

# Bhutan Political Crisis and Bhutanese Refugees

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**Abstract** — The Nepali speaking people had entered Bhutan at different points of time and lived in the south of Bhutan as the people of Nepali origin until 1958. In the process of breaking the padlock of isolation, Bhutan accepted them as Lhotshampas and granted formal recognition into the mainstream of Druk society. Ever since then, all the Bhutanese people of the communities of Sharchhokp, Kheng, Bumthang, Kurtoed, Ngalong, Brokpas, Doya and the Nepali speaking section, irrespective of diversity of religion, culture and language coexisted in complete peace and harmony. Until mid-eighties, Bhutan was enjoying peace economic prosperity and stability. How ever since late eighties, Bhutan had been engulfed into a serious political crisis of its own making (the refugee crisis). This article written in the periphery of the Bhutanese political crisis which is explained in brief.

**Keywords** — *Nepali Speaking People; Refugee Crisis; Bhutanese.*

## 1. Introduction

Bhutan, Druk-Yul, the land of thunder dragon, a Himalayan Buddhist kingdom, has an area of approximately 47,000 sq. km. and a population of about 7,00,000. Being an agrarian country, agriculture is the main occupation and the source of employment of a large majority of its population. A country of diverse ethnicity, it is inhabited, apart from other smaller groups, by three major ethnic communities- the Ngalongs in the west constitute about 15-17% of the population, Sharchops in the east about 50-52% and the Lhotshampas in the south about 30-32% of the population.

The culture of the majority of the ethnic groups in Bhutan is rooted in Mahayana Buddhism, which was first introduced to Bhutan by the Saint Guru Padma Sambhava in the eighth century. The Lhotshampas are predominantly hindus, while some are Tibeto-Burman speaking. Bhutan remained in isolation till 1960's and is still considered to be one of the least developed and remote countries in the world [1].

## 2. Ethnicity

Before the first Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal Rinpoche, the founder of Bhutan, unified it into one country in

the 17th century. It was a land of many small independent principalities, but the sovereignty of the region and its habitation dates back to time immemorial. The first Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal Rinpoche consolidated its borders to what was then known as LhoMon Kha Sjee, meaning the land of herbals in the south whose four borders are the four Zones. Shar Dungsum Kha or Deothang in the east to Nub Daling Kha or pedong. Kalimpong in the west and Jang Takxi Kha, beyond Laya in the North to Lho Paksam Kha or Buxa Dooars in the south. The Shabdrung gave it the name Druk Gyalkhab and hence all its citizens, be they Ngalongs of the west, Sharchops of the east, Lhotshmpas of the south or whichever ethnic group, are known as Drukpas or the people of the Dragon Kingdom.

Pelela Pass, in central Bhutan, is the point which divides the kingdom into the four different direction, East, West, North and South [2]. Sharchops hail from the eastern region of Bhutan, In the days of the Shabdrungs, eastern Bhutan was known as the Sharchok Khorlo Tship Gey, which means "Eight Spokes of the Eastern Wheel", in other words indicating "Eight Eastern Provinces that from a circle". Sharchok Khorlo Tship Gey comprised of the eight provinces of Mangdi, Bhumthang, Kheng, Kurtoe, Mongar, Tashigang, Dungsum and Yangtse. As the name suggests, all the different ethnic groups of that region are Sharchops (people from the east). These eight provinces, covered the entire regions east of Pelela Pass including north and the south. The various ethnic sub-groups of the Sharchop Khorlo Tship gey, are mostly known by the names of the provinces, i.e. Bhumthaps, Khengpas, Kurteps etc. Sharchops from Mongar, Tashigang, Dungsum and Yangtse are known as Tshanglas, the present ruling dynasty is from Kurtoe.

Northern regions of Bhutan are inhabited largely by Brokpas and Bjops. They are predominant in the regions of Merak and Sakten and in the northern reaches of Bhumthang, Longte-Longmed, Lungnanak, Gasa, Laya, Lingshi, Paro and Haa. Though, they own grazing lands, Brokpas of Merak and Sakten are nomadic herders, rearing yak and sheep, while those in other regions own lands for cultivation, in addition to rearing yak and sheep. Bjops inhabit the North-western regions.

Ngalongs come from the western region of Bhutan, which includes Sha (Wangdi), Punakha, Dagana, Thimphu, Chukha, Paro, Haa and Gasa. Lhotsampas are of Nepalese origin and live in the south, primarily in the districts of

Chirang, Sarbhang, Samchi and Chukha while some also live in the southern parts of Dagana and Samdrupjongkhar districts.

Monpas are a unique tribal people of Bhutan. While around 1 to 2 thousand live on the banks of the Mangdi river, around 2 to 3 hundred live in Taba Damtse, up river around the banks of the Toorsa river near Phuntsholing [3].

### **3. Population Complex of Bhutan**

The population of Bhutan was projected at 1.4 million when Bhutan joined the United Nations Organization (UNO), probably to garner more international development aid, this figure was suddenly decreased to 600,000 in 1988. Out of this, approximately 49% are Lhotsampas (Nepali-speakers from the south), 16% are the Ngalongs (who provided the ruling elite), 33% are the Sarchhops (from the east) and the other small ethnic tribes make up the rest. The Ngalongs migrated to Bhutan from Tibet, the Sarchhops from Indo-China and Burma and the Lhotsamps from Nepal. The citizenship act of 1958 granted citizenship to all the than existing ethnic groups, making Bhutan a multi-lingual, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious land of immigrants. The Ngalongs follow Kargyupa sect of Mahayana Buddhism, the Sarchhops follow the Nyingmapa sect of Mahayana Buddhism and the Lhotsampas are predominantly Hindus, Christians (small in number) are persecuted ruthlessly [4].

### **4. The Crisis**

Today, Bhutan is engulfed in a crisis that has its seed in the desire of the king and its coterie to maintain and retain, its complete despotic tyrannical rule over the people. Any radical forces popping up in the land were to be crushed and confined to such places from where it'd be impossible for them to be of any significance. The main causes of the present political quagmire can be outlined as follows:

One nation One People policy 1988 - The people of southern Bhutan formed the Bhutan state congress in 1952 and petitioned the third-king to usher in some changes. The party was banned, its followers ruthlessly killed and some of them were later pardoned. This led to resolution No. 8 of the 11th session of the National Assembly (NA) in 1958 by which the southern Bhutanese were made Bhutanese subject, under the Bhutanese King. There are two ethnic groups in the Kingdom under the rule of his Majesty the King. Since Nepalese inhabiting southern Bhutan as bona-fide citizens of this country have submitted bond agreement affirming their allegiance to the king and the country, the assembly resolved that from this date Nepalese will enjoy equal rights in the National Assembly, and in the country, as other bona-fide citizens. From then on, the Nepali-speaking people of southern Bhutan have worked towards the economic well being of the nation and

proved themselves entrepreneurs. But from the very beginning, the religion and culture of these people had been targeted by the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) in an attempt to assimilate them. The resolution No. III-3 of the first session of the NA in 1953 read, with the aim of converting the Nepalis of southern Bhutan to Buddhism, his Majesty the King was pleased to command the establishment of a Monk Body consisting of five monks with one head lama in the Nepali villages of southern Bhutan [5].

This cultural and religious presentation reached its zenith under the One Nation One, People Policy in the 1980s. This policy, formulated and implemented zealously since 1988. Under this policy, the dress, language, culture, religion and social etiquette of the ruling elite (the Ngalongs) was forcefully imposed on all other communities. Driglam Namzha, an ancient code of social etiquette of the Ngalong was incorporated in the sixth five year plan (1986-92) and implemented with great vigour. Dr. Parmanand of Delhi University has written that this drive has been harsh to the Bhutanese national of Nepali origin, Indians, Tibetans and Sarchhops living in south and east Bhutan" ("The King Drives in Reverse Gear", Link Massive May 20, 1990), failure to observe the code of conduct and the dress code was punishable by a week imprisonment or a fine under the same policy, the Nepali language was banned from schools. The King regretted this move in 1990, but the remedial measures have not come across so far. Regarding this, the king has said; " I admit this is a very unpopular decision and I fully sympathize with the Nepalese ( Interview to Kamaljeet Kalkan, the Economic Times Delhi, September 25, 1990) but he has not reinstated the language so far.

### **5. Citizenship Acts**

The 1958 Citizenship Act looks in the southern Bhutanese as the bona-fide citizen of Bhutan. Their dependents faced a major and irreparable damage in 1958, when the Citizenship Act was amended. The third Article of this Act insisted that, those who settled in Bhutan before 31st of December 1958 would be considered as citizens of Bhutan. These so-called citizens also should register their name properly in the Census Register which is kept and preserved by the Ministry of Home Affairs of Bhutan. When this was implemented in 1988, people were asked to produce the tax receipts of 1958 to prove their domicile then. Based on the availability of such obscure documents, the people of southern Bhutan (southern Bhutanese only) were categorized into the following groups:

F1: Genuine Bhutanese

F2: Returned Migrants (Left Bhutan but returned)

F3: Drop-outs (Not available during the census)

F4: A non-national woman married to a Bhutanese man

F5: A non-national man married to a Bhutanese woman

F6: Adoption cases

F7: Non-nationals (migrants)

People who could produce the 1958 tax receipts were declared Bhutanese and the rest were declared non-nationals.

## **6. The Human Rights Movement**

When People began to be deprived of citizenship through unfair means, the Royal Advisory Councillors, Mr. Tek Nath Rizal and Mr. Bidhya Pati Bhandari submitted a petition to the king advising against the practice. Unfortunately, Mr. Rizal was arrested on June 3rd 1988 and imprisoned. He was stripped of his post. He was later released and asked to leave the country. After this the census teams started confiscating citizenship cards at random and racism at the government level became rampant. Mr. Rizal fled to Nepal and formed the people's forum for human rights of Bhutan (PFHRB) on July 7, 1989 and waged a human rights movement from exile till he was abducted to Bhutan on November 16, 1989. After this people were systematically tortured, intimidated and forcefully evicted from Bhutan. Now there are about 97,000 plus people in the camps in Nepal, about 20,000 outside the camp and another 15,000-20,000 scattered in India without any refugee status and assistance. The government of India had not recognized the refugee status.

## **7. The Political Movement**

When the human rights movement started, its appeals and pressures for minimum provisions for meaningful human life were not heeded, the Bhutan Peoples Party (BPP) was formed on June 2, 1990 and political movement was launched in exile. Among other things, the BPP demanded change from absolute to constitutional monarchy, reform of the judiciary and amendment of the current Citizenship Act, Repressions, tortures and intimidation, leading to forced evictions increased inside Bhutan. This led to the BPP's organizing of mass rallies throughout southern Bhutan in September 1990 which were brutally crushed by the armed forces of the government. Arbitrary arrests, torture, rape, murder, arson, looting, economic sanctions and confiscation of citizenship became the order of the day. This political movement were carried on, in exile, under the United Front for Democracy, on conglomeration of Bhutan Peoples Party (BPP), Bhutan National Democratize Party (BNDP) and the Druk National Congress (DNC).

## **8. Bilateral Talks**

The eight rounds of bilateral talks between Bhutan and Nepal aimed at solving the refugee crisis have failed to obtain any tangible result. An agreement had been reached

between the two parties to categorize the refugees into four groups.

1. Those who have been forcefully evicted
2. Those who have migrated
3. Bhutanese criminals
4. Non-nationals

Bhutan does not want to take back those belonging to No.2 and 4 and maintains that most of the "people in the camps" are not Bhutanese. Nepal wants Bhutan to take back all the refugees who possess valid Bhutanese documents to prove their nationality. Nepal wanted Indian intervention in the crisis. So do the refugees. The refugees had also condemned the categorization and they also demand their representation in the talks.

## **9. Political Scenario in Exile**

The three major political parties, (BPP, BNDP, DNC) had formed an umbrella organization called the United front for Democracy in Bhutan (UFD). Though, the UFD had not conducted any meaningful program so far, it advocates complete overhauling of the system of governance in Bhutan. It espouses peaceful means to establish a parliamentary democracy, a multi-party system and a constitutional monarchy in Bhutan. Refugees in the camps were frustrated and restless with no solution in sight. Mental illness, social evils, educational problems and a host of other negatives were creeping in. There was a visible donor fatigue which may lead to lack of relief in the near future.

## **10. In Bhutan**

Many political prisoners, including Mr.T.N. Rizal, continue to languish in Jail. In October 1997, Sarchhops staged a rally in the east. More than a hundred were arrested, tortured and imprisoned; tens of students were expelled from schools for their parents in the democratic struggle. One lama, Gomchhen Karma, was shot dead by Mr. Lakpa Dorji, the district administrative officer of the Mongar district in eastern Bhutan. About 13 shedras, religious centres of the Ngingmapa sect of Buddhism) were closed and many schools in southern Bhutan remain military barracks. Civil servants related to the refugees were being forcefully retrenched. People from the east and west were being forced to settle in the land left vacant after the people from the south were forcefully evicted.

## **11. Conclusion**

Now the 10 million refugees, who were taking asylum in Nepal are settled in different parts of the world. This is not a durable solution. A move must be made to initiate dialogue between the Royal Government of Bhutan and the Bhutanese Pro-democracy leadership in order to find a

durable long-term solution to the Bhutanese crisis, including the refugee issue.

The Royal Government should accept to negotiate a settlement, an arrangement that will guarantee good governance and protect all its citizens fundamental rights, including the right to equality, freedom and justice, without which, it would not be possible to fulfill the aspirations of the Bhutanese people and for the genuine Bhutanese refugees in exile to be repatriated to Bhutan with their safety guaranteed.

For these efforts to have credibility, the Royal Government must restore trust through confidence building measures such as recognizing the need for true democratic changes and the legitimacy of the Bhutanese people's desire for the changes by releasing all political prisoners and withdrawing all charges against political activities.

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