

[thehindu.com](https://www.thehindu.com)

## Who will be a soldier?

*Chintan Girish Modi*

6-7 minutes

---

### **A documentary screening and discussion this evening highlights the Gurkha community and their 200-year-old tradition of fighting someone else's wars**

Several of us make the mistake of using the word Gurkha interchangeably with security guard. What we do not realise is that Gurkhas are a group of people with a 200-year-old tradition of serving in the British Army. Tens of thousands of Nepalis continue to serve in the Indian Gurkha regiments.

Kesang Tseten, a Nepali filmmaker of Tibetan origin, hopes that his documentary, *Who Will Be A Gurkha*, will help clear some of these misconceptions. It will be shown in Mumbai on February 26, as part of the monthly screenings hosted by Vikalp: Films for Freedom.

Tseten, who also produced the documentary under the banner of Shunyata Films, says, "Obviously, most Nepalis do not like being tagged as *chowkidars* or *bahadurs*, and so on. Unfortunately, this is how many Indians know of Nepalis. I think this mirrors how they

look at Nepal: a little brother state they can patronise and bully when it suits them. For many Nepalis, their connection to India is a love-hate relationship.”

*Who Will Be A Gurkha* explores stories from the Brigade of Gurkhas, a special unit within the British Army made up of boys recruited from the mountain villages of Nepal. They are posted with British soldiers in conflict zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Their suitability for military service is tested on three counts: physical fitness, motivation and intelligence. The selection process involves three phases, and takes place over six months. Being part of this brigade is a source of social prestige for the boys, and assures them of an attractive salary.

Filmmaker Anand Patwardhan, one of the curators of Vikalp@Prithvi, explains the reason behind the selection of this film. “Tseten’s film marries the glorious possibilities offered by this observational genre with a subtle but distinct ethical understanding of the tragedy of a people trapped both by poverty and a carefully inculcated ideology that perpetuates their mercenary warrior tradition.”

### **Seed of the idea**

Patwardhan, who is known for his critically-acclaimed documentary *War and Peace*, says, “As colonial armies continue to recruit soldiers to fight wars they have no personal interest in, we the audience are left to ponder the question of whether almost all armies are made up of the poor and powerless; fighting wars, begun by the rich and powerful, that have little to do with their own well-being.”

Tseten stumbled upon the idea of making this film while was

researching the subject of masculinities in South Asia for a project anchored by filmmaker Rahul Roy under the Delhi-based Aakar Trust. He was studying the work settings of men who are soldiers, tailors, cooks, hairdressers, and priests. Tseten knew a former general who served in the British army. He helped Tseten get permission to enter a camp of Gurkha soldiers. It was then that the idea of making *Who Will Be A Gurkha* began to take shape.

### **Showing rather than telling**

Tseten says, “I am more interested in showing rather than telling. The fact that Nepal and Britain are in the same frame is what I like. There is employer and employee, former power and coloniser and the margins, in a visceral medium. Often, we make films that are very ‘local’; there is nothing wrong with that. But it’s great for a change to have the local in apposition to the international. For those of us who are telling stories from this side of the information order, for a change, we do not need to explain more, or almost apologise for our ‘local’ stories. The subject immediately contemporises the story, which is great because the more you have to explain context, background, the particular culture, etc., the story begins to slow down.”

Since getting into the Brigade of Gurkhas is a competitive process, many aspirants get enrolled in academies that promise to train them. Not all of these academies equip them well enough to succeed. Some of the boys grow to believe that the selection procedure is not as “free, fair, and transparent” as claimed by the British commanders. Apparently, certain castes are given priority over others, and some positions are even up for sale. Tseten attempts to record and narrate these dynamics without resorting to interviews that are a staple in many documentary films.

He says, “Encountering the youth who were desperately trying to get in, seeing how they carried themselves, and how hard they strove to get in: these observations gave me a different kind of knowledge and feel for this unique tradition of soldiering. I understood why the communities from which a majority of the Gurkhas came from were proud of their history and tradition, while no one would really think fighting in someone else’s army is a good thing.”

Placing *Who Will Be A Gurkha* in the context of the history of documentary filmmaking, Patwardhan says, “Tseten’s film marks a sophisticated advance in the *cinema verite* genre of filmmaking. Originally, the genre was created by people like Richard Leacock in reaction to the authoritarian ‘voice of god’ documentaries prevalent in the 1950s and 60s, which explicitly told the viewer what to think.”

### **Fly on the wall**

Patwardhan, who will facilitate a discussion following the screening of this film, says, “*Cinema Verite* adopted a fly-on-the-wall technique that merely observed without taking sides, pretending as if the camera and crew were invisible voyeurs.”

**‘ Who Will Be A Gurkha’ will be screened today at 7 pm,  
Prithvi House, Juhu. Entry is free and open to all.**

*The author is a freelance writer*