

## Regimental Histories and Army Handbooks: A Bibliography of the Gurkha Regiments.

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In the course of research on the Gurkhas I have amassed a large and eclectic bibliography. While the titles it includes have come to seem familiar, as might the horizon to a sailor long at sea, I have discovered in conversation with other students of South Asia that to the world at large it is a rather obscure collection. I offer here a list of regimental histories, army handbooks and other titles of an official nature about the Gurkhas in the hope that it may prove useful to others. For those interested in any aspect of the Indian Army<sup>1</sup> this bibliography will serve to bring to attention a type of literature whose value may not be readily apparent. While not sufficient in themselves for doing research on the Indian military, as a supplement and an initial guide to archival sources these works can be of significant value.

### Regimental Histories

As a standard general work on the Indian Army<sup>2</sup> describes them, regimental histories are

of considerable breadth but uneven quality. They were usually written by some literary-minded officer in his spare time, and are often simple paeans to his colleagues' valor and the regiment's history. A few contain important data.

Most regimental histories do make for rather heavy going, and in most cases they are far from critical of their subjects. The Gurkha regimental histories had to pass the approval of a Regimental History Committee before they were published and so contain little that senior officers were not proud to recall. The authors are indeed often retired officers (occasionally from another regiment), but in fact many have written other historical works. Despite the conditions under which they were produced, and the evident bias of their authors, not just a few, but all, of these histories, contain much information, which is valuable in several ways.

A regimental history follows a fairly standard format. Arranged chronologically, each volume gives most attention to periods of combat and particularly to those engagements considered well-executed or which involve famous members of the regiment. All the same the authors are sufficiently dutiful and punctilious frequently to mention minor events and individuals of low rank who perform actions thought worthy of note. The various appendixes often contain

<sup>1</sup>Reference throughout the text to the 'Indian Army' should be taken to refer to the pre-1947 British-Indian Army.

<sup>2</sup>Stephen P. Cohen *The Indian Army*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971. p. 205.

detailed information that would be difficult and time-consuming to collect elsewhere, such as:

- Changes in name of regiment and additions, deletions of battalions.
- Lists of medal recipients, usually with individual name and rank.
- Lists of men killed in battle, with date, name and rank.
- Lists of Commanding Officers of the regiment, with dates of tenure.

Anyone attempting to trace individual soldiers, even those of low rank, should check the appropriate regimental histories. If one's interest is rather a battle or, say, a shift in military policy, a comparison of accounts in all the relevant volumes<sup>3</sup> may bring to light sources one might not otherwise discover. Most of us have limited time in the archives and these histories are published sources, relatively easily available, which can be consulted beforehand. Just *because* they are anecdotal they can make one aware of the existence of documents such as correspondence between Commanding Officers and Army Headquarters or position papers submitted to the India Office, that may be available in archives. Finally, for a social historian, these histories are in themselves valuable cultural documents. They provide some sense of daily life in a regiment, albeit from the British officers' perspective, and can be useful in the study of representations of native troops, of the (ideal) relationship between native soldiers and their officers, theories of discipline, racial determinism, and so on.

In oral history research, where independent lines of evidence are so important, regimental histories are again valuable. One can compile detailed chronologies of the movements and activities of a regiment which will help one to follow an informant's account and also serve as a cross-check on matters of fact. Stories and accounts from regimental histories can be a rich source of topics for investigation, suggest lines of questioning, and even provide names of individuals one might wish to interview.

## Handbooks of the Indian Army

Handbooks on the ethnic groups recruited by the British were published from the late nineteenth century up until World War II. They were written by and for officers of the various regiments, and were in effect practical ethnographies intended to aid the British in controlling and, it was hoped, gaining the respect and loyalty of their troops. The handbooks cover such topics as religious practices and taboos, dietary prohibitions, caste and social organization, and strengths and weaknesses of temperament. While some are much more accurate than others, all were widely consulted by officers and therefore provide much insight into the working assumptions upon which regimental organization and discipline rested. Since most handbooks went through several revisions, a historian who wishes to track changes in these assumptions will find the comparison of different editions to be a worthwhile undertaking. These books, being in a sense 'internal documents',

<sup>3</sup>If one needs to consult a wide range of regimental histories it would be worthwhile to consult this bibliographical source: R.A. Myers, *Regimental Histories of the Indian Army: A Bibliography*. Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of London, 1957.

provide, moreover, a useful contrast to the more public presentation found in the regimental histories.

A complete set of the Handbooks of the Indian Army is, I believe, available at the Ministry of Defense Library, India, and at the United Services Institution of India Library in New Delhi. A good collection is also to be found at the Ames Library of the University of Minnesota.

## Other Works

There is, of course, a wealth of published material on the Indian Army beyond the official publications mentioned here. I include in this part of the bibliography below only volumes that may alert readers to unusual sources for published material, and the occasional volumes of regimental history which defy neat bibliographical classification. These include abridged and short works, and volumes on war-raised and other special battalions.

For the Gurkha regiments there are several unusual sources of published material. The Brigade of Gurkhas publishes occasional volumes, usually in commemoration of anniversaries and other special occasions. The Gurkha Welfare Trust, established in Britain to provide relief funds to retired Gurkha soldiers, also publishes occasional pamphlets. At the army base in Aldershot, U.K., there is a Gurkha Museum which has published several works, including a bibliography, in very limited editions. The Gurkhas are a special case in that some regiments went to the British Army after Indian independence, but some sources of these types may be available for other regiments as well.

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