

# The Dress Rehearsal of Anglo-Nepal War of 1814

-Shaphalya Amatya

Under the leadership of a young, ambitious, spirited and able Prime Minister General Bhimsen Thapa, the brave sons of Himalaya, the Nepalese got inspiration and encouragements to extend their boundaries. As a result in the year 1804 Gurkha power was at its zenith. It had touched Sikkim in east, Kangra in west and Tibet in north, but it had not come into rivalry with the other growing power, the phenomenon of the 19th century, British India.<sup>1</sup>

## Nepal's Policy of Aggressive Militarism

Bhimsen Thapa knew it well that sooner or later confrontation with the British was unavoidable. Therefore, military preparations were undergoing in Nepal to meet any foreseeable events.<sup>2</sup> Anirudha Gupta has rightly observed, "A regime which squarely depended for its sustenance on an army, raised on a "war footing" could not sit at rest until it found new avenues of territorial expansion. Hence, failing in the Northern region, the army was sent to push the frontier further south.....<sup>3</sup> Dr. K. Majumdar opines. "It is

political life of Nepal, when factions multiplied, animosities raged, blood frequently shed, the Nepalese maintained a uniform record of extending their Kingdom by arms and conquests. The first decade of the 19th century witnessed Nepal's territorial limit stretched from the river Tista in the east to the river Sutlej in the west, embracing a number of hill states on the Himalayas"<sup>4</sup>

Nepal exploited the weakness of the hill states to her west and occupied some of them. The Nepalese attacked Kangra on 1805.<sup>5</sup> Kaji Amar Singh Thapa was the commander of the Nepalese army in the western front. He anyhow wanted to capture Kangra fort, so he even pledged for British help to complete the seizure of Kangra.<sup>6</sup> But the Nepalese were not given any military aid to attack Kangra by the British. Instead the Britishers accepted the request of the Raja of Kangra to help him to expel the Nepalese.<sup>7</sup> When the Nepalese army attempted to capture the Kangra fort for the fourth time.<sup>8</sup> Samsar Chand, the Raja of Kangra, requested Ranjit Singh, the Sikh, ruler to help him against the Nepalese promising him to surrender the Kangra fort

as a gift for his help. Maharaja Ranjit Singh promised to help Kangra on his request but in reality he wanted to fulfill his inner desire of grabbing Kangra, which he did sometime later. The Nepalese then attacked Kulu and Mandi valleys.<sup>9</sup> Nobody could check Amar Singh Thapa; he seized some villages belonging to Raja Ram Singh, one of the Sikh Chiefs. In the beginning the Britishers did not take any part in his-sutlej affairs. They choose their policy of non-intervention. Actually they wanted a series of fight between the two mightiest and strongest races of Asia, the Gurkhas and the Sikhs—they wanted to weaken them just by watching them.<sup>10</sup> In any event, the powerful Sikh ruler acted as a serious obstacle to Nepal's expansion to further west. In fact, from 1805 to 1809 Amar Singh Thapa remained surrounding the fortress of Kangra. But he was forced to leave Kangra by the Sikh Army in August 1809. The Nepalese were ordered to remain in the west of river Sutlej. This news of the fall of Kangra fort in the hands of the Sikhs angered the Nepalese court. Amar Singh was blamed for it, which was partly true also.<sup>11</sup> To continue the western expansion Kaji Abhiman Singh was dispatched but it did not help the Nepalese to regain their lost position; they had to be contented with their position to the east bank of the Sutlej. Some historians are of opinion that attack on Kangra was in fact a grave mistake committed by the Nepalese because it exposed their inner desire of policy of expansion which roused the fear of neighbouring Indian States, which resulted into their non-cooperation during the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814.<sup>12</sup>

### **Nepalese Encroachment on British territories**

Bhimsen Thapa, who subsequently attained one of the greatest names in Nepale-

se history and who can indisputably be called the first of the series of distinguished statesmen to whom the present prosperity of Nepal is due was brain behind the policy of expansion.<sup>13</sup>

As soon as he consolidated his powers he began to search for a further outlet for his warlike energy. He at once saw the south where Nepal had common border with British India. According to Mr. W. Brook Northey —“To encroach upon British territory, however was a perilous undertaking, in view of the possibility of reprisals which might bring his country under British ascendancy—a contingency of which the Nepalese lived in perpetual dread. At the same time Bhimsen had always regarded the East India company as his foe rather than his friend; but, in judging it by its somewhat timid and vacillating attitude towards Nepal during the previous thirty or forty years, he made the mistake of underestimating its power at this time. At any rate he decided to see how far it could go, and from 1804 to 1812 the Gurkhas pushed steadily southwards into British territory, until by the end of that time no fewer than two hundred villages in the fertile Tarai and Tirhut had been annexed”.<sup>14</sup> According to Mr. Ali Shah, “Nepalese had been encroaching upon the British foonter ever since 1787 but the East India Company was not in a position to retaliate, or to back its protests with force. The whole of the sub-continent was in various degrees of disorder. The Peshwa was only seeking his opportunity to turn against the British and the powerful Scindia and Holkar were in a continuous state of revolt. Further to the north, the redoubtable Sikh Emperor at Lahore was awaiting his hour, and the kingdom of Oudh, which impinged on Nepal, was isolated.”<sup>15</sup>

According to Tukes—“Bhimsen could

now look around him. In India a British power in a position of some peril, all about it, India he saw was in ferment. The Mahratta confederacy was on the war path while Scindia and Hulkar were persecuting the Rajput principallities left over from the Turks expansion. The former was at grips with the brilliant commander, Lord Lake, have been heavily defeated near Delhi and was about to receive the *Coup de grace* at Laswari. Holkar was about to administer a beating at the Mukund Dara Pass to the small force under Monsoon, an operation which made a far greater noise in the India or its day than its insignificant scale warranted. But there it was; a widely reported defeat of the British forces. Soon afterwards, the Mahratta chiefs combined with Bhurtpore in an attack on Delhi, stoutly and successfully defended by Lieut. Colonels Ochterlony and Burn. Then came the British victory over Holkar at Deeg. Counterbalanced by Lake's repeated failures to capture the great moated fortress of Bhurtpore. Along the frontiers beyond Bihar and with Gyalior and other native states, the robber Pindari horsemen were making chaos worse confounded—Sikim, Garhwal, Kumaon, Sirmoor, the Doon, the long strip of Tarai were under the heel of Gurkhas. If anything, Bhimsen must have seen Nepal as a strong and progressing state and British India as one suffering from grievous wounds any one of which might, if inflamed, be fatal".<sup>16</sup>

Thus blocked in the west, the martial ardours of the Nepalese found an accentuated went in the south, where the British territory lay in tempting opulance. Border disputes were there from time immemorial and it became easier for both the parties to fight for it.

In 1801, the session of the Gorakhpore territory to the Company by the Nawab-

Vazier of Oudh, had brought British India into direct contact with the Nepalese frontier. Nepal now started a deliberate policy of infiltration through the tarai, slowly absorbing village after village which was situated either in territory under dispute like Butwal and Sheoraj or British territory itself.

Though the border dispute between Nepal and British India was old and unsettled there was no violent conflicts and aggression upto the year 1804. In 1804, Nepal annexed Butwal when the Raja of Palpa was deposed from his kingdom. The Dewan of Palpa entered into an agreement in the meantime with the British Government against Nepal and encouraged the Britishers to demand Butwal as their territory. In fact the Nepal Government had long ago occupied Sheoraj and had been gradually occupying Butwal. Nepalese Soldiers had captured Butwal already by 1806. Against this the British Government sent lot of official protests to Nepal Darbar. In reply to all these correspondence the Raja of Nepal said that he did not wish to commit any aggression in the territory of Hon'ble Company's territory. He proposed to settle the dispute peacefully.<sup>17</sup> This dispute on Butwal and Sheoraj continued upto 1814, which played the role of a spark in the war between Nepalese and Britishers in 1814-16.

Apart from this, the Company Government and Nepal Government came into conflict in many places. In the extreme east, the Gurkhas were said to have occupied the Zamindari of Bheemnagar, in subversion of the proprietary rights of the Zamindar and the sovereignty of the Company in the year 1807.<sup>18</sup> The Magistrate of Pornea made representation to the Nepalese Officers at Morung with no effect. But reports against continued encroachments of the Officers of Nepal in the District of Morung were still coming and at last the Nepal Raja wrote to the Governor

General that he had sent Sirdar Guj Singh to adjust the disputes respecting the lands in Bheemnagar.<sup>19</sup> But very soon the problem of Bheemnagar was solved and those villages which were taken by the Nepalese were restored to their rightful owner.<sup>20</sup> Then Sirdar Guj Singh was directed to withdraw from that land of Bheemnagar.<sup>21</sup>

In the district of Tirhut also, Lord Moira alleged that innumerable cases of encroachments had taken place, some as old as the year 1787.<sup>22</sup>

In the year 1811 the disputes of Saran was also quite serious. The Raja of Nepal made a complaint to the Governor General stating that on January 27, 1816, between the hours of nine and ten in the district of Saran had sent to the Pergunnah of Rautehat armed sepoy, numbering 1600, who fell upon the said Pergunnah, killed Lochan Gir, Tehsildar of the place, Bhakta Ray, Bechoo Singh Zamindar, and nine sepoy belonging to the subah and carried off all properties and treasures of the Nepal Government.<sup>23</sup> The Raja of Nepal demanded severe punishment for Bir Kishore for his crimes. The magistrate of Saran, in reporting these occurrences had blamed the Nepalese as being the aggressors. In the correspondence which ensued with the Raja of Nepal on this occasion, the two states agreed to depute officers to the spot and fix the boundaries. The Raja of Nepal deputed Kaji Randeep Singh and Sirdar Parasran (Parasu Ram) Thapa as his representatives.<sup>24</sup> Later on Raj Krishna Pandit was also deputed.<sup>25</sup> The Company's Government entrusted the conduct of the enquiry to Mr. Young who, on his arrival at the frontier, found that the Nepalese had actually taken complete possession, not only of the villages which formed the previous subject of dispute, but of other villages also making a total of twenty-two villages. Nothing could be decided by this commi-

ssion and the Britishers began to reinforce Bettiah Battalion under the command of Maj. Paris Bradshaw to recover by arms the lands usurped by the Nepalese on the frontier of Saran and Maj. Bradshaw was also deputed to take up the case of Saran after completing the investigations in Butwal.<sup>26</sup>

The immediate casus belli of the war was the dispute of Butwal and Sheoraj of the north of Gorakhpur district, "The desire of the barons of Nepal to extend their ways over the Zamindars of the plains and tap this convenient source of income, for whatever the pipers might tell of glory in the field, it was the share-holders in London and the Court in Kathmandu that called the tune".<sup>27</sup> In fact the Company Government wanted to control Butwal and Sheoraj since the beginning of the 19th century when they said that the mighty Gurkha power was increasing tremendously. They knew the importance of it both politically and commercially and they also knew that Nepal can be penetrated easily if needed in future from this direction.<sup>28</sup> As we have already stated that Sheoraj was already under the Nepalese and Butwal was partly controlled by them but the Raja of Palpa was against the Nepalese and he encouraged the Company Government to claim Butwal as their own.<sup>29</sup> In fact these two Zamindars had always been held by the Raja of Palpa in the hills. There was, however, some sort of suzerainty exercised over them off and on, by the Nawab Vizier. On the other hand, the Nepal Government also exercises control over Palpa. When in 1801 the Nawab of Oudh ceded the Gorakhpur territories it began to claim Butwal also as its dominion. After the cession of Butwal to the company by the Vizier, a settlement was made by the collector of Gorakhpur with the representative Raja Prithvi Pal Singh, the hereditary Raja of Palpa who himself was at that time

a prisoner at Kathmandu. A regular commitment was entered into that the rent of thirty-two thousand rupees per annum should be paid to the British Government for their lands. During that time no objection was raised to this arrangement by the Gurkha Government. On his return from Kathmandu, the Raja of Palpa confirmed the act of his representative and acknowledged his obligations to pay the rent of Butwal to the British Government. He was shortly afterwards called back to Kathmandu, presumably for his agreeing to pay the rent of Butwal to the British Government instead of the Gurkhas, and was put to death after a short period of imprisonment. His family retired into Gorakhpur, provision being made for them by the British Government while their lands in Butwal were managed by its officers. In 1804, the Raja of the Nepal made the Raja of Gulmi as the head of Butwal as representing their former tributary the Raja of Palpa. The British Government protested against it. The British Government also demanded the proofs of the possession of Sheoraj from Nepal Court. The Nepal Court neither evacuated Butwal nor sent any proofs. A reminder was sent to the Raja of Nepal in January 16th 1809 calling on him to withdraw his troops from Butwal and allow to establish the British authority there, and that otherwise more serious measures would have to be taken.<sup>30</sup> In 1811 the Magistrate of Gorakhpur complained of encroachments by the Gurkhas in lands adjoining Butwal and Sheoraj. As the conflict was increasing day by day both the Government thought it quite essential to and settle the outstanding disputes on the spot. To represent the Company Government Maj. Bradshaw was appointed as Commissioner.<sup>31</sup> The Nepalese Commissioners were joined by the Nepalese vakil Krishna Pandit and his brother Raghunath Pandit. Both parties produced their proofs, documents and papers in their favour.

But Maj. Bradshaw remained adamant and never tried to come into settlement. He could not be convinced by the Nepalese Commissioners. As their design was to wage a war they were collecting lot of information about Nepal's politics, economy and strength from the very beginning and thus ultimately they decided to fight.<sup>32</sup> At this stage Bradshaw concluded the proceedings without the consent of the Nepalese Commissioner and reported to his Government that the investigation had proved the rights of the British Government to both the Taluks of Butwal and Sheoraj. This made Nepalese Commissioners very furious and felt humiliated. Actually Maj. Bradshaw was encouraged by his Government not to come into any agreement with the Nepal Government. He was also directed to be prepared to expel the Nepalese if they refuse to withdraw or delay in withdrawing from the territories which might be proved to belong to the Company.<sup>33</sup> His attention was therefore mainly to fight with the Gurkhas. At the same time he sent a detailed account of nature, strength and disposition of Nepalese forces in Butwal and Sheoraj. On April 11, he reported to the translation of the description of the place by a sepoy who had journeyed to Amar Singh's residence.<sup>34</sup> He also suggested for the movements of the two companies of sepoys from Gorakhpur to Lotun, to take action if necessary in future against Nepalese, and reported to the Commander-in-Chief the strength and description of the Nepalese in the Tarai and the garrisons at Nuvakot and under Amar Singh Thapa.<sup>35</sup>

On June 18, the Company Government sent its considered answer to the above Communication from Major Bradshaw expressly stating that the right of the Honourable Company to the taluks of Butwal and Sheoraj had been established, and the notification to

this effect would be made to the Raja of Nepal which would be supported by arms if necessary. The Government also thought that it would be inexpedient to permit the Nepalese to retain any portion of the lands to which the right of the Company had been established. At the same time the Adjutant General Mr. Pagan was asked to request the Com.-in-Chief to take into consideration the military arrangements which might be required to recover and maintain Butwal and Sheoraj by force of arms if necessary.<sup>36</sup> As they could not come into any decision war became evident. The Raja was asked to withdraw his officers from the lands in dispute and to renounce his claims to them. At the same time 3 companies of regular infantry and three companies of the Bettia local Corps were sent to support Maj. Bradshaw, who was asked, after allowing sufficient time for the receipt of an answer from the Raja of Nepal, to proceed.

The Nepalese Cammissioner left the frontiers peremptorily asking Maj. Bradshaw to withdraw from the 22 villages which had been earlier handed over to him in trust pending decision of the investigation.

But suddenly a detachment of seventeen companies of sepoy with the guns was formed under the command of Lt. Col. Richardson to occupy and hold Butwal and Sheoraj. Gen. Wood with five Companies and two field pieces from Lt. Col. Richardson's detachment marched in support of the measures of the Magistrate of Gorakhpur against the Nepalese.<sup>37</sup> In the last week of April, 1804, Mr. Martin, the assistant at Gorakhpur, directed the persons whom he proposed to establish as police officers in the taluks of Butwal and Sheoraj to advance and to establish their Thannas at the places already determined. The Nepalese officers resisted this procedure and the Thanadars

retired to British territory. At this the Magistrate of Gorakhpur requisitioned the troops that had been sent to Lotun for this purpose and they marched into the disputed lands without opposition. The Nepalese troops retired as the Company's troops advanced. The police Thanas were then established at the places fixed for them, under the protection of the troops. To avoid the worst summer in the Tarai during May, the British troops were ordered to Gorakhpur. This situation was exploited by the Nepalese to attack the Thanas in Butwal on 29th May 1814 and occupied the whole of Butwal. The last straw was broken by the reply of the King of Nepal to the letter of the Governor-General which was received by the later on the 12th August 1814. In that letter, the King of Nepal requested the Governor-General to instruct Major Bradshaw to restore twenty-two villages and other lands occupied by him, adding that otherwise his government must take measures for the security and protection of the country of Nepal, for which it was its duty to provide. After that correspondence with the King of Nepal was stopped and the first step towards war was taken by the Governor-General by prohibiting all commercial intercourse between the British and the Nepalese.<sup>38</sup>

In the western frontier although General Ochterlony was advised and ordered by the Company Government "to refrain from any interference within the hills," he was determined to check any further expansion of the Nepalese in the east 'of Sutlej.'<sup>39</sup> In the meantime both the Britishers under General Ochterlony and the Nepalese under General Amar Singh Thapa tried some futile attempts of negotiating some problems peacefully but these

attempts were foiled. It seems that the Company Government was now intent on war and had discarded any peaceful solution altogether. They started collecting informations of military importance on Nepal from different sources.<sup>40</sup> In this way the relations between the two states gradually degenerated into one of open hostility. The traditional suspicion towards the Britishers, the rude conduct of Major Bradshaw to the Nepalese Commissioner,<sup>41</sup> and the breach of faith of the Britishers by not returning 22 villages which had been earlier handed over to them in trust and the arrogant policy of the British imperialists to occupy Nepal compelled the brave sons of Asia, the Nepalese, to defend their country. Discussions were held at Nepal Durbar to decide the future policy and action towards the British Government. The Raja of Nepal posed the question of war before the Durbar when it became almost inevitable and the discussions that followed showed two distinct opinions, one in favour of war the other against it. Although the war party influenced the decision of the Durbar, yet Raja Guru Raghunath Pandit did not hesitate to point out that "there was no injury done to Nepal that called for an appeal to arms".<sup>42</sup> What Raj Guru Raghunath Pandit considered as a injury to the nation is not clear here. When a peaceful settlement could not be concluded the war was essential and on the other hand the direct penetration of Britishers in Nepal and breach of trust of 22 villages all compelled the Durbar to decide in favour of war. Mr. Chaudhary is also not correct in his statement that the decision to go to war on the boundary disputes was mainly due to Bhimsen Thapa's confidence in the fighting strength of the Gurkhas.<sup>43</sup> Because Bhimsen was not only a warrior and able general, he was a shrewd statesman and diplomat also, when he saw that the Britishers were not in favour of peace he decided in

favour of war, because there was no other alternative. Dr. Regmi has aptly pointed out that "Nepal was facing a foe who was determined to fight it out, and achieve the ends sought".<sup>44</sup> Ultimately the war was declared on 1st November 1814 by Gov. Gen. Lord Moira.

### References

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2. a) C. Nepali, *Bhimsen Thapa Ra Tatkalin Nepal*, (Bhimsen Thapa And the then Nepal) Nepali, (Kathmandu, Sambat 2013), pp. 83-94.
- b) In my previous articles published in this journal I have discussed the various factors leading the Nepalese and the Britishers into the two hostile camps. (I) Shaphalya Amatya, "British Diplomacy And Its Various Missions in Nepal" *Ancient Nepal*, No. 6, January 1969, pp 1-5. (II) Shaphalya Amatya, "Indo-Nepalese Relations In the beginning of the 19th century (1799-1801), *Ancient Nepal*, No, 7, April 1969, pp. 46-49. (III) Shaphalya Amatya, "The Failure of Capt. Knox's Mission In Nepal, (1801-1804), *Ancient Nepal*, No. 46-48, June-Nov. 1976, pp. 9-18.
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4. Kanchanmoy Mojumdar, "Indo-Nepalese Relations", Ph. D. Thesis, Indian Council of World Affairs Library, Sapru House, New Delhi, pp. 1 to 50.
5. a) For more details of the western campaigns, see D. R. Regmi, *Modern*

- Nepal*, Vol. II, (Calcutta, 1975), pp. 199-232.
- b) *Foreign Political*, January 9th, 1810, No. 3.
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7. *Foreign Political*, Sept. 13th, 1811, No. 56, (NAI).
8. For details see; Siva Prasad Dabral 'Charan', *Gorkhayani*, Part I, Vir Gatha Prakashan, (Dogodha, Garhwal (India) Sambat 2030), pp. 119-128.
9. *Foreign Political*, October 4th 1811, No. 18. (NAI)
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12. C. Nepali, No. 2, pp. 104-6.
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14. Ibid., p. 57.
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16. Francis Tucker, No. 1, pp. 71-72.
17. *Foreign Secret*, December 4th, 1806, No. 77, (NAI)
18. *Foreign Political*, March 5th, 1807, No. 105. (NAI)
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20. a) *Foreign Political*, October 12th, 1810, No 173. (NAI)  
b) For more details see D.R. Regmi, No. 5 a, pp. 248-252.
21. *Foreign Political*, April 19th, 1811, No. 69. (NAI)
22. a) *Foreign Political*, June 4th, 1813, No. 46. (NAI)  
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23. *Foreign Political*, November 8th, 1811, No. 69. (NAI)
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26. For more details see (a) B.D. Sanwal, No. 10, pp. 117-18.
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29. *Foreign Secret*, June 30th, 1802, No. 24. (NAI)
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31. *Foreign Political*, January 15th, 1813, No. 46. (NAI)
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33. *Foreign Political*, January 15th, 1813, No 48. (NAI)
34. *Foreign Political*, April 30th 1813, No. 23. (NAI)
35. Ibid, No. 34.
36. *Foreign Political*, June 18th 1813, No. 23. (NAI)



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37. Foreign Political, May 13th, 1814, No. 43. (NAI)
38. For details see:-
  - a) B.D. Sanwal, No. 10, p. 143.
  - b) D. R. Regmi, No. 5 A, pp. 254-96.
39. B.D. Sanwal, No. 10, pp. 121-22,
40. They were also provoking the Nepalese by seizing the disputed areas by force. For more details see (a) D. R. Regmi No. 5A, p. 293. (b) B.D. Sanwal, No: 10, pp. 118-33,
41. B. D. Sanwal, No. 10, pp. 137-139.
42. Henry T. Prinsep, *History of the Political And Military Transactions In India During The Administration of the Marques of Hastings, 1813-1823*, ("Nepal wars" in vol. I, Chapters II-V, pp. 54-213), Two volumes, (London, Kingbury, Parbury & Allen, 1825).
43. K. C. Chaudhari, *Anglo-Nepalese Relations*, (Calcutta 1960), p. 161
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