CHAPTER-4

ETHNIC PROBLEM IN BHUTAN

I

Modernization and ethnicity

Ethnic conflict has affected nearly all types of states and regions. South Asia is not immune to it. The fundamental assumption underlying the modernization theory has been articulated in terms of converging aspirations of people. As Melson and Wolpe have put it, “People’s aspirations and expectations change as they are mobilized into the modernizing economy and polity. They come to want and to demand more goods, more recognition, more power. Significantly, too, the orientation of the mobilized to a common set of rewards and path to rewards means that many people come to desire precisely the same things. Men enter the conflict not because they are different but because they are essentially the same. It is by making men more alike, in the sense of possessing the same wants that modernization tends to promote conflict”\(^1\). Exponents of the modernization theory argue that the benefits of modernization are not equally enjoyed by the ethnic groups of society. Thus inequality causes antagonism between them. Besides this, ambiguity in the concepts like ethnicity, ethnic groups, nationality especially in the post cold war scenario has brought the different states of the world into the vortex of ethnic problem of multi-dimensional character. Bhutan is no exception to it. Its ethnic conflict has produced refugee problem in South Asia involving two other countries of the region - Nepal and India.

II

Historical background

Through the ages there were sporadic incursions by Bhutanese into Indian territory. Stray cases of disturbance and violent conflicts across the border were not uncommon. It is conjectured that there were not many Nepalese in southern Bhutan before 1865. After the Treaty of Sinchula in 1865 which terminated the Anglo-Bhutanese war, Nepali immigration into Bhutan started on a small scale. The first Nepali settlement took place approximately 107 years ago. Nepali settlement in the Chirang area grew ten years later.

There is no authentic account of Nepali immigration into Bhutan. Eminent British officers like Clements R. Markham, J. C. White, and Charles Bell have no doubt, furnished satisfactory account of Bhutan's history and polity, but a comprehensive and detailed analysis of Nepali immigration into Bhutan is not available in their works. On the basis of oral evidence collected in and outside Bhutan and some old official files dealing with Bhutan affairs, Apa B. Pant, formerly Political Officer in Sikkim prepared a note on this highly significant problem.

Nepali settlements in Bhutan were confined to its southern region. These were concentrated in three main regions which are as follows: (i) the “Western” or SAMCHI (Chamurchi) area which lies opposite the Western Dooars of the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. This area comprises Sibsu, Chamurchi/Chengmari and Denchuka/Dorokha subdivisions; (ii) the “Eastern” or CHIRANG area opposite the Eastern Dooars of the Gopalpara district of Assam. This area chiefly encompasses Kalikhola, Jaigon, Sarbhang / Lapse Bhote, Darang and Newoli sub-divisions; (iii) the “Central” area comprising mainly Tala and Dagana. These areas do not extend beyond some twenty-five or at the most thirty miles from the border, northwards. There was practically no Nepali settlements eastward beyond Hatisar except at Darang.

4. C. A. Bell: *Tibet: Past and Present*, (OUP, 1924)
The Nepalese came here initially in order to quarry lime. There was an arrangement by which one Dalchand Gurung secured a concession from the Paro Penlop for an area which was practically coterminus with that now included in the Samchi district minus Sibus. This area was a difficult terrain to colonise. It practically separated the Nepali settlers completely from the Drukpas. In 1958 the total Nepali population in Samchi, Apa B. Pant informs us, was estimated to be about sixty thousand only.\(^6\)

As per the agreement with the Paro Penlop, Dalbahadur Gurung started recruiting settlers in eastern Nepal. He succeeded in getting a letter of authority from the Nepal Darbar to bring increasing number of settlers to Bhutan. The Gurung family was the de-facto ruler of this area. They collected whatever taxes they could. They handed over only a small percentage of the collection to the Penlop once a year. They had complete judicial powers. In the case of death penalty it had to be confirmed by the Penlop. The Maharaja of Bhutan had no control whatsoever over this area till the death of the last Paro Penlop in 1946-47.

The area known as Sibus was under the direct control of the King of Bhutan himself. In 1891 under the authority of the King of Bhutan a letter was sent to Laxmi Das Pradhan, the then leading member of the Nepali community in Darjeeling. Pradhan was offered the thikadari of an area including upper and lower Sibus in return of an annul cash payment of Rs. 20,000 only. Pradhan demanded additional areas, but the King of Bhutan declined. The Zamindari of Sibus was subsequently given to some other immigrant and the area was integrated into the rest of Samchi. The descendants of Dalbahadur Gurung secured charge of this place. The Gurung brothers were eventually dismissed from service by the King of Bhutan. They were however awarded an annual pension of Rs. 4,000 each as long as they lived in Bhutan.

Immigration of Nepalese to the Chirang district was encouraged by Kazi Ugyen Dorji, grandfather of Jigmie Dorji. The first settlers arrived early in 1900 or so. This area was previously almost entirely a jungle. The policy of Kazi Ugyen Dorji in encouraging Nepalese settlement was to extend cultivation in the area. He was interested in its cash revenue. The process continued for about thirty years by which time about thirty-five thousand Nepalese settled in that area. Since 1930s the inflow

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6. Ibid, para 5, p.3.
was restricted considerably. In 1945 it was completely stopped. In 1958 the population was estimated at about seventy thousand only.

Certain areas in Chirang were leased out by the King of Bhutan to Kazi Ugyen Dorji on payment of some ‘taxes to the State’. Dorji parcelled out some of these to Nepali settlers and extracted various kinds of taxes. Eventually he secured from the King of Bhutan a lease of practically the entire forest area of southern Bhutan in his name. He was also given the authority to look after the affairs of the southern frontier. In most parts of Bhutan taxes were largely paid in kind. But in southern Bhutan collection was made in cash. In 1958 the cash collections amounted to Rs. 5 lakhs per annum and formed a very important source of cash revenue for the State.

It is conjectured that Nepali settlement in Tala and Dagana were an outflow from Chirang. In 1958 these two areas had a Nepali population of about sixty thousand only. In the Darang/Newoli/Hatisar area there were another ten thousand Nepalese. Apa B. Pant points out that the total number of Nepalese in southern Bhutan could be estimated roughly at two lakhs.

The All India Gorkha League helped the Nepali Congress in the latter’s fight against Rana regime in Nepal. After 1947 this organization propagated the idea of an Uttarkhand Pradesh which was to include Darjeeling and other border districts of India, Sikkim and southern Bhutan, all of which have large number of Nepali residents.

Towards the middle of 1948 some members of All India Gorkha League entered Bhutan and started enrolling members for the League and collecting money from the Nepali settlers. They were inciting the Nepali community against the Bhutan Government. Raja Dorji took steps to thwart their activities. Most of the leaders of the League left Bhutan and took up residence in neighbouring tea estates in Assam and West Bengal. They turned to Nepal Government for help and also contacted H. Dayal, the Political Officer in Sikkim, urging him to look into the grievances of the Gorkha community in Bhutan. The replies were not encouraging. The Political Officer of Sikkim, however, talked to Raja Dorji who assured him that the Nepalese who had left Bhutan in 1948 were permitted to return provided they stood trial in Bhutan.

7. Ibid, para 11, p.5.
8. Ibid, para 12, p.5
On 4 November 1952 Bhutan State Congress was formed at Patgaon in the Goalpara district of Assam. One Dalmardhan Raj Chhetri of Patgaon was elected President and Dhan Bahadur Gurung of Siliguri (related to the Gurung family of Samchi) as Vice-President. The aim of the organization was stated to be firstly to safeguard the interests of the Nepalese in Bhutan and secondly to secure democratic government there. The President of the Dhubri District Congress took part in the deliberation. The Bhutan Government protested. The Government of India advised Dhubri District Congress to disassociate itself from the activities of the Bhutan State Congress.

The Bhutan State Congress made several representations to the Government of Nepal and also to the Government of India. Meetings were held in various places of the Dooars. Discontent was in the air. In March 1954 about 100 members of the Bhutan State Congress staged a Satyagraha from Patgaon to Sarbhang. The Bhutanese police opened fire on the agitators who tried to cross the border and enter into Bhutan. Three of the demonstrators were killed and many were injured. Some members of the Nepali Congress led by Girija Prasad Koirala reached Patgaon in order to offer support to the Satyagrahis. In April 1954 the Political Officer of Sikkim also visited Sarbhang. The Government of India instructed the Government of West Bengal and the Government of Assam not to allow Indian territory to be used for agitations against Bhutan. On account of these steps, since 1954 the agitation subsided and the Bhutan State Congress ceased to play an effective role.

In 1958 Bhutan State Congress estimated that the number of Nepalese in Bhutan would approximately be four to four and a half lakhs. According to the estimate of Bhutan Government their number was no more than one lakh fifty thousand. In 1958 Bhutan Government practically prohibited and discouraged Nepalese immigration into Bhutan.

The Nepalese elected the representatives who were known as Mandals. They controlled the administration of small areas. A comprehensive network of administrative control was exercised by the thikadars or the land tax collectors. They were appointed by the Bhutan Government. The Government of Bhutan auctioned the southern areas of Bhutan for land collection. As stated earlier the system is known as Thikadari. The Nepalese complained against the system to the Maharaja and it was terminated in 1952-53.

In the Bhutan Administrative Service there were only few Nepali officers. In the immediate circle of Councillors of the King of Bhutan, there was no Nepali advisor. The King of Bhutan was all along indifferent to the problems of southern Bhutan. The Drukpas feel that they are less equipped than the Nepalese in the game of survival in this modern world. The Nepalese were enterprising, diligent and competent agriculturists. The rate of growth of population among the Nepalese frightens the Drukpas. Culturally and emotionally Drukpa and the Nepali population are incompatible, if not antagonistic. According to Apa B. Pant, “This then can be said to be the central problem of the Nepali population of Bhutan”. This is the historical background to the present crisis, that is to say, the exodus of huge number of Nepalese from Bhutan to neighbouring India and Nepal.

III

Ethnic groups in Bhutan

Since its origin in the mid-seventeenth century when a Tibetan Monk, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal united the areas within its present borders, the kingdom of Bhutan has proved to be the haven of cultural and ethnic variety with 'Mahayani Tantrik' sect of Buddhism acting as the unifying force. Bhutan possesses a variety of four ethnic groups – first, a group comprising of Tibetan (Bhotia) origin mostly settled in the western part of the country; a second ethnic group consisting the Sharchops of

11. Ibid, para 6, p.3.
Indo-Mongoloid origin who reside mostly in the eastern and north-eastern part of Bhutan; a third element in Bhutan's population consists of a number of small tribal groups like the Drokpas, the Lepchas and Doyas known to be the aboriginal indigenous inhabitants of the Druk Yul. The country also has distinct ethnic communities like the Mangdipas, Bhumthangpas, Kurteopas and Khenpas. Finally the most significant ethnic group which has attracted great concern of the Royal Government comprises the ethnic Nepalese who are mostly settled in southern Bhutan.\textsuperscript{12} The first Nepali settlers entered southern Bhutan with official encouragement in the late nineteenth century. They assumed an important economic role first as cultivators and eventually as businessmen, teachers and civil servants. In 1958 the Royal Government granted them Bhutanese citizenship and distinguished them as Lhotshampas. In the same year the National Assembly of Bhutan in its 11th Session declared 1958 as the cut-off year for granting Bhutanese citizenship by the Nationality Act of 1958.\textsuperscript{13} Yet Nepali settlement in southern Bhutan experienced a surge as abundant jobs and easily available fertile lands attracted more Nepalese to the kingdom. Expectedly the continuous immigration altered the demographic balance of the country.

\section*{IV}

\textbf{Nepalese immigration since 1961}

The next phase of Nepali influx into Bhutan, as the Royal Government observes, began in 1961 when Bhutan overcoming its self imposed isolation embarked on a process of planned socio-economic development by launching its First Five Year Plan with the assistance of India. Unlike the entry of Nepalese in the first half of the century when they came as contractual labourers, the Royal Government states, that this influx


\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Anti-National Activities in Southern Bhutan - An Update of Terrorist Movement}, Department of Information, Ministry of Home Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan, Thimpu, 1991, p.34.
was a case of outright illegal immigration through the 700 km porous and open Indo-Bhutan border\textsuperscript{14}. In Bhutan these illegal immigrants are called as \textit{Ngolops}\textsuperscript{15}.

They were encouraged to come to Bhutan by their \textit{Lhotshampa} relatives for jobs. Meanwhile faced with the shortage of manpower to construct roads and implement development projects, the Government of Bhutan employed \textit{baidars} (labour contractors) to import labourers from Nepal. This silent invasion by economic immigrants took advantage of the above policy of the kingdom, and the Government was unaware of the presence of illegal immigrants. "It was the active connivance of the local population in southern Bhutan and the corruption of local administration (civil officials of the south are mostly the ethnic \textit{Nepalese}) that prevented the government from realising the massive scale of illegal immigration that had taken place after 1961".\textsuperscript{16}

\section*{V}

\textbf{Thimpu's point of view}

The nation building goals of Bhutan are organically integrated with her development strategy. This strategy again is based on six well-known principles: self-reliance, sustainability, efficiency and development of the private sector, people’s participation and decentralization, human resource development and regionally balanced development.\textsuperscript{17}

In consonance with these principles the Seventh Five year plan (1992-1997) has turned its focus on stable law and order situation, macro-economic management, matured international relation including aid and trade, basic economic infrastructure, basic social

\textsuperscript{14.} \textit{The Southern Bhutan Problem : Threat to a Nation's Survival}, Ministry of Home Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan, Thimpu, May 1993, p.4.
\textsuperscript{16.} \textit{The Southern Bhutan Problem : Threat to a Nation's Survival}, May 1993, p.5.
infrastructure, direct involvement in major enterprises and national consensus on development objectives. It should be clearly stated here that preservation of Bhutan's cultural heritage is the primary concern of the Bhutanese government.

In attaining her nation building goals she is faced with quite a number of almost insurmountable constraints. These include her landlocked geographical isolation, extremely mountainous terrain, scattered settlements in remote areas, lack of effective communication network and skilled manpower and excessive dependence on foreign assistance.

The most potent and real threat, as perceived by the Government of Bhutan, to her nation-building strategy is the crisis generated by the exodus of Nepalese of southern Bhutan to the neighbouring countries, India and Nepal since 1988. The Bhutan Government made serious efforts to bring Lhotshampas into the national mainstream. A Census Programme was launched for the first time in Bhutan in 1988. In that year, the Bhutan Government declared that illegal immigrants who acquired property rights in Bhutan and also those married to Bhutanese nationals before the Citizenship Act of 1985 would be entitled to Special Residence Identity Card. These gave them practically all the facilities and privileges enjoyed by a bonafide Bhutanese citizen.

The 1985 Citizenship Act reiterated that 1958 was merely the year in which Nepalese settlers in Bhutan were conferred citizenship by the National Assembly for the first time. It is the complaint of the Government of Bhutan that since 1988 anti-national activities were launched by vested interests in southern Bhutan. These vested interest include large number of Nepalese settled down in Bhutan and illegally registered as Bhutanese citizens.

To the Royal Government of Bhutan some of the letters issued by the Bhutan's People's Party (BPP) and the Student Union of Bhutan (SUB) revealed the extent of anti-national activities pursued by them. One such letter dated 20 October 1990, signed

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21. The term anti-national has specific meaning and connotation in Bhutanese law. For details see Appendix No. 3.
jointly by a number of Nepalese of Bhutan’s People’s Party said, “Kindly do issue some arms and ammunitions to Mr. Ganesh Pondyel and Party, also please make arrangements to guide them to Amteka so that the material reach the proper place. We have decided to resort to violence. Please make it sure that the proposed strategy is fulfilled”. A note had also been added to this letter by Tarabir Subedi, Secretary of Students Union of Bhutan, saying, “Please also plan for a massive destruction in this area (Sarbhang), otherwise the situation may turn worse”.22 Another letter (Ref. No. SB/3-A/90/07-25) sent to the Unit Secretary of Kalikhola Unit of Bhutan’s People’s Party by the Unit Secretary of Sarbhang Unit of the same party on 21 October 1990 quoted: “As per your instruction I am sending the boys for the explosive. Please send as much as they can carry. As per your requirement I am sending 25 Nos. of detonators, one coil fuse wire only as we don’t have much in stock”.23

Besides the exchange of explosives and ammunitions, the anti-nationals, according to the Royal Government, had also planned to close all education institutions of southern Bhutan. A letter issued by Tarabir Subedi to the Nepali students of Sarbhang High School saying, “The time has come to shout for democracy. The SUB (Students Union of Bhutan) has taken the step to close up almost all education institutions of southern Bhutan”,24 provided evidence to the above allegation of the Bhutan Government. In addition to these, the Ministry of Home Affairs published detailed reports of terrorist activities pursued by the anti-nationals.

To safeguard the long term interest of the nation, the Royal Government of Bhutan is striving to promote national integration, social harmony and cohesiveness. With that in mind the Government of Bhutan had adopted the policy of “One Nation, One People.” But the Royal Government alleged that the anti-nationals opposed the Government’s policy of national integration, because guided by narrow selfish interests they were against the people of southern Bhutan joining the national mainstream. They had been trying to incite not only the southern Bhutanese people but even the eastern Bhutanese against the Royal Government to achieve their seditious and treacherous

23. Ibid, p.3.
objectives. According to Bhutan Government, they had even attempted to damage Indo-
Bhutan relations in the hope of gaining support for their movement from political parties
and groups in India.

To the Government of Bhutan, objectives of anti-nationals include: (1) to
completely stop all development programmes in southern Bhutan (2) to create a
separate Gorkha state within Bhutan, by dividing southern Bhutan from the rest of the
country and (3) to mobilize through extortion as much money as possible to finance
the anti-national movement. It was further added that to carry out the second objective,
the anti-nationals “had even enlisted people living across the border who supported their
treachery ambitions by promising land, jobs and Bhutanese citizenship to these
outsiders”.25 In an interview to the Kuensel, the Deputy Home Minister, Dasho Dago
Tshering said, “Despite the Royal Government’s sincere efforts to integrate them into
the mainstream of Bhutanese society, they had obviously identified themselves with the
people living outside Bhutan’s borders. If they cannot accept the Bhutanese people as
their fellow citizens they should go back to where they came from”.26 Bhutan had
experienced its first anti-national or ngolop uprising in 1955. It had been quelled by
sentencing a few of the leaders who instigated the agitation. But the present agitation
of the ngolop, according to Dasho Dago Tshering, initiated in 1989 is of much larger
and more violent proportions, threatening peace, security and sovereignty of the nation
and its nation building process.27

While visiting the security troops in Geylegphug, the King said that the Royal
Government was “deeply saddened by the spate of destruction and terror let loose by
the anti-nationals (ngolops) who had pillaged and destroyed schools, agricultural
centres, veterinary centres, post offices, forest range offices, revenue and custom offices,
shops and houses. As a result of these activities, the kingdom’s foreign exchange
earnings had dropped and the rate of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) had
plummeted from 8% to 3%”28. The Royal Government further alleged that civil
servants of southern Bhutan were absconding, jeopardising the developmental activities
of Bhutan. It is of great concern for the King because Bhutan is short of trained and

27. Ibid, p.2.
skilled man power.\textsuperscript{29} Besides these, brutal murders, robbery, theft and spate of unprecedented violence by the \textit{ngolop}-terrorists especially in the southern districts of Bhutan disrupted development activities and created a sense of insecurity among the local Bhutanese population. They were also encouraging the \textit{Lhotshampas} and criminal elements to join refugee camps in Nepal and India as Bhutanese refugees to earn international support. Their calls for democracy and human rights was a guise to gain international attention and sympathy. The members of the 71st National Assembly stated that “the major propaganda campaign by the \textit{ngolops} based on false and distorted information was aimed at strengthening opposition against the kingdom and bringing pressure against the Royal Government”\textsuperscript{30} The 69th Session of the National Assembly of Bhutan had resolved that no further amnesty should be extended to the anti-nationals. The Government of Bhutan argued that initially though the King was very tolerant and patient with them, unfortunately now the Home Ministry has taken firm and strong action in the light of their terroristic activities, consequently hindering the implementation of nation building programmes. To diffuse the unbearable situation, the local Bhutanese asked the Royal Government to organize militia training for rural volunteers and to supply them with arms to drive the \textit{ngolops} out of the country.

Between 1988-1993 about one lakh Bhutanese citizens left Bhutan and took shelter in various refugee camps situated in different parts of India and Nepal. Various Human Right Organizations argued that Bhutan Government was pursuing ethnic cleansing policy against Nepali speaking population who are racially and ethnically different from the \textit{Drukpas}. They believe that the reason for influx of Bhutanese refugees was due to the unbearable socio-political situation in the kingdom during last three years particularly in southern Bhutan.\textsuperscript{31} These Human Right Organizations had criticised the policy of refugee categorization that resulted from the Nepal-Bhutan Ministerial Committee Meeting held in Kathmandu in October 1993. The categories include: I. \textit{bonafide} Bhutanese evicted forcefully, II. Bhutanese who have voluntarily emigrated, III. Non-Bhutanese people and IV. Bhutanese who have committed criminal acts. They declined to accept categorization of refugees because: first, it was “politically motivated and serves the interest of feudal rule in Bhutan”. Secondly, though they claimed that

\textsuperscript{29} Kuensel, 29 December 1990, p.4.
\textsuperscript{30} Kuensel, 9 November 1991, p.1.
\textsuperscript{31} Kuensel, 31 October 1992, p.1.
most of the refugees fall under-category II, however, they feared that “almost all of them could be regarded as criminals as per the Bhutan’s law except the children”; thirdly, “the 72nd Session of Bhutan’s National Assembly in July 1993 has put a ban on return of emigrants” confirming the design behind categorization politics and fourthly, “as per the Bhutan’s laws, while a person has the right to leave the country, once he does so, he forfeits his citizenship”. In the 73rd session of Bhutan’s National Legislature, the members considered the refugee problem seriously, but none wanted their return to Bhutan. A Royal Advisory Councillor said, “The so-called refugees left on their own will. If the Nepali government now feels that it is not their concern why should we be worried about the problem”.

The Foreign Secretary of Bhutan Ugyen Tshering in an interview held on 8 June 1999 told me that there were some difference in the southern part of the country. This difference may be described as an ethnic difference in terms of the way people look and also in terms of their religious differences. He argued that in the 70s and 80s of the last century these differences did not mean much and everything was going very well. He stated:

I would like to look at this whole issue as not so much an ethnic issue but, I think, this is going to be a big problem that will face this whole region in a way, very difficult way in the long run. You know a lot of population movement in this area. We have Biharis moving to West Bengal, we have the Assamese complaining about the Bangladeshi’s back and forth. So, this whole area and the Nepalese Movement, all the way to the far North-East and then again being sent out back, and this is part of overall issue. I think, this broader context has to be seen. Within the broader context, I think, this sort of activism that has started, e.g. in the Darjeeling Hills. Before that the Sikkim problem activism. So, these are part of what I call Population Movement Driven ethnicity kind of issues that have come up and I think, Bhutan became affected by that and Bhutan also has to do with. A very quick success in Nepal, what the Democracy Movement in Nepal where we can reach where we are able to topple the Government and I think that there was a feeling that something like that could also be done easily here.

33. Ibid, p.3.
The Marriage Act and the Citizenship Act passed by the Government of Bhutan resembled in substantial manner those Acts prevalent in ten or twelve other countries. "The fact was that there were lot of people who did not qualify to be citizens and the activism started at that stage. Once an activism starts the best way to do an activism is on ethnic act", he argued, "and that is the easiest and that is what they did and we had to respond in whatever way possible to keep up the sovereignty. But it is not true that there has been mass scale deportation$. He further reminded that in Nepal initially there were hardly just two hundred and fifty or sixty odd people who camped in a field and they were recognized as refugee. When they were three hundred and twenty eight persons there, they applied for international assistance. Once the assistance came the numbers jumped to sixty or seventy thousand and until that time there was no recording or screening.

The Foreign Secretary explained the position of the Royal Government of Bhutan thus:

And as far as we are concerned the security situation in the country have improved vastly. Life is as normal as it can get and as far as we are concerned we want to try and put the effects of this problem behind us. We have equal amount of development activities taking place in all parts of the country as there have been before and we are moving along. In the meantime, we continue our negotiations and try and resolve this. But, we do not accept this fact that we are the sole cause of this problem. This problem has to be seen in much broader terms. The last point I want to make on this is that we are looking for a permanent solution that we don't have to deal with something like this again. But having said that, I can quite clearly say that in India, especially in the north-east part of India, including West Bengal, Bihar, Assam population movement and other issues is going to be a major political problem. What do you think this Ulfa-Bodo issue is all about is just simply that their reaction to overcrowded and over run and this is going to be a very significant problem in the near future.
VI

The findings of the human rights organizations

An organization defending the human rights of the Bhutanese refugees known as Peoples’ Forum for Human Rights of Bhutan (PFHRB) has issued large number of important documents and pamphlets in which the problem of Bhutanese refugees have been analysed. The people of Nepali origin in Bhutan residing in the south of Bhutan alleges that the Royal Government of Bhutan is guilty of gross human rights violation of the Nepalese settled in Bhutan.

Bhutan is an absolute monarchy ruled by the Wangchuck dynasty of hereditary monarchs since 1907. There is no written constitution or the bill of rights. Prior to 1907, Bhutan was ruled under the theocratic order of Shabdrung system (a political system based on re-incarnation principles) introduced into the country by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, a Tibetan monk who established the Drukpa Kagyupa school of thought of Lamaist Buddhism in Bhutan. All those people who followed this school of thought were regarded as Drukpas. Thus Drukpa does not indicate any ethnicity, but a religious group.

The Shabdrung system was replaced by hereditary monarchy established by Ugyen Wangchuck, the then Governor of Tongsa, who began his family rule in 1907. In Bhutanese politics, the King is regarded as the supreme being wielding both spiritual and temporal powers. Citizens considered as subjects are required to pay absolute allegiance to the King and his government. Any opposition to the King or government is termed as ‘Anti-national’. The opposition as per the Bhutanese laws has been crushed down. All the three branches of administration – executive, legislative and judicial – are centralised in the King. The government is accountable to the King and not to the people. The so-called National Assembly of Bhutan (Tsongdu), formed in 1958 by the third king, late Jigme Dorji Wangchuck represents the interest of feudal elements. He is the symbol of the ruling Drukpas. There is no opposition party or group in the National Assembly, as opposition to the Royal Government is punishable. The Assembly does not have elected members. The citizens do not have the right to vote.

Political parties are banned. Representation is not based on population but on communal and racial factors.\textsuperscript{35} The King is the highest Court of Appeal.

The pamphlet of the Peoples' Forum for Human Rights of Bhutan (PFHRB) titled, \textit{Campaign for Establishment, Protection and Promotion of Human Rights in the Kingdom of Bhutan}, published an assessment of human rights record in Bhutan which are as follows: (1) No right to speech and expression, (2) no right to publication and press, (3) no political rights, (4) no right to form associations, unions and organizations, (5) no right to seek justice and (6) no social and cultural rights. The ethnic Nepalese of Bhutan claim that “the fear of political majority of the Nepali-speaking southern population led to the enactment of a number of national legislations aimed at the depopulation of the southern Bhutan. The Citizenship Act of 1985 which was implemented through a census in 1988 was given a retrospective implementation from 1958”.\textsuperscript{36}

The ongoing turmoil in the Kingdom can be directly attributed to this Act. It has arbitrarily nullified all the previous laws, regulations, practices and decisions on citizenship. Any citizen who could not produce the document of 1958 was listed as an illegal immigrant. The Marriage Act of 1980, which was given a retrospective implementation from 1977, stipulated a number of penalties against Bhutanese marrying foreign nationals, such as denial of promotion in the civil service, denial of agricultural and industrial loans, denial of foreign travel and fellowship.\textsuperscript{37}

The ethnic Nepalese complain that under the policy of 'One Nation, One People' (\textit{Driglam Namsha}), the Royal Government rigorously pursued forced integration, grossly violating the social and cultural rights of the non-\textit{Drukpa} ethnic groups. “Ethnic discrimination became the national policy of the Royal rulers”.


\textsuperscript{36} All Bhutan Students Union (ABSU), "Bhutan : Ethnic Discrimination and Human Rights", Nepal. The mimeographed paper was distributed at the Seminar on \textit{Bhutanese Refugees and Human Rights}, Calcutta, 26 March 1995.

\textsuperscript{37} Arbitrary Detention in the Kingdom of Bhutan, Peoples' Forum for Human Rights, Bhutan, (PFHRB), Kathmandu, Nepal, December 1994, p.3.
In the political confrontation between the forces of Royal regime and those of democracy, the latter claim that about one lakh, that is to say, one-sixth of Bhutan’s population have been forced to flee the kingdom and take shelter in refugee camps in India and Nepal. The PFHRB reports that about 90% of Bhutanese of Nepali origin due to ethnic cleansing and political repression are residing as refugee in the refugee camps in Jhapa, eastern Nepal and in the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal. The fear that the Nepalese majority in south may jeopardise the existence of the current partyless and undemocratic government, led to formulation of a number of national policies that were aimed at ethnic cleansing in southern Bhutan. The enactment of 1985 Citizenship Act which was implemented retrospectively from 1958, the Green Belt Policy that aimed to destroy southern fertile lands, the cultural edict that prohibited the language, culture and traditions of southern Bhutanese are but examples of policies of ethnic cleansing.38

The findings of the Peoples’ Forum for Human Rights (PFHRB) have been corroborated by the International Organizations like Amnesty International, United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR); United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC); International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR); United Nations Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities and United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

VII

The supportive organizations

The Bhutanese refugees in the refugee camps appealed to the King of Bhutan and the heads of several countries like India, Pakistan, U.S.A., U.K., France and the International bodies to support them in their fight for restoration of human rights in Bhutan, repatriation of refugees to Bhutan and the release of some of their leaders.


detained in the Royal Court of Bhutan. They formed several dissident organizations like Appeal Movement Coordinating Council, the Bhutan Gorkha National Liberation Front (BGNLF), Bhutan’s Ex-Servicemen Organization (BESO), Bhutanese Coalition for Democratic Reforms/ Movement (BCDR/M). It is comprised of seven political organizations formed in 1995. It wants India to play an interventionist role. The other demands include the establishment of constitutional monarchy and an independent judiciary. The United Front for Democracy in Bhutan, an organization for the regrouping of Bhutan rebels, wants to confine the movement within Bhutan.

On the Indian side a number of Support Organizations for the Bhutanese Refugees (SOBR) have been formed in Siliguri, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong, Mirik and Pedong in Darjeeling district. Other organizations like Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR), Peoples’ Union for Civil Liberties, the CPIM, Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League (ABGL) (All India Gorkha League), Manav Adhikar Suraksha Manch (Platform for Protection of Human Rights), Ambedkar Bichar Manch (the Platform for Ambedkar Discourse), Sanjukta Gorkha Manch (United Gorkha Front), All India Gorkha Students’ Union, Gorkha Democratic Front supported the cause of the refugees.  

The Bhutanese of Nepali origin, as they claim themselves concentrated more on the fight for human rights, democracy and they realised that the refugee classification in several rounds of Nepal-Bhutan talks was politically motivated and arbitrary. Most of the refugees fall under the category II, that is to say, Bhutanese who have voluntarily migrated. But as per Bhutanese laws they are regarded as criminals.  

VIII

Aspects of refugee agitation

The refugees in the camps in India and Nepal resorted to phased agitation against the Bhutan administration. Many banned dissident parties like, the Bhutan’s Peoples’ Party and the Druk National Congress sent their volunteers from refugee camps in

Nepal and India in support of the agitation.\textsuperscript{41} Activists of the Youth of Bhutan and Students' Organization of Bhutan led by the latter's General Secretary, Ganesh Subedi, launched a four day cycle rally in North Bengal in support of the democratic movement. As many as ninety-five cyclists headed for Jaigon, Jalpaiguri district, adjacent to Phuntsoling. They were followed by fellow refugees in rickshaws unnoticed by the Police. Their banners seeking "Indian support and opposing the autocratic monarchy in Bhutan".\textsuperscript{42} They were stopped from entering into India after prohibitory orders under section 144 were promulgated in Siliguri subdivision. However for the first time, a contingent of 191 Bhutanese refugee who formed part of the long march to Thimpu marched in Indian territory on 27 March 1996 since they began their march on 14 January 1996 from their camps in Nepal. They arrived on the outskirts of Siliguri after trekking 22 km. from Mechi river on the Indo-Nepal border.\textsuperscript{43}

The marchers were seeking repatriation to Bhutan. Amidst the chanting of vedic hymns and the vow of never returning to the refugee camps in Nepal, 150 Bhutanese of the Appeal Movement Coordinating Council set out on 14 January 1996 from Damak in eastern Nepal for a 20 days long march to Thimpu. The People's Forum for Human Rights of Bhutan and \textit{Druk} National Congress were actively associated with it. Thousands of refugees from the neighbouring camps and a large number of activists and leaders of the ruling Nepali Congress; the \textit{Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League}; the Dooars based \textit{Sanjukta Gorkha Morcha}; Harka Bahadur Chhetri, member of the CPIM's Sikkim unit; the Support Organizations for the Bhutanese Refugees; the Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights and the All Gorkha Student's Union turned out to give the rallyists a warm send off. The marchers were scheduled to reach Thimpu on 5 February 1996 after passing through Nepal and parts of India and Bhutan, probably the first such march in recent history covering three countries. The leader of the procession, Jogen Gazmere said, "We are leaving for our homeland, never to return here. We are undertaking this mission to forge national reconciliation with our King".\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{The Telegraph}, 8 December 1995, p.4.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{The Telegraph}, 14 January 1996, p.1.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{The Telegraph}, 28 March 1996, p.8.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{The Telegraph}, 15 January 1996, p.6.
Bhutanese refugees on 10 June 1999 courted arrest in Bhutan for the solution of their problem. They demanded the guarantee of the protection of ethnic national identity and fundamental rights of the Bhutanese Gorkhas; fair and proportionate representation of the Bhutanese Gorkhas in the National Assembly; immediate repatriation of the Bhutanese refugees from the camps in eastern Nepal and India with dignity and honour and establishment of an independent judiciary in Bhutan. They also resented that the Bhutanese refugees are referred to as people of Nepali origin and demanded that they should be called as “Gorkhas of Bhutanese origin”. Bhutan Solidarity, a human rights organization decided to petition the Supreme Court of India to seek repatriation of Bhutanese refugees to their country.


Public Opinion Trends Analyses and News Service is also called as POT. In this connection I quote here a passage from the Kathmandu Post that deserves special attention.

Text: These days, some southern Bhutanese people in exile are asserting themselves to be called as Gorkhas rather than accept the names given to them over the years by the rulers of their land. Ostensibly, they seemed to have drawn this lesson from India’s Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), which renamed the Nepali-speaking Indian citizens residing in Darjeeling district as Gorkhas since 1987 and became quite successful there. Whatever may be the source of inspiration, these Lhotshampas have a reason to do so as they were earlier known as Gorkhas even in Bhutan. Even the late Kings of Bhutan recognized and accepted the Nepali-speaking citizens of southern Bhutan as Gorkhas.

The term “Nepalese” could signify a nationality and not the race, argues the Bhutan Gorkha National Liberation Front (BGNLF) in its literature. Even the Bhutanese government has been saying that the term “Nepali” belongs to a different sovereign country, Nepal.

Meaning of other terms:

If some Lhotshampas call themselves Nepali, they should go to Nepal. But it may be argued that even the term “Lhotshampas” could mean the “people of south as in case of Sharchhop” which means the people of the east. These terms are only territorial identities and names given by the Ngalong regime to the people of southern and eastern Bhutan for its administrative convenience. These terms are like calling the people in Nepal as “Pahadi” (people of hills) and “Madhes” (people of plains). These are not ethnic or group identities like Ngalphongs, Sharchhops, Gorkhas or Nepalese. Like other communities Nepali-speaking Bhutanese citizens have been living in southern Bhutan in close harmony with other ethnic groups for centuries. They have adjusted with all types of social stratification among their own community and developed cohesive and harmonious relationship with other communities in Bhutan. They have passed through many hardships. They were called to settle in Bhutan, much before the unification and consolidation of monarchical rule of the Wangchuck dynasty between 1897 and 1907 and even earlier. During these periods, the Wangchuck dynasty, was directly responsible for the induction of majority of the Nepalese in Bhutan and their acceptance as citizens, though they are now considered as second-class people.

They were asked to clear virgin forests for cultivation to make them provide the nascent monarchy with tax revenue and political loyalty. They were addressed as Gorkhas by the Bhutanese rulers and the British authorities. After over 60 years of official identity as Gorkhas, the Bhutanese regime in 1958 granted them citizenship as Lhotshampas, barring them to identify with Gorkhas outside Bhutan. Probably, the name Gorkhas for the Ngalong rulers meant a warrior group. Since then, they were called not Gorkhas or Nepalese, even if they prefer to call themselves so. Today, if they prefer to call themselves Gorkhas and struggle to establish democracy and human rights, including Lhotshampa rights to return home peacefully, everybody will have to support them. See POT, Nepal Series, 5, No. 57, (16 October 1999), p. 608.
The United Front for Democracy in Bhutan, leading the agitation for the restoration of democracy and human rights in the Himalayan kingdom decided to begin a mass mobilization campaign in northern part of the kingdom, where the Drukpas are in a majority. An underground monthly journal, Lhoke-Kuju has also been launched in Dzongkha, the language of the Drukpas. Narayan Katel, the former Bhutanese diplomat and publicity in-charge of the organization told, “The democracy movement has so far been considered as an affair of the Lhotshampas. We want to change this. Unlike the past, we want to confine our movement within Bhutan. We will return to Bhutan as we are ready to sacrifice our lives for freedom”.

The Bhutanese Coalition for Democratic Movement (BCDM) decided to launch a renewed agitational programme in support of their cause. It was the first time that BCDM which is a platform for political parties in exile from Bhutan trained its guns on Nepal, which has granted the displaced Lhotshampas refugee status. They decided to hold silent processions followed by rallies at Damak and Birta (east Nepal) urging the Government of Nepal to abrogate the bilateral understanding reached with Bhutan to categorise the refugees into four types. According to D.N.S Dhakal, Coordinator of the BCDM, all emigrants from Bhutan were ‘forcible evictions’ and not ‘voluntary emigrants’ as projected by the Royal Government.

IX

India's standpoint: government and non government

So far as the refugees are concerned, the support extended by the Indian political parties to the cause of the refugees were not in agreement with the policy adopted by the Government of India or West Bengal Government. In reply to the letter from the former Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu stating that the attempt of the refugees to return to Bhutan through India was creating problems for the Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri district administration, the Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao said, “since the refugee problem is

47. The Statesman, 10 February 1996, p.4.
a bilateral issue, it has to be resolved by Nepal and Bhutan, otherwise such efforts will create confrontation and cast shadows on our relations with Bhutan”.\(^{48}\)

The Centre’s refusal to take up the case of Bhutanese refugees living in India and Nepal has put the CPI(M) dominated Left-Front Government in a tight spot. For the CPI(M) party, early repatriation of these displaced persons and introduction of democracy and human rights is both a commitment and a matter of prestige. In fact the 15th Party Congress of the CPI(M) held at Chandigarh ratified the resolution adopted at the 14th Party Congress which asked Bhutan to ensure democratic rights for all ethnic groups. Madan Kumar Bantawa, General Secretary of the Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League (ABGL), charged the State Government with scuttling the pro-democracy movement in Bhutan by imposing Section 144 and stopping the cycle rally at the border.\(^{49}\)

The move of the West Bengal State Government to deport ninety-six Bhutanese refugees imprisoned at Panitanki on the Indo-Nepal border for their cycle rally to Nepal from the Siliguri jail was foiled by the activists of APDR. The Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League (ABGL) sponsored a twelve hour bandh on 14 January 1996 in support of the refugees. They organized a rally in Darjeeling where they extended full support to the movement for democracy and human rights in Bhutan. The long march of the refugees to return to Bhutan through India was organized by the Appeal Movement Coordinating Committee, a front of various refugee bodies. It was fully supported by the Ambedkar Vichar Manch and the Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League.\(^{50}\)

Regarding the condition of the refugees there are different points of view. Some say that with 30,000 refugees stationed in North Bengal and Sikkim, New Delhi must pilot a deal by which Bhutan Government is made to take back its citizens without losing face. Dhan Bahadur of Birpara, Jalpaiguri, complained that for the similar cause, the Government of West Bengal showed active sympathy and support to the Tibetan refugees. They are indifferent to the fate of Bhutanese refugees. While the Government says that the problem is a bilateral issue at the same time it violates the Bhutanese

\(^{48}\) The Telegraph, 19 March 1995, p.5.

\(^{49}\) The Telegraph, 14 January 1996, p.8.

\(^{50}\) The Telegraph, 14 January 1996, p.7.
refugees’ right to return to their homeland. C. K. Ghising of Sikkim through a letter to the editor, *The Telegraph* says that India should mediate with Bhutan for the return of the refugees since the issue after all is for preservation of human rights. “India should be as vocal about human rights in Bhutan as in South Africa”.

Giving a new twist to the movement of ethnic Nepalese displaced from Bhutan, the Support Organizations for Bhutanese Refugees (SOBR) called a five day strike in Darjeeling, the Dooars and Sikkim from 26 June 1996 in protest against state government’s *lathi* charge on the exiled Bhutanese in Siliguri. The police resorted to *lathi* charge in order to prevent them from breaking the security cordon near the Mahananda bridge on National Highway 31. The refugees were trying to take the body of a Bhutanese refugee who died in jail custody in Behrampore, to Bhutan. The SOBR Chief Coordinator, Dr. Harka Bahadur Chettri said, “It is our duty to oppose the undemocratic and dictatorial attitude of the West Bengal government and oppose the Centre’s support to monarchy”.

Ashoke Poudyal, the Chief of the Nepal based Bhutanese Refugee Support Group, accused India of harbouring expansionist design by imposing Section 144 on no-man’s land. “By stopping the refugees from going back to their own country Poudyal says, “India has made it clear that it wants to annex Bhutan”.

Indian political parties and organizations are deeply divided over supporting the Bhutanese refugees. The CPI(M) lost face when West Bengal Government imposed prohibitory orders in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts to foil the cycle rally by the refugees in January 1996. The Marxists have been accused of double standards by the *Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha* League, the Support Organization for Bhutanese Refugees, the Gorkha Democratic Front, the APDR and the *Manav Adhikar Suraksha Manch*.

The Darjeeling district committee of Left Front sought Centre’s help for rehabilitating the refugees in Nepal and North Bengal. The district Left Front Convenor, Rama Sankar Prasad, the CPI(M) Rajya Sabha Member, R.B Rai, Kailash Nath Ojah of the CPI and S. Bhattacharya of the Forward Block felt that Nepal and Bhutan cannot

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solve refugee problem without India. “More than 1.25 lakh refugees travel through India to Bhutan and Nepal regularly. They interact with the people of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling with whom they have close ethnic affinity”, Prasad said. According to Rai, “India cannot brush aside the problem. There have been occasions where India has offered guidance to Bhutan on internal matters”. He regretted the Left Front’s “passive role” in the crisis. “We should have been at the fore front of the Bhutanese movement for democracy and human rights rather than extending moral support”.55

C. B Dahal, the General Secretary of the Bhutan National Democratic Party describes the deportation of the refugees as a violation of the 1949 Indo-Bhutan Treaty, which allows Bhutanese free movement in India. “No body stopped us when we passed through Indian territory when we left Bhutan to leave in exile. Why are we being stopped now when we are trying to go back to our country?” Dahal said that, according to the Indian officials the presence of the refugees was not in accordance with any provision of the treaty. “We can allow free movement to the Bhutanese coming directly from Bhutan but not to those entering through a third country.”56 The West Bengal unit of the CPI supports the refugee agitation for democracy and human rights in Bhutan.57

The Bhutanese Coalition for Democratic Reforms/Movement, Coordinator (internal) Chhabilal Timsina claimed, that Bhutanese nationals enjoy most of the fundamental rights guaranteed to Indian citizens under the 1949 Indo-Bhutan Treaty. “The Indian Government’s ban on their peaceful programmes demonstrates it continues to support the autocratic regime in Bhutan”, Timsina said. Describing India as the “land of the Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi who showed the world the path of peaceful struggle”, Timsina appealed to the Government of India and the Indians to recognize the “just cause of the Bhutanese people”.

Officials are in dilemma as no clear cut government policy is evident. While the CPI(M) and its Left Front partners support the refugees’ movement for democracy in Bhutan, the Government of India forces the State Government to take action against

them. Angry at the Centre for forcing the State Government to take action against the refugees, the Darjeeling district CPIM blamed Delhi for “its dual policy which led to the arrest of a number of cadres and leaders of the Bhutanese peoples fighting for human rights and democracy”. The Bhutanese Coalition for the Democratic Movement leadership was upbeat due to the support of the CPIM. “We will continue with our struggle, irrespective of consequences”, said D.M.S Dhakal, the Coordinator of the Organization.

Jyoti Basu requested the Centre “to take up the matter with Bhutan and Nepal so that the problem of the displaced persons from Bhutan are settled bilaterally”. It needs urgent intervention “before the situation goes out of hand in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts”. He further added, “The presence of a large migrant population in the two northern districts has sharply increased social tension and affected the law and order situation. Attempts by the refugees in Nepal to move to the Bhutan border through Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts have further worsened the situation. Since West Bengal sandwiched between Bhutan and Nepal, we have to face the consequences of any agitation directly”. However keeping in mind the overwhelming number of Nepali voters in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri, Jyoti Basu offered to sort out the Bhutan refugee problem by saying, “if necessary I can even go to Bhutan to sort out the issue of the Nepali-speaking people”.

Dilkumari Bhandari, the Sikkim Sangram Parishad, M.P. (Member of the Parliament), and a member of the Support Organization for the Bhutanese Refugees (SOBR) pointed out that she favoured Indian intervention in the Bhutanese imbroglio. “We wish India could solve the problem. It could at least help the refugees to go back to their country. Our country has always supported democratic movements. When we can talk of South Africa and Myanmar, why can’t we talk about human rights violation in Bhutan”.

The Sikkim Chief Minister, Pawan Kumar Chamling, in taking up the issue of the Bhutanese refugees with the Prime Minister, H. D. Devegowda argued that “the refugee

60. The Telegraph, 3 February 1996, p.10.
cannot be treated merely as a problem between Nepal and Bhutan. Now with the refugees pouring in, it has very much become India’s problem too. Now it has become my duty to bring the matter to the Prime Minister’s notice. Chief Minister Chamling’s concern was consequent to the one day bandh in Sikkim called by the various State based students and humanitarian organizations in Sikkim. It was part of the five day bandh called by the Support Organizations of Bhutanese Refugees (SOBR) in the Darjeeling hills.

In the whole issue of Bhutanese refugees and the Indian game of politics, the Gorkha National Liberation Front President, Subhas Ghising remained non committal about the issue when asked by the Press. Marcus Dam stated, “the one voice that remains silent is that of Subhas Ghising whose Gorkha National Liberation Front had climbed the rungs of power in quite a similar situation the last time the Nepalese had found themselves at the receiving end”. In an interview with Marcus Dam, Subhas Ghising for the first time accused the local political parties of raking up an issue “imported” from the neighbouring countries. He reiterated that all parties of the region save the GNLF, “had been starved of political fodder” and was trying to extract maximum political mileage from an issue which should not be India’s concern but be settled between the Bhutanese and Nepalese Governments.

Reactions of Nepali press

Lamenting that Bhutan has managed to quietly carry on with its policy of ethnic cleansing, the Kathmandu Post (21 February 1995) in an editorial commented, “It seems to be in India’s (which bilaterally controls Bhutan’s foreign policy affairs and defence) interest to turn a blind eye to the atrocities being perpetrated in the name of ensuring cultural purity. So it appears that the only option available to Nepal is to pursue the policy of exerting international pressure on Bhutan.

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63. The Telegraph, 2 July 1996, p.5.
Stating that the Bhutanese refugee issue is one of the major irritants in the Indo-Nepalese relations, the Foreign Minister of Nepal, Dr. Ramsharan Mahat, in an interview with the weekly Spotlight (23-29 July 1999) spelt out the Nepalese perception of resolving the issue through open step-by-step diplomacy. “First of all, our Bhutanese refugee policy should be based on an all-party national consensus,” he stated. The all party consensus suggested that first Nepal should go bilaterally. If it failed, then it would request India to intervene. If the trilateral negotiations also failed, then it would opt to internationalize the issue. “Of course, the Bhutanese refugees came via India. We are not the second country and we have border with Bhutan”, the Foreign Minister added.67

The Gorkhapatra (22 April 1995) regrets that “the big nations of the world, who frequently make a lot of hue and cry on human rights violations, are paying little attention to these hapless refugees”.68

Lok Raj Baral, former Nepalese Ambassador to India and Bhutan in an article in the Kantipur (3 September 1999) says that on the question of democracy and human rights those countries who proclaim themselves to be ardent supporters of democracy act in their own interests. “India has its own interest. One cannot imagine it to put pressure for democracy on one of its very good friends. If seen in totality, the solution to the refugee problem lies in the confidence between the two neighbours. There is no other alternative unless the situation suddenly takes a different turn. Democracy and human rights have their own place and importance but it cannot be said that a decisive movement would usher in democracy. Attraction for democracy will never die. In politics we should work on possibilities not on hypothesis”.69

Nepal thinks that the attitude of India to the refugee crisis has remained not only antagonistic but also aggressive from the very beginning which has frustrated the refugees. The Kathmandu Post (3 August 1999) alleges that in abiding by Article 7 of the 1949 Indo-Bhutanese Treaty, New Delhi, has chosen to be extra friendly by allowing even the Bhutanese police to freely cross over to Assam to arrest some of the refugees camped in the region. Hence, Nepal perceives, that, since then India has

been adopting a standard view of not interfering in bilateral issues involving two neighbours and this has tarnished India's image as the largest democracy in the earth.70

The Kantipur (10 April 1995) adds that the Bhutanese refugees living in Nepal fear that inconclusive talks on the problem will make their future uncertain and the entire lot may get absorbed in the Nepalese society itself. S. K. Pradhan, the General Secretary of the Peoples’ Forum for Human Rights, Bhutan, told the weekly, “Most of us hail from the hills. Therefore, the climate of Terai is becoming unbearable for us. The prospect of longer stay has infuriated the people. How long can we survive on international alms?”71 The Deshantar Saptahik (16 January 2000) reports that R.K. Burathoki, the President of the Bhutan’s Peoples’ Party (BPP), has said that the Bhutanese refugees can give up their demand for restoration of democracy and human rights for the time being if they are allowed to return to the country honourably and under the conditions that existed before 1990.72

The Rising Nepal (30 April 1995) and the Kathmandu Post (29 September 1999) allege that New Delhi has an invisible but central role in Bhutan's strategy and tactics of negotiations with Nepal. They argue that King Jigmie Singye Wangchuck is trying to use the special treaty with India as a shield against resolving the problem of refugees. Nepal prefers to adopt two policies.

First, the Nepalese policy planners still believe that India can play a significant role despite the latter's backing of the Bhutanese position in the guise of an even-handed policy vis-à-vis its two northern neighbours.73

Secondly, the Rising Nepal suggests that Kathmandu must take resort to drastic alternatives to resolve the issue. These measures may include the snapping of air service through Nepal; mobilize human rights organizations in the region and outside to focus on ethnic cleansing in Bhutan; enlist the support from other non-governmental

organizations. However, Nepal reiterates, “All this may not be required, if India, which
guides the Bhutanese defence and foreign policies, decides to intervene”.74

Nepal thinks that though Bhutan is dragging its feet in the solution of the problem,
yet it recognizes the fact that political developments in Sikkim in the early 1970s
followed by resurgent Gorkha militant activities in Darjeeling under the GNLF during
the 1980s also indirectly aggravated the feeling of insecurity in Bhutan contrary to
popular belief of comparative calm and serene political atmosphere there.75

Although the eighth round of Nepal-Bhutan talks on the Bhutanese refugees issue
has failed to yield any concrete result, yet the Rising Nepal (18 September 1999)
comments that Thimpu has shown some “flexibility”. Flexibility is shown by the
acceptance of the inclusion of a third party in the joint verification team to verify the
categories of the Bhutanese refugees comprising five persons from each side.76 At the
same time, M.R. Josse in an article in the Kathmandu Post (22 September 1999) says,
“Regarding the 8th round of joint ministerial level talks, the ‘nitty-gritty’ of the recent
talks aside, one wonders whether any one realises that while Bhutan’s ethnic cleansing
drive is a fait accompli, Nepal has no means to ensure that Bhutan – backed to the
hilt behind the scene by India – will reverse gears”.77 Hence according to Nepal it is
Bhutan rather than Nepal that has gained from the eighth round of ministerial level talks
between Nepal and Bhutan on the refugee issue.

The problem is deep-rooted. The kernel of the problem has aptly been stated by
Sunanda Kumar Dutt Ray:

“Locally it reflects the hunger for land and a living that is the inevitable consequence
of South Asia’s relentless explosion of numbers. But the cataclysm is also a skirmish
in that wider conflict in which mono-cultural orthodoxy is challenged by the politically
correct arrogance of fashionable multi-culturalism”.78

See for a brief account of ethnic problem in Bhutan and the role of neighbouring countries, Sanjay