

BILATERALISM UNDER THE SHADOW: THE PROBLEMS OF REFUGEES IN NEPAL-BHUTAN RELATIONS

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Formally, Nepal and Bhutan established diplomatic relation in 1983. Such a move was presumably prompted by the enthusiasm and calculation with which the South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) scheme was being given a formal shape following the proposal made by Ziaur Rahman, then President of Bangladesh. In 1985 the first South Asian summit accepted it, turning SARC into an association – South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). However, the two Himalayan Kingdoms, Nepal and Bhutan, were not new nations to the south of the Himalayas, as their civilizational links were more deep-rooted than political and other interactions. Even for knowledgeable scholars of the South Asian region, the close cultural and economic relations between them remained unformed until Bhutan was thrown into the recent ethnic conflict generated by the alleged discriminatory policy – implementation of the Bhutanese State against the “southern Bhutanese” or the people of Nepali origin.

Now this small Himalayan Kingdom, almost entirely isolated from the rest of the outside world until quite recently, has suddenly come to the limelight. It is drawing the concerns of a large number of international agencies over human rights and democracy, despite the Bhutanese effort at presenting its own version of the issue – i.e. the Nepali minority in Bhutan is out to capture power by raising the bogey of discrimination, democracy and human rights. The coercive measures applied by the Bhutanese seemed to have been guided by an extreme sense of insecurity for both national identity and state security. In the perceptions of the Bhutanese elites, comprising basically the central elites around the king, these are being threatened by a demographic imbalance within the country. To thwart this perceived danger to many Bhutanese Nepalis, the royal government of Bhutan has imposed the compulsory dress and language of Tibetan origin of the minority 16% of the country onto the Nepali majority. The Nepalis resisted this and other laws relating to citizenship, thereupon the government, making the issue into one

of survival, implemented its policies of "Bhutanization", forcing the Nepalis to flee the country. Most of those who fled, whether voluntarily or due to coercion, found their way into Nepal, after having been encouraged to go there by the Indian authorities manning the North Bengal corridor between Bhutan and Nepal. About 85,000 refugees currently reside in the camps inside Nepal and a few thousands more in India.

Historical Background

Historically, Nepal's cultural and political relations with Bhutan were established long before the unification of Nepal in 1768. The Gorkha kings, the Mallas of the Kathmandu valley and the kingdoms of Mustang and Vijaypur of western and eastern Nepal had close relations with Bhutan. The main reason for these relations were religious, strategic and socioeconomic. The Kingdom of Gorkha had developed such relations, particularly during the reign of King Ram Shah. Later, it was said that Ram Shah solicited the help of the king of Bhutan in a request to send a Lama for performing certain rituals that could enable the queen to give birth to a child of their choice.¹

Some historical references have also been made that the Shah kings of Gorkha and also the rulers of "greater Nepal" following the unification had been able to garner Bhutanese support during their wars with Tibet (*Bhot*), for which the Bhutanese side was rewarded either by land grants or monasteries. From today's point of view the previous Bhutanese support for the rulers of Gorkha or greater Nepal against Tibet is incredible, because of close religious and cultural links between Tibet and Bhutan. However, the *realpolitik* seemed to prompt Bhutan to lend such support to Nepal.

The close bilateral relations paved the way for the movement of trained manpower. The Nepalis helped Bhutan to organize its administration and army and provided assistance to improve its agriculture, livestock, trade and commerce. Some sources have stated that the Nepalis committed themselves to protecting the Kingdom of Bhutan by identifying themselves with the fate of that country.² Later, the other Nepalis found the southern part of Bhutan as their place of settlement. People faced with difficult conditions in the Nepal hills migrated to Assam, Darjeeling, Sikkim of India, and Bhutan in search of better opportunities. Despite these historical and human links, there was very little economic interaction between Nepal and Bhutan, a trend that continues even today.

Since Nepal and Bhutan share no common border and are separated by India, their low economic links are understandable. Why the Nepal-Bhutan bilateral relations had been inactive and cool even after the overthrow of the 104-year-old Rana family rule in Nepal remains an enigma. The cooling of relations began soon after the Nepal-Tibet War of 1855-56, because Bhutan

took no interest in helping Nepal during the war. Perhaps its cultural and religious ties with Tibet overrode the strategic links between it and Nepal. It has been said that there have been no direct relations between Bhutan and Nepal since the Anglo-Bhutanese Treaty of January 10, 1910, which made Bhutan's external relations a direct concern of the Government of India.³

A country with whom Nepal had so much interaction in the past could seldom take any decision to upgrading the level of relations, let alone the exchange of visits between the two heads of state and government. Did the Bhutanese king choose a deliberate policy of distancing himself from yet another monarchical country? Or were there other compulsions to do? The creation of the Bhutan State Congress (BSC) in the wake of Nepal's democratic upsurge in the early 1950s, and the alleged encouragement given to the BSC by the Nepali side, could be one reason. The BSC was perceived as a threat to the absolute monarchy even though the party could hardly mount any decisive anti-regime movement since its birth. In 1964, some Bhutanese involved in an attempted coup d'état assassinating Prime Minister Jigme Palde Dorji were given political asylum in Nepal. "In any case the Nepalese action hurt Bhutanese susceptibilities," despite the subsequent amnesty granted to most of the fugitives by the king of Bhutan.⁴

Recent Refugee Movement and Nepal-Bhutan Relations

Refugee conditions are generally created by structural violence or repression or by some other "push" factors attributed to nature or society or both. Yet normally, "violence is the cause of refugees and the source of it can be state and society".⁵ It can also be correlated with severe ethnic conflict working as it does in causing migration, though not just migration alone as the refugees are not primarily produced by what Weiner calls "access and differential variables" or "pull" factors changing demographic settings.⁶ There has been a reverse wave of migration of the Bhutanese of Nepali origin – known as *Lhotshampa* – following the royal Bhutanese government's decision to intensify the campaign of 'one people, one nation' imposing the language of Tibetan origin – *Dzongkha* – and the dress of *Ngalung Drukpas*. A more important cause of the developing conflict between the southern Bhutanese (Nepalis) and the Drukpa-dominated elite group was "the implementation of the 1985 Citizenship Act which adopts 1958 as the cut-off year. In the implementation of the Act, the Royal Government has made it mandatory for every Bhutanese of Nepali ethnicity (sic) to produce 1958 land tax receipts to qualify for Bhutanese citizenship", knowing well that no villagers could preserve such records for 30 years.⁷ The process of Drukpanization seemed to have been precipitated by elite consternation at *Lhotschampa's* penchant for the Nepali language and culture, which in their perception would eventually

see the extinction of the *Driglam Namzha*, a traditional dress and etiquette that "dates from the time of the early Shabdruns of Bhutan."

The 1958 citizenship arrangement contained the following elements for recognition as Bhutanese citizens:

Any person was eligible for a national status

- (a) if his/her father was a Bhutanese national and was a resident of Bhutan; or
- (b) if any person was born within or outside Bhutan after the commencement of this law, provided the previous father was a Bhutanese national at the time of his/her birth.
- (c) if any foreigner who had the age of majority and was otherwise eligible, he could be granted citizenship after administering the oath of loyalty according to the rules laid down by an official, provided that:
 - (i) the person was a resident of Bhutan for more than ten years, and
 - (ii) owned agricultural land within the Kingdom.
- (d) a woman married to a Bhutanese national was granted citizenship after taking oath as laid down by law;
- (e) If any foreigner submitted a petition to the king expressing his eligibility on the grounds of age and other requirements, had served satisfactorily in government for at least five years, and had been residing in Bhutan for at least 10 years, he might receive the citizenship certificate.

This provision was amended in 1977, making 15 years of service and residing 20 years in Bhutan. Making language as one of the mandatory conditions, the 1977 Citizenship Act demanded allegiance to the king, country and people. According to an Amnesty International Report, during 1988 several thousand non-nationals were reportedly ordered to leave the country as landless or unemployed illegal immigrants or for overstaying initial permits, as part of a longer-term policy to limit the role of the non-national wage labour force. Linking to the possible impact of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) movement across the Indo-Bhutanese border, the citizenship policy was "apparently implemented" vigorously. In the late 1980s, a committee for determining the proof of citizenship categorized people as

- (a) genuine Bhutanese citizens
- (b) returned migrant people who had left Bhutan and then returned
- (c) drop-out cases

- (d) a non-national woman married to a Bhutanese man
- (e) a non-national man married to a Bhutanese woman
- (f) adoption cases
- (g) non-nationals, i.e. migrants and illegal settlers

The recent Bhutanese conflict originates from the elites' vulnerability and fears that the Drukpa traditions and customs which are of Tibetan origin would be subordinated to the culture and religion (Hindu) of a Lhotshampa-dominated society. The imposition of *Dzongkha* as the only language and the *kira* (a dress for women) and *gho* (dress for men) in addition to the use of the 1958 Citizenship Act and their vigorous implementation made the people paranoid. In 1991, explaining the *raison d'être* of the official policy of regularizing citizenship for the promotion of national identity, the royal government of Bhutan declared:

...The Royal Government will never compromise when it comes to ensuring Bhutan's long-term security and integrity. The terrorists movement threatens the very sovereignty and integrity of Bhutan and its survival as a nation. Therefore, the policy on immigration and census and Citizenship Act of 1985 will have to be implemented in full. Nor can the royal government afford to discontinue the policy of national integration and the concept of one nation and one people. These policies are vital for ensuring Bhutan's long-term security and well being as a united and cohesive nation. That is why the Royal Government considers it so crucial for all citizens to look upon themselves as Bhutanese regardless of their race or religion, and why it so important for all citizens to take pride in being fraternal members of the united Bhutanese family.⁸

The marriage clause could be valid if marriage between a woman and a man or vice versa took place before 1985. Threatened by the cultures (both political and traditional social values) and by the increase of a minority that eventually turned out to be majority, the Bhutanese authorities decided to "counter" such threats by a "well planned programme of depopulation." "The rulers know the world well. They are astute and use every available advantage: the remoteness of their country, manipulable media, the weakness of all outsiders for 'last remaining Shangri-Las' and the blessings of giant southern neighbour that obligingly turns a blind eye."⁹ Whether or not the southern Bhutanese started fleeing the country in order to escape repression, Nepal became the ultimate destination for them as only small fraction of

refugee population from Bhutan is now residing in Indian state of West Bengal and Assam, while the number of refugees in Jhapa and Morang districts of Nepal reached 85,000.

Although conflicting versions are in circulation concerning the causes of the refugee conditions, the southerners (Lhotshampa) who are residing in Nepal as exiles say that the present crisis is the reflection of a policy which "is intended to mould a single Bhutanese cultural identity (in which their own culture has no place) and protect the interest of the northern *Drukpa* elite against a worldwide trend toward democratization." Corroborating the policy of "Depopulation," the educated southern Bhutanese maintain that the Bhutanese government is bent on evicting 100,000 Bhutan Nepalis with a view to balancing the demographic equation."¹⁰ The government, on the other hand, claims that most of people fleeing the country were illegal immigrants whose presence was detected by a census operation in 1988.

It has been said that Bhutan's fertile and lightly populated low-lands, free education and medicine, the porosity of the borders along with the social and economic pressure in Nepal encouraged the immigration. In the Bhutanese version, "what was a manageable ethnic minority during the first half of the century, has turned into a large community which considers itself as a part of the Nepalese diaspora with a different cultural background and little allegiance to the Thimpu regime."¹¹

The regime believes that Bhutan has become the victim of a terrorist movement led by the Bhutan People's party, a Lhotshampa-dominated organization formed in 1990, which the government says is coercing southern Bhutanese into leaving the country in huge number in order to "internationalize the issue granting of wide ranging political demands."¹²

Human Rights Issue

Now the Bhutanese conflict has assumed both national and international dimensions because of the alleged violation of human rights by the royal government whose accountability and legitimacy before the world community is nil. Despite its adroit propaganda that the minority was out to capture power by raising the bogey of bad human rights record of Bhutan and the discriminatory policy of the government forcing the Lhotshampas to join the refugee camps in Nepal and India, the Sangrila-la image is being eroded. And the main villain behind such an erosion is obviously the case of the Bhutanese Nepalis or *Lhotshampas* whose representation has had been made by the BSC since 1952. Now other parties are also in the picture despite the internecine inter-party conflicts between the two groups – The Bhutan Peoples' Party and The Bhutan National Democratic Party. The organization of BSC and the demonstration it staged in 1954, and the demands made by

the new parties for redressing the complaints of the aggrieved community – *Lhotshampas* – have had enough grounds for sowing mutual distrust between Bhutan and Nepal.

In the context of the influx of Bhutanese refugees and the violation of human rights by the royal government, the official Bhutanese position is somewhat characterized by a sense of paranoia by trying to link the domestic ethnic problem with the alleged support of the present Nepali Congress government for the anti-regime movement in Bhutan. Although the predecessor of the present king had introduced some reforms in his absolute regime, the 1958 Citizenship Act which “empowered” the local officials to grant citizenship certificates gave rise to internal problem. Despite an improvement in the representation pattern having 16 *Lhotshampa* representatives in the 158 member National Assembly and one representative for the 10 member Royal Advisory Council and one judge in six member High Court. In addition, according to the official version, by 1990, 39% of all Bhutanese civil servants were *Lhotshampas* but by July 1992, 475 of them had fled the country.”¹³

The flight of trained manpower and their joining the movement against the regime is likely to be more costly for the regime. Branding them as traitors and “anti-nationals”, a common vocabulary used by the royal regime in Nepal for stigmatizing its enemy – the Nepali Congress – in the 1960s and 70s, the royal Bhutanese government is being accused of adopting a policy of “ethnic cleansing.” Prior to the intensification of the present crisis, some members of the National Assembly and Royal Advisory Council had drawn the attention of the king of the “classification of people as nationals, non-nationals, and people without status” based on incomplete documentation and hearsay.”. Instead, making them as security problem, the government, calling them anti-national, went on a repressive spree. One of the royal advisors, Tek Nath Rizal, was expelled from the Council for inciting people and spreading false propaganda against the royal government. After fleeing the country, Rizal continued his human rights campaigns in various forms including the distribution of pamphlets, activities which the royal government called “seditious.” Later, Rizal and his two colleagues were arrested in Nepal on November 15, 1989, and “handed over to the Bhutanese authorities the next day.” The Amnesty International has since adopted Rizal and other six southern Bhutanese as prisoners of conscience. In 1990, demonstrations were organized in southern parts of the country turning ethnic conflict into a full scale movement for democratizing the Bhutanese power structure. The successful anti-regime movement in Nepal in 1990 was also an immediate impetus to the Bhutanese dissidents living in exile in India and Nepal.

The relations between Bhutan and Nepal were further strained by the swelling refugee population and the organization of parties whose objective is not only to create conditions for the safe repatriation of Bhutanese refugees residing in camps in Nepal and in India, but also to introduce democratic reforms that are likely to change the power structure in Bhutan. Thus, showing his assertive postures, King Jigme Singye Wanchhuk said that all those in the refugee camps in Nepal are not Bhutanese nationals, as many people from India are also joining as refugees due to the attraction of money distributed by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNCHCR). Following the breakdown of the talks between the king of Bhutan and the prime minister of Nepal during the Seventh SAARC Summit in Dhaka in April 1993, senior government officials of Bhutan, as the official paper, the *Kuensel*-states, are "convinced that the position adopted by Prime Minister Koirala in Dhaka clearly indicates his support for the objective of the dissident groups to congregate as many ethnic Nepalese as possible in the camps in Nepal to mobilize international sympathy and support. Senior Bhutanese officials point out that the role played by Prime Minister Koirala in establishing the BSC in the 1950s has now assumed great significance."¹⁴

The initial remarks made by Prime Minister G.P. Koirala on the Bhutanese refugee problem and its background have not been taken positively by the Bhutanese side. Koirala's comment and the reactions that appeared in the Nepali press are interpreted as an act of abetment to the Bhutanese fugitives. Some points that have had stultified the process of negotiation were more related to the status of refugees, repatriation process and nature of negotiation. Rejecting the Nepali demand that the people residing in the refugee camps be treated as refugees, the Bhutanese side maintained that only the joint committee set up by the two sides could determine the genuineness of Bhutanese nationals in the camps while the Nepali side wanted to call them refugees awaiting safe return to their country. Later, obviously piqued by the sudden change of attitude of Bhutanese authorities on the issue of a ministerial committee, Koirala said that "Nepal should now ask the world community to help it cope with the burden imposed on it by the influx of Bhutanese refugees."¹⁵

Another issue appears to be more psychological having long-term and deep-rooted implications for the existing regime in Bhutan. The foreign minister of Bhutan, Lyonpo Dawa Tsering, is of the view that by bringing as many ethnic Nepalese as possible to the camps in Nepal and projecting them as Bhutanese refugees, the dissident groups are calculating on mobilizing international opinion against Bhutan and returning what he says

“in triumph with over a hundred thousand ethnic Nepalese to achieve their objective of turning Bhutan into a Nepali dominated state.”¹⁶

Third, the issue of internationalization of refugee problem seems to be attracting the attention of both Bhutanese authorities and the Nepali intelligentsia, though both sides have juxtaposed concerns. The All Party meeting in Nepal has reached a consensus on a three-pronged strategy to the issue: settlement of problem through bilateral negotiations or quiet diplomacy, mediation of India if the first option failed; and the internationalization of the issue in case both the options proved inconsequential. Prime Minister Koirala, by way clarification, stated that internationalizing the issue did not mean anything other than seeking external assistance for feeding the refugees and their proper management. However, the Bhutanese foreign minister was quick to respond to Koirala saying that Nepal was not interested in settling the issue, as it was preparing to internationalize it.

Despite such standoffish approaches of the two sides, recent developments are sending some positive signals for constituting a joint ministerial committee in order to determine the status of refugees.¹⁷

Fourth, Nepal's “open door policy” allowing all people to cross the border had, in the Bhutanese version, complicated the situation. The Bhutanese king had reportedly advised Prime Minister Koirala to discourage the people from coming to Nepal to which Prime Minister Koirala expressed inability to do so because of public opinion and the opposition he would face from political parties. Although such a suggestion was theoretically correct, as no Bhutanese nationals could enter Nepal without valid travel documents, it was not possible for Nepal to prevent any person from coming after having crossed the Indian territory, as Indian and Nepali nationals are not required to possess such documents along the open Indo-Nepal border. It was also found that the Indian authorities themselves encouraged the southern Bhutanese to go to Nepal when they are required to transit themselves from Bhutan to Nepal.

Greater Nepal

The bogey of “greater Nepal” is being increasingly publicized by the Bhutanese government in order to drive a wedge between the Nepali and Indian governments. King Jigme Singye Wanchhuk himself said that the Nepali politicians, including those of the ruling Congress party, were “supporting the Nepali speakers in Bhutan in their campaign to form a separate Nepali state.” The foreign minister Dawa Tsering was more explicit in his BBC interview on May 25, 1993, saying that certain elements dreaming of “greater Nepal” in the entire Himalayan region were active

behind the Bhutan problem. On this issue both Subash Ghising, the Gorkha National Liberation Front leader of Darjeeling, and Dawa Tsering of Bhutan are together despite their contradictory positions on the Bhutanese ethnic problem. The foreign minister of Bhutan, Dawa Tsering, said before a visiting Amnesty International delegation that the Nepali-speaking southern Bhutanese were "supported by groups and individuals in India and Nepal who support the concept of greater Nepal which is based on the premise that the Himalayas are the natural home of the Nepalese, a myth which is not supported by historical fact."¹⁸ Elaborating further as reported by the official paper, *Kuensel*, Dawa Tsering told the National Assembly:

It was not merely out of ethnic affinity that the political parties and people of Nepal were supporting the anti-nationals of southern Bhutan, but more out of their deep-seated desire to promote the concept of a Greater Nepal. This concept envisaged Nepalese domination over the entire Himalayas by bringing Bhutan, parts of the Duars in West Bengal and Assam and the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland under Nepalese control just as in the case of Sikkim and Darjeeling.¹⁹

Despite such fears and anxiety of Bhutan, the Nepali side had never given any inkling towards the "greater Nepal" idea. On the contrary, Prime Minister Koirala has had been repeatedly saying that the idea is "a product of unstable minds" and that Nepal is satisfied with the existing international boundary. Only a few Nepali poets and writers reminiscence Nepal's past glories, without any ambition for future adventures. Regarding the correlation between the greater Nepal idea and the Lhotsampha movement in Bhutan, it is only a question of power-sharing and dispensation of justice for them. As Kanak Dixit, a journalist, said in his attempt to probe into the subject, no Bhutanese dissident leaders or parties seem to have been motivated by such idea of "greater Nepal."

Nepal-India-Bhutan Triangle

The Bhutanese strategy of frightening India by pointing to the threat of greater Nepal in which the entire Nepali speaking Himalayan region is included seems incredible in view of Nepal's own severe limitations on such issues. Indian leaders are unlikely to be so easily swept away by such a "grand design" highlighted by Ghising or Dawa Tsering. The former has been almost marginalized in recent years; the latter's case is understandable because of the unprecedented pressure of dissidents who have at least been

able to build a case against the royal regime. And democracy and human rights have now become additional agenda which have put the regime on the defensive.

The Indian position on the Nepal-Bhutan trade-off is characterized by both neutrality and caution, suggesting that the two neighbours should resolve the issue bilaterally without third party mediation. The Indian Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, was stated to have listened to the Nepali Prime Minister, G.P. Koirala's version of the failure of the bilateral talks during the recent SAARC summit. Yet, Indian quiet mediation seems to be in the offing. But it should be understood that India is hardly prepared to oblige Nepal by putting adequate pressure on Bhutan.

If the Bhutanese crisis lingers showing no sign of abatement, all the three countries are likely to be engulfed by the spillover effects of refugees. Certain negative trends are visible today in Jhapa District of Nepal as the refugees are increasingly becoming social problems. The refugees are unwanted on most accounts. "They seem to represent an economic burden, a political liability, a foreign policy complication, or all of the above."²⁰ For Nepal, it is already a burden; for India, the security implications will increase if the crisis remains unresolved; and for the *ancient regime* in Bhutan, it is not only an ethnic problem demanding appropriate solution but it will cost the royal regime heavily if it remains intransigently stubborn. The perceived threat of refugees may turn out to be real, making it a political ploy by some unforeseen forces and trends as had happened in the case of Sri Lankan Tamils.

Thus, both the receiving, sending and intermediary states involved in the refugee conditions are likely to be affected by the turn of events. The sending state (Bhutan) is likely to be hard hit by the continuation of refugee movements attracting the attention of wide ranging agencies and international forums. Moreover, the refugees may turn into rebels to realize their goals. Such a situation also tends to promote revanchist or irredentist sentiments if other methods fail to yield result.

If the traditional monarchical Kingdom of Bhutan is subject to ethnic and political crises, Nepal, as a receiving country, has started seeing negative trends in three broad areas: (1) Impact on civil society including environment, (2) democratic stability and (3) impact on foreign policy. Deforestation and the other elements of environmental degradation are connected with the influx of refugees and their routine activities. The second issue is both psychological and political in that it implies the credibility of the elected government. If the government fails to tackle the issue due to external and internal machinations, it may pose threats to democracy itself. For most anti-democratic forces unreconciled to the successful democracy

movement of 1990, the low performance record of the government on social, economic, and diplomatic areas would be negatively exploited by the retrogressive forces.

A government which was and still is a novice in both domestic and foreign policy is being grilled by the highly sensitive opposition and other so-called "nationalist" forces opposed to the Congress Party. As there are other crucial areas requiring immediate governmental attention that sidetrack the efforts of the government. More significant, the foreign policy of a small country is the most talked about subject within the country trying – knowingly or unknowingly to discredit the government on this count. When the issue of internationalization of the refugee problem became a subject of public debate, the position of the government was somewhat watered down to saying that Nepal's version of internationalization of the issue of refugees was nothing more than the drawing of attention of the international community to the financial burden incurred by Nepal. At the Congress Working Committee meeting, Prime Minister Koirala said that the government had not yet decided to internationalize the Bhutanese refugee problem. Emphasizing on the bilateral talk, he said that he had presented the issue at the diplomatic level only as one viewpoint.

Such a moderate position taken by Nepal could considerably ease the vexed problem through bilateral negotiations in July. Accordingly, a ministerial level meeting was held in Kathmandu in last October which agreed to screen the refugees for determining their status. Four categories of people staying in the refugee camps were made. They were: Bhutanese nationals forcibly driven out of the country, immigrants from Bhutan, non-Bhutanese nationals and Bhutanese nationals who are guilty of different crimes.

Although the implications for Bhutan transcend polity, society and economy because of the involvement of one of the principal communities of southern Bhutan, the issue seems to have been precipitated by the inability of the power elites to go beyond their set traditional agenda of governance. Always haunted by the shadow of the Nepali population, whatever developments took place in adjoining areas – Sikkim, Darjeeling and Nepal – have caused "consternation in Bhutan." It has been said that "Gorkha militancy in Darjeeling arose further Bhutani suspicions about Nepali settlers." Whatever its basis, the cultural anxiety of the Drukpas has expressed itself in an unfortunate programme of depopulation. But does cultural anxiety alone explain the Government's cruelty towards the Lhotsamphas? What else accounts for the obvious insensitivity of the *dzongdas* and *dungpas* (District Administrators and sub-divisional officers) as they chase the Lhotshampas from the souther hills?"²¹

For Bhutan, the conflict is not between two communities; threat perceptions of the rulers give rise to conflict. Such perceptions, which are common in South Asia, tend to close other options due to fear that any concessions given to demanding people to fear that any concessions given to demanding people would erode the traditional power structure. Sometimes, refugees also provide more options and benefits for the receiving countries, though for the short run, as happened to Pakistan during the Afghan conflict. All cases are not beneficial. During the Cold War, the extra regional option could be conveniently used for realizing certain objectives, as there was a tendency of a superpower and its allies to get involved for removing both immediate and long-term threats emanating from their adversaries. But the situation changed following the withdrawal of an interventionist power or the minimization, if not resolution, of conflict. Following the Soviet withdrawal and subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union along with the collapse of communism, the Afghan problem is almost forgotten by those who were involved in containing the Soviet threats in Afghanistan. Now Pakistan is being branded as a center of drug smugglers and terrorists by its former allies, impressing on us how a receiving country experiences social and political tensions. Presenting Pakistan as a case in point, the *International Herald Tribune* succinctly reported: "A nation that once was a linchpin of U.S. foreign policy has become casualty of post-Cold War political realignments. Amid domestic political turmoil, Pakistan is struggling to cope with the refuse of a superpower battle: a glut of weapons in the market place, large numbers of restless, combat-experienced foreign guerrillas, millions of Afghan refugees and an unbridled drug trade."²² We cannot expect a parallel situation of such after effects south of the Himalayas owing to a number of reasons, yet the prospect of the emergence of a new guerilla-type movement cannot be ruled out, especially where one hundred thousand refugees have failed to attract attention from the world community.

The influx of Bhutanese refugees into Nepal is not being seriously taken by the outside world because of the lesser importance of it to the big powers, either within the region or outside, despite the involvement of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNCHR). Even India is pursuing a policy of studied silence as the magnitude of the problem is not seriously felt by it. Thus, the Bhutanese authorities are apparently taking some calculated risks by forcing the undesirable people from their country, which in their thinking is going to permanently solve the problem. On the contrary, attributing the cause of the refugee exodus into Nepal, King Jigme Singye Wanchhuk said that "acts of violence by Nepali dissidents had forced people to leave the area", adding that some kinds of guerilla training were being

given to the people in camps within Nepal. Nepal has denied such allegations.

Apparently Bhutan seems to be in an advantageous situation due to the lack of any external pressure on it for creating favorable conditions for early repatriation of refugees. As India continues to pay short shrift to the problem in order not to hurt the sentiment of the Bhutanese power elites an early end is not in sight. Now Nepal should either depart from its present policy by developing its own capacity to permanently absorb the refugees or by sorting the problem out bilaterally on the basis of mutually agreed formula for determining the status of refugees. Such an approach seems to have been adopted by Nepal, thus modifying its hardened line of internationalizing the issue.

Although the two sides have lately agreed to hold ministerial meetings for determining the status of refugees, their mutual suspicion and distrust continues to haunt them. The Bhutanese side had allegedly changed its views on the status of refugees of "displaced" persons.

Relations between the two Himalayan Kingdoms have lacked cordiality throughout modern times. The principal reason is the fear and anxiety of the Bhutanese ruler that the increasing Nepali immigrants would in course of time influence the power structure of the *ancient regime*. The policy of *Driglam namzha* (cultural traditions), imposition of *Dzonkha*, and total allegiance to the king and his government incurred displeasure from the Bhutanese of Nepali origin. In addition, the government's controversial "Green belt" measure along the southern Indo-Bhutan border denying lands to the people for settlement was taken as a strategy to evict the people. Security considerations rather than environmental problems seemed to have prompted the authorities, as the other parts of Bhutan are green and "richly-forested". Hutt writes that "this policy involved the compulsory demolition of *Lhotshampa* homes, but was quietly discontinued, allegedly on the advice of alarmed foreign aid officials."²³

In conclusion, it can be said that the strained Nepal-Bhutan relations are unlikely to be smooth, even after the repatriation of refugees. The question remains how the Bhutanese monarch whose legitimacy issue would most probably recur as hundreds of expatriates have already vowed to democratize the obscurantist royal regime. Moreover, Bhutan is already exposed to the new democratic upsurge across the world, making the rulers jittery for preserving the status quo. Lashing out at the new demands for democratization of Bhutanese polity as an act of "anti-nationals", bitterness between the monarchy and the dissidents is unlikely to abate unless a compromise formula is worked out between them.

If a peaceful transition becomes difficult to manage at the present juncture, more sporadic violent activities are likely to be mounted by the opponents of the regime. The royal government may contrive divisions within the contending parties and diffuse the crisis, but it will not be a long-term solution unless some sort of reforms are introduced within the traditional monarchy. The Bhutanese power elites would be tempted to show a nexus between the Bhutanese dissidents operating either from India or Nepal or Nepal and the Nepali government. Although Nepal has no contiguous border with Bhutan, demographic continuity linking the Nepali dominated areas of Darjeeling, Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan would, in Bhutanese perception, encourage the irredentist trend in the entire Himalayan region.

Bhutanese authorities believe that the worst scenario would be the division of Bhutan into Nepali and non-Nepali states. Such an interpretation seems to have been overstretched without weighing Indian security environment in the Northeast. From Nepal's point of view, any effort to divide Bhutan on ethnic grounds would not be endorsed by either Nepal or India; security implications might arise for both the neighbours. Yet, Bhutan cannot remain indifferent to the demands and aspirations of its own people as any delay for the resolution of the present crisis will only add more woes and complications to the triangular relations.

Notes

1. Literatures regarding the relations between the Kingdom of Gorkha and the Kingdom of Bhutan are mentioned by some Nepali and foreign scholars. Some of the articles have appeared in *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, Kathmandu. For more details, see Ramesh Dhungel, "Nepal-Bhutan Aitihashik Sanskritik Sambandha" (Nepal-Bhutan: Historical cultural Relations), *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 16:2; July 1989; Dilli Raj Sharma, "Nepal-Bhutan Sanskritik Sambandha Badhaunama Swayambhu Chaitya Tatha Gumbako Bhumika" (The role of Swayambhu Chitya and Gumba for strengthening Religious and Cultural Relations Between Nepal and Bhutan), *Ibid*, 17:2 (1990); and Shushila Manandhar, "Nepal-Bhutan Arthik Sambhandha: Aitihashik Swarup" (Nepal-Bhutan Economic Relations: Historical Nature), *Ibid*.
2. See *Himal Chuli Weekly* (Biratnagar), January 18 and February 8, 1987.
3. Ram Rahul, *Royal Bhutan* (New Delhi: ABC Publishing House, 1983), p. 54.
4. *Ibid*.
5. Astri Suhrke, "Migration, State and Civil Society in Southeast Asia" (A Working Paper, CHR. Michelsen Institute, Norway, 1992).

6. See Myron Weiner, "On International Migration and International Relations," *Population and Development Review*, 11.3: September 1985, pp. 44-46.
7. *Memorandum To honourable Member of Indian Parliament on the Political Crisis in Bhutan by the President Bhutan National Democratic Party, July 1992.*
8. Amnesty International, *Bhutan: Human Rights Violations against the Nepali Speaking Population in the South, December 1992.*
9. Kanak Mani Dixit, "The Dragon Bites its Tail," *Himal* (Kathmandu), July-August 1992, p. 7
10. Michael Hutt, "Refugees from Shanri-la" (A Paper presented at the Seminar at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London on March 21-33, 1993).
11. Thierry Mathou, "The Growth of Diplomacy in Bhutan, 1961-191: Opportunities and Challenges" (A Paper Contributed to the Conference on *Bhutan: A traditional Order and the Forces of Changes*, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 22-23 March, 1993.
12. Ibid.
13. Hutt, n. 10.
14. *Kuensel*, April 17, 1993.
15. *Rising Nepal*, April 13, 1993.
16. Ibid.
17. Prime Minister G.P. Koirala's recent interview with some leading Nepali journalists indicated that both Thimpu and Kathmandu are now preparing for continuing their negotiations at the ministerial level. See also *Rising Nepal*, June 7, 1993.
18. Cited in Kanak Dixit, n. 9.
19. Ibid.
20. Suhrke, n. 5.
21. Roy Choudhary as cited in Dixit, n. 9.
22. *International Herald Tribune* (The Hague), April 23, 1993.
23. Hutt, n. 10.