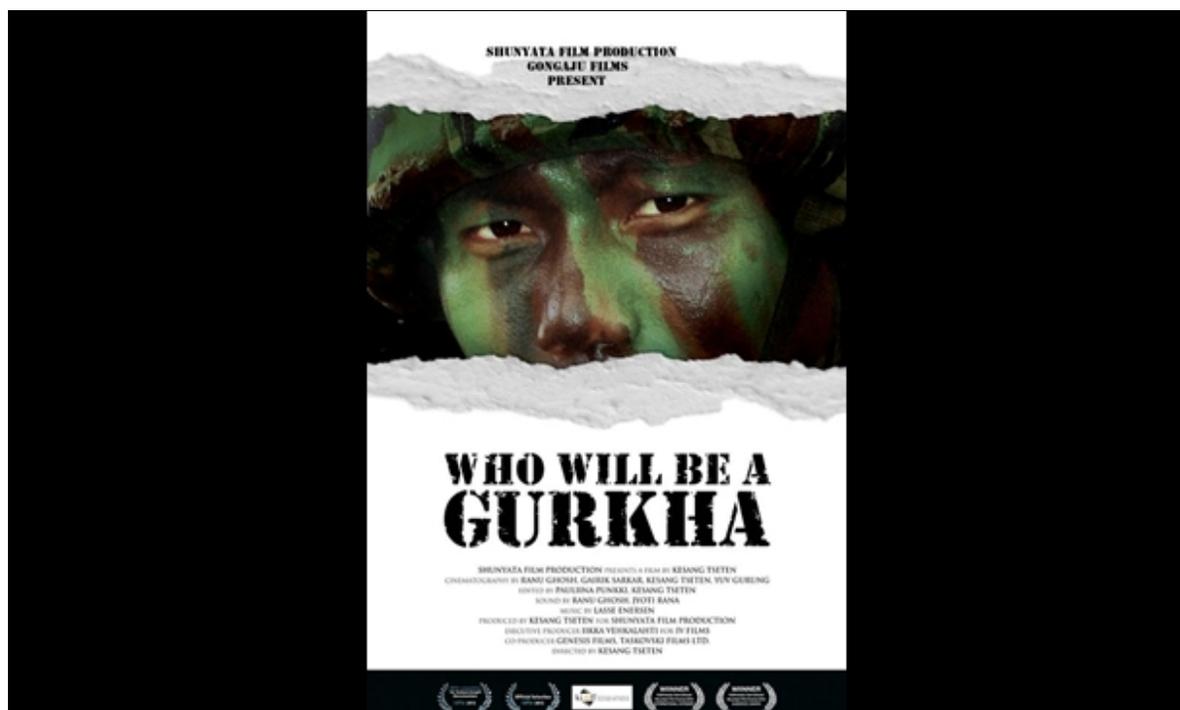


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Fit and worthy - Himal Southasian

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7-9 minutes



Nepali men have served as soldiers in foreign armies since 1815, originally for colonial India and then, after 1947, for independent India and the United Kingdom. Known as Gurkhas – an Anglicisation of ‘Gorkha’, the small state in the central hills of Nepal – they have long been considered one of the ‘martial races’, famous for their military exploits and seen as ‘the bravest of the brave’. The British who faced them in the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814-16 were sufficiently impressed that they later created a special regiment of Gurkha troops. Britain’s demand for a steady

supply of recruits – especially during the two world wars – was utilised by the Rana elites (the rulers of Nepal until 1950) to ensure Nepali sovereignty as the British gradually took control in northern India, the continuation of their autocratic rule, restoration of territory lost to the British following the Anglo-Nepalese War, substantial monetary payments, as well as honours and titles.

The issue of Gurkha recruitment has long been a subject of debate, viewed as the last bastion of colonialism in Southasia, yet valued for foreign currency earnings. These debates continue today. Despite this, the actual process of recruitment has never been open to public scrutiny, until now. It is in this context that the film *Who Will Be a Gurkha*, made by Nepali filmmaker Kesang Tseten, breaks fresh ground. With unprecedented access to a recruiting centre, Tseten traces the journey of hopeful applicants, following them from regional recruitment centres to the final selection trials at the British Gurkha camp in the city of Pokhara three months later. The film poignantly reveals the human face of the nationalist debates over recruitment, and also the colonial absurdities that persist in British military recruitment practices in a country that proudly claims that it was never colonised.

Over the course of the 78-minute film, the audience sees scenes of timed runs, heaves, sit-ups and written exams, and of interviews conducted by British and Gurkha officers. Throughout, Tseten works to reveal many aspects of the Gurkha recruitment. For instance, we learn that all ethnic and castes groups, and not just the ‘martial races’ formerly favoured by the British Army – Rais, Limbus, Magars and Gurungs – are now considered for recruitment. Tseten also shows British and Gurkha officers reiterating that the recruitment process is “free, fair and

transparent”, which suggests the prevalence of ‘brokers’ – those who accept payment from aspirants in return for supposed guarantees of selections. The recruiting officers also frown upon the practice of joining training academies offering preparatory courses. Those who fail to pass the regional tests are told they should have relied on the instructions from the official website, and not on the information given by training institutes.

One of the strengths of *Who Will Be a Gurkha* is the human dimension that it brings to the recruitment process. Close-ups during interviews capture the tense atmosphere as interviewees anxiously struggle to answer questions in English. The applicants are expected to have fairly high proficiency in English, as interview questions and briefings from the British officers are all delivered in English. Candidates recite obviously memorised answers. They give repeated ‘yes sir’s, followed by laboriously constructed answers to succeeding questions. The questioning in Nepali is no less excruciating. Questions from the Gurkha officers range from the mocking – “You’ve eaten up [memorised] the Gurkha museum” – to the grimly interrogatory – “Why did you shave your legs? To look younger? How old are you?” After such candid scenes, it is difficult not to root for the nervous, tense and struggling aspirants.

Unsurprisingly, the aspirants reveal varying levels of comprehension and general knowledge. In one conversation between two young men, a young man who is obviously from the Adivasi-Janajati group (indigenous ethnic minorities) asks if they will be taken to the UK by bus once they have passed. A youth who looks upper-caste smiles and says that during the briefing, the officer had said it was 7328 kilometres to the UK, and that travel

would be by air.

The film also illustrates the larger military structure and culture into which some of these young men will soon be integrated. For example, it becomes clear that like in many militaries, the Gurkhas promote 'manhood' by shaming any supposed signs of weakness as being 'feminine'. During a training session, when a member of one group of recruits expresses the need to go the bathroom, the officers instruct another group to tell them, "Shame on you women, we can hold our pee for a week," while the first group declares, "We are women."

In listening to the aspirants' conversations during periods of waiting, the audience can see that these are simply young men longing for a better future, worried about the debts of their parents, calculating their own marriage prospects, and reflecting on the necessity of repressing the urge to laugh at a British officer. As one potential Gurkha says: "We have to sacrifice, all sorts of sacrifice, a smile can easily be sacrificed."

Thus, the audience feels elated when a young man is successfully recruited on his birthday, and deep sadness when another candidate coming from two generations of Gurkhas fails in his third and final attempt at selection. He exits the gates of the British camp in Pokhara, head bowed and hooded. Knowing the trials he has undergone, the high stakes involved, and the lack of employment opportunities for Nepali youth, the consolatory remarks the unsuccessful candidate receives from the officers ring hollow even for the audience.

Given this emotional slant, the Nepali Gurkha officers, depicted as gatekeepers with the power to influence the opinions of British

officers, appear in the film as the bad guys. They have blunt interview techniques and less generous appraisals of potential recruits. For example, there is a scene in which a Dalit candidate states that his father encouraged him to join because he himself was unable to do so due to caste discrimination. There is an awkward moment when the young British officer turns to the older Gurkha officer for his assessment; while the British officer is enthusiastic – “He is well informed, and has an enjoyable character” – the Gurkha officer is visibly unhappy. After a prolonged moment of silence, he states, “I don’t like people talking about racial discrimination, trying to get sympathy vote. I told him not to talk about these things.”

Oriental warriors

The core theme of this film, however, is the very colonial and archaic practice of recruitment that still exists within the Royal Gurkha Rifles regiment of the British army. The film opens with images of young men having their bare chests painted with numbers, followed by recruits having their chests measured, being weighed, having their height measured, sitting in lines on the floor, etc. All of this is interspersed with old, black-and-white archival footage depicting the same recruitment practices. The only change between the present and past appears to be the use of shorts in place of loin-cloths.