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# BHUTAN in 1993

## *Continuing Ethnic Stalemate*

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“If you cannot defeat an enemy, entrap him in a marital alliance,” goes a popular Bhutanese saying. And among many proverbs prevalent among the Nepalese is the following: “A son is born to go out in the world to earn wealth; and once he has earned it, he is to come back home [to Nepal] with it.” These two expressions may symbolically represent two perceptions that are relevant to the current ethnic strife in Bhutan. Bhutan in 1993 no longer appears to be an exotic, isolated, and politically placid country as its five-year-old ethnic conflict continues. The *Tshongdu* (Bhutan’s National Assembly) spent most of its 72nd session in July-August discussing the ongoing conflict and the approximately 100,000 refugees still in various camps in Nepal.

On the issue of the flight of the *Lhatshampas* (Nepalese in southern Bhutan) to the refugee camps, certain contradictory developments are taking place. First, the dissidents claim to be fighting for the cause of the Bhutanese Nepalese, but there is evidence suggesting that some of the unruly characters among them are burning houses, terrorizing, and physically and sexually assaulting the loyal Nepalese left behind in Bhutan. Many of the refugee leaders have charged that the violence against the *Lhatshampas* is actually being perpetrated by the police and army. However, those who have been caught committing violent acts are invariably persons of Nepalese ethnic background. While there have been some cases of individual violence, the state as a whole does not appear to be responsible for the extensive violence and destruction of private and state properties in southern Bhutan. A second issue is the king’s appeal to the *Lhatshampas* to remain in their adopted land. Formerly the dissidents had encouraged the *Lhatshampas* to leave Bhutan for the refugee camps in Nepal, but now they maintain that they have full faith in the

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king and blame the *Dukpa* (indigenous Bhutanese) bureaucracy for the sad plight of the *Lhatshampas*.

Possibly the armed dissidents responsible for violence in Bhutan may not be directly linked with the exiled *Lhatshampas'* political parties, but rather may only be criminal gangs or extremists among the refugees. Similarly, the wild charges of financial irregularities, forgery, and criminal misappropriation made against many of the deserting former bureaucrats who are now political leaders in the refugee camps appear to be an afterthought of the Bhutanese establishment to defame and discredit them. If such higher bureaucrats in the government were so involved in financial irregularities, the system should have developed corrective measures and initiated steps much earlier than after these individuals had left Bhutan as political dissenters. Apparently, the Bhutanese bureaucracy forgot that education and awareness of democratic rights invariably go together.

The king does not hide his disappointment on the ethnic issue, as many *Lhatshampas* ignored his pleas and assurances. In Thimphu it is commonly believed that the *Lhatshampas* had designs to change the Bhutanese political and ethnic scenario within the next 25 years by altering the citizenship laws and opening up Bhutan to a flow of alien Nepalese. This, it is alleged, would have made it easier to extend Nepal's hegemony to Sikkim, Darjeeling, and the *Duars* in West Bengal, and ultimately to Bhutan. Even if the current ethnic conflict is resolved, the ethnic scenario is going to be difficult for Bhutan in the near future. Pronounced divisions exist between the *Dukpas* and the *Lhatshampas*, on the one hand, and on the other, between the *Lhatshampas* who remained in Bhutan but were subjected to deprivations and all sorts of violence and the refugees who may eventually come back from the camps. Even if the king offers amnesty to the refugees after their return, so much animosity has been created that the *Lhatshampas* may act to settle scores within their community.

There is complete unanimity among the *Dukpas* that the *Lhatshampas* have to be assimilated within the *Dukpa* mainstream, with no compromise on this point. The Bhutanese consider the ethnic issue as an internal matter and do not desire any third-party interference in it. The fact that the *Lhatshampas* in the refugee camps in Nepal are willing to talk to the Nepalese authorities about stopping the ethnic strife can cause serious difficulties. The Bhutanese find three shades of politics among the Nepalese that have a bearing on the current ethnic strife. Firstly, the "greater Nepal" (*Maha Nepal*) protagonists, who have a loose but unreasonable, expansionist cultural aspiration, and who have a grandiose view of the Nepalese past, elevating its occasional armed sorties to unforgettable historical achievements. Secondly, it is the Nepali Congress (NC) and several Marxist opposition parties that are now politically significant in Nepal. The Bhutanese perceive the NC ruling party in Nepal as

an administratively and politically inexperienced collection of tired old men torn between old idealism and the demands of real politics. On the other hand, the opposition political parties in Nepal are seen as an aggressively ambitious and impatient crowd of troubleshooters, more interested in settling their scores with their arch rival—the NC. Thirdly, the immediate neighbors of the Bhutanese on the west, the Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP) of Nar Bahadur Bhandari and the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) of Subhash Ghising in Darjeeling are viewed as serious potential threats to the Bhutanese state ethnic policy. It is felt that the SSP and the GNLF leadership are looking to New Delhi and Calcutta to take public postures on the refugee issue, and then they may take an aggressive ethnic posture. To the surprise of the Bhutanese functionaries, the assurances given by New Delhi to discourage anti-Bhutanese activities from Indian soil have no meaning in the changed political scenario in which the Nepalese leaders in Sikkim and West Bengal are now in a position to instigate, support, and even finance agitations. With a view to counteract transborder violence, the Bhutanese are coordinating their actions with the state governments of Assam and West Bengal, which have had long experience in dealing with anti-state violence.

The Nepalese seemingly did not foresee the Bhutan government's aggressive and defensive stand to pursue its objectives, and thus the *Lhatshampas* leadership is confused and apparently in disarray. The Bhutanese establishment maintains that it has a complete understanding with India on the ethnic issue and that the latter has advised both parties to solve the issue between themselves. Indian Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao, on a visit to Bhutan in August, expressed his confidence in the wisdom and ability of the leaders of Bhutan and Nepal to tackle and solve the difficult ethnic question. While he felt that the large-scale population movements over an extended period of time were the most difficult and complicated problems to solve, Rao also found that "the quiet diplomacy between the two [countries] offered the best chances of resolving the refugee issue." In this context, the Bhutanese in July signed a joint agreement with a Nepalese delegation to Thimphu, led by Nepal's home minister, to identify the Bhutanese nationals among the refugees and to nominate three members from each country to implement the agreement. The Bhutanese feel that the refugee problem would be solved sooner if the leaders of the royal government of Nepal would effectively contain the Marxists seated on the opposition benches in the Parliament.

In light of the Indian prime minister's advice, the outlook on the ethnic conflict appears to be more positive. According to a press release issued on October 7 in Kathmandu, the Joint Committee set up by the governments of Bhutan and Nepal has agreed to identify and divide the estimated 85,000 refugees into four categories: (1) bonafide Bhutanese, (2) Bhutanese emigrés, (3) non-Bhutanese people, and (4) Bhutanese who have committed

criminal acts in Bhutan. The committee is scheduled to meet in Thimphu in February 1994 to determine mechanisms for individual verification. The two governments will then propose their specific positions on each of the above categories of refugees and evolve a mutually acceptable plan that may provide a basis for a resolution of the ethnic problem. The two home ministers, who were the leaders of their respective delegations, expressed determination to move forward urgently to bring about a quick resolution.

The ethnic conflict has exposed the hollowness and limitations of consensus politics as a state policy in Bhutan. The argument that the *Lhatshampas* problem is an external conspiracy against the *Dukpa* state does not carry universal conviction. It is a fact that the emergence of conventional democratic fora such as pressure groups, various sets of interest groups, and political parties and institutions is still not evident in the current set-up in Bhutan. Until they are, the bureaucracy will continue to function as the conscience keeper and trendsetter as well as the most orthodox form of legitimacy in Bhutanese public life. However, neither the *Tshongdu* nor the bureaucracy seem to provide nontraditional alternatives. Primordial ethnic perceptions do not accept insubordination for ever, and if the current stalemate is to be removed, Bhutan must evolve means for accommodating dissent. The *Dukpa* state will serve its own interests if it offers options other than its policy of assimilation.