Storytelling in Prison: Oral Performance of a Gurkha Prisoner of World War I

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Abstract
Among the non-European military forces that fought on the European continent during World War I, the Gurkhas from Nepal emerged from the conflict having achieved wide renown for their bravery. In fact, it was not only on the battlefield where they demonstrated all their powers of endurance. A considerable number of Gurkhas were captured by the Germans while fighting for the British and were made prisoners of war. Though many of them succumbed to the harsh living conditions in foreign climes, some of them managed to leave behind memorials of their lives and their country in the form of voice recordings for German scholars who had a keen interest in collecting source material for their research into foreign cultures and languages. This paper briefly reviews the results of these scholarly activities regarding one Gurkha prisoner of war, Ait Singh Gurung, who was sent to Halbmondlager (Half Moon Camp). He never returned home but bequeathed to posterity a story and a poem that he recorded for the Germans. After a review of what we know about his life history, the two texts are examined to see what they reveal about Ait Singh’s personal experience and the history of Nepali literature and its print culture.

Keywords: Gurkha, life-writing, Nepal, POWs, World War I
Introduction

During World War I many Gurkhas found themselves venturing overseas for the first time in their lives and most of them were the first members of their families to do so. Gurkhas of six Gurkha Battalions, among twenty-four thousand men from South Asia, docked in the port of Marseilles in France between September and October 1914 to help sustain the British war effort (Merewether and Smith 1918: Foreword). The first units of Indian soldiers, including Sikhs, Jats, Dogras, Rajputs, Pathans, Gahrwalis, Mahrattas, Gurkhas and Punjabi Moslems, etc., left India to be mobilised and deployed in France and Belgium. ‘The winter of 1914 in northern France and Belgium was severe, with frequent snowstorms and a biting wind. The Gurkhas felt the cold intensely; it was damp, not the dry cold to which they were accustomed. Frostbite was a major problem among troops of all nations’ (Farwell 1984: 89–90). However, the Gurkhas performed well despite the strange climate and the fearful casualties in their battalion. ‘In spite of the Indian Corps’ good record in France, military historians have doubted the wisdom of sending it. [...] It was a mistake. Indian troops were to perform better on the hot sands of Mesopotamia than in the wet cold of France. [...] The plan to send two divisions of the Indian Army to France was ill conceived; the decision to withdraw them for use elsewhere was wise’ (Farwell 1984: 94–95). Indeed, after thirteen months of service and 21,000 casualties in France, Indian soldiers were transferred by the British to Mesopotamia.

In the first year of the war, after Britain’s declaration of war on Germany on 4 August 1914, most of the Gurkha Rifles regiments that

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1 King of Gorkha, Prithvi Narayan Shah, laid the foundations of today’s Nepal in the eighteenth century, hence the unit of troops he created was called the Gurkhas. They waged war (Anglo-Nepal war) with the British during the period 1814 –1816, which then resulted in the recruitment of Gurkhas in the East India Company’s Army (Smith 2007 and Corrigan 2015).

2 The total number of South Asian soldiers and labourers who were shipped across oceans between August 1914 and October 1918 amounted to more than 940,000 (Ahuja 2011: 4). Of these, some 200,000 Gurkha soldiers are reported to have served in the British Indian Army (Caplan 1995: 22), with one in ten never returning home from the battlefield (Bolt 1975: 66).

3 1st Battalion 1st Gurkha Rifles, 1st Battalion 4th Gurkha Rifles, 1st Battalion 9th Gurkha Rifles, 2nd Battalion 2nd Gurkha Rifles, 2nd Battalion 3rd Gurkha Rifles and 2nd Battalion 8th Gurkha Rifles.
arrived in Marseilles were transported to the front and fought, among other battlefields, either at Neuve Chapelle or Givenchy in northern France or at Ypres in Flanders, Belgium. Besides the high number of casualties, nine million POWs were taken during WWI by the two sides combined. Two and a half million soldiers fighting in British ranks were captured on the battlefield and imprisoned in Germany (Roy 2011: 53). South Asian soldiers captured by Germany on the Western Front were first taken to camps in Germany: as of early 1915 Indian POWs were kept at Halbmondlager (Half Moon Camp) in Wünsdorf (Liebau 2014). Having been classed as Indian soldiers, most Gurkha POWs were also held at Halbmondlager.

Gurkha POWs are often grouped together with Indian soldiers in studies. Yet, in spite of the fact that Gurkhas were recruited in India and fought under the British India Army, they constituted a distinct military entity. Regimental history records show that a total of eight regiments out of ten fought on European battlefields. We are therefore justified in attempting to explore the experiences of Gurkha POWs as a subject in its own right. In this article I focus on an individual soldier, Ait Singh Gurung, a Gurkha soldier who never returned home from Europe but died at Halbmondlager in Wünsdorf on 15 March 1917 before his fellow fighters sailed back to their homeland (see Fig. 1).

This article approaches the life of Ait Sing Gurung from a different angle than the one commonly used in life-history research. The latter, which has strong roots in sociology, is also widely pursued in other disciplines. Unlike the common practice of using first-person narratives, personal interviews, and other material containing information about the subject in question, this article presents a biographical account of Ait Singh Gurung based mainly on the voice recordings he made at the prisoner-of-war camp in Germany in 1916. Although the recordings do not provide any concrete information about him, his comrades or the socio-political spaces they inhabited, there are nevertheless many scattered, though limited, details that bear on both him and his Gurung-Gurkha5 comrades. However, to start with, we should ponder

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4 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10 GRs.
5 I use this expression to refer to Gurkhas who crossed the sea to fight in WWI as members of the Gurung ethnic group originally from western Nepal (all of whom bear the family name Gurung).
the question of whether he exercised full freedom of agency in the production of the recordings. Or was he merely reciting what German scholars asked or ordered him to? If he was able to choose, why did he choose that particular story and poem rather than something else? What does the content of the story and poem tell us, not only from a linguistic perspective but also as historical, sociological and literary source material? Were the story and poem his own creations or had he memorised works by other authors? Does the recited text contain any link to the corpus of Nepali literature?

The transcription and translation of his text was done entirely by the author and is provided in the appendices. Conducting an analysis while reading between the lines of Ait Singh Gurung’s texts and studying the available historical material on him and his comrades are other possible approaches to this article. Several studies have already been conducted on a song by a Gurkha POW of WWI, Jas Bahadur Rai, and on a few letters and other documents from Gurkha soldiers in WWI (Chudal 2020, Das 2015, Hilden 2015, Lange 2015, Onta 2016). This article presents a new text produced by a Gurkha POW and its analysis. Before turning to Ait Singh and his texts, it is worthwhile taking stock of what we know about POWs and Halbmondlager, along with the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission which recorded his voice in the camp.

**Halbmondlager and the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission**

Weinberglager (Vineyard Camp) in Zossen and Halbmondlager in Wünsdorf were Sonderlager (special camps) set up for propaganda purposes and especially designed for soldiers from the Entente powers’ colonies in Africa and Asia. In contrast to other POW camps, prisoners of these two camps were to be treated in accordance with their religious practices and were simultaneously politically indoctrinated as part of a secret German military strategy to persuade them to turn against their colonial masters (Liebau 2011). Halbmondlager, a so-called Inderlager (Indian camp), was built about 40 kilometres from Berlin to keep South Asian prisoners separate from French colonial

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6 This section is a slightly revised version of a similar section in Chudal 2020.
soldiers from North Africa and from Russian POWs. Although life was very hard in these camps and the mortality rate was high, prisoners usually enjoyed better conditions and better treatment than in normal POW camps (Lange 2011). The men were from various ethnic, social and religious backgrounds, including from Gurkha regiments. As this was a propaganda camp, built partly for show, a greater number of cultural and physical activities were provided than in the other camps, along with facilities for religious worship (Liebau 2011). However, all these activities were restricted by the limited space in the camp. Today, there is nothing left of the site. A visit to Zossen-Wünsdorf in November 2016 revealed no sign of the war. However, a few kilometres away in Zehrensdorf, an Indian cemetery for WW1 POWs still exists and is well tended, having been restored by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.7

Halbmondlager comprised 50 barracks and associated outbuildings for 4,000 prisoners who were housed according to their religion and nationality. Each barrack provided accommodation for 80 inmates, with a prisoner being attributed approximately 103 m². Sanitary facilities in the camp were also generously apportioned (Gussone 2016: 181-183). However, the weather was in no way kind to the South Asian soldiers and this was one factor that contributed to the comparatively high mortality rate among South Asian POWs. The cold, harsh winter climate often led to fatal cases of tuberculosis (Lüders n.d.: 12). The cemetery in Zehrensdorf, contains 85 headstones of Gurkha soldiers from seven Gurkha regiments,8 and four from the Burma Military Police. POWs were kept there until 1918. Towards the end of the war, before British forces could free the survivors, POWs, the Gurkhas included, were transferred to the Indian camp at Morile-Marculesti in southern Romania where the climate and living conditions were more salubrious and similar to what they were used to (Höpp 1997: 44–45, Adam 1936: 534).

The Royal Prussian Phonetic Commission was set up in October 1915 to record the numerous languages, dialects and music of soldiers and civilians imprisoned in Germany’s international POW camps. The

7 Details may be found at: https://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/34721/ZEHRENSDORF%20INDIAN%20CEMETERY
8 Gurkha Regiments 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 10.
commission of German researchers set out to compile a sound archive of all the languages in the world (Doegen 1925: 10). Indeed, the camps filled with prisoners of war were a Mecca for the commission, providing access to soldiers from around the globe.

The commission comprised thirty academics from different fields of research, including anthropology, linguistics, musicology (Mahrenholz 2011: 190). The commission's broad objective was to make systematic recordings of languages, music, phonetic sounds and stories representative of the prisoners' countries of origin and to store them in a comprehensive sound archive. To complement the phonographic corpus, members of the commission sought to produce a transcript of the recordings in the native script, a reproduction in phonetic notation and a translation into German, together with a standardised Personal-Bogen (personal file) containing personal data of the recorded prisoners and metadata about time, location and type of recording. Today the recordings have been digitised and, together with all the existing files, are part of Berlin's Humboldt University Sound Archive.

Heinrich Lüders (1869-1943) was in charge of recording Indian languages of South Asian prisoners, including those of the Gurkhas. For this purpose he visited Halbmondlager and the Indian camp in Morile-Marculesti, southern Romania in 1918 after POWs had been transferred there in early 1917 (Hilden 2015: 8). Lüders was a German orientalist and Indologist, and had learnt South Asian languages such as Sanskrit, Bengali and Pashto. During the period of the recordings, 1915-16, he was professor of Indian philology at Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin and a member of the Prussian Academy of Sciences (Lange 2011: 157). Lüders’ essay Die Gurkhas (Lüders 1925) and his archive housed at Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities) show that he was very much engaged with the Gurkhas. He writes in his essay that when he and Wilhelm Schulze visited the camp to research the Gurkha (Nepali) language, the brave Gurkhas provided information with great enthusiasm. They were proud, Lüders writes, to know that German scholars attached such importance to their language (Lüders 1925: 135).

After this brief introduction to the commission and its activity, we turn now to Ait Singh Gurung, one of the Gurkha POWs imprisoned in
Halbmondlager who told a story and recited a poem for the German scholars. Before delving into his recording, let us first review what we know about the man himself. The personal information sheet that was produced for him before his recording contains very scant details. This is the main primary evidence we have concerning him; the rest has to be provided by seeking links to wider historical evidence.

**Ait Singh Gurung: a Gurkha Prisoner of WWI**

The British had long observed different types of Indian peoples, but after the Indian Mutiny they began to class Indians into superior and inferior groups. Victorian anthropologists helped legitimise the division of India into martial and non-marital races based on climate theories, physical qualities and behavioural characteristics. When the government conducted an official inquiry after the outbreak of the Sepoy Rebellion in 1857 into the cause of the mutiny, martial races became a concern. The report concluded that the mutiny had started with high-caste Brahmans, who at the time dominated the Bengal Army, and that the British had been unaware of the true martial attribute that various Indian ethnic groups possessed. This simple explanation appealed to British administrators at the time. After all, Gurkhas, Sikhs, Marathas and Rajputs, who were once the most formidable enemies of the British, had remained loyal and accepted British supremacy. For the British, this group understood the meaning of honour and duty, and were therefore India’s truly martial people (Barua 1995).

It was the Gurkha units’ conspicuous loyalty and competence during the Indian Mutiny that brought to the attention of the British the fact that Gurkhas were something special. The British appreciated their capacity to endure fatigue, their lack of any pretension to caste, their huge muscles and great strength despite their being of short stature. Thus, the number of Gurkha regiments with Gurkha components increased. Moreover, Magars and Gurungs were at first the ethnic groups most sought after by Gurkha regiments (Baura 1995, Hodgson 1972, Caplan 1995). Two decades before WWI, Vansittart (1894) mentions four major fighting elements in the Gurkha army, namely Khas, Magars, Gurungs and Thakurs. He then states that ‘Magars and Gurungs are by common consent recognised as the beau ideal of what a Gurkhā soldier should be’ (Vansittart 1915: 74) and goes on to remark
that they are scattered from the Kali River in the west to the Mechi River in the east of Nepal (ibid.: 75). Thus, it is clear that Gurungs were among the most sought-after recruits for Gurkha regiments. And, as the Nepali scholar Dor Bahadur Bista notes, there was an economic dimension to their zeal (Bista 1967: 71): ‘The most important source of Gurung family income is from the pensions and salaries of those who become soldiers. A great majority of Gurungs join the Indian and the British armies [...]’.

One can therefore say that Magars and Gurungs were considered to be some of the best martial races among the Gurkhas and during the period under consideration they undoubtedly formed the majority in Gurkha regiments (Morris 1936: 184). Furthermore, Lüders (1925: 136) mentions that both Magar and Gurung POWs were present in greater numbers than other groups in the camp. Lüders himself had started learning the Gurung language with the help of Gurung POWs.9

A list of approximately 300 Gurkha POWs in Halbmondclager indicates that 98 Gurung-Gurkha POWs were captured by the Germans, including 72 POWs from the 1st Battalion of the 4th Gurkha Regiment (to which Ait Singh Gurung belonged).10 Eleven of them made recordings for the Royal Prussian Phonetic Commission, four of them in their mother tongue. Altogether, 25 Gurung POWs died in the camp during their imprisonment and were buried at Zehrensdorf Indian Cemetery nearby.11

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Ait Singh Gurung, the main subject of this article, came from Tahsil

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9 I found evidence of this in the archive in which he left notes and a self-compiled vocabulary of Gurung words with their English translation. NL Lüders, Nr. 9, Nr. 10 and Nr. 11.
10 IOR MSS Eur F120/272 Indian Soldiers’ Fund, 15 October 1918.
11 This was determined during a visit to Zehrensdorf Indian Cemetery in November 2016.
No. 2 West, Gurkha district. Lamjung and Gurkha districts were two districts in No. 2 West (Vansittart 1987: 192). The personal file associated with the records of the Sound Archive and Lüders collection at the Archive of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Berlin corroborate other biographical information about Ait Singh and provides valuable additional details. From the very limited information available on him in the POW camp records, we learn that he belonged to a Gurung family in No. 2 West Nepal. He was recruited by the 4th Gurkha Rifles (henceforth 4GR) in India. The commission collected these details from each POW before the voice recordings were made. Besides general biographical information, the commission recorded some additional facts, such as: interest in making the recording, ability to read and write, secondary languages and mastery of a musical instrument. In the data collected prior to the voice recordings, Ait Singh’s age is given as 33, whereas his age in the personal file filled out on the day of the recording states that he was 35. Although the date of the earlier data collection is not mentioned, if accurate, this would suggest that Ait Singh lived a little over one and a half years in the camp before the recording was made, in which case he may well have been captured by the Germans at the end of 1914.

Both records mention Ait Singh’s birthplace as Bhudasing and the data collected during the voice recording mentions Gorkha as his home district. On the current political map of Nepal, Bhudasing is part of Tarakeshbor rural municipality in what was formerly called West No. 1 in present-day Nuwakot district in central Nepal’s Bagmati Zone. In the data collected earlier, it is indeed stated that Nuwakot is the name of the largest town near Ait Singh’s birthplace. He gives Gurkhali as his mother tongue, claims to speak Gurung and a little Hindustani and to be proficient in reading and writing the Devanagari script. He practised the Hindu religion and his profession was farmer. The data collected before the recording included a remark that his voice was

12 ‘The highlands or mountainous country [...] between the first range of hills on the south and the Tibetan frontier on the north, is divided into 21 Tehsils’ (Vansittart 1987: 186).
13 The German documents register the name of the district and language as Gurkha. Otherwise, it is spelt Gorkha.
14 Archive of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities: Heinrich Lüders Collection, Nr. 1 Bd. 4, page 58.
strong and that he could sing a local song very well. However, the reason for his wanting to record his voice is indicated in the earlier file as unknown.\textsuperscript{15} He did not play a musical instrument. Having been asked to state where he lived between the ages of seven and 20, Ait Singh Gurung answered – in this file and thereafter – Bakloh, a hill station in Chamba district in the state of Himachal Pradesh, India. Furthermore, he never went to school or received any formal education but could read and write Devanagari script, suggesting that he learnt these skills either on his own or in the regiment during training.

One conclusion that we can draw is that, since he was 35 years old at the time of the recording, in May 1916, Ait Singh must have been born around 1880. Furthermore, the Commonwealth War Grave Commission (CWGC) files inform us that his father was Goria Gurung from West No. 2 Nepal. One can then fairly confidently assert that Ait Singh was born in Bhudasing, in West No. 1 Nepal, later resided in West No. 2 and at some point was recruited as a Gurkha soldier into 4GR and stationed in Bakloh.

Before India’s independence, each Gurkha regiment was stationed at a permanent cantonment in the Himalayan hills or foothills, although the regiment's battalions would frequently be absent from their base during exercises or when on active service (Caplan 1995: 22). The 4GR was headquartered at Bakloh (ibid.: 27) for 82 years, from 1866 to 1948. The record identifies a period of time during which Ait Singh lived in Bakloh but it does not give a clear indication of the year in which he was recruited. We can merely surmise that he was in his teens, which would mean sometime in the 1890s. It is likely that he went home at least twice after that, since six months’ leave was granted every three years (Parker 2005: 83).

Ait Singh Gurung served as rifleman in his regiment and bore the service number 4351. The dates of his journey to Europe and his imprisonment are not available. However, based on information supplied by Lüders about POWs being brought to Halbmondlager during the first year of the war, we can assume that Ait Singh Gurung reached Europe with the first group of soldiers having entered France via Marseilles, was captured in battle during the first year of the war,

\textsuperscript{15} NL Lüders, Nr. 1 Bd. 4, page 58.
transported to Germany and imprisoned in the camp in Wünsdorf. There is no information as to where, when and under what circumstances he was taken prisoner. According to the literature, only the 1st Battalion of the 4GR fought in WWI in Europe: Ait Singh therefore belonged to that battalion. The 1st Battalion of the 4th Gurkhas (henceforth 1/4 GR), under the Lahore Division, Sirhind Brigade, embarked at Karachi on 24 August 1914 for Europe. The Sirhind Brigade was detained in Egypt to reinforce the garrison there and only reached Marseilles on 30 November 1914 (Willcocks 1920: 19–20). We may therefore assume that as Ait Singh was part of 1/4 GR, he arrived in Europe on that day.

As for many other South Asian men, Ait Singh’s journey to Europe did not come with a return ticket to his family and friends. Not much information is available about his family or marital status. Despite all the memories of his homeland, his desire to return home remained unfulfilled and he died on 15 March 1917 at the age of 36. His remains are buried in the Indian Cemetery at Zehrensdorf with 24 other Gurung soldiers. The cause of his death is not known but like Lüders concerning similar cases, we may conjecture that, as Germany was slowly recovering from the peak of winter, he died of tuberculosis.

![Headstone in the cemetery in Zehrensdorf. 5 November 2016. Photo by Alaka Chudal](image)
Ait Singh recorded a story and a poem in the afternoon of 29 May 1916 between 12:45:00 and 05:01:35 in the Ehrenbaracke (honour barracks) of Halbmondlager. The recording required four phonograph cylinders, labelled with the call numbers PK 246, PK 250, PK 251 and PK 252/3. The first three cylinders contain some episodes of a story. Recording PK 252/3 consists of a poem. The personal file states that the second part of the story is recorded on cylinder PK 247, but this is not in the archive. PK 251 is identified as the concluding part of the story. With the poem, the archive therefore contains 7:07 minutes of Ait Singh’s voice recording.

The Story

The story Ait Singh recorded is the first of India’s famous vampire riddle-tales known as the Vetāla-pañcaviṃśati (‘The Twenty-Five Tales of an Animated Corpse’). Why did Ait Singh record this particular story as opposed to something else? To answer this question we first study the transformation of these vampire riddle-tales from the original Sanskrit into Indian vernacular versions and eventually into European languages.

The four main Sanskrit versions of these stories, which are thought to have been rooted in oral tradition, are likely to have been composed in the early- to mid-second millennium (Sathaye 2017: 3). The version by Shivadasa from Gujarat c. 1200 became the most popular version and was translated into a number of vernaculars. Surati Mishra translated Shivadasa’s Sanskrit version into Braj Bhasha prose under the title Baitāl Pacīṣī in c. 1700. This was translated into Hindi (1805) under the same title by Lallu Ji Lal assisted by Mazahar Ali Khan Wila for use in language courses for East India Company staff officers at Fort William College, Calcutta. It was later simplified by Tarini Charan Mitra. Duncan Forbes published another revised and simplified version of it in Hindustani (bearing more Persian or Urdu influences) in 1861 (Forbes 1861: v-vi). Meanwhile, English and German translations were also already being published in the nineteenth century in Europe before Ait Singh arrived and recorded his version of one of its stories in Germany. Early versions

16 For the full transcription and translation, see Appendix 1, Sections 1-3.
17 Literary language of north-central India until the nineteenth century.
published in Europe include John Platts’ English translation in 1871 (based on Forbes 1861) and an 1881 German commentary on Shivadasa’s version by Heinrich Uhle. A printed Nepali version was available on the Indian market, but it is difficult to trace the date of its first publication. In 1916 Sir George Abraham Grierson included the introductory chapter – the frame story – from a printed book as a text example of Khas-kura (or ‘Naipali’) (Grierson 1916: 69–74).

The above details all bear witness to these 25 stories being popular during the period in question. This compilation was one of the set texts in the entrance examination for candidates entering the East India Company’s military service (Barker and Backhouse 1855: vi).

In the light of the foregoing, we can assume that Baitāl Pacīsī was standard reading material among British staff officers for learning the language of their recruits. Indeed, the publication of Nepali books in India, and in Varanasi in particular, had as one of its major target readerships the Gurkha Rifles headquarters. However, it is difficult to know whether Ait Singh himself ever read the Nepali version or not. One might argue that he heard the stories being recounted in his village. It is more likely, however, that he first learnt to read and write in his regiment. We may speculate that it was there that Ait Singh had the best opportunity to read the stories or to have them read to him from a Nepali or Hindi book of the type sold or available at the regimental headquarters. The story Ait Singh recites is much shorter than the Hindi version published during that period but more elaborate than the printed Nepali version. Moreover, the printed Nepali version is in verse, whereas Ait Singh’s version is in prose and in a colloquial form of Nepali to boot.

Ait Singh’s Transmission of the Story

We have already mentioned that the story Ait Singh recited is the first of the 25 famous vampire riddle-tales. In contrast to traditional versions that are about a Varanasi prince and his best friend, a minister’s son, Ait Singh’s version features a king and his minister.

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18 There is good reason to assume that he knew a Nepali version: in the version he recorded he introduces the main female character as being from Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh, whereas in the Hindi and Sanskrit versions she is from Karnataka. The published Nepali versions have the form Karṇapura, from which Kanpur derives.
Except for Princess Padmāvatī, he does not use the names of the other characters in the original story. He names Padmavati’s mother Dantavati and her father King of Kanpur (a city in north India).19 His version does, however, recount the main elements of the story, namely what happens when the king falls in love with Princess Padmāvatī during an encounter with her while away from his palace. No words are exchanged at that time, but the princess conveys information about herself through mysterious gestures before leaving. The king finds her with the help of his minister, accuses her of being a witch and proves this to her father who expels her, therefore making it possible for the king to marry her. Nevertheless, a number of conspicuous new elements have been introduced into Ait Singh’s version. The first one concerns a fair that takes place on somvare aũsī,20 which sets the scene for the meeting between Padmāvatī and the king. In standard versions, the prince goes hunting and comes across the princess in the jungle. Ait Singh recreates the traditional acts of worship Padmāvatī engages in according to Hindu tradition. She offers a flower to the Sun in the sky and one to Mother Earth before communicating with the king by means of signals. In the original versions, Padmāvatī does not worship before gesturing to the prince. What is striking is that the prince in the original story has become a king, whom Ait Singh portrays in a much less flattering light than the prince. As a prisoner of war and victim of the political intrigue of kings, Ait Singh may have used the recording to make a veiled statement of his own. For example, the king suspects that his lovesickness is due to his own minister’s sorcery aimed at killing him and taking over the kingdom. On the other hand, Ait Singh’s version shows much more prudery than the original story. The one-month secret romance between the prince and Padmāvatī at the palace becomes ‘rājā rānī bhai rahe’ (they live as king and queen), therefore leaving out all the erotic scenes in the Sanskrit and Hindi

19 See footnote 18.
20 Somvare aũsī is a new-moon day that falls on Monday. Such a convergence is considered very auspicious in Hindu religious texts. Taking a bath at riverbanks without uttering a word on that day is believed to earn a person great merit. The same is true for performing rituals for deceased ancestors, worshipping Vishnu and making one hundred circumambulations of a peepul tree. On this day many places along riverbanks that serve as ghāts for pilgrims, like the one mentioned in the story, are locations for fairs (melā).
versions. For instance, there is no mention of the princess requesting that the prince remain sexually continent for three nights during her menstruation. In earlier versions, after Padmāvatī’s father learns the truth about his daughter and secretly banishes her, Ait Singh has all the women of the city examined before Padmāvatī is, for a telltale mark of a witch on their bodies. Once Padmāvatī has been shown for who she is, she is expelled publicly, seated on an elephant and made to go round the city three times. Ait Singh gives the story a happy ending by uniting the two lovers, with intimations of a long married life. There is no vestige of the sad outcome in earlier versions for Padmāvatī’s parents, who die of grief at having had to abandon their daughter. The ending of Ait Singh’s story may bespeak a positive attitude towards his own life and future. Perhaps he knew someone back in Nepal whom he was looking forward to meeting again.

Documents in the Sound Archive and Lüders’ own archive in Berlin reveal that the recorded texts were first written by the reciter and then transcribed and translated. Once the manuscript was approved by Lüders’ committee, the recording could go ahead. Lüders’ archive itself contains some texts of the recordings: they are written in Devanagari, transcribed into Roman script and translated into German. Among them is Ait Singh Gurung’s story in Devanagari with a transcription. However, they both differ in content from what is found in Sanskrit or Nepali manuscripts and published versions in that there is no riddle at the end of the story as there is after every story in the Vetāla-pancaviṃśati. We do not know how much of the text was in the missing second recording, but the story Ait Singh wrote down appears to have been longer than the one he recorded. We can assume that the missing recording contained portions of the transliterated version.

The impression Ait Singh’s story leaves is that he had a fairly good command of Nepali. There are, however, notable Hindi influences, reflecting the long time he spent in India and his constant exposure to Hindi speakers and Hindi reading material. For instance, he sometimes

21 Archive of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities: Heinrich Lüders Collection: No. 5 Bd. 2, pages 45–48. The Devanagari version is on No. 4 Bd 6 pages 48–49; the transcript in Roman script, on pages 45–48.
22 The unrecorded parts of the transcription appear in cursive in Appendix 1, Section 2.
mistakes the Hindi dative–accusative postposition for the Nepali one, and he stumbles over certain items of vocabulary, including cognates in Hindi and Nepali that have a different range of meaning. In addition, he often does not pay attention to gender and number agreement between subject and verb.

The Poem
The poem Ait Singh recited is composed in the prāśnottar (‘question–answer’) style. Like the Baitāl Pacīṣi, this kind of Nepali poetic composition has its roots in Sanskrit literature. Bhanubhakta Acharya composed his Praśnottarmālā (1853) in Nepali based on Shankaracharya’s Maṇiratnamālā. His Ramgiṭā (1868) is also composed in the same style. Lekhnath Paudyal’s Buddhivinod and Krishna Prasad Regmi’s Thulo Bhaktamālā Laksmaṇ Praśnottari are later examples in the same tradition. Ait Singh’s poem shows that the style was still popular among ordinary Nepalis of his time.

The śārdūlavikṛṣīṭa, a classical Sanskrit metre, was another element that continued to be used in poetic composition. So common was it that it even came to be called the jatīya chanda ([Nepali] national metre). Bhanubhakta Acharya’s Ramayana, which was the most widely read book of the time in Nepali, had more than 80% of its 1,038 stanzas written in this metre. Many Nepali poets including Acharya would alter the spelling of words for the sake of metre. The first book of Bhanubhakta’s Ramayana (Bālkāṇḍa), except for one couplet, is composed entirely in śārdūlavikṛṣīṭa. Each line of this metre has 19 syllables with a major caesura after the 12th. When reciting his poem, Ait Singh marks these required pauses. Given his command of prosody, it is quite possible

23 As in the following two examples of the dative–accusative postposition in Hindi: नरेंद्र के निद्रा पर गया (The minister fell asleep.) राजकी के सपना देखे (Then he saw the king in a dream.)

24 For example, the verb mārnā in Hindi means both ‘to beat’ and ‘to kill’, whereas in Nepali it can mean only the latter. Ait Singh uses this verb with the former meaning.

25 For a full transcription and translation, see Appendix 1, Section 4. The first stanza is numbered 1 and the second 2, each with its own line numbering.

26 The formula for the śārdūlavikṛṣīṭa is as follows (‘‐’ stands for a short syllable and ‘‐’ for a long one):

Here is one of the best examples of śārdūlavikṛṣīṭa from Ait Singh’s poem: प्रेम–पारदी हिंदी परन्तु रहने त्यो हो पढी सौंचिने
then that Ait Singh composed the poem himself. In any case, it is but another example of the popularity of Bhanubhakta Acharya’s work and the associated current of Rama devotionalism at the time. We shall now consider the poem itself and Ait Singh’s recitation of it.

Ait Singh tries to recite the poem metrically, but this does not prove entirely successful. This practice of reciting poems metrically, even though they were not written in metres, was relatively common at the time. These Nepali poems were called *silok*. Ait Singh actually performed this type of recitation. He had obviously memorised the text at some point in the past and wanted to render it intact, including in the proper metre, but he clearly forgot some words and inserted others that break the metre while still conveying the gist of the poem. Therefore, it may be argued that, like the story he recorded, the poem is a borrowed improvised text.

The poem first poses questions which on the surface seem to be aimed more at eliciting the secrets of worldly pleasures and individual glory, but then goes on to provide answers with a wholly moral or spiritual thrust to them. Ait Singh knows that a stanza has four lines. He adheres to this form in the second stanza but not in the first which has only three lines. Ideally, the first stanza should have contained the questions and the second stanza the answers. But after three lines in the first stanza he starts providing answers, so that one may assume that he forgot the third line in the first stanza containing further questions.29 There are five questions in the first two lines of the first stanza (1.1, 1.2): What should one eat? How should one prepare food so that it is tasty? What work should one do that has a lasting effect? What should one plant that will later benefit humans? What can be preserved for future use?

The person expressing themselves in the first lines realises that they are faced with difficult questions and is wise enough to see that moral rather than private considerations may be at stake. Thus he asks a sage for his insight (1.3). The latter provides suitable answers in the next

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27 Bhanubhakta Acharya stands as the country’s leading poet in this tradition.
28 Derived from the Sanskrit *śloka* (metrical verse).
29 Most pairs of lines display an end rhyme. Moreover, the lines of the first stanza would end with exactly the same word as those of the second stanza if there were a third line in the first stanza that ended with maulne.
lines: the name of Ram is always sweet; chanting it every day has a lasting effect (2.1). Places providing travellers with water and lodgings are to be maintained in the future (2.2). When planted, good deeds bear the fruit of great knowledge. The poet comes back at the end to acknowledge that these are all indeed profound purposes that come from weighing sin against virtue. The two lines, 1.3 and 2.4, are the same, save for two syllables: the first line asks the sage to speak and the second endorses his answer.

Motiram Bhatta (2046 BS: 6–8) in his published biography of Bhanubhakta Acharya writes how the latter was inspired by a man he saw cutting grass. The account contains a couplet that Bhanubhakta wrote on that occasion. The man was building a well to gain merit (punya). Bhanubhakta regretted that, though he himself was rich, he had built no inns or water facilities for pilgrims which would outlive him. This instigated Bhanubhakta to later compose his undying Ramayana. The author of the present poem, Ait Singh seems to have been clearly aware of this story, given the reference in it to meeting pilgrims’ needs for water and rest. Here we should remember that many Gurkha soldiers returned to their villages both during their career and after retirement to invest their hard-earned pay in them. During the many years in his regiment, Ait Singh may well have looked forwards to the day when he too could carry on this tradition of acquiring karmic merit.

**Conclusion**

Having undertaken this analysis, we return once again to the central question regarding Ait Singh’s freedom of agency while recording his story and poem. Had he been asked by the Germans to compose a story and song, or to recite ones he simply knew? Or could he have done either? Whatever the case, we can say that Ait Singh almost certainly did not have full freedom of agency. Whether he was requested or ordered to tell a story and to sing a song in his native language and from his homeland, it would have been normal for him to exercise a certain amount of self-censoring. He knew that his texts would be translated into German and read by his captors. Creative compositions can be used to make political statements: we have seen one allusion to the distrust of royalty in the story Ait Singh related, which may
reflect his own personal attitude towards kingly power. However, on the whole he seems intent on not expressing whatever hostile feelings he may have had in this regard. He knew that the story he recited was one that the German Indologist Lüders was doubtless familiar with and would have no qualms about. And indeed, Lüders (1925: 135) later mentions a Gurkha POW recording one of the famous *Vetāla-pancaviṃśatī* stories. As for the poem, it is entirely in keeping with the popular didactic vein. Another POW in the same camp, Jas Bahadur Rai, was noticeably less inhibited in expressing his personal feelings through the song he sang. The recordings in languages other than Nepali are more likely to have been used as vehicles for expressing strongly felt sentiments, since the POWs in question would have been confident that ethnic languages such as Gurung, Magar and Rai would not be translated into German by Germans themselves. Ait Singh would not have felt the same freedom of agency in this regard and may have consciously resolved not to test his own limits.

Returning now to the questions raised at the outset: what can we learn from these recordings by Ait Singh? Why did he choose this particular story and song, and why not something else? What does the content of the story and poem tell us about the history of Nepali literature? Ait Singh’s recording is a small but not insignificant piece of evidence which attests to one chapter in the history of Gurkhas, namely evidence that the latter were major consumers of popular Nepali literature published in India. The story he tells is not a folk tale anyone in his village would have been likely to know; it is drawn from a classical Sanskrit text. It was translated into Nepali and published by Nepali entrepreneurs and eventually became standard reading material in Gurkha regiments. Ait Singh’s recording of the story is proof of this.

His poem clearly reflects the popularity of *Rām bhakti dhārā* (Rama devotionalism) and the question–answer style of verse composition. Although Ait Singh lacked formal education, his story and poem suggest frequent exposure to imaginative works written in Nepali. He had spent years in his regiment before being sent to war and therefore had the opportunity of acquiring vast general knowledge. That, along with a commanding voice, made him a particularly suitable volunteer

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30 For an analysis of Jas Bahadur’s song, see Chudal (2020).
for the Germans’ recording venture. His intellectual bent comes across in the poem in his choice of genre. Rather than a folk song or romantic ditty of the popular genre known as *lahari*, his tastes apparently inclined to more serious subjects.

The work of the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission was not designed to disseminate the output of the POWs to a wider German audience or to their homeland but was meant to be tapped for its linguistic value alone. Indeed, recordings like Ait Singh’s have both linguistic and literary value, encapsulating as they do a slice of the history of Nepali literature. The recordings produced by the commission are therefore very valuable, whether in historical, linguistic, literary or simply human terms. They are also examples of how printed or written texts can live on in oral form, their content in this case being borne from Asia to far-off Europe, there to be retold, transcribed and captured on phonograph cylinders.

British authorities realised that climatic conditions were not suitable for Indian soldiers and wisely decided to send them to Mesopotamia. By 10 November 1915 the last unit of the Indian Corps had left France and Flanders (Corrigan 2015: 236). A similar conclusion was reached in Germany, though somewhat later than in Britain, and POWs began to be transferred to Romania. However, this came too late for Ait Singh Gurung. He never saw Romania, nor would he be lucky enough to leave Europe with those of his comrades who survived the battlefields of France and Belgium.
Appendix 1
1. The first part of the story by Ait Singh Gurung

Archive No. PK 246 at Lautarchiv, Humbolt University, Berlin. Recorded at the POW camp in Wünsdorf, Germany, on 29 May 1916 at 12:45. Duration of the recording: 02:32.

There [once] was a poor king somewhere. He had a minister who could understand the language of large animals. A big fair (melā) had been
organised somewhere. The king, and the minister too, went there. It was Monday and a new-moon day. At the fair’s bathing ghāt there was a cautāra. The king and the minister sat down in the shade of the cautāra. The minister fell asleep and the king [remained] sitting. During this time a girl, the daughter of the king of Kanpur, rode up in a horse-drawn carriage, stopped it under the cautāra and went to the bathing ghāt. She began to bathe, and when she had finished bathing, she offered a first flower to the sky and a second flower to the earth. She placed a third flower at her ear. She tore a fourth flower off with her teeth and threw it away. She crushed a fifth flower under her foot, patted her chest, got into the carriage and departed. The king became worried. ‘What did this girl do?’ ‘It’s in my nature not to understand, and so I’ve become completely emaciated.’ Then the king summoned his country’s wise men and got them to look into the matter. Not even a single wise man – not one of them – could diagnose the malady. The king then began to be assailed by the aberrant thought that the minister wanted to kill him and assume kingship – that he was the one who had staged the scene. Believing this, he dismissed the minister. After a few days the wise men began to say, ‘If anyone can solve this problem, it’s the minister; no one else will be able to.’ Hearing this, the king gave the order: ‘Call back my minister!’ Then he began to speak to the minister again. The minister started [by] asking the king, ‘What are you worried about. Tell me’.

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35 A platform shaded by trees, along a road where travellers can rest.
2. The second part of the story by Ait Singh Gurung

Archive No. PK 250 at Lautarchiv, Humbolt University, Berlin. Recorded at the POW camp in Wünsdorf, Germany, on 29 May 1916 at 04:25. Duration: 01:59 min.

The following cursive text is found in the written version but not in the recording.

“को” is an accusative postposition in Hindi.

The recording picks up the story from here.

36 Only in the recording, not in the transcript.
The king replies, ‘It’s nothing.’ One day when we were travelling, a girl came and offered flowers. I didn’t understand the meaning of this, and that worries me.\textsuperscript{40}

[‘Even though you are a great man, my lord, you have not found the meaning. Do not worry on account of this matter. I shall tell you. She offered the first flower to the sky. The second one she offered to the earth goddess. The third one she placed at her ear. Her father’s name is King of Kanpur.\textsuperscript{41} The fourth one she tore off with her teeth and threw away. Her mother’s name is Queen Dantavati.\textsuperscript{42} The fifth one she crushed under her foot. She gave [you] to understand that her name is Queen Padmāvatī.\textsuperscript{43} Then the king was satisfied and he recovered day by day. ‘Her gesture of patting her chest means that if you’re a man come with me.’ After some days the king and the minister visited the house of the wet-nurse of the king of Kanpur’s daughter. Then the king and the minister said, ‘I will give you five hundred rupees.’ He sent her (as a messenger) and requested her to tell the princess that the earlier man had arrived. The princess had the ability to know the fortunes of animals. The princess already knew this. Then the princess asked her what she meant. With five fingers she scratched five lines down her cheek and (angrily) sent her off. Then that old lady told them to return, because the princess had beaten her. Then the minister said that she had told (them) to stay there five days; that she had not beaten (her). And the next time he threw (her) through a window to the east. Then the queen\textsuperscript{44} brought a ladder (to help him climb up to her). Then they lived as king and queen. After a month the minister thought that (the king) had forgotten him. Then he saw the king in a dream. Then the king became worried about his minister (and) horse (and let his thoughts be known to the queen). Then the princess put poison in a kasār laḍḍu.\textsuperscript{45} Then (the king) gave it to the minister. The minister did not accept it, saying, ‘I won’t eat it.’ He told him to give it to a dog, and as soon as the dog ate it it died.]\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{40} The following cursive text is found in the written version but not in the recording.
\textsuperscript{41} kān means ‘ear’.
\textsuperscript{42} danta means ‘tooth’.
\textsuperscript{43} pad means ‘foot’.
\textsuperscript{44} The narrator uses the words for queen and princess interchangeably regardless of her actual status at the time.
\textsuperscript{45} A Nepali sweetmeat.
\textsuperscript{46} The recording picks up the story from here.
Then the minister said: ‘We need to get the princess’s diamond necklace’. Then he made a trishul. Then he made a mark with the trishul on her left thigh and took the princess’s diamond necklace. Then the king and the minister became yogis. Then the king’s daughter’s diamond necklace was found to be lost. An official announcement was spread throughout the whole world that whoever brought the princess’s diamond necklace would be awarded half the kingdom. Then the king’s minister who had become a yogi went to the shop to sell it where the (other) king regularly made purchases. The minister remained at the burning ghāts and the shopkeeper took the necklace and delivered it to the palace. Then the king apprehended the shopkeeper on (charges of) theft. ‘It wasn’t me who stole it; a yogi came to sell it.’ He sent out (an order) to bring in the yogi. Then ...

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47 A trident.
3. The third part of the song by Ait Singh Gurung

Archive No. PK 251 at Lautarchiv, Humboldt University, Berlin. Recorded at the POW camp in Wünsdorf, Germany, on 29 May 1916 at 16:30. Duration: 01:56 min.

The yogi says, ‘I didn’t steal it. My guru gave it (to me).’ He asks, ‘Where is your guru?’ ‘My guru is sitting at the burning ghāts.’ Then the king sent a guard. Then the yogi started saying, ‘The kingdom has many witches. So it was [one of] the witches that gave it (to him). That witch has the mark of this trishul of mine on her left thigh.’ Then the king ordered all the women to reveal what was underneath their clothes. No one emerged (as the culprit). Finally his own daughter emerged (as the one). Then the king, seeing the mark of the trishūl, ordered the witch to be hanged. Then the yogi says that when a witch emerges from within a palace she should be expelled. There and then the princess was seated on an elephant, taken three times around the city on a sindure jātrā, and expelled. Then the king and the minister went their way. The princess, too, went her way. Then the king and the minister changed their clothes, took the princess (with them) and [henceforth the pair] lived as a royal couple.

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48 A festive procession during which red lead powder is thrown on participants.
Appendix 2
The Poem recited by Ait Singh Gurung

Archive No. PK 252/3 at Lautarchiv, Humboldt University, Berlin. Recorded at the POW camp in Wünsdorf, Germany, on 29 May 1916 at 16:55. Duration: 00:40 min.

1.

1.1 क्या खानु [रि] मीठो कसो गरी हुने क्यारे⁴⁹ त धेर बौँचिने What to eat and how so that it is tasty; what [work] to do that has a long-lasting effect?

1.2 क्या चीजू रोपिदीएर फल्च्छन् नया क्या हो पछि सीचिने What things to plant that will bear fruit among humans; what it is that [can] be preserved for the future?

1.3 यस्को अर्थ कहो मृन हो पाप-धर्म तीलने Explain the purpose of [all] this [effort], O sage, [you who] weigh sin and virtue.

2.

2.1 रामको नाम मीठो सैधे भज लिनौ त्यो अर्थ धेर बौँचिने Chant ever the name of Ram; that purpose has a long-lasting effect.

2.2 पीवा-पाट हिदी पतनू रहने त्यो हो पछि सीचिने That sunken fountains⁵⁰ [and] pilgrims’ shelters remain operative – that is [what can be] preserved for the future.

2.3 पुजै रोपिदीएर फल्च्छन् विष्णु बिद्धे दूलो मौलने If you plant good deeds, they will bear fruit among humans – great knowledge that flourishes.

2.4 यस्को अर्थ गो हो मृन हो पाप कर्म तीलने This is the purpose of [all] this [effort], O sage, [you who] weigh sin and virtue.

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⁴⁹ क्यारे is a short form of के गरी spoken in western Nepal.
⁵⁰ For supplying water to the public and to pilgrims in particular.
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