

A Policy Born of Apprehensions

*History, culture and politics set the Lhotshampa and the Drukpa apart.
The Drukpa has decided to act, but can he prevail in the long term?*

by A.C. Sinha



Drukpa ritual dance, known as chham, and Lhotshampa maruni dance (right), performed by Bhutanese troupes before guests at Motithang hotel.

It was Kazi Ugen Dorji — the chief of the King's household (*Deb Zimpom*), the Royal Chamberlain (*Gongzim*) and the Governor (*Jongpon*) of western Bhutan, who encouraged large scale Nepali settlement in the southwestern part of the country in the last decades of the 19th century. British diplomat Charles Bell found 14,000 Nepalis on the Torsa river bordering India in 1903. In no time, the land-hungry Nepali cleared the thick vegetation and organised themselves as cultivators in the southern Duars.

Some 25 years later, in 1932, Captain C.J. Marris of the Gorkha Regiment was commissioned to investigate the possibility of recruiting Bhutanese. He made an extensive tour of the two Nepali districts of the south and made a crude estimate that the 1,500 households of the eastern and 4,000 households of the western districts contained a population of 60,000. He remarked upon the largeness of Nepali families. Marris stated that the actual number of Nepali settlers in Bhutan was much higher than his estimate because he had not included Sipchu area to the extreme south-east.

Nepali immigration to Bhutan continued well into the present century even though there was a shortage of arable land. The Drukpa *darbar* eventually banned further Nepali immigration in 1959. In addition, the Nepalis were forbidden to settle beyond an imaginary east-west boundary drawn north of the Himalayan foothills.

The bamboo and thatch houses of the Nepalis are less substantial than the multi-storeyed stone houses of the highlanders. The Nepali areas are predominantly agricultural, producing rice, maize, wheat, pulses, orange, pineapple, ginger, cardamom and so on. Migrating across from Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim over

the past 125 years, the Nepalis turned this 'negative land' into a productive breadbasket.

The Nepalis lead a frugal life. They are available for doing any type of work, and well-suited to the extreme climate of the Bhutanese hills. In addition to agriculture, they have provided the work force for the recent development programmes. With the emergence of Samchi, Phuntsholing, Daga, Sarbhang, Geylephug, Chirang and Samdrup Jongkhar as the new commercial and (albeit modest) industrial towns of southern Bhutan, the role of the Nepalis in the national economy became more pronounced.

Food, dress, the *khukuri*, perseverance, industriousness and 'mercenary' character make the Nepali-speakers one on an alien soil. They look to Nepal and India as the founts of their civilisation, their historical achievement, and where their places of pilgrimage are. Elite Nepali castes practice ritual purity and shun beef, polyandry and widow remarriage.

The Nepalis are new entrants in Bhutan, and also occupy lower economic and political status in national life. As residents of Bhutan, however, Nepalis do expect to share in the destiny of their new homeland. They have some expectations of the Bhutanese nation state.

As the Nepalis found the Bhutanese environment stifling, they started to turn to India, where economic and educational opportunities existed. In the process, they also got politicised in schools and colleges, in trade unions, and in political parties. They returned to Bhutan expecting a rightful democratic share, which the Wangchuk regime ruler denied them.

The cultural, political and economic gulf between the Nepalis and the Lamaist Drukpa was, therefore, deep.

The Drukpa regime maintains no distinction between the sacred and the secular. For the average Drukpa, the King is not only the ruler but he is also to be revered. Traditionally, revenue collected by the State was paid in kind and was largely spent in maintaining a large body of monks. For the past 125 years, up until recently state expenditure was drawn mainly from the subsidy provided by the Indian government.

Faith and Loyalty

In the Bhutanese hierarchy, faith and loyalty to one's superiors goes unquestioned. A society of pastoralists and subsistence farmers was happy to leave trade, commerce and industry in the hands of the royal family. Bhutan's dynastic rule did not permit an aristocracy to emerge. Thus, in today's Drukpa society consists of an all-powerful ruling family at the top, the commoners at the bottom and a monk body in between.

The geographical compulsions of mountainous country further isolated the Drukpa commoner from the shared experiences of modern technological society. Under such circumstances, the urge for democratic participation practically does not exist. An semblance of representation has to be sponsored from the top, and the regime is notoriously intolerant of dissent.

The stage was thus set for conflict. While the Drukpas tried to impose an assimilationist policy, demanding oneness in language (*Dzongkha*), dress (*Gho* and *Kira*) and cultural systems, Nepalis regarded themselves as culturally superior. They naturally look west to Nepal and south to India, to populations with which they feel ethnic affinity.

The Bhutanese administration had always

kept a careful watch on the course of anti-feudal movements in Sikkim and Nepal, because the Lhotshampas have natural allies there. It therefore came as a shock to the Bhutanese ruler when the 334-year old Namgyal rule over Sikkim came to an end in 1975, succumbing to a movement organised almost entirely by Nepali-speakers.

Even closer to home, the Bhutanese found the armed struggle in Darjeeling ended with the Districts also being governed by Nepali-speakers. The realisation dawned that, in the long run, New Delhi's commitment to prohibit anti-Bhutanese movements on Indian soil had no meaning. In a changed political scenario, the Nepali-speaking rulers of Nepal, Sikkim and Darjeeling could nullify New Delhi's assurances. This they could do by instigating, supporting or even financing agitation.

Acting on these fears, the Bhutanese implemented an aggressive policy of cultural assimilation, starting with the implementation in 1988 of the Drig Lam Namzha code. The rest is the story of Lhotshampa flight from their Bhutanese paradise.

A classical theocracy turned into an exotic Wangchuk-ruled Bhutan had little experience of ethnic coexistence on its own soil. It has not been able to weigh the implications of its aggressive ethnic policy to assimilate an ancient, martial and substantive Nepali commonwealth into its relative thin, simple and recent Drukpa fold.

Drukpa policymakers, such as Foreign Minister Dawa Tshering, appear to have an exaggerated image of their powers. They tend to forget that their aggressive ethnic policy and false sense of absorptive capacity is bound to affect the pace of economic transformation. The Bhutanese aberrations might slow but cannot stop the Nepali expansion in the Eastern Himalayan foothills; rather, such antics as the Drukpa regime is currently engaged in may provide an impetus for a Nepali resurgence in the region.

Professor Sinha is Head of the Department of Sociology at the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong, Meghalaya. His most recent book is *Bhutan: Ethnic Identity and National Dilemma* (Reliance Publishing, 1991).



Seal of the Royal Government of Bhutan.