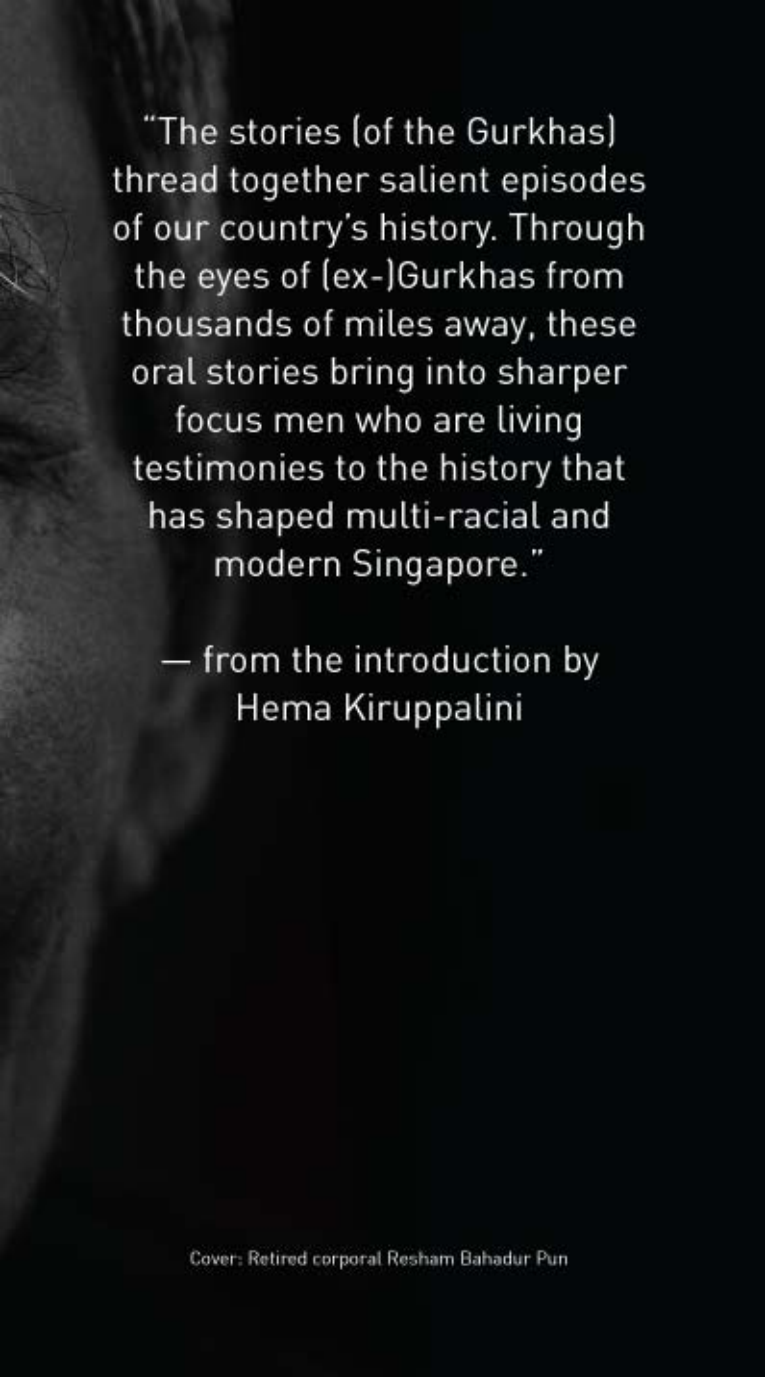




**OUR  
GURKHAS**

SINGAPORE THROUGH THEIR EYES

**ZAKARIA  
ZAINAL**



“The stories (of the Gurkhas) thread together salient episodes of our country’s history. Through the eyes of (ex-)Gurkhas from thousands of miles away, these oral stories bring into sharper focus men who are living testimonies to the history that has shaped multi-racial and modern Singapore.”

— from the introduction by  
Hema Kiruppalini

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For Mak and Bapak



# Introduction

## by Hema Kiruppalini

The Brigade of Gurkhas in Singapore was part of the British Army during the 1950s and 1960s. It was stationed at Slim Barracks near Portsdown Road and in Pulau Blakang Mati—now better known as Sentosa. Around the same period, the Gurkha Contingent was formed in April 1949 as a crucial component of the Singapore Police Force and as an alternative special force to replace the Sikh Contingent. The Gurkhas have made their historical mark not solely in the Singapore Police Force but on physical structures such as an estate and some street names, for example, Nepal Park, Nepal Circus and Kathmandu Road.

In the years preceding and following independence, the Gurkhas played a key role in the internal security of Singapore. Colonial imaginations that categorise the Gurkhas as a “martial race” continue to define these legendary fighters who hail from Nepal. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Gurkha Contingent was deployed during some of Singapore’s most tumultuous historical episodes, when racial tensions and frequent demonstrations prevailed, such as the 1950 Maria Hertogh riots, the 1955 Hock Lee Bus riots, the 1956 Chinese Middle School riots and the racial riots of 1964. In 1978, Changi Prison and Moon Crescent Centre were being guarded by an elite Gurkha unit, known as the Prison Guard Unit, and this was the first time that any country had enlisted Gurkhas as prison wardens. According to Singapore’s Ministry of Home Affairs, the Gurkhas’ principle roles are to act

as a specialist guard force at key installations and to serve as a supporting force in police operations.

Gurkhas are usually around eighteen to nineteen years old when they enlist in the Singapore Police Force. They are about forty-five years of age when they are repatriated. The training and selection process prior to enlistment lasts for a year or even longer in some cases. In view of the economic hardships in Nepal, many families see enlistment into the British Army or Singapore Police Force as equivalent to securing a place in Oxford University. The Gurkhas serve in Singapore for approximately twenty to twenty-five years, after which they are repatriated to Nepal together with their families.

In Singapore, Gurkha families reside in Mount Vernon Camp on Upper Aljunied Road. The Mount Vernon Camp that spans approximately nineteen hectares is a self-contained area that includes various facilities to make Gurkha families feel at home. At present, it has been estimated that there are about two thousand Gurkhas and together with their families, there are approximately five to six thousand members of this community. During their service, Gurkhas are each given a four-digit numerical identity and are categorised by number rather than by name. More astounding is their ability to remember the numerical identities of all their other Gurkha colleagues. Their crystal clear recollection of Singapore’s political history,

key personalities, landmarks and local cuisine speak volumes of their connectedness to the Lion City that has critically shaped their sense of being.

The interior and exterior of Mount Vernon Camp has been designed to project a Nepal-type landscape and during their sojourn, most Gurkha families expressed feelings of living in an “advanced Nepal” with all the modern facilities of a developed country. Ordinarily, Singaporeans are not permitted to enter the camp and photography of the premise is strictly prohibited. On occasion, I would be politely (sometimes sternly) told by a Gurkha at the entrance of the camp: “Sorry, but you are a Singaporean; outsiders are not allowed.” However, in Nepal, during the course of my research, I was warmly welcomed by them in their homes. In fact, I received special treatment simply because, as most of them would nostalgically tell me, “You are from Singapore, and we were there once.”

Repatriation to Nepal is perceived in different ways by Gurkha families, who are largely nostalgic about permanently leaving a country they have come to regard as home. While some Gurkhas seek re-employment in security related services abroad for a second career, others view repatriation as a means to return to Nepal and contribute towards the development of their birthplace. Conversations with retired Gurkhas illuminate Singapore’s history of racial riots and other troubled periods,

and provide exclusive insights into then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. In the same breath, they share concerns about their wives’ and children’s futures.

Valued for their loyalty, dedication, discipline and most importantly, impartiality, the Singapore Gurkhas have rendered invaluable service for the last sixty-three years. Batches of Gurkha sojourners have left their mark on Singapore, and the stories they share thread together salient episodes of our country’s history. Through the eyes of the Gurkhas from thousands of miles away, these oral stories bring into sharper focus men who are living testimonies to the history that has shaped multi-racial and modern Singapore. However, these Gurkhas have truly become distant voices. Their lives, times and recollections exist far beyond Singapore, in the remote realms of Nepal.

*Hema Kiruppalini, a research associate at the Institute of South Asian Studies in the National University of Singapore, specialises in the study of the Nepalese diaspora in Singapore.*



# OUR GURKHAS

SINGAPORE THROUGH THEIR EYES

Retired staff sergeant Chandra Bahadur Thapa





“We speak  
in Malay  
to practise  
among  
ourselves.”

I do not speak English. But I can still speak a little Malay. Even after leaving Singapore for 40 years, we Gurkhas can still remember Malay, the language we learnt when we were serving in the Singapore Gurkha Contingent. Sometimes, here in Nepal, we speak in Malay to practice among ourselves. Since the 1950s, Bazaar Malay was the common language used and that was how we communicated. I think, now, English is more common.

*Nar Bahadur Gurung (4518) holds up a framed photograph of himself, taken when he first arrived in Singapore in 1953. The 74-year-old retired corporal served from 1953 till 1973.*



“We  
are an  
impartial  
force.”

The role of the Singapore Gurkhas is simple. We are an impartial force in multi-racial Singapore. Why do we need Gurkhas in Singapore? This simple analogy may just explain it. Your family dog would only bark at an outside intruder but not at a thief from within your home. But bring a dog from the outside into your home, and it barks at all wrongdoers.

*Chandra Bahadur Gurung (4646) holds up a photograph of himself in uniform. The 70-year-old retired staff sergeant served from 1961 till 1988.*



7

“All of us  
wanted  
durians.”

This special fruit. I have forgotten its name. It has a thorny outer shell but inside it is creamy and sweet. Now I remember: durians. During our training sessions at Pulau Tekong, we would search high and low for this special fruit—especially when it was in season. All of us wanted durians. Using our kukris, we would break open the durians’ tough outer shell and enjoy them on the spot. You know, you can only find them in Southeast Asia. You cannot find them here in Nepal.

*Buddhi Babadur Gurung (4865) holds up a framed photograph of himself in the trademark Gurkha uniform, taken in 1994. The 63-year-old retired police constable served from 1973 till 1994.*

## “I came across an old man.”

When the Gurkhas trained on Pulau Tekong, I remember taking leisurely drives along the Tekong highway. Once, I came across an old man, in his eighties I think, at Camp Two which was located at the eastern part of the island. Carrying a cangkul and wearing a bamboo hat, I wondered what this man was doing so late at night. It was 21:45 on my watch. He asked: “How far is Camp One from here?” It is quite a distance, I replied. And the old man said thank you and simply walked away. I shared what happened with my friends the following morning. They were surprised and earnestly told me that there was no civilian life on Pulau Tekong at night—especially someone in his eighties, with a cangkul and bamboo hat. Till today, that old man’s face is something I will never forget.

*Shree Babadur Thapa (9143) holds up a photograph of himself in uniform. The 54-year-old retired police constable served from 1978 till 1994.*



## “Two cable cars plunged into the sea.”

It was an ordinary Saturday, like any other day and I was off duty. Together with my wife, we wanted to take the cable car back to Mount Faber from the offshore touristy island of Sentosa. It was her first time visiting since we had just gotten married. Little did we know that we were one cabin away from the cable car incident of 1983. Tragedy struck when two cable cars plunged into the sea, killing seven people, after the cableway was struck by the derrick of an oil-drilling vessel. Thirteen people were left trapped in four other cable cars between Mount Faber and Sentosa. We were told to wait for the next one and then we saw the cable cars plunge. Only later did I realise, during that fateful day, that my wife was expecting our first child. This close shave still leaves me reeling till today.

*Dal Babadur Tamang (4941) holds up a photograph of himself in uniform. The 55-year-old retired police constable served from 1975 till 2000.*



## Author's Note

We were lost. In the thick jungle of Pulau Tekong, myself and two other trainees were unable to find the next checkpoint for our navigational exercise. Trudging on aimlessly, we came across a fit and stout young man with Mongoloid facial features. His uniform was different from ours. That could only mean one thing: a Gurkha.

We asked for help. Not a word was said. He looked at our maps, and without hesitation pointed us in the right direction. This encounter marked the start of my fascination with the Singapore Gurkha community, a community that has been serving Singapore for over sixty years. Established in 1949, the Singapore Gurkha Contingent is known as an elite force guarding important locations and ministers. These men from Nepal are famed for their bravery, loyalty and impartiality—as observed and retold through Singapore's history during the turbulent 1950s and 1960s. And, the legacy of the Gurkhas goes beyond the independence of Singapore to the present day.

But what about their stories? What do they remember of Singapore—the place they have spent, on average, close to thirty years living and working in, and defending? Their stories are stories that belong to Singapore too.

In Nepal, I tracked down, interacted with and photographed these Gurkhas with the help of the Singapore Gurkhas Pensioners' Association (SGPA). In making these portraits, I placed great importance on these silent sentinels and their place

as a community in Singapore. This anthology serves to bring awareness and uncover historical anecdotes of Singapore through the eyes of the Gurkhas. It should also serve as an important visual archive of a visibly invisible community.

Currently, there are over two thousand retired Singapore Gurkhas scattered around Nepal, while the younger generation of Gurkhas has migrated to countries like the United States, Hong Kong and Canada. Meeting and spending time with these Gurkhas in Nepal, I felt as if I was still in Singapore. The statue of the merlion in their living rooms is hard to miss. Sometimes they keep an additional statue or two. Just being kiasu, they say. Retirement plaques with the emblem of the Singapore Police Force are also proudly displayed.

Every Gurkha I met was a skilled storyteller. Each of them had tales about Singapore that they were eager to share, and I listened. These stories cannot be found in history books—they have to be experienced in the oral tradition. The anecdotes in this book have been rewritten in the first person, based on my long conversations with the Gurkhas. This is what I believe the Gurkhas would say to Singaporeans—young and old, of different religions and races.

**Zakaria Zainal**

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Most importantly, I am grateful for the support of my family, especially Mum and Dad who, in their quiet ways, always believed.



Zakaria Zainal has worked as a reporter and photojournalist in Nepal, Bangladesh and Singapore. He is a photographer who makes meaning of the world through his pictures, and has travelled widely and documented many parts of Asia. From observing a former monarchy's transition to a federal republic in Nepal to witnessing the plight of internally displaced persons in Pakistan's military offensive against the Taliban, Zakaria was there to document events as they unfolded before his eyes.

He is currently focusing on documentary projects showing the changing face of Asia in conflict or in progress. His photographs and stories have appeared in various publications both in Singapore and Asia.

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Gurkhas. The word evokes images of an elite force dedicated to protect and serve.

Loyal and impartial, these men from Nepal have undergirded the security of Singapore through turbulent times—like the Indonesian Confrontation, Hock Lee Bus Riots and Maria Hertogh Riots—as well as stood guard at historic events, like the first General Election of Singapore in 1959.

Through this poignant anthology of portraits and anecdotes, experience first-hand accounts of key milestones in Singapore's history, and marvel at the contribution of the silent sentinels who have dedicated their lives to this nation.

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