The Bhutanese Refugee Imbroglio

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Abstract

The 107,000 Nepali- speaking refugees, known as Lhotshampa, claim Bhutanese citizenship based on historical residence patterns. They have languished in refugee camps in Nepal's Terai districts since the early 1990s because of Nepal's, India's and Bhutan's inability or unwillingness to resolve their citizenship status. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), many Bhutanese refugees say they want to return to their homes in Bhutan. Despite this desire- and despite numerous high- level meetings between the governments of Bhutan and Nepal to resolve the refugee crisis over the past 20 years- Bhutan has not permitted a single refugee to return home. Local integration has not been possible for political reasons. With neither repatriation nor local integration a realistic possibility for the great majority of refugees the latter had accepted resettlement in eight Western countries: 91,713 refugees offered settlement in the US had already arrived, some noticeably malnourished and suffering from a vitamin B12 deficiency. Resettlement to a third country has emerged as the only durable solution to the problem.

Key words: Bhutan, Nepal, ethnic, refugee, Lhotshampa

1. Introduction

For centuries the Himalayan kingdoms between India and China have inspired the romantic longings and imaginings of Westerners, who believed them to be out of time and beyond change.

One by one, these miraculous realms had been swallowed up or absorbed into the real world. Only Bhutan remained, the image of the 'last Shangri- la'[1] . Now even that is threatened.

In defending its policies of integration and the ideology of 'one nation, one people', and to check the overflow of illegal Nepali immigrants into Bhutan, the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGB) decided to adopt several policies. It passed resolutions in its National Assembly which went against the interests of Bhutanese of Nepali origin. The RGB demanded a 'no objection certificate' (NOC) issued by the police or local administration as a pre-condition, at least in southern Bhutan, for access to health facilities, education, civil service jobs and to allow the sale of cash crops. In 1991 it was decreed that anyone involved in peaceful demonstrations or suspected of supporting the human rights movement would be evicted. Forceful eviction was legitimized with the introduction of voluntary migration forms (VMFs). Since these forms were printed in the Dzonkha language, most Nepalese could not read their contents: they filled them the best way they could, indirectly surrendering their citizenship of Bhutan and playing straight into the Bhutan government's hands[2]. There are, of course, two versions of events. The erstwhile Lhotshampa ('people of the southern border' or southern people) administrators who had taken asylum in Nepal claimed that recent events reflected a radical reversal of policy which was intended to mould a single Bhutanese cultural identity (in which their own culture has no place) and protect the interests of the northern Drukpa elite against a worldwide trend towards democratization. They claimed that Nepali- speaking southerners already constituted a majority of the kingdom's population of 600,000 and that the government had decided to evict perhaps 100,000 of them to balance the demographic equation. The government claimed that most of the people who had fled southern Bhutan were illegal immigrants whose presence was detected by a census operation begun in 1988. It believed that Bhutan has become the victim of a terrorist movement led by the Bhutan People's Party, a Lhotshampa- dominated organization formed in 1990, which the government says is coercing the southern Bhutanese into leaving the country in huge numbers in order to internationalise the issue and force a mass return accompanied by the

1 'Shangri- La is an imaginary, beautiful place, often far away, where everything is pleasant and you can get everything you want,' accessed from dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/shangri-la (accessed July 14, 2017)

2 Rajesh S Kharat, "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal: Survival and Prospects." *Economic and Political Weekly* 38:4 (January 25, 2003), p.285, accessed from http://www.jstor.org/stable/4413124 (accessed May 14, 2012)

granting of wide- ranging political demands[3]. Numerous domestic and international agencies, especially the UNHCR, have played a pivotal role in producing the rights of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. Several rounds of bilateral talks have been held between Nepal and Bhutan in order to find a solution to the problem, including the repatriation of the refugees to Bhutan. Not much progress has been made in resolving the dispute and the future of the refugees remains grim because of absolute reluctance in Bhutan to allow them to return[4]. In my conversation with an erstwhile government official of Bhtutan, employees in private concerns and people from all ranks of society in Phuentsholing, Bhutan (identity not disclosed on conditions of anonymity) I found that there was reluctance to speak on this issue as it is anti- government. My respondents even told me that the Tshering Tobgay government has no interest to bring the refugees back in Bhutan.

2. Bhutan: Ethnic Groups

Bhutan is an independent Buddhist kingdom situated in the Himalaya mountains between northeast India and China (Tibet). Over 60 per cent of the country is forested and there are no large cities: Thimpu, the capital, has a population of around 25,000. The Bhutanese can be divided into three broad ethno- linguistic groups: the Ngalongs (or Ngalops) of the west; the Sharchhops of the east; and the Lhotshampas (or 'Nepali Bhutanese') of the extreme south. There are also many other smaller groups. The Ngalongs are in a minority overall but they and the central Bhutanese occupy most senior government positions and the Ngalongs' language, the Tibetan- derived Dzongkha, is promoted as the national language. The Ngalongs, the central Bhutanese and the Sharchhops practice a Tibetan style of Buddhism, which is supported by the state: they and the other Buddhist communities of northern Bhutan are therefore usually known collectively as 'Drupkas,' and intermarriage is common between them. The Lhotshampas who inhabit the southern foothills are mostly Hindus who speak the Nepali language[5].

The terms 'Lhotshampa,' 'Nepali,' 'Nepali Bhutanese,' 'Bhutanese Nepali' and so on should perhaps not be used interchangeably. These terms can have political undertones: for instance,

3 Michael Hutt, "Refugees from Shangri- la," *Index on Censorship* 22:9 (April 1, 1993),p.10, accessed from DOI:10.1080/03064229308535539 (accessed June 24,2017)
4 Kharat, "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal," p.285
5 Michael Hutt, "Ethnic Nationalism, Refugees and Bhutan," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 9:4 (London: University of London, December, 1996) , pp..397-398,p. 400, accessed from DOI:10.1093/jrs/9.4.397 (accessed March 2, 2017)

'Lhotshampa' is sometimes used by the Bhutanese government to denote the 'legal' or 'loyal' Nepali- speaking community that remains within the kingdom, to distinguish its members from those who have departed, while 'Bhutanese Nepali' denotes a Bhutanese sub- set of a larger Nepali entity. Mathew argues that the Thimpu- based government introduced 'Lhotshampa' as a new term in the mid- 1980s, which was intended to underplay the dynamics of the ethnic consciousness of the Nepali and to create a distinction between the Bhutanese of Nepali origin and the people of Nepalese ethnicity in India. In other words, this Lamaist kingdom has a sizeable immigrant population strategically located in a frontier zone over which the center may not have complete control[6].

The borders of the kingdom of Nepal do not delimit exactly the region whose dominant population is identified as 'Nepali.' The Nepalis of northeast India and Bhutan come originally from a variety of castes and ethno- linguistic groups that have traditionally inhabited specific sections of the eastern Nepalese hills but post-migration generations are unified by their use of Nepali language as a common tongue. Nepali's are a majority in Sikkim (an autonomous Indian protectorate until 1975 but now a state within the Indian Union), in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal and in the foothills of southern Bhutan. There are also Nepali communities in Assam and scattered across the hill states of northeast India[7].

Although Sikkim had a Nepali majority by the time of its first census in 1891, it appears that Nepali farmers did not begin to settle in southern Bhutan in significant number until after about 1880. The south of the country had until then remained a hinterland, where the kingdom's rulers preferred not to settle prematurely. At some point towards the end of the 19th century it was decided to follow the example of the British in Darjeeling district of West Bengal and bring Nepali peasant farmers into southern Bhutan to bring the land under cultivation. In the 20th century, Bhutan's authorities allowed Nepali settlements in certain parts of southern Bhutan to work in commercial logging and clearing of land.

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6 A. C. Sinha, "Bhutan in 1994: Will the Ethnic Conflict be Resolved," *Asian Survey*, 35:2 (California: University of California Press, February, 1995),p.167, accessed from http://www.jstor.org/stable/2645026 (accessed May 14, 2012). See also, Birendra Giri, "Mourning the 15th Anniversary of Crisis: The Plight of Bhutanese Refugee Women and Children," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 40: 5 (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi:SAGE, Sep 21, 2005), p.346, accessed from DOI:10.1177/0021909605057742 (accessed June 24, 2017). Further refer, Hutt, "Ethnic Nationalism," p. 400

7 Hutt, "Ethnic Nationalism," p. 400

Bhutan's Lhotshampas are the descendants of peasant farmers from Nepal who began to migrate to southern Bhutan after the Anglo- Burmese war of 1865 until about 1930. Successive generations cleared the forests and formed agrarian communities (as discussed in the preceding paragraph) that quickly became Bhutan's main producers of food. The Nepali settlers became the kingdom's main source of cash income: unlike the Drukpas of the north, who paid their taxes in kind right up until the late 1950s. British colonial records show that Nepali settlers in south- west Bhutan were paying taxes in cash even before the Bhutanese monarchy was established in 1907[8]. The first Nepali settlement took place in the far southwestern district of Samchi and further east in Chirang. During the 1960s, Nepali Bhutanese were resettled in the far southeastern district of Samdrup Jongkhar, possibly because of a shortage of cultivable land in the districts of first settlement. Until 1958, when they became Bhutanese citizens, these settlers and their descendents had the status of tenants and until 1961 they paid their rents and taxes to the Bhutan Agent at Kalimpong. After that, the south was administered directly from the new permanent capital at Thimpu[9].

Although Bhutan has been the subject of a handful of historical studies, the history of its southern districts remains unresearched. Thus, the only sources on the actual size of the Nepali population in Bhutan during the early decades of the twentieth century (a crucial figure in view of the Bhutanese government's allegation of massive illegal immigration after 1958) are the somewhat random reports left by British colonial officials who passed through the region on their missions to the capital. By 1932, according to one such source, about 60,000 had settled in the south-west of the country[10].

It seems very likely that the Gorkhaland movement[11] inspired a fear of Nepali- led activism among the Bhutanese ruling class. These fears added to the long held apprehension of a tiny Buddhist monarchical state that had watched neighbouring Sikkim (the propaganda about the role of the people of Nepali origin in the fall of Chogyal, the ruler of Sikkim and its merger with

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8 Michael Hutt, "The Bhutanese Refugees: Between Verification, Repatriation and Royal Realpolitik," *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, 1:1 (January, 2005), p.45, accessed from the bhutanese refugees:between verification...-CiteSeerX (accessed June 24, 2017).

9 Hutt, "Ethnic Nationalism," p. 401

10 Ibid.

11 a campaign of strikes and civil disobedience backing a demand for an autonomous state in the Darjeeling hills. This degenerated into violence and claimed some 200 lives between 1986 and 1988 before a compromise solution was reached, accessed from Hutt, "Ethnic Nationalism," p. 402.

India in 1975), whose ruling family was related through marriage to Bhutan's, being absorbed into India, aroused a phobia of the Lhotshampas for their alleged destabilizing role of the monarchy in Bhutan and had seen the original population of Assam have become a minority after massive Bengali immigration. In 1990, human rights and democracy were the key slogans of a movement within Nepal itself that reduced the king of Nepal to a constitutional monarch. The fact that a group of Nepali Bhutanese exiles began to mouth the same slogans in 1989 can only have confirmed the ruler's perception of the large Nepali Bhutanese population as a threat and of their own position as an increasingly exposed minority in an unstable corner of the Indian subcontinent. In other words, the assimilation process had accelerated too quickly for some powerful members of the elite, who felt that the newly admitted Lhotshampas were bringing with them democratic claims and values[12].

3. Political Developments in Bhutan

In 1958, the 'Lhotshampa' population of the southern districts of Bhutan was granted Bhutanese citizenship and tenure of its lands. The Bhutanese government later pursued a policy of integration that met with considerable success: having allowed the south to run its own affairs for decades with minimal contact with the north. The land- hungry Nepalese farmers had actively contributed to the economic development of Bhutan, turning the “negative” southern area into a vibrant zone of prosperity. The government began to train Nepali Bhutanese for government service and for some years even offered a cash incentive for Nepali- Drukpa intermarriage (cash grant of Nu 5,000 were given by the government to encourage inter- ethnic marriages). Thus, the Nepali Bhutanese began to play a more important role in national life, occupying some senior positions in the administration and sometimes even representing the kingdom overseas. Nevertheless, they were treated as second- class citizens and denied high positions in the bureaucracy, army, the Royal Advisory Council and the National Assembly[13].

The disproportionate presence of an ethnic Nepalese in Bhutan led to apprehension among the ruling Drukpas of being outnumbered, making them bring some measures against the Nepalese.

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12 Ibid. See further, M Mayilvaganan, "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal: Problems and Prospects," p.2, accessed from repository.um.edu.my/78472/1/Bhutanese%20 Refugees%20 art.pdf (accessed January 9, 2017). See also, Hutt, "The Bhutanese Refugees,"p. 45

13 Mayilvaganan, "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal,"p.2. Also see, Hutt, "Ethnic Nationalism," p. 402. Refer further, Sinha, "Bhutan in 1994," p.168

The Drukpas are said to comprise 16 percent of the population, the Sarchops 31 per cent and the remaining are said to be the Bhutanese of Nepali origin. Besides, the Lhotsampas are politically more conscious, better educated and more exposed to modernizing and democratic influences of India and Nepal than other ethnic groups in Bhutan[14].

Jigme Singhe Wanchhuk (the king of Bhutan) brought a new law in 1977 in order to restrict the fresh inflow of Nepalese by which it was made 'obligatory for the new entrants (labourers of Nepali origin) to procure valid passport and other documents. Besides, they were also asked to seek government clearance before appointment'. Later a Marriage Act promulgated in 1980 made it more difficult for Bhutanese to marry non- Bhutanese, especially targeted Lhotshampas and disqualified those who did so from receiving various state benefits like promotion in government service, fellowship for education abroad[15].

During the 1980s every adult member of the Bhutanese population was issued with a printed citizenship card bearing the photograph of its holder. But in 1985 a new Citizenship Act was introduced further to curb the majoritarian nature of the Bhutanese of the Nepalese origin, given the fact that they were 53 per cent of Bhutan's population, according to 1981 census. The 1985 Citizenship Act amended the legislation on citizenship by birth so that citizenship could only be acquired automatically from both parents instead of through the father alone; it required evidence of permanent domicile on or before 31st December 1958 as the basis for citizenship by registration; and for citizenship by naturalization it required a number of criteria that could not be met by most Nepali Bhutanese, such as fluency and literacy in the national language, the Tibetan- derived Dzongkha. In other words, according to the new Act, the Bhutanese government 'granted citizenship retrospectively only to those inhabitants who could prove that they had been residents of the country from 1958. The 1985 act adopted 1958 as the cut- off year after which no Nepalese would be granted citizenship and declared 'illegal' entrants. As a result, the Lhotshampas, who could not prove that both parents were Bhutanese citizens, were declared illegal immigrants, retroactively, even if they had been citizens under the national law of 1958.Because of scrapping the 1958 Law, more than 60,000 children born out of marriages from 1958 to 1988 were declared non- citizens. Likewise, while depriving their right to nationality to more than 10,000 Lhotshampa wives, the census further claimed that it discovered a total of

14 Mayilvaganan, "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal,"p.2
15 Ibid

103,000 'illegal' and 'economic migrants' in the country. In short, the revision of the Marriage/Citizenship Acts and census were intended to revoke the citizenship of the Lhotshampa minorities and, by dubious means, to denaturalize the once naturalized citizens. The government claimed that the Act was in no sense retroactive but strictly in line with earlier legislation. In particular, the Marriage Act of 1980 and the Citizenship Act of 1985 were purposely designed to reduce the number of Lhotshampa population and ultimately their mass eviction. If discriminatory domination can survive only when it is reproduced through multiple acts of exclusion, inferiorization or marginalization, this is exactly what Ngalung rulers attempted to achieve[16].

Subsequently in 1988, the Bhutan government practically launched a census exercise to determine the population status of its residents. The term 'çensus' has always been used by the Bhutan government for these operations but they do not produce the statistical profile of the population of Bhutan that one might expect from a national census. Instead, the main purpose is to guard against illegal immigration, a constant threat in the south where the border with India is porous. Accordingly, 'censuses' appear to have been conducted annually in most southern districts since 1988 but have not taken place regularly in the northern districts, except perhaps in Thimpu. The 1988 census led to unease because, according to those who have since become refugees, excessively strict standards were set for documentation. According to the government, a survey of the south had detected the presence of over 100,000 illegal immigrants and the population was to be placed into seven categories, from 'F1' to 'F7' as follows: F1 Genuine Bhutanese citizens F2 Returned emigrants F3 Drop- out cases (i.e. people who were not around at the time of census) F4 Children of Bhutanese father and non- national mother F5 Non-national father married to Bhutanese mother and their children F6 Adopted children F7 Non-nationals[17].

It has been alleged that the census teams retroactively categorized southern Bhutanese children stateless, according to the cut- off year by violating Articles 7 and 8 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child and Article 15 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Right which the RGB ratified in 1990. Again, the discriminatory provisions for women in Bhutan's

16 Ibid. Further refer, Hutt, "Ethnic Nationalism," p. 402. Also see, Hutt, "Refugees from Shangri-la,"p.10. See further, Giri, "Mourning the 15th Anniversary of Crisis," pp.348, 350

17 Hutt,"Ethnic Nationalism," pp.402-403

citizenship laws were at odds with the UN Convention on Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which Bhutan ratified in 1981[18].

It has been argued that the 1985 Citizenship Act would not have posed major problems for most Nepali Bhutanese, who were accustomed to retaining documents such as land tax receipts, if it had been implemented fairly during the census. But in the event many who could not provide documents that proved they resided in Bhutan in the specific year of 1958 itself were apparently categorized as returned emigrants or non- nationals, regardless of whether or not they held citizenship cards, land tax receipts etc[19].

These moves by Bhutan's government created an identity crisis for those who were either born after 1958, or had no document of their stay in southern Bhutan prior to the cut- off date fixed by the government. The matter became worse in the wake of 1990 democracy movement when a large number of families in southern Bhutan were evicted under the anti- national category[20].

In order to control the anti- Drukpa activities of the Bhutanese of the Nepal origin in Bhutan, the RGB decided to bring them into the mainstream and integrated them forcefully into the Bhutanese culture. As a result, the king of Bhutan introduced 'One Nation, One People' ideology in late 1980s and 1990s that formed a part of the Sixth Five- Year Plan (1987-92) through a policy of *Driglaham Namzha* i.e. a revival of traditional Bhutanese culture that led to the imposition of a cultural code comprising compulsory use of Dzongkha language, religion and dress of traditional Bhutanese upon the entire populace of Bhutan.

The king, *druk gyalpo*, issued a royal decree (*kasho*) on January 6, 1989 implementing *driglam namza* in order to promote a distinct national identity in pursuit of one nation, one people theme. Failure to abide by the *driglam namza* was subjected to a week in prison or a fine. Thus it denied the right to enjoy their own culture, wear ethnic dress and learn their own language of the Lhotsampas[21].

The dress element of this code required all citizens to wear the *gho* (a knee- length robe for men) and the *kira* (an ankle- length dress for women) in the following contexts: inside and outside the Dzong premises [fortress- monasteries now used as centres of district administration];[at] all government offices; at the schools; [at] the monasteries; at the official

18 Mayilvaganan, "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal,"p.4
19 Hutt,"Ethnic nationalism," p.403
20 Mayilvaganan, "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal,,"pp.3-4
21 Hutt," Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal". See also Hutt," Refugees from Shangri-la'', p. 12

functions and 'public congregations.' Pandits, pujaris (Hindu priests) and non- nationals would be exempt from the requirement)[22].

At the practical level, even if the Lhotshampa community agrees to wear *gho* and *kira*, the clothes are incredibly thick and are not suitable for the tropical weather of southern Bhutan. Despite that, Bhutan's government forces everyone to abide by all aspects of Ngalung cultural etiquette. People had been fined on the spot to the tune of Ngultrum 50-150 (US$2-5) when they had visited shops without wearing the *gho* in Chirang district of Bhutan. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch [HRW] have also recently re- confirmed that Nepali- speaking Bhutanese women, who are still living in southern Bhutan, continue to face restrictions under the Bhutanese *driglamnamja* doctrine, as it prevents them from wearing their traditional sari- sometimes even on their wedding day[23].

A central plank of the Bhutanese government's policy since the late 1980s has been to strengthen the role and status of Dzongkha in national life. One effect of this has been a downgrading of the role of Nepali generally (the claim that Nepali is 'banned' in Bhutan is an overstatement) and its removal from the syllabus of schools. Greater stress began to be laid on a knowledge of Dzonghka and local officials and school staff in southern Bhutan had to attend compulsory Dzongkha classes from 1990 onward. This was a complete reverse of the policy of the late 1950s, which had encouraged the teaching of Nepali and Sanskrit languages, as well as the sending of Lhotshampa students abroad for higher education. At the beginning of the school year in March 1990 the teaching of Nepali was discontinued and all Nepali curricular materials disappeared from Bhutanese schools. The Bhutanese government's case now is that because English had been the medium of education in Bhutan since 1961, the need for school children to study a third language in the south put them at a disadvantage; that Nepali was only of many languages spoken in Bhutan and was, moreover, the national language of a foreign country; and that new curricular materials could not be produced in Nepali in line with the New Approach to Primary Education Programme, for reasons of cost. According to Dasho Thinley Gyamtsho, Director of Education, the decision to remove Nepali was made on purely educational grounds in response to a UNICEF report which suggested that the need for southern school children to study three languages was hampering overall levels of achievement. However reasonable these

22 Hutt,''Ethnic Nationalism,'' p. 403

23 Giri, "Mourning the 15th Anniversary of Crisis," pp. 351-352. See also, Hutt, "Refugees from Shangri-la,'' p.12

arguments might be, the move came on top of the census and the dress code and could only add to a growing sense of cultural marginalization among the Nepali Bhutanese[24].

4. Ethnic Conflicts

The Bhutanese of Nepali origin in southern Bhutan protested against the cultural imposition or code of conduct. For them, it was a forceful imposition of Drupka culture and tradition upon people who had different cultures and traditions altogether. The Nepali community tried to resist it politically and a dissident movement took shape in Bhutan. In September and October 1990, Lhotshampa activists orchestrated mass demonstrations, in which demands for civil and cultural rights were presented to district headquarters all across southern Bhutan. The People's Forum for Human Rights, the Bhutan's People's Party and the Students' Union of Bhutan organized mass public demonstrations in southern Bhutan in September and October 1990 that were unprecedented in the kingdom's history.

The eruption of ethnic conflict between the people of Nepali origin and the 'Ngalong'-dominated government occurred in 1989.

The first organization which came into being against the discriminatory policies was the People's Forum for Human Rights, Bhutan (PFHRB). It was formed on July 7, 1989 at Kakarivitta in Nepal under the leadership of Tek Nath Rizal, a former royal advisory council member of Nepali origin. The activities of PFHRB created panic among the ruling elite. Rizal was extradited to Bhutan with the connivance of the government of Nepal on November 17, 1989. In Thimpu after a prolonged trial, Rizal was found guilty of treason three years after his arrest and remained in prison until December 1999.

The Bhutan People's Party (BPP) was formed on June 2, 1990 at Garganda tea estate in Siliguri, West Bengal. According to the manifesto of the BPP, it stands for democracy, parliamentary system of government, constitutional monarchy and multiparty system in Bhutan. The BPP organized series of demonstrations throughout southern Bhutan during September- October 1990. The government tried to suppress the wave of discontent through different measures. A new term, 'Ngolops' (anti- national or terrorists) was coined to describe the agitators and it became synonymous with anybody who demanded human rights and democracy in Bhutan.

[24] Hutt, ''Ethnic Nationalism'', p. 404. See also, Hutt,'' Refugees from Shangri-la'', p.12. See further, Giri, ''Mourning the 15th Anniversary of Crisis,'' pp.350-351

To counter the pro- democracy demonstrations in September- October 1990, the government deployed the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) throughout southern Bhutan. They were arrested and questioned, and often beaten, tortured and held for months without trial. Batches of such prisoners were released in amnesties announced by the king: several hundreds in September 1990, 727 in August 1991, 74 in October 1991 and so on. Almost without exception, those released left Bhutan and joined relatives in the refugee camps in Nepal. This led to the exodus of the people of Nepali origin from the country in large numbers. The people who left Bhutan at first came to India and then moved to eastern Nepal.

As the pro- democracy movement has grown in strength, the different trends dormant in the movement have come out in the open. Organisations like the PFHRB, the BPP who led the movement initially, started distancing themselves from each other. New organizations like the Bhutan National Democratic Party (BNDP), the Human Rights Organisation of Bhutan (HUROB), the Association of Human Rights Activists, Bhutan (AHURA Bhutan), the Bhutan Congress Party (BCP and the Druk National Congress (DNC) had been formed.

The BNDP was formed on February 7, 1992 in New Delhi. The BNDP believed that southern Bhutan problem was a struggle for democracy and demanded for the establishment of constitutional monarchy in a multi- party democratic set-up, secular constitution and respect for the 1948 UN Declaration for Human Rights in all parts of Bhutan.

The HUROB and AHURA Bhutan were formed on September 7, 1992 and November 16, 1992, respectively. The BCP was formed in May 1993 after a split in the BPP. The DNC came into being on June 16, 1994. While other political parties and human rights organizations are led by the people of Nepali origin, the DNC was a non- Nepali political party. Rongthong Kunley Dorji, a Sharchop from eastern Bhutan, was the chairman of the DNC. According to its manifesto, the party stands for parliamentary democracy and wanted to declare Bhutan as a multi- ethnic, multi-lingual, Buddhist constitutional monarchy.

The release of Tek Nath Rizal on December 18, 1999 after 10 years of rigorous imprisonment became a turning point in the recent history of the pro- democracy movement. Pro- democracy organizations once again regrouped under his leadership to form the Human Rights Council of Bhutan (HRCB) on July 13, 2003.

The radicalization of politics in Nepal by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) had its impact on the Bhutanese refugees. Bhutanese Communist Party (Marxist- Leninist- Maoist) in the early

months of 2003 was formed in order to ventilate the resentment as a result of the indifference of the Bhutanese government towards the futile non- violent struggles of the moderates among the refugees for repatriation[25].

Immediately after the protest rallies of the early 1990s, the southern Bhutanese villages were left only with women and children, as most of the male members fled the country for fear of persecution by the Ngalung government. As a result, hundreds of women were reportedly subjected to rape, while some were tortured to death at home or in custody. After the demonstrations, many new rules and procedures were introduced in the south. Lhotshampas saw these measures as attempts to attack the economic and social bases of their communities. Restrictions were placed on the transportation of essential commodities such as salt. Applicants for scholarships and civil service appointments had to produce a 'No Objection Certificate' (N.O.C) that they had acquired from the Royal Bhutan Police. This certified that the holder had a clean record, i.e., that they had not taken part in oppositional activity and were not related to anyone who had. The N.O.C. was also required of children seeking admission to school, with the result that children whose parents had taken part, or were suspected of taking part, in ánti-national activities' had difficulties gaining access to formal education. Other controversial government measures in the south include a shortlived attempt to establish a 'Green Belt' along the border probably for security reasons rather than environmental ones since Bhutan is already richly- forested. This policy involved the compulsory demolition of Lhotshampa homes but was quietly discontinued, allegedly on the advice of alarmed foreign aid officials.

Kuensel, the only newspaper published inside Bhutan, recorded a dramatic increase in violent crime, robbery and destruction of development infrastructure in southern Bhutan during the early 1990s and blamed all such crimes on ''anti- national terrrorists'. It often alleged that the 'terrorists' had come from the refugee camps in Nepal and on at least one occasion this was admitted by a dissident organization[26].

Though the above reasons laid foundation for their problems, the main reason and immediate one for the exodus of southern Bhutanese was the legitimization of forceful eviction by the introduction of Voluntary Migration Forms (VMFs) by the RBG in 1991. Since the VMF was

[25] Hutt, ''The Bhutanese Refugees'', pp. 46-47. See also, Joseph C. Mathew, ''Political Transition in Bhutan,'' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41: 14 (Apr. 8-14, 2006),p.1313, accessed from http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418044 (accessed May 14, 2012)

[26] Giri, ''Mourning the 15th Anniversary of Crisis,'' p. 354, Michael Hutt, ''The Bhutanese Refugees''p. 47. See also, Hutt, Refugees from Shangri- la," p.12

printed in Dzonkha language, most of the Bhutanese of the Nepalese origin could not read the content and thus they 'filled it with blind faith' and indirectly surrendered their citizenship to authorities. Besides, many Bhutanese of the Nepalese origin were turned into refugees primarily because some protested against the discriminatory state policy about language, religion, nationality and culture. Others were forced to leave on the allegations that they supported the movements against the government. Some regarded their eviction as an attempt of 'ethnic cleansing' resulting in denial of nationality for the ethnic Nepalese[27].

The first group of around 60 Bhutanese of the Nepalese origin entered Nepal from Kankarbhitta in December 1990. Subsequent years witnessed a large flow of Bhutanese refugees of Nepalese origin into Nepal due to the discriminatory policies of Bhutan. Though Nepal is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention on Protection of Refugees or the Protocol, it is assisting the refugees. Legally, refugees are treated and the laws applicable to ‘aliens’ in Nepal. By and large, Nepal’s government policy as regards to entry and stay of refugees and aliens has been quite liberal[28].

The Bhutanese government is anxious to depict many of the refugees as 'voluntary emigrants' who have been enticed or intimidated into leaving for the camps by the dissident political parties operating in exile in Nepal. In April 1994, one such group of some 34 families left for the camps from the Dorokha sub- division of Samchi district in southwest Bhutan, having signed 'voluntary emigration' forms. The eviction/emigration was carefully choreographed and the émigrés were even videotaped as they declared that they were departing on their own free will[29].

A very different picture of this episode emerges from a joint statement signed by 27 family heads who were among a group of 284 people from Dorokha who arrived in the refugee camps on 9 April 1994. One claimed that he had been served with a notice to leave Bhutan because his older brother had already left, others said they had been told to leave because they were unable to produce certificates of origin (because their relatives had left Bhutan and taken such documents with them), one because his brother was an 'anti- national,' and so on[30].

Bhutan's national newspaper, Kuensel, reported that a decree from the king of Bhutan which urged the people not to leave had been read out to the group. This decree was said to have been

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[27] Mayilvaganan, ”Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal,"pp.5-6

[28] Ibid.p.6

[29] Hutt,"Ethnic Nationalism," p.407

[30] Ibid.

dated 26 March but the people claimed that it was not read out to them until 7 April, by which time several of their houses had been demolished. None the less, it did result in five families and two individuals staying on. The lengthy Kuensel report, published on 9 April 1994, depicted the families 'decision' to leave Bhutan as something incomprehensible and began: 39 families and 7 individuals from Samtse have relinquished their citizenship and opted to leave the country despite efforts by the government to persuade them to stay back. The gup (headman) of the Denchukha block was quoted as saying, all the reasons given by them were excuses. They had no reason to leave the country as they have not been mistreated by the local authorities, the government or the security personnel. The real reason was that they had no love or loyalty for the country. The article ended with a quote from the district administrator of Samtse (Samchi): I wonder how the people who have refused to stay back in Bhutan despite all our efforts to persuade them to withdraw their applications to emigrate can be accepted as refugees in Nepal[31].

The Bhutanese government had always argued that the people in the camps should not all be regarded as refugees from Bhutan. An important exposition of this argument came from the king of Bhutan in an interview with Ramesh Chandran published in the *Sunday Times of India* on December 18 1994: There were 10 million Nepalis in India, nearly 20 million in Nepal and 87 per cent of them were living on subsistence farming. Many of them don't own land, have no access to electricity, water, sanitation facilities. Many work as construction labourers and if they work hard they get paid 14- 15 rupees a day as wages. They cannot afford to send their children to school or get medicinal care. The main camp in Jhapa is one of the best run refugee camps one can find anywhere. The refugees get free housing, free electricity, drinking water, proper sanitation, free monthly rations, nutritional sustenance, free clothing, blankets, education up to class 10 and 3 dollars a day. There are eight vocational training programmes and income generating vocational training schemes. Whatever money is earned by working outside the camp is extra. Even cooking utensils, gas stoves, soaps are given free[32].

The Bhutanese government had asserted on various occasions that the camps contained a variety of different categories of people: illegal Nepali residents in Bhutan; imported Nepali labourers who were claiming to be Bhutanese nationals by virtue of having worked in Bhutan; dissidents, many of whom had committed criminal and terrorist offences in Bhutan; Bhutanese nationals

[31] Ibid. pp. 407-408
[32] Ibid. pp. 408-409

who had emigrated legally after renouncing their citizenship and selling all their properties; and people from other parts of the region, including Nepal itself, who had never even set foot in Bhutan[33].

Leo Rose (1994) argued that many of the Nepalis who were expelled from the tribal hill states of the Indian northeast during the *bhumiputra* ('sons of the soil') movements of the late 1970s and early 1980s came to settle illegally in southern Bhutan; there they joined others who had entered Bhutan to work on infrastructural development projects in the 1960s and 1970s and then stayed on 'formally illegally but with the tacit consent of the government'. Rose stated that these 'illegals,' were 'asked to leave by the RBG' during 1988-90', even those Nepalis who had lived in the country for ten or more years and had made major contributions to Bhutan's development programmes. Dhakhal and Strawn (1994) agreed that 'in line with the objectives of the sixth plan, non- national workers were either evicted or encouraged to leave the country,' but they date this to the period 1986-88[34].

The argument about whether the people in the camps in Nepal are or are not genuine Bhutanese citizens has raged for five years. The fact that many members of the camp population hold either citizenship cards or other documentary evidence of residence in Bhutan that stretches back beyond the crucial date of 1958 is dismissed by the Bhutanese government, which argued that many of the cards were forgeries and that the 'anti- national terrorists' had often raided census offices and destroyed or made off with documents. It had published documents which it claimed prove that people registered in the camps were not *bona fide* Bhutanese: for instance, the Nepalese citizenship card of one Indra Bahadur Chettri alongside a letter from the UNHCR representative in Kathmandu, dated 24 October 1991, declaring that he was a Bhutanese national who is of concern to the UNHCR. On the other hand, the government of Nepal conducted a survey at the end of 1993 with the assistance of UNHCR and was reported to have concluded that there were 10, 073 families with citizenship documents; 1762 families with records pertaining to land ownership;251 families with health documents; 40 families with education certificates; 2494 families with documents such as to seek service in the government, marriage certificates and court documents and only 368 families without any documents[35].

[33] Ibid. p. 409
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.p.410

Tahir Ali, who was the UNHCR's representative in Kathmandu until the end of 1995, advised that these figures should be treated with some caution and stressed that UNHCR has not adopted a position on the matter of whether the people in the camps are genuine citizens of Bhutan. UNHCR explicitly recognizes that it is for the governments of Nepal and Bhutan… to assess and verify these claims[36].

5. The Camps

The first *prima facie* refugees arrived in Nepal at the end of 1990 and were followed by several hundreds per month, reaching a total of about 5000 by September 1991. At this point the government of Nepal formally requested UNHCR (which had been providing some *ad hoc* assistance since February 1991) to coordinate all emergency relief assistance. A feature of the early inflow was that many families had already been out of Bhutan for months but had not been permitted to set up camps in Assam or West Bengal and claimed to have been subjected to harassment by both Indian and Bhutanese police. The largest inflow occurred during 1992 with an average of 300- 600 arrivals per day during the period March- July, bringing the total to nearly 50,000. The flow of new arrivals gradually decreased through 1993 and 1994 to a trickle during 1995 of one or two per day[37].

The first arrivals set up three camps inside Nepal: first at Maidhar, then at Timai and Sanishchare. The first bamboo huts at Maidhar were erected on the banks of the river Mai but mortality rates was very high and before the summer rains struck, the Maidhar camp was dismantled and its residents were dispersed to other camps. The remaining eight camps are on five different sites. All of these are in the Jhapa district of Nepal, except Sanishchare, which is in Morang district. The Beldangi site, with a total population of over 43,000 is the largest human settlement in Jhapa district, which in 1991 had a total population of 593,737. The camps' population figures as of 30 September 1995 were as follows:

Timai	8,389
Goldhap	8,069
Beldangi I	15,201
Beldangi II	19,108

[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid. p.411

Beldandagi II Ext.	9,539
Sanishchare	17,360
Khudunabari (N)	7,320
Khudunabari (S)	3,894
Total	88,880 [38]

At the end of September 1995 UNHCR reported the presence of a further 264 registered refugees living outside the camps and an estimated 15,000 non- registered refugees, also living outside the camps (all figures from UNHCR October 1995). Timai and Sanishchare are the oldest existing camps, while Khudunabari, the newest, was established in February 1993[39].

All the camps are situated under trees on 222 hectares of marginal forest land. Conditions were basic but descent, although life was very uncomfortable during summer rains and the population consisted mainly of hills people who were not accustomed to the high temperature of Nepal's Tarai lowlands. The huts were made of bamboo and plastic sheeting and lasted for about three years. Thus the oldest were becoming dilapidated. Most of the people had fewer clothes or other possessions. Registered refugees received rations of rice, pulses, oil, sugar, salt and blended food from the World Food Programme. The Nepal Red Cross also supplied some vegetable, rations and basic household items, including kerosene stoves and kerosene to reduce the use of firewood. Refugees did not receive cash payments unless they were employed by the implementing agencies; in such cases the wages that they received were lower than the local rate for equivalent jobs. The refugees in the camps could not keep animals and had no land to work. Unless they worked as teachers in the camp schools or had no minor administrative role, there was very little for them to do. Most refugees were agriculturalists in Bhutan and many had left behind land and property of considerable value, of which they often had photographs[40].

A Community Development Approach (CDA) was taken in running the Bhutanese camps. The CDA is a set of guidelines developed to strengthen the self- reliance of refugees during protracted refugee situations. The CDA takes the viewpoint that refugees should have ownership of their situation and the opportunity to enhance their skills and capacities in order to build self-reliance and reduce dependency. The day- to- day management of the Bhutanese refugee camps

[38] Ibid.p.412
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid. pp. 412-413

in Nepal are coordinated by democratically elected camp management committees made up of volunteer refugees. Committees are responsible for social services, health services, counseling and administration. The distribution of international aid, including food rations are administered through sector and sub- sector heads of each camp. The CDA meant in practice a rights- based approach and democratic structures of self- management, the promotion of the interests of women and children and equitable access to basic services. Whilst giving the refugees an active voice in their day-to-day activities has empowered refugees it also led to heightened political activism, escalation of demands for improved services and wide spread disillusionment among the Bhutanese refugees[41].

Within the refugee camps of Nepal comparatively high levels of primary, secondary and tertiary education were achieved and several preventive health programmes were instituted along with regular nutrition and other services. In effect, the refugee population enjoyed 'disproportionately higher indicators of well- being' than the local Nepali population. The camps themselves while overseen by the UNHCR are refugee run- with the refugees providing policing, social, project, health services, counseling aid distribution and camp administration. The result has been described as a 'best practice' example of refugee camp 'care and maintenance'.[42]

Despite such a 'relatively high standard' of education and services, the UNHCR has acknowledged 'considerable frustration' among refugees. This frustration is 'particularly pronounced' among young people. The provision of education to advanced levels has raised skills and expectations that cannot be fulfilled in the context of confinement to camps. The UNHCR and Nepal government efforts in the Refugee Camps like Happy Nepal TPO (the Trans Psycho- Social Organization) had elicited simmering discontent from the camp population. While some members of the above mentioned organizations were enthusiastic and well-meaning, others provided fuel to resentment of the refugees regarding how they felt about the way those issues were handled. Lack of experience in dealing with the issues and the fact that the local Nepalese were recruited for these jobs also created mistrust. Many felt that the local Nepalese brought in their negative perceptions and stereotyping of the Bhutanese refugees into their job.

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[41] Beth Ferguson, "The Bhutanese Refugee Resettlement Journey- Part 3," *Labour and Migration Research Centre* (New Zealand: Wellington, 2011), p.2, accessed from www.mbie.govt.nz/publications.../bhutanese-study-part-3.pdf (accessed June 12, 2012)

[42] Ibid.

Suicide rates, domestic violence, alcoholism and trafficking of women and children were increasing along with child marriage, polygamy and prostitution. Refugee families were dispersed across different camps and young people often lacked identity papers since they had been born in camps after families fled Bhutan.

Within its uneasy birth and legacy, the Bhutanese refugee activism went through several phases, ranging from demand for human rights, peaceful advocacy for repatriation, militancy and political front groups and parties and parties of all shades. The refugees were not immune to the larger socio- political movement in Nepal and the surrounding regions of India, particularly the group who left Bhutan as children and grew up in the camps. Not allowed access to legal employment and education, frustrated at their situation and with the other political entities and international agencies deciding their fates, they were easy targets as recruits for political movements in the region, including the People's War in Nepal[43].

6. Endeavour for a Political Solution

The governments of Bhutan and Nepal agreed to establish a Ministerial Joint Committee to work towards a resolution of the refugee problem in July 1993. At its first meeting in Kathmandu in October 1993, the Committee agreed to verify the status of the people in the camps and agreed on four categories:

1. bonafide Bhutanese if they had been evicted forcibly;
2. Bhutanese who emigrated;
3. non-Bhutanese people;
4. Bhutanese who had committed criminal acts.

Since then, several rounds of talks had not produced further tangible results and the Nepalese media had criticized their government for agreeing to these four categories. The negotiations had not been helped by two changes of government in Nepal since they began. Whenever the delegations met in 1994 and 1995, it seemed that the Nepalese team usually pressed to move on to the verification process and that the Bhutanese team insisted that the two sides should 'harmonise their positions' on each category first. This delayed progress, because the latter objective was very difficult to achieve without one side or the other making concessions. If the

[43] Ibid. See also, Sreeja Balarajan, " Attaining *Trishanku's* Heaven? Bhutanese Refugee Re- Settlement in the United States," *Refugee Watch*, 39 & 40 (June and December 2012), p.70

Bhutanese were allowed to apply their national laws, the Nepalese feared that huge numbers of people would fall in category 2 (unless it could be proved that emigration forms were signed under duress), category 4(for having demonstrated against government policies), or category 3 (simply for leaving the country and thereby forfeiting their citizenship).

Subsequently, in April 1996, the Bhutanese delegation met the Nepalese counterpart in Kathmandu but nothing happened for refugees. The government of Bhutan felt that the Nepalese government was not interested in resolving the issues bilaterally, instead it wanted a third party to be involved in the talks. Bhutan further alleged that the government of Nepal wanted to send all the people in the refugee camps to Bhutan. As a result, there was a deadlock in the talks between the two countries from 1996 to 1999. However, the eighth round of talks took place in September 1999 by the pressure of the international human rights organizations but nothing emerged productively[44].

At the end of 2000, possibly as a result of a visit to Bhutan and Nepal by two American secretaries of state, it was agreed that a team of Nepalese and Bhutanese officials would initiate the process of verification, negotiated in 1993. Subsequently, on March 2001, the 'Joint Verification Team (JVT)' began verification in Khudunabari, one of the smaller camps, where some 12,500 people were living. The JVT comprised five Nepalis and five Bhutanese. Though the verification in the Khudunabari camp was completed on 14 December 2001, the outcome was kept undisclosed for more than 17 months. In early 2003, Bhutanese officials reassured international donors at a meeting in Geneva of their commitment of finding a solution to the refugee problem. As a result, the JVT spent many weeks in secret discussions in Thimpu before presenting its report to the fourteenth meeting of the Ministerial Joint Committee (MJC) in Kathmandu in May 2003. The JVT identified only 293 individuals as bona fide refugees who were evicted forcibly. According to the joint press release issued by the Ministerial Joint Committee on 21 May 2003, the RGB would take 'full responsibility' for the 293 individuals categorized as 'bona fide Bhutanese evicted forcibly'. These people would be permitted to return and would be issued with citizenship cards. Remaining, as stated by the JVT, those of the 8595 'Bhutanese who emigrated' and wished to return would be given the option of re-applying for Bhutanese citizenship ‘in a liberal interpretation of the Bhutanese Citizenship and Immigration

[44] Hutt,"Ethnic Nationalism," p.413. See also, Mayilvaganan, "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal,"p.11

Laws,' while those who did not wish to return would be 'given the option to apply Nepalese citizenship in accordance with the laws of the kingdom of Nepal.' 'Bhutanese who had committed criminal acts' would have 'full opportunity to prove their innocence in the court of law in Bhutan.' Many observers had assumed that the JVT simply took this category at face value, without looking into the various reasons for flight[45].

Both the governments of Bhutan and Nepal made a concerted effort to present the verification exercise as a major brerakthrough. After the 15th MJC meeting in Thimpu in October 2003, the Bhutanese government announced that all refugees would be able to return except the non-Bhutanese and the 'criminals.' This was hailed as a major concession. It was pointed out that having consistently denied for over a decade that the camps contained a significant number of its own people, the Bhutanese government then accepted that around 75% of the population of the first camp either were, or had once been, Bhutanese citizens. However, even after recognising many refugees as Bhutanese, those categorised as 'emigrants' could apply for Bhutanese citizenship but they would have to travel to Bhutan to submit their applications. Although the categorisation was carried out on a family basis, applications would only be accepted on an individual basis and applicants would have to remain in Bhutan for the duration of the probation period during which they would have to be able to speak Dzongkha and would need a 'good knowledge' of the culture and history of Bhutan' without making clear where they would live during the probation. The refugees had been consistently refusing this 'concession' of Bhutan. Moreover, Bhutan was against the presence of any third party like the UNHCR on its soil to monitor the repatriation process, as demarcated by the refugee leaders. Moreover, the Bhutan government's discrimination against the Lhotshampas remaining in Bhutan in the fields of employment, education, freedom of movement and citizenship and its policy of resettling northern Bhutanese on the lands vacated by the evicted Lhotshampas undermined any prospect of repatriation[46].

The UNHCR has tried to find a durable solution for the Bhutanese in Nepal. However, its attempts to get agreement for their repatriation to Bhutan failed and the Nepali government opposed local integration. International observers criticised integration on the grounds that

[45] Mayilvaganan, "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal,"pp.11-12

[46] Ibid. pp.12-13

Bhutan's behaviour constituted ethnic cleansing and local integration was a dangerous precedent. In 2006, the UNHCR acknowledged that the 'many refugees from Bhutan who were deprived of citizenship [and] languish in camps in Nepal foresee little chance of returning home or reacquiring their citizenship'. They faced a prospect of remaining 'part of the UNHCR casebook for the coming years[47].'

In 2007, the UNHCR, started accepting applications for moves to third countries. In mid 2008, the UNHCR acknowledged the failure of repatriation efforts, saying the United Nations had 'found it impossible' to broker solutions, so the strategy was to 'phase out assistance' and support targeted third- country resettlement as a 'solution to this problem.' The Bhutanese in Nepal were seen as a 'priority' for resettlement. After almost a decade of the resettlement program, more than 105,000 Bhutanese refugees have moved abroad. The vast majority have started new lives in the United States. Lack of political will to pressurize Bhutan by the concerned parties, the international community, India's reluctance to 'officially' involve itself in the issue due to geo-political interests, brought about the third country resettlement process than repatriation to Bhutan[48].

According to Kevin Allen, the Kathmandu- based representative of the UN refugee agency, global displacement has now reached world war 11 levels and fewer than 1 per cent of refugees typically find safe home in new countries. Eight years ago, some 108,000 refugees from Bhutan were living in seven camps in Jhapa and Morang districts in eastern Nepal. Today, just two camps remain and the refugee population now stands at less than 18,000 people. A core group of eight countries came together in 2007 to create this opportunity for Bhutanese refugees to begin new lives: Australia (5,554), Canada (6,500), Denmark (874), New Zealand (1002), the Netherlands (327), Norway (566), the United Kingdom (358) and the United States of America (91,713). UNHCR Representative Craig Sanders commented that this is one of the largest and most successful programmes of its kind and the resettlement of nearly nine out of 10 Bhutanese refugees is an extraordinary achievement. In 2007, New Zealand became the first country to accept Bhutanese refugees for resettlement[49].

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[47] Ferguson, "The Bhutanese Refugee Resettlement Journey" PP. 3-4

[48] Ibid. p. 4. Refer further, Balarajan, " Attaining *Trishanku's* Heaven?," p. 71

[49] "Resettlement of Bhutanese refugees surpasses 100000 mark," UNHCR, accessed from www.unhcr.org/.../resettlement-bhutanese-refugees-surpasses-100000-mark.html (accessed January 9, 2017). See also, "As Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal wind down, resettlement...," accessed from

7. Bhutanese Refugees Find Home in USA

Over the past decade, many Bhutanese refugees have found a home in America. Of the 100,000 Bhutanese refugees who have been resettled abroad in the past 20 years, 85 percent have been resettled in the United States with the largest populations residing in Texas, New York, Indiana, North Carolina and Georgia.

The official estimates of the number of Bhutanese citizens in the US before the resettlement program were about 150. By 2007, 3000 Bhutanese refugees had applied to the UNHCR for the third country resettlement option. The first batch of refugees started coming to the US in early 2008. By the end of 2008, the US had resettled more than 5000 Bhutanese refugees. The figures for the Bhutanese refugees resettled into the United States are: 47,843 at the end of June 2011.In 2007 US told that she would resettle some 60,000 refugees whereas till December 15, 2016 the resettlement figure was 91,713[50].

The Bhutanese refugees are resettled by the International Migration organization, IOM. The IOM coordinates with the US State Department to work on the refugee resettlement program[51].

The Bhutanese refugees have the highest suicide rate among the resettled refugees. A study done by the IOM, finds that suicide rate in the camps had increased from 20.3 per cent per 100,000 to 27.3 percent, post- resettlement, to 31 among those resettled in the US. Studies found that 11 Bhutanese refugees had committed suicide after resettling into the US. According to a study conducted by IOM, the refugees committing suicide in the States appeared to be younger than the ones who had committed suicide in the camps. In all identified suicides of individuals below 40 there seemed to be an association with excess of responsibility imposed on non- traditional providers towards the family or with excess of responsibility in females separated from their families and/ or other social support networks. It also pointed to the poignant trajectory of the Bhutanese refugee. For nearly 20 years, majority of the refugees who were constrained legally for employment and higher education faced a devaluation of their skills and social roles. While

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https://www.pri.org/.../2016.../bhutanese-refugee-camps-nepal-wind-down-resettlement-program-considered-success (accessed January 9, 2017).

[50] "Bhutanese Refugees Find Home in America," *whitehouse.gov,* accessed from https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/.../bhutanese-refugees-find-home-america (accessed July 23, 2017). Further refer, "Bhutanese Refugees," *Refugee Resettlement Watch*, accessed from https://refugeeresettlementwatch.wordpress.com/.../bhutanese-refugees/ (accessed July 23, 2017).

[51] Balarajan, " Attaining *Trishanku's* Heaven?," p. 71

debilitating in many ways, the camps were also places which enabled community ties and ethno-cultural identities. However the resettlement process has once again splintered and fractured those ties. The debilitating conditions in the camps, combined with the anxiety and fears of the re- settlement process, had given rise to high rates of depression, generalized anxiety and post traumatic stress disorders as well as some psychiatric disorders. These persistent conditions are carried over by the refugees who re- settle. Many refugees felt let down, after reaching US. The main issue concerns the gap between the expectations and the reality in the US. The added dimension of the economic crisis in the US also put pressure and colored the attitude of both the staff and the refugee[52].

In Nepal the belief was widespread that the government of India held the key to the problem, since it had a guiding hand on Bhutan's foreign relations and was moreover the country of first refuge for those who fled from southern Bhutan. However, India insisted, that the matter was purely bilateral issue and that it had no role to play in solving it. India had some constraints. It cannot interfere in the internal affairs of Bhutan according to the Indo- Bhutan treaty of 1949. Besides, being the neighbour, China is one of the key considerations for India to frame its policy towards the Himalayan state[53].

Around 2000 of the remaining 11,000 refugees, put up at various camps in Jhapa and Morang are refusing the third country resettlement and willing to return to their own homeland in Bhutan, according to a source at the UNHCR. The repatriation campaign has come to end after the UN body's resettlement programme. The repatriation campaign has been weakened as the leaders spearheading repatriation themselves opted for third country resettlement and the majority of the remaining refugees are also in resettlement process, giving up hope of repatriation as UNHCR's third country resettlement programme will come to an end in 2017. Bhampa Rai, Balaram Poudel, among other refugee leaders, are still campaigning for repatriation, though Rai claimed that ***hundreds of refugees had been forced to chose third country resettlement against their will[54].***

Conclusion

[52] Ibid. pp.74-76

[53] Mayilvaganan, "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal,"p.14. Also see, Hutt,"Ethnic Nationalism," p.414

[54] "Bhutanese Refugees," *Refugee Resettlement Watch*

The elites in the north realized that the ethnicity of the Nepali Bhutanese community in the south was very different from that of the north in that it pervaded all levels of southern Bhutanese society and also that in neighbouring areas this ethnicity had already been mobilized to bring about political change. It seemed axiomatic to the Bhutanese leadership that the populist ethnic nationalism of the Nepali Bhutanese in the south would in time be mobilized and that such a mobilization would sweep away the more exclusive ethnic nationalism of the Drukpa in the north. Hence the extension of the Driglam Namzhag code of social etiquette and dress from elite and monastic circles to the general populace; the banning of TV antennae and satellite dishes; the promotion of the national language, Dzongkha; the downgrading of the status of Nepali in national life; the tightening of citizenship and marriage laws and so on. Bhutanization provoked resistance from the Nepali Bhutanese, who had until then remained a 'quiscent and accomodated demotic ethnie. This resistance took on all the characteristics the northern elites most feared: an attempt at mass political mobilization and a stretch for support from Nepali- led political groups outside Bhutan. The Bhutanese government justified its response to this resistance by classifying a large portion of the southern population as non- nationals, playing up the violent aspects of its resistance and presenting it to the outside world as terrorism.

Inevitably, the two sides of this argument- the exiled Nepali Bhutanese leaders thrown up by the crisis and the Drukpa elite in Thimpu- have widely differing perceptions of the problem. The exiles argued that their return must be accompanied by political reforms in Bhutan that guarantee the Nepali Bhutanese a greater say in the administration and ensure their civil and cultural rights. The GOB laid stress on the robberies in the south and the threat of 'demographic invasion'. It described the issue as its 'southern problem' and presented it to the world as a 'threat to a nation's survival.' The situation is not adequately described by cliches such as 'clash of cultures' or 'ethnic cleansing'. It is the result of a politically dominant ethnic community seeking to defuse the potential threat of a previously marginal and subservient but very different ethnic community that existed within its own territory and is also part of a larger cross- border grouping. This it did, in effect if not by intention, by presenting it with a choice between subscribing visibly and actively to the Drukpa ethnic and political ethos or surrendering its rights to a continued presence in Bhutan.

As a result of the outflow of southern Bhutanese, the characteristics of each ethnic community had been heightened, the distance between them had become much greater and the search for an

accomodation had become much more difficult. Any resolution of the crisis must take account of the fears of the dominant group, the Buddhist highlanders of the north and of the aspirations and grievances of the Nepali- speaking people of the south[55].

It is impossible for the Bhutanese elite to accept the return of any significant proportion of the refugees unless it can be sure that its hold on power will not be fatally weakened as a consequence. Bhutan's Prime Minister Tshering Togbay has categorically refused to accept any of them as his fellow countrymen, ruling out any possibility of repatriation. In response to a letter sent by US Senator from New Hampshire Jeanne Shaheen, which urges Tobgay to allow family reunification of remaining Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, the latter has described them as "non-nationals and illegal immigrants." He has also accused the UNHCR of admitting refugees without screening their origin and questioned the origin of Bhutanese refugees. Senator Shaheen has also mentioned that so far only one refugee's application for return had been approved by Thimpu and he died before he could act on the approval[56].

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[55] Hutt,"Ethnic Nationalism," pp.417-418. Refer further, Hutt," Refugees from Shangri- la," p. 10

[56] Hutt,"Ethnic Nationalism," p. 418. Also refer, "Bhutan PM refuses to take refugees back," *Kathmandu Post*, accessed from kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/.../bhutan-pm-refuses-to-take-refugees-back.html (accessed March 3, 2017)

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