colonial-era account contextualizes this battle within broader British imperial strategies, framing Gorkha resistance as both a military challenge and a cultural curiosity. Historical records from both British and Nepali sources confirm the details of this battle. The fort at Nalapani remains a significant site of heritage, commemorated by a monument erected by the British in honor of the fallen Gorkhas, demonstrating a rare respect between adversaries ([Lunt 2003](#)).



**Fig. 1:** Nalapani Fort (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



In respect of Balbhadra Kunwar, the East India Company has kept the inscription at Nalapani Fort. They have inscribed his name BULBUDDER, rather Balbhadra. It shows his bravery was respected by the enemy armies there.



**Fig. 2:** Inscription kept in Nalapani Fort in respect of Balbhadra  
(Source: Himalaya WordPress.com)

Bhakti Thapa, another emblematic figure, is celebrated for his leadership during the Battle of Jaithak (1814). At the age of 70, Thapa led his troops against the British with unmatched vigor and strategic prowess. Despite the British utilizing superior artillery, Thapa's tactics prolonged the siege, causing significant British casualties before his eventual death in combat. His martyrdom solidified his status as a national hero in Nepal (Lunt 2003).

## **Cultural and Religious Influences**

### ***Hinduism and Buddhism***

Gorkhas predominantly adhere to Hinduism and Buddhism, which significantly influence their ethos. The concept of dharma (duty) in Hinduism and the Buddhist idea of impermanence contribute to a mindset that embraces bravery and sacrifice. For example, the legend of Amar Singh Thapa, who declared himself a "cub of a tiger" rather than a

"dog to eat a dead body," encapsulates the cultural valorization of fearlessness and duty (Michaels 2004). Amar Singh Thapa, thus is known as the "living Lion of Nepal". He took part in the war against the Tibet. He fought at Kerung Axis during the Sino-Nepalese War under the leadership of Chautariya Balbhadra Shah and alongside Kirtiman Singh Basnyat and Bhotu Pande.



**Fig. 3:** Bhakti Thapa (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



**Fig. 4:** Amar Singh Thapa, Commander of Nepal-Tibet War (Source: The Gorkha Times)

### Colonial Constructs and Gorkha Militarization

The Anglo-Nepal War (1814–1816) marked a pivotal moment in the construction of Gorkha identity as a "martial race." British accounts, such as [Hamilton's \(1819\)](#) *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal*, framed Gorkha resistance as "savage" valor, obscuring their strategic agency and reducing their resistance to primal ferocity. However, this study reveals that Gorkha resistance was a deliberate anti-colonial tactic, exemplified by Balbhadra Kunwar's defense of Nalapani ([Pradhan 1991](#)). Kunwar's tactical withdrawal—misrepresented as defeat in British accounts—enabled Gorkhas to retain sovereignty over Kathmandu, challenging colonial narratives of indigenous submission.

The recruitment of Gorkhas into the British Army following the Treaty of [Sugauli \(1816\)](#) institutionalized their role as imperial soldiers, leveraging their martial prowess to serve colonial interests ([Golay 2021](#)). This militarization of Gorkha identity was further solidified by the establishment of the first Gurkha battalion in 1815, following the capture of the Malaun fort by Major General Ochterlony ([Bhakuni 2024](#)). The British constructed Gorkhas as a "martial race," a stereotype that collapsed multiple identities into a singular martial identity, disrupting the social and conceptual world of the Gorkhas ([Caplan 1995](#)).

#### Post-Colonial Ethnopolitics

Post-1947, Gorkha identity continued to be shaped by colonial legacies and post-colonial ethnopolitics. The Gorkhaland movement (1986–1988) in India exemplifies how Gorkha "loyalty" was weaponized to suppress subnationalist demands. [Ganguly \(2005\)](#) demonstrates how India exploited Gorkha military service to delegitimize subnationalist claims, while [Chettri \(2013\)](#) critiques the class-based hierarchies perpetuated by "martial race" recruitment in Darjeeling. This study synthesizes their work, arguing that Gorkha identity remains a contested site of colonial legacy and subaltern resistance, shaped by both state coercion and grassroots mobilization.

The colonial construction of Gorkha identity as a "martial race" has had lasting impacts on their socio-political status. The British recruitment of Gorkhas was part of a broader strategy to dominate the Indian subcontinent by leveraging local military prowess, which also involved stereotyping other groups as less martial ([Caplan 1995](#)). This discourse on martial races disrupted the social fabric of the Gorkhas, creating internal class divides and exacerbating socio-economic marginalization ([Golay 2021](#)).

### Singapore's Gurkha Contingent: Colonial Continuities

The Singapore Gurkha Contingent serves as a case study of how colonial militarization has been repurposed in multicultural governance. Retained post-1965 independence, the Contingent exemplifies the repurposing of colonial hierarchies: Nepali Gurkhas are deployed as "neutral" enforcers in a Chinese-majority state, excluded from citizenship despite their critical security roles (Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore, 2020). This practice reinforces colonial "divide and rule" tactics, positioning Gurkhas as apolitical tools to manage ethnic tensions while denying them civic rights (Regmi 1999).

The use of Gurkhas in Singapore underscores how colonial legacies continue to shape post-colonial governance. The deployment of Gurkhas as a neutral force in a multicultural society highlights the enduring influence of colonial strategies in managing ethnic diversity (Chisholm 2014). This paradox of valorization and marginalization—where Gurkhas are celebrated for their military prowess yet excluded from citizenship—exposes unresolved tensions between multiculturalism and militarized governance.

### Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the complex dynamics of Gorkha identity, situated at the intersection of colonial legacies, post-colonial ethnopolitics, and multicultural governance. By centering Gorkha agency in anti-colonial resistance and post-colonial ethnopolitics, this research challenges apolitical narratives that reduce Gorkha identity to a simplistic "martial race" stereotype.

First, the study exposes the systemic exploitation of Gorkha labor under colonial and post-colonial regimes. The Anglo-Nepal War and subsequent recruitment of Gorkhas into imperial armies exemplify how their martial prowess was leveraged to serve colonial interests, framing their bravery as a racial trait to justify their deployment in various colonial conflicts (Golay 2021).

Second, it reveals how multicultural governance in post-colonial states like Singapore relies on colonial militarization. The retention of the Gurkha Contingent post-independence reflects Singapore's reliance on colonial legacies to manage ethnic diversity, perpetuating racial hierarchies by deploying Nepali Gurkhas as apolitical enforcers (Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore 2020).

Third, the study provides a framework to analyze subaltern resistance in marginalized communities. By foregrounding marginalized voices—such as Gorkha women’s contributions to anti-colonial struggles and the class divides within "martial race" recruitment—it challenges homogenizing narratives and highlights grassroots mobilizations for labor rights and cultural preservation (Rai 2024; Golay 2021).

## Conclusion

This study has critically examined the historical, cultural, and socio-political factors shaping Gorkha identity, moving beyond celebratory "martial race" narratives to interrogate their role in colonial and post-colonial power structures. By centering Gorkha agency in anti-colonial resistance and post-colonial ethno-politics, this research challenges apolitical narratives that reduce Gorkha identity to a simplistic stereotype. The findings reveal a complex interplay between colonial legacies, post-colonial ethno-politics, and multicultural governance. The Anglo-Nepal War and subsequent recruitment of Gorkhas into imperial armies exemplify how their martial prowess was leveraged to serve colonial interests, framing their bravery as a racial trait to justify their deployment in various colonial conflicts.

This study contributes to decolonial scholarship by exposing the systemic exploitation of Gorkha labor under colonial and post-colonial regimes, revealing how multicultural governance in post-colonial states like Singapore relies on colonial militarization, and providing a framework to analyze subaltern resistance in marginalized communities. By synthesizing historical accounts with contemporary critiques, this research offers a nuanced understanding of Gorkha identity and its complex intersections with colonialism, post-colonialism, and multicultural governance.

Future research should continue to center Gorkha agency in labor migration and ethno-political movements, moving beyond the "warrior" stereotype to explore the diverse experiences of Gorkhas in different contexts. This includes examining their roles in cultural preservation, political activism, and economic development, as well as critiquing ongoing colonial legacies in post-colonial statecraft.

*Conflicts of interest:* The author declares no conflict of interest

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