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Relationship in Progress: Absent Gurkhas and Their Proud but Disconnected Children

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ABSTRACT

The Gurkhas, who hail from Nepal and serve in the British Army, are considered one of the world's fiercest soldiers. Being transnational military migrants, they are away from their homes for extended periods, and as a result, they are physically and emotionally absent from their children's lives. Separation from loved ones is never easy; and transnational life is emotionally draining no matter how tough and brave the Gurkha soldiers are. Nevertheless, the children of Gurkhas hold their fathers in high regard for their sacrifices and for bringing them to the UK, thus, opening them up to scores of opportunities. However, they find it considerably challenging to live together with their otherwise absent fathers under the same roof. Consequently, many Gurkhas and their children have a detached relationship and have become estranged. Meanwhile, some have reconnected and fought to rekindle and rebuild their relationships after coming to the UK. In the process of rediscovering, some children also recognize the emotional side of their fathers whom they earlier thought to be introverted and cold.

Keywords: fatherhood, Gurkha, transnational families, military migration, emotions

Background

My daddy is a Gurkha army
And he was often far away
To some far-off country
Where he had to serve and stay
Working for his family
It probably wasn't always that easy

As a little girl, I used to really miss my daddy
I would wait in the front yard holding my teddy
Wishing "come home soon daddy"

As I grew older, focused more on my life journey
maybe we became stray
Sometimes I even thought he was my enemy
But I know he only wanted me happy
I know I am not always praiseworthy
But he always found his way to show and say
he always knew I needed something from daddy
When I would go calling daddy
And he has always helped me along the way
In his own way

My daddy is a Gurkha army
And now I am the one far away
in my home country
Where I have to serve and stay

Now I know, the love I have for my daddy
Which shall never fade away
He will always be my daddy
And nothing will take that away
Thank you, daddy
For making all the sacrifices for your family
And for getting us where we are today
and for that, I am grateful for eternity
(Thapa, "#MYFATHERISAGURKHA," 2020)

Pooja, a National Health Service (NHS) England employee, was born about 30 years ago in a rural village in Ilam, a district in eastern Nepal, when her mother, Kabita, only 16, and her 22-year-old father, Prem, was serving in the Brigade of Gurkhas (BoG) of the British Army. Prem had returned to Hong Kong for his three-year-long posting leaving pregnant Kabita in Ilam. Pooja had not met her father until she was three. One day, while "playing in the chicken coop," she saw a stranger coming towards her house. This was Pooja and Prem's first encounter. Toddler Pooja stared at Prem incessantly as an unfamiliar face started living in their house and sharing their bedroom. Although vaguely, she remembers that she wondered why the stranger was with her mother, Kabita, and tried her best not to let her parents sleep together. She kept asking Kabita why "*tyo manchhe*" (that person) was there and when would he go away. Pooja laughed while narrating this and said, "He was a complete stranger to me."

Before 1997, when the Brigade of Gurkhas was stationed in Hong Kong, Brunei, Singapore, and Malaya, the Gurkhas, throughout their service, were only allowed one family permit lasting three years (Bellamy 2011). Every three years, they were also given a six-month-long leave. Apart from those times, the military separated the family of the soldiers. The soldier and the family would only get a chance to (re)connect when they are physically together or through occasional letters. When Pooja first met Prem, he had come back home for the six-month holiday with a "family permit." This meant that Prem could take his family with him to a foreign military camp for the next three years. As his battalion had been transferred from Hong Kong, Prem took his family to Brunei. Pooja got to know her father more when they moved to Brunei, but she was too young to remember all of it. "It's more like a feeling than memory," Pooja told us during an interview via Zoom, "the feeling of the Brunei heat. I remember *bhai* (younger brother) being born and my father being there." After three years, the family came back to Nepal awaiting another separation from Prem.

After Brunei, Prem and Kabita admitted six-year-old Pooja to a school hostel in Kathmandu because education in rural Ilam was not as good. Prem went back to Brunei and Kabita and Pooja's three-year-old brother, Kiran, went back to live in their ancestral home in Ilam. Later, Kabita and Kiran also moved to Kathmandu after the family built a house there, but Pooja continued staying at the hostel.

When Pooja was about ten years old, Prem got a leave again. Pooja had to get "special permission" from school to go home and meet Prem. Every time he came back or sent gifts, Pooja and Kiran would get lots of Bounty chocolates. Pooja remembered, "it (receiving chocolates) was a very good memory" and laughed. However, she suddenly got serious, took a short pause, and said, "I do not have much memory of him actually." She then took a long pause. Bhawana, a co-author of this paper and daughter of a Gurkha, jumped in during the interview and lightened the mood, "*Mero pani tei ho* (it's the same for me). All I remember when I was a child is receiving gifts and parcels" and laughed. "Yeah, and phone calls," Pooja responded, "I remember mom waiting for those. And letters too. Now when we think about it, wow, that's so crazy, isn't it? It was just one letter in I-do-not-know-how-many months or a phone call, I-do-not-know when. Right?" Kabita yearned for the phone calls from Prem but for Pooja, those were mostly very formal—limited to her father asking about her education and Pooja responding in short answers. Also, as she was mostly in the hostel, Pooja talked to him on the phone only during holidays when she was home. Sometimes, she wrote him letters asking for favors that Kabita would not fulfill.

Pooja continued her hostel life until she was 14, when her family migrated to the UK permanently in 2007. In the early 2000s, the Gurkha soldiers who had worked for the British Army won multiple lawsuits against the British government and received settlements and citizenship rights not just for themselves but also for their families (Kochhar-George 2010). When the Gurkhas won settlement rights for the first time in 2004, such family migrations from Nepal to the UK started. Like Pooja, many Gurkha children and families from Nepal have taken either a British citizenship or

permanent residency. Her family finally started living together, however, Pooja found it difficult to live and adjust with her parents. This has partly to do with spending all her childhood at the school hostel and her migrant father who was away while she was growing up. She had at least lived with her mother during school holidays, but it was "definitely *naulo* (new or strange) with dad," Pooja mentioned:

> It took many years for me to understand who he was. What type of a person he was? It was almost like I was living in a house with a stranger, and he was my dad. I did not know what ticked him. I did not know what he liked to eat, or what he didn't like. I knew he liked a pint after coming back from work, but apart from that ... you know small details [about your father] but I didn't know, like, what's his style if I were to buy him a present, apart from knowing that he is [my] father and has been providing for me. He used to ask a lot of questions and as a teenager, I found that pretty annoying. But now when I look at it, I realized he was also trying to adjust to his children and his wife.

Nevertheless, Pooja yearned to know more about Prem and to connect with him. Although the longing for an absent father during her childhood has remained a barrier for her to reach out to him when she was younger, they have both been working on it in their own ways. Although individual experiences might vary, the story of Pooja and Prem resonates with many Gurkha soldiers and their children.

Introduction

Contributing to the literature on transnational migration and transnational families and focusing on absent military fathers, this paper argues that the Gurkhas who overcome their training as hypermasculine soldiers can reconnect with their children from whom they have been separated for years as transnational military migrants. In cases where reconnections do not happen, the Gurkhas remain to have a detached

relationship with their adult children, leading to estrangement even when living under the same roof. The young adult Gurkha children face a paradoxical situation whereby, on the one hand, they are proud of and grateful to their Gurkha fathers, although only materially (for example, for bringing them to the UK and providing them with opportunities that were hard to come by in Nepal), and on the other hand, they face emotional hindrances and challenges to personally connect with their fathers. Living together under the same roof in the UK, some Gurkhas and their children work out their relationships in spite of the slow, rough, and laborious process of reconnection and reestablishment of their detached relationships. Gurkha fathers are not just transnational migrant fathers who are absent from their households for stretched periods, they are also military men who are trained to be disciplined, stoic, hypermasculine, and cold. Even with their children, spinoffs of their military training are practiced. In addition to the emotionally draining migration process, the making of Gurkhas could pose emotional hindrances to their family members. Like in most patriarchal societies, when the fathers are away, mothers are bound to care for and raise the children alone at the cost of their own aspirations and identities (see also Kang 2012; Sharma 2022b). For young children, the absence of their fathers for extended periods, with visits only for six months at a time every three years, has become a "normal" part of their lives. Nonetheless, the separation has still been difficult and has taken an emotional toll on both the children and fathers involved.

Although various dynamics of the Gurkhas have been researched, issues concerning their experiences in fatherhood and aspects of their emotional side are still underexplored. Research on military fathers is a new frontier (Karre, Perkins, and Aronson 2018) and evidently, there is a dearth of literature that explores transnational military fathers and their families. As an important attempt to empirically and analytically enrich the existing research on transnational military families, this paper focuses on the emotionality of Gurkha fathers and children. Karre et al. (2021, 2) suggest that most of the literature on military families tends to overstress the "dysfunctional" side. Karre, Perkins, and Aronson (2018, 643) highlights

the resources and capabilities of military families focusing on the positive impacts that military fathers have on their families. This paper, however, goes beyond the dysfunctional or functional aspect of Gurkha families and brings forth the nuances involved in transnational military families, which are neither plainly negative nor positive. It underscores various upheavals and nuances among Gurkha families with a migrant soldier father. The Gurkhas and their families have lived transient lives throughout history with constant cyclic migrations from Nepal to South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Europe (Low 2016). Only recently have they been able to experience relatively settled lives—as immigrants in the UK. Furthermore, the paper attempts to expand the understanding of transnational families that was academically analyzed primarily since the late 1990s (Skrbiš 2008, 234) by adding the dimension of transnational military families. Although the Gurkhas are trained by the British to be brave and stoic, when it comes to the trauma and stress that may have resulted from their involvement in wars or as soldiers, their experiences are seldom talked about. This is significant as numerous studies have shown the impact of military experiences on the life and mental health of veterans and subsequently their families (Donoho et al. 2018; Hoge et al. 2016; Karre, Perkins, and Aronson 2018; Karre et al. 2021; Glenn et al. 2002; Forrest, Edwards, and Daraganova 2018; Duncanson and Woodward 2016). However, the topic of their collective mental health is often ignored.

For this article, virtual interviews via Zoom were conducted between August and October 2021 when the UK maintained the implementation of COVID-19 restrictive measures. UK-based retired Gurkha soldiers and young adult children of the Gurkhas from various professional fields were invited to participate. All 11 Gurkha children who participated in the research were between 18 and 35 years old, and friends with at least one of the authors of the paper. Among them, nine were women and two were men. Similarly, the Gurkhas were also approached based on the author's personal contacts and four of them interviewed. All the Gurkhas were men and were between 60 and 75 years old. The interviews were carried out in English and Nepali languages and all the names of the research

participants were made anonymous. We also gathered information from the #MyFatherIsAGurkha campaign publicly launched in 2020 on Instagram and Facebook to celebrate International Father's Day. In this campaign, Gurkha children posted on social media about their father's legacy of serving in the Brigade of Gurkhas. The publicly accessible posts helped better understand how Gurkha children perceived their fathers as soldiers. We gathered a total of 61 social media posts, manually analyzed their contents, and categorized them according to themes. Apart from the proud Gurkha children celebrating their fathers' legacy, some social media posts highlighted the *dukha* (suffering or hardship) they had to face while they were serving as British Gurkha soldiers. One of the co-authors presented nuanced information from her lived experiences as a Gurkha daughter, including her upbringing in eastern Nepal, brief residence in Brunei with her Gurkha father and family, migration to the UK at a young age, and settlement there as a mental health professional. While the findings in this article may not apply to all Gurkhas and Gurkha children, the authors made efforts to gather diverse perspectives and representative cases about military fatherhood and transnational families. Furthermore, the article focuses solely on father-child relationships, excluding other familial relations for greater discussion.

Gurkhas and Masculinities

One of the key arguments of the paper is that the military indoctrination of the Gurkhas as hypermasculine and their unavailability as transnational migrants might pose challenges in establishing their emotional and physical presence to others, especially their children. Moreover, being unable to re-establish the relationship between the fathers and children even after living together, may result to the deterioration of their relationship and further detachment. In some cases, this may also result in negative emotions like fear. Hari, 65, narrates that he tries to maintain open communication with his children, however, because of his military background, his adult children still fear him: "*Mero military background le garera pani hola uniharu ma alikati traas huney*" (They [Hari's adult children] might somewhat be afraid of me because of my military background). He continued:

> Even if we (Gurkhas) try not to be strict, it is [unconsciously] reflected on us because of the years of training and discipline—probably it is reflected in our demeanour. That's why they (the children) do not share [their thoughts with me as] much. They do all the sharing with their mother. It then comes to me through her.

Contrary to Hari's understanding, the Gurkhas' unconscious behavior is not the sole factor that contribute to their children's perception of them as cold and emotionally unavailable. In many ways, this may make the fathers yearn for a deeper connection with their children. Explaining further about the growing dissociation between the Gurkha fathers and children, Hari mentioned, "Obviously when you are in the army, you have to be disciplined. When one is disciplined, the children would naturally feel that their father is strict." As a Gurkha son, Bishwas, a 30-year-old UK-based physiotherapist, does the same with his father. He only discusses his financial problems with him while most of the other things are conferred with his mother. He narrated: "It's probably just financial with him, problems wise. I don't think I reach out to him about my problems, just maybe financial stuff, admin stuff, and that's that. Majority of [the other] problems, I'll chat with my mother but not about relationships." Years of military training have reinforced masculinity and the Gurkha connection among the soldiers making some of them unapproachable to their children.

Impressed with their war skills primarily during the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814–1816, the British (and later India, Singapore, and Brunei, among others) started recruiting the Gurkha soldiers in 1815. Initially, they were mercenaries, dissidents of the expansionist Nepali empire, or prisoners-of-war (PoW) of the Anglo-Nepal War (Des Chene 1991; Husain 1970; Regmi 1999). Because they found it cheaper to hire than to pay their citizens (Ware 2012, 65), the British racialized, militarized, and masculinized various ethnicities from Nepal under the quasi-fictional category "Gurkha," believing that these Nepali men belonged to the same "race" as those who lived under the expansionist "Gorkha" empire in the early nineteenth century (see Gellner and Hausner 2013 for the plurality of Gurkha and

Nepali diasporic identities and belongings). With the rising territorial control that the British were gaining inside India and elsewhere, they needed a "native" army to help materialize their expansionist dreams and to control and govern the populations (Des Chene 1991, 2). From Gallipoli to Burma, from Malaya to the Falklands, the Gurkhas have helped the British win numerous wars. Although they started as mercenaries and PoW, the Gurkhas have evolved into an elite, most celebrated forces of the British Army glorified primarily for their bravery, martiality, and loyalty (Caplan 1995).

The gender analysis of racial exoticization established that masculinities are fluid and that the British, Indians, and Gurkhas were constantly shaping and redefining each other's colonial masculinities—although the former pushed the latter two to a subordinate position (Sinha 1995, 2). Similarly, the British fostered military masculinity in "martial" men like the Gurkhas by portraying and grooming them as English schoolboys and boy scouts who had the potential to embrace British masculinity (Uprety 2011). The British Army recruited these specific groups, taught them English gentlemanly values, and classified others as effeminate, such as the Bengalis who did not abide by their rules. This recruitment and indoctrination were a manifestation of hegemonic masculinity. The British hegemons disregarded the plurality of masculinity by believing that this was the only one way to be a man (Rose 2010, 57). Recent authors have significantly qualified the Gurkha traits as masculine, as Caplan notes: "There is no printed work on the Gurkhas which does not refer to their toughness, strength, ferocity, courage and bravery" (Caplan 1991, 585). Additionally, the Gurkhas' obedience towards the British and fidelity during and after the Indian Rebellion of 1857 was well-recognized. Their continuous acts of "bravery" made the British appreciate their perceived fearlessness on the battlefield as the epitome of military masculinity (Caplan 1995, 132-3). Streets (2004, 2) argues that the "racial and gendered constructions profoundly affected the identities of the so-called 'martial race' population in both Britain and India [and Nepal], who both embraced and manipulated their own representations as martial heroes." These constructions manifested into a hegemonic and militarized masculinity among the Gurkha soldiers.

Such masculinity has had a lasting impact on the Gurkhas' personalities, personal lives, and their relationship with their family (see also Pariyar 2020, 623). The paragraphs below will explain how both the Gurkhas and their children view the former as brave, disciplined, well-organized, punctual, and hardworking and its impact on their relationships.

Brave Gurkhas, Proud Children

With 13 Victoria Crosses and countless other military decorations, numerous wars that Nepali Gurkhas have fought and won for the British (and others) like in the World Wars and the Falkland War in 1982, they are hailed for their war skills and bravery (there are many books that talk at length about the Gurkha bravery, like Tuker 1957; Rathaur 2000; Bellamy 2011). Dev, 64, a retired Gurkha currently living in the UK, had always dreamt of following the legacy of his family by becoming a soldier. His grandfather served during the First World War and his father fought in the Second. His mother, who had witnessed the pain her husband went through as a soldier, discouraged Dev from joining the army (see also Des Chene 1991 for similar stories). Despite his mother's apprehension, Dev decided to get recruited "for a better future." He mentioned: "I am happy to be a soldier, I have been lucky to be able to work in the [Gurkha] Signals and study well and get a promotion." He adds, "If I were not in the army, I would not have been able to travel across the world." Because of his military experience, he has traveled to 89 countries while working as a security guard after retirement (see Chisholm 2014 and Coburn 2018 for Gurkhas working in the security sector).

Getting recruited as a British Gurkha continues to be one of the most sought-after professions for Nepali youth. From roughly 20,000 aspirants, only about 300 get recruited each year (see Piya 2020 for the recent Gurkha recruitment practices). Bishwas, 30, trained himself to become an army officer and live the legacy but dropped out a year later after realizing it was not his "thing." He mentioned, "When I was young, there was a bit of

pressure on me to go to the army and do whatever he (father) did, follow his footsteps. It was a little pressure that I have to continue the family history." In his understanding:

> Getting into the Gurkha is a massive accomplishment, if you think of it, the best 200 [*sic*.] soldiers in the whole of Nepal ... you train your arse off to get into it, that's one accomplishment. My dad is quite an educated man as well ... I think he's learnt a lot from the army, and he's brought those learnings and what he's learnt, he's portrayed on to us and in a way, we benefited from it as well ... dad's accomplishments are impressive.

Gurkha children who know the importance of their father's legacy are very proud and cherish the more than 200-year military history. Bishwas continued, "I feel really proud, definitely really proud. I feel like I can make conversations with people about my dad. There's always that solid background for me that people respect and that's something ... *chhati fulayera bhaneko jastai* (boast the glory). I think it's just the history of everything ... he's lived a hard life, it's hard to get in from Nepal and stuff, so I do respect that." Jagriti, a 26-year-old medical student, echoed the same sentiment: "[I am] proud of my *baba*; him being in the army was life-changing for all the facilities for children. My dad is my rock and tree, and I am the fruit of the tree, he is strong and sturdy." She believes she has inherited her father's bravery saying, "*ma Gurkhali ko chhori hu* (I am a Gurkha's daughter) and I feel brave and strong because of my father." Getting their father's traits may have also helped these Gurkha children establish their identities in the UK and compensate their immigrant status by claiming their right to live and work in the country as British citizens.

Not only are they proud of their military fathers, but the Gurkha children are also deeply indebted to the fathers for bringing them to the UK. Prerana, a 34-year-old London-based government employee, speculates that if it were not for her father, she would probably have been married in a rural Nepali household with kids, just like her Nepal-based cousins

who have already become parents. Currently, Prerana is excelling as a British government employee and has no plans of getting married anytime soon. Similarly, a 25-year-old UK-based Gurkha daughter, Bidhya recently graduated in Finance and is proud and grateful of her father because she also "got to come to the UK, got aware of many things, got exposure to many things, found more opportunity for education and facilities, and never faced troubles." Gurkha children recognize their privilege as British citizens and take advantage of it to further their education and careers.

Likewise, many people also narrated their father's story online and expressed their pride as Gurkha children. In 2020, they posted on social media with the hashtag, #MyFatherIsAGurkha in celebration of the International Father's Day. They also mentioned their gratefulness to their fathers for bringing them to the UK and opening a wide window of opportunities that were difficult to come by if they were in Nepal. For instance, Gurung wrote on Instagram: "If it wasn't for him (and many other Gurkha fathers out here) we wouldn't have had the opportunities we have now just by being brought up in a first-world country, for which I'm forever grateful" (M. Gurung 2020). Similarly, Pattangwa wrote: "I am so blessed to be your daughter and I would always appreciate your hard work. It is only because of you [that] I'm in this country which provides lots of opportunities" (Pattangwa 2020). Furthermore, some Gurkha children also lauded their supportive fathers who always provided not just material resources, but also moral support when needed. Limbu wrote on Instagram: "I would like to take this opportunity to thank my father for being my real-life hero, financial support, great listener, life mentor and simply always saying 'Yes' whenever mom's answer was 'No!'" (Limbu 2020). With regular and comparatively better income than regular Nepalis, the British Gurkhas were able to provide their children with a good education in Nepal. Additionally, when the family came to the UK after winning the settlement rights, the children found it easier to continue with their education and find jobs. Thanking her dad for the opportunity, Rai wrote on Instagram: "I take immense pride in telling people that I am a proud daughter of a

Gurkha. Thank you for everything you have done for the betterment of our future, dad! And thank you for always being selfless, supportive, and kind! I love you, dad" (Rai 2020). Like Prerana, many Gurkha children compared their UK life with that of their Nepal-based cousins and friends and believe that their transnational migration opened avenues that were unlikely in Nepal. Generally, in the UK, there were differences in societal expectations especially for women, positive take on independence, and less pressure to get married. Hence, the adult Gurkha children acknowledged the struggles their fathers went through and cherished the opportunities that they provided.

Reflecting on her father's achievements and struggles, Bidhya mentioned that she was a proud daughter "as he has accomplished so much. There were hardships and struggles before he went into the army when he was 17 or 18 years old. He was providing for everyone and fought for the country. He is not scared of dying. He saw many of his own friends die but he is still fearless." In the same way, 25-year-old Shila residing in England shared a similar experience. The trainee accountant was the only person we talked to who had never lived away from her father. She told us she was proud of her father as he has "been in wars and he even nearly got shot, came back with physical injury and mental stress, but he is persistent." In the recent years, the deployment of Gurkhas in places like Iraq and Afghanistan and their involvement in other major wars have not been studied at all, let alone its impacts on the veterans' family members. Forrest et al. (2018) highlights its considerable adverse effect on the mental health of the children of deployed soldiers. Although this study does not delve into mental health, it recommends that there should be mental health-related research involving the Gurkhas and their family members.

In addition to having a respectable and honored job, the Gurkhas had a comparatively better financial situation in Nepal. Shila continued, "By being in the Gurkhas we have financial stability, he got to experience a lot of things and because of that he has a lot of wisdom and knowledge that he shares with us. He is caring and wise, jack of all trades—very skilled,

upbeat, positive." In spite of being discriminated by the British who gave them less remuneration and benefits for their services (for more information about the discrimination against the Gurkhas, see Kochhar-George 2010; Carroll 2012; T. Gurung 2020), the money the Gurkhas earned was still comparatively better in economically deprived Nepali society. Consequently, the Gurkha children had better education in the urban centers.

The Gurkha children are also aware of the racial and monetary discrimination that their (fore)fathers faced from the British. Pooja analyzed her father's and other Gurkhas' contributions to the UK.

> When I think about it now, I realize it is a very tough job in reality. I am not really proud of what he had to go through. In that sense, I am more grateful for what he has done for us than anything. Honestly, I do not like the army culture anymore. It was the only world I knew but now I would not want anyone to go through that unless they enjoy it. It was circumstantial for us, you know.

Like Pooja, many dislike the military as young adults and not everyone buys the idea of celebrating the military legacy wholeheartedly. Deepak, a Hong Kong-born 29-year-old artist and filmmaker, was embarrassed as a Gurkha son and echoed this narrative. Other children who inherently do not agree with military values may share a similar view and perhaps struggle to fully embrace their father's legacy. When his father was serving as a British Gurkha, Deepak, whose family hailed from Ilam in eastern Nepal, stayed in a school hostel in Kalimpong (India, bordering Nepal) from the first grade till age 12. He started living with his family only after moving to the UK. There was a lot of friction in the family. He also used to quarrel with his father frequently. He studied fine arts (always his dream) after attempting to study engineering and IT under family pressure. He told us,

> Although I feel proud, when the *goras* (whites) chant "Gurkha, Gurkha," I was quite embarrassed. I think I realized [about the importance of Gurkha legacy] after reading this book *Ayo Gorkhali*

> (T. Gurung 2020) (shows us the book). I realized while reading this book why I felt that way (embarrassed). When the goras told things about the Gurkhas, I did not think my father met the criteria. I think they romanticize the Gurkhali [*sic*] image in their history ... I was quite uncomfortable ... but I feel proud of all that my grandfather and uncles did ... they moved the family forward ... but [at the same time] I also feel bad because I do not like the army ethically.

Moreover, Pariyar (2016, 220) suggests that the Gurkhas he talked to for his doctoral research "were extremely resentful of the way in which they, especially their fathers and grandfathers, had been made to fight and die in terrible conditions around the world for little compensation." They believed that they had legitimacy in claiming their right to live in the UK because they and their forefathers had shed blood for the crown. The sense of pride that has been mentioned by many children may also be reinforced by the fact that they arrived as "proud military-oriented Gurkhas" (Pariyar 2016, 218) as opposed to general immigrants or other civilian Nepalis in the country.

Absent Gurkhas, Disconnected Relationships

As job opportunities in Nepal are limited and less lucrative, seeking employment abroad is a long tradition resulting in a "culture of migration" (see also Massey et al. 1993, 452-3). For many families, ethnicities, and regions in Nepal, getting enlisted in the army has become a matter of culture and pride in addition to ensuring a very stable and lucrative source of income (Des Chene 1991; Yamanaka 2000). Moreover, because of the celebrated nature of foreign military jobs, the youth continue to get attracted to the profession (Piya 2020). Scores of Nepali men in the past and at present have enlisted in foreign militaries to help their families with their financial needs, knowingly well that it would be a tough job and would entail emotional sacrifice. During wars and because of their intensive military training, the mental health of their families has enormously been

affected. In an interview with *Forces*, Major Rajeshkumar Gurung of the British Gurkhas mentioned, "We have a strong motto: 'It is better to die than to be a coward,' so talking openly about the mental health issue could be seen as cowardly" (Forces News 2021). Thus, issues of mental health were deemed unimportant. A recent study about the mental health of Nepali women in the UK establishes that the absence of family is one of the factors that lead to the deterioration of their mental health and emotional well-being (Sah, Burgess, and Sah 2019; see also Sharma 2022a where he talks in detail about Gurkha women's invisibility). Although they agreed to be away from their families for extended periods, they still took a lot of convincing. No matter how tough and fierce the Gurkha soldiers are, separation from loved ones is never easy and transnational life is emotionally draining. Hari, a 65-year-old retired Gurkha veteran, expressed that although he and his fellow Gurkhas deeply missed home and family, they had to keep going while thinking that the separation is for the greater good and better future of their family and themselves.

> We just had to convince our hearts thinking that one day we will all be together and happy.... It was difficult for me to get a job in Nepal then. And only the rich could afford to go abroad to study. When I joined the British Army, I had a career and with that, I gave a suitable lifestyle to my family. Additionally, I could give a good education to my children. I am happy thinking about that.

However, the cost of that comfort is separation and disconnected relationships.

One day while he was still young and serving in Hong Kong, Hari received a letter from his wife, Kusum, at the *paltan* (platoon) and found out that his second child, a son, was born in Nepal. His wife had also sent a photo of the baby boy, "I just had the photo." Hari said,

> I could not hold him. It was *khallo* (dull or unpleasant) as I could not see the [baby's] daily growth. That's what I greatly missed. Even when I went to Nepal during leave and called my son, "*eh aau chhora*!" he used to run away because he had not seen me, right? It was only later when we started living together that he got little closer to me.

Being physically away and not witnessing their children's development may further detach the father-child relationship. Hari, now a grandfather of a three-year-old, tries to find solace in being able to watch his granddaughter grow and getting nostalgic about missing his children's childhood. He added, "The most important thing that we miss is their step-by-step growth. For example, they are born, then they start crawling, then walking. I have missed many of those stages. As I was not there, I could not see all of it." Being a Gurkha son himself who was sent to boarding school, Hari knew the pain of not being with his parents. Although he tried his best to stay as long as possible, his duty called him abroad. He tried to compensate for his absence by staying with his family after retirement. Parreñas (2005) discussed a similar overcompensating nature of migrant mothers in the case of the Philippines by sending *balikbayan* boxes and extra money. However, the Gurkhas, who were male migrants perceived as the "breadwinners" in the patriarchal Nepali society, never experienced the same level of social pressure to be present at home that mothers, like the Filipino migrant mothers, usually suffer today. Hari explained his compensatory sentiment.

> When I went back during leave, my sons would not recognize me because they were born and raised when I was not around. They had never seen me. They had not heard my voice. It deeply hurt me. One of my children was born in Nepal (the other two were born in Hong Kong) and he did not know me. I then promised myself that once I leave the army, I will keep my family with me. I had many opportunities abroad, but I came to the UK and brought my family here. I didn't even put my children in boarding school. I was trying to compensate for the time that was lost. I hope the children

> understand that as well. I stayed away from my parents when I was growing up as my father was serving with the Gurkhas and I was admitted to a hostel. I did not want my children to go through that.

Although they became strangers in their own house because of their extended absences, the Gurkhas and their children learned about each other when they migrate to the UK and start living together. Pooja told us that she got to know Prem after coming to the UK.

> I am learning about him as well only now. We started living together properly when we shifted to the UK when I was 14. That's a very difficult age for me as well. It's a whole new change and a change for him too. He suddenly got to live with his children, you see. And his wife, which is a huge lifestyle change. He was alone [all his life] or with his friends.

It is not just the Gurkhas who miss their children, the children miss their fathers too. Pooja expressed that she missed the "protection" that Prem would have offered her if he was around. She exclaimed, "As I was in the hostel and if something happened, *laa k garne* (oh what to do!), there's mom only. She probably can only do so much."

Similarly, when Bidhya was still in primary school, she used to miss her father a lot, especially on important occasions like Father's Day and festivals. She deeply felt the absence and realized during such occasions that others are celebrating with their fathers while hers was not present. Her mother filled the void. Gradually, when she got older, she got used to not having her father around and understood that he had gone abroad to earn money. On the other hand, for Jagriti, not being with her father meant that their relationship got stronger when he was home. "Every moment was special when dad was home," she told us. "When he was working, I missed his presence overall, missed him not being there but he still taught me how to swim or ride a bike." Her father's absence helped Jagriti to empathize, connect, and love him more. She was more comfortable talking

to him, her "go-to person." Also, if she wanted to "buy something, [she] would tell dad over the phone then mom would buy them." For Bhawana, however, it was different. As she lived in Dharan, a city in eastern Nepal, where many families of Gurkhas resided, not having her father around was quite common. One day, during Dashain (a major Hindu festival), she was alarmed when one of her friends told her that her father was home. She could not understand how her friend's father, a civilian, was present at home when hers and her other friends' fathers who were soldiers and migrants, were always away during Dashain. When her father returned home, she remembers that she "felt happy but also pretty weird that *a man* was in the house" (her emphasis).

Moreover, for 32-year-old UK-based nurse Jasmine, separation from her father was extremely difficult because after her father would leave for the *paltan*, she would also have to leave for her school hostel, just like Pooja. When Jasmine's father was home, "the family was complete [as] he always brought the families and the villagers together." Jasmine had also lived independently and worked as a nurse in Nepal before going to the UK. Living with her father, she was not used to her dad checking on her and driving her to work, picking her up. Nevertheless, "I felt content, happy living with *baba*," she exclaimed with a faint smile, "he has always been supportive."

The more time children spend with their parents, the closer they become. As Gurkhas are mostly away when the children are growing up, the children grew closer to their mothers than their migrant fathers. During his interview, Bishwas expressed this sentiment and mentioned that his sister, who has spent more time with their father, was closer to him.

> I've not really spent much time with him (father) or got to know him in that depth. I've not really spent much time with him to tell you about him. I think my sister is closer to my dad than I am. She spent more time with the family, *keta heru testai ta ho, baira gako gako huncha* (the boys are generally away from home). You don't know family dynamics, so they don't know as much as a female counterpart would know. My sister communicates better with dad.

Although much of Bishwas' understanding is gendered, citing men's absence from home and lack of bond between fathers and sons, his emphasis on the time spent together between father and children to make stronger relationships might be valid. Even after they lived in the UK, he has not been able to reconnect with his father before he moved out. They could not go past the gap in their relationship. Bishwas said, "I don't mind him as a person, he's a great guy, I've got loads of respect for him, but I think him not being present when I was growing up or in my youth, has caused a massive roadblock for us. That's probably the highlight of the drawbacks of having a Gurkha father." As a child, he might never overcome the emotional hurdles of his childhood as a result of his father's absence. In the following section, we will talk about how dissociation grows stronger when the gap in the father-child relationship is not reconciled. However, if the fathers and children spend more time together and can re-establish their relationships, the disconnection may eventually be corrected.

Physical Presence, Emotional Availability

Because the Gurkhas are frequently away from their homes, they remain unavailable both physically and emotionally which can impact the rest of the members of the family. Scholarly works have stressed the impact of militarization not just on the soldiers but also on their family members (Duncanson and Woodward 2016). In the following paragraphs, we analyze the emotional availability of Gurkhas and their children. Although our research interlocutors like Hari claimed that he understood that his children are educated, he pointed out that because of the generation gap, the parents might not always understand their children and vice-versa. Therefore, while education might bridge the gap between fathers and children, the age gap could push the differences further, especially if the parents, particularly the fathers are not updated about their children's preferences and choices. He mentioned,

> And I think there is a generation gap especially when the parents are uneducated. The parents cannot understand many things that happen with their children's generation and the society that they

> have been raised in. Education plays a vital role to keep up with the times. But I have been lucky because I am educated, and I can actually understand what my children are going through. [I can relate to them] also because I went through the same. When I was in school, all the other parents used to come and meet their children every week. There were five of us (children of Gurkhas) who never had any visitors. We used to miss our parents. My parents used to come when my father came for a leave.

Rekindling relationships between the father and the children is a collaborative effort. Deepak, 29, for instance, mentioned that he has become mature over the years and has been trying to open up to his father and talk to him more frequently—but it is easier said than done. The physical and emotional unavailability of fathers during childhood may nonetheless pose hindrances to connect even into adulthood despite deliberate efforts to reduce the hurdles. Deepak explains,

> I have, over the years, become mature ... I keep trying to open up, how to talk to *baba* ... how to talk nicely [with him]. I think ... I do not go asking for advice from my *aama*, *baba*. Sometimes, I never call them, not even once ... maybe I am independent now ... maybe I was raised like that from childhood. But when I go home, I feel like having a good conversation with them. That's it! If I ever get depressed or sad, I do not go to my parents. If it becomes too hard, I think of going home, but they are not my emotionally coping persons. My *paa* keeps giving me advice. So, even though I cannot open myself up, I just listen to him. I find it strange sometimes. I would feel so bad that I would stay silent, but my father would keep talking and sometimes the advice was exactly right. He keeps saying good things even though I get irritated listening to him. Even then, I do not look up to them emotionally.

Many Gurkha children like Pooja reacquainted themselves with their fathers after spending more time with them. The more time they spend together, the better it is for their relationship. Pooja always thought of her father as "very quiet, timid, shy, *dherai nabolne*, a man of few words" while he was serving in the army. However, once they started living together, she realized that it was not true. She continued,

> That was not true. Like, he loves, loves, loves to chat (she laughed when she told this). He loves a good laugh. He is probably more light-hearted in the family than me or my mom. He is quite a jolly kid. When I look at Nepali society and the men in Nepali society, compared to my dad, it does not match up. His masculinity is not like what a Nepali male should be. He is very much in touch with his feminine side. He would cook and clean the entire house very often ... In that sense, I think he is slightly different in the social norms, Nepali norms, in what a dad should be like.

Over the years, Pooja's father has become warm and caring—as Pooja has also moved out of her parent's home and lives independently in London, her father gives her more time than her mother. She told the story, "When I live away now, he Facetimes me more than mom. Mom is too busy. He asks me what I want to eat. It's a really good relationship now, definitely, like over the years, it's grown to a healthy one."

Interestingly, Bishwas believes that if his father were not a Gurkha, they would be closer to each other. When asked to reimagine his life if his father were not a Gurkha, he said,

> If my father were not a Gurkha, the only thing I would probably say is we'd be a lot closer. This is going to be really subjective and obviously hypothetical, but all my references would be seeing other children with their dads, when children are young, they're quite close, he's taking you to play football, he's coming to see you in school, getting joined in activities, going out for a pint, watching football, like that you know, really close father-son bond. I think

> my references are all from like *gora* families I guess, I think most Nepali sons and dads are pretty similar, everyone's. I would like to see what I see here in the UK, with sons and dads, how close they are and how they get along.

Conclusion

This paper examined an overlooked subject of study—the relationship between transnational migrant soldiers and their children. The paper explored the detached relationships of the Gurkhas and their children because of the former's physical and emotional unavailability and stoic nature. For many Gurkha children, the absence of their fathers while growing up was normal. In a patriarchal society like Nepal's, Gurkha fathers played the typical gender role of a male migrant and breadwinner, in addition to being brave masculine soldiers. They provided for their family and opened opportunities to their children by bringing them to the UK. Consequently, the Gurkha children were highly indebted towards their fathers. However, having a migrant soldier father meant they were perceived to be highly disciplined and cold, hence, the mothers fulfilled their socially prescribed gender roles and cared for the children and the family alone. After living together in the UK for many years, the Gurkhas and the children were able to reacquaint themselves with each other and reconnect their detached relationships. For others, however, this was not the case. Some individuals interviewed, like Bishwas, believed that if their fathers were not soldiers, they would have had a closer relationship. The level of military training and schooling the Gurkhas received and absorbed manifested into their personas and personal lives even to the extent of breaking relationships with their loved ones. The paper raised several topics for further research. For instance, although the paper picked up emotions from a sociological perspective, a rigorous analysis of the impacts of migration and militarization on Gurkhas and their families should be done from a mental health angle. Similarly, in the case of military migrants,

the intersectional analysis of the parent-child relationship is another less-researched area. Furthermore, comparing these findings with the UK-based Nepali civilian fathers to explore the relationship between migrant fathers and their children would also be interesting to pursue.

Previous research on Nepali Gurkha communities in the UK have found that the military shapes the thinking and attitude of the men. There is a strong sense of community even after retirement but the interaction with civilians, including those from Nepal, is limited (Pariyar 2020). Therefore, as there are similar findings with British military families, whether this is solely the impact of a military background could be explored (Yarwood, Tyrell, and Kelly 2021). The limitation of the study is that it has a small sample size and cannot be generalized into all Gurkhas. It also does not explore the impact of militarization on the spouses. It is, however, clear that fathers deeply care for their children and carry their children in their mind and heart wherever they go. Likewise, some struggle to express their emotions fully while others succeed.

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