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‘People Recognise Us as the Bravest of the Brave’: Retired Gurkha Soldiers Negotiating Employment, Racialisation and Identity in Britain

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to contribute new insights into ageing migrants and masculinity by drawing upon life story interviews with retired Nepali Gurkha soldiers settled in South-East England. Less is known about middle-aged and older migrants who migrate not to retire per se but to pursue a second or third career in later life. Our research adds new insights into how these men mobilise capitals to navigate new and unfamiliar job markets, post-retirement, in their middle and older age. Drawing upon the concept of ‘presentation of self’, the paper illustrates how Gurkha men utilise their martial identity—as brave, strong and loyal ex-soldiers in the British Army—to challenge discrimination and navigate new lives in Britain. However, the Gurkha image is also based on colonial racialisation. Nonetheless, we find that preserving their Gurkha identity and their legacy of service to the British Crown was not only to gain recognition of their military service and unique status, but also to assert their masculine identities in the new contexts in Britain.

1 | Introduction

In the last decade or so, a body of research has emerged on ‘transnational ageing’ focusing on issues relating to care, mobility, and health experienced by older migrants in host countries (Bolzman 2012; Ciobanu and Hunter 2017; Hunter 2018; Torres and Hunter 2023). Within this body of research, the nexus of migration, masculinity and ageing has been gaining particular attention (Zhu and Chan 2024). This paper contributes to that emerging literature by focusing on a specific under-researched group, retired Gurkha soldiers in Britain. Gurkhas are of Nepali origin and have a unique history of over 200 years continuous military service in the British Army across multiple wars and global conflicts. Nonetheless, they have also been in long-lasting campaigns to demand equal pension rights and UK settlement rights as recognition of their service to the British Crown

(Gellner 2013). Policy shifts, over recent decades, paved the way for tens of thousands of retired soldiers and their dependants to permanently settle in Britain (Adhikari 2012; Ware 2012).

There are no data on the volumes of migration; Gurkha associations estimated that, as of September 2019, more than 90% of the veteran community—approximately 100,000 individuals—moved to Britain, particularly south-East England (Gurkha Welfare Trust 2020). However, little is known about their lived experiences of migration, ageing and sense of identity in this new context (Adhikari et al. 2022). In this article, focusing on the nexus of migration, masculinity and ageing, we use rich qualitative data to explore how middle-aged and older Gurkha migrants utilise their martial identity to challenge discrimination and navigate new lives in Britain. However, we also note the colonial racialisation associated with this Gurkha image.

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Our paper makes three specific contributions to migration research. Firstly, we contribute new insights into research on ageing migrants. Gurkha migrants do not fit within the archetypes in the existing literature on ageing migrants such as retirement migrants, established migrants ageing in destination countries or migrants who return to origin countries in older age (Hunter 2018; King et al. 2017; Lulle et al. 2025; Warnes and Williams 2006). Instead, we address the call for more research on those who migrate to pursue a second or third career in later life (Lulle 2024a, 2024b). Most of the middle-aged and older Gurkha men in our study had not expected to settle in Britain but rather to retire in Nepal. However, British policy changes in the early 2000s opened new opportunities for second or even third careers after they retired from the army.

Secondly, our study adds to research at the intersection of masculinity and migration (Zhu and Chan 2024), and how migrant men negotiate their gendered identities in new socio-cultural environments (Datta et al. 2010; McIlwaine 2010; Ryan and Webster 2008; Wojnicka and Norwicka 2022). In particular, we contribute to the growing literature on South Asian masculinity (Kukreja 2021; Pandey 2017), drawing on the specific experiences of Gurkhas. We show how Gurkha men, despite being retired from the military, continue to assert their martial identity to negotiate their masculine identities through particular public displays and performances.

Thirdly, our paper advances understanding of how male migrants encounter and resist processes of racialisation and discrimination. Despite their long association with the British Army (Caplan 1991; Low 2016), upon settling in British society, our participants often experience unanticipated challenges. Presenting their Gurkha identity, to assert loyalty to 'the Crown', risks reinforcing racialised stereotypes rooted in colonial history (Gurung 2014). Drawing upon Goffman's (1959) concept of 'presentation of self', this paper considers how the migrant men navigate these conflicting images to assert a positive self-image. In so doing, we examine how Gurkhas use their various capitals to find employment and settle in Britain.

The paper begins with a review of the relevant literature on migration, ageing and masculinities highlighting how our research advances this scholarship. This is followed by an overview of Gurkha and martial masculinity; and then we discuss Goffman's Presentation of self. Then we present our study and, in subsequent sections, discuss our key findings. The conclusion summarises the overall contribution of our research.

1.1 | Migration, Ageing and Masculinities

It has been argued that migration studies suffer from 'ageism'—i.e., older migrants have been often overlooked as the focus is on youth (Bastia et al. 2022; Lulle et al. 2025). In the last decade or so, research has emerged on 'transnational ageing' (Torres and Hunter 2023). Within research on ageing migrants across Europe, three archetypes can be discerned: (i) the retirement migrants who are 'affluent, healthier, more active', (ii) labour migrants who have 'reached old age-settled in the countries of destination during their early-working and child-raising years' and (iii) return migrants who have returned 'to

their native or childhood countries and regions' (Warnes and Williams 2006:1261). Gurkha men settling in Britain as middle-aged and older migrants (after gaining residence rights), do not fall within these archetypes.

Indeed, our participants may have more in common with middle-aged and older people who migrate not to retire but to pursue second or third careers in later life (Lulle 2024a, 2024b). King et al. (2017: 195) argue that while many older migrants face significant challenges to their well-being due to 'vulnerable social position and lack of various forms of capital', they may also experience a 'fulfilling, enjoyable, even liberating and empowering' life despite migrating in later life. There are calls for more attention to middle-aged and older migrants, especially men, and how they find jobs in destination societies (Lulle 2024c). Our paper, focusing on middle-aged and older men, contributes to that gap in current knowledge.

Over the last 20 years, research on transnational gender dynamics has examined migrant men's understanding of self (Datta et al. 2010; Mahler and Pessar 2001). The existing research on men and masculinities demonstrates, on the one hand, how the notion of masculinity (as a male bread winner) shapes their decisions to migrate, and, on the other hand, how the migration process itself affects their identity (Kukreja 2021; Pandey 2017). It is argued that gendered identities are challenged and transformed in multiple ways in receiving countries (McIlwaine 2010). Masculinity intersects with various other identities—age, class, ethnic and national backgrounds—resulting in the emanation of subordinate masculine positions (Datta et al. 2010; Ryan and Webster 2008).

Furthermore, migrant men may experience downward social mobility in host countries due to lack of qualification and skills recognition, language barriers, limited networks and racialised discrimination in labour markets (Ahmad 2008; Charsley 2005). Several studies have explored South Asian migrant men's experiences, highlighting their 'failed' masculine/emasculated identities and how they navigate/resist/adopt various strategies to cope as racialised men (McDowell 2008; Pandey 2017; Ye 2014). For instance, Kukreja (2021) explored how South Asia male migrants in Greece have negotiated their masculine identities. Facing emasculation due to racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia, the men resist by utilising their physical masculinity to contrast themselves with Greek men and assert their ability to undertake hard labour. Della Puppa's work on Italian-Bangladeshi men who migrated to London to achieve upward social mobility, showed how the migrants experienced professional devaluation and de-skilling, as they were forced to take up low paid jobs, such as mini-cab drivers or washing dishes in restaurants, that they considered 'not good enough for their age and social identity' (Della Puppa 2023:370). While migrating to London increased their 'male honour' status, this status was compromised by not being able to accumulate the needed capital and wealth with negative effects on their male identity (Della Puppa 2023).

Drawing on this existing body of work, we seek to add new insights to understanding migration and masculinity by focusing on the specific case of middle-aged and older Gurkhas settled in South-East England, an under-researched but increasing

migrant group, and how they mobilise their martial identity to find job opportunities and resist discrimination.

1.2 | Overview of Gurkhas and Martial Masculinity

Nepali Gurkhas have played a key role in the British military and have been deployed in major conflicts since 1817 (Caplan 1991; Gellner 2013; Low 2016). They have received numerous awards for bravery including the Victoria Cross and their allegiance and sacrifice have ensured that 'the Gurkhas remain a much-celebrated part of the British army' (Kochhar-George 2010:44). Nevertheless, Gurkhas have historically been subjected to discrimination regarding pay, pension and mobility rights. Following years of campaigning, policy changes in 2004 and 2009 saw the British government grant settlement rights to those who served as Gurkhas for at least 4 years, along with their spouses and children (Pariyar 2020). Additional settlement rights for adult children were added in October 2018. Prior to these policy changes, Gurkhas did not expect to settle in Britain but rather, following their army career, to retire to Nepal.

To explore how Gurkha men negotiate their masculine identities in their new lives in Britain, requires an understanding of the contradictory colonial construction of 'martial race'. Gurkhas were perceived as more masculine, 'above all a martial race...' (Bolt, 1967 in Caplan 1991: 580)—a belief that Gurkhas were more 'warlike' compared to other people in the Indian sub-continent (Montgomery 1998). 'Martial races possessed obvious masculine qualities which the nonmartial races lacked' (Caplan 1995: 152). The notion of Gurkhas as a 'martial race' has been described as a 'colonial construct and invention' within a specific historical and ideological context (Gurung 2014: 528). The representation of the *Bir Gokhari* (brave Gurkhas), as 'bravest of the brave', with their motto 'better to die than be a coward', and 'loyal warriors' can be witnessed throughout British colonial history in the region and continues to shape perception today. In the colonial discourse of 'martial race', however, two contrasting imageries of Nepali Gurkhas operated simultaneously. On the one hand, they were portrayed as 'natural soldiers', 'stoical', 'fierce' and 'self-disciplined'; on the other hand they were perceived through racialised stereotyping as 'innocent', 'juvenile' and 'slow witted' (Caplan 1991; Gurung 2014). However, this image of the 'slow witted' and 'silent Gurkha' (Des Chene 1991; Caplan 1991), can be contested by Gurkha veterans' long campaign for equal rights and pensions (Kochhar-George 2010).

Therefore, in contrast to the emasculation of other south-Asian men discussed in the wider literature above, Gurkhas have been ascribed almost hyper masculinity. Moreover, Gurkha men also utilise the stereotypes, drawing upon their martial identity, to build second careers, post-retirement, in the security sector around the world. However, racialised discrimination can be encountered in these second careers. Using a postcolonial analysis, Chisholm's (2014: 27) study on ex-Gurkha men employed in the private military security companies (PMSCs) in countries like Afghanistan, underscores the connection between 'histories and current security market'. Despite the dominant historical imagery of the 'martial race', Gurkhas often find themselves

at the margins of the security industry compared to their white counterparts (Chisholm 2014).

As we discuss later in this paper, migration experiences and the pursuit of second and third careers, after retiring from the army, raise questions about how Gurkha men navigate racialised stereotyping in their middle and older age in new contexts in Britain.

1.3 | Presentation of Self

The work of Erving Goffman is useful to inform understanding of everyday social interaction. He defines interaction as 'the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence' (Goffman 1971: 26). His metaphor of the stage to consider 'performance' in social settings is especially illuminating: 'life itself is a dramatically enacted thing' as social intercourse is based upon 'actions and counter actions' (Goffman 1959: 72). Goffman argues that one's 'social place' is not a material thing but rather is based on performing a role and, importantly, having that presentation of self recognised by the relevant audience (Goffman 1959: 75).

In presenting oneself, it is necessary to pay attention to the audience. Goffman refers to 'audience segregation' (Goffman 1959: 49), meaning that different audiences may view the performance in different ways. Therefore, the performance needs to be tailored for the relevant audiences. In giving such performances, Goffman notes how 'cues', such as 'uniforms' by which we 'wrap ourselves in a mantle' (Goffman 1959: 56), can save time by quickly communicating information to the audience about the identity and role of the performer. It may be especially challenging for people moving to a new context or taking on new roles to navigate their performances within these unfamiliar places (Ryan 2010, 2011; Yurdakul and Altay 2022). Now their presentation of self is taking place on a different stage to a new audience who may not recognise the cues. Thus, some performers may be in a 'precarious position' as the audience does not recognise or give credibility to the 'impression' that is asserted (Goffman 1959: 59). In this way, as Goffman notes, the 'crucial sociological consideration' is that 'impressions fostered in everyday performances are subject to disruption' (Goffman 1959: 66).

Drawing upon Goffman's work, this paper shows how our participants evoke their Gurkha identities to claim their 'social place' as brave and loyal supporters of the 'Crown' through public performances such as parades in their military uniforms. However, this means overcoming audience misrecognition or lack of awareness, in new social contexts, and navigating experiences of stigma and racialisation as migrants. Using the concept of 'Presentation of self', previous research demonstrates the varied strategies migrants use for overcoming stigma in migration contexts. We draw upon previous work of Ryan (2010, 2011) in which she used the 'presentation of self' to explore how migrants utilise specific cultural/ethnic traits, while simultaneously distancing themselves from other stigmatising or racialised characteristics. Furthermore, using the notion of 'migrant capitals' (Erel and Ryan 2019), we explore how these men mobilise social and economic capital to access labour markets and forge second or third careers as middle-aged and older migrants but also how

they mobilise their cultural capital, as Gurkhas, to reassert their masculine identities and to cope with racialisation and discrimination in South-East England.

2 | The Study

This article draws upon research undertaken in 2023–2024 to explore middle-aged and older Gurkha military veterans' experiences of settling in South-East England. The South-East was selected as a case study due to its concentration of Gurkhas as most tended to settle in towns/cities linked to military barracks. The study included 17 in-depth in-person interviews with Gurkha men and observation of support programmes for retired Gurkhas including language and yoga classes organised by the Nepali Society. The aim of the participant observation was to gain familiarity with these events and to build rapport/trust with research participants. This informed understanding of the benefits and challenges of such support programmes in developing skills, forming social ties, and maintaining overall well-being.

Study participants were recruited through a community leader and snowballing through Nepali contacts. One of the authors is Nepali, lives in the research area and, thus, is familiar with local Gurkha groups. This familiarity helped in building trust and enabling recruitment. The other co-author is not Nepali and throughout the process of interpreting the data and writing this

paper we actively reflected upon our varied positionalities (see Nowicka and Ryan 2015).

This study draws on life stories of Gurkha men who settled in South-East England after gaining their settlement rights. While some of the men in this study had been based in Britain for specific periods during their army careers, others had been based in Hong Kong and different locations internationally. Following retirement from the army, most of these men had a second career in cruise ships or the Gurkha Reserve Unit (GRU) and worked in countries like Brunei (see Table 1). Thus, moving to South-East England often involved a third career. Participants were aged from 50 to 70 years. Most interviewees were currently actively engaged in the labour market in England, working as bus drivers, private security guards, running businesses or in NGOs as community leaders (see Table 1).

There were practical challenges to arrange interviews, as some men worked at night (as security guards) and therefore slept and were unavailable to meet during the day. In such cases, the interviews were scheduled during their days off. All interviews were conducted in Nepali, which lasted between 60 and 90 min. Interviews were recorded and anonymised to protect confidentiality and translated into English. Interview questions explored how these middle-aged and older migrants found jobs, navigated language barriers, encountered any discrimination, accessed networks and made sense of their 'new home'. As discussed below, in the findings section, Gurkha identity, martial

TABLE 1 | Background of Gurkha men interviewed for this study.

	Age	Second career post retirement	Settlement in England	Current occupation in England
Saroj	50s		2006	Security guard in a private company
Hem	50s		2006	Security guard in a private company
Ajay	60s	ARU, England	2006	Business owner/Community leader
Bijay	60s	Security guard, GRU, Brunei	2008	Bus driver in a private company
Tek	60s		2006	Bus driver in a private company
Surya	60s		2006	Bus driver in a private company
Sam	60s		2006	Bus driver in a private company
Rabi	60s		2006	Security guard in a private company
Anil	60s	Security Officer, Royal Caribbean International Cruise Ship	2006	Security guard in a private company
Keshab	60s	Driver in a private company, Hongkong	2005	Bus driver in a private company
Shiva	60s	Security guard, GRU, Brunei	2009	Security guard in a private company
Raj	60s	Driver in private company, Hongkong	2010	Bus driver in a private company
Bal	60s	Security guard, GRU, Brunei	2006	Security officer in a private company
Hari	70s	ARU, England	2000	Community leader
Ram	70s	Security guard, GRU, Brunei	2013	Retired
Mani	70s	Security guard, GRU, Brunei	2011	Retired
Jay	70s	Security guard, GRU, Brunei	2013	Retired

heritage, and masculinity emerged as strong themes from the outset of the interviews.

The data was manually analysed by the research team. Thematic analysis was employed for identifying patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Having identified a list of codes, both authors worked together to refine these further, over several meetings, to produce fewer/defined codes, for instance, such as 'martial identity', 'migrant capitals', 'discrimination', and 'migrant masculinity'. Ethical approval was granted by London Metropolitan University.

3 | Findings

Our findings show how these Gurkha men, in their middle and older age, encounter various challenges in settling into their 'new home' and realising their career aspirations. They mobilise capitals to navigate the labour market and tackle challenges. Confronted by racialised discrimination, these men draw upon the cultural capital of their martial identity not only to present masculine identities but also to gain recognition of their long-standing association with the British military. The findings are presented in three overlapping themes below.

3.1 | Navigating Second/Third Careers in Middle and Older Age

As mentioned above, Gurkha migrants do not fit within archetypes in the existing literature of retired and ageing migrants (i.e., long-term migrants ageing in the destination country, retirees to the sun or returnees to the origin country) (Lulle et al. 2025; Warnes and Williams 2006). We address the call for more research on those who migrate to pursue a second or third career in later life (Lulle 2024a, 2024b). In the past, Gurkha men had limited options for work or second careers after retirement. The change in immigration policy allowed Gurkhas to take up their second or third career in Britain and pursue a better future for their families.

It was evident in the interviews that the participants had mobilised a combination of 'migrant capitals' (Erel and Ryan 2019). They utilised their cultural capital, e.g., martial heritage/Gurkha identity (reputation for loyalty, bravery, and discipline), as well as economic capital (pension) and their social capital, through networks of relationships and physical ties, to navigate employment opportunities and build their new lives. For instance, Surya stated:

Many of us work as bus drivers— this is because we had Hong Kong¹ driving license that helped getting British license. Many others got driving license. After coming to Britain, I also learnt how to drive trucks.

Many interviewees mentioned how their social networks were crucial in the initial period. Upon arrival, Bal mobilised his connections with former army colleagues to explore work opportunities:

I contacted one of my friends from my service who was also here in Britain. ...Initially, it was challenging to find a job...I then found a company nearby who was looking for a security officer... I chose this job because I have experience in this sector....as I worked as a security officer for the Brunei government for more than 12 years. Because of my Gurkha background, I got the job.

Being a Gurkha and having previously worked with British soldiers meant that they had some pre-existing social networks in Britain. Their experience of working in the army and their social capital encouraged them to look for opportunity in the security sector. Anil shared his experience of finding a job through his Gurkha connections:

I found work as a security guard through a former colleague and friend. I have previous experience working in the Army and on a cruise ship...with my good communication skills, it made it easier for me to find a job in Britain. While serving in the army, I worked with British colleagues, so I was already familiar with their way of life before settling in England.

Despite their long-established connections with the British Army, speaking, reading and writing in professional English was a challenge. Therefore, participants tended to look for low skilled jobs that could be managed through limited English language skills. The situation however altered gradually as they gained experience and confidence. The following statement of Keshab, who works as a bus driver, is an example:

Initially, I started a part-time job in London with the same company I had worked for in Hong Kong. I quit that job few months later. I have been working as a bus driver for 18 years now. During my service in the army, I worked closely with locals. Although my English isn't perfect, I can now understand about 90 percent of what they say.

Loyalty associated with being a Gurkha frequently emerged as a common theme when discussing employment. This has also put Gurkhas in a position for certain types of roles and employment. For example, Hem stated how the Gurkha image and loyalty proved to be useful in securing a job: 'I now work as a security guard. I secured the job because I have experience, can drive, and demonstrate loyalty in my work.'

The continuity of the colonial perception of Gurkha's loyalty and honesty was evident during our interviews. Thus, it was important for them to maintain their martial identity in their everyday encounters. For instance, commenting on the importance of 'loyalty', Raj stated:

There is a perception that Gurkhas never lie, which is why they are seen as very loyal at work. I am very

loyal at my job...Many also work as security guard because Gurkhas are perceived as loyal and honest.

Due to their history of service to the British crown, Gurkhas often see themselves as separate not only from other migrant groups but also from the wider Nepali population in Britain. Despite encountering similar challenges to many other migrant groups, for these men, their Gurkha identity has made it easier for them to settle in the country and secure certain types of employment in which loyalty is championed (Pariyar 2020). However, relying on stereotypes of their Gurkha identity was not necessarily a positive source of capital. It was apparent that the men also encountered racialisation rooted in colonial history and current anti-migrant discourses.

3.2 | Reinforcing Gurkha Stereotype, Masculine Identities and Discrimination

In contrast to the emasculation of other south-Asian men discussed in the wider literature (Kukreja 2021; Pandey 2017), Gurkhas have been ascribed almost hyper masculinity, enabling them to secure employment opportunities in later life. However, the conflicting colonial construction of 'martial race' (Caplan 1991; Gurung 2014) and Gurkha stereotype continue to exist. The experiences, after retiring from the army, demonstrate how racialised stereotyping has impacted on their career trajectories and sense of identity. Although most participants worked in security or transportation jobs, some had aspirations for better paid, professional occupations. Some participants undertook training as they aspired to pursue different professions but they found it difficult to succeed. For instance, Shiva stated: 'I remember applying for an accountant position. I was qualified for it as I had done a lot of training, but I didn't get the job. I was told it was because I was an ex-Gurkha. I am also not young anymore. So I took up a job as a security guard'.

This quote from Shiva is particularly revealing and highlights the intersection of ageism and racism. As a retired soldier and a Gurkha, he is perceived as too old and too inexperienced to start an entirely new, professional career. Similarly, Hem recounted his experience of retiring from military service and enrolling in a plumbing course:

When I was about to retire, I did a plumbing course. However, I struggled to find a job related to plumbing because employers often required prior experience. It was assumed that I as an ex- Gurkha, was unfit or unqualified for other roles.

Like Shiva above, Hem's story also shows the challenge for these middle aged and older ex-soldiers to begin a new career from scratch without any prior experience. Raj acknowledged during the interview that: 'Many Gurkhas have no choice but to take up security guard roles'.

Despite easy access to low-skilled employment, some Gurkhas, however, reiterated their experience of discrimination at work. The following statement by Sam serves as an example:

After coming here, I started searching for a second career. I was working as an army reserve because of my qualifications and experiences in the army. I worked as army reserve (in the British army) for 3 months in the London Olympics.² Most of the staff working in the reserve were British and their starting allowance/salary was from £45, whereas I was given minimum wage. The salary was based on previous experience, but my previous experience of serving in the army was not considered. It was unfair and I felt discriminated against despite being equally qualified for the role.

Previous studies have explored South Asian migrant men's experiences, highlighting their emasculated identities as they were forced to take up low-paid jobs and how they resist/adopt various strategies to cope as racialised men (McDowell 2008; Pandey 2017). In the case of Gurkha men also, we found that they had to constantly negotiate their masculine identities, drawing on the martial masculinity to cope with discrimination. Ajay shared his personal story of struggle and resilience as an ex-Gurkha. After serving in the army for 31 years, upon arrival in England, he decided to start a business, drawing on the skills he had developed during his military service:

I started to become worried about what to do after my retirement... I wanted to open a Nepali restaurant. We approached the bank for a loan, but they did not trust us. We were kept waiting for six months, only to be told that our application was rejected due to our lack of experience in running a business. My brother helped me, and we bought the place with our personal savings. The army taught me to thrive in a disciplined environment. I am fierce and disciplined because of my Gurkha background. The army experience has helped me preserve while setting up the business.

Ajay's challenges in securing a loan, illustrate the difficulties that newly arrived migrants encounter in trying to build trust and access institutional support in new and unfamiliar environments. Unable to obtain funding from the bank, instead he relied on his personal networks to generate economic capital through a relative. Ajay's quote is an example demonstrating how Gurkha men utilise their martial masculinity—'fierce and disciplined'—to resist and cope with discrimination.

Furthermore, despite Gurkhas presenting themselves as unique and different from other migrant groups (see also Pariyar 2020), they often experienced unanticipated challenges upon settling in Britain. Given that few Gurkhas had the opportunity to settle in Britain prior to recent policy changes, Gurkhas were largely unknown to local British residents. However, having obtained settlement rights in the 2000s, the number of Gurkhas arriving in Britain significantly increased within a short period of time. Moreover, because most tended to settle in specific towns and cities linked to military barracks, their presence became very noticeable in some local areas, especially within South-East England.

According to study participants, it was challenging for local residents, particularly younger generations, to accept the Gurkha presence and lifestyles, including their unique way of dressing which added to their visibility in predominantly white, English towns. Some participants described incidents of explicit racist harassment when they first arrived in England. Keshab, a bus driver, spoke about his experience: 'We faced harassment. Some school children would throw stones and damage the bus.'

In addition to such overt racism, Gurkhas continue to experience subtle forms of discrimination in their everyday encounters with local residents. For instance, Sam stated: 'There is still discrimination between local and migrants here. It is visible in their behaviour towards us'.

However, presenting their Gurkha heritage was important to resist racialisation and re-claim their identities. Reiterating the key Gurkha traits, Rabi stated: '*As Gurkhas, we have the attitude of never giving up. We should continue to persevere and embrace our identity*'.

3.3 | Presentation of Self: 'Recognition of the Service and Loyalty to the Crown'

As discussed earlier, many interviewees reinforce the complex image of Gurkhas (see also Gurung 2014; Kochhar-George 2010)—entailing masculine identities of strength, bravery and loyalty, whilst also acknowledging racialised and colonial stereotypes (see also Caplan 1991; Gurung 2014). During the interviews, it was noted that all the men had fully embraced their Gurkha identity (brave, disciplined and loyal). For instance, Anil stated: 'I joined the Army in 1983 and served in Hong Kong. I feel so proud when I call myself a Gurkha. Gurkhas have participated in peacekeeping missions, the Falklands War and many more'.

Recollection of bravery they showed in the battlefield was noted during the interview. As Raj stated: 'Gurkhas participated in the peacekeeping force, the Falkland War, the Iran and Iraq War, the Afghanistan War and many more. I feel so proud when I call myself ex-Gurkha Army'.

Most participants shared similar views of what it meant to be a Gurkha 'Laure'. Interestingly,³ although Shiva took great pride in being a Gurkha, he reinforced the colonial discourse of 'martial race' (as brave warriors) (Low 2016). In an apologetic tone, he stated:

I don't want to say anything negative about the Gurkhas, but it's important to acknowledge that many people may act without full awareness of the situation. They lacked knowledge about World War I and II. Despite this lack of understanding, they displayed tremendous courage. They engaged the enemy with their *Khukuri*. The British created a perception of the *Bir Gorkhali*.

Most men acknowledged that, despite this emphasis on bravery and loyalty, they were treated differently from British soldiers during their service. For instance, Ajay pointed out that:

The British government used to say, Gurkhas are part of the British Army, equal treatment on promotion and welfare on other facilities. But the rule was different for us. We were treated as second-class citizens [in the army].

While participants mentioned how they were subject to stereotyping and discrimination because of their visibility as Gurkhas, most of the participants perceived this image as a positive presentation of a strong masculine self. As noted elsewhere in the literature (Ryan 2010, 2011; Yurdakul and Altay 2022), due to racialisation, particular identities may become highly stigmatised, resulting in local animosity and discrimination. In such cases, migrants need to carefully navigate that presentation of self to specific audiences in ways that seek to distance themselves from negative stereotypes, whilst asserting a positive image (Ryan 2010). For example, as we discuss below, in relation to our participants, this could involve strategies to inform and educate local residents about Gurkha legacy and contribution to the British Armed Forces.

Faced with racism and discrimination from some local residents in their new localities, these men drew upon their Gurkha identities to emphasise positive traits such as bravery, strength and discipline, but also, very importantly, loyalty to the British Crown based on their long and unique military history. Rabi, during the interview, stated:

Perhaps it is due to the loyalty and bravery of our ancestors that we have the opportunity to stand proudly in a developed nation and declare that we are unique among its citizens. It is essential for us to continue to work hard to uphold and promote the honour, legacy and respect earned by our ancestors through their sacrifices and dedication.

Having the opportunity to settle in Britain has been a great sense of pride to many Gurkhas. Thus, the Gurkhas have leveraged their image to navigate local challenges in quite distinct ways. Bijay stated the importance of the Gurkha legacy:

People recognise us as the bravest of the brave... Our grandfathers have fought wars, they have recognised us to the world and got us this opportunity. They have created a legacy, because of them Gurkhas are known to be the most loyal people.

Therefore, the recognition of their service, as Gurkhas, was an essential aspect of coping with and resisting the everyday challenges they faced in British society. However, mobilising their cultural capital, as Gurkhas, could also mean distancing themselves from other stigmatised groups such as 'illegal' migrants.

Ajay stated: 'As a community leader, I have fought in various places in job centre, council and charities for veterans' *rights. Because they put illegal migrants and other people like us (Gurkha veterans) in the same basket. It is hard for them to understand veterans' issues*'.

As strategies for challenging stigma, as migrants, and displaying a positive presentation of self, opportunities are often sought to showcase publicly the services that Gurkhas provided to the British Crown. For example, Jay said:

Local people recognise us as Gurkha. I communicate and share with them about the British medals that I received. On Remembrance Day, we wear our uniforms and medals and meet with people at these events. This helps the local community recognise us as Gurkhas.

Moreover, Gurkhas were engaged in various voluntary work/community activities such as selling poppies⁴ to raise funds for veterans' charities. Such activities enabled a public and highly visible presentation of their Gurkha identity as proud, former soldiers, displaying their medals, in town centres across the South-East of England during poppy fund raising events. As Goffman (1959) notes, public performances, especially involving a cue such as uniforms can help communicate a role to an audience. Commenting on the importance of engaging in these activities, Mani stated: 'I feel proud to be called a Gurkha. This is all I have ...my Gurkha identity'.

Beyond organised military displays, these retired Gurkha soldiers found other ways to present their military identities in everyday encounters. Bijay (who works as a bus driver) stated that he usually wears his army veteran badge at work and justified this visible presentation of his military heritage: 'This is my effort to help us gain recognition... to honour my great-grandfather's legacy and to remember and recognise the bravery of the Gurkhas'.

Nonetheless, because most of the Gurkha military involvement occurred overseas, such as Afghanistan or the Falklands, it was unfamiliar to local British residents, especially younger generations. During the interviews several Gurkha men explained how they spoke with local veterans and the local Member of Parliament, who helped disseminate knowledge about Gurkhas to residents. Keshab added: 'There were awareness programmes in the schools, and they were told about us (that bus drivers are ex-Gurkha armies) ...the children began to treat us (bus drivers) kindly.'

Making the young generation aware of Gurkhas and their contributions to the country was particularly emphasised. Commenting on the need for a wider public recognition of Gurkha identity, Bal stated:

My Gurkha background has made it easy for me to connect with the locals here. Most of my neighbours are older people who are familiar with the World War. For those who are unaware of the Gurkha army, I take

the time to explain our contributions to the British government. Unfortunately, young people in England generally lack knowledge about Gurkhas.

As Goffman (1959) argues, the presentation of self relies on audience recognition. As illustrated by quotations above, asserting a Gurkha identity can be meaningless unless British people recognise the significance of that image. To reclaim their identity and inform public awareness, illustrating their contribution to the 'British Crown', has become important for Gurkhas. Participation in public displays like military processions and selling poppies become means to reclaim their identity as proud Gurkha men in British society. Moreover, helping to educate local residents, especially younger generations, about the Gurkha contribution to British military history forms a key part of this positive presentation of self. Therefore, as argued throughout this section, for our middle aged and older participants, Gurkha identity provided a form of cultural capital which could be mobilised to challenge racialised discrimination and anti-migration encounters in British society.

4 | Conclusion

This article has developed novel insights at the nexus of migration, ageing and masculinity, by focusing on the specific case of Gurkhas in South-East England, an under-researched but increasing migrant group, and how they mobilise their martial identity to resist discrimination. Our paper makes three main contributions.

Firstly, we add new insights into middle-aged and older migrants. Existing research focuses on the experiences of different types of ageing migrants (such as retirement migrants, ageing migrants in the destination society and return migrants) (King et al. 2017). Our work focuses on a different constituency of older migrants—i.e. those who migrate in middle or later age to pursue second or third careers. In so doing, we respond to calls (Lulle 2024a, 2024b) for more research on middle-aged and older migrants since the EU and global policies are very much about sustainability in an ageing world. However, little is known about how eager older people are to pursue new careers or their struggle for recognition in new labour markets (Lulle 2024c). For our participants, changes in immigration policy allowed them, after retiring from the army, to settle in Britain and take up different types of jobs. These men had not expected to settle in Britain following military retirement but rather to return to Nepal. Therefore, our research adds new insights into how these men, mobilise capitals, to navigate new and unfamiliar job markets, post-retirement, in their middle and older age.

Secondly, we have contributed to research at the intersection of masculinity and migration (Zhu and Chan 2024), and how migrant men negotiate their gendered identities in new socio-cultural environments (Datta et al. 2010; McIlwaine 2010; Ryan and Webster 2008; Wojnicka and Norwicka 2022). Our work adds knowledge to research on South Asian masculinity (in contrast to emasculated identities) by exploring the particular experiences of Gurkhas who have been ascribed almost hyper masculinity as a 'martial race'. Historically, while Gurkhas were regarded as natural and fierce soldiers, they were also perceived

as 'innocent' and 'slow witted' (Caplan 1991; Gurung 2014). Therefore, their masculinity intersects with racialised stereotypes rooted in colonialism. These stereotypes are confronted afresh when the men migrate, as retired soldiers, to towns and cities in the South-East of England.

Thirdly, our article contributes knowledge about the presentation of self and mobilising cultural capital in the context of migration and racialised discrimination. Drawing upon Goffman's (1959) concept of 'presentation of self', this paper shows how the men navigate the contradiction at the heart of the Gurkha image. Although these migrant men encounter racialisation, especially in the labour market, and become segregated into specific jobs, by mobilising cultural capital, they sought to counter negative stereotypes by presenting a positive sense of self (Ryan 2011). Emphasising pride in their Gurkha heritage, for example through public displays of their military affiliations, the men sought to inform local audiences about the contribution of loyal Gurkhas to British military history, whilst also distancing themselves from stigmatised migrants.

As a rich qualitative project based in the one location, i.e., the South-East of England, this study is limited in scale. Future research might be undertaken in other locations to test the applicability of our findings to other regions.

Thus, in conclusion, a key finding to emerge from our rich qualitative research is the complexity of the Gurkha image. While on one hand, this enables the assertion of a strong masculine identity and long historical links to the British Crown, on the other hand this image also risks reinforcing racialised and colonial stereotypes. This finding underlines how the 'presentation of self' interacts with particular audience perceptions. Our paper reveals the ways in which the participants actively negotiate this conflicting image as they seek to build their new lives in Britain.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Peer Review

For transparency, the peer review documents associated with this article are available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.70219>.

Endnotes

¹ Many Gurkha soldiers spent time in British military barracks in Hong Kong before the handover to China.

² London hosted the Olympic Games in the summer of 2012.

³ Gurkha 'Laure' is the term used by Nepalis, to refer to young Nepali soldiers who were sent to Lahore for training and who served the British army. These young Nepali soldiers who left their homeland were believed to have made fortunes abroad and therefore held a special status back home. In recent times, 'Laure' also refers to migrant workers abroad.

(<https://archive.nepalitimes.com/news.php?id=15294>. Accessed on 4.06.2025).

⁴ Red poppies are sold in November throughout Britain to raise funds for charities supporting military veterans.

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