

# Turning martial race into labourers: A phase of modernity in Assam's colonial past

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## ABSTRACT

After 1857, British officials working in colonial India developed the theory of the martial race, according to which groups, castes, tribes, or communities that were brave, loyal, and possessed fighting skills were considered martial races. In contrast, those who were unfit for military service were considered non-martial races. During the 19th century, colonial administration of India divided the communities, tribes, castes or groups into two categories: martial races and non-martial races, in which martial races were considered for the military and non-martial races were reserved to be labourers. The Gorkhas or Gurkhas of Nepal were considered a martial race, especially ethnic tribes like the Magars and the Gurungs, whereas the other Nepali communities were categorised under non-martial races and were generally recruited for working in economic sectors. Gradually, when the demand for labourers increased in Assam, the Gorkhas, who were considered a martial race, not only served in the British military but were also forced to work in economic sectors. The martial races, like Gorkhas, who were turned into labourers in Assam by the British, changed the basic concept and definition of martial and non-martial races by the end of 20th century...

**Keywords:** Gorkhas, British colonialism, Martial race, indentured labourers

**How to cite this article:** Jordan Thapa, Dr. Susmita Hazarika, : Turning martial race into labourers: A phase of modernity in Assam's colonial past. *Int J Drug Deliv Technol.* 2026; 16(8s): 525-529; DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.8s.61

**Source of support:** Nil.

**Conflict of interest:** None

## INTRODUCTION

The colonial history in Assam is largely revolved around the discovery of economic sectors, the settlement of the British Army and the migration of labourers. The development of the British Army is closely related to the development of martial race theory, which boosted the recruitment process. The theory of Martial race has received widespread attention from many military writers over the last 150 years, in which many new ideologies, concepts and analyses have been made by scholars to understand the reasons and motives of the British officials behind the theory. The martial race theory was developed by the British officials in India, especially after 1857, when the British faced the Indian sepoy mutiny. The concept of martial race revolved around recruiting the brave, experienced and loyal soldiers in the British military. The British in India divided the groups, castes, tribes or communities into two categories: that is, martial races and non-martial races, in which martial races were recruited in the British military. The theory emphasises that the martial races were fit to be a part of the British army, which also gave them great benefits, as they now had access to stable colonial government employment. The martial race theory gradually became an essential part of the British policy for the recruitment of soldiers into the military. The British officials identified Sikhs, Rajputs, Pathans, Garhwalis, and Jats from the Indian sub-continent as a martial race, who were fit to be recruited into the British Indian Army.

By 1857, the Gorkhas of Nepal became one of the most efficient soldiers in the British army, who fought for the British East India Company with honesty and proved to be very loyal. The Gorkhas were also categorised as a martial race, and their population drastically increased in the British army by the end of the 19th century, especially after the British strategy for Northeast India became political and economic. It is important to understand that the British regarded certain ethnic groups like Magars, Gurungs and Khas as Gorkhas. In contrast, other non-martial races fall under the Nepali community in general. The demand for Gorkhas increased, and to meet the demand, the British also added some other tribes and castes of Nepal into the Gorkha army in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The demand for the Gorkhas during the 20<sup>th</sup> century increased not only for military purposes, but also for working in the British economic sectors of Assam. In this paper, an attempt was made to find out the basic ideology and concept of martial race and how the Gorkhas became one of the martial races that were not only recruited for military purposes but also for working in the economic sectors of Assam. This research paper is based on understanding the history of Gorkhas not only as British soldiers but also as labourers during the early 20th century in colonial Assam, and why a martial race like Gorkhas were forced to work in the British economic sectors in Assam.

## 2. The theory of martial race

There are two dominant debates regarding the ideology of martial races, which are known as Primordia-lists and

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Constructivists [1]. The primordia-lists believe that certain groups have a history of warfare, which made them eligible to be soldiers or a martial race. In contrast, the constructivists argue that the British developed the theory only to designate certain groups for a steady stream of recruits in the British Army. Both primordia-lists and constructivists agree that the martial race doctrine developed after the sepoy mutiny of India in 1857. Still, the theory of martial and non-martial races was already made by the British during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the British, the martial races are those who are brave, strong and have war skills; they are more eligible to be part of the British Army compared to non-martial races, who were unfit to be soldiers.

From 1857, the numbers of communities, groups, castes and tribes were divided into martial race and non-martial race, in which those who were listed in martial race categories were generally considered to be recruited in the British Indian Army. On the other hand, those who were listed as non-martial races were declared as unfit to be soldiers and were generally recruited to work in the British economic sectors. The martial race soon became an important criterion for the recruitment of soldiers in the British Indian Army. The population of the martial race from 1857 increased rapidly, especially after the British divided the communities into martial and non-martial races. The true concept and ideology of martial race is one of the most debatable topics among both military historians and scholars. In one of the concepts, the martial race is based on masculinity [2], in which the British regarded the martial race as only those tribes or communities who were physically superior to the others.

As the ideology of martial race developed in India mainly due to the Sepoy mutiny of 1857, the basic idea was to recruit those soldiers who would remain loyal towards the British. Some modern scholars also state that the martial race theory is about recruiting soldiers in the British military who were loyal and cheap by labelling them as martial races [3]. The martial race theory is also said to be a British system that was made to divide the communities, groups and tribes into two sections, in which the educated class were regarded as non-martial races as the modern scholar believes that the idea behind the martial race theory was to recruit uneducated and poor tribes who can be easily manipulated and work for low wages [4]. The number of martial races was generally ethnic tribes, which made the theory more complicated, as some historians argue that the theory of martial race was made only to recruit the ethnic tribes who were always a blockade for the colonial routes [5]. One of the facts of martial race is that the ethnic tribes are mostly declared as martial race by the British, either because they are brave, strong and are experienced in war, like the British officials proclaim, or they labelled them as martial race to recruit them in the British military to subdue the danger from the ethnic tribes.

There is no denying the fact that the number of ethnic tribes was considered a martial race and were recruited in the British Indian Army. For instance, the Gorkhas of Nepal were largely ethnic tribes who fought the British East India

Company in the Anglo-Nepalese War in 1814. During the war, the British official decided to recruit these Gorkhas into the British military, which was later categorised as a martial race. The policy of recruiting soldiers in the British army was largely based on the martial race theory during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The criteria to be a martial race were not only based on theory but also on the nature of the soldier towards the government during the 1857 revolt, in which those who were loyal towards the colonial power were also taken into consideration for the martial race. The British categorised some groups under the martial race category according to those who took part in the armed rebellion against the British and those who didn't.

### **3. Gorkhas of Nepal as a martial race**

The word Gorkha is also spelt as Goorkhas and Gurkhas, especially in the British documents. Etymologically, Gorkha means *Go-Raksha*, which means protector of the cow, whereas some also believe that it refers to followers of *Guru Goraknath*, who was associated with martial tradition. The term Gorkha is also associated with the Gorkha kingdom established by King *Dravya Shaha* in 1559, in which the citizens were regarded as Gorkhas and the army was known as Gorkhalis. The unification campaigns of Nepal under King Prithivi Narayan Shah started from 1743 to 1768, where the Nepali ethnic tribes like Magars and Gurungs were mostly served in the Gorkha army of the Shah dynasty. After the death of Prithivi Narayan Shah in 1775, the kingdom of Nepal continued to wage wars and expand its territories. During the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a territorial dispute between the British East India Company and the Gorkhas of Nepal, which ultimately led to the Anglo-Nepalese War in 1814. During the Anglo-Nepalese war, the British officials were impressed by the Gorkha war skills and bravery, due to which they requested the king of Nepal in 1815 to recruit the Gorkhas in the British military. By 1816, Nepal surrendered and signed the treaty of Sugauli, which was a peace treaty that ended the territorial disputes between the British and Nepal. One of the most important aspects of the war was the recruitment of Gorkhas in the British army from 1815. Initially, the 1<sup>st</sup> Gorkha (also spelt as Gurkha) regiment was raised as the Nasiri regiment, which later became the 1<sup>st</sup> King George's Own Gorkha Rifles [6]. The Gorkha regiment fought different wars for the British East India Company, like the Pindari war of 1817, which was against the Marathas of India, the Jat war of 1826 for conquering Bharatpur for the British, and the 1st Anglo-Sikh War of 1846, which was fought against the mighty Sikh warriors. By 1850, the Gorkhas fought many battles for the British efficiently, which increased the demand for the Gorkhas in the British Indian Army.

As discussed earlier, the martial race theory was developed by the British officials in India after the 1857 revolt, in which the native soldiers revolted against the British East India Company. The martial race theory became one of the most important aspects for the recruitment of soldiers in the British Indian Army from 1857, especially because India became a British colony politically in 1858. They believed that all the armed forces around the world are comprised of different ethnicities, which have been organised into military organisations since the beginning. The British believed that the Gorkhas were warrior tribes of Nepal and were eligible to be part of the British military [7]. According to the British, the ethnic tribes like the Magars and Gurungs were the Gorkhas of Nepal, who had all the criteria of a martial race. In contrast, those who were unfit for the military were generally regarded as Nepali and categorised as non-martial race. The Gorkhas were placed in the northeast region of India to protect the economic interests of the British, especially in Assam. According to 1864, the Gorkhas were considered an ethnic group and were recruited in the British military more than any other ethnic group.

*Population of officers and soldiers from the ethnic group in 1865 in the British Indian Army [8]*

ETHNIC GROUPS	NO. OF OFFIERS	NO. OF SOLDIERS
Gorkhas	41	365
Nagas	1	5
Kukis	4	50
Garos	5	95
Kampti	1	0
Khasi	5	34
Bhutias	0	3
Mikris	0	19
Total	57	571

The British recruited only Gorkhas in the British army, and the other communities of Nepal were hired and recruited to work in the British economic sectors. Another reason behind considering ethnic tribes as Gorkhas by the British is also because the ethnic tribes were different from the other Nepali communities, especially in terms of religion and social life. The ethnic tribes of Nepal were generally animist and were less influenced by the social structure and system of Hinduism in Nepal.

The ethnic soldiers proved to be very useful in northeast India during the colonial period, since they were experienced in guerrilla warfare, they were aware of the geographical conditions, and many of these ethnic tribes had a history of warfare. The British initially recruited Gorkhas for the northeast region of India for their own political interest and forced Gorkhas to settle in different regions of the northeast. The discovery of tea, coal and other natural resources in northeast India, especially in Assam, changed the political strategy of the British into an

economic strategy in which the British were in need of both soldiers and labourers.

#### 4. Gorkhas as labourers in Assam

The process of migration and settlement of Nepalis in India, especially in the Northeast region, generally started because of the British Gorkha Army and the economic sectors that developed in Assam during the colonial period. The history of Gorkhas in the Northeast region is closely related to the rise of the Assam Rifles, which was formed in 1835 as the Cachar Levy. The Cachar levy was generally created to protect the economic interests of the British, especially the tea garden in Assam [9]. The number of Gorkhas in the Cachar levy was generally higher than that of the other communities since they were the most loyal and brave community in the British prospectus. The Cachar levy became the Assam frontier police in 1883, Assam military force in 1891, Assam military police in 1913 and finally the Assam Rifles in 1917. The population of Gorkhas by the 20th century was recruited into the British military, and the British encouraged them to settle in the Northeast region of India for military purposes.

Assam became one of the central zones for the British economy during the 19th century when they discovered tea in Assam in 1823, coal in 1825 in Upper Assam near the Disang River, and petroleum in 1867 near Margherita. The

demand of Gorkhas for the protection of economic sectors in Assam kept on increasing, while on the other hand, the British were also in need of labour. According to the British, the local labourers in Assam are lazy and expensive, which made the British look for alternative communities, tribes, tribe or groups during the 19th century [10]. The development of economic sectors in Assam, like tea, coal mines and petroleum, also led to the construction of railway tracks, which were first made in 1881 connecting Dibrugarh to Margherita. The need for labourers kept on increasing in Assam during the 19th century, for which labourers were brought from Nepal, Bihar, Bengal, Odisha and central India [11]. The British generally call coolie to migrant labourers and encouraged them to settle in Assam with minimum wages. The number of labourers soon left Assam due to unsatisfying living conditions and wages provided by the British companies [12]. The demand for the coolies in Assam kept on rising, for which the British had no other options left but to place retired military soldiers with some

newly recruited soldiers. According to the British report of 1923 [13], the British Lieutenant W.F.T.O Connor formally wrote a letter to the Chief Secretary A.W. Botham, for transferring the recruited Gorkha soldiers into the coal mines and railway construction in Assam as coolies. As he writes:

*The Gurkhas are the best soldiers we have in our department, and retired Gurkhas are already ordered to work in tea gardens and crude oil sectors, which they are capable of...The coal mine of the Magherita region is reported to have a scarcity of labourers and coolies as reported by labour associations. The Gurkha soldiers who are serving in the British military can be useful coolies.*

The proposal was made in 1922, which was finally considered by the British in 7<sup>th</sup> March 1923 and accepted by Nepal. The ethnic tribes of Nepal, like Magars, Gurungs and some Khas-Aryan ethno-linguistic groups like Chhetris, who were part of the British Indian Army, were forced to work in the British economic sectors in Assam. The Gorkha soldiers who were once categorised as a martial race were now also serving the British in coal mines and railway construction as a coolie. The Gorkhas lost their privileges as the British soldiers and worked in coal mines of Margherita, Assam, even after being selected as soldiers in the first place. A large number of Gurkhas were transferred from the British military to the coal mine and railway sectors, in which a number of Gurkhas suffered and requested to return to Nepal. The issues in coal mines for Gurkhas were largely due to living conditions and wages, which were not what they were provided in the military. The other non-military Gorkhas or Nepalis were ready to work in coal mines, generally because of working conditions that even affected them physically. The British had no other options but to force the Gorkha soldiers to work in coal mines by providing them with free land and slightly higher wages than the others. The issues in working in coal mines kept on increasing, and a report was given to the Deputy Commission of Lakhimpur on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1923 by the Chief Secretary of Assam [14], which states

*The number of Gurkhas who joined as Coolies on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1923 was as follows:*

Military caste	Numbers of Coolies
Mogar	32
Chhetri	22
Gurungs	12
Others	43

*In which the number of Coolies demanded to return their ancestral land, presently out of 129, only 92 coolies are engaged in Maghareta coal mine.*

The Gorkhas' conditions in the coal mines changed gradually, but the numbers kept on increasing even after many left for Nepal, as by 1938, the number of Gorkha soldiers reached 310 [15]. The British not only forced Gorkha soldiers to work in coal mines, but also many Nepali communities from non-military backgrounds work in different economic sectors in Assam, like tea, petroleum, and railway construction.

## 5. Conclusion

No doubt, the central ideology of martial race theory was to recruit the best soldiers in the name of the martial race. Still, the truth behind the theory remained unclear, as there is no definite answer to why the British developed the theory for military purposes, or was there any other motive hidden behind the theory? As we discussed, the British motive behind the martial race is not certain. Still, the theory is based on racial types, which believes that the physical characteristics are inborn with non-physical characteristics such as courage, servility, loyalty and warrior skills. The Gorkhas, who were considered a martial race, were recruited in large numbers into the British Army during the initial period and rapidly increased after the 1857 Indian rebellions, generally because of martial race theory. The Gorkhas were settled in Northeast India by the colonial power for their own political, military and economic interests were largely from ethnic tribes of Nepal, like Magar, Rai, Gurung, etc. The transformation of Gorkhas from soldiers to labourers during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was purely due to the demand for labourers in coal mines and railway construction work in Margherita of Assam, which changed the foundation of marital race. No doubt the system of placing the retired soldiers in economic sectors was not something new in the colonial age. Still, the Gorkhas in Assam were also recruited to work in economic sectors, not as soldiers but as labourers.

The changing nature of the British regarding the recruitment of Gorkhas also changed the ideology of martial race theory. As we discussed, the martial race theory was based on recruiting the best soldiers in the British army; they were categorised as warriors and fit for the military, but in the case of Gorkhas, they were forced to work as manual labourers. The coolies or labourers in coal mines of Magarita Assam were not satisfied with the living conditions, as working in coal mines is a difficult job for anyone, even the martial races like Gorkhas. The British had no solution for the high-risk physical from suffocation, explosions and mine collapses. There was also a chance for labourers to suffer from CWP, which is also known as Black lungs, leading to lung damage and creating breathing issues. Along with other migrated Nepalis, the Gorkha soldiers and retired soldiers of the British army also settled in Assam as manual labourers, but the number of Gorkhas increased year after year, even after many left due to harsh living and working conditions in coal mines.

The British decided to recruit Gorkhas for the coal mining projects, especially because they were physically strong enough to handle heavy machinery in coal mines. Moreover, they were one of the most loyal communities that ever served in the British military as soldiers and officers. It is also important to understand that the reason behind recruiting the Gorkhas in the British army was not only due to their physical strength or loyalty and bravery, but also because they were cheap, which made them one of the largest communities recruited in the British military. The transformation of Gorkhas from military to working in a coal mine was largely due to the economic interest of the

British, for which they even neglected the traditional doctrine of Martial race

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