



Gorkhas of Mizoram: Migration and Settlement

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Abstract

The Gorkhas were recruited in the British Indian Army after the Anglo-Nepal war. They soon proved to be loyal and faithful to the British. The British took great advantage of their loyalty and they became the main force for the British success in occupation especially in North East India. They came with the British and settled in Mizoram from the late 19th century. They migrated and settled in different parts of the state. This paper attempts to trace the Gorkha migration since the Lushai Expeditions, how they settled permanently in a place so far from their own country. It also highlights how the British needed them to pacify the Mizo tribe in the initial period of their occupation.

Keywords: *Gorkhas, Lushai Expeditions, Migration, Mile 45 Dwarband Road*

Introduction

The Mizo had no written language before the coming of the British. From generation to generation, the Mizo history, traditions, customs and practices were handed down in oral forms. The earliest written works about the Mizo were produced almost exclusively by westerners, mainly military and administrative officers who had some connection with Mizoram. This connection was related to the annexation and administration of the area by the British government (Gangte, 2018). The bulk of the early writings on Mizo were done by government officials. Another group of westerners who had done writings on Mizo were the Christian missionaries. It was in the late 1930s that Mizo started writing their own history, reconstructing largely from oral sources. In most of the colonial writings, Gorkhas are frequently mentioned, especially in those written by the administrators. The Gorkhas played a crucial role in establishing colonial dominance over the whole of North East India as they were the main force that fought for the British. In the early writings of the likes of T.H. Lewin's *A Fly on the Wheel*, A. Mackenzie's *The North-East Frontier of India*, L.W. Shakespear's *History of the Assam Rifles*, A.S. Reid's *Chin-Lushai Land*, R.G. Woodthorpe's

The Lushai Expedition etc., the role of Gorkha soldiers in the annexation of the North East are clearly mentioned. In fact, the colonial writers were all in praise of the Gorkhas for

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their bravery and swiftness in the hostile land. Moreover, some references to the Gorkhas can also be seen in the writings of the missionaries as well.

The Gorkhas have settled permanently in Mizoram for more than a century. They have been there in all stages of Mizoram political history since the first Lushai Expedition. However, hardly any indigenous local writer ever mentions the Gorkhas in their narratives on the history of Mizoram. Though there is no ill-feeling towards them, they are unheard in the writings of Mizoram history. It is in this background that this paper tries to highlight the Gorkha migration and settlement in Mizoram.

Who are the Gorkhas?

It is generally believed that the Gorkhas are soldiers from the Kingdom of Nepal or Kingdom of Gorkhas. In 1742, Prithvinarayan Shah became the ruler of Gorkha state. The Shah wanted to unify all the Himalayan territories into a single, powerful state. He therefore created a new avatar of the Gorkhas by combining the forces of Khas, Magars and Gurungs into a great army and later encompassed the Rais and Limbus too (Mani, 2015). Around this period, the British East India Company was expanding its area of interest and advanced towards Tibet. However, Nepal stood in the way of building trade routes in the north. There soon developed a clash of interest between East India Company and Nepal. A war was then fought that lasted for three years (1812-1815). In this war, the Gorkha army fought bravely in spite of inferior weapons. The British were greatly influenced by the fighting skill and bravery of the Gorkhas. Thus, with the signing of the Treaty of Sugauli, the British started recruiting them for the British army. The Gorkhas soon proved to be loyal soldiers and became the main reason why the British were able to rule over the North East.

Movement in the North-East India

The first direct contact between the Nepalis and the North East India region appears to have occurred in 1817, where a number of Gorkhas (Cuttack Legion) took part in the Sylhet Operation (Sinha, 2003). This movement was important because firstly such migration on a significant scale to North East India did not take place before the British period and secondly, the pattern of movement fits the general trend of human movements sponsored by the colonial state (Gurung, 2001). The British recognized early that the Nepalese, as hardy hill cultivators, could constitute an ideal group with which to penetrate and form strategic buffers in the northeast and, even more than this, actually demographically change the composition of the local populations in some northeast hill areas (Dutt, 1981). It is notable that the British prudently sent in Aryan Gorkhas in the plain region and Mongoloid Gorkhas in the Hills to combat the natives (Interview with Pun, 2018). As the British employed the Gorkhas in large number, they started playing the key-role in the penetration of the North East Hills. Even after retirement, they did not go back to Nepal and continued to settle in the area. The settlement of the ex-servicemen opened the way for more Gorkhas to migrate in the Hills thereby creating chain migration. In Nepal, due to the distress economic condition, many people were compelled to migrate to search for opportunities outside. Ironically, this factor corresponded to the very need of the British to have a group of people to be a pawn in the

colonisation of the North East. As such, herdsmen, cultivators, lumbermen and others began to migrate. These Gorkha settlements in different parts of the hill region were facilitated by the needs of the British administrators and the settlement emerged out of the requirement to check the hill tribes and keep them under control.

Contact with the Mizo

The early contacts between the British and Mizo were on hostile grounds due to the expansion policy of the British. The British had expanded their economic interest in Cachar and Sylhet plains by planting teas in huge areas. In the process of doing so, they encroached the Mizo hunting grounds which led to the raiding of these places by the Mizo. The Mizo felt that the British had determinedly tried to occupy in order to extend their empire. As such, the Mizo resisted the emerging foreign power by the only means they were accustomed to. A. Mackenzie wrote, "Unless their independence as a powerful tribe is quite broken, the frontier will never be free from their attacks" (Mackenzie, 1995). As such, the British felt the need to carry out retaliatory punitive raid against the Mizo. A particularly brazen attack on a tea garden in Cachar, resulting in the death of one British man and a little girl carried off as a captive, caused the massive Lushai Expedition of 1871-72 to be launched as a kind of final solution to put down the raids (Perry, 1997).

The expeditionary force was composed of 2nd and 4th Gurkha Regiments, the 22nd and 27th Punjab Infantry, the 42nd and 44th Native Infantry, two companies of Sappers and Miners, and a strong detachment of the Peshawar Mountain Battery (Mizoram District Gazeteers, 1989). Most of these soldiers were Gorkhas. Apart from the regular soldiers, there were a great number of Gorkha coolies. The Darjeeling hills were known to be a very favourable ground for obtaining Napoleonic coolies (Mackenzie, 1995). It is thus very clear that the British recruited the Gorkhas in great numbers not only for soldiers, but also for coolies. This expedition saw the first wave of Gorkhas who set foot in Mizoram.

At the end of this expedition, frontier posts were set up in order to maintain peace in the hills. Thomas Lewin set up villages in the borders of south Mizoram that could serve as buffer between the hills and the plains. These buffer villages were occupied by Gorkhas and Lewin (2005) wrote, "I had formed a high opinion of the little Ghurkhas, who, under Colonel Macpherson, had done the fighting of the expedition and I obtained permission to send to Nepal and get emigrants from there to colonise my frontier wastes...and early in 1873 I set out from Demagree to visit them, and see how the settlement was progressing". This must have been the beginning of Gorkha migration and settlement in and around the borders of Mizoram.

Peace was restored in the hills for about a decade. Then, the Mizo started raiding the plains again. The British government decided to put an end to it once and for all. In the Lushai expedition of 1899-90, the British took over the control of Mizoram and established permanent military posts in Aizawl and Lunglei. At this time the posts held in the South Lushai Hills by the Military Police were Demagiri, Lungsin, Lalthuama and Fort Tregar,

while those in the north were Sherchip, Changsil, Kolasib, and various small ones, the headquarters of both Battalions being at Lungleh and Aijal, respectively (Shakespeare, 1977). In the North Lushai Hills, Aizawl fort was garrisoned with 200 armed personnel of Surma Valley Military Police to be named later as the first Lushai Hills Assam Rifles (Pradhan, 2003). Expansion works at Lunglei and Aizawl began. For the expansion work as well as the smooth functioning of the government machinery, and also to meet basic human requirements, the government needed man power like traders, masons, dak-runners, chowkidars, to man the halts (bungalows), farmers to grow vegetables and rear domestic animals for meat and milk. As the natives did not yet docile fully, the government had to look for these elsewhere...the Gorkhas fitted into the hill perfectly (Pun, 2000).

Migration and Settlement

As mentioned earlier, the first wave of Gorkhas that arrived in Mizoram were the soldiers who were extremely loyal to the British. It has been mentioned that as early as 1871, Gorkha settlements had been established in the southern Mizoram. However, this early settlement did not last for long as the British had no intention of staying permanently. The first and foremost factor for their migration seems to be the appeal of military adventure. It is said that the Gorkhas were promised an attractive pay packet and other facilities, such as no dearth of milk, abundant food supply and lots of adventurous opportunities “to play battle”. (In Nepali, a battle is not fought, but *Ladai Khelnu*, meaning played) (Pun, 2000). The official records of the Government clearly show that the Gorkha migrations and settlement in Mizoram began in 1891, after the permanent forts were constructed at Aizawl and Lunglei (Pradhan, 2004). This statement seems to be true as prior to the Lushai Expedition of 1899-90, the previous expeditions did not leave any permanent mark in Mizoram. The Expedition of 1899-90 saw the establishment of permanent posts in which the earliest occupants were the Gorkha soldiers. The British also started setting up halting places at regular intervals throughout Mizoram. For smooth and better administration the British Indian government required manpower as dak-runners, chowkidars, peons, cart-drivers, traders, masons etc. Since such works were unknown to the natives, the Gorkhas were employed for the same (Pradhan, 2003).

It is thus clear that apart from the soldiers, many Gorkhas were brought in by the British since they needed huge man-power to work in every field. There were a great number of regular soldiers, some worked in newly constructed halting places as chowkidars, and some worked as dak-runners. There were also a number of farmers and herders. They were hard working, intensely loyal and could adapt to any situation. The British might have felt that the Mizo could learn from them. On the other hand, the situation also provided an escape route for the Gorkhas as settling down in Mizoram gave them opportunities which were not available in Nepal. They were able to live comfortably in their newly adopted land as they were much favoured by the administrators (Interview with Chhetri, 2018). Moreover, the Gorkhas themselves were content to settle down. The natives too, physically resembled them as most of the Gorkhas also belonged to Mongoloid stock. The hospitable, carefree, fun-loving, friendly, straight forward nature of the natives won their heart (Pun, 2000).

The Gorkhas who were involved in different work field such as bungalows, post office, hospitals, farmers, herders etc. further brought their families and settled in different parts of Mizoram. Likewise, the soldiers brought back their families when they returned from leave. The wave of migration created by the soldiers and the porters paved the way for more Gorkha to migrate and many Gorkhas arrived in the Hills after hearing about Mizoram and what it had to offer. Furthermore, retired soldiers also remained behind in Mizoram. In fact, some of them had stayed in the hills for so long that their connections in Nepal had been severed, lost their homes and in course of time, had no choice but to permanently settle in the Hills. These retired soldiers took up dairy farming or crop cultivation. In this way, the Gorkha population increased over time.

In the initial period, though the Gorkhas were not allowed to settle outside the allotted areas, many Mizo chiefs were eager to have them in their villages. They even entreated the Superintendent of Lushai Hills (the District Administrator) to permit the Gorkhas to reside in their villages (Pradhan, 2003). In this connection, W.L. Scott, the then Superintendent of Lushai Hills made it clear in his Standing Order No. 31 of 1922 that the presence of Gorkhas in Mizo villages will have an educative effect (Standing Order, 1922). In the early period, the main settlements were Aizawl, Lunglei, Kolasib, Bualpui, Champhai, Vanlaiphai, Tawitaw, Selesih, Neihbawi, Sialsuk and Thenzawl. In Aizawl, the Gorkhas were the first to occupy almost all the localities except Mission Veng (Interview with Pun, 2018) where the missionaries resided. During the British period the Gorkha population in and around Aizawl town was in majority. Most of the locality names were in Gorkha language, but after formation of Mizoram as Union Territory, these names were gradually changed to Mizo names, e.g. Survey Tilla is now Dinthar, Gairi Gaon is now known as Tuikual D, Khakria is now Rangvamual, Patharkhana is now Hunthar veng, Shrimantilla is now Zotlang (Kundu, 1995). Some of the retired personnel of SVMP and Frontier Police Battalions were allotted considerable portion of land for dwelling and agricultural purposes (Pradhan, 2003).

Likewise in other places such as Kolasib, Champhai, Thenzawl, Lunglei, Tlabung, Sialsuk, Bualpui etc., the Gorkhas settled in large number. In Tlangnuam, Lal Singh Thapa (Lalchhinga) was made the chief. In Champhai, Singbir Rai was also made a chief of one locality. As early as 1906, a Siva mandir had been set up in Champhai which shows that the Gorkha population must have been very high (Interview with Jaisi, 2018). It is also worth mentioning that in Champhai, Sukrim Bahadur Thapa, a retired soldier was engaged as instructor for wet-rice cultivation. One particular settlement was the Mile 45 Dwarband Road. This is the area where settlement is allowed to non-Lushais who by exceptional services or work in the Battalion can claim special consideration for permanent settlement in the Hills (McCall, 2008).

Conclusion

Since the establishment of the colonial period in the North East India, the Gorkhas played an important role in the socio-economic development of Mizoram. Their migration

might have been due to the push and pull factors of their own condition, however, it was much encouraged by the British for their larger aim and of the process of colonization in the North East.

Since the beginning of their settlement, the Gorkhas, being used to a very rugged terrain in Nepal, felt at ease and right at home. They have been much inspired by the Mizo way of life. They have a feeling that their community will grow more by imbibing the good practices of the Mizo society. One such example is the absence of caste system which is solely due to the influence of casteless Mizo society. Other influences can also be seen in the establishment of social institutions such as the Gorkha Sangh, Nari Samaj and most importantly, the Mizoram Gorkha Youth Association. They have done away with a number of their customary practices by incorporating the good practices of Mizo society. Yet, it is amazing to learn that they could still retain their identity and language even after more than a hundred years of settlement in a foreign country.

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