

Through thick and thin

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☰ Abstract

None available.

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Kathmandu, Dec. 1 -- Nepal's relations with Britain go far back into history. It was Britain's expansionist policy in South Asia that inspired King Prithvi Narayan Shah to unify Nepal in the first place. This policy of Britain inevitably brought her into contact with Nepal. When King Prithvi Narayan Shah attacked Kantipur in the process of unification, Jaya Prakash Malla, king of Kantipur, sought British help. This began the first saga of Nepal's war with Britain. Captain Kinlock led some 2400 men into Nepal and was defeated by the Nepalese Army in Sindhuli Gadi in August 1767. Border tensions between Nepal and British India led to the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814 to 1816. The war ended with the signing of the treaty of Sugauli in 1816. This war was a very painful experience for Nepal. Nepal preserved her sovereignty but in the process lost a lot of territory. The new borders of Nepal were defined by the River Mahakali in the West and the River Mechi in the East.

The bravery and professionalism displayed by the Nepalese Army in these wars impressed the

British. There stands even to this day, in the highest tradition of the British Army, a memorial dedicated to "Our brave adversary Bul Budder [Bir Bhadra] and his gallant men." Soon began the recruitment of Nepali soldiers into British Army, which was to establish an enduring relationship between Nepal and Britain.

This relationship was put to test in 1857, when Indian nationals led a powerful mutiny against the British rule in India. The British Empire requested Nepal for help. And in response, Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief Jung Bahadur Rana led some 17,000 Nepalese Army troops to suppress the Indian mutiny. This further enhanced the relations between Nepal and Britain. Britain returned to Nepal significant stretches of lowlands that Nepal had earlier lost in the Sugauli Treaty.

In 1914, with the onset of the First World War, Britain once again faced a shortage of troops. On 3 August 1914 the then prime minister of Nepal, Chandra Samsher, promptly summoned the resident British representative and offered military assistance. The following month, King George wrote to Chandra Samsher accepting the offer. An extract from his letter, which lies secure in EI Bundle No 5-File No 3-Document No24 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reads thus:

".....that I could always count upon you and your people as my truest friend. I do thank you from the depth of my heart for placing the military resources of your state at my disposal. I am more touched than words can express at your personal offer of machine guns and field equipment for Gurkha Regiments, especially for the 4th Gurkha Rifles..."

The Nepalese Army who fought during the First World War included the 1st Rifle, Samsherdal, Jabbar Jung, Pashupati Prasad, Bhairav Nath, 2nd Rifle, Bhairung and Shreenath battalions. A total of 14,000 Nepalese Army personnel were deployed. Apart from this, some 200,000 Nepali men joined the British Indian Army. Considering the small population of Nepal, (917,144 according to the 1911 census), the proportion of Nepalese citizens who served in the war was larger than that of most other countries. Besides providing the much-needed troops, Nepal also provided assistance in cash and kind. In September 1914, a cash grant of ₹37,000 was made, out of which ₹20,000 was earmarked for the procurement of machine guns. In 1915, on the occasion of King George's birthday, Nepal gifted 31 Vickers Maxims to Britain.

At the same time, 340 mechanics from the Government of Nepal were offered for service in Indian ordnance plants. In January 1916 and January 1917, ₹20000 was provided to the Viceroy of India to be used for any purposes related to the war. In 1918, ₹13,333 was gifted on the occasion of their 25th wedding anniversary of Britain's royal couple. A further 78 tonnes of cinnamon, 84,699 lbs of tea, some 8,133 hill blankets, 200 jackets and 12 greatcoats were also gifted at this time. Some 220 sisau logs and some 200,000 sleepers of sal wood were dispatched for the construction of railway tracks. In 1917-1918 when Britain's economy was torn by war, Nepal provided the British government with Nepalese and Indian currency amounting to ₹792,000 in exchange for gold bullion and sovereign.

In 1917, the Masuds of Afghanistan, seeing that the British were extending their hold further east, decided to revolt against the British. Once again, Nepal offered military assistance to Britain. The 1st Rifle and the famous Mahendradal battalions fought shoulder to shoulder with the British regiments, winning many honours for their valour.

In 1940, the British presence in India was threatened when Japan got involved in the Second World War. The Nepalese Army then offered the British the service of Shree Nath, Kalibox, Surya Dal, Naya Gorakh, Barda Bahadur, Kali Bahadur, Mahendra Dal, 2nd Rifle, Bairung, Jabbar Jung, Sumsher Dal, Sher, Devi Dutta, Bhairav Nath, Jaganath and Purano Gorakh battalions. The Nepalese troops fought with distinction under Field Marshall Slim in the 14th Army.

Britain's recognition of the Nepalese Army's contribution in times of their need forms the backbone of Britain-Nepal relations. Britain has held this contribution in the highest regard, and continues to support the Nepalese Army in many respects. Britain remains one of the largest contributors to the training of the Nepalese Army. For half a century, Nepalese Army officers have been trained in the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. Young officers have specialized in many trades in Britain. Nepalese field officers have benefited from military education at Staff College. Senior officers have attended the Royal College of Defence Studies. Non-commissioned officers have also received extensive trainings at the British NCO schools.

For half a century, Nepal has been a reliable partner to the United Nations for bringing peace to the world. Some 68,000 Nepalese troops have participated in 33 missions, making Nepal's contribution to UN peacekeeping forces the fifth largest in the world. The United Kingdom has supported this effort by providing a facility for learning English language at the Birendra Peace Operations Training Centre in Panchkhal.

During the decade-long conflict, when the Nepalese Army was engaged in counter-insurgency operations across Nepal, Britain came to her aid by providing considerable expertise and equipment for the disposal of improvised explosive devices. She also provided the Nepalese Army a specialist aircraft for intelligence purposes.

Nepal continues to support Britain by providing high-quality manpower for defence requirements. At present some 3600 Nepalis serve in the British Army. They have fought from the Arctic wastelands of the Falklands to the hot deserts of Iraq. They have been engaged in protecting mainland UK to fighting in the rugged terrain of Afghanistan.

The historical/military ties between Britain and Nepal are deep and unique. Britain has now started recruiting from various Commonwealth nations for her defence requirements. Although Nepal is not a member of the Commonwealth, it is the only country whose citizens form entire regiments in the UK. Nepalese citizens still form a part of the elite contingent that guards the British monarch.

Nepal greatly values the historical ties between the two countries. To maintain and strengthen this relationship, Chief of General Staff of the British Army, General Sir Richard Dannat, on the invitation of Chief of Army Staff of Nepal, General Rookmangat Katuwal, arrived here on 28 November 2008 for a four-day visit. It is hoped that such exchanges will take Nepal-Britain relations to new heights.

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