



Anglo Gurkha War and Strategic Importance of Garhwal

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Abstract

Anglo Gurkha War was the result of the British imperialistic interests to expand their sphere of influence. East India Company had consolidated its control over most part of India after defeating Marathas and signing peace treaty with Ranjit Singh, it was free to deal with the Gurkhas, due to its proximity with Tibet, the area of Garhwal had its strategic importance. Trade and threat of combined venture Sindhia, Sikh and Gurkha against British were secondary concern of this War, leading Garhwal. Under British shadow which consequently led to many administrative economic and political changes in the region.

Key Words : Strategic, imperialistic, proximity & venture.

The area of Uttarakhand was coveted by British because of its strategic importance. Uttarakhand had its border with Tibet, Mana and Niti were the passes which had direct access to Tibet where as these passes were the traditional routes to Tibet. Ram Rahul has advocated a different view he observes that British policy in the Himalayas was influenced by the need to check the growth of Russian influence in Central Asia, to break the isolationist – nature of policies of Tibet. The attitude of British government toward Tibet was that it had no desire to annex the country, or control its administration, its sole interest was that Russia should not bring Tibet within its sphere of influence. So that could raise the problem of insecurity. India's policy towards Tibet was determined by the view that wider the barrier of mountains and roadless country between Russia and Indian frontiers, the better.¹

This strategic requirement was satisfied by young husband's mission to Tibet. The route to Tibet through Garhwal was known to British even before 14 A.D. and according to some historians like Moreraft, Garhwal claimed tribute from some parts of Tibet.²

It seems that in the initial stages, it was indo- Tibet trade which inspired the British to annex Garhwal Kumaon, in later phase owing to its geo-political advantages, this terrain assumed a new importance for alien rulers, through the Garhwal, the British had occupied one of the most important tract of N. West frontier line and thus while administrating this terrain the strategic importance was kept in views. To maintain a friendly area in the north, British administered in consonance with this view.³ Both the Gurkhas and the British were eager to try their strength against each other. The Gurkhas essentially a military people slipped no opportunity of provoking hostilities against the British.⁴

As regards the British motive of annexing Uttarakhand, most of authors on border studies have highlighted the prospects of indo-Tibetan trade through this terrain trade with China through the company govt. in Kumaun – Garhwal was possible. By 1803, after occupying land of Sindhia and Nawab Wazir, company's frontier had extended from Yamuna to Kali River. In such situation company tried to get commercial benefit by getting control over Himalayan trade. Hasting was of the view that the way to Tibet through Kumaun and Garhwal is easier, that's why he was interested to throw away Gurkhas from Kumanchal and Garhwal so that company could control over the trade with Tibet. Hastings had expressed this view in his diary.⁵ Hastings felt that Kumaon passes were more convenient than Garhwal so it was decided to annex only Kumaon and

Dehradun while rest of Garhwal was made a native state.⁶ Most of the authors on border studies have highlighted the prospect of Indo-Tibetan trade through this terrain. Its well known that Mana and Niti passes in Garhwal were traditional routes to Tibet and interesting enough Indo-Tibetan trade was important source of income of Bhotias even during the panwar rulers of undivided Garhwal.⁷

Ram Rahul in his book "The Himalyan Border Land" has advocated different view, he observes the need to check the growth of Russian influence in central Asia and the isolationist nature of Tibet largely moulded the British policy in the Himalayas. The attitude of British toward Tibet was that it had no desire to control its administration, its sole interest was that Russia should not bring Tibet within its sphere of influence since that could have involved slight thought by no means a serious threat to India's security.

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In 19th century Assam borders were of little use for Tibet, Geographically western Tibet was nearest to the Russian territory and its position gave it a great political importance.

The route to Tibet through Garhwal was known to the Europeans as earlier as 1624 A.D. Wessel is of view that same year, Father Antonio de Andede, a jesuite missionary visited Tsprange in Tibet via Garhwal. The aim of the jesuite visit was to spread the Christianity. He laid the foundation of a church at Tsaprang on 11th April 1926.⁸

The British economic interests were affected with the occupation of Kumaon – Garhwal by the Gurkhas. The Gurkha rulers engaged their attention to the more lucrative mercantile activities and had virtually monopolised the trans – border trade passing through chilikia and Bharamdeo. That had direct impact on the British commercial interest not only in the area acquired by them (Bt.) but in the interior hill region of Kumaon held by the Gurkhas that supplied raw hemp to the British hemp – processing factory at Kashipur. The British superintendent of that factory Rutherford had already advanced money to the supply – contractors in the Kumaon hills to ensure uninterrupted supply of raw – material. The British agents could not reconcile with the restriction imposed by the Gurkhas on the export of raw hemp to their factory. Irked by that situation, the British were looking for some excuse to fight against the Gurkhas.⁹ Shiv Prasad Dabral in his book Garkhayani (Uttarakhand Ka San Itihas, Vol. V) has given the

view that trade with Tibet through Kumaun and Garhwal passes was one of the cause of anglo – Gurkha War. British were interested, in trade with China but Chinese emperor allowed them to trade only in canton city that too only with those Chinese traders who were members of commercial cooperate society "Kohung" British traders had to pay in gold for tea and spices in China. So company wanted to have trade relation with Tibet which was famous for its gold mines. The demand for Britain cloth could be in great demand in cold region of Tibet and could exchange it these for gold, kasturi, pashmina shawls. Company's plan to get the trade favours from Nepalese Raja Jaiprakash Mal by helping him against Prithvinarain Shah defeated under captain Kinlock in 1767.

In 1774 warren Hastings tried to trade with Tibet through Bhutan, however this also failed because Nepali King Prithvinarain opposed this and wrote panchan lama of Tibet forbiding him to maintain any relation with firangis.¹⁰

In 1792 Lord Comwallis entered into a commercial treaty with the Gorkhas, in conqsequence of this, a mission under Kirpatrick was despatched to Nepal in the same year. In 1793 colonel Kirpatrick quitted Nepal as he found the Nepalese determined to avoid close alliance.¹¹

In 1795 maulabi Abdul Kadir was sent to Nepal to search out the possibilities of trade with Tibet, Maulabi informed that if the company could reach Tibet directly than they could get double profit from the trade. Nepal government was against the idea of direct trade relation between Tibet and India as Nepalese gained a lot by acting as mediator between India and Tibet. In order to improve trade relation, company sent captain Naux but he could not get any success.¹²

In 1801 Lord Wellesely got the most fertile areas of present Gorakhpur, Devia, Basti, Azamgarh, Allahabad, Fathepur, Pilibhit after defeating Sindhia in the battle of Laswqari company got the area of present Saharanpur, Muzaffarnagar, Meerut when company reached so near to Garhwal, Kumaun, then it paid more attention to the trade with Tibet.

Lord Wellesely and Lord Minto were not in favour of waging war against Gurkhas on issue of trade. Marques of Hasting was also attracted towards trade, in mineral wealth of Garhwal and Kumaun. He had expressed these views in his diary. Captain Heyrsey wrote to John Adam, secretary of company about the vast copper & iron mines. Garhwal had vast sources of pine trees, woods of which could be used to build ships of Britain.¹³

Hastings feared that the British might face the united attack of the Sikh, Marathas and the Gorkhas. The company's empire was surrounded from south, west, north by these three powers. Hastings feared some type of secret pact among these powers to throw away company's empire. There is no doubt that Thapa rulers sent their ambassador to many Indian rulers. In 1816 after the treaty of Sigoli, Edward Gardener was appointed as ambassador to Nepal, he got the news of secret pact between Nepal Darbar, Daulat Rao Sindhia and Ranjit Singh. Peshwa of Poona had also promoted Gurkhas to fight against the company so that he could also avail the opportunity of attacking company power. However it is not authenticated since in 1813 Amar Singh Thapa had proposed to Ochterlony through Bhakti Thapa that in case of company's neutrality, he could seize Kangra fort from Ranjit Singh. The Nepali king had also proposed to Governor – General through his lawyer Chander Shekhar Upadhaya that company and Gurkhas should join hands to attack Ranjit Singh's kingdom and divide it among them, 1/4th for the Gurkhas and 3/4th for company. Although Governor – General did not accept this proposal yet this shows the Gurkhas' attitude towards the Sikh kingdom.¹⁴ Ranjit Singh was also interested to oust the Gorkhas from neighbouring areas. Hastings was also of the view that in case of company's attack on the Gurkhas, Sikhs and Marathas would not come for their help. So it was a golden opportunity for company to crush the increasing powers of the Gurkhas.

Bhabar Terai border issue the state that finally triggered a direct confrontation between the British and the Gurkhas was border disputes. These border disputes had a long history, in the beginning, the Gurkhas and company had 1100 km. long border by 1803, when Gurkhas occupied Dehradun, company had reached upto Saharanpur.

In Kumaon the areas of conflict were Kilpuri, Rudrapur, Kashipur, Nanakmate, Suber, belari, these areas were earlier under Kumaon, when the Gurkhas occupied these areas automatically these areas also came under the Gurkhas, however company did not accept this claim because these areas had already been snatched by Nawab Shuja-ud-daula and ceded to the British. So company accepted the Gurkhas claim over Kilpuri only. In Garhwal Lal Dang was the area claimed by both.¹⁵

In the west of Yamuna Amar Singh Thapa claimed the areas of Pinjore, Naraingarh, Lakhanpur as he had conquered Nahan. Ochterlony informed Amar Singh Thapa that

hill areas from Yamuna to Satluj had come under company's sovereignty so any type of aggression in these areas would not be tolerated by company.

Sayurri and Bhootwal (Gorakhpur) had become the main cause of border issue between company and the Gurkhas. These areas were obtained by Raja of Palpa from Nawab of Awadh on the agreement of paying annual tribute to Nawab Wash in 1801 Nawab ceded these areas to the company. In Nepal Nepalese was over thrown and general Amar Singh Tapha became the ruler of Palpa who stopped paying tribute to company. In addition to this he sent his soldiers to Bhootwal to collect the revenue. Governor General reminded Nepal government of evacuating these areas and paying annual tribute. Amar Singh Thapa who was getting lakh of rupees annually was not ready for this. From 1787 – 1812, the Gurkhas had occupied almost 200 villages in this area.

In 1813, company and Nepalese representatives met for peaceful solution of the areas – saran, when the talks were going on, the Gurkhas occupied few villages of Saran district. The Governor – General Lord Minto was fair to write a letter of remonstrance to young raja of Nepal in June 1813. An effort to solve the issue peacefully was made through major Broadshow, however it also failed Lord Hastings, Lord minto's successor also wrote a letter to Nepal in which he asked the Gurkhas to surrender Sayuraj and Bhootwal or to face stem action. The letter was discussed in the court in which all the important Generals participated. The generals like Bhim Singh Thapa, Amber Singh Thapa favoured an attack against the British.

The immediate cause of war was a wanton attack of Gurkhas upon principal police station in the territory of Bhootwal on 21st May 1814 in which eighteen British soldiers were killed and six were wounded. Muniraj the leader of attack himself superintended the barbarous murder of the police darogha, although he had surrendered himself as a prisoner.

The capture of other police stations with more loss of life followed. The governor general Lord Hasting wrote a letter of remonstrance to young raja of Nepal whose aggravating answers rendered reasoning no longer possible, the war was formally declared on Nov. 1, 1814. Resulting in the victory and subsequently signing treaty of Sigoli in 1816.

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