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The Anglo-Gorkha Wars: Campaigns from Kali to Sutlej

Ritesh Kumar Shah

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The Anglo-Gorkha Wars: Campaigns from Kali to Sutlej*

Ritesh Kumar Shah**

Abstract

During 1814–16 there were two wars between the British and Nepal fought on different frontiers in the region stretching from the river Sutlej to the Teesta.

Though the English had won the first war, and as a result controlled the entire territory from river Kali up to Sutlej, they could not touch Kathmandu, the Gorkha capital. A second campaign had to be launched to complete the consolidation of the British victory over Nepal. Once this was accomplished, the Gorkha sardars were forced to agree to the terms of the Sangauli treaty.

This paper deals with the first war, largely because the second war was nothing more than a rounding-up operation, to bring the defeated enemy to accept the victor's demands. The events on the eastern frontier, in the territory lying between the Kali and Teesta rivers, have been omitted as there was little action here. Neither the British moved ahead from their position nor did the Gorkhas launch a counter offensive. My paper's focus is on events in the period from October to May, 1814–1815. It will show that the British had mixed experience in battle; there were losses, most notably that of the fall of Gillespie at Nalapani, as well as gains, especially by Ochterlony against Kazi Amar Singh Thapa, and also by Gardner and Nicolls in Kumaon.

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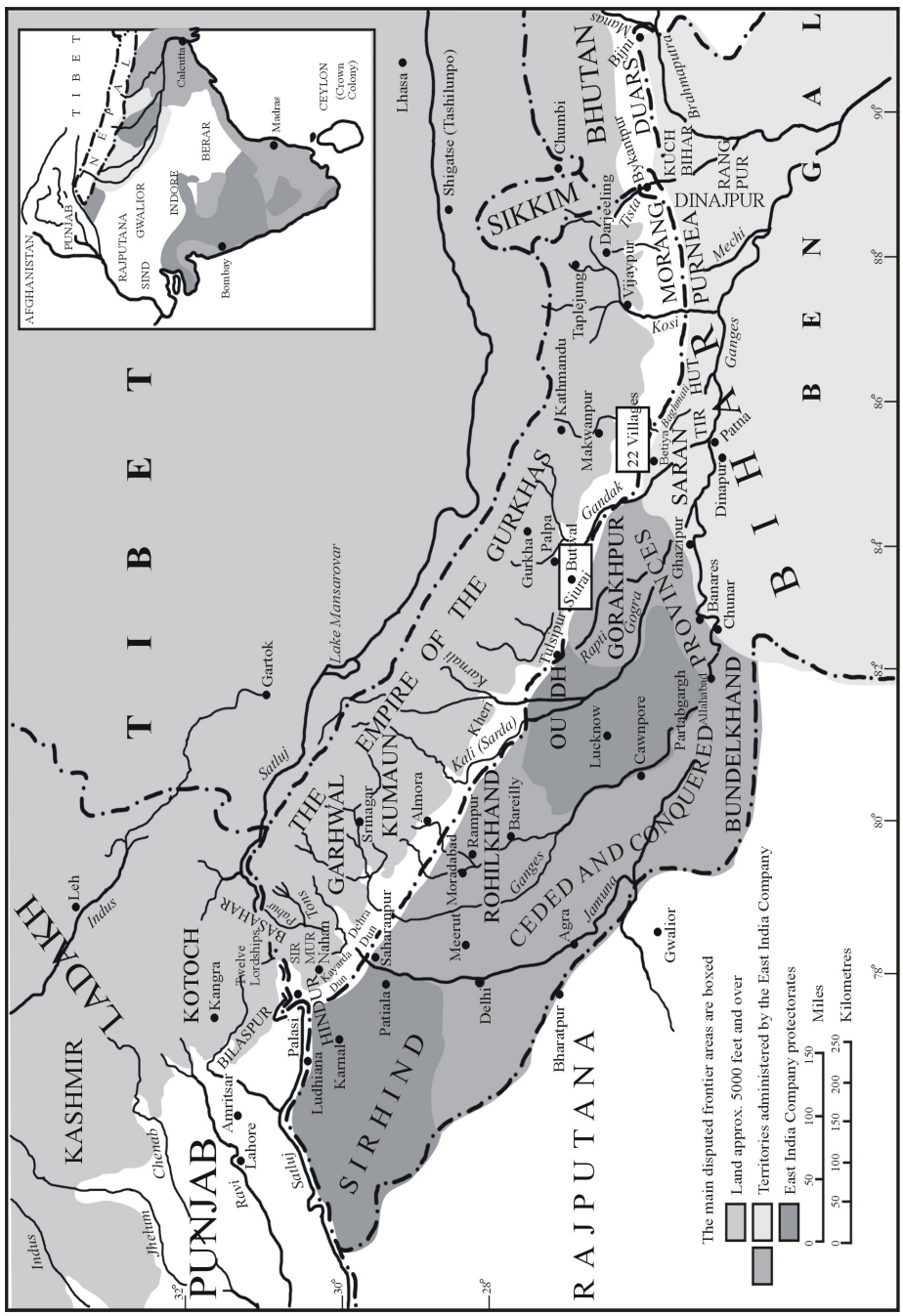
** Ritesh Kumar Shah is Assistant Professor in the Department of History, Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi, Delhi.



Map showing North India in 1814

It will be argued that the British victory in the war, in spite of the great success and ability of Ochterlony and the triumph in Kumaon, was essentially because of the failure of the Gorkha military. Gorkha was after all a Himalayan state with limited resource base and thus did not have the reserve to control a territory spanning 1,300 miles from its centre at Kathmandu.

Introduction

Nepal, in the middle of the eighteenth century was a land divided into myriad states from the east of river Kali to the Kathmandu valley. These included the Chaubisi and the Baisi kingdoms.[1] Gorkha, located about a 100-kilometres to the west of the valley of Nepal, was one small hill principality in the Chaubisi area. It was a rather poor state with little agricultural land and trade routes at its command. It was with the rise of Prithvi Narayan Shah (1743–1775) that the Gorkha state began to consolidate and expand. Right from the beginning he was keen to acquire the Nepal valley for it was, of all the hill states, the richest on account of its agriculture, manufactures and trade with Tibet and India. It took him twenty-five years to capture the valley. But, more importantly, the career of conquest started by him did not end with his death as fresh territory was won in the east and the west.[2] In the west, by 1789, the *Chaubisi-Baisi* kingdoms were taken and river Kali formed the boundary. Towards the east the Teesta was the eastern limit of the Gorkha army.

For M.C. Regmi "The conquest of more than fifty states during a period of five years from 1786–1791 is a clear evidence of imperialism".[3] Gorkha imperialism expanded further: it annexed Kumaon (1791), Garhwal (1804) and in the subsequent decade, after the conquest of Garhwal and preceding the war with British, Kazi Amar Singh Thapa was busy subduing small kingdoms up to Sutlej. It was here that he ran into Ranjit Singh, the formidable Punjab ruler. Thus, by the beginning of the second decade of the nineteenth century, just before the war with the British, Gorkhas were firmly placed in the land from the Jamuna to Teesta and battling to extend control up to the Sutlej.

The East India Company transformed from being a mere trading company to a major territorial power with conquests in Bengal during the mid-eighteenth century. Acquisition of a prized possession forced Warren Hastings, the Governor-General, to turn Awadh into a buffer state to protect Bengal from Afghans of Rohilkhand, and the Marathas. The period of Lord Cornwallis, the Governor-General who succeeded Warren Hastings, is primarily known for conquests in south, but a definite move up towards the Ganga-Jamuna doab took place under Richard Wellesley, the Governor-General from 1798–1805. It was Wellesley who, through the treaty of Subsidiary Alliance with the Nawab of Awadh, in 1801, secured Rohilkhand and all the territory between Ganges and Jamuna. With the capture of Delhi, in 1803, all Maratha territory between Jamuna and Ganga fell to the British. This combined territory was called 'Ceded and Conquered Provinces' that became a part of Bengal Presidency.[4] In this way not only was Awadh surrounded from three sides but the entire doab was captured. Once their control in Bengal and Bihar was secure, the British moved ahead and reached up to the point from where the conquest of Kumaon and Garhwal to the north and north-east of Awadh was the next logical step forward. Possession of these hilly areas would not only consolidate British along the northern frontiers of Awadh but along the eastern boundaries of Ranjit Singh.[5]

War: Reasons

The immediate cause of war was the provocation caused by Gorkha attack on British *Thanas* at Butwal, killing eighteen people. These events are dated 29th May 1814. According to the official British version, their hands were forced, after the Gorkha excesses along the Terai. They had been harassing the company's zamindars and annexing their lands with impunity. Thus when the limits of British tolerance were reached, a commissioner was appointed in 1812, to demarcate the territory. The award of Major Paris Bradshaw was not agreeable to the Gorkhas. As per his findings Butwal and Sheoraj were to be evacuated by Nepal. When they were asked to withdraw from Butwal, Kathmandu resorted to violent means by killing people at British posts. The British were left with no alternative other than to fight for their dignity and lost pride. War was thus for purely punitive purposes with

no acquisitive intent.[6] The version of the rival party is that the British, since the time Gorkhas came to power, were frustrated at being denied access through Nepal's territory, to Tibet. According to this view there is an element of inevitability to war, simply because the East India Company did not want a powerful state between their territory and Tibet. It was only a matter of time when border skirmishes turned into a full-fledged war.

It is important to examine both these contentions to appreciate the backdrop of the war. First, it is interesting to note that the two sides chose to start a war on claims over Butwal. The point here was not Butwal, but the entire stretch of land, called Terai.[7] Terai was important to the Gorkhas as it contained the most fertile agricultural land. It was on the strength of revenues realised from the Terai that the Gorkhas maintained their army. Since it was a huge territory, a strip of about twenty kilometres all along the plains of the Ganga and its tributaries, and for the most part was not demarcated clearly, there were claims and counter claims about possession. So long as the conflict remained confined to the Gorkhas and neighbouring rajas and zamindars it did not get out of control. But as the British from 1801 onwards, began to advance and capture the plains of north India there was a gradual, but definite, increase in trouble between the two sides. It was therefore a conflict between the two rival powers, one of which drew its sustenance from the revenues of the Terai and the other that was moving further north as part of its larger designs in India. East India Company's rigidity on Butwal, therefore, was not a mere coincidence; they knew very well that the territory in question was perhaps the most fertile area in Nepal and that it was located at a pass connecting the Nepal valley to Terai and thus very important for the Gorkhas. But what is equally interesting is that Gorkhas too had made up their mind for war, convinced that the British could not conquer the hills.

It is difficult to argue that the British did not want a war with Nepal. They were fully aware that Bhim Sen Thapa, the Prime Minister of Nepal, was trying to get together different Indian rulers against the British by sending envoys to them. And as John Pemble puts it, "Hastings' [the Governor-General] policy was motivated principally by a sincere fear that unless the British acted first, the native states

would combine and drive the Company from India. Only paramountcy could pre-empt destruction. This way of thinking made it impossible for Hastings to treat Nepalese encroachments as mere isolated border incidents".[8]

This brings us to the second question of Himalayan trade. For the Gorkhas, when British attempts to reach Tibet were repeatedly thwarted by the presence of a strong state in between, they declared war against it. There is no doubt that the British were interested in reaching out to Tibet. The accounts of various missionaries and travellers had interested them in the exotic country. But as long as the Mughal empire and the subsequent native rulers were strong, they could not think of going beyond mainland India.

Soon, however, the opportunity came with the capture of Bengal, after the battles in Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1764), and the victory over the French (by1760s). As early as 1767 a mission was sent under Major Kinloch, to help the local Newari kings, fighting Prithvi Narayan's army to retain possession of the Nepal valley. It was for the same purpose that another mission was sent two years later, in 1769, under James Logan. The motive was clear: to help the side that was on good terms with the Tibetan Lama so that smooth trade could commence between British India and Tibet. Once Nepal's valley fell to Prithvi Narayan who, for obvious reasons, was hostile to the British, the Company was frustrated. It is in this light that Warren Hastings' war against Bhutan, in 1773–74, should be seen.

Could it then be argued that the British went to war against Nepal because of a burning desire to reach out to Tibet as all other means of doing so had failed to yield results?

There is no doubt that the British had been interested in Tibet but the political equations changed rapidly by the second decade of nineteenth century. China had become a very important factor in the overall British scheme. During the last quarter of the eighteenth century China's importance for Britain increased significantly because Chinese tea became Britain's national beverage. Britain required Chinese tea more than the Chinese need for the British market. The Company was

worried for the future of the tea trade and the handsome returns that it received on account of this commerce. It was well aware of the increasing Chinese interest in Tibet; this probably explains their worries when the Gorkhas were trying to peddle the theory that the British war on Nepal was done with a purpose of reaching Tibet. The British were so disturbed that they chose to send two separate royal ambassadors, in place of emissaries from a trading company, Macartney and Amherst, in 1792 and 1816 respectively, to apprise the Chinese king about the British position on Nepal.[9] Therefore, in spite of a continued interested in Tibet and its commerce the British policy changed substantially from the period of Warren Hastings because of changed circumstances.

Thus, Company's policy towards Nepal was an outcome of fear of the native states coming together against them. Lord Hastings wanted to deliver a decisive blow to Gorkhas before any such coalition become a reality. Commercial considerations had always been important for the British but they chose to put a lid on their ambitions in Tibet because of the Chinese factor.

Frontiers of War

The British chose to open several frontiers across the southern territorial boundary of Nepal. Major General David Ochterlony was to directly confront Amar Singh Thapa in the hilly terrain around Sutlej. Major General Robert Rollo Gillespie had the responsibility of capturing Dehra Doon after which a detachment of his forces were to march towards Srinagar in the east, to relieve the capital of Garhwal, while the bulk of the force was to move west to aid the operations of Ochterlony. Almora, the capital of Kumaon, was to be attacked from Rohilkhand plains, after the occupation of Garhwal. In the Terai, a force was assembled from Banaras and Gorakhpur and put under Major General John Sulivan Wood to reach Palpa through Butwal, the purpose of this march was to ease the pressure on the main army marching to Kathmandu. The attack on the enemy capital, Kathmandu, was to be carried out through Saran, under Major General Bennet Marley. Beyond Kosi eastward, Major Latter was furnished with two thousand men for the defense of Poornea frontier. This broad plan underwent changes as the war progressed.

The most important frontier of war was through Saran as the main army was to march through it. The British chose to multiply points of attack along the border with Nepal because, not sure of the enemy's strength, they wanted to divide its forces.

This clearly shows that the British were not confident about taking on the enemy in a terrain that they knew very little about. One of the most important reasons for British fear in engaging with Nepal was the land that separated it from British India. This was the stretch called Terai. With the expansion towards the Gangetic plains, the English came into close association with Terai; their knowledge must also have been augmented by the travels of people like Major Kinloch (who attempted to help Newaris against Prithvi Narayan, in 1767), Colonel Kirkpatrick (who visited Nepal, in 1792) and Francis Buchanan Hamilton (visiting Nepal with Captain Knox's mission, in 1802–03, and travelling widely along the border of the Company's territory with Nepal). Hamilton not only had the accounts of those people who had formerly been associated with the principalities annexed by the Gorkhas but also had information from the people coming down to the plains.[10] So it is certain that the writings of these travelers and the association with the territory in their immediate neighbourhood deterred the British from taking action, in spite of clear provocation during the rainy season, which was not favourable for a long campaign. It is therefore not surprising that five months elapsed after the events at Butwal, before war commenced in late October (31st October).

This paper's focus is on the frontier west of Kali because there was no fighting in the Terai. While Saran was to be the most important frontier from where the main army was to march towards Kathmandu the campaign did not take off . It is difficult to argue why the illustrious Generals put in charge to lead the British assault against the enemy — Marley and then his replacement George Wood, in Saran, and John Sullivan Wood, in Butwal— failed to take the war forward. Their lack of action could probably be explained by the fear of having to continue war, should it enter the unfavourable summer season, in Terai, coupled with the news of British reverses at Nalapani. Whatever might have been the reason for the British lack of progress it embarrassed Lord Hastings and did some serious damage to "British prestige". But to the

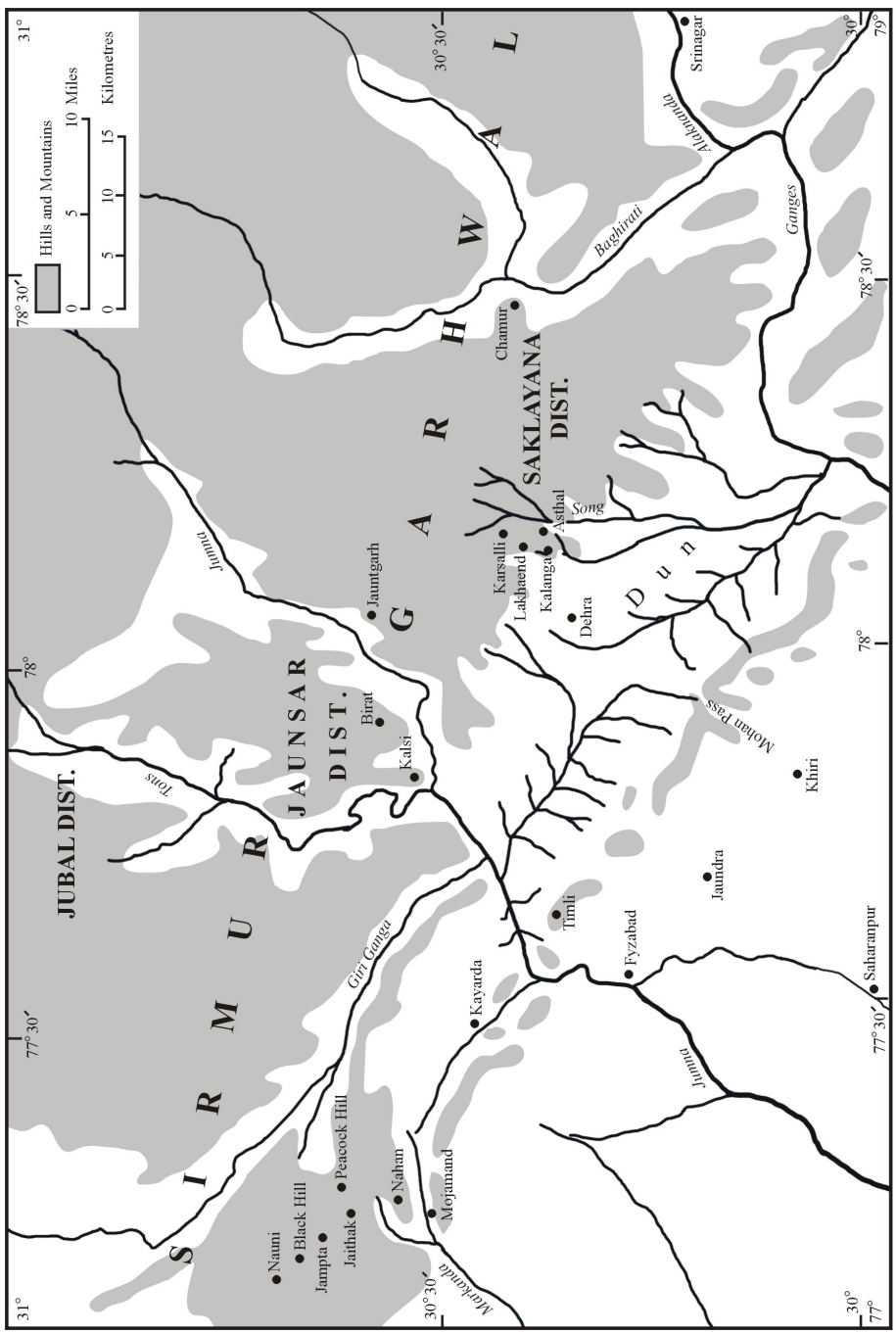
relief of the Company there were encouraging developments taking place in the Sutlej-Jamuna region and Kumaon.

The War

Gillespie, with about 3,500 soldiers, was the first to penetrate enemy frontier from Meerut in the doab, on 22nd October, where about 600 men were posted under Captain Balbhadra Singh for the defence of Doon. Balbhadra positioned himself at a hill, about five miles from Dehra, variously called Nalapani or Kalunga. After Colonel Mawbey failed to move ahead Gillespie himself advanced with his entire army to storm the fortress. But the rash temperament of the commander and the haste with which the plan was executed meant that entire force could not be roped in.[11] Gorkhas had worked out their defences well and just as he tried to storm in, Gillespie was shot dead. The events are dated 31st October. Charge of the army now fell on Mawbey who waited for reinforcement from Delhi. Finally, on 30th November, the fort was captured and razed to the ground but not before Balbhadra escaped. The battle was a disaster for the British. Loss of a General of Gillespie's eminence, the hero of Vellore and Java, was an embarrassment to the army and demoralising for the soldiers. Because of these developments, as well as the bravery of the Gorkhas in the entire series of events, Lord Hastings had to alter his initial plan of sending a detachment to subdue Garhwal; now the entire force was to aid the operations of Major General Ochterlony against Amar Singh and his commanders.[12]

To the west of Dehra and across Jamuna, at Nahan, was posted Runjoor Singh Thapa, son of Amar Singh Thapa, with a force of about 3,000 soldiers. Major General Martindell had taken over the charge from Colonel Mawbey. With the Doon falling to the British, communications of Amar Singh with the eastern part of his empire had become very difficult. So even if events at Nalapani caused much embarrassment to the British, the capture of the crucial passes on Jamuna helped them gain possession of a line of communications that made it extremely difficult for Gorkhas to send supplies to Amar Singh.

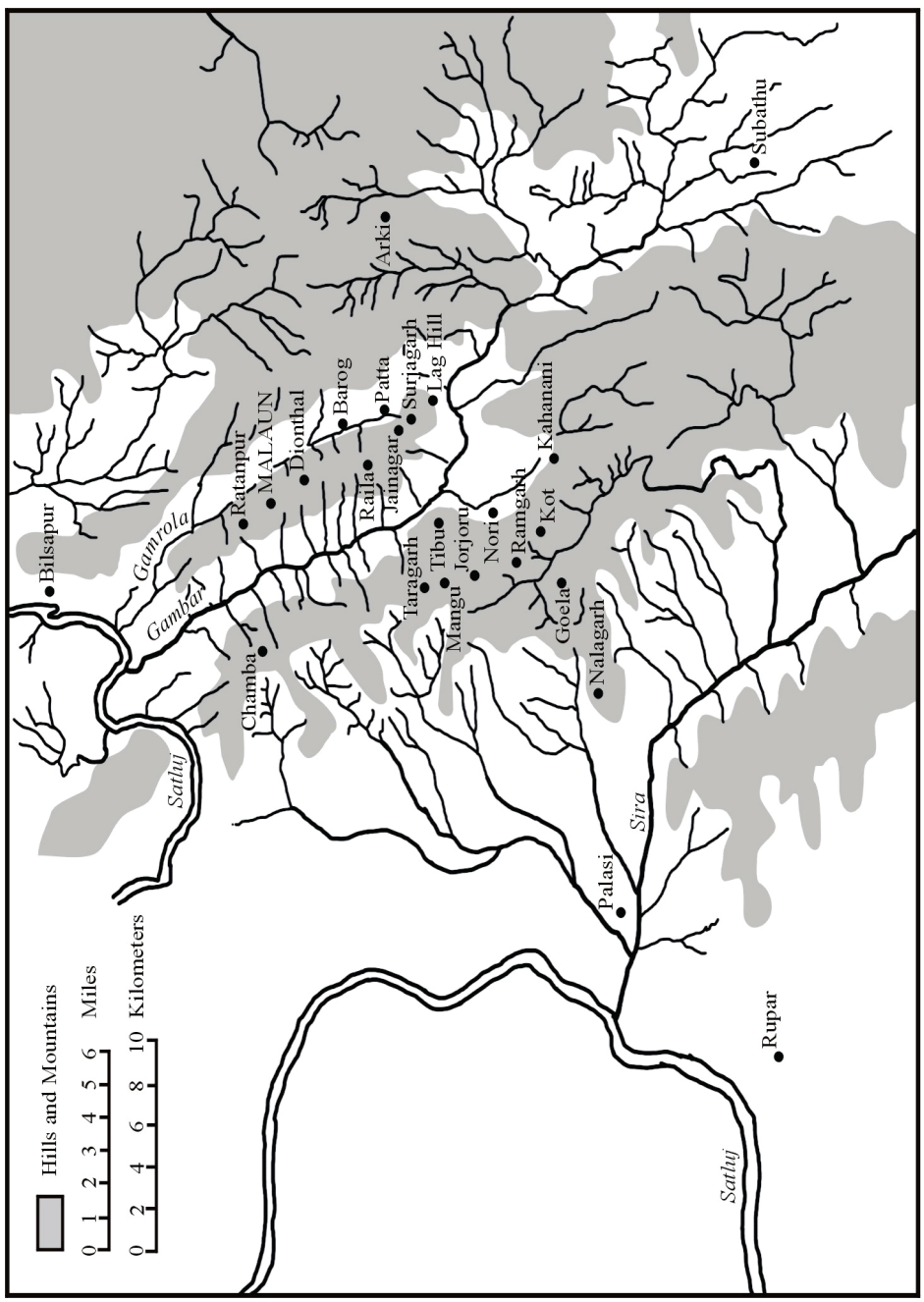
Just as the British army advanced towards him, Runjoor Singh



Map Illustrating the operations in Garhwal and Sirmur in 1814-15

moved to another hill, Jyathak, which was even higher than Nahan; this probably explains why Jyathak was preferred to Nahan. The first attempt to take Jyathak also failed and the adventure cost the British army many soldiers. Though he had a force substantially larger than his rival commander, Martindell did not act for many months; the initial failure had shaken him up completely. The peak could be captured only in late May (21st May) after much remonstrance from Governor-General Hastings himself and when Ochterlony was about to take charge of the operations. This delay in finishing the task could have proven very costly if only the Gorkhas were not helpless, fighting away from Kathmandu and in constant need of supplies.

In the far west, Ochterlony began his operations against Amar Singh precisely at a time Gillespie had started his. Amar Singh had been in these hills for the past decade without much success against the minor hill rajas. He also laid a siege on Kangra fort, lying across Sutlej, but failed to capture it. The fort was ultimately taken over by Ranjit Singh, in 1809.[13] Starting from Ludhiana Ochterlony reached Palasi from where he began operations against Amar Singh positioned at Arki. Circumstances which the British faced were extremely challenging: the terrain was totally unfamiliar, harsh winter was fast approaching and the enemy needed to be dislodged from the advantageous position it occupied atop these hills. The only probable advantage with them was the size of army: their forces hugely outnumbered those of Gorkhas. Fortunately, Ochterlony turned out to be the man for the occasion. So while his fellow commanders were either falling to enemy fire or were not able to move ahead, he progressed, carefully planning against his rival. After carefully surveying the region he built roads towards the enemy's forts and dragged up the heavy siege guns (as the Gorkha stockades were resilient to the light artillery) to within shooting range to breach its walls. This was something that had never ever been done before in these hills; even Gorkhas, the experts in mountain warfare, were surprised to find use of elephants for the purpose as they looked at the spectacle in amazement. Ochterlony also learned the art of stockade[14] warfare from the Gorkhas and used it to good effect against them. In this way Nalagarh was secured (5th November), Taragarh fell next and then having secured his position, moved towards Ramgarh, carefully stockading the captured forts.



Map Illustrating Ochterlony's operations in 1814-15

Years of warfare in these hills had alienated local rajas from the Gorkhas and it was here that there was a possibility for Ochterlony to turn them against the Kazi. Conversely, there was also a possibility of Amar Singh forging strong alliances with some of these states. But as it finally turned out Ochterlony won over the local rajas—some of them easily as they were already harassed by the Gorkha generals and others by coercing them to change sides. Palasi raja belonged to the first category and he readily offered help to lay a road to Ramgarh.[15] Belaspur was forced to defect from the side of Amar Singh; Maha Chand had been connected to Amar Singh through marriage. He agreed to submit out of fear of being removed from power. Belaspur's defection proved to be extremely important as it was from here that Kazi got all his supplies at Maloun, his new location, after he had to abandon Arki, being surrounded from all sides. Once the line of communications from the north was captured Amar Singh's position became very weak. The Belaspur ruler also provided the British with an additional force of a thousand auxiliaries and access to the road to Ratanpur, lying to the north of Maloun. In this way they completely isolated Amar Singh. He had been under great strain as supplies from Kathmandu had not been reaching him. But when Maha Chand deserted him, his position became desperate.

But it took another two months before the final surrender at Maloun, because a direct assault on Kazi's position was deliberately delayed as there were still capable Gorkha fighters to support their general. Moreover, the British had time on their hands, with no reinforcements coming from anywhere they could wait for his surrender as Amar Singh was being hemmed in from all sides. As soon as Bhakti Thapa's fierce attack on the British post at Deothal ended in failure, the formality was completed. Kazi surrendered by 15th May after the news of the fall of Kumaon was broken to him.

It was perhaps the victory over the Gorkhas in the Sutlej-Jamuna hills that decided the course of the war. No doubt Kumaon had fallen earlier, but as long as Kazi continued to engage the British the Gorkhas felt the war was still not decided. Amar Singh Thapa was the symbol of Gorkha resistance to the enemy. But when he surrendered the course of war had been decided in favour of the British. Yet it will be an error

of judgement to hold the Kazi responsible for defeat. In fact, it was his indomitable spirit that led him to resist a force which hugely outnumbered his. His effort appears to be all the more heroic because he continued to engage with the British for over six months even as they, through their promise of restoration of local rule, had won over local rajas to their side. It is pertinent to mention that the Gorkha general throughout his engagement with Ochterlony, was demanding reinforcements from Kathmandu. Though the supplies never reached him, Kathmandu cannot be blamed for letting down its most brave warrior. There were more fundamental reasons for the failure of Gorkhas.

It was a failure of the policy that led the Gorkhali state to expand much beyond its means. The fact that effete hill kingdoms could not be subdued by Gorkhas in ten years of active warfare meant that Gorkha position was weak in the outlaying areas of the kingdom away from the centre of their power. It was on account of this inherent weakness that Gorkha failure against the local rajas, 1804 onwards, and the British, in 1814–15, can be best explained.

Kumaon, the base of Gorkha expansion towards the west, was free of any activity up to January 1815, because there were hardly any forces to assault Almora. Attack was also delayed because of a change in strategy after Gillespie's fall at Nalapani. So on account of both these factors when the campaign actually began, in February, it was decided to multiply points of attack. The shortfall in the number of soldiers was to be made good by raising Afghan irregulars from Rohilkhand: the choice of Rohillas was made because they had, on several occasions in past, invaded the region. Captain Hyder Hearsey[16] was chosen for recruiting the Rohilla Pathans. The British were probably little more confident, perhaps on account of Raper's writings on Gorkha excesses in the region, that they would not be unwelcome in a land that was already suffering on account of alien rule.[17] E.T. Atkinson's writings, perhaps the most detailed source of information on the events in Kumaon, build up on Raper's findings and convey an impression that right from the time Gardner began to climb up the valley of the Kosi, the inhabitants were waiting to receive the British with open arms to relieve them from Gorkha tyranny.[18] It is difficult to say whether

the marching army had similar experiences. Atkinson needs to be read carefully as he was not only writing seven decades after the events but also had a responsibility of legitimising British conquests and the subsequent annexation of the region.

The campaign in Kumaon was different from the one conducted by Ochterlony against Amar Singh Thapa. While the fighting in the Punjab hills was about dislodging the enemy from the comfortable position he had occupied atop the hills, in Kumaon it was about capturing Almora, the capital and the seat of the Gorkha government.

Four thousand five hundred men were split into two: three thousand, and one thousand and five hundred under Lieutenant-Colonel Gardner and Major Hearsey respectively, as a two-pronged attack was launched. While Gardner was to reach Almora with the main body of troops from Kashipur, Hearsey was to enter Champawat, the old capital, in Kali Kumaon,[19] from Pilibhit up the Kali river. The task for Hearsey was to safeguard the line formed by Kali that divided the eastern and the western parts of the Gorkha empire. The idea was to break all communications between Doti and Kumaon by destroying the bridges over Kali so that any reinforcements from Kathmandu could not pass through. Kathmandu sent Hasti Dal, the governing chief at Doti and the brother of Bam Sah, the Governor of Kumaon, to aid the establishment at Almora. Hearsey however made the mistake of dividing his army by engaging in the two tasks simultaneously: that of manning the boundary at Kali as well as besieging the Kootulgarh fort. It was on account of this division of forces as well as the determination of Hasti Dal that the latter crossed Kali at Kusumghat, twenty miles east of Champawat, which led to Hearsey's defeat and capture (2nd April).[20]

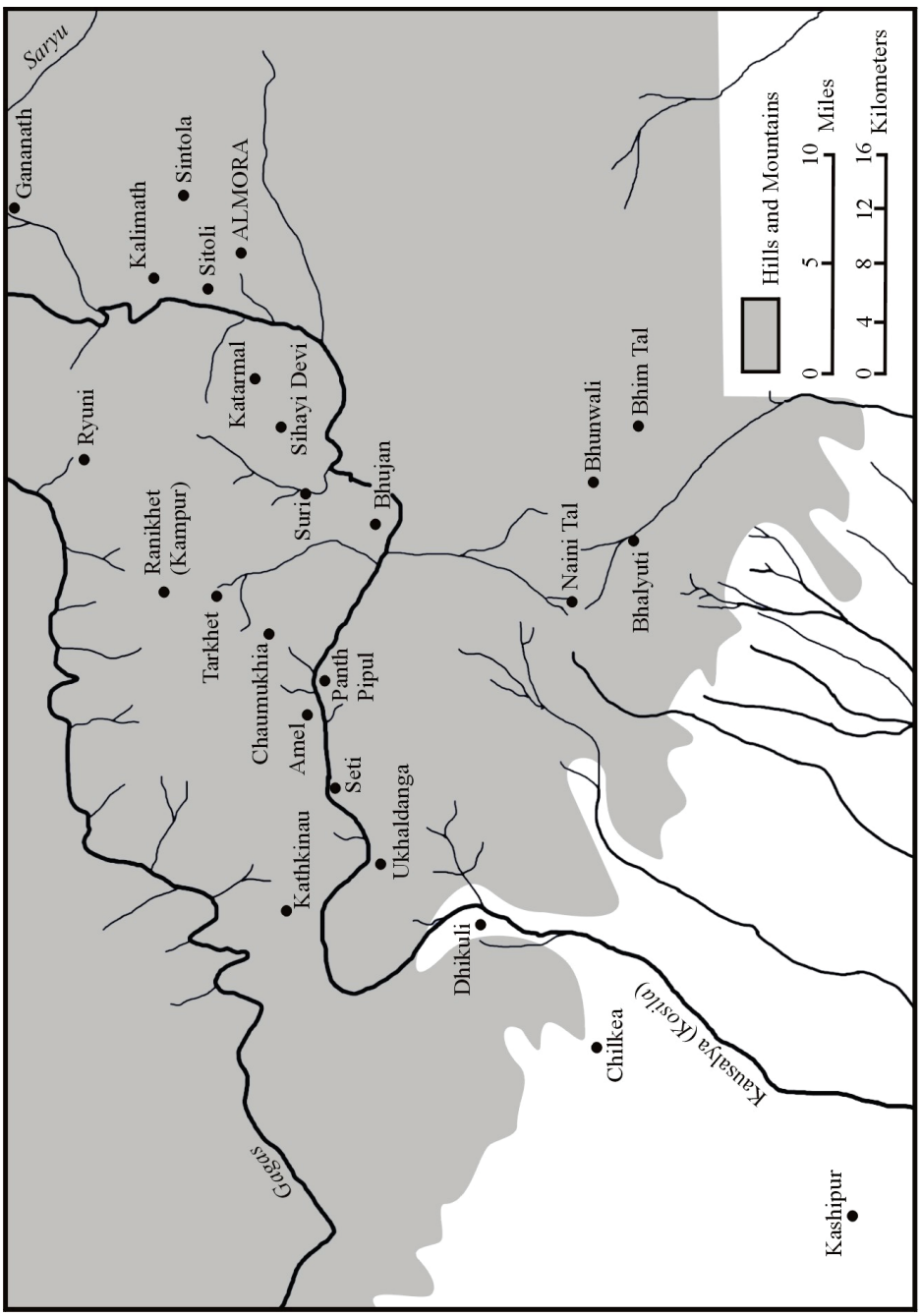
The main party under Lieutenant-Colonel Gardner, accompanied by Edward Gardner, the Agent to the Governor-General, started from Kashipur on 11th February, and then moved up to Chilkea, and Dhikuli on the bank of Kosi, and from there moved up along the river valley to Sethi. On their way there were Gorkha stockades at some places but the occupants chose not to confront the marching British force; instead, they left their posts. At Sethi, the British intelligence confirmed

the presence of about an eight hundred-strong Gorkha contingent at Bhujan, about fifteen miles up in the valley. At this point Gardner chose not to directly confront the enemy as he took an alternative course to Almora. The party advanced a few miles up the valley, to Amel, from where it took a sharp turn left to take the post at Chaumukhia, located at an elevation of over 6,000 feet. Though the Gorkha force stationed at Bhujan followed the British it could not overtake them and, considering the weakness of their position, they fell back. As Gorkhas were determined to stop the march of the invaders towards Almora they positioned themselves at Kumpur, in the road between Chaumukhia, where the British were camping, and Almora. The British force, being outmanoeuvred, made a march to Kapina-ke-danda, near Kumpur. The strength of Gorkhali force at Kumpur based on a well chosen position, convinced Gardner of the futility of trying to take the post by assault. But he had been informed of scarcity of fighting men at Almora which led him to believe that the British post could not be assaulted. As it turned out, there was no military action during the three weeks (from 28th February to the 22nd March) when the two armies remained encamped facing each other. Not launching an offensive against British when they were waiting for supplies reflected an acute weakness on the part of Gorkha army: they simply did not have enough soldiers to fight. On 22nd March, after 850 men joined in from Hapur, a decisive move was made by Gardner. Strengthened in his resolve by addition of fresh troops he now, instead of taking on the enemy at Kumpur, marched towards Siyahi Devi, a mountain above 7,000 feet high. While the army moved ahead, a small contingent demonstrated in front of the enemy stockade to divert its attention. Having no clue of the change in strategy Gorkhas were merely tackling a small platoon when in the afternoon they came to know of the British advance. This was a brilliant strategic move by Gardner who now ensured that invading force was placed between Gorkhas at Kumpur and Almora. In this way the British achieved their objective of moving towards Almora without any loss to its army. When they discovered that they had been completely outsmarted Gorkhas they destroyed their stockade and rushed towards Almora via Ryuni and Katarmal. Though there remained only the valley of Kosi separating them at Siyahi Devi from Almora, they chose to take the conventional route through Ryuni and Katarmal as it was extremely difficult to move ahead from

Siyahi Devi. In this way the British troops, without shedding a drop of blood, reached Katarmal, only a few miles from Almora, an effort for which Gardner must be commended. Enthused by Gardner's successes Lord Hastings dispatched a force of regular 2,000 strong infantry and twenty-five firelocks under Jasper Nicolls. It was at Katarmal that the two British forces met on 5th April. Hasti Dal reached Almora but not before Nicolls had made it to Katarmal. Katarmal is situated at the top of a hill from where Almora is visible. On 23rd April Hasti Dal appeared, as his movements were visible from the British camp, to move out for an expedition; the British followed him. He went straight to Gananath, a hill fifteen miles north-east of Almora, but before he could make arrangements for his defence the British troops were already in the vicinity. In a quick action that followed, to the misfortune of the Gorkhas, their commander received a musket ball on his temple and died instantly. The British had secured a major victory, for Hasti Dal was no ordinary soldier and his loss was greatly felt in Almora.[21] Now, the British troops were in total command of the situation: Sitoli, lying very close to the north of Almora, was captured on the 25th April. The enemy was then pursued into Almora; Bam Sah Chountara realizing the desperate nature of situation immediately proposed suspension of arms. On 27th April peace was signed and Bam Sah agreed to retire to the west of Kali. Thus Kumaon fell to the British.

It is important to explain the move of Hasti Dal to march towards Gananath. It appears that seeing a strong British contingent so close he feared a final assault on the capital. He might have considered the bold move of surprising them by launching a counter offensive, but the huge numbers in the British camp would have deterred him. So he decided to confuse them by marching towards Gananath. By moving to Gananath he was also ensuring that he retained possession of the northern parganas of Kumaon for safeguarding communications with Kathmandu and, more importantly, he was waiting for an opportune moment to attack the invading army from behind when it had entered Almora. Hasti Dal tried to avert the inevitable but failed.

The inability of Gorkhas was most visible at a time when the rival forces were lodged in front of each other for over three weeks. Gorkhas



Map Illustrating the operations in Kumaun in 1815

could not assault the British, because with a few hundred soldiers they did not have the confidence of defeating the enemy.[22] The experiences of both, Amar Singh Thapa as well as the Gorkhas in Kumaon, were more or less similar: they were essentially fighting a defensive war, never moving ahead against the enemy because they did not have the men and material to fight an aggressive war. It is therefore important to examine the reasons for the Gorkha failure.

Problems of Gorkhali Military

One of the chief factors that made the Gorkha state special among myriad hill principalities in the Himalayan region was its army. Gorkhali army had been organised by Prithvi Narayan Shah who considered it to be the most important pillar on which the state rested. Soldiers were allotted *jagir*s to ensure their economic security. Liberally granting land to soldiers in a predominantly non-monetised economy in a milieu where acquisition of land brought high social status was indeed a practical move which helped Gorkhas raise one of the most remarkable fighting armies. Regmi calls Gorkha state the first in Himalayan region to have a standing army.[23] It was with the help of a standing army that they were able to extend their victory march from Teesta to Sutlej in a very short span of time.

No doubt raising a standing army in the hills made them a territorial power to reckon with, yet this army was raised on the strength of land they were able to assign to their soldiers. This created a peculiar situation, as summed up by L. Stiller, "…as a direct result of this practice [a] double dichotomy was set up: the limit of the army is the land; the limit of the land is the army. The army could expand as long as there was land to be assigned for its maintenance. And there would be land to provide for the maintenance of an expanded army as long as the army was strong enough to conquer and hold it".[24] But the way the apparatus of Gorkhali state functioned did not necessarily lead to these new conquests causing a commensurate increase in the land to be allotted to military. This was because the state followed a policy of sparing lands for the maintenance of the families of the fallen soldiers, as rewards to the defectors from the side of the enemy, as *gunthi*s for the upkeep of temples, as *birta*s for the maintenance of Brahmans,

and also to meet the increasing expenses of the royal household. The fact that not all lands, especially the ones recently acquired in Kumaon and Garhwal, were as rich as those in Terai put more pressure on the available resources. This situation led to problems at various levels. While new territory was won with relative ease (largely because mercenary armies of hill rajas were no match for Gorkhas) the standing army perhaps did not increase in that proportion. Stiller, basing his figures on a study of contemporary sources, gives their number to be 1,200, in 1769, which increased to 11,000–16,500, by 1804, at the time Amar Singh Thapa began his campaigns in the far west.[25] These figures appear impressive especially in a region that does not have a tradition of standing armies. In effect though, for controlling a territory as huge as that of the Gorkhas 15,000 soldiers are too few. Thus, during the war with the British a big province like Kumaon was manned by only 750 regular soldiers! The shortfall in the main army was met by the irregulars. It is not surprising to find numerous occasions when Kazi Amar Singh Thapa was asking for reinforcements from Kathmandu. So even though Gorkhas had won over huge territory they did not have sufficient men to defend it. The problem perhaps was more fundamental: that of raising the army through allotment of *jagir*s. *Jagirs* were limited as these had to be shared between the standing army, the families of the deceased soldiers, as *birtas* and *gunthis* and for the upkeep of the royal household. Therefore Gorkhali state had an inbuilt limitation where the standing army could not be raised beyond certain limits. But as conquests continued unabated it became increasingly difficult to man this huge empire with a few thousand regular soldiers aided by locally available, but not so reliable, irregulars. Through this arrangement Gorkhas might have succeeded in winning over petty hill states not far from Kathmandu but as they moved further west, and with the increasing strain on their resources, it became difficult for them to even subdue small kingdoms. Amar Singh Thapa had to face these problems in the Sutlej hills. More than anything the decade long warfare in the region brought to the fore these problems affecting the state.

While Kazi had been fighting in the Sutlej-Jamuna hills without much help from Kathmandu, the apparatus of the state was geared towards supporting his wars. So, even if Atkinson's writings on

Gorkhali excesses in Kumaon and Garhwal are treated as an exaggeration it is difficult to disagree that Gorkhali rule to the west of Kali was harsh and exacting (especially as Kazi's wars were financed by the treasury of Kumaon and that *jagirs* in Garhwal were parcelled out to military commanders). In a situation like this, especially in those regions that had been recently annexed, there could be problems of integration. Moreover forty years is hardly a sufficient time for a state to consolidate (given the fact that the career of Gorkha conquests started not before late 1760s).

Yet one cannot overemphasise this point. The state did actually make attempts towards integrating different communities living in its territory. In many of the conquered kingdoms lying between the valley of Nepal and the Kali river the administrative arrangement of the pre-annexation days was continued unhindered; even for the people in Kumaon and Garhwal, Kathmandu court showed its concerns — by exhorting those who had fled their homes to come back, by asking the team of officials sent to Kumaon to punish the low caste soldiers who had forcibly married Brahmin girls, and by repeatedly warning the local administrators from collecting unauthorised taxes.[26] But, these efforts could not produce any desirable results, largely because the affairs at Almora could not be governed from Kathmandu and also because to do so in a set-up where the fighting army drew its sustenance from the local resources, was very difficult. These problems could not have been overcome within a period as short as three decades. There are reasons to believe that the Gorkha state was still evolving its relationship with different ethnic communities in its territory by the time disturbances with the British began to assume threatening overtones. The fact that the Gorkha rule was not shattered in recently conquered territories during the course of the war—especially as the *jhara* system of transporting military supplies and official mail to different parts of the Gorkha state, that depended on the willing cooperation of the locals, worked quiet efficiently—cautions us against characterising it as a mere military experiment.

There also appears to be a distinct lack of coordination between the Prime Minister, Bhim Sen Thapa, in Kathmandu, and Amar Singh Thapa.[27] While the Prime Minister was trying to cobble together a

coalition of the native states against the English, Amar Singh Thapa was moved by the solitary zeal of westward expansion. This nearly brought him into a direct conflict with Ranjit Singh over the possession of Kangra fort. Surely Ranjit Singh could never have been a part of any attempt to corner the British if the most important general of the key coalition partner was busy campaigning so close to his domains. Perhaps the Kazi should have realised that he was not making any headway in the decade-long battles due to his weak position. But he persisted with the desultory warfare which was not coming to an end. Even if, hypothetically speaking, he were to succeed in his efforts against the local rajas, and there was no possibility of a clash with the British, a direct confrontation with Ranjit Singh was imminent. And it is not difficult to imagine that in any such conflict the odds were heavily stacked against the Gorkha general. Thus it was not only a poor assessment of his abilities but also a bad political move on the part of Kazi to be fighting so close to Punjab. For sure, his presence in the vicinity of Ranjit Singh's territories ruled out any possibility of a united front of native rulers against the British.

Towards a Conclusion

The Gorkhali army had become used to fighting wars, and the fact that they had had a successful record so far, meant there was not going to be any restraint on its forward march. Even as clear signs of stasis were visible from the middle of the first decade of nineteenth century, the army continued to push for victories. Gorkhali conquests had already resulted in one very important contradiction: at one level the army's desire for glory continued unabated while at another level *jagirs* could not help raise adequate number of soldiers to defend the ever expanding territory. In the absence of the regular soldiers, irregulars were roped in but they could only be poor substitutes for the standing army. It was therefore not surprising to note the desperation of Gorkha generals at being short of regular fighting men.

Though they suffered serious reverses at the beginning (Nalapani, Jyathak and even Terai) largely on account of unfamiliarity with the terrain, as the war progressed the British recovered and by the middle of 1815 defeated the enemy. What happened in 1814–15 was a mere

confirmation of a long process of decline, starting a decade earlier when the mighty warrior, Amar Singh Thapa, failed to conclusively defeat the petty chieftains in the region. He could not move forward simply because faraway from Kathmandu he lacked the means to subdue them. To supply men and material from Kathmandu to Srinagar took no less than two months. The situation did not improve even though Gorkhas had been controlling the region for long. Perhaps the distance from Kathmandu or the atrocious communication network was also not an issue. The problem lay elsewhere: in the nature of states that the Himalayan economy could support. In the entire Himalayan belt there had always been small states with limited resource base. No wonder they did not have a standing army. What Gorkhas tried to do was unprecedented in history: never before or afterwards was there a single state stretching over a thousand miles. This was made possible on the strength of rich revenues generated from the Terai. But as they moved into the not so productive areas in Kumaon and Garhwal there were clear signs of strains on the state machinery. Amar Singh Thapa's wars failed to yield desirable results because of this crucial factor. The Gorkhas had overstretched to the extent, the resources of the Terai failed to meet their requirements. But it was impossible to rein in the warriors who knew no defeat, as they had been imbued with a dream of a pan-Himalayan empire. If only the Gorkhas had confined their territory to the limits that their resources permitted and had consolidated it, the Gorkhali state might not have suffered at the hands of the British in 1815.

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End notes

[1] In the basin of Karnali (Ghagra in India) river system, to the west, were Baisi, or twenty-two Rajas and further east, in the Narayani basin (comprising 7 branches of Gandak), were Chaubisi or the 24 Rajas. The names of states in the lists, as given by writers like Kirkpatrick, Francis Buchanan, Vansittart, Oldfield and various Nepalese chronicles, are sometimes contradictory. Perhaps Baisi and Chaubisi were generic names, indicating that there were small kingdoms in the two river valleys. Whatever be their number it is certain that these states were in a state of constant warfare. See section IV, chapter I in Francis Buchanan Hamilton, *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal, and of the Territories Annexed to this Dominion by the House of Gorkha* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Company, 1819); later reprinted in (New Delhi: Manjusri Publishing House, 1971), pp. 237–290.

[2] It is important to note that Gorkhas did not conquer lands towards north or south. With horizontal expansion towards the east and the west, the Gorkhas were able to capture the trade routes connecting Tibet to Bengal. Since Tibet's significance lay mainly as the centre of the Himalayan trade, it did not figure in Nepal's schemes as a land to be conquered once the benefits from its commerce were secured. No doubt sometimes, attracted by the prospect of capturing the wealth locked up in its monasteries and lamaseries, Nepal did conduct military expeditions against Tibet; it was after one such raid in 1791 that Chinese not only pushed the invading forces out of Tibet but came within a few miles of the capital, Kathmandu. This particular event seems to have been quiet significant as, from then onwards, Nepal's involvement in Tibet's affairs became limited. To the south of the territory won over by Gorkhas was a belt of about twenty miles, Terai, beyond which were lands that was rapidly falling to the British. Nepal court avoided a direct confrontation with British but it were the claims and counter claims over Terai, that had became important for the economic sustenance of the expanding Gorkha military, that led to British interceding on behalf of those states that were on the receiving end of Gorkha aggression. It was finally this issue that acted as the immediate cause to the war. The presence of British to its south must have been a deterrence for the Gorkha expansion in that direction but they were also probably not interested in expanding towards the plains of India; their chief interest being establishing a Himalayan empire for which the warrior Kazi Amar Singh Thapa had been fighting, since 1804, in the Sutlej hills. See chapters 5 and 6 in Kumar Pradhan, *The Gorkha Conquests: the process and consequences of unification of Nepal, with particular references to eastern Nepal* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 89–149.

[3] M.C. Regmi, *Imperial Gorkha: An account of Gorkhali rule in Kumaon, 1791–1815* (Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 1999), pp. 5–6.

[4] John Pemble, *The Invasion of Nepal, John Company at War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 32–33.

[5] Amar Farooqui, *Colonial Forest Policy in Uttarakhand, 1890–1928* (New Delhi: Kitab Publishing House, 1997), p. 5.

[6] H.T. Prinsep, first published under the title *History of the Political and Military Transactions in India during the Administration of the Marquess of Hastings, 1813–23, Volume 1*, (London: 1825); later reprinted in (Ireland: Irish University Press, 1972), pp. 61–80.

[7] The word Terai is probably derived from Persian, meaning damp. It is the intermediate region between the Siwalik hills and the vast Gangetic plain. Strictly speaking it is divided into two regions: Bhabar and Terai. Bhabar literally means 'porous'. It lies at the foot of the Himalayan hills where the deposited gravel material brought by the rivers causes the water to sink. Here all the small streams of outer mountains are absorbed and thus it is practically devoid of water. It is at Terai that all the disappeared water reappears. And it is because of this that terai is largely waterlogged. Due to availability of water and the warm tropical climate the region is luxuriant in vegetation and full of animal life. See chapter 1 Farooqui, Op. Cit., pp. 12–16.

[8] Pemble, Op. Cit., p. 49.

[9] Ibid., pp. 68–69 and 78–79.

[10] Hamilton calls the region Tariyani or Tarai or Ketoni which is about twenty miles in width. Giving details about its flora, fauna he mentions that except during the cold season country becomes very unhealthy when even water for drinking becomes very scarce, and, till the cold season, people are subjected to fevers and bowel disorders which he calls "Ayul", a poisonous air, which, as per popular belief, comes from the breath of large serpents. See Hamilton, Op. Cit., pp. 62–65.

[11] The night before the assault on the fort British had planned the attack by synchronizing the action of all platoons but on the fateful day Gillespie impetuously, because of the lack of progress of his Colonel, decided to attack the enemy's location an hour before he was supposed to; as a result only two of the four platoons could join him. Still there were over a thousand and five hundred soldiers with him when the operation began; a huge number compared to Balbhadra's five to six hundred men. But Gillespie very foolishly chose to assault when the rest of the army was retreating on account of

heavy firing from the other side. In an attempt to move ahead he fell to a bullet, being shot through the heart. Prinsep, Op. Cit., pp. 87-90.

[12] Ibid., pp. 86–94.

[13] Pemble, Op. Cit., p. 25.

[14] For making a stockade wood was cut into requisite shape and size and formed into stakes driven into the ground with pickaxes and shovels making an inner and outer circle which was connected by means of smaller trees or branches woven between them filling the intermediate space with stones and loose earth. The description does not give an impression of the stockade being a strong redoubt but it proved to be wonderfully resilient: light artillery could not breach it, and it could only be destroyed through cannon shots. As wood, stones and loose earth required to make it were readily available stockades could be easily built at the best spot on a hill. Stockade warfare was the original contribution of Gorkhas to the technique of warfare and it was through these that they conducted a very daring warfare. See Anonymous, *Military Sketches of the Goorka War in India, in the Years 1814, 1815, 1816* (London: J. Loder, 1822), p.8.

[15] Prinsep, Op. Cit., p. 109.

[16] Hearsey was a mercenary who had made a fortune by fighting with various native princes. In 1811, he had bought a deed of a right to Dehra Doon for a few thousand rupees from the impoverished exiled heir to the kingdom of Garhwal. In consultation with Harak Deo Joshi he had his own plan for the invasion of the western hills. The fact that he had widely travelled in the region, being the companion of Raper and Lieutenant Webb all along the journey through Garhwal and Kumaon, in 1808, and that of Moorcroft on his journey to Mansarovar, in 1812, was important in deciding the choice of Hearsey. Moorcroft had also recommended him as an informant on local knowledge and military experience. Hearsey himself was eager to participate in a plan that offered prospects of war with Nepal for the realization of his claim to Dehra Doon. Thus, in November he was instructed to raise a corps of 1,500 irregulars in Rohilkhund. See E.T. Atkinson, first published under the title "The Himalayan Districts of the North Western Provinces of India", *Gazetteer NWP Volume XI* (Allahbad: 1882); later reprinted as *The Himalayan Gazetteer, Vol II Part II* (Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1973), pp. 607–698.

[17] Raper had travelled in 1808 from Haridwar to Badrinath and from there, via Kumaon, to Rudrapur and Bareilly as part of the British expedition to the sources of the Ganges. This was the first official British mission of enquiry in the region. The visitor carefully recorded the places through which they travelled and the impressions of a people that had been recently brought

under the rule of Nepal. His account cites many instances of Gorkha oppression and peoples' disaffection with it. Atkinson who wrote his gazetteer much later, in 1880s, quotes Raper at many places to cite the instances of Gorkha misrule and Peoples' suffering on account of it. It is pretty certain that British, after Raper's survey, formed an opinion of the Gorkhas as the most disliked rule. See F.V. Raper, "Narrative of a survey for the purpose of discovering the sources of the Ganges", first published in *Asiatic Researches XI* (1818); later reprinted in (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1979), pp. 459, 465–466 and 496.

[18] He writes "The greatest source of weakness to the Gorkhali cause was the universal disaffection of the people of the country. Nothing could exceed the hatred which the tyranny and exactions of the twenty-five years past had created, and no sooner had the British forces entered the hills than the inhabitants began to join our camp and bring in supplies of provisions for the troops. The same causes made it easy for us to obtain information regarding every movement of the enemy and gave us every facility for obtaining a knowledge of the localities of this country — a knowledge which in mountain warfare such as this, and in the absence of all trustworthy maps, was almost essential to success". Atkinson, Op. Cit., p. 654.

[19] This is a region in the eastern part of Kumaon where, or close to which, the Kali flows, hence the name, Kali Kumaon.

[20] Badridutt Pande, *Kumaon ka Itihaas* (Almora: Shree Almora Book Depot, 1937), pp. 416–417.

[21] Atkinson, Op. Cit., pp. 645–665.

[22] Atkinson admits that by no means the number of Gorkhas opposing the British were more than 1,500, of which no more than one half were Gorkhalis. This is too less a number considering that Gorkhas were in control of a huge territory in Kumaon. See Ibid., p. 654.

[23] Regmi, Op. Cit., pp. 65–66.

[24] L.F. Stiller, *The Rise of the House of Gorkha: A Study in the Unification of Nepal, 1768–1816* (Ranchi: The Patna Jesuit Society, 1973), p. 279.

[25] Ibid., pp. 282–283.

[26] Regmi, Op. Cit., pp. 93–96, and 116–127.

[27] J. Adam, Secretary to the Government to the Hon'ble Edward Gardner, Futtygurh, 15th June, 1815 in B.P. Saksena (ed.), *Historical papers relating to Kumaun, 1809–1842* (Allahabad: Government Central Record Office, 1956), pp. 146–150.