

EVICTED FROM HOME, NOWHERE TO GO

The case of Lhotshampas from Bhutan

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The Lhotshampas, or the Nepalis of the southern Bhutan, are predominantly Hindus. The community has been in turmoil for the past 25 years, subsequent to their forceful eviction by the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGB) and their settlement in the refugee camps in eastern Nepal and elsewhere. In 1991, more than 75,000 Lhotshampa refugees were sheltered in UNHCR-run camps in Nepal. The UNHCR tried its best to repatriate them, but failed. Meanwhile, it found it increasingly difficult to manage the funds for the maintenance of the refugee camps. The Royal Government of Nepal (RGN) and the RGB were goaded to hold 15 rounds of talks with a view to solve the refugee problem, but nothing came out of those deliberations. This is the background in which the USA proposed to take the refugees from the camps to the USA and inspired other Western countries to follow suit. This move led to acrimonious debate among the refugees in the camps and outside, as their first priority was their repatriation to Bhutan. However, in spite of opposition from a section of the refugees, about 40,000 of them have been relocated in Western countries. After the initial euphoria for going to the West withered away, the refugees realised that it had raised new questions such as: What will happen to their culture? How will they communicate with others in the new situations? What will happen to their language? What about their religious performances? How will they cremate/bury their dead bodies and where will they go for worship? These questions continue to haunt the Lhotshampas and there is no clear answer yet.

Constructing the Lhotshampa culture

The Lhotshampas represent an underdog migrant population in Druk-yul (Bhutan), where modern education itself was introduced in 1962. They had to struggle all the time to survive in the administratively and politically hostile environment. They were themselves divided among castes and communities and many of them had their own languages. However, *dauna-suruwal*, *dhaka topi*, *khukuri* and Nepali as the lingua franca were the items in their cultural kitbag, which gave them a common identity against the dominant Drukpas, who were the rulers of the land. In the lawless feudal Bhutan, the oral orders of the local feudal, priestly or administrative functionaries were the laws of the land, which were invariably used against the Lhotshampa migrants. Formal education was unheard of and the only literates were priestly Brahmins, who informally, invariably and illegally ran the Sanskrit schools or *pathsalas* at home or in the make-shift temples and trained Brahmin boys in priestly vocation. Dress, inter-dining, food taboo, recitation of *Bhanubhaktako Ramayan*, singing and reciting Hindu mythologies from *The Mahabharata*, *Puranas* and the *Upanishads* among the unlettered masses and visiting holy places such as Varanasi by a select few were what gave them a distinct sociocultural identity. Even the communities known as Kiratis, who were not directly part of the classical Hindu great tradition, found it convenient to join caste Hindu Nepalis in such congregations as a mark of migrant Nepali solidarity. It was a loosely hierarchical society, in which caste status and social disabilities were moderated by a common struggle to make a living. As the rulers were hostile to any form of organised activities among the Lhotshampas, there was no question of producing a written literature by them. Hence, it is not surprising how the community, which at one time claimed to represent 64 per cent of Bhutanese population, did not produce any significant literature (Gurung 1960).

Michael Hutt notes that the Lhotshampas were regarded as 'more conservative, more submissive to the figure of authority, more "old-fashioned" than their "Nepali" or "Gorkha" counterparts across the border in India and Nepal' (Hutt 2003: 102-3). The reason is historical, and not sociological or lack of creativity. In general, migrant communities zealously stick to their cultural baggage in alien social contexts. In the relative absence of contact with the mother country, their language, cultural items and even religious practices get fossilised in course of time. The unlettered indentured labour or manual agricultural labour are invariably engaged in daily drudgery of negotiating mere survival, which hardly leaves them

with any time or leisure for literary creativity. That is why Australia did not produce any great literary giant in the 18th century in English, and the same is true of Mauritius or West Indies Indians about any classic in Hindi in the 19th century. The Lhotshampas too had no opportunities for engaging in any literary activity in the first 100 years of their habitation in Bhutan, as they did not have any access to the reading, writing and publishing world. Even the dominant Drukpas could not develop Dzongkha as the national language. Incidentally, the national lingua franca of Bhutan was Nepali. In fact, the Lhotshampas used to take pride in their language. Their contact with Nepal was less, as they did not want to be seen as hobnobbing with their Nepalese counterparts. Even their meetings with Indian Nepalis were watched by the Drukpas. Many Lhotshampas were educated in India like the Drukpas themselves, and they had plenty of friends and relatives across the border.

In the changed situation of temporary refugee camps in eastern Nepal, a different type of experiment is being made, which may have far-reaching consequences in the future. Rosalind Evans informs how the refugee children are being ideologically oriented through games and play. The Bhutanese Refugee Children Forum (BRCF) engaged itself in cultural expressions and tried to address how various actors use cultural expressions to transform individual consciousness and create collective identities (Evans 2010: 306). With a view to developing *chetana* or 'awakening' or 'consciousness' among the youth, the Communist Party of Bhutan (BCP) utilised the BRCF as a means of raising people's consciousness about the structures that oppressed them. Though the BRCF tried to cultivate normative ideals of proper childhood and increased the children's confidence in persuasion and expression, the forum seems to be hijacked by the BCP with its revolutionary ideology and anti-American agenda expressed through poems, dramas and articles.

Bhutanese response to Lhotshampa aspirations

Certain historical events must be kept in mind before tracing the roots of Nepali migration to Bhutan. After the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814–15, the British discovered a reliable fighting force in the Gurkhas. Darjeeling was secured from Sikkim and 18 Duars from Bhutan and they were instituted into districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri under Bengal Presidency. The two districts were soon turned into thriving tea plantations in no time with the help of migrant Nepali labourers. The Anglo-Bhutan War of 1863–64 led to peace between the British and Bhutan. Hard-pressed by cruel administration, chronic drought and pestilence and diminishing

cultivable land, the Nepalis migrated first to Darjeeling, and then, to Duars and Sikkim. By then, Ugyen Dorji, the king of Bhutan, emerged as a reliable ally of the British, who desired to interpose Nepalis as a buffer community between the Drukpa highlanders and the Bengali plainsmen. Sinha writes

Ugyen Dorji's father, the Kazi of Jungta, was an influential figure in the western Bhutan and Bhutan court in 1860's. It appears that his services were frequently commissioned by the British to settle the matters of importance related to the south-western Bhutan borders . . . (He) settled down at the emerging trading mart of Kalimpong in Darjeeling district with his estates in the British territory as well as western Bhutan . . . In 1898, he was appointed Haa Thrugpa, chief administrator of Haa, with rights over the whole of southern Bhutan and the rights vested in him to settle immigrant Nepalese in his territory. He was also made Bhutanese Agent in Kalimpong besides being interpreter of the Deputy Commissioner, Darjeeling. Sir Charles A. Bell, ICS, the Sub-Divisional Officer, Kalimpong, cultivated the Agent of Bhutan and used him to carry the Viceroy's Letter to the Dalai Lama in 1903. He provided valuable services to the British during the Younghusband Expedition to Lhasa, 1903-04. As a recognition of his services rendered to the British, the title of 'Raja' was conferred upon him.

(Sinha 1991: 36-37)

From malarial jungle to thriving settlements

Prior to introduction of the Wangchuk dynasty in December 1907, Bhutan was ruled by a faction-ridden oligarchy of clergy and gentry. Social structure and economy were based on theocratic feudalism. Technologically, it was a simple society. The people were afflicted with goiter, syphilis, bronchial, malarial and other chronic diseases.¹ The Drukpas ruled over the serfs, slaves and bonded peasantry with primitive harshness. In 1867, a British surveyor noted 'the absence of inhabitants and want of footpaths or roads' in western Bhutan. The Nepali settlers came to the south-western part in 1870s to quarry lime. They visited the south-eastern district of Chirang for a few months during hot weather in order to tap rubber trees for natural rubber till the trees died out of over-tapping. Charles Bell noted in 1903 that the British subjects used to 'go in to the

(Bhutanese side of the) land for grazing and other purposes during the part of the year'.² The following year, he wrote about the forests in Bhutanese Duars thus:

The area over 7,000 feet elevation is and will no doubt remain under dense forests. It contains many kinds of trees suitable for timber, fuel, mat-making and other purposes, among them rhododendron, maple, magnolia, oak and walnut. The forests have also a certain value as grazing grounds. The number of graziers is comparatively small at present owing to the scanty population in low lands. But they are capable of . . . cattle farms to a large number of all races . . . many of the graziers, who supply Darjeeling town with milk, send their cattle, when off milk to the forests at the head of (river) Dikchu.³

Bell noted further: 'raiyaats (tenants) in Bhutan can cultivate any unoccupied bits of land, and burn the jungle as they please for the purpose. This is much appreciated in the backward state of cultivation there, as good land and forest are still abundant, and the waste entailed by such a system is not yet brought home to them . . . They can cut wood wherever they like, since there is no reserve forests. The burning of the jungle and promiscuous felling of timber will, however, before long leave them worse off than if they had been subjected to restrictions imposed by our administration in these respects'.⁴ This wanton destruction of the forests attracted the attention of the British within a couple of years, as noticed in the following words:

A great deal of friction between ourselves (British) and Bhutan has originated in the Bhutanese dread of fever in the lower hills, of which they know nothing whatever, nor do the officials ever go there . . . The authorities have allowed the Paharias (the Nepalese) of doubtful character to settle on the frontier taking quite nominal rent and have thus deprived themselves and the Government of all the profits which have been made of timber and charcoal etc. Besides this, in some parts near the tea districts (in Indian district of Jalpaiguri), all the valuable timber has been cut and probably sold as firewood. The cutting is quite indiscriminate, the contractors even go so far as to fell a tree and cut only the branches for firewood, as they are too lazy to cut the trunk.⁵

After signing the Anglo-Bhutan Treaty, 1910, Captain Robert E. Kennedy, accompanying Political Officer Charles A. Bell on their return journey, noted in his diary about Menchu, a site on southern Duars at the height of 1,550 feet from the sea level as a 'Nepalese settlement on the hill side . . . (where) only a small portion is cultivated. Jhumming is extensively indulged in; it consists of burning a patch of jungle, roughly cultivating it for a few years and then repeating the process with another patch'.⁶ Ascending a height of 3,950 feet from the sea level at Miritsen on 30 December 1909, he had 'passed by a few patches of cultivation, but practically all the country was under dense forests, though there were many promising looking "flats" on the sides of the hills'.⁷ After signing the Treaty, Bell recorded in his report: 'we can now safely accept Bhutan's offers to exploit the forests and mines of her lower hills with the British capital and the Indian (Nepalese?) labour'. Incidentally, the Bhutan agent, Raja S. T. Dorji, controlled the entire southern Bhutan through his two allies, Nandal Chhetri and Garajman Gurung, who were contracted to settle southern Bhutan with Nepali immigrants and pay house tax to the cash-starved Bhutanese *darbar*.

Negotiating with the settlers

Within no time, the Nepali peasants organised themselves into village settlements such as the ones they had in Nepal. Their settlements were rarely characterised by compact villages, as they required extensive land for grazing and transhumance. The internal administration was left in the hands of their traditional headmen or *mandals*, who were held responsible for collecting and depositing the revenue to the 'contractors', who handed it over either to the Bhutan agent or Paro Dzongpen, as the order might be. The villagers also developed agricultural *haats* at nodal points on various days of the week. Similarly, they evolved a system of weight and measure in terms of *pathy* for measuring the land and grains. There was no police and no agency to enforce law and order. It was the contractors or the Bhutan agent, who were the ultimate laws of the land for the settlers. Socially, the Nepalis followed their own rules based on *Muluki Ain* promulgated in Nepal and vaguely claimed to be the subjects of Panch Sarkar, the king of Nepal in the absence of the Bhutanese king among them. In fact, most of the Lhotshampas had never seen Bhutanese kings in the first half of the 20th century.

While Bhutan apprehended trouble from the increasing number of Nepalis on the southern frontiers, whose loyalty they were

not sure of, the British were more concerned with using them as soldiers' farm. In this regard, Peter Collister writes that the first approach was made by the officiating Political Officer W. L. Campbell in 1917–18 to permit recruitment of the Bhutanese Nepalis to the Indian Army, which was turned down (Collister 1987: 174). This request was renewed more than once in 1920s, but it was denied. However, two Bhutanese returned after training in the Indian Army as Jamadars and another 14 were recruited in Shillong with 2/10th Gurkha Rifles in 1930. Captain C. J. Morris came to south-central Bhutan to assess the possibility of recruitment to Gurkha regiments and surveyed the area extensively for the purpose. He found that the Nepalis constituted about 20 per cent of the total Bhutanese population of 300,000 in 1932 (Sinha 2003: 139–61). Even this survey did not convince the Bhutanese to let the Nepalis join the Indian armed forces. But a small number of trained soldiers from the Indian Army ultimately provided the nucleus to the palace guards, when such a unit was raised in Bhutan. The British noted in the early 1930s that both Zhabdrung and Nepalis were sympathetic to the cause of the Indian freedom movement. Naturally, by the 1940s, seeds of political cogitation began to be felt among the well-settled Nepali peasants in Bhutan, who used to travel south in the Indian plains for a variety of purposes. They could not be kept immune to the influence of Indian National Congress, Sikkim State Congress and Nepal's Nepali Congress. Politically conscious and otherwise dissatisfied elements from among them got together to organise the Bhutan State Congress, with populist demands, which was ruthlessly suppressed by Bhutanese militias.

Ethnic assimilation of Lhotshampas

By the early 1950s, the second Druk-rGyalpo and his main ally and Bhutan agent, Raja S. T. Dorji died and they were succeeded by their sons, Jigmi Wangchuk and Jigmie Palden Dorji, respectively. Two young functionaries were trained in public administration at Dehradun in India and had travelled abroad, and thus, were exposed to the fast-changing political contours of the developing countries. They possibly realised soon that their old Bhutanese policy of isolation may lead them to serious trouble, as it happened in the case of Tibet. So, they decided to go for social and economic development of their country. In this context, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru made an arduous journey across Himalayan heights to reach Bhutan as the first international

dignitary. India agreed to finance the socio-economic development of Bhutan and provide technical expertise as well. But development required not only financial support and technical expertise, but also inexpensive and sufficient labour force. Here came the Bhutanese Nepalis handy. The king was foresighted enough to grant citizenship to long resident, landowning Nepalis of southern Bhutan and the latter came forward to work for all types of constructions such as roads, office buildings, power houses, airport, township, repairs and construction of the monasteries, and so on.

The Lhotshampas acted wisely for themselves by not taking sides in factions in the royal court in 1964 and 1972, when the ruling oligarchy was divided into two conflicting blocks. These national crises followed the murder of Jigmie Dorji, the first prime minister of the country, at Phuntsholing in 1964 and death of the third Druk-rGyalpo led to dispute between two of his sons in 1972-74 over succession to the throne. An obliged Drukpa regime took two important decisions pertaining to the Nepalis as reward. One, they decided to assimilate them by officially encouraging inter-ethnic marriages and providing incentives to such unions in cash rewards of INR 5,000 to begin with, teaching of Nepali language in schools in the southern districts and opening Sanskrit schools for the Brahmin priests. Two, the regime sent a number of deserving Nepali students on scholarships to study abroad in technical and other subjects, who manned important positions in the administration on their return. One may identify a third significant favour of the Druk-rGyalpo to the Nepalis in constitutionally providing a nomenclature for them in 1975, namely 'Lhotshampas' or the southerners. It appears that the fourth king, Jigmi Singhe Wangchuk, in his enthusiasm for the national language Dzongkha, desired that the Lhotshampas be given a territorial nomenclature, as they were permitted to settle only in designated southern foothills. They were also represented in the National Assembly of Bhutan along with the Drukpas, though it was more of a token representation. It is another matter that the term got currency only after the flight of thousands of Nepalis from their villages in southern Bhutan to the refugee camps in Nepal in 1991.

Ethnic catharsis and expulsion of Lhotshampas

Alarmed by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) movement in Duars and Darjeeling district of West Bengal, the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGB) initiated a motivated census operation to identify the

alleged illegal Lhotshampas of Bhutan in 1985. In many cases, even old settlers with citizenship certificates were declared illegal migrants and pushed out of Bhutan. Next, the RGB introduced its notorious policy of 'Driglam Namza', the code of conduct for the southerners. All efforts by the Lhotshampa bureaucrats and *Chimis* (members of the National Assembly or *Tshongdu*) to reach the king to acquaint him with their problems were frustrated by the determined Drukpa courtiers. T.N. Rizal, one of the senior members of the Royal Advisory Council and a member of the National Assembly of Bhutan representing the Lhotshampas, tried to petition the king on the grievances of the community, but he was punished instead. As a result, the organisationally inexperienced Lhotshampas began to demonstrate at various points on southern border towns to ventilate their frustration.

D. N. S. Dhakal, one such leader and contributor to this volume, records two waves of Lhotshampa demonstrations: one, throughout southern Bhutan on 19–25 September 1990 and the other on 4 October 1990 (Dhakal and Strawn 1994: 214). It is reported that about 15,000 Lhotshampas resorted to demonstration at Chamurchi in Samchi district on 25 October 1990 and the royal militia opened fire, leading to the death of many demonstrators. That event proved to be the turning point in the history of Lhotshampas. The RGB began an operation to flush them out of Bhutan in an organised way. Within months, about 100,000 Lhotshampas left Bhutan, either for the refugee camps set up by the UNHCR in Nepal or got dispersed among their kinsmen/friends in Darjeeling and Sikkim.

The RGB also mounted an effective publicity campaign against the Lhotshampas by alleging that they had planned to usurp southern Bhutan as a part of their design for 'Greater Nepal'. They appeared to be not only successful in selling this theory to the Indians, but also tried to convince them that Darjeeling and Sikkim would be the next target of the Greater Nepal zealots. The Bhutanese also convinced the leaders of the Indian National Congress and took special care to court the rightist Rastriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) allegedly with mini gold bricks for the Ram temple in Ayodhya and the leftist Communist Party of India (Marxist) by inviting the chief minister of West Bengal as a state guest. After securing the support of the border state of West Bengal, they mounted publicity blitz to convince the western world, which is ever awed with anything Buddhist, that the very existence of the Shangri-la was at stake. The Bhutanese establishment successfully managed to do this. On the contrary, the beleaguered Lhotshampas had no spokesmen and their miserable plight did not attract any

attention of the international community. The Indian establishment stood steadfast by the Bhutanese official stand and declared the issue as a bilateral one between the RGB and the RGN. The two Himalayan governments were forced to hold 15 rounds of talks over the issue of repatriating the refugees, but not a single refugee was repatriated to Bhutan. Meanwhile, the UNHCR began reporting donor fatigue and pressed for quicker solution to the problem. About 100,000 Lhotshampa refugees continued to reside in the seven camps in eastern Nepal for longer than two decades. Their unequivocal desire to go back to their country, Bhutan, remained unheard by the international community and remains so even today.

At this juncture, the United States came forward to take as many as 60,000 refugees and it persuaded its other Western allies such as Australia, Great Britain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and others to share refugees from the camps. This move created total confusion among the refugees, who were initially unwilling to consider such a proposal. Slowly, a section of youths came forward to accept the proposal, but left-oriented youths were against it. There was violence on the issue, but the UNHRC welcomed the move and reasoned with them that the camps could not be run indefinitely without Western support. The RGB welcomed the move and the RGN had a sense of relief that, at long last, the camps on their soil would be closed, while the Government of India remained unconcerned. After a considerable period of conflict in the camps, the refugees began to enrol themselves as potential migrants to various Western countries, and, in 2009, many of them actually left for their new destinations.

By the 1990s, Bhutan had changed significantly. A rudiment of the middle class, representing the Drukpas as well as Lhotshampas, had evolved. While the Lhotshampa elite was not content to settle for crumbs, the Drukpa rulers saw themselves as vulnerable because of a sizeable Lhotshampa population in a compact area away from Thimpu, the capital of Bhutan, but close to Nepal and Darjeeling. Bhutan's two South Asian neighbours, India and Nepal, had their own priorities. While India, as the emerging regional power, did not appreciate another trouble spot in its backyard, Nepal, enthused with the dawn of the second wave of democracy in 1990, gleefully welcomed the refugees without realising the consequences. The Bhutanese leaders did not waste time in whispering to their benefactors – the Indian policy-makers, in particular – that the Lhotshampa trouble was a part of the 'Greater Nepal' strategy. The Lhotshampas finally saw a design in the

Bhutanese policy to assimilate them within the Drukpa fold, but then, it was rather too late.

Demography: politics of statistics

Population figures in Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal have always been suspect, as the three Himalayan kingdoms identified certain communities for special treatment at the cost of a real or putative migrant community. Thus, the Namgyals in Sikkim inflated the Bhutia-Lepcha population against the Nepalis, the Wangchuks in Bhutan conceded a mere 14 to 25 per cent to the Lhotsampa population against the pastoralist Drukpas, and the Shahs in Nepal deliberately displayed a linguistically fragmented and small Madheshi population. In case of Bhutan, it was actually quite comical. In 1960, the National Assembly decided that the population figures to be presented to the foreign dignitaries would be 700,000, of which 25 per cent were Nepali speakers. The accuracy and source of data at the time remained unstated. It claimed in 1971 to have a population of a million in its application for the membership of the United Nations Organisation. It was revised to 1,200,000 in 1979, which naturally rose to 1,375,000 in 1988. At the end of 1991, Bhutan declared its population to be 600,000 only. Even a naive reader can detect the politics of statistics as all the figures given above have three zeros at the end, which means all these statistics are based on estimates without enumeration on the ground and for administrative convenience only (Sinha 2003: 177–78). Same is true of the Lhotsampas. Their population is invariably declared as 14 to 25 per cent, but their claim goes as much as 64 per cent. However, scholars agree that Lhotsampa population should be anything between 25 and 33 per cent.

Estimate of Lhotsampa population

The Lhotsampa population at present exists not only in Bhutan and in the refugee camps of Nepal, but also in India and the West. Hence, a region-wise estimation of their population is in order here.

Inside Bhutan

Keeping in mind the voters' list of 2008 and making allowance for the transfer of Drukpa population from north and eastern Bhutan to southern districts in recent times, anything from 80,000 to 100,000 will be a

reasonable guess as the population of the Lhotshampas in Bhutan. Even today, the RGB informs that Lhotshampas constitute 25 per cent of their national population.

In the refugee camps in Nepal

As of 30 November 2010, the record of the Government of Nepal provides the following figures of the Lhotshampa refugees:

In India

There is no compact settlement of the Lhotshampas in India. As per the national obligation between the two countries, the Bhutanese may stay and work in India. So, their scattered population in India is estimated anything between 30,000 and 50,000.

The West

The Government of Nepal maintains such a list, as embarkation of the Lhotshampas from the refugee camps is carried through it. The records as on 30 November 2010 display the following figures of the Lhotshampa refugees, who left Nepal for their Western destinations:

Table 15.1 Number of families, huts and population of Lhotshampa refugees

| <i>Camps</i> | <i>No. of families</i> | <i>No. of huts</i> | <i>Population</i> |
|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Beldangi-I | 2,263 | 3,086 | 13,305 |
| Beldangi-II | 2,914 | 3,916 | 15,288 |
| Beldangi-Ext | 1,264 | 1,582 | 8,893 |
| Goldhap | 772 | 722 | 5,028 |
| Khudunabari | 1,746 | 1,853 | 10,773 |
| Sanischare | 2,518 | 2,568 | 14,244 |
| Timai | 1,019 | 1,264 | 759 |
| Out of camp register | 34 | 46 | 72 |
| Total | 12,530 | 15,087 | 74,861 |

Table 15.2 Destinations of male and female Lhotshampa refugees

| <i>Destination</i> | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| USA | 16,834 | 16,509 | 33,143 |
| Canada | 1,125 | 1,131 | 2,256 |
| Australia | 995 | 1,057 | 2,152 |
| New Zealand | 248 | 250 | 498 |
| Norway | 154 | 219 | 373 |
| Denmark | 155 | 171 | 326 |
| The Netherlands | 112 | 117 | 229 |
| Great Britain | 53 | 58 | 111 |
| Total | 19,770 | 19,309 | 39,079 |

The above figures come to a grand total of 245,931, which may be conveniently put to anything between two and a half to three hundred thousand. The purely domestic problem of the Lhotshampas became a bilateral one between Bhutan and Nepal after 1990. India did not mediate the problem between its two neighbours. With their dispersal in a number of Western countries, the Lhotshampas have become a global community with new challenges and opportunities. With their largely monolingual and rural agricultural background, they are worried about the future of their Lhotshampa identity in the new environments.

Future of Lhotshampa identity

The Lhotshampas are quite different from the Drukpas. They are naturally closer to their ethnic cousins in Darjeeling, Sikkim and Nepal than the Drukpas of Bhutan, but a century and a half long history of living in the same physical environment as the Drukpas has made them different from their ethnic cousins as well. Their social structure, cultural practices, shared memory, religious performances, literary output, worldview and a vision of the future make them a distinct community. Their worries for the future are uniquely theirs, for which their ethnic cousins from Nepal and India can sympathise, but do precious little to help them, as was the case during the past two decades. They have gone to their new destinations in the West with a lot of anxieties. The elderly among them are particularly anxious about the disposal of the dead and subsequent death

rituals. The younger generation is worried about jobs, education and employment while a small intelligentsia among them seeks an 'honourable solution' to their problem.

Despite the currently depressing situation, what happens to the leftover Lhotshampas in Bhutan may hold the key to the future of all the dispersed Lhotshampas. Will they be absorbed by the dominant Drukpas or will they continue to maintain a distinct identity of their own? Will they be forced to leave Bhutan or will they be allowed to stay on, and if so, on what terms and conditions? Partially, Lhotshampa destiny may also be influenced by events unfolding in Nepal and the Western countries where they have settled. Equally significant to watch will be the ongoing demand in Darjeeling district for a separate state called Gorkhaland. If they achieve Gorkhaland, which is difficult, but not impossible, will they like to lend their support to the Lhotshampas? Will the Lhotshampas ever have the wherewithal to influence the national politics of Bhutan, Nepal or India?

Apprehension of the Lhotshampas in Bhutan

Of late, some concessions have been given to the Lhotshampas, such as 'No Objection Certificates' (NOC) and use of dress on certain occasions. One has to wait and see whether these concessions are temporary to appease the international community or they would revert to the post-1990 situation once the glare of the international community is shifted to some other country. They fear that they would be slowly pushed out of the country, as the international community is working in tandem with the Bhutanese establishment. Bhutan's objective is to create a Buddhist country. It believes that its long-term security depends on a mono-cultural landscape. It has the tacit support of India, some Western countries and the People's Republic of China. Thus, it appears that the fate of the Lhotshampas is, at least for now, sealed.

How Lhotshampas respond to the evolving situation will be interesting to observe. The Indian Nepalis are ideologically divided into many groups to give them any united support. Nepal is submerged in political catharsis and there is hardly any chance of a concrete support from that country in the near future. Indian policymakers know that economic integration of Bhutan would serve their long-term purpose, but there is no immediate reason for supporting the democratic movement of Lhotshampas. Keeping these possibilities in mind, the best they can do is to keep them united. The dawn of democracy in Nepal has given a voice to the Madhesi population in Nepal. The Lhotshampas may expect the same to happen in Bhutan someday.

Cultural space for Lhotshampas in India

Recently, an important former Indian diplomat wrote the following, which deserves to be quoted here at length for its cogent enunciation of the formal Indian assessment of the Lhotshampa refugee problem:

a solution was possible (in 1996) . . . I believe Bhutan had identified 12,000 such refugees at a time when the total figure quoted was 80,000. The number now exceeds one lakh, with an uncertain influx. The next step would be to identify the numbers which Nepal would accept, and leave the remaining for India to negotiate, with a scheme to resettle a substantial number within India, and persuade Bhutan to increase acceptable figures within a reasonable limit . . . In fact, these refugees were instigated to cross into Bhutan, and India had to prevent such an influx. There was also reason to believe that such refugees were approached by the Indian insurgents from Assam, known as ULFA to join hands in creating problems both for Bhutan and India. Our M(inistry) of E(xternal) A(fairs) was aware of these developments. Keeping the larger view of Bhutan's stability and ethnic balance in mind, India could not support the demand of the refugees, or of Nepal. It has been a very wise decision, Bhutan being most vulnerable on its southern boundaries, which are dominated by people of Nepalese origin. The late King Jigme Dorji (Wangchuk) often talked to me of his apprehensions that Nepal would visualise a 'Maha Nepal' constituting Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim, and some Nepalese dominated regions of West Bengal, like Darjeeling. The Southern population of Bhutan, consisting over 90% Nepalese origin, would be used as a launching pad in Bhutan, apart from the 75% of the entire Sikkim population which is Nepalese. One prime reason for his policy of closeness to India was to ensure protection of Bhutanese culture, and independence from the Nepalese political intrusion.

(Das 2010: 97–8)

About a 150-years-old Lhotshampa community has a history of suffering, survival and quest for identity in Bhutan. In spite of all odds, the community mounted a heroic effort for its survival and their struggle has proved that they have the tenacity to protect their rich cultural legacy against all odds. Their dispersed existence may force them to go for the use of modern means of communication technology to maintain their cultural ties and unity intact. Their cultural cousins from Nepal and

India, and, of course, their kith and kin in Bhutan may provide moral support, but ultimately, it is they who have to help themselves.

Of late, there has emerged a new possibility in the form of Facebook (Scrutton 2011). The journalist who reported from Bhutan writes: 'face book has opened the flood gate for open criticism of the government. People feel the need to be vocal. Only two years ago, criticism – constructive or not was quite anonymous'. The Lhotshampas may rise to the occasion to see that their culture survives, no matter where they have been resettled and how much against their own will.

Notes

- 1 India Office Library & Records, London (IOLR): MSS/EUR//L/Pes/2224: Collection 8: Bhutan, Letter from Political Officer in Sikkim to the Government of India, No. 16 (1), P/30, dated 2 April 1931.
- 2 IOLR/MSS/EUR/F/80/15c, p. 32, C.A. Bells, 'Confidential Report to the Deputy Commissioner, Darjeeling', dated 23 September 1903.
- 3 IOLR/MSS/EUR/F/80/5c; Confidential Report to the Chief Secretary, Government of Bengal, dated 21 July 1904.
- 4 IOR&R/MSS/EUR/F/80/15c, p. 32; Charles A. Bell, 'Confidential Report to the Deputy Commissioner, Darjeeling', dated 23 September 1903.
- 5 Report on the Relation between the British and Bhutan during 1905–07 as an enclosure of a letter to the His Majesty's Secretary to the State of India, No. 25; dated 21 February 1907.
- 6 F153-c/224(b); Captain Robert E. Kennedy's Bhutan Diary, 1909–10.
- 7 Ibid.

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