

Mahesh C. Regmi. 1999. *Imperial Gorkha: An Account of Gorkhali Rule in Kumaun (1791-1815)*. New Delhi: Adroit Publications.

Almost fifteen years after its publication, Mahesh Chandra Regmi's book remains the go-to monograph on the subject of Gorkha conquest and rule over Kumaon. I am hardly qualified to write a formal review of the book, as I have little knowledge of the Gorkha State or the archives that Regmi draws upon for this work. I am a historian of British India, who, for the last ten years, has been increasingly interested in the history of Kumaon. However, when asked to write about this book I was delighted to take the opportunity to do so because it allowed me to think more closely about the period in Kumaon's history immediately prior to British conquest of Kumaon.

Regmi's book examines the period between 1791, when the Gorkhali armies annexed Kumaon to their growing empire of Himalayan states, and 1815, when they ceded Kumaon (and more) to the English East India Company administration after their loss in the Anglo-Gorkha wars. As the subtitle suggests, the book is an account of Gorkhali rule over Kumaon. Other than a Prologue and Epilogue, the book is composed of seven substantial chapters, outlining the political, military, and economic history of the period. The impacts of Kumaon on Nepal are of secondary significance to this work, for which Regmi often refers to his earlier book, *Kings and Political Leaders of the Gorkhali Empire* (1995). Though there are some glimpses of social and cultural interactions between the Gorkha personnel and Kumaonis, those are not areas of primary interest for the author. It is also quite possible that the sources Regmi used to write this book, primarily the records of the Department of Land Revenue in the Ministry of Finance of the Government of Nepal, did not dwell on these potentially fascinating encounters. However, given the paucity of secondary work on Kumaon, and the Himalayan region in general, Regmi is to be applauded for undertaking this work rather than critiqued for its shortcomings.

What is quite evident, even from the title of the book, is that Regmi is very critical of what he terms Gorkhali Imperialism. There are some sections of the book where a reader might infer that a part of Regmi's critique is based on regret that palace intrigues and hastily planned actions "turned the Gorkhali Empire into a mere Kingdom" (p. 16). But that would be unfair. Running through the book is a thoroughgoing critique of the adverse impacts of Gorkhali rule on Kumaon. Whether it is the question of pillage or loot, of

forced labour, taxation policies, new, harsh, forms of punishment, or indeed the many extra-legal cesses imposed on the Kumaonis, Regmi is quite adamant that despite the ameliorative rhetoric that sometimes came from Kathmandu, Gorkhali rule was exploitative and was deeply resented by the Kumaonis. As he concludes, “[F]or the people of Kumaon, the 25 long years of Gorkhali rule had a negative impact on important aspects of their lives, political, social and economic. This was natural, for the Gorkhalis did not occupy Kumaon, and rule it for a quarter-century, for the benefit of its inhabitants” (p. 127). Equally evident are the more general critiques of imperialism from which Regmi’s draws his inspiration. He sees Gorkhali imperialism as merely one more example of the working of imperialism in general, which he describes as a means of getting “rich through short cuts at the expense of weaker populations and territories” (p. xvii). In fact, he goes on to describe this book as an effort to see the connections between Nepali history and larger themes such as imperialism. In that context, this book he says presents, “a familiar dish served with a Gorkhali sauce” (p. xvii).

Although much of the narrative of the book under discussion is about Kumaon, it is apparent that the epicenter of Regmi’s history is in what is today called Nepal. The motivations that Regmi explores are those of the Gorkhali conquerors, and the story of Kumaon is told as part of ongoing arguments about the history of Nepal. That comes as a welcome change from the focus on the British or Indian nationalists that otherwise dominates so much of South Asian historiography. Only too often we read history teleologically, with events acquiring their significance (and hence scrutiny from historians) only because they help us understand or reinterpret what came to become dominant. Thus the historiography of modern South Asia pays a disproportionate amount of attention to the emergence of British colonialism and Indian nationalism. This pushes to the margins other histories, whether they be of subaltern people, alternative themes, or of regions that now come to be seen as peripheral to the master narratives of history. Reading Regmi’s book, however, compels us to pay attention to the amazing achievements of the Gorkhali state, that, in about 70 years expanded from being a small state of less than a 1000 square kilometres, to establishing a virtually unprecedented empire that spanned the Himalayas from Sikkim in the east and threatened Kangra in the west. The aim, according to Regmi, was to establish a trans-Himalayan empire that would also include Kashmir. In doing so, in the late 18th century, at least, Regmi tells us, “the Gorkhalis

seem to have outpaced the British East India Company in the march toward the status of an imperial power” (p. 5). Given the paucity of resources (economic and demographic) of the entire region, this was a phenomenal achievement. While the Gorkhas tried to make alliances with other successor states in north and central India when confronted with the possibility of war with the East India Company, these did not result in the desired outcomes. Their loss in the Anglo-Gorkha wars of 1814-16, ensured that this Himalayan imperial formation never came to be. The tragedy is not the loss of this specific empire. The real issue is one of the attenuation of our historical imagination. Given our historiographical blinkers, and nation-state dominated historical narratives, contemporary historians of South Asia find it difficult if not impossible to imagine a state formation of the sort that Regmi’s book brings to our attention. Even if we do know about the Gorkha state and its imperial imagination, colonialism and universality of modern nation-states have ensured we can only think of it as a historical oddity rather than an alternative polity. If sensitive historical exploration is about paying attention to the paths not taken, paying attention to possibilities unrealized, so as to imagine a different future, then this book compels us to think closely about one such moment in the history of the Himalayas.

Another way in which Regmi’s book is important for historians of British India, dependent as most of us are on British or nationalist archives, is that it opens our eyes to the rich archives of the Gorkha state. Although historians of India too have, in recent years, begun to use archives of successor and princely states for histories of the 18th or 19th centuries and earlier eras, “the archives” for most of us continue to be the records of the British colonial state and its predecessor. No wonder then that the concerns of these archives, colonialism and nationalism, come to dictate the master narratives created out of these archives. Although Regmi’s book does not necessarily use Gorkha archives to explore social and cultural themes, even passing references that Regmi makes to the role of religion or caste, for instance the role of the *dharmādhikār* (p. 120), give us a sense of the way in which these were central to the working of pre-British polities in South Asia. To cite just one other example, the book gives us a fascinating glimpse, for instance, into pre-nationalist ideas of belonging. In a bid to persuade peasants who had fled Gorkha domains in Kumaon because of excessive revenue demands and severe punishments, in 1796 King Ran Bahadur made an appeal to them to return to their former homes. “You had served the former king of Kumaon

faithfully...” he said. “By the grace of God, that territory now belongs to us. *Good people should be loyal to the throne, rather than any individual*” (p. 119, emphasis added).

The above should not be construed to mean that there are no problems with relying on the archives of a single state, whether imperial or otherwise. The book might have been much richer if Regmi could, for instance, have found sources that provided us with some idea of how Kumaonis themselves perceived the Gorkhas (other than in the forms of petitions to the Gorkha state, which he does cite). It is probably the reliance on state archives alone that prevents Regmi from exploring issues of gender relations, although the material certainly calls out for some analysis about ideas of masculinity. I am not aware whether Regmi’s archives, for instance, have information about sexual relations between Gorkha soldiers and Kumaoni women. We get but a passing reference to “torture, abduction, and rape of wives, daughters, daughters-in-law of the people” by soldiers of the Gorkha army (p. 122). Use of alternative archives might have helped in filling in this lacuna. Finally, there is the question of Regmi’s almost uncritical acceptance of British denunciations of the atrocities committed by the Gorkha regime in Kumaon. Of course, doing so helps Regmi fortify his argument about the exploitative nature of Gorkha Imperialism. Without denying that argument, it is important to keep in mind that British accounts of Kumaon (Regmi relies almost exclusively on Atkinson’s *Gazetteer* and a few contemporary published British texts) sought to justify their own conquest and vilification of the Gorkhas was an important part of that justification. While Regmi certainly presents a great deal of other information about the atrocities committed by Gorkha soldiers and administrators, he appears to rely exclusively on British sources to attest to the fact that Kumaonis in fact deserted Gorkha domains in large numbers because of these atrocities and excessive revenue demands.

One last quibble I have about the book relates to problems with production and proofreading. In chapter two, for instance, there is a missing endnote somewhere around the note 34 mark. That means that all the notes after this are off by one number. Yes, it is possible to figure out the references by taking this error into account, but one should not have to do that. Related to that is the strange practice of occasionally attaching an endnote to the start of a whole section (see, for instance p. 84 or p. 119). Given this is not a practice followed through the entire book, it makes for awkward reading if one is following references closely.

Despite quibbles and some shortcomings (and I know of no book that could not be subject to these) this is a very important book. Regmi brings out details about the land revenue system, the administrative structures and the army that I have not even touched upon in these comments. It provides important information that was not available in English anywhere else. Even in its limitations, it compels us to ask questions that will move the field of Himalayan history (in Nepal as well as Kumaon) in important new directions.

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