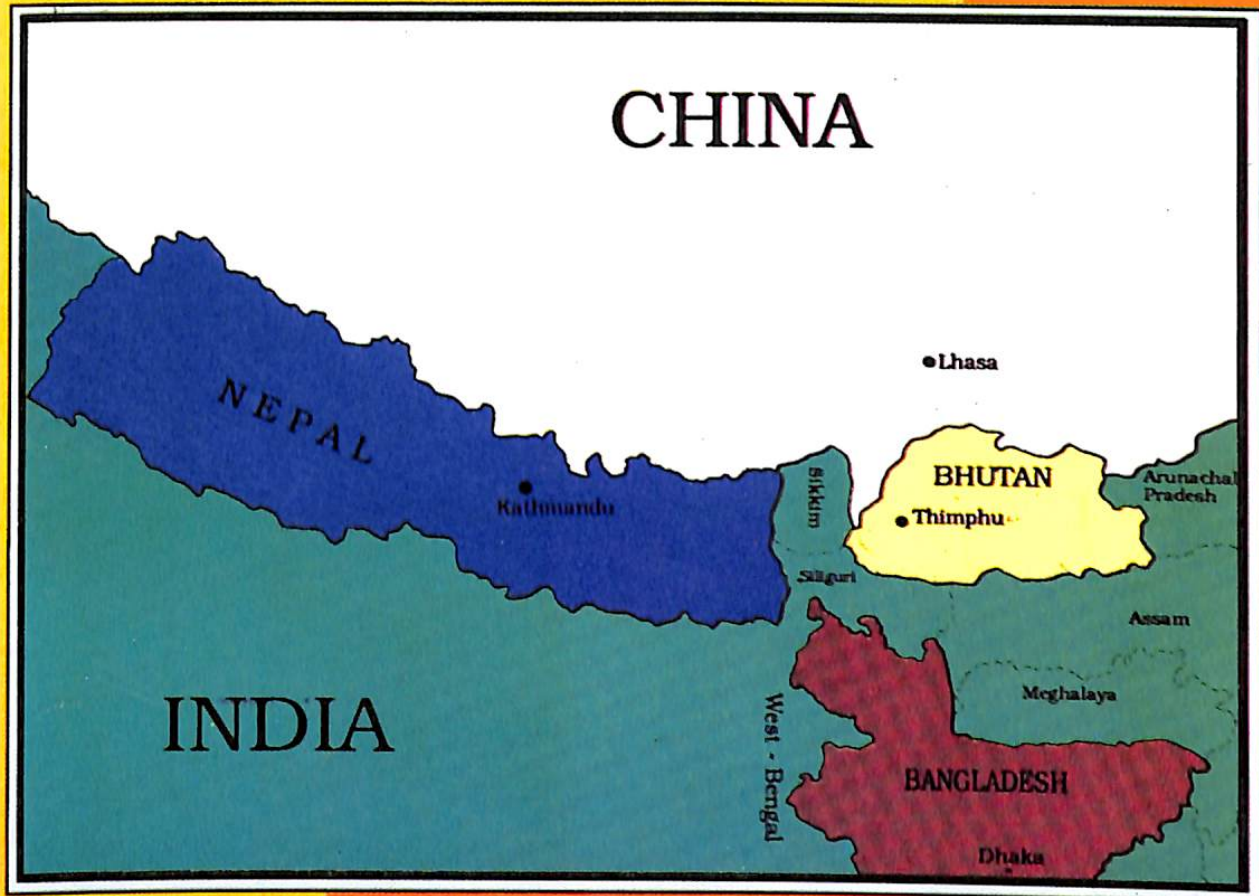


THE SOUTHERN BHUTAN PROBLEM



**THREAT
TO
A
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The Southern Bhutan Problem Threat to a Nation's Survival

The southern Bhutan problem has now entered a new phase. Apart from the continuing spate of terrorist activities, the dissident groups based in Nepal are making an all out effort to use the existence of the refugee camps in Nepal to bring international pressure on Bhutan. In this process they are backed by various organisations in Nepal such as the Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), the Human Rights Organisation of Nepal (HURON) and the Institute for Human Rights, Environment and Development (INHURED).

This review of the subversive activities against the Bhutanese government seeks to project the grave problem confronting Bhutan today in its proper perspective - a threat to Bhutan's survival as a distinct political and cultural entity, rather than an issue over democracy or human rights as projected by the dissident propaganda.

Brief background of the Nepali presence in Bhutan and the implications of illegal immigration

To understand the problem Bhutan is facing today from the subversive activities organised by a nexus of illegal immigrants and vested interests among the Lhotshampas (Southern Bhutanese of Nepali origin), it is necessary to delve a little into Bhutan's history and examine when and how Nepalis came to constitute a part of Bhutan's population. It is also pertinent to examine how it is that the large-scale influx of illegal immigrants into Bhutan

over the past three decades comprised only people of Nepali origin.

It has been said frequently by the dissident groups that Bhutan is a country of immigrants and that the Drukpas (a loose term for the original inhabitants of Bhutan) came from Tibet with Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in the 17th century. According to them the Nepalis were invited to Bhutan by the Shabdrung himself. History, however, reveals otherwise.

Bhutan's recorded history goes back to the 7th century A.D. when Buddhism began to take root in the country and supplant Bonism (a shamanistic form of religion). It was at this time that the two sacred monasteries of Kyichu in the western district of Paro and Jampa Lhakhang in the central district of Bumthang were built. A century later, Guru Padmasambhava visited Bhutan and preached the Dharma. The demographic pattern in Bhutan then was much the same as it is today except for the total absence of Nepalis. Whatever remaining movement of peoples occurred to form the demographic pattern we find in western, eastern and central Bhutan, or what is collectively known today as northern Bhutan, took place between the 7th and 10th centuries which was a period of religious ferment in the eastern Himalayas. What constitutes southern Bhutan today was, however, dense jungle until the beginning of the 20th century when Nepalis first began to trickle into Bhutan in the course of their eastward diaspora.

Bhutan's history from the 10th century to the 17th century is an account of the rivalry between different sects of Mahayana Buddhism striving for supremacy. It is true that several prominent religious personalities came to Bhutan from Tibet during this period, the most outstanding being Phajo Drigom Shigpo and Shabdrung

Ngawang Namgyal. They, however, did not come as immigrants but as spiritual leaders who through their charisma and the deep faith they inspired in the people also played important political roles. Based on the solid foundation Phajo Drigom Shigpo had laid in promoting the Drukpa Kargyupa sect in Bhutan in the 13th century, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal established the supremacy of the Drukpa sect in the 17th century. Bhutan, thereafter, has been popularly known as Druk Yul or the land of the Drukpa Kargyupa sect of Mahayana Buddhism whose mystical symbol has been the thunder dragon. With his towering personality and extraordinary qualities of leadership, the Shabdrung established a strong administrative system throughout the country centered around dzongs (fort like constructions that formed the seat of religious and secular authority in every district). He fashioned the unique national identity that is cherished by the Bhutanese to this day, and which ensured Bhutan's survival as a sovereign, independent country in the face of repeated invasions from Tibet in the north and the formidable British imperial might in the south.

Historical documents, including British records, do not report the presence of any Nepalis in Bhutan until the beginning of the twentieth century. Bhutanese authorities allowed the entry of Nepalis into the country only in 1900 when the Bhutan Agent in India, Kazi Ugyen Dorji, was authorised by the Tongsa Penlop to recruit Nepalis as contractual labourers to extract timber from the dense tropical forests of Samchi, the westernmost district in Bhutan's southern foothills. Between then and the 1950s, the Nepali presence was confined to Samchi and the malaria free hills of Chirang. It was only in the early 1950s that they began to occupy the densely forested foothills of Sarbhang and Geylegphug, and later the south-eastern part of Samdrupjongkhar.

It may be asked why the Bhutanese authorities ever allowed the Nepalis to establish a presence in their southern foothills. The answer is that initially they were brought in as 'tangyas' (forest labourers). Later they were allowed to stay as tenant farmers in the areas where the forests were cleared. These groups of Nepalis, who had over the past few decades settled down as farmers, were given Bhutanese citizenship for the first time in 1958 by the National Assembly of Bhutan when it enacted the Nationality Law of Bhutan. It was, therefore, only in 1958 that people of Nepali origin acquired Bhutanese nationality.

The next phase of Nepali influx into Bhutan began in 1961 when Bhutan cast aside its policy of self-imposed isolation and embarked on a process of planned socio-economic development by launching its first Five-Year Plan with generous assistance from India. Unlike the entry of Nepalis in the first half of the century when they came as contractual forest labourers, this influx was a case of outright illegal immigration over a porous and open border. Pre-occupied with the implementation of development programmes and with only a skeletal administrative set-up in the south headed by civil officials who were mostly ethnic Nepalis, the government remained ignorant about the scale of this silent invasion by economic migrants. Meanwhile, faced with a shortage of manpower to construct roads and implement development programmes, the government employed baidars (labour contractors) to import tens of thousands of labourers from Nepal. Almost three decades passed before the Royal Government became aware of the presence of illegal immigrants. By then substantial numbers of them had already mingled and merged with the local population in southern Bhutan.

A unique feature of the illegal immigration into Bhutan is that all the immigrants are ethnic Nepalis. This is so

because the areas contiguous to Bhutan's southern borders, the Duars region of West Bengal and Assam, and the neighbouring areas of Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Sikkim are all dominated by Nepalis. Bhutan with its small population and favourable land-people ratio, and with abundant employment and business opportunities arising from the rapid economic progress and expanding development programmes, became an economic haven for ethnic Nepalis facing population pressure and job scarcity in their own areas. Moreover, they were being encouraged to come to Bhutan by their kith and kin who had themselves only recently acquired Bhutanese nationality. In fact, it was the active connivance of the local population in southern Bhutan and the corruption of the local administration that prevented the government from realising the massive scale of illegal immigration that had taken place after 1961.

The Nepalis are the only truly migratory race in the Himalayas. Their eastward migration has already reduced several indigenous people of the Himalayas into minorities in their own land. The Lepchas of Kalimpong and Darjeeling have almost vanished in the face of the Nepali demographic invasion while the Lepchas and Bhutias of Sikkim have been reduced to a small minority. Bhutan is clearly the next target and the odds are overwhelmingly stacked against her.

Bhutan is a very small country, both in terms of size and population. People of Nepali origin already constitute the majority population in five of the 20 districts in Bhutan. Nepal's average annual population increase of 5,00,000 is almost as much as Bhutan's entire population. Several million Nepalis live immediately next door to Bhutan across an open and porous border. While Nepal and the neighbouring areas are already overcrowded, Bhutan is the only country in the region that has a favourable land-people ratio. The sheer force of demographic pressure from

a migratory race waiting to cross over an open border into what they perceive as their natural Lebensraum may in the long run be almost impossible to contain. The dissident groups have openly offered citizenship and land to all ethnic Nepalis outside Bhutan who support their cause. Bhutan's only safeguard against a demographic invasion are its citizenship and immigration laws. In order to circumvent these laws the dissident groups have launched the strategy of congregating ethnic Nepalis in camps in Nepal and declaring them as "refugees forcibly evicted from Bhutan".

A review of the southern Bhutan problem

The past year has been marked by the intensive efforts of the dissident groups to increase the number of people in the refugee camps in Nepal. The strategy has been to entice as many ethnic Nepalis as possible from Bhutan and the neighbouring areas in the region, including Nepal itself, to come to these camps and then declare them all as "Bhutanese refugees" who must be allowed to "return to Bhutan in dignity and honour".

Why should the dissidents adopt this unusual strategy one may ask? A brief review of the subversive movement in southern Bhutan will provide the answer.

In 1988, the government initiated a detailed census for the first time. A nexus of illegal immigrants and a section of the Southern Bhutanese population with political ambitions, headed by Tek Nath Rizal, bitterly opposed the census and decided to launch subversive activities. Wild allegations were made and rumours were spread by them that the government was planning to evict all the Southern Bhutanese in order to take over their property.

The efforts of the government to strengthen the policy of national integration in 1988 by promoting a national dress and language was deliberately distorted and maligned by these vested interests to further their political ambitions. Although the people of southern Bhutan confirmed their support for this policy in large public meetings attended by the King, and later in the National Assembly, these subversive elements dubbed it a racist policy and a move to destroy the Nepalese culture. Seditious literature was circulated and an organisation called the Peoples Forum for Human Rights (PFHR), was formed on 7 July 1989 by Tek Nath Rizal in Kakarbhitta, Nepal.

Soon terrorist activities were started, and a political party called the Bhutan People's Party (BPP) was established in Garganda, India in June 1990 by the PFHR. Inspired by the success of the democratic movement in Nepal and apparently believing their own propaganda that Nepalis constituted a majority of the population, the BPP and the PFHR organised violent demonstrations in all the southern districts between September 17 and October 6, 1990.

However, the dissidents and their supporters had miscalculated on three major counts. Firstly, ethnic Nepalis did not constitute the majority of the population. Secondly, the government refused to be provoked into armed retaliation despite attacks on the police with guns, "khukuries" (knives) and bombs by the so-called peaceful demonstrators. Thirdly, convinced that it would be sufficient if they could persuade some of the people in southern Bhutan, and force others, to participate in the "demonstrations" to bring about the government's capitulation, the dissidents had launched their agitation without considering whether they had genuine mass support. With an economic boom in southern Bhutan due

to large-scale export of cash crops and the establishment of several industries which have created abundant jobs, and the substantial benefits accruing from developmental projects, the majority of the Lhotshampas refused to support the agitation launched by the dissidents.

As a result, the agitation fizzled out when the "demonstrations" failed to bring about the capitulation of the government. However, the fact that the "demonstrations" were staged and carried out entirely by Lhotshampas exposed a latent desire among them to take over political power in Bhutan.

Realising that they had miscalculated and that the true nature of the BPP and the PFHR had been exposed, the leaders of the movement fled to Nepal. Those who had played a more covert role absconded in May 1991 when they realized that an audit of accounts in their departments would expose their embezzlement of huge sums of government funds.

Having observed the disillusionment of their Southern Bhutanese supporters who felt let down when the "easy victory" promised to them did not materialise due to lack of genuine mass support in the five districts of southern Bhutan, and seeing that the government had the complete support of the people in the 15 northern districts, the dissident leaders realised that it would not be possible for them to organise a popular movement inside Bhutan. At the same time they knew that they could not keep on claiming to be a movement for democracy and human rights without some visible proof of a mass support base. The strategy of inducing ethnic Nepalis from southern Bhutan and elsewhere to congregate in Nepal and declaring them as "Bhutanese refugees" was the only solution for them to overcome this dilemma, and at the same time win international sympathy and support for their cause.

They felt that with the help of the Nepalese government it would be possible to bring sufficient international pressure upon Bhutan to compel the Royal Government to "take back the Bhutanese refugees". This would at one stroke be a great political victory and a neat circumvention of Bhutan's immigration and citizenship laws. They calculated that if they could document all the people in the camps as "Bhutanese refugees" they would in effect succeed in securing Bhutanese citizenship for all the illegal immigrants as well as those Nepalis in the camps who had never even set foot in Bhutan. Producing Bhutanese citizenship identity cards and tax receipts posed no problem as these could be easily duplicated (see Appendix one). The Royal Government had failed to take the precaution of printing the citizenship identity cards in a press specialising in such work, and had printed the cards in a commercial press in Calcutta, India in 1981. While the supplying agency was paid Nu. 2.00 per card, the actual cost of the printing was Rs.1.64.

Calculating that the "refugee issue" would bring them one step closer to their goal of establishing a Nepali majority in Bhutan and usurping political power, the dissident groups have spared no efforts to congregating as many ethnic Nepalis as possible in the camps in eastern Nepal. A well-oiled machinery was soon at work to achieve the target of gathering at least one hundred thousand persons in the camps to attract the attention of the international community. Various organisations like the INSEC, HURON and INHURED have been only too happy to help in internationalising the issue.

There has also been no let up by the dissidents in their terrorist activities in southern Bhutan over the past year, the main targets being Lhotshampas who refuse to support them or those who they consider are government supporters.

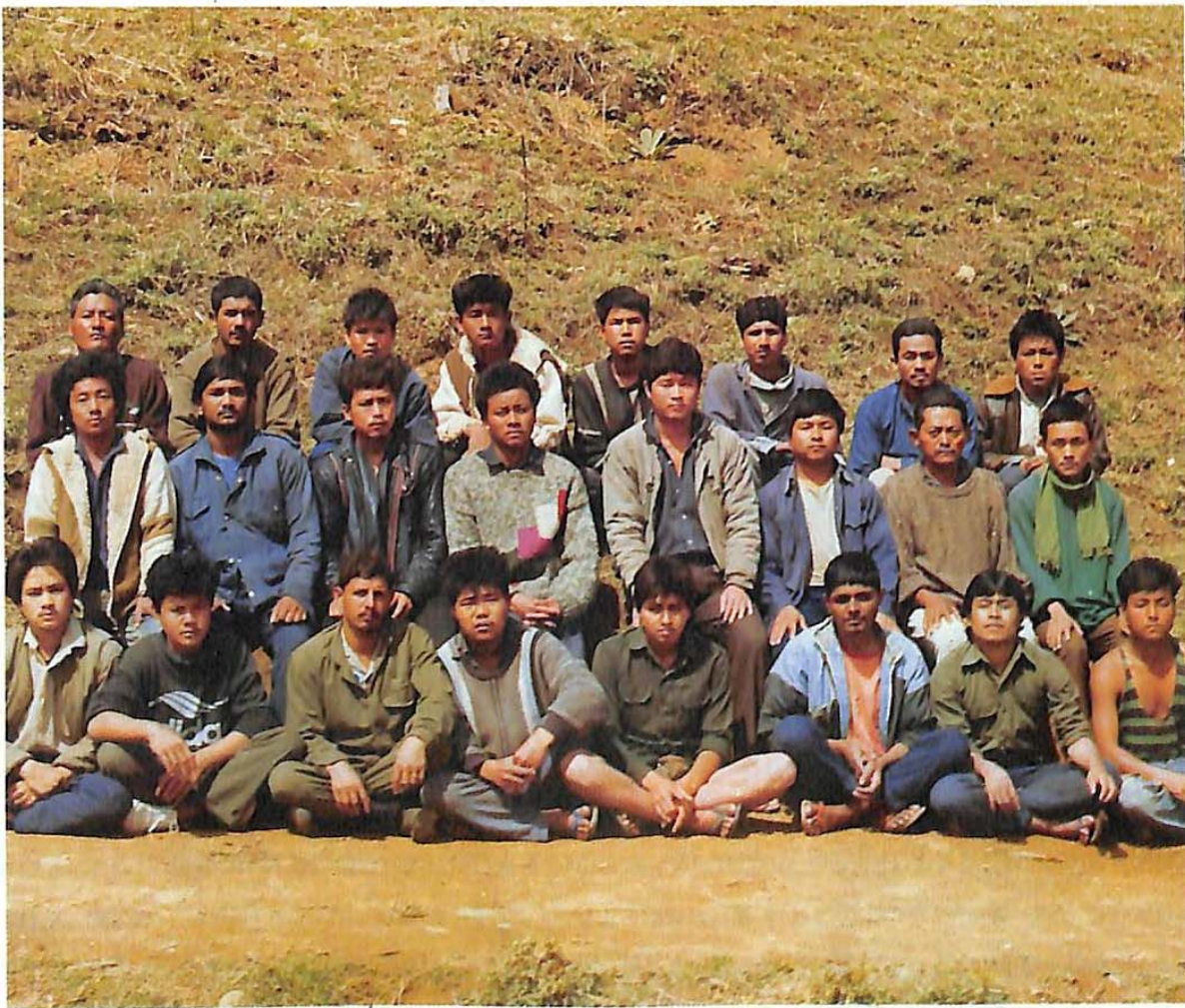
Most of the terrorist raids are being carried out by terrorist groups sent from the refugee camps in Nepal, with operations actually being directed by the leaders in these camps. A number of terrorists sent from these camps have been apprehended.

It has been confirmed that the murder of the "Dungpa" (civil administrator) of Geylegphug last May was directed by the BPP. Ganga Ram Dhakal, the terrorist who fired the shot that killed the Dungpa was captured by villagers on November 14, 1992 when he came to raid a village in Geylegphug sub-district. Ganga Ram Dhakal told the police that he had been sent from Nepal with other terrorists to kill the Dungpa. On his return to Nepal after killing the Dungpa he had been personally commended by the BPP president R.K.Budathoki.

On January 8, 1993, security forces pursuing a gang of terrorists who had raided three houses in Dagana captured one of the members, Srijung Subba, who turned out to be a terrorist sent from the Beldangi camp in Nepal. Srijung Subba revealed that he and two other young men from his camp, Hemlal Subba and Khundu Subba had been directed to enter Assam, link up with other terrorists and infiltrate into Dagana district to rob the rich villagers. They were instructed to bring their loot back to their leaders in Nepal at regular intervals.

On February 24, 1993, five terrorists who had killed the daughter of Jagat Bahadur Rai, a rich villager in Sarbhang district, were caught by his relatives living across the border in Assam, India. The five terrorists, Sukman Gurung, a deserter from the Meghalaya Home Guard Institute in India, Ratna Bahadur Thapa, Barmalal Adhikari, Karna Bahadur Sunar and Dil Kumar Subba revealed that they were registered as refugees in the Tinmai and Beldangi camps in Nepal. They had been sent as part of a

group of twelve selected terrorists by Rajman Gurung and Indra Gurung, the Administrative Officer and the Secretary of the Tinmai camp to raid the house of Jagat Bahadur Rai in Sarbhang who was reported to have Nu.2,50,000 with him from the sale of his cash crops. The five terrorists said that one member of their group, Bhim Bahadur Subba, was from Sikkim in India but was registered as a Bhutanese refugee. They also gave the police a list of names of Nepalis from Nepal and India who were registered in their camps as Bhutanese refugees. Apart from killing Jagat Bahadur's daughter, the five terrorists were also responsible for the rape of a 17 year old girl and several armed robberies in Sarbhang district.



Terrorists sent from the refugee camps in Nepal to raid and terrorise villagers in southern Bhutan. 21 of these terrorists, who are all registered as refugees in Nepal, were apprehended by village volunteers and 3 by the security forces.

On March 24, 1993, village volunteers in Dhovan block under Sarbhang district captured four terrorists who had been sent from the refugee camps in Nepal to raid the villages in the southern districts. Three of them, Lhakpa Tamang, Dambar Bahadur Subba and Karna Bahadur Tamang were registered in the Beldangi camp while the fourth, Somraj Subba was registered in the Tinmai camp. Lhakpa Tamang and Dambar Bahadur Subba had both emigrated from Bhutan many years ago. Lhakpa Tamang had settled in the Lohagat Tea Gardens in Darjeeling, India, while Dambar Bahadur Subba had settled in Harya Budhabari village in Jhapa district, Nepal. They had registered themselves as Bhutanese refugees in the Beldangi camp to avail of the free rations and education and health facilities provided by international agencies.

On May 12, 1993, two terrorists sent from the refugee camps in Nepal were caught by village volunteers in Labrang village under Kalikhola sub-district. The two terrorists, Jit Bahadur Chettri who had absconded from Kalikhola and Nar Bahadur Mongar who had absconded from Dagana, had registered themselves as refugees in the Beldangi camp in Nepal. They had been involved in several other raids on villagers in Kalikhola before they were caught on May 12.

It has been confirmed that the dissident groups have a two pronged strategy to take over political power in Bhutan. While the internationalisation of the "refugee issue" with the help of the Nepalese government is pivotal for the success of their over all plan, they also have a back-up strategy to launch armed insurgency to ensure that "power is wrested permanently from the Drukpas". To that end cadres of young men are being trained in the forests near the refugee camps in Nepal by army deserters and retired Gurkha veterans. Arms and ammunition are being collected and stockpiled.

Changing the citizenship laws is one of the declared objectives of the dissident groups. They calculate that "returning on the tide of international pressure with all the Bhutanese refugees" will enable them to automatically breach these laws. "Returning with all the refugees" would also enable them to take full control of the five districts of southern Bhutan. This would make it possible for them to facilitate the influx of more Nepalis to achieve their goal of turning Bhutan into a Nepali dominated state.

Not taking anything for granted this time, the dissident leaders have drawn up the back-up strategy of launching an armed insurgency if they cannot "dictate terms" to the extent they would like even if they succeed in "returning" with international support. In that event they would start a political agitation on some pretext or other to divert international attention and simultaneously launch an insurgency movement. This would soon turn into an invasion from outside by Gorkha veterans and mercenaries who would be only too willing to support them. After all who is to distinguish a Lhotshampa insurgent from a Gurkha veteran, and who would be able to effectively detect and stop a steady infiltration of such people across an open and porous border. Power would then be wrested from the Drukpas through a combination of political agitation and armed insurrection.

Either way they feel they will achieve their objective. "However, they know that the immediate task before them is to mobilise enough international support to enable them to "return" to Bhutan with all the "Bhutanese refugees". And they are banking greatly on the support of the Nepalese government to achieve this goal. The subversive movement against the Bhutanese government is now entering the phase of internationalising the "refugee issue".