Lionel Caplan, *Warrior Gentlemen: "Gurkhas" in the Western Imagination*. Berghahn Books: Providence, Oxford, 1995, 181 p.

Review by Harka Gurung*

Gurkha rhetoric and reality

This book is not merely an addition to the voluminous literature on the Gurkhas of Nepal (see 'The Gurkha Guide' *Himal*, IV, 3). It presents an entirely new perspective that will provoke those attuned to the stereotyped genre. The term 'Western Imagination' as the subtitle of the book may evoke reaction to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (London, 1978), but the reference is entirely to English or British imagination. After all, the Gurkhas have never served under officers other than British (and Indian after 1948). This is further evidenced by the extensive bibliography the author provides. It includes 311 published entries of which only three (two by P. Sagant and one by M. Gaborieau in French) are non-English. Of the published items, 64 are by British officers who served with the Gurkhas. Incidentally, the author overlooked Sir Ian Hamilton's *Gallipoli Diary, 1915* (London, 1930) and thus missed the following nugget on page 33:

> "... each little Gurkha might be worth his full weight in gold at Gallipoli."

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The theme is well-researched and the case presented in five coherent chapters. The introduction ('discovering Gurkhas') is a review of Gurkha texts and Gurkha involvement in British service. The second chapter ('ecology of military service') relates Gurkhas to their homeland in economic, social and political contexts. The third chapter ('culture of command') is an interesting description of a particular species of British officers who lead Gurkhas. The next two chapters, under the subheadings 'rhetoric of martiality' and 'making of warrior gentlemen', are essays into the image construction of stereotyped Gurkhas. The concluding chapter ('Gurkha fictions and political realities') attempts a synthesis on how the strategies of the text and colonial power are interlinked to produce the imagined Gurkhas.

To begin, the author relates available literature to the social and cultural settings from which the officers themselves come. The close identification with the persons they study emerges as the 'mysteries of courtship' between persons of unequal class. In this discourse on the Gurkhas, there are only romantic approvers since the same 'tatterdemalion bands' (Pemble, *The Invasion of Nepal*, 1971, p. 28) as Nepalese soldiers are transformed into *beau-ideal* soldiers under the British. One of the distinguishing features of this literature is its strong sense of continuity. Thus, the series of Gurkha handbooks continue with the brick and mortar of Buchanan Hamilton (1819), Hodgson (1833) and Vansittart (1894), versions on ethnic qualities while early Gurkha heroic tales and their loyalty to the British are recounted as sacral *mantra* that become embedded as

elemental Gurkha. Thus, in attempting to dissolve the polarities between rigidly text-centred approaches and those which, in a privileged context, downplay or dismiss the character of the texts, the author discovers that the Gurkha is a creation of military ambience.

The anthropologist-author explains that Nepal itself has no category of people calling themselves 'Gurkhas', only certain ethnic groups preferred in military service. These Mongoloid tribals constitute an overwhelming majority in foreign armies but in Nepal itself, Caucasoid Chetris predominate. He also clarifies Anglophile Jang Bahadur's ambivalent role in restricting Gurkha recruitment by the British. Formal agreement (1886) was reached only with the accession of Bir Shamsher who sought British support in his power struggle against Jang Bahadur's son.

The chapter on 'Gurkhas at Home' is of much interest from the Nepalese perspective although the regional terms, 'middle hills' and 'mid-montane' Caplan uses interchangeably could just simply be 'the hills'. The hills from where the Gurkhas come happen to be in the middle of the mountain and the Tarai regions. He cites anthropological studies and official data on the economic benefits from Gurkha service. Of the latter, the officially quoted are some £22 million as annual pay and approximately £5.6 million as pension. It would be much higher in the case of pay and pension from the Indian army, as Gulmi district alone receives an annual pension of Rs. 1.5 crore in Indian currency. Caplan raises the issue of annual British subsidy for allowing the recruitment of Gurkhas, a subject on which the Nepal Government has remained silent.

According to available information, this amounted to Rs. 10 lakh (Indian currency) annually since 1919, and Viceroy Wavell raised it to Rs. 20 lakh per year in 1945. The last time this amount was transferred from the State Bank of India to Nepal Rastra Bank was fiscal year 1976-77 (B. Lal, *Himal*, 2047, Nepali edition, p. 15). However, some information on the British grant made in recognition for the 'service rendered by her people and her rulers during World War I' (vide Pahari, *Himal*, 1991) may be useful here. Part of this grant was used for the construction of Bir Military Hospital. This was followed by a grant of Rs. 76 lakh (Indian currency) after World War II and known as Post-War Reconstruction Fund initially handled by a joint Nepal-India Committee Central Coordination Board. It is now operated by India, of which the Sainik Nivas building at Thamel and the various District Soldiers' Boards (referred to by Caplan, p.54, footnote 17) are the legacy.

Gurkha remittance has much economic significance, particularly to certain hill communities. Indeed, the increasing pressure for army service is indicative of the deteriorating economy of the hills. Caplan cites Macfarlane (*Resources and Population*, 1976) and Des Chene (*In Service of Colonialism*, 1988) who discuss past negative attitudes to enlistment among the Gurungs. In early days, the headman used to assign youths from poor and indebted households as recruits to the *gallawala* (recruiting agent). Nowadays, the recruiters are bribed by the wealthy to send their sons to foreign armies. Another important change is in the direction of flow of army income. Once the only means of cash flow in rural areas, it is now being diverted to urban areas for investment in real estate and new enterprises. As

cited by Caplan (pp.50-52), there has been considerable migration of ex-Gurkhas not only to Kathmandu, they have also spawned new colonies in Pokhara, Butwal, Chitwan, Dharan and other towns.

Another aspect touched on by Caplan is the social effect of Gurkha service in rural Nepal. Although there is no clear evidence of demographic disequilibrium on the fertility level, large-scale male emigration has meant increasing autonomy as well as a burden on the women of soldiering communities. The role of ex-servicemen in spreading education has been noted by a number of observers. Less highlighted is their Nepalization role in language and religion. Once illiterate tribal youths, the soldiers exposed to Roman Nepali and regimental Brahmin chaplains, return home as role models of Nepali speakers and neo-Hindus along with economic resources. What has remained problematic is the political implication of Gurkha service. The ex-servicemen have coexisted with the traditional elite as well as taken over leadership roles according to local circumstances. In a majority of cases, they have emerged as community leaders. At the national level, they are handicapped by the power structure of high caste dominance, both in politics and administration. The very fact that military service abroad drains the best talent from their community, makes them unable to compete for positions of power. This long tradition of external alternatives has certainly marginalized them within Nepal.

The three chapters dealing with sociology of officers who command Gurkhas, imaging of Gurkha martiality and as 'little' gentlemen fall more within the British perspective. While Gurkha chroniclers continue to emphasise peculiarities of Gurkha ethnicities,

Gurkha soldiers need not be concerned with the pedigree of their officers. Caplan discusses their public school heredity and their empirical model in education. The accounts of hierarchy between Royal and Indian officers, the elitism of Gurkha regiments, their corporate identity, and 'muscular Christianity' epitomised in sports make interesting reading.

In formulating martiality as a dogma, some Nepalese ethnics were categorised as 'martial races' based on the doctrine of biological determinism. Their ethnic classification was based on hearsay as only a few military authors were permitted to visit Nepal. Despite the close ties of the Rana regime with British India, Nepal had only 153 European (mostly British) visitors during the period 1881-1925 (P. Landon, Nepal, vol. II, 1928, pp. 298-305). Incidentally, the Ragsdale estimate to which Caplan refers (p. 96) on the ethnic composition of recruits during 1894-1913 actually appears as a detailed appendix table in the 1933 Gurkha handbook edited by C. J. Morris.

The second point Gurkha literature emphasizes is the utter loyalty of Gurkhas to their British officers and the bonds of trust between them. The handbooks' emphasis on simple youths from remote areas as ideal recruits fitted well with the pervasive anti-intellectualism of the army and ease in moulding the recruits. The Gurkha authors contrasted colonial subjugation of India with Nepal's spirit of independence to gain the Gurkhas' unquestioning allegiance for use in politically sensitive situations. The mystic bond was based on paternal patronage in which the British led and the Nepalese followed. A lead article in *The Economist* (London) last year, thus suggested raising a UN peacekeeping force of Gurkhas with British

officers. The myth of unique loyalty was explored by the 'comparatively dour and quicker anger' of an eastern regiment at Honolulu in 1986.

Another burden of the theme happens to be the blind bravery of Gurkhas that Sir Ralph Turner memorialised as 'bravest of the brave'. Indeed, since the Victoria Cross was instituted in 1856, Gurkha regiments have claimed 26 and half of these were awarded to Gurkhas. The recipients include six Magars, four Gurungs, and one each among the Limbu, Rai and Tamang. However, Caplan recounts the fearful memories of ex-servicemen he met in Ilam who equate *bahaduri* (bravery) with medals and not of the Baynes variety (No Reward but Honour?). Gurkha courage seems to be related to absolute obedience, and that Gurkhas also experienced fear is clearly evidenced by P. Onta (*Himal* VIII, 6) from their letters from the French front during World War I.

The 'miniaturisation' process of the Gurkhas that evolved from their long association with the British is being replicated in the Indian army. In essence, whatever one may call it -Gurkha project or Gurkha syndrome- is an expression of Nepal's dependence. Caplan makes reference to Nepalese intellectuals who decry Gurkha service as a vestige of colonialism. They need to consider the exploitation at home that compel these hill men to fight and die for others. The Nepalese elite should have realised that foreign is not familiar, as when abroad, they had to resort to Mount Everest, Sherpas or Gurkhas to locate their Nepalese identity!

This book is about marginalization of a people at home and abroad. Gurkhas do not have the choice of mercenaries epitomised in

Sir Walter Scott's *Quentin Durward*. Their juvenility and exoticism are ideological constructions harking back to an imagined time. As analysed by Caplan, Gurkha literature is basically a colonial discourse. The book is recommended to those interested in perception and interpretation of an alien culture.