



Nirala

BHUTAN

A Movement in Exile

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Chapter One

Rearranging the Ethnic Mosaic

Bhutan is essentially a nation of immigrants. As peoples migrated and settled in the once sparsely populated area that is now Bhutan, they displaced the original and earlier inhabitants of the region. Like the other peoples throughout the Himalayas, the people of Bhutan lived mostly isolated from their neighbours by the rough terrain. In this way, the peoples who settled in Bhutan were able to maintain their ethnic identities to a great degree. Bhutan's small physical size and population mask the numerous distinct ethnicities and cultures that populate the country¹, although the introduction of schools, roads, and development is slowly eroding the divisions in the country. Because almost no research exists on the ethnic groups of Bhutan-their origins, their cultures, and their languages-only a rough description of the peoples of Bhutan is possible. There is in fact some argument and confusion over who were the original inhabitants of the country, when different ethnic groups settled in Bhutan, and what the relation between the ethnic groups is. Still what literature exists is enough to give a general picture of the ethnic composition of Bhutan.

Bhutan is made up of many distinct peoples, but four ethnic groups-the Ngalongs, Sarchops, Khengs, and Nepalis-comprise over 98% of Bhutan's population. The Ngalongs, Khengs, and Sarchops form what is sometimes called a Drukpa identity group, as the three ethnic groups are cul-

turally integrated to a degree, especially compared to the Nepalis. Still, each of these groups has different ancestral ties and a distinct identity. The Ngalongs, represented mainly in the West of Bhutan, are a Tibetan origin people who migrated into Bhutan in the ninth and tenth centuries AD (Aris 1979:58-9; N.Das 1974:2; Rahul 1971:7). They form the social and ruling elite in the country and follow the Drukpa Kargyud school of Mahayana Buddhism, which is the state religion. The Ngalong people speak a dialect similar to Tibetan which varies "not only from valley to valley but even from village to village" (Aris xiv). The Dzongkha language, the national language of Bhutan, is derived from the speech of the Ngalongs:

Since the 17th century unification of Bhutan there has, however, developed an official idiom known as 'Dzongkha' (rDzong-kha, 'the language of the fortress'), a polished form of the village patois of the Ngalong people. This is spoken among government officials and monks from all regions of the country, and the idiom is so developed that often one can find people from the central and eastern parts of the country who speak it better than someone from the western region where the idiom first arose. (Arix xvi-xvii)

Earlier, Dzongkha was the "official language" of Bhutan, but was not forced on other ethnic groups, as Leo Rose notes in 1977: "So far, the government has resisted the temptation to try and impose Dzongkha on the majority of the population that does not speak the language, rejecting the "national language" policies adopted by the neighbouring states of Nepal and formally at least, India" (44). Since then, the government made Dzongkha the "national language", refining the grammar, putting it to script, and later imposing it on the rest of the country:

The policy of the present government is to advance the diffusion and status of Dzongkha further by making it obligatory study in all schools throughout the country.

To that end the local scholars employed by the Education Department have had to take brave and difficult steps towards adapting the ancient literary language to accommodate the spoken forms of Ngalong, the first time that any of the Bhutanese languages have been written down in Tibetan script. (Aris xvii)

Eastern Bhutan is inhabited primarily by the Sarchops, who are possibly the earliest settlers in Bhutan. They, by and large, like the Ngalongs, are Buddhists of the Drukpa Kargyud sect, but they have their ethnic roots in Arunachal Pradesh and are of Indo-Mongoloid rather than of Tibetan descent. The Sarchops speak their own language, Tsangla, and have a distinct ethnic identity of being "Sarchop". The inhabitants of central Bhutan clustered around Bumthang, Tongsa and Shemgang, called the Khengs appear to be related to each other and speak a similar language, although the different groups of people in the area have distinct regional identities². At one time, the Khengs were more powerful rulers of central Bhutan (Aris 97). They were conquered by the Ngalongs by the seventeenth century, as were the Sarchops, and they are also following the Drukpa Kargyud school of Buddhism. Like the Sarchops, they are very early, or may be even indigenous, inhabitants of Bhutan. Although their ancient clan leaders claim to trace their roots to the exiled Prince Tsangma of Tibet (Aris 98), related ethnic groups with a similar language are found in Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya in India (Aris xv; Sinha 1991:27). Usually, a differentiation is only made between Ngalongs and Sarchops, with the Khengs most often included with the Sarchops. Although it seems certain that the Sarchops and Khengs are ethnically distinct from each other, their lack of a more direct link to Tibet places both of them together in a category separate from the Ngalongs, though the three groups are now culturally integrated to an extent.

The Neplalis live mainly in the southern belt and are relatively recent immigrants to the area, most of them having

come in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While Nepalis are made up of a combination of caste/ethnic groups-Bahun, Chhetri, Gurung, Limbu, Newar, Rai, Tamang, et cetera-they are effectively a single community bound together by the common Nepali tongue and hill-hinduism³. The origin and culture of the Nepali Bhutanese is described in detail in Part II.

Numerous other ethnic groups are also present in Bhutan on a much smaller scale, such as Adhivasi, Birmi, Brokpa, Doya, Lepcha, Tibetan, and Toktop⁴. These groups represent both clear, and more recent, extensions of neighbouring ethnic groups-the Adhivasis from India, Lepchas from Sikkim, and Tibetans from Tibet-and groups who have Tibetan roots, such as the nomadic Birmi and Brokpa yak herders, who appear to have a long history in Bhutan. In searching for the indigenous Bhutanese, the Toktop and their relatives, numbering now only in the hundreds, are the clearest candidates:

If one were to apply the label 'indigenous' to any peoples in Bhutan in the same way as it is applied to the Lepchas of Sikkim, one would be tempted to focus on the very small communities of jungle-dwellers who practise shifting cultivation of the fringe of the major groups... They are known as the 'Toktop' and live in two permanent villages south of sPa-gro (Paro) called Upper and Lower 'Toktokha'. They are probably related to the people living in 'Taba-Dramten' and 'Loto-Kuchu'... All these minute western groups come under the authority of an official appointed from sPa-gro formerly called the (Steward of the gDung)...The name gDung is pregnant with meaning for the lost history of the country. It is suggested that the gDung were once a people who appear to have been spread over the whole country and who have now all but disappeared under the impact of fresh migration or military defeat from the north. (Aris xvii-xviii)

The smaller ethnic groups, though adding great diversity to Bhutan's ethnic make-up, represent only about one to two percent of the total population.

Despite the availability of authoritative sources, however basic they may be, the ethnic composition of Bhutan is a confused and volatile political issue. Writers often lump the Khengs, Ngalongs, and Sarchops together into a "Drukpa" group. This practice has become especially evident as Bhutan gained more attention in the last few years. In the press, the present refugee crisis is sometimes portrayed as a Drukpa versus Nepali conflict, assuming that the entire non-Nepali population of Bhutan is galvanized against the "anti-national" Nepalis. At its most naive, this view is presented by Tim McGirk in the London paper *The Independent*: "The Drukpas-the Thunder-dragon people-who are the original inhabitants of Bhutan, are now at odds with the Gurkhas, the tough warrior clansmen originally from Nepal in the south"(6 January 1993:4). Most books on Bhutan are broader in scope, detailing the numerous ethnic groups in the country. But even in recognizing Bhutan's ethnic diversity, authors occasionally describe a united Drukpa group distinct from the Nepalis (i.e. Mehra 1974:9; Parmanand 1992:6). Recent government publications reinforce this perception. A pamphlet from the Royal Government of Bhutan's Planning Commission of the National Environmental Secretariat (NES), for example, claims:

The people of Mongoloid origin, with their distinctive language, Buddhist religion and cultural patterns of Tibetan origin inhabit the Northern and Central parts of Bhutan. The Mongoloid settlers in south-eastern Bhutan termed the Sarchopa's (Sarchops), though of the same origin, have a distinct cultural pattern akin to the Tibeto-Burmese. *However, they have completely assimilated into the Buddhist derived culture of the northern and central parts of Bhutan.* The settlers in southwestern Bhutan are predominantly Hindus. The bulk of them

have immigrated more recently. (1992:15; emphasis added)

Both McGirk and the NES mistakenly assert that, apart from the Nepalis, Bhutan is composed of a nearly homogeneous, unified culture-the Drukpa-ignoring or downplaying the ethnic identities and unique culture of the Khengs and Sarchops.

As indicated in the above quotes, a concurrent misconception is the belief that the Drukpas are the indigenous, or at least the earliest, inhabitants of Bhutan. A recent government publication distributed to embassies by Bhutan's Department of Information, titled *Anti-national Activities in Southern Bhutan*, goes so far as to define "Drukpa" as "a name by which the *original inhabitants* of Druk Yul (Bhutan) are commonly known in the Himalayan region"(1991:1; emphasis added). While the Khengs and Sarchops might arguably be labelled "original inhabitants" as it is hard to place other peoples' settlement in Bhutan before theirs, there is no question that the Ngalongs, also subsumed under the Drukpa label, came much later and most likely displaced the "original inhabitants". To be accurate, though, the term "Drukpa" should refer only to followers of the Drukpa Kargyud sect of Buddhism, as this is where the term is derived from (Mehra 9; also Introduction). For this reason, the different ethnic groups in western, central, and eastern Bhutan are called Drukpa because of their shared religious belief, not because they form a single culture or ethnicity. Accordingly, generalizing about the culture or roots of Drukpas is inherently misleading, as many distinct groups are subsumed under the Drukpa. In addition, the Drukpa ethnic groups definitely have a distinct identity along with their individual languages and cultures. In common usage, however, the rubric term Drukpa has slowly begun to be synonymous with Bhutanese. Depending on the views of the person as to what a "true Bhutanese" is, a Drukpa might be any citizen of Bhutan,

a follower of the Drukpa Kargyud school or Buddhism, or just any non-Nepali Bhutanese⁵. Because Drukpa is used without a clear delineation of whom the term applies to, descriptions of the ethnic composition of Bhutan are easily blurred or distorted.

Population Politics

Like the history of the ethnic groups in Bhutan, an accurate description of the population size and ethnic distribution of Bhutan is difficult to produce. Both the dissident groups and the government release questionable figures: the dissidents portray a country tyrannically ruled by a small minority; the government attempts to establish representative legitimacy and show the threat of mass Nepali immigration. Of course, the dissidents have no way to document the size of the Nepali population in Bhutan, except for the growing number of refugees in the camps and block-wise information recorded by former assembly members and mandals about household numbers, family sizes, and so on. Since the government has not published data on ethnic distribution by district and has only given figures for the nation as a whole, it is hard to evaluate how accurate the government's reporting is, as ethnic population in Bhutan are concentrated in different regions. Furthermore, a recent, drastic government change in the estimate of the total population calls into question the accuracy of any government population statistics.

For a long time, the Bhutan government could only estimate the total population of Bhutan and the size of the ethnic groups. For otherwise reasons or the lack of data in 1960 led to the rather unique situation of the National Assembly deciding on the population figures to be presented to visiting foreign dignitaries: 700,000 would be given as the total population, of which 25% were supposed

✓ to be Nepali Bhutanese (NAB 1960 (14th), Resolution 2, Part VIII). The accuracy and availability of population data at the time, as well how much the estimate was based on true statistics and how much it was politics, is uncertain, but certainly the politics of population is evinced by the National Assembly's role in deciding the numbers. In the information booklet *Bhutan: Himalayan Kingdom*, published in 1979, the population of the country is given as 1,200,000. Not surprisingly, the population for Bhutan in 1988 was estimated to have grown to 1,375,000 (Department of Education 1991:4). At the end of 1991, however, Bhutan completely revised its numbers, claiming the population to be only 600,000, or less than half of the previous estimate. In fact, the same 1979 publication of *Bhutan: Himalayan Kingdom* distributed in the 1980s was given out in Dhaka, Bangladesh, during the 1992 SAARC Summit with the old population figure of 1,200,000 whited-out and 600,000 written in by hand⁶. King Jigme Singye Wangchuck explained that his father, the late King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, was told that he needed to claim his country had over a million people in order to gain membership in the United Nations (Sen, 1990:28;qtd. Parmanand 27). Dissident groups point to more sinister motives: they allege that Bhutan previously kept its population estimate high to help ensure generous UN and foreign aid funds, but revised it to a more realistic figure that also excluded the Nepali Bhutanese to be evicted from the country (Dixit, July/August 1992:17). The dissident groups place the total population of Bhutan between seven and eight hundred thousands, but there is no way ✓ to tell for certain.

Population estimates by ethnicity are even more controversial and contestable than the figures for Bhutan's total population. Although it is impossible to give unassailable figures for the ethnic distribution of population in Bhutan, the range of the estimates for each ethnic group given by different sources indicates the general population size and

enables several broad conclusions about the relative sizes of ethnic populations in Bhutan. The Khengs and the smaller minorities altogether comprise around 10% of the population, a figure not really disputed. The estimates of the size of the Ngalong population range from 10% in dissident literature to around 25% in van Driem's and Parmanand's estimates. The Sarchops comprise anywhere from about 30% of the population, according to early PFHR literature ([1991?]:[1], to around 50% in Aris and Rahul's estimates (xv;8). The Nepalis form 33%, according to the highest government estimate (Parmanand 17), or a little over 50% of the population, according to the highest dissident estimates. From these figures, one can surmise that the Nepalis and the Sarchops are the largest ethnic groups in the country (each comprising 30-50% of the total population), though it is difficult to judge which group is larger. Most likely no ethnic group by itself forms a clear majority in the country, especially if the Khengs and Sarchops are not included together. Out of the four largest ethnic groups, the Ngalongs are almost certainly the third smallest, more populous only than the Khengs. With this small of a Ngalong population forming the basis for a "Bhutanese identity" and the core of the government, it is understandable that the Royal Government of Bhutan might not be too keen on publishing precise census enumeration by ethnic groups.

The most recent figures, and the most descriptive to date, for Bhutan's total population and ethnic distribution are given in a language survey of Bhutan. According to van Driem, a Dzongkha scholar who works for the Royal Government of Bhutan, the recent government language survey shows that there are approximately 600,000 people in Bhutan: 160,000 Dzongkha speakers, 156,000 Nepali speakers, 138,000 Tsangla speakers (Sarchops), 80,000 people who speak similar central Bhutan dialects (Khengs), and many small groups of speakers of related dialects and separate languages (1993:4). Although van Driem does not clarify,

presumably he surveys speakers' mother tongue, since the total population surveyed is the official total population of the country. Also, since so many Bhutanese are bi- or tri-lingual the total survey would represent a much greater number than 600,000 if fluency or conversational ability was surveyed.

Two things are surprising about van Driem's figures. ✓
First, the figure of 156,000 Nepali speakers probably does not include the Nepali speakers in the camps, unless the survey was done many years ago. If the refugee groups are correct in their estimates of the total number of the refugees, this means that there were approximately 300,000 Nepali speakers in Bhutan before the refugee crisis started, making the Nepalis the largest single ethnic group in the country by far. In fact, even the recent Bhutanese government acknowledgement that there might be some 30,000 true refugees in the camps suggests that the Nepalis are the largest single ethnic group (Bhaumik, 19 April 1993, BBC Radio Broadcast; *The Independent*, 28 April 1993:1). ✓

Secondly, the number of Dzongkha speakers given by van Driem is very high and the figure for Tsangla speakers quite low. van Driem is the only person who has ever contended that there are more Ngalongs than Sarchops. Both Aris and Rahul write that the Sarchops form a clear majority of the population (xv;8). More recently, Parmanand, an Indian political scientist who is sympathetic to the Bhutan government, estimated the percentage of Sarchops as 44% of Bhutan's total population and the Ngalongs as about 28% (116-7). It could be that Parmanand and Rahul include the Khengs in their estimates of the number of Sarchops, but even then the Sarchops would still outnumber the Ngalongs, as the Khengs only form around ten percent of the population. Aris writes that the Tsangla speaking Sarchops specifically are the most numerous group in the country, though he has no recent census data to support his assertion besides the 1969 information provided by Rose (1977:41),

which does show a significant majority of the population inhabiting the East, the area of the Sarchops. Given that van Driem is a Bhutan Government employee, a Dzongkha scholar, and an apologist for nationalization of Dzongkha and curtailing of Nepali language instruction in schools (1993), it is suspiciously convenient for him, as well as the Bhutan government, to be able to point to the Ngalongs as the single largest group in the country. Unfortunately, even though van Driem's figures are the most recent and detailed to date, the contradiction of his data with previously published works and his own conflict of interest renders his work inconclusive. His data simply shows how conflicting different sources are when describing the ethnic composition of Bhutan.