

# The Maddhat Shamuha - Nepalese Help

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Co-founder of Maddhat Shamuha



Only a few years ago, a saint said to a wealthy man "the worst disease to affect humanity is not to be cared for" (Mother Teresa of Calcutta). From my experience of service life, injury, illness and suffering a progressive disability, I wish, in this article, to express my gratitude to those people who have cared for me and who continue to help me. Through their help, knowledge and generosity, I have gained many skills that have given me the ability and the opportunity to give something back to both the local community and the people of Nepal. I hope to show you something of my personal life, and, as a trustee of Maddhat Shamuha (Nepalese Help), to inform you of our work, the services that the Charity provides and the principles under which it operates. Our Nepalese culture and family teaching tell us that, if we are honest people, hardworking and trustworthy, God will always find us a way.

Without any hesitation, I can say that it was inevitable that one day I would follow in the footsteps of my beloved father, Mr Nanda Bahadur Purja, as he served with the Indian Gurkha Regiment. It was during his career in the Army that he met my dear mother, Mrs Purna Kumari Purja, who was our village group leader until around 1980. Both my parents were also local farmers, who raised just enough money to provide for their four sons and daughter in Nepal.



Regardless of their financial hardship, they managed to send my three brothers, my sister and myself to be educated at our extraordinary local school. As with most rural schools in Nepal, it goes without saying that its resources were very limited, but, for us, coming from a devoted and loving family, we all wanted to achieve our parents' aims, ambitions and objectives in life. They instilled in us their principles of having strong discipline and respect, which have inevitably served us all well.

My eldest brother, Mr Ganga Bahadur Purja, enlisted as a Gurkha before me and served with the British Army. Following his service career, he settled with his family in England in the town of Eastleigh in Hampshire. Our next brother, Mr Jit Bahadur Purja, trained as a schoolteacher and is today teaching in Dana, Nepal. Our youngest brother, Mr Nirmal Bahadur Purja, also enlisted as a Gurkha and is still serving with the British Army. As for my dear sister, Miss Anita Kumari Purja, she progressed from our local school to Kathmandu University. There, she trained and qualified as a Registered Nurse. Today, she is still practising at the Bharatpur Hospital in Nepal.



It is a privilege to know many Nepalese people now living in all corners of the world, but I remain conscious of those, less fortunate, living in Nepal. As people would expect, Nepalese living abroad assist their families, but through time those left behind can be forgotten. It is the fortunate few that move overseas, gaining wealth and a higher standard of living, but, from time to time, I am reassured to see news articles telling of the help given to the villages back home. As I care about those at home, I feel it is my duty to give something back and to maintain a level of awareness here in the United Kingdom.

Following the well-known, arduous Gurkha-selection process in the summer of 1989, I entered the British Army in the November and, at just 16 years old, I left Nepal to be based first in Hong Kong and later in the United Kingdom. It was an honour to serve Her Majesty the Queen for a little over 17 years.



During my service career, I received a severe injury and then became acutely unwell, and that, unfortunately but unavoidably, led to my medical discharge from the Gurkha Regiment. Following two spinal surgeries on my lower back, I developed a disease of the bone marrow called aplastic anaemia. I then contracted tuberculosis. It was during this difficult time that I experienced the exceptional care and support of doctors, nurses and the general public. These included the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Regiment Medical Team; Professors Marsh and Smith, Consultants at St George's Hospital in London; Dr J Van De Pette and Dr Livoonchong, Consultants at the Royal Hampshire Hospital in Winchester; Captain J Broham, Consultant at the Warminster Military Hospital; Squadron Leader Spitta, Consultant at RAF Wroughton; RAF Headley Court Rehabilitation Team; The Prince of Wales and The Queen Elizabeth Hospitals in Hong Kong; Haslar Hospital, Warminster, Tidworth and RAF Wroughton; Hampshire County Hospital, Winchester; and, Queen Alexandra Hospital, Portsmouth in the UK. All these I have named but there are carers, nurses, support staff and volunteers that I have encountered everywhere who have cared for me and helped me. Thank you all.

During the early years of my illness, I was still able to serve in some form of employment with the Army, but, eventually, my working ability was downgraded, resulting in a posting to the Winchester Gurkha Museum. Currently, I am the longest serving Gurkha ever to work there. It was during this time that I gained the skills that would prove essential for my role with the Maddhat Shamuha charity. This experience included working with civil servants, the Ministry of Defence, civilians, global customers and ex-servicemen. My duties further included managing the Museum bar, the shop and the sales department. Often my work would take me to many towns and cities across the UK where Gurkhas always received a warm welcome. There are a number of special people and organisations that I would like to thank for this opportunity and support. These include Brigadier C J D Bullock OBE MC (Museum Curator), Colonel D R Wood MBE, Colonel J M Evans MC and Mrs Evans (Museum Trustees), Lieutenant Colonel A L Bridger OBE (Museum Accountant), Major Lemon MBE (Ex-Museum Curator), Mr G Edgerley-Harris (Museum Archivist), Mr Megh bahadur Rai, the Brigade of Gurkhas and all other Trustees of the Gurkha Museum.





During my employment at the Museum, I worked very closely with a volunteer, Colonel John Craig (OBE). This exceptional and extraordinary gentleman was to become my Godfather. He was born in the Highlands of Scotland and served as an officer with the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles, he spoke fluent Nepali. The respect and admiration I have for this Scotsman is very special and could never be summed up in a few words. My Godfather died 19 December 2003 and there is not a day that passes when I do not miss him still.



During my last few years in the Army, my treatment was taken over by the Royal Naval Hospital Haslar in Gosport, England. This occurred during the restructuring of the three military medical services. The standards of care received can only be described as outstanding during this time and I would like to thank Brigadier Johnston (Consultant), Dr A Okhandiar (Consultant) and all the nurses, paramedical staff and the Haslar Hospital civilian driver for their care.



It was during my treatment at Haslar that I met my Scottish God-Brother, Joe Bremner. He was responsible for my care and treatment on his medical ward. Joe continues regularly to help me with all aspects of medical queries, particularly regarding any disability or medical translation matters I have. Because of our long-standing friendship, I am now Godfather to his son Archie Bremner.

After leaving the army in 2006, I suddenly felt alone, depressed and isolated. Because of my illness and level of disability, life was not going to be easy. Indeed, I experienced many obstacles and problems after my discharge, such as how to register with a local doctor or dentist, with whom or how do you communicate with welfare and financial organisations, such as Social Security or banks and building societies. As a War Veteran, there were many concerns and problems encountered, such as disputing the level of disability awarded by the Army on my discharge. Negotiating the Veterans Agency's procedures and paper work for medical assessments, claims and appeals was like walking through a minefield. From my experience and with the charity, I now aim to assist people with such matters. For me, the first year was particularly difficult, and I felt like a headless chicken that had very little support in these matters but it was during this difficult time in Fareham that I received the selfless support of PC Paul Ross who helped in so many ways. My gratitude to that man knows no bounds.

In England, I often heard the phrase that had some true meaning: "If there is a will, then there is a way" – so, from my experience and ability to adapt, I began to help other Gurkhas by giving them and their families support, a need that still has room for development and progress.

Around 2007, I began doing two hours a week as a registered interpreter, mainly in local hospitals in the Hampshire area. Following the well-publicised changes to the immigration rules for retired Gurkhas that had been based in Hong Kong, life became even busier as more families set up home here in the UK. There are charities and organisations that give assistance to Gurkhas on their retirement, but, from my own experience, there are not enough to deal with the current level of demand. Later in 2007, I was requested to meet Miss Amanda Lee of Hampshire County Council's Community Development Office, Fleet, to

discuss running a 'drop-in' centre located at the Citizens Advice Bureau in Farnborough Community Centre. In 2008, I began voluntary work for a few hours with Amanda as an interpreter due to the large numbers of Nepalese that required urgent assistance and/or advice. In April 2008, our drop-in centre became 'The Maddhat Shamuha – Nepalese Help' ("maddhat shamuha" translates as "help group"), which has recently become a registered charity. As co-founders, we further promoted our services and support by placing adverts in the local media and handing out fliers stating the range of services available. It did not take long before the number of customers exploded, and it became clear that Farnborough Community Centre was too small to deal with the number of people attending. We relocated and now operate from St Marks Church Hall, Farnborough. The number of our Maddhat Shamuha members has exceeded 600 in this short period. The number clearly demonstrated to us why other agencies, such as Citizens Advice Bureau, could not handle the level of enquiries made. Our number continues to grow steadily, while other problems such as funding have arisen. Hampshire County Council is very supportive of Gurkhas and their families, but it has been hit hard with the financial austerity measures put in place by Government.



Co-founder and living legend, Amanda Lee, with her soft voice and wonderful manner remains very active in her support. It grows increasingly clear to me that she is a Goddess to the people of Nepal.

Maddhat Shamuha has been conducting regular presentations where an interpreter is available at all times for the whole community. A wide range of groups and professions continue to give educational presentations that include:

- Pension Credit
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Police
- Fire Brigade
- Mental Health
- Healthy Living
- NHS Hampshire
- Gurkha Welfare Trust
- Royal British Legion
- Gardening
- Rushmoor Borough Council
- Member of Parliament
- Charity groups
- Financial Advisor

My undying gratitude goes to all these organisations and individuals who have contributed their help to us.

Regardless of age and gender, we aim to provide help with general education and improving English language skills. Further to this, our charity provides help and assistance with matters that include social welfare. This means help with mental and physical aspects of health, such as infirmity, disability, financial hardship and recreation/leisure activities. As the charity is still developing and broadening its degree of support, please do not hesitate to contact us to find out what we can offer to assist you.

And now some further heartfelt thanks.

On behalf of Maddhat Shamuha, I wish especially to thank the Charity Commission; donors; volunteers; Trustees; especially Mrs Lynette Lee, our hard-working Treasurer, Miss Katherine Bowden, Mr Yogendra Bahadur Chettri, Mr Mike Biggs and former Trustee Miss Claire Dowbekin, and all the people involved directly or indirectly with Maddhat Shamuha for their support in our development and progression: Hampshire County Council; Rushmoor Borough Council; Cllr Alex Crawford, Mayor of Rushmoor; Mr Steve Dean, charity supporter; The Royal British Legion, Farnborough Branch, especially its Chairman, Mike Biggs, who is one of our Trustees and the caseworker for our ex-service personnel, as he is an example and inspiration to all; The Lingland Company; we have received wonderful support from the Mr Milan Tamu (Gurkha.com team), television and press both in the UK and Nepal.

With other Gurkhas, I have made my home in Eastleigh, Hampshire, where we have formed the Eastleigh Gurkha Nepalese Association (EGNA), which is dedicated to supporting local Nepalese, helping them to integrate successfully in Eastleigh's community and to contribute to that community while, at the same time, preserving our own culture and traditions.

Again I have experienced wonderful support, and, on behalf of EGNA, I wish to thank the people of Eastleigh and the local authorities and organisations that have been so helpful. I must include Eastleigh Borough Council and its officers (Helen Coleman, Rajni Bali and Karen Jones, in particular); Hampshire County Council's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Team; BME Direct Payment Project worker Mr Ed Walton and most especially its manager, Mr Mohammed Mossadaq, for his personal and professional support; the local branch of The Royal British Legion, and here I must single out Gerry Musgrove, who has become one of our Trustees; Fire and Rescue HQ in Eastleigh; The Highbridge Farm Project; Henry, our Landlord; The Asian Welfare and Culture Association; One Community and its members in Eastleigh, especially Liz Taylor; and, our Trustees (Gerry Musgrove, of course, Andy Moore, Joan Pragnell, Major Angela Burrows and Cllr Glynn Davies-Dear).

As you can see, throughout my life I have received wonderful help, support and care when I have needed it. I thank all who have done this and apologise if I have left any out. If they are not in this paper, they are in my heart. My body will die someday, but my memory of those who have cared for me and helped me will not die.

I have a philosophy that we are born naked into this world, we arrive with nothing and, when we leave this world, we can take nothing with us except, maybe, the positive memory of what we have done to uplift those people who have had fewer opportunities than ourselves. To be able to give back while we live is far more satisfying than accumulating capital or assets that are meaningless in the wider scheme of things. Having acquired all such material things, we then have to protect them and nothing in that can make us at all happier. So, while we live, I feel that it is our moral duty to do something positive to make a better world and to leave this behind for other people who can, in turn, do what they can for the next generation. That is why I do what I do.

We will continue to need all the support that can be given, no matter how big or small, so please get involved with helping the Ghurkhas and their families, as it would be wonderful to speak or meet with you.

Thank you.

By Kamal Bahadur Purja