

## Upright and true gurkha

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Halfway into the film, *Who Will Be a Gurkha?*, potential British Gurkha recruits talk among themselves about an ‘education sir’ with a blinking tic. It was hard not to burst into laughter while he was interviewing them, they say. Then, in a moment of introspection, one of them opines that since they have already made (and will continue to make) so many sacrifices in order to become a Gurkha, why not sacrifice a smile?

It is this element of sacrifice that defines these youth, the recruiting process, and essentially the entire film. As one applicant put it, “tears will flow” on either side of the fence of the British Gurkha camp in Pokhara. Those who don’t make it return with a dream smothered; those who do will never return the same. Words of comfort such as “don’t cry, be big-hearted” sound like nothing but ill-timed jokes.

Shot almost entirely inside the Pokhara camp, and interspersed with black-and-white footage from the late 50s, the documentary shows how little has changed in the recruiting process in over six decades. Today’s applicants may wear shorts instead of loincloths, but their stares are just as blank—yet apprehensive—and reflect the pride, however hurt, of generations of Gurkhas.

As the film displays, the erosion of pride starts early in the recruitment process. In one scene from a regional selection interview, a Gurkha officer asks an applicant whether he shaved his legs to make himself look younger, since new recruits have to be between the ages of 17.5 and 21. The young man denies the charge but the officer continues to prod him.

“Tell me the truth. How old are you?” “20.” “And after the shave?” “20.”

The second question invites giggles from the audience but the young man’s response is so quick and unflinching that it invites neither embarrassment nor pity. Still, this little exchange elucidates a deeper humiliation the Gurkhas, and Nepal as a nation, go through in serving a foreign army. And this somewhat uncomfortable feeling lingers throughout the film.

As the officers constantly remind potential recruits that the recruitment process is “free, fair and transparent”, one cannot help but wonder how fair it really is that men born in Nepal have to declare that they will never hesitate to sacrifice themselves for Britain. How fair is it that all the effort they’ve put into their training will earn them no more than a chance to salute a picture of Queen Elizabeth?

If the film blames anything for this absurdity, it is perhaps the circumstances that compel these young men to join the British Gurkhas. *Who Will Be a Gurkha* is sprinkled with references to poverty and the lack of opportunities in Nepal. One applicant calls his love for his parents his greatest weakness; another is content to die in operation, for it will mean a hefty sum in compensation for his family. Yet another, as he sings *Jaadaichhu Paltanma*, reveals an unmistakable sense that he is going away not to save Nepal from wars but from poverty.

The film doesn’t prescribe any solutions to these problems. As the young applicants dance in camaraderie to *Aage Aage Topaiko Gola* on the eve of ‘results day’, no matter what fate has in store for them—cannon balls, machine guns, cigarettes or love—one can only hope that they always remain as full of life.

While the film does not directly confront the larger issues at play here—the questions of politics and exploitation that arise when one country’s citizens are mercenaries for another—it captures the burden of history in the small dramas of these young men. This is what the film does best—it takes the audience beyond the Gurkha camp and into the lives of these young, hot-blooded Nepali men.

For a better evaluation of the film, though, one has to go back to it. Early on in the film, during the regional selection interview, one applicant is asked to list a few interesting points about himself. The young man, bare-chested and in shorts, sits “upright as a true Gurkha” and says that he is “honest,

intelligent and not boring.” While this might be true of the man, it is certainly a succinct description of the film.