

## Beyond Lhotshampa resettlement

The only way that India can make up for having failed the Bhutani refugees these 17 years is by learning from its omissions, and providing protection to the remaining Lhotshampa population within Bhutan. India must also simultaneously be sensitive to its own Nepali-speaking citizens, vulnerable to future upheaval.

BY A C SINHA

After 17 years of impasse, 2007 finally brought some good news for the 106,000 Lhotshampa refugees living in camps in southeast Nepal. It now seems likely that most of the seven camps will be closed in the coming years, as the refugees resettle in the United States and the five other countries that have offered them residence and eventual citizenship. The US has offered to take in more than 60,000 refugees, and other countries, including Australia, Canada and Denmark, are likely to pick up the rest. But given the confusion and conflict that the question of resettlement has created in the camps over the past year, it has become evident that the refugees had not been prepared for this eventuality. In the face of Thimphu's constant stonewalling of talks on repatriation to Bhutan, the Lhotshampa tended their dreams of return for more than a decade and a half – while making few contingency plans.

While Bhutan appears to have 'gotten away' with the mass eviction of its own citizens, through the depopulation exercise of the early 1990s, and while Nepal continues to reel from the political instability that has kept it from effectively intervening on the Lhotshampa's behalf, India's non-involvement in what it always insisted was a bilateral Kathmandu-Thimphu issue also seems to have paid off. As the Western governments come forward to pick up the refugees and whisk them away, India can smile smugly and support the exercise because of its 'humanitarian' nature.

Indeed, no one can deny the refugees this opportunity to rebuild their lives away from the refugee camps, where they have lived for 17 long years. As many look to be processed for resettlement over the coming months, there is a sense of relief at being able to leave the camps and to 'get on with' lives that have been held at a standstill. But there is also a conviction that justice has not been done. Now may be a good time to reflect on everything

that India, a country most intimately involved in the Lhotshampa plight, did and did not do on their behalf – and to reconsider policies for the future.

### Lhotshampa history

Bhutan was a theocratic polity for about two and a half centuries before Ugyen Wangchuk, the founder of the Wangchuk dynasty, emerged victorious following a series of civil wars and rebellions between 1882 and 1885. The country became a British protectorate shortly after Ugyen Wangchuk's ascension. The opposition to the new royal regime backed the Shabdrungs, the religious rulers of Bhutan since the early 1600s, as the country's rightful sovereigns. In 1931, the last official incarnation of the Shabdrung approached Mohandas K Gandhi for support in overthrowing the second Wangchuk ruler, Jigme Wangchuk. Shortly thereafter, however, the Shabdrung was quietly poisoned to death by royal functionaries, and the British seem to have been involved in the assassination's cover-up.

Though there is no evidence of Gandhi's support for the Bhutani dissidents, King Jigme turned hostile to the Indian freedom fighters in general, and Gandhi and the Indian National Congress in particular. On the eve of Independence, Bhutan chose to remain a British protectorate and voiced a number of demands, including an increase in cash subsidy from India and the restoration to Bhutan of the hilly, forested tracts of the southern Duars. In 1949, under a treaty of friendship, India stepped in for Britain to guide Bhutan's foreign relations, and partially met the demands for increased subsidies and territory restoration.

On a visit to Bhutan in 1958, Jawaharlal Nehru persuaded King Jigme Dorji, the third Wangchuk monarch, to open the country up to the south by constructing roads, monetising the economy and introducing social reforms through five-year development plans. To this day, New Delhi remains the main financier of these five-year plans. For their part, the Wangchuks have taken care to maintain a close rapport with successive Indian prime ministers. It was New Delhi that, among other things, facilitated Bhutan's induction as a member state of the United Nations.

In 1952, D B Gurung, a descendant of the Samchi Kazis, an important Gurung family that began its relationship with the Bhutani administration as contractors and then tax collectors several generations beforehand, founded the Bhutan State Congress, a political party with a reformist agenda on the pattern of the Indian National Congress. The party's cadres, drawn mainly from the ranks of Bhutani Nepali-speakers, drew inspiration from the democratic movements launched by the Sikkim Congress and the Nepali Congress parties. The Bhutan State Congress organised a sit-in at Sarbhong, in southern Bhutan, in March 1952. The military opened fire on the protestors on the order of the Jhulendra Bahadur Pradhan, the Lhotshampa commissioner of southern Bhutan known popularly as Neoly Babu. While some were im-



prisoned, most fled across the border to India, where they regrouped to plan a future course of action. The government of India, however, assured Thimphu that the agitators would not be permitted to use Indian territory for anti-Bhutan activities.

In 1958, Bhutan granted citizenship to the Lhotshampa, with an eye to weakening the reformist demands of the Bhutan State Congress, and to ensure the continued supply of cheap labour. For the next 25 years, the Thimphu administration would try to assimilate the Lhotshampa by reaching out, promoting the teaching of Nepali and Sanskrit in schools, and granting scholarships to Lhotshampa students to pursue higher education abroad. In the latter half of the 1980s, however, Lhotshampa-related policy changed suddenly, and many of the programmes that made the Lhotshampa feel at home in Bhutan were cancelled. This inevitably led to a strong reaction among the Lhotshampa community. In August 1990, Lhotshampa assembled in a considerable number of towns in the districts of Samchi and Phuntsoling to demonstrate against atrocities committed by government functionaries on rural householders in southern Bhutan. The agitators were fired at and forced to flee to Chamurchi and Jaigaun in West Bengal. New Delhi once again advised the aggrieved Lhotshampa not to use Indian territory to organise against Thimphu. Once again, and in violation of international refugee-rights law, they were forbidden from forming colonies in northern West Bengal.

At least from the late 1980s, there appears to have been a tacit understanding between the governments of Bhutan and India over clearing the Lhotshampa out of the southern Bhutani Duars, the narrow strip of plains adjoining the Assam and West Bengal Duars. At one point, Thimphu proposed a plan, under its Green Belt Policy, to draw a two-kilometre swath along the border between the two countries. This innovative (and rather inhumane) environmental programme was proposed in 1984, and passed by the Tshongdu, the national assembly, in March 1990, with the government claiming that its intention was merely to work against floods and soil erosion. Today, this is the area in which most of the hydroelectric power plants sponsored by India are located, and it seems that New Delhi had agreed to fund the implementation of the Green Belt Policy itself.

Important towns were excluded from the Green Belt scheme, but members of the rural population were to be either compensated or settled in the Bhutani interior. When compensation rates were announced, however, there were no takers. The Lhotshampa had little means of expressing their outrage in a country devoid of mass media. Once ethnic conflict erupted in the late 1980s, New Delhi seemed to end its support of what was essentially a depopulation exercise. But Thimphu nonetheless remained committed, and within the span of a couple of years, starting in 1990, 100,000 Lhotshampa



were forcefully evicted from their homes in southern Bhutan and forced into exile. One again forbidden from setting up camps of any significant number of people in neighbouring states of India, a considerable number of refugees moved to southeastern Nepal, where the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, erected camps in the districts of Jhapa and, later, Morang. Thousands more dissolved amongst their cultural kinsmen in neighbouring areas of India. Regardless, New Delhi has all along maintained that the concerns of the Lhotshampa refugees are a bilateral issue only, between Bhutan and Nepal.

BILASH PAI

## Beyond the Duars

Though they come from varied caste and ethnic stock, Bhutan's Nepali-speakers present a solid flank of social solidarity. Though the Thimphu establishment tried to show them as divided, the Lhotshampa drew and continue to draw a sense of a common subjectivity from their past sufferings, their use of the same language, and many common ritual and cultural practices, including in dress and cuisine. Across the border, northern West Bengal and Assam have long been important parts of the Nepali-speakers' social milieu. Not only are these geographically adjacent to the largely Lhotshampa southern Bhutan, but the Lhotshampa are also connected to the area through marital ties, markets, and festivals and religious congregations.

This area, home since the 1980s to campaigns such as the Gorkhaland movement and the Koch movement, is also where the Lhotshampa have been exposed to democratic politics. Indeed, it can be seen to have provided an interesting, dynamic, educated and welcome relief from the regimented and repressive world of Drukpa Bhutan, where a close watch is kept on any Lhotshampa omission and commission. It is through this area that their ancestors passed during their migration from eastern Nepal to Bhutan, and it is into this area that that they were forced to flee, starting in the late 1980s.

It is unfortunate for the Lhotshampa that the Indian Northeast and northern West Bengal have largely been at the margins of Indian political life. India's Nepali-speakers, the Lhotshampa's cousins in the area, do not figure anywhere on the national political scene. Furthermore, for their own political reasons, the state governments of Assam and West Bengal are not favourably disposed to this population. The 'issue' of alleged Nepali migrants in Assam, as well as the Gorkhaland movement, which aimed at secession from West Bengal and the



formation of another state within India, was bound to affect the Bhutani refugees. Over the past 17 years, the Bhutani-refugee issue has not been raised once before the Indian Parliament.

Given the attitude of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led West Bengal government towards the state's own Nepali-speakers and their calls for the formation of a Gorkhaland state during the 1980s, it is not surprising that this champion of underdogs saw to it that the refugees could not even form camps in West Bengal. Funds for the upkeep of the refugees were apparently raised in Sikkim, but this came to nought when the Lhotshampa were forbidden to set up camps there as well. Though the Lhotshampa had helped the Nepali-speakers of this area in their Gorkhaland-related hours of crisis, they found no help here either, from their own cultural kin.

While the states have their own reasons for ignoring the refugees' plight, the attitude of the New Delhi government can be summed up in a statement made in 1995 by the late J N Dixit, the former foreign secretary. Queried on the fate of the refugees, Dixit memorably stated, "One lakh persons does not matter to the government of India." Given the sense of finality in such a stance – voiced on behalf of Southasia's superpower, not to mention the only country seen as holding the key to the refugees' repatriation – it is not surprising that, in the end, relief for the refugees in the Nepal camps had to come from elsewhere.

On 27 March 2005, the Bhutani government unveiled the draft of its new Constitution in public ceremonies across the country. The proposed 34 articles outline the role of the monarchy, clergy, political parties, as well as the fundamental rights and duties of the people. The country will have a bicameral parliament – an assembly with 47 seats and an upper house with 25 nominated members. Bhutan, divided into 20 districts, has now been divided into 47 parliamentary constituencies according to population. Political parties and voters will need to be registered with the Election Commission, with voters needing to be photographed and issued identity cards. Indeed, Thimphu is placing so much emphasis on documentation that one would be suspicious of its motives even without noticing that these multiple mechanisms are already being used to deny the country's remaining Lhotshampa population of citizenship rights.

The Indian media's euphoric coverage of the 'Indian contribution' to Bhutan's democratic evolution has come hand in hand with a blindness on the part of the Indian establishment to the fact that the draft constitution, in the correct words of refugee leader Thinley Penjore, "bypassed the refugee issue altogether". The Indian position has not changed even in light of clear evidence of massive human-rights abuses on the part of the Bhutani state, as well as the continued and visible presence of more than 100,000 refugees in the camps of southern Nepal for over a decade and a half. But the implications of India's stance are felt not only by registered and

unregistered refugees in Nepal and India, they are also felt by the large Lhotshampa population that remains in Bhutan, as well as by India's own Nepali-speaking citizens – both of these vulnerable groups within the areas in which they live. How can India absolve itself of these massive failings?

## Nepamul Bharatiya

The UNHCR's operation in the refugee camps is becoming victim to donor fatigue. Given the apparent impossibility of finding a solution while working with Bhutan, India and Nepal, the agency has been forced to look elsewhere. In that process, it has met with a generous offer by the US, which proposes to resettle as many of the refugees as are willing, as well as encouragement on the part of Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Norway, all of which have said that they will offer resettlement to some refugees. After the initial offer was made by the US in October, the Bhutani state-run newspaper *Kuensel* pleaded: "All of us in the region should welcome the chance to arrive at a permanent solution to a problem that has major implications on this part of the world." The official Nepali and Indian reactions have been positive as well.

In the current context, it is important that New Delhi turn its attention to four issues. First, India must ensure that Bhutan does indeed take back a share of the refugees in the Nepal camps. Second, New Delhi needs to take into account the plight of the Bhutani refugees living within Indian territory, who are not registered with UNHCR and are without recognition and support. Third, India must ensure that no further eviction from Bhutan takes place, and must remind Bhutan of its obligations to *all* its citizens. Fourth, and potentially most important, India must ensure the protection of its own Nepali-speaking citizens, particularly those scattered across the country's Northeast – where they have been living insecure lives for too long.

*Nepamul bharatiya*, or Indians of Nepali origin, in the Northeast live under constant threat of arson, violence and eviction. New Delhi must remember that this community is similarly vulnerable to the Lhotshampa in Bhutan, and must ensure that there is no repeat of the evictions that overtook the Nepali-speakers of Meghalaya in 1986, for example. In no way can the resettlement of the Nepali-speakers in the camps in the Nepal Tarai be allowed to act as a catalyst that victimises the Nepali-speakers in Northeast India. It is urgently time to take a close look at this population of Indian citizens, who have long felt homeless in India, and to act to protect its members. Likewise, the dissatisfaction of the Nepamul Bharatiya must not be made so great that it explodes in organised or spontaneous violence, or makes them fall prey to extremist politics in other ways. As the Lhotshampa refugees in Nepal begin the process of making new lives for themselves, the Nepamul Bharatiya must finally be made to feel secure in India, as a rooted community with a long future there.