

The Lhotshampa and Indian abandonment

by | A C Sinha

The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) formally unveiled the draft of its constitution on 26 March 2005 with public ceremonies across the country. The Calcutta Statesman enthusiastically enumerated the 'important Indian contribution' in terms of counsel, expertise, material and personnel that went into formulating the document. It gleefully informed readers that while the king of Nepal had usurped democracy, the Druk gyalpo (monarch) was gracious enough to grant his country its first constitution.

The newspaper's congratulatory report reflected the tone and tenor of the Indian reaction to the Bhutanese move: quite willing to look the other way while the constitutional draft, in the words of refugee leader Thinley Penjore, "bypassed the refugee issue altogether". Singing Bhutan's praise is not a habit perfected only by the Indian media. It is in the tradition of the Indian state's attitude towards Thimphu, notwithstanding the massive abuse of human rights committed by the latter, the evidence for which is abundant in eight refugee camps in eastern Nepal. These camps host more than a hundred thousand Lhotshampa, Nepali-speaking 'southerners', citizens of Bhutan and victims of an infamous exercise in mass eviction carried out more than a decade ago.

Benign detachment

The Indian reaction to the exodus of the Lhotsampa and their 15-year wait to return to their country has been enigmatic, evasive and callous to say the least. This willing disregard is even more significant because the Government of India, as per a 1949 bilateral treaty, advises the Bhutan government in its foreign relations. Bhutan could never ignore Indian intervention on the refugee issue, but New Delhi has chosen to remain silent, disregarding persistent pleas made at its doorstep.

By refusing to take up the issue of the Lhotshampa refugees, India is willingly contravening its own well-known international stand on the issue of human rights. It is left to scholars to try and explain

the enigma of India's silence on the Lhotshampa's eviction from Bhutan, and a little bit of history does provide an explanation beyond the demands of realpolitik, which is where retired foreign office bureaucrats place the cause.

Soon after Independence, the new rulers of India showed consideration for Bhutan by extending it protection under the Indo-Bhutanese Treaty of 1949, increasing the annual cash grant to Thimphu, and ceding to it some 32 square miles of territory claimed by the Himalayan state. Over the years, the political movements inside Bhutan, primarily led by those who came to be called the Lhotshampa, were discouraged by India. Activists who sought refuge in Indian territory were asked to desist. Before 1947, the Wangchuk dynasty had been resolutely against Indian freedom fighters. Thereafter, the kings have always wooed successive Indian prime ministers, starting with Jawaharlal Nehru himself, who arrived in Bhutan on horseback in 1958. Likewise, Bhutan's English-educated elite has made it a point, as a primary foreign policy strategy, to maintain an excellent rapport with Indian diplomats, policy makers, and the elites of the academia and the media, even if at the exclusion of Western 'suits'.

When pressed, Indian prime ministers and bureaucrats have consistently refused to mediate between Nepal and Bhutan on the issue of the Lhotshampa refugees sheltered by the former since 1990. The tortuous negotiations, marked by a singular Bhutanese ability to delay and procrastinate, would have yielded a resolution long ago and given respite to more than a hundred thousand refugees, but for the distance New Delhi has maintained from the process.

Rather ingenuously, New Delhi maintains that the refugee issue is a bilateral one between Nepal and Bhutan, a stand that undermines some basic humanitarian principles as well as India's obvious duty to right a massive wrong under the 1949 treaty. Besides, the refugees from the southern hills of Bhutan first entered India, only moving on to Nepal

when they found themselves unwelcome in northern Bengal. This would assign some responsibility not only to New Delhi but also to Calcutta.

The official Indian attitude is clear in the quasi-official state-ments of some of its functionaries. Former foreign secretary Jagat Mehta, writing in 2004, at first waxes eloquent about Bhutan's democratic development and 'environmental husbanding'. He then goes to say, "The pressure is on India to mediate the problem of rehabilitating expelled Nepalese of Bhutan. The whole problem of spill-over ethnicity in the sub-continent is a vast and complex subject, but perhaps we should continue with benign detachment."

Another retired foreign secretary, known for his reliance on realpolitik and for having fashioned much of India's Bhutan policy, was more blunt about the matter. Said J N Dixit about the refugees, "One lakh persons do not matter to the Government of India."

Sources of support

Many reasons have been offered to explain India's benign detachment, including the importance of cheap electricity from Bhutan's hydropower plants built with Indian grant assistance, the need for a stable kingdom in the sensitive Himalayan rim, and the support Bhutan invariably provides India in international fora where that extra vote has often been of some assistance. But there are other equally significant factors in the background that also need to be considered.

North Bengal and the Assam Duars lie within the social world of the Lhotshampa and have been a natural outlet to them geographically, socially and economically. This region, highly politicised because of ethnic solidarity movements such as those of Gorkhaland and Koch, is also where the Lhotshampa have been exposed to active politics. In a nutshell, this is an active, thriving, interesting, educative region, a welcome relief to the Lhotshampa from the regimented Drukpa world of Bhutan where a close watch is kept on every Lhotshampa act or omission.

Unfortunately, North Bengal and the Duars, where there is at least an understanding of the challenges faced by the Lhotshampa within Bhutan, exist at the margins of Indian politics. Likewise, the natural allies of the Lhotshampa, the Nepalmul (Indians of Nepali origin), do not figure anywhere in the Indian political scene. Added to this is the fact that the states of Assam and West Bengal are not favourably disposed towards the Nepalmul, and hence are naturally distanced from their linguistic relations, the Lhotshampa. The issue of alleged migration from Nepal to Assam and of the Gorkhaland Movement in West Bengal were bound to have serious and negative impact on issues close to the Lhotshampa. Even though Assam and West Bengal would have the closest understanding of the

depopulation exercise underway in the hills of Bhutan in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it is obvious that they chose to remain silent and not put any pressure on New Delhi. The fact that there are not even a handful of Nepali-speaking members in the Indian Parliament also explains why the refugee has never had a profile and why Indian foreign policy remains the way is.

While the interests of the Lhotshampa may well have been sacrificed by New Delhi on the altar of realpolitik, it is worth considering the questions that history will ask of the Indian state. Let us speculate on the effect of this unstated policy on India: What will be its impact on Nepal's response to Indian diplomacy, given that the Indian state has deliberately opted to back Bhutan at the cost of Nepal? What happens to the oft-repeated mantra of special relations between Kathmandu and New Delhi? How is the Indian state going to deal with the discontent among those of its citizens who are Nepali-speakers, and who are witness to the unfairness being meted out on their linguistic cousins by New Delhi's policy?

Today, the Drukpa regime in Thimphu is determined to demonise the Lhotshampa as the villains of all their problems. It is busy demolishing all vestiges of the Nepali-speakers' presence in Bhutan. The Lhotsampa are not recognised as a separate community as in the past, and they have no representation in the council of ministers, the royal advisory council or the constituent assembly. In the Drukpa scheme of things, there is no scope for the continuity of the distinct Nepali-speaking Lhotshampa heritage.

In Thimphu, there is a loathing of the Lhotshampa that is visible even today. So, they want a written constitution? Okay, we shall write it without their participation so that they, the Lhotshampa, will not figure in our polity. So, they want us to consult with the people? Our gyalpo will go to every district and block and meet with the heads of households, and we will concede to all important demands of the people, but we shall deal firmly with the ngolops (anti-nationals). They want an inclusive constitution? It will be so, only they will not figure anywhere in it.

Today, as Bhutan goes through the exercise of adopting an exclusionary constitution, the Lhotshampa in the refugee camps, who represent a seventh of the country's population, have never been more neglected. Look at their fate. They survive on dole from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, which is being progressively reduced as per the agency's policy. Nepal, the host country, is in the midst of the worst phase of its modern history and is hardly able to focus on the refugees. The Lhotshampa have been left to themselves, without anyone to provide empathy or a helping hand. If only the Indian state were to turn a humanitarian leaf, it would make all the difference to one of the most dejected population segments of the Subcontinent. ▲