

Lightning Strikes the Paradise:

Sociopolitical Upheavals in Contemporary Bhutan

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Introduction:

The small kingdom of Bhutan with about a million inhabitants is little known in the international scene. A few who have heard about Bhutan imagine it to be an unspoilt, exotic and the world's only Buddhist Shangri-La that is hidden somewhere in the Himalayas.² Even today, very limited social scientific research regarding politicoeconomics of Bhutan has been carried out. Most information comes from those who are interested in Mahayana Buddhism, which is often loaded with personal biases. The fact that Bhutan is a country of multiethnic, religious and multilingual units largely remains unexplored. Yet the mystery of Bhutan as a 'peaceful dragon' is vigorously sought to cover its faction ridden history. At least since the 17th century (i.e. when the mass migration from Tibet began), Bhutan has gone through constant political turmoil because several small factions were vying for political and religious supremacy. By the late 19th century, however, a *Dorji* family came to dominate southern Bhutan and a *Wangchuck* family, who established hereditary monarchy in 1907 with the help of the British, came to overshadow north-western Bhutan. It was also the period when *Kazi Ugyen Dorji* was given full authority to recruit people of Nepalese origin to work in his inhospitable region. These two families furiously competed with each other indicating Bhutan as a very weak state.

By the 1960s, the political power of the *Dorji* family was finally stripped by means of assimilation as well as elimination but new factions of reformists and conservatives have emerged ever since. In the 1970s and beyond, the traditionalists (i.e. the rulers of pre-monarchy Bhutan, monastery community as well as several local landlords) grouped together and made a resurgence in Bhutan's politics.³ This led to the gradual reversal of democratisation

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² Sinha 2001: 9

³ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 321

and modernisation process, initiated by the father of the present king *Jigme Singye Wangchuck*. Because of the fear of losing absolute power, the *Ngalung* conservatives effectively manipulated the current king to exasperate the new emerging class of people and policy makers. As such, the *Ngalung* rulers ignored the complexities of a mixed population within its southern region and believed that by placing restrictions on citizenship rights and by limiting the movement of the predominant *Lhotshampa* peoples of Nepalese origin, the regime would be secured.⁴ As soon as a handful of educated or politically conscious *Lhotshampa* members took to the streets demanding their politicoeconomics rights, the bureaucracy and police resorted to strong-arm methods committing excesses. As a result, a mishandled politicoeconomics problem became a major ethnic issue, where even the bona fide *Lhotshampa* peoples, settled for over a century felt threatened⁵ and ultimately fled the country. Since the early 1990s, close to 100,000 *Lhotshampa* refugees have languished in the seven United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (or UNHCR) monitored camps in the Jhapa/Morang districts of eastern Nepal. Some 20-30,000 others are scattered elsewhere in India.

Thus far insubstantial scientific research has been conducted concerning the *Lhotshampa* refugee crisis. Even then, most scholars⁶ seem to associate the problem with the rise of ‘ethnonationalism’ in Bhutan, which could be defined as nationalism based on ethnicity. Indeed, the source of ethnonationalism has always been evident in a multicultural environment like Bhutan, which has three major groups: a) *Ngalung* is the most powerful ruling establishment that overshadows north-western Bhutan, b) *Lhotshampa* is the largest farmer community concentrated in the south, and c) *Sarchhop* is the poorest group whose members are subsistence farmers or shepherds and dominate the eastern Bhutan. Yet the *Ngalung* elites insensitively argue that the *Sarchhop* group is a part of the so-called Drukpa identity (i.e. *Sarchhop* peoples follow the same *Ngalung* cultural etiquette). In the 1980s, when Thimphu began to implement *driglamnamja* or ‘one nation, one people’ policy on all of its citizens, the largely Hindu *Lhotshampa* group demanded that their basic human rights should be respected. The *Sarchhop* peoples, though less intensely, also followed suit appealing for similar rights. In this context, ethnonationalism could also be seen as the ‘politics of recognition.’⁷ Such a dictum, however, does not explain why it should suddenly spring into prominence bringing with it far reaching implications at different levels. The issue certainly goes beyond a ‘cultural resurgence’ with strong political as well as economic connotations. In all the above scenarios (i.e. culture, demographic, socioeconomic), the threat of the *Lhotshampa* group was at the core, a political one.⁸ This means, instead of just ethnonationalism, the current upheaval in Bhutan between the *Ngalung* dominated state and the *Lhotshampa* peoples is definitely rooted in politicoeconomics and their linkage to the process of economic modernization.⁹

British colonial governors in India not only made economic and cultural penetration by

⁴ Das 1996

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ E.g. Hutt 1996

⁷ See Taylor 1992

⁸ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 313

⁹ Joseph C. 1999: 193

drawing (useless) borders but also invoked the formation of tribes and ethnic groups, which previously had not existed.¹⁰ Many of today's conflicts, therefore, trace their origins to the Western expansion, domination and the meddling of the great powers. Moreover, the geographical factors such as the size of a country, its location, and the nature of its borders are extremely important¹¹ in explaining the scope of conflict in Bhutan. The *Ngalung* government has tried to suppress the ethnic Nepalese in order to dominate its resources rich south but the decades of rebellion in the northern Indian states has now penetrated into its jungles, posing an unmanageable security challenge. In fact, it is noted that roughly 51 percent of the conflicts extend to (or across) the national border of the conflict-ridden country.¹² As a small and poorly developed state of Bhutan is unable to contain a carefully organised armed insurgency.

In short, Bhutan's present crisis is closely related to the rapid population growth especially in its southern plain and the subsequent constraint on land ownership, the widening living standards and income gaps between the *Ngalung* elites and other ethnic groups, Thimphu's desperate attempt to centralise and monopolise politicoeconomic power and in particular the imposing of the 'one nation, one people' doctrine.

To analyse the issue, Section I introduces geopolitical and politicoeconomic realities of Bhutan. A particular focus is placed on southern Bhutan, which is dominated by the *Lhotshampa* community. It acknowledges that South Asia has gone through momentous political upheavals since the post colonial era. It also describes how Bhutan's interconnectedness to the outside world has influenced Thimphu's domestic policies.

Section II examines the situation of refugees in the seven different camps in eastern Nepal. What has happened to their repatriation process? It is hoped that facts drawn from multiple sources including questionnaires lead to a neutral conclusion concerning the refugee issue. Also a special emphasis is placed on critically analysing pro-*Ngalung* (instead of impartial) views and reports presented by some (Western) scholars, journalists and aid personnel.

Section III, while analysing Bhutan's interconnectedness, argues only when the *Ngalung* rulers fully understand that its society is multicultural and initiate concrete methods to bring different ethnic groups into mainstream politics by closing the perceived politicoeconomic inequalities, will some peace be brought to Bhutan. Otherwise Thimphu is likely to be shaken by a seismic wave composed of all the excluded communities.

¹⁰ Tainter 1998: 185

¹¹ Buhaug & Gates 2002: 419

¹² Ibid. 425

Section I

Bhutan's Geophysical Features:

The landlocked kingdom of Bhutan is situated in the eastern Himalayas and is mostly mountainous and heavily forested. The size of Switzerland or one third the size of Nepal, Bhutan is bordered for 470 kilometres by Tibet (China) to the north and northwest and for 605 kilometers by Sikkim to the west, West Bengal to the southwest, Assam to the south and southeast, and Arunachal state to the east - all forming a part of Indian Union.¹³ The distance between Bhutan and Nepal is divided by an eighty-eight kilometre wide territory of Sikkim, which India annexed in 1975.

Broadly speaking, the geographic situation of Bhutan can be divided into three parts. The northern region consists of an arc of glaciated mountain peaks with an arctic climate at the highest elevations (i.e. over 7000m high Himalayas). The alpine valleys of this region are watered by snow fed rivers and provide pasturage for livestock tended by a sparse population of migratory shepherds. The inner or middle part of Bhutan is made up of several fertile valleys including the major cities like Paro and Thimphu. The southern region is covered with dense deciduous forest, alluvial lowland river valleys, and a few mountains of around 1500 meters height. It is an important commercial centre of Bhutan where primary cash commodities like rice are produced extensively.¹⁴

Since Bhutan is a part of the cis-Himalayan region, its climate is also affected by geographic altitudes and monsoons as in other neighbouring countries. In the north, there is only about forty millimetres of annual precipitation whereas 7,800 millimetres per year has been registered at some locations in the humid south ensuring the thick tropical forest or savannah. However, Bhutan has the least percentage of agriculturally suitable land in the whole of South Asia - only 7.7 percent of its total land has agricultural and cultivation potentials.¹⁵

Economic Outlook:

Similar to any other underdeveloped country, Bhutan's economy is based on agriculture and forestry. The former consists largely of subsistence farming and animal husbandry, which provide the main livelihood for almost 90 percent of the population and accounts for more than 40 percent of Gross National Product (or GNP). In the fiscal year 1998-99, Bhutan's total revenue was estimated at *Ngultrum* 1,686 million (\pm Nu 31 = 1 Euro) whereas only six districts - in the order of revenue Chukha, Thimphu, Samchi, Shabdrak Jongkhar, Paro and Sharbhang - contributed 90 percent of its revenue. Four of these districts were from southern

¹³ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 31, Joseph C. 1999: 23

¹⁴ Sinha 2001: 19-25

¹⁵ CEMARD-Bhutan (or the Centre for Protection of Minorities and Against Racism and Discrimination in Bhutan) is a Nepal-based NGO established by a group of intellectuals who were exiled by Bhutan's government for alleged 'anti-national' activities inside Bhutan. The main objective of this NGO is to fight for the rights of the disadvantaged peoples. URL (<http://www.bhutannewsonline.com/refugees.html>)

Bhutan and are predominantly inhabited by the *Lhotshampa* people of Nepalese origin,¹⁶ which has been the main area of conflict. Like its defence and foreign affairs, Bhutan's economy is closely aligned with that of India through strong trade and monetary links. Its industrial sector is technologically backward and most production is of the cottage industry type. Infrastructural development in Bhutan started only in the 1960s, which is made difficult and therefore costly by the rugged mountains dominating its terrain. Most development projects like road construction rely on migrant labour as well as financial aid mainly from India. Bhutan's hydropower potential and its attraction for tourists are key resources, which still remain to be fully exploited.

Since the 1970s, however, Bhutan has gradually expanded its relations with Western countries with an idea of posing itself as a mysterious Buddhist Shangri-La. This seems to be working because Western states today increasingly provide a substantial part of Thimphu's national budget. In this context, one author¹⁷ argues that 'no wonder Bhutan today claims to have the highest per capita income (\pm 400 Euro per person in 1998) in South Asia for a population officially listed as 600,000 with the large volume of aid that has been poured into the kingdom. For its seventh Five Year Plan 1992-1997, foreign aid accounted for an equivalent of *Nu* 40,000 million.¹⁸ The state owned *Kuensel* daily also reported that various foreign institutions had pledged some 473 million Euro to assist Bhutan in its eighth Five Year Plan¹⁹ while its foreign reserve is claimed to have reached a record 288 million Euro in 1998-99.²⁰ It is said that Thimphu has been fairly successful in using foreign aid but not all communities have been able to reap the benefits. Since only the *Ngalung* group totally controls the economic and political spheres, it has brought about consequent changes in the social structure, with the wide gap between 'haves' and 'have nots' creating points of conflict.²¹

Demographic Composition:

The government of Bhutan has carried out a number of censuses and projections during the past two decades but each time the results indicate an incredible discrepancy. In 1978, one author²² noted that Bhutan's estimated population stood at about a million inhabitants. A decade later, it was estimated at 1,451,000 and in July 1992 at 1,660,167.²³ Again a revised figure of 657,548 was announced by Bhutan,²⁴ which makes no reference of over 100,000 exiled peoples since the early 1990s. It has been suggested that the *Ngalung* rulers want to keep the population size secret. Even though a scholar argues that Bhutan is one of the few countries in which statistics do tell lies,²⁵ there is still no definitive answer why Thimphu desires for such a secrecy. Nonetheless, it is impossible to declare, for instance, the proportion of the total population that is or was Nepalese speaking.²⁶ In this research, the

¹⁶ Sinha 2001: 237

¹⁷ Das 1996

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Himal* 10/1998

²⁰ Sinha 2001: 237-38

²¹ Das 1996

²² Nari Rustomji 1978: 3

²³ Hutt 1996, see also Sinha 2001: 203-04

²⁴ See the report of Bhutan's Planning Commission, 1999

²⁵ Sinha 2001: 238

²⁶ Hutt 1996: 400, see Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 41-51 for debates

World Bank's figures²⁷ for the year 2000, which stood at 782,000, is used as an acceptable estimate.

However, since Thimphu claims that its total population is just 600,000 and blames the *Lhotshampa* community of Nepalese origin for magnifying the country's higher growth rate, it would be interesting to apply some hypotheses like 'social characteristics' and 'minority groups status' to see if (or why) different ethnosocial groups of Bhutan have larger or smaller average family size than those ruling *Ngalung* group. The former views that fertility differences between majority and racial ethnic peoples (or in the case of Bhutan, *Ngalung* vs. other groups) is tied to differences in the distribution of socioeconomic factors. The latter implies that other aspects of minority life (e.g. their independent role) besides those associated with socioeconomic status contribute to minority fertility patterns.²⁸ Unfortunately, the fertility statistics for Bhutan's multicultural society could not be found; even the aggregate 'social indicator' data²⁹ prepared by different organisations appear to be quite inconsistent (see table below).

Bhutan's Social Indicators, estimated by:	ADB	FAO	UNICEF	UNDP
Total Population in 1998	618000	600000	2 million	1.2 million
Annual Birth Rate " "	3.1	3.1	2.79	2.6
Total Fertility Rate " 1994	5.6	5.6	n/a	5.9
Infant Mortality Rate " "	70.7	n/a	84	n/a
Life Expectancy at Birth " "	66	n/a	61	61.5
People Below Age of 15 " 1995	n/a	45%	n/a	43.1
Total Adult Literacy Rate " 1996	56%	46%	42%	41.1
Primary School Enrolment " "	72%	72%	75%	n/a
HDI, out of 174 countries, " 1998	142th	125th	159th	155th
GNP Per Capita in Euro " "	598	n/a	439	400

Bhutan's society could be divided into three broad ethnolinguistic groups.³⁰ First, the practitioners of Lamaist Buddhism and Dzongkha (an offshoot of Tibetan language) speaking *Ngalung* peoples including the monarchy, form about 18 percent of the total population and occupy north-western Bhutan. They are from Ha, Gasa, Paro, Punakha, Thimphu, Wangdiphodrang and some parts of Chukha Dzongkhags. Second, the *Sarchhop* group of Indo-Burmese origin living in eastern region, constitute around 33 percent of Bhutan's total inhabitants. They also practice a Lamaist form of Buddhism and speak a similar language that is spoken in the Arunachal state of India and are mainly from Luntshi, Monger, Pemaghatsetel, Tashigang, Tashiyangtshi and part of Samdrup Zonkher districts.³¹ The *Ngalung* and *Sarchhop* peoples are often collectively called the *Drukpas*. However, it is warned that *Drukpa* is used without a clear delineation of whom the term applies to.³² In fact, the concept 'Bhutanese' is associated almost exclusively with the *Ngalung* group.³³ Third, the Nepalese

²⁷ cit. CEMARD-Bhutan 2002

²⁸ Bean & Marcum 1978: 193-94

²⁹ Sources collected from Asian Development Bank (ADB) 2000; Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) 1999; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2000; UN Development Programme (UNDP) 2001

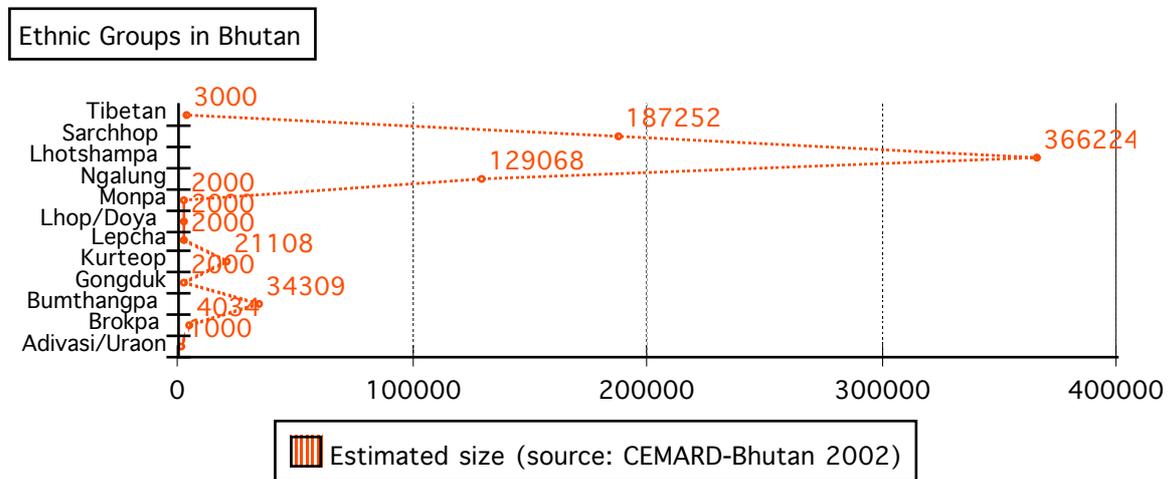
³⁰ Hutt 1996

³¹ Sinha 2001: 24 & 81

³² Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 46-47

³³ Ibid. 57

speaking *Lhotshampa* group who are largely Hindus make up about 43 percent of Bhutan's total population.³⁴ They are confined to densely populated southern districts of Chirang, Chukha, Dagana, Samchi, Sharbhang and Samdrup Zonkher.³⁵ Other smaller ethnolinguistic groups account for the rest, which is indicated in the figure below.



The figure also makes it clear that Bhutan is a multi-ethnic, cultural, lingual and multi-religious society, which is why different scholars depending on their field of interests divide Bhutanese society into several groups. For instance, Leo Rose³⁶ and Joseph C.³⁷ argue that there are four major groups (i.e. *Kheng*, *Lhotshampa*, *Ngalung* and *Sarchhop*) who make about 98 percent of Bhutan's population.

Today, around 17 percent of Bhutan's population are under 5 years old and 45 percent under 15 years.³⁸ If we add such youthful age structure with the high birth rate of 3.1, the population is expected to double in 23 years, resulting in an immense pressure on the scarce arable land and the fragile mountain ecosystem.³⁹ At the same time, however, some authors⁴⁰ claim that the *Lhotshampa* community is a polygamous race where a household of three or four wives and a dozen or fifteen children is not an uncommon phenomenon. Such statements are loaded with cultural biases and therefore are academically unscientific. If the *Lhotshampa* people of Nepalese origin were/are of a polygamous race, then, should the king of Nepal not marry four wives and have fifteen or so children? Since the racially non-polygamous king of Bhutan himself has multiple wives and about dozen children, it would be mad to think that the largely illiterate *Lhotshampa* peoples living under Thimphu's constant vigilance resist the temptation of having many wives and children like their king. Despite everything, if the *Lhotshampa* people have higher fertility rate than those *Ngalung* elites, that is because the highest fertility is exhibited by groups whose members have been in the country for the longest time or groups

³⁴ Chandrasekharan, e-mail 5/2/2002, Giri 1999: 19, Tsering 1990: 70

³⁵ Acharya, e-mail 4/2/2002, Sinha 2001: 169-70

³⁶ Rose 1977 cit. Sinha 2001: 25-26

³⁷ Joseph C. 1999: 23

³⁸ FAO Country Report, 1999

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Rustomji 1978: 7

whose members have historically been concentrated in rural areas and have been the objects of discrimination.⁴¹ The latter has certainly played a major role in Bhutan.

Bhutan's Political History:

For the sake of simplicity, the history of Bhutan could be divided into three periods. First, Bhutan as a 'tribal belt' ruled by various chieftains. In the sixth century AD, the incursions from Tibet to Bhutan are believed to have started. Tibetan migrants soon began to dominate existing groups through intermarriages and the assertiveness of their culture brought from Tibet. This resulted in heavy intertribal conflicts, especially during the ninth century. To settle this never-ending conflict, an Indian Buddhist pundit named *Padma Sambhava* was reportedly invited by one of the chieftains. The pundit supposedly solved the conflicts and converted the major tribe into Buddhism. Thus Buddhist teaching reached Bhutan for the first time. Second, Bhutan was unified by *Ngawang Namgyal* (a Buddhist Lama of the *Drukpa Kagyu* sect who fled from Tibet in 1616) eradicating all his opponents and avoiding supplementary Tibetan incursions.⁴² *Namgyal* taught throughout the region and soon established himself as the religious ruler of Bhutan with the title *Shabdrung Rimpoche*⁴³ or *Dharma Raja*.⁴⁴ While the political system he had created lasted until the beginning of the 20th century, the announcement of the *Namgyal's* death in 1705 was followed by two centuries of political infighting, losing much of *Shabdrung's* temporal power to feuding district governors. Much like in Tibet, struggles for religious supremacy over different sects of Lamaist Buddhism severely reduced the *Shabdrung* family's power to rule Bhutan as a political entity though they somehow remained until the 1900s.⁴⁵ Third, Bhutanese geopolitical borders were drawn by the British empire. In 1774, a British mission arrived in Thimphu to promote trade with India, which could be considered as Bhutan's definite interconnection to the outside world. The British occupation of Assam in 1826 led to renewed border raids from Bhutan. In return, the British India governor occupied part of southern Bhutan in 1864, which was formally annexed after the Duar War in 1865. However, the Treaty of Sinchula provided for an annual subsidy to Bhutan as compensation. Internally, the office of the *Shabdrung* was finally abolished in 1907 when *Sir Ugyen Wangchuck* became the first king with the approval of the British whom he had supported during their incursions into Tibet. The treaty of Punakha signed in 1910 between Bhutan and the governor of British India established that the foreign relations of Bhutan were under Britain's control with internal autonomy remaining with the Bhutanese.⁴⁶ Thus the status of Bhutan as a very weak state was kept intact.

By the end of the Second World War, Britain was finally forced to withdraw from South Asia (or Asia in general) in which India became an independent country. Yet the Indian rulers maintained external policies left behind by their colonial masters (i.e. India took over Bhutan's defence and foreign policies).⁴⁷ Similarly, the borders between Bhutan and India were

⁴¹ Bean & Marcum 1978: 190-91

⁴² Das 1996: 10-13, Hutt 1996

⁴³ It basically means 'at who's feet one submits' (Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 63, Rustomji 1978: 3).

⁴⁴ Rose 1977: 23, Sinha 2001: 17

⁴⁵ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 31, see Sinha 2001: 52-61 for details

⁴⁶ Das 1996: 10-13, Hutt 1996, see also Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 62-66

⁴⁷ See Hasrat 1980: 218-24 for the Indo-Bhutanese Treaty of 1949

recognised internationally only in September 1971 upon the former's admission to the United Nations. Since 1907, Bhutan has been ruled by four kings of the *Wangchuck* line and the present king *Jigme Singye Wangchuck* began his reign in 1972.⁴⁸ Bhutanese kings are considered to be the incarnations of the deity *Chakna Dorji* much like the kings of Nepal who are claimed to be the incarnations of the Hindu god *Vishnu*.⁴⁹

Migration from Nepal:

The history of southern Bhutan and especially that of the *Lhotshampa* community (variously known as ethnic Nepalese or Nepalese Bhutanese or southern Bhutanese)⁵⁰ is even more contested than Bhutan's population figures. The *Lhotshampa* intellectuals argue that their history dates back to the days when *Shabdrung* was fleeing Tibet from religious prosecution. This claim is a bit hard to verify since very little research has been conducted concerning the inhabitants of southern Bhutan. However, this region was accorded a special administrative status in 1898 under the authority of *Kazi Ugyen Dorji*, who was given full administrative authority over the whole of southern Bhutan including the right to settle Nepalese immigrants in what was then a virtually uninhibited section.⁵¹ In short, scholars generally agree that the Nepalese came legally as labourers to clear forests in Samchi area and the cleared land was parcelled off to the workers.⁵²

In 1932, a British army officer estimated that there were 60,000 *Lhotshampa* inhabitants in south-western Bhutan out of some 300,000 people in total.⁵³ That is why some districts in eastern and southern Bhutan already faced population pressures on the land. By 1950s, population pressure upon land resources was becoming a problem in both regions.⁵⁴ Today for the exiled *Lhotshampa* peoples, this is a telling pointer to the fact that significantly large numbers of people from Nepal already existed in Bhutan at that time. Hence they argue that: a) Nepalese immigrants had settled in southern Bhutan prior to the installation of the hereditary monarchy in 1907, b) they settled in virgin territory without displacing the original inhabitants, and c) southern Bhutan suffered from population pressures even before the 'cut-off' year of the Bhutanese Citizenship Act of 1958.⁵⁵ In summery, various scholars have presented sources conforming that the *Lhotshampa* people of Nepalese origin were present in Bhutan at least since the Anglo-Bhutan Duar War of 1864-65.⁵⁶

In 1991, Bhutan's Foreign Minister reportedly said that the Nepalese have been settling down in our southern plains from the 7th century; we welcomed them because they were hard-

⁴⁸ Hutt 1996

⁴⁹ Cf. Mathou 2000 & Sinha 2001: 72-77

⁵⁰ Joseph C. (1999: 139) argues that *Thimphu* introduced *Lhotshampa* as a new term in the mid-1980s, which was intended to underplay the dynamics of the ethnic consciousness of the Nepalese and to create a distinction between the Bhutanese of Nepalese origin and the people of Nepalese ethnicity in India and Nepal. However its usage in this research is simply meant to avoid confusion for those readers who might be less familiar with the complex social construction of South Asia.

⁵¹ Rose 1977 cit. CEMARD-Bhutan 2002, Sinha 2001: 28-31

⁵² Hutt 1996, Joseph C. 1999, Rose 1977

⁵³ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 131, Hutt 1997: 122-23, Sinha 2001: 30

⁵⁴ Ibid., Thronson 1993

⁵⁵ CEMARD-Bhutan 2002, Hutt 1997: 122-23, see also Sinha 2001: 145-55 for field study

⁵⁶ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 113-20, Joseph C. 1999: 45, Sinha 2001: 162

working people but they cannot swamp us.⁵⁷ Just two years later, Thimphu's report claims that there was no Nepalese presence whatsoever in Bhutan prior to the 20th century.⁵⁸ Of course, if the 'authority' is in crisis, the fear of being swamped by foreigners is easy to mobilise onto the political agenda, especially since it has often happened in history like obliteration of Hottentots in South Africa or the suppression of the natives in Americas.⁵⁹ Even so, the *Ngalung* rulers have been unable to distort the fact that the British encouraged Nepalese immigration to Bhutan as a counterpoise to northern influences of Bhutanese especially Tibetans (and Chinese) sweeping down to the plains.⁶⁰ In the early 20th century, Bhutan's authorities encouraged Nepalese settlements in certain parts of its south to work in commercial logging and clearing land.⁶¹

Also, it is incorrect to claim that Bhutan was/is a melting pot or an economic El Dorado,⁶² which continuously attracted people from Nepal to escape from their poverty. It might be said that after escaping from the pre-1950 Rana dictatorship at home, the Nepalese immigrants could pursue a somewhat better life in Bhutan but the country certainly has no 'honey pot.' Even today, there is no industrial development and Bhutan as whole has only 7.7 percent land that is arable. Even then, most of the land available in southern Bhutan is hot, humid and largely malaria prone until recently.⁶³

Modernisation of Bhutan:

It is stated that the third hereditary king *Jigme Dorji Wangchuck* (reigned 1953–72) is considered as the moderniser of Bhutan who abolished slavery and the caste system, emancipated women, divided large estates into small individual plots and started a secular educational system. Today, he became known as the architect of modern Bhutan.⁶⁴ However, whatever his motives behind such drastic initiatives, a major concern was that Bhutan's survival was at stake. The Chinese had taken complete control over Tibet thereby increasing Sino-Indian regional rivalry.⁶⁵ As a result, India became assertive and then encouraged and funded Bhutan to begin development programs, especially road construction. Since Bhutan not only borders the most rebellious north-eastern Indian states but also forms a security buffer zone,⁶⁶ it naturally concerns New Delhi as a hegemonic power of South Asia. Therefore, the road construction projects in Bhutan could be a part of a security plan to station India's armed vehicles close to Bhutan-Tibet borders for possible hostility with China. In the mean time, people in Nepal had just overthrown the Rana dictatorship, which had lasted for over a century. This might have had an impact on Bhutan's third King. That is to say that if the people of Nepalese origin were not included in national mainstream politics, they could have started protests challenging his absolute power. Indeed, a loosely grouped Bhutan State

⁵⁷ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 116

⁵⁸ See Government of Bhutan 1993a

⁵⁹ Buzan 1991: 85

⁶⁰ Rustomji 1978: 14

⁶¹ Ura 2001, see Sinha 2001: 163-69 for a concise overview

⁶² See Mathou 2000, Shaw 1992, Ura 2001

⁶³ CEMARD-Bhutan 2002, Joseph C. 1999: 44, Sinha 2001: 35 & 81

⁶⁴ Prof. P. D. Kaushik, *The Kathmandu Post* 4/4/2002, see also Mathou 2000

⁶⁵ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 152, Sinha 2001: 79

⁶⁶ See Buzan 1991: 191-97

Congress party was already formed by the *Lhotshampa* intellectuals and they were demanding equal treatments by Thimphu.

As a weak state, Bhutan found itself trapped by historical patterns of development and political power, leaving the state underdeveloped and politically penetrated, and unable to muster the economic resources necessary to build a stronger state.⁶⁷ A state that is internally weak and externally dependent is referred to as penetrated.⁶⁸ In this context, the third King probably saw that institutional reforms were the key to a stronger Bhutan. He formed the National Assembly in 1953, abolished serfdom in 1956, enacted Citizenship Law in 1958 granting citizenship to the *Lhotshampa* peoples and constituted the Royal Advisory Council in 1965 and the Cabinet Council in 1968.⁶⁹ The King also evolved a policy of integrating the *Lhotshampa* community into the mainstream since their labour power began to play a critical role in Bhutan's economy. Naturally, the teaching of Nepalese and Sanskrit was introduced and the *Lhotshampa* students were sent abroad for higher education. It is said that these reforms were better adopted under non-crisis conditions so that the monarchy could keep the lead, control the whole process and avoid disruptive effects on traditional system and national unity that could have resulted from radical changes.⁷⁰ However, as already mentioned, the *Lhotshampa* group stood solidly behind the various steps undertaken by the third King.⁷¹

The king *J. D. Wangchuck*, however, did think about the idea of assimilation. He probably noticed from India's experience that minorities that have a rural base are far more likely to see large-scale ethnic violence than urban and widely dispersed minorities.⁷² In this sense, a cash reward was granted for inter-ethnic marriages between the *Lhotshampa* and other communities. Also, the *Lhotshampa* peoples were given a representation rate of a mere 14 percent in the state structure ranging from the village to the Royal Advisory Council.⁷³ In practice, it was not a process of equal treatment but one to gradually assimilate the *Lhotshampa* peoples with the *Ngalung* group. When the fourth king *Jigme Singye Wangchuck* took office in 1974, he began to totally reverse the modernisation policies. The *Lhotshampa* community started to realise that Thimphu was not willing to consider them as citizens of Bhutan. Now, it is important to briefly summarise the sociopolitical challenges that South Asia⁷⁴ has encountered since the World War II. This might help to clarify why Thimphu began to stubbornly press for its concept of 'unique Bhutanese culture.'

Status of Bhutan's Neighbours:

Although it is nothing comparable to that of Somalia or Yugoslavia, ethnosocial conflicts in almost all South Asian states seems to often challenge the stability in the region.⁷⁵ The decolo-

⁶⁷ Ibid. 99

⁶⁸ Cerny 1990 cit. Krasner 1999: 11

⁶⁹ Kaushik, *The Kathmandu Post* 4/4/2002

⁷⁰ Mathou 2000

⁷¹ Sinha 2001: 81-82

⁷² Buhaug & Gates 2002: 420

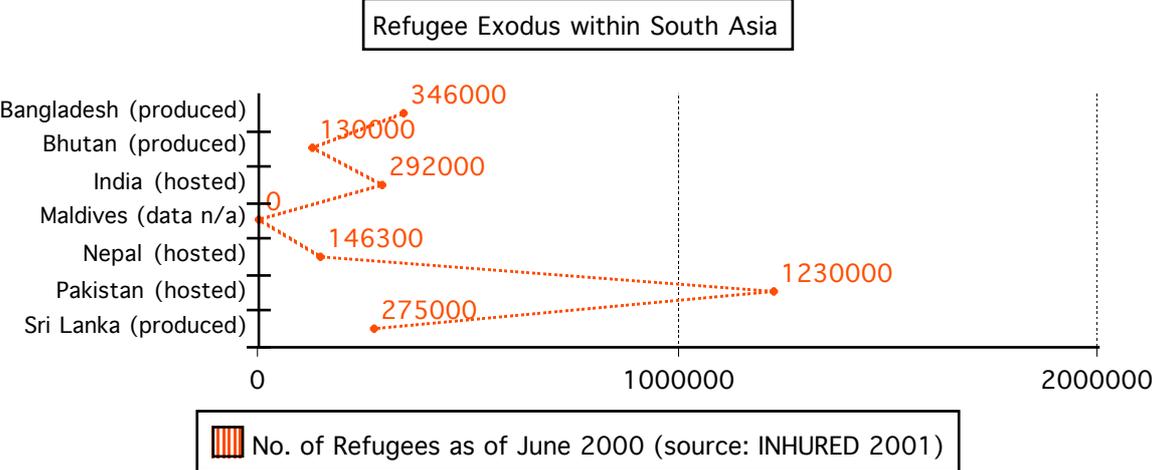
⁷³ Sinha 1998, see also Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 152-54

⁷⁴ *South Asia is often known by the Colonial name 'Indian Subcontinent.' Today, however, the seven member South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (or SAARC) defines the region, which are Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan & Sri Lanka.*

⁷⁵ Thronson 1993

nisation process became a major factor as it created large numbers of new territorial states in the European image, whereas the political legacy of most least developed governments like that of South Asia was a state without a nation or even worse a state with many nations.⁷⁶ In 1947, when India was divided into two political entities (i.e. India and Pakistan), many people were evicted on the basis of religious differences and anxieties about minoritisation after independence. The scale and nature of violence that India's partition involved makes it one of the most violent events in the history of state formation. Between August 1947 and the spring of the following year, it is estimated that at least 18 million people (Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs) were forced to flee their homes and become refugees and at least a million were killed in communal violence. Ever since, the sociopolitical disgruntlement continues to create subsequent conflicts in the region (though perhaps on a smaller scale).

When China assumed direct control over devoutly Buddhist Tibet in 1951 and pressed for atheism, many Tibetans were forced to take refuge in the neighbouring countries, notably India, Nepal and to some extent Bhutan. Likewise, apart from partition devastation (i.e. when East Pakistan became Bangladesh in 1971), violence still sweeps through the big cities of Bangladesh and Pakistan forcing many people to become internal as well as external refugees. The clashes between Tamil Tigers fighters and the government forces have raged in Sri Lanka for over two decades and has made many people to flee elsewhere. Interestingly, none of the South Asian governments have so far signed either the 1951 Treaty on Refugees or the 1967 Protocol. However, most countries have accepted refugees both from countries inside the region and outside.



As the above figure illustrates, Nepal is hosting the *Lhotshampa* refugees from Bhutan since the early 1990s, Pakistan is accommodating over a million *Afghans* from Afghanistan, India is accepting *Tamils* from Sri Lanka and so on. The figure, however, simply indicates how many people are registered as refugees on the given date. It says nothing about the time frame, relocation, repatriation or deaths of the refugees.

⁷⁶ Buzan 1991: 98

In weak states such as Bhutan or Nepal, the domestic threats to the government can almost never be wholly separated from the influence of outside powers and hence the domestic security problems of such states are often hopelessly entangled with their external relations.⁷⁷ In this sense, both Bhutanese and Nepalese governments are challenged by new problems, which appear so grave that there seems to be no way out in the short run. The so-called 'People's War' initiated by the Communist Party-Maoist has been terrorising Nepal since 1996, while top rebel leaders are presumably hiding in India. Apart from the *Lhotshampa* refugees, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front for Bodoland (NDFB) based in north-eastern India bordering Bhutan have made territorial incursions to Bhutan's southern jungles. Since the 1990s, the rebels have posed an unmanageable security challenge to Thimphu. The rebels will push to gain access to an international border because neighbouring countries often provide a safe refuge away from governmental troops, but also because weapons and natural resources are traded and transported across these borders. Control of international borders thus ensures that the rebel army will fight another day.⁷⁸ In this respect, both geography and history relate that the situation in neighbouring countries has greatly influenced Bhutanese rulers' domestic policies. As already mentioned, Bhutan is a weakly developed and poorly established state-nation that is vulnerable to challenge and interference from within and without. Therefore, so long as the *Ngalung* rulers fail to solve their nationality problem, they will remain vulnerable to instability and internal conflict or even dismemberment and intervention in ways not normally experienced by states in harmony with their nations.⁷⁹ However, Thimphu perhaps believes that this is not a serious assertion.

Ethnonationalism in Bhutan?

In the post 1990 world, the use of 'ethnonationalism' seems to have become quite fashionable. Many scholars⁸⁰ apply it to explain conflicts between different groups. For instance, a Nepal expert, Dr Michael Hutt, has used 'ethnonationalism' to explain the roots of the conflict between the *Ngalung* rulers and the southern Bhutanese when writing a number of articles on the *Lhotshampa* refugees issue. Dr Hutt uses the definition of Anthony D. Smith who defines ethnonationalism in the following terms: Whereas territorial nationalists are content to endow their nation with a common history and mass culture, such that people of different origin can join and participate in both, ethnic-nationalists predicate shared history and culture on a myth of common ancestry i.e. on ethnicity in the narrowest sense. Here lie the seeds of a collective excuselessness that so frequently begets persecution and homelessness.⁸¹

Smith further argues that there are two types of pre-modern ethnic community: a) the 'lateral' which is limited to the higher strata of a society: The monarch and his court, the nobles, priests and officials, sometimes the richer merchants who show no interest in disseminating

⁷⁷ Buzan 1991: 106

⁷⁸ Buhaug & Gates 2002: 422

⁷⁹ Buzan 74

⁸⁰ E.g. Gosh et al. 1991, Hutchinson et al. 1996, Wilmsen et al. 1996

⁸¹ Smith 1994: 190

their ethnic culture to outlying groups or lower strata; and b) the ‘vertical’ in which the ethnic culture is more widely diffused through society: we find artisans and urban traders, and even some peasants, drawn into a more sharply defined ethnic group.⁸² It follows that the ethnic community in this last case of ‘the people’ can be organised by religious and political leaders. Smith characterises such an ethnic community or *ethnie* as ‘demotic’ or popular. Dr Hutt accordingly makes a hypothesis that Bhutan’s current sociopolitical upheaval is a confrontation of a new style of nationalism (or a ‘lateral’ nationalism) promoted by the Bhutanese state since the late 1980s, and the demotic nationalism (or a ‘vertical’ nationalism) of the cross border Nepalese population in the border region. It is, therefore, the rise of nationalism among the *Ngalung* rulers and the eviction of a large group of *Lhotshampa* peoples that had increased the nationalism among a part of the southern Bhutanese and consequently had resulted to a confrontation between them.⁸³ If one argues from Hutt’s perspective, ethnonationalism in Bhutan encompasses a sense of ‘sons of the soil’ (being the *Ngalung* group) allegedly threatened by Nepalese immigrants from outside, while a sense of discrimination is felt by the *Lhotshampa* community. It is a conflict of cultures and a stark geopolitical reality where the argument of demographic imbalance as the national issue of Bhutan might ultimately threaten the survival of the *Ngalung* state itself.⁸⁴

In one sense, the modernisation process of the 1950s was meant to fulfil two main purposes: a) to maintain Bhutan’s sovereign status, and b) to avoid possible internal ethnosocial tensions. A Bhutan expert accordingly argues that the best trial of ‘ethnic integration’ was conformed by the detached response of the *Lhotshampa* group during 1964-74 where two serious efforts were made to oppose the continuation of the monarchy itself. First, when the then Prime Minister and the royal consort’s brother *Jigme Palden Dorji* was shot dead in 1964 at Phunsoling in the southern region, Bhutan was plunged into an internal conflict. Second, when the present king was to be crowned, a mistress of his father and her associates tried to up-stage the succession in 1974 and supported an alleged illegitimate son of the third king to be crowned as the king. Even the sporadic searches to find and consecrate an incarnation of the *Shabdrung* by a section of *Ngalung* group did not find favour with the *Lhotshampa* peoples.⁸⁵ Then, the Tibetan refugees were made scapegoats following an abortive external political intrigue in 1974. The accused were *Gyalo Thondup* (brother of the 14th Dalai Lama) and an unnamed external power who plotted to assassinate the then crown prince.⁸⁶

Whatever the claims, the real cause behind such upheavals was the infighting between two factions: The conservatives forces vs. the reformist elites⁸⁷ and no outsider was involved whatsoever. Fearing a threat to his absolute power, the present king *Jigme Singye Wangchuck* began to reverse the process of modernisation and democratisation once he assumed office. He soon introduced the Citizenship Act of 1977 whose main conditions are as follows: a) fifteen

⁸² Ibid. 190-95

⁸³ Hutt 1996

⁸⁴ Baral & Muni 1996

⁸⁵ Sinha 1998

⁸⁶ Baral & Muni 1996

⁸⁷ Sinha 2001: 79-82

years of service without any adverse record, b) should have resided in Bhutan for at least 20 years, c) should have some knowledge of Bhutanese language and the history of Bhutan. In practice, it was the first drastic steps towards monopolising politicoeconomic power by the *Ngalung* rulers. Under the 1958 Nationality Law of Bhutan, a person could obtain Bhutanese citizenship if he or she had lived more than 10 years in the country and possessed agricultural land, had reached the age of majority and has made a promise of loyalty to the king. Likewise, a person who did not have land could obtain nationality if he or she had served Bhutan's government for at least 5 years and had lived in Bhutan for more than 10 years.⁸⁸ This law was meant to assimilate particularly the *Lhotshampa* community into the *Ngalung* norms.

Over the years, the *Ngalung* establishment began to press not only for political but also for the *Ngalung* cultural supremacy. The 1980 Bhutan Marriage Act detailing laws for marriage with a non-national effectively restricted matrimony from outside.⁸⁹ Under this Act, a Bhutanese citizen who marries a foreigner is denied government support in the form of land, seeds, loans, livestock, and health benefits. Assistance from the government for education is denied and any expenses incurred to the day of marriage must be refunded.⁹⁰ It is further argued that the 1980 Act was discriminatorily enforced against the *Lhotshampa* group and not at all against other ethnic groups. For instance, many *Ngalung* elites have Chinese or Western wives and they do not have to prove anything; however the wives of *Lhotshampa* men from India or Nepal and their children must strictly oblige to the Act.⁹¹ Regardless of the *Lhotshampa* peoples' outcry, the *Ngalung* rulers continued to marginalise them. Again a contentious Citizenship Act of 1985 was imposed, which further asserts that Bhutan's citizens can lose their nationality in the case of anyone registered as a Bhutanese national who has left his farmland as well as in the case of anyone who being a bona fide national, fails to observe the laws of the *Ngalung* dominated kingdom.⁹²

Hounded *Lhotshampa* People:

In a tough effort to solidify their exclusivist policies, the *Ngalung* rulers also began to focus on the role and status of Dzongkha language in national life. One effect of this has clearly been a downgrading of the role of the Nepalese language generally and its removal from the syllabus of schools.⁹³ Thimphu presents three arguments concerning the ban of Nepalese language: a) because English has been the medium of education since 1961 the need for school children to study a third language in the southern region puts them at a disadvantage, b) Nepalese is only one of many languages spoken in Bhutan and is moreover the national language of a foreign country (i.e. Nepal), and c) new curricular materials could not be produced in Nepalese in line with the New Approach to primary education program for reasons of costs.⁹⁴ In fact, the 1985 Citizenship Act clearly states that a person who is either 21 years old or 15 and both parents are Bhutanese citizen, can receive his nationality by naturalisation if the following additional

⁸⁸ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 149-55, Lee 1998: 130

⁸⁹ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 154-55

⁹⁰ Ibid. 173-75, Thronson 1993

⁹¹ CEMARD-Bhutan 2002

⁹² Lee 1998: 131

⁹³ Hutt 1996: 404

⁹⁴ Hutt 1997: 107, Joseph C. 1999: 174

criteria are met: Have 20 years of residence in Bhutan (in addition the period of residence must be in the census records), have a good knowledge of Bhutan's history, culture, religion, customs and tradition and the ability to speak, read and write Dzongkha well, have a good moral character and no criminal record and the applicant should not have any record of disloyalty to the king, country and people.⁹⁵ Thus the local officials and school staffs in southern Bhutan had to be present at obligatory Dzongkha classes. Likewise, the teaching in/of Nepalese language was suspended and Nepalese curricular equipments disappeared from schools after the commencement of the school year beginning from March 1990.

In 1987, Bhutan started its sixth Five Year Plan, which incorporated a notorious rule of *driglamnamja* (or one nation, one people). This policy initiated a code of traditional *Ngalung* dress and etiquette. The dress aspect required all citizens to wear *gho* (a knee length robe for men) an *kira* (ankle length dress for women) in areas like Dzong premises (i.e. fortress monasteries now used as centres of district administration), government offices, schools, monasteries, official functions and public congregations etc.⁹⁶ At first, the dress rule was functional in government offices only but very quickly the regulation was applied in all schools, even at *pathshala* (i.e. an informal place that provides a traditional Hindu/Sanskrit education). As a result, all individuals including children had to wear the *gho* or *kira*. Those people who did not wear such dress would forthwith face a cash penalty and/or imprisonment.⁹⁷ Yet another disputed census carried out in 1988, primarily in south Bhutan, placed people into seven categories: F1) Genuine Bhutanese, F2) Returned migrants i.e. people who had left Bhutan and then returned, F3) Drop-out cases i.e. people who were not around at the time of the census, F4) A non- national woman married to a Bhutanese man, F5) A non-national man married to a Bhutanese woman, F6) Adoption cases, and F7) Non-national i.e. migrants and illegal immigrants.⁹⁸ It was made clear that in 1998, for instance, a person should have arrived in Bhutan at the latest by 10th of June 1965 in order to qualify for citizenship under the 1985 Citizenship Act.⁹⁹ This is a nearly impossible requirement in a country with widespread illiteracy that only recently adopted administrative procedures.¹⁰⁰

The declaration of Dzongkha as the only national language, the ending of the teaching of Nepalese in schools, the promulgation of a social code of etiquette and the identification of 'illegal' immigrants were assimilated to a *Ngalungisation* process whose only purpose was to favour the politically dominant group.¹⁰¹ While an unprecedented upsurge of ethnic consciousness was prompting worldwide, Thimphu's policies spurred anger leading ultimately to the outbreak of protest.¹⁰² In this sense, it should be noted that if the narrow idea of state (i.e. *driglamnamja*) is weakly held or strongly contested, however, then a lapse in institutional strength might well bring the whole structure crashing down in civil war, revolution or the disintegration of the state as a political unit.¹⁰³ While Thimphu has so far not seen civil war or

⁹⁵ Lee 1998: 130-31

⁹⁶ Hutt 1996: 403

⁹⁷ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 201-208, Sinha 2001: 227-28, Thronson 1993

⁹⁸ CEMARD-Bhutan 2002, Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 255, Hutt 1996: 402, Thronson 1993

⁹⁹ Lee 1998: 130

¹⁰⁰ US State Department 1996 cit. Giri 1999: 19

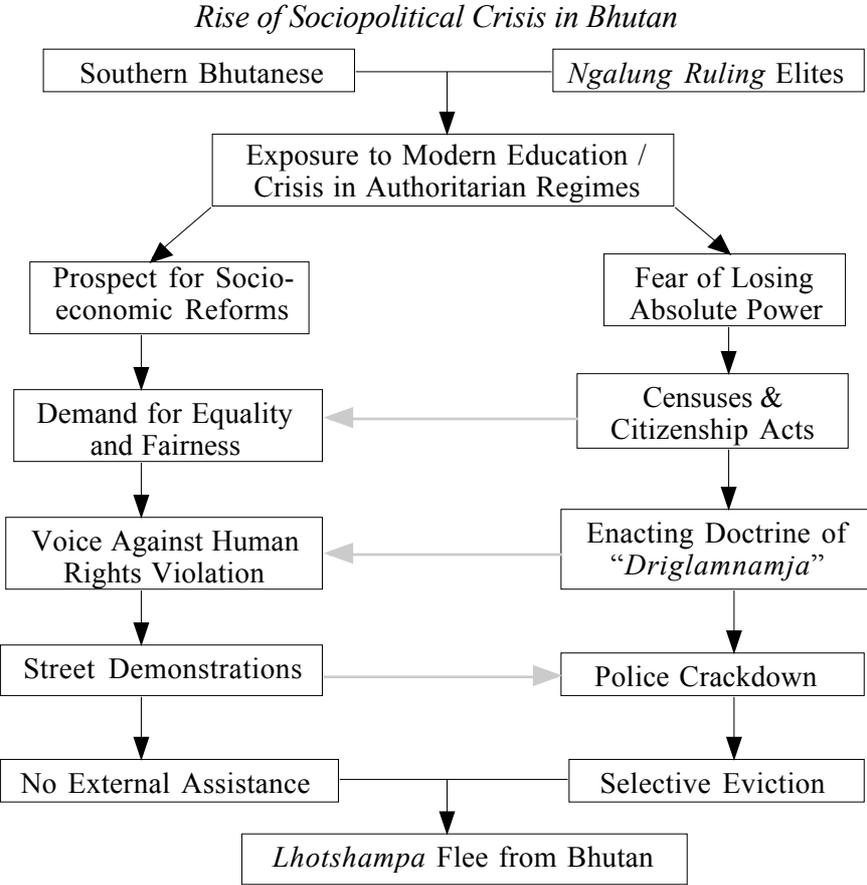
¹⁰¹ Mathou 2000

¹⁰² Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 154

¹⁰³ Buzan 1991: 82

revolution, the implementon of several controversial policies exclusively aimed at securing the autocratic regime (while excluding other communities, especially the *Lhotshampa*) is unlikely to last forever. Accordingly, this paper contends that the use of ‘ethnonationalism’ does not fully explain the roots of the conflicts in Bhutan. As Thimphu embarked on the ‘*Ngalungisation*’ drive, the *Lhotshampa* members got activated and politicised, which can be seen as a counterweight to the paranoid assertion of *Ngalung* ethnic particularism in the name of Bhutanese nationalism.¹⁰⁴

In short, the centralisation of power in the hands of the *Ngalung* elites being represented by the king and the consequence marginalisation of different ethnic communities ultimately resulted in the ethnic conflict. Thimphu’s (repressive) response towards the ethnic crisis resulted in the large scale exodus of the *Lhotshampa* group to India and ultimately to Nepal.¹⁰⁵



The above flowchart shows that the *Ngalung* establishment at Thimphu and the *Lhotshampa* community in the south had a different understanding of modernisation process, which was initiated by the third King. While the people saw the development as the key to the better politicoeconomic opportunities, the conservative ruling circle perceived it as the source of threat to their absolute domination. It is clear that when events unfolded almost in a parallel fashion, this eventually resulted in the eviction of a large number of *Lhotshampa* peoples.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph C. 1999: 26-27
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 112

Section II

Mass Banishment:

As noted in Section I, weak states like Bhutan either do not have or have failed to create a domestic political and societal consensus of sufficient strength to eliminate the large-scale use of force as a major and continuing element in the domestic political life of the nation.¹⁰⁶ In fact, the *Ngalung* rulers interpret the concerns raised by the *Lhotshampa* community as some kind of conspiracy for the ‘greater Nepal’ area that would include northern India and southern Bhutan, besides Nepal. Thus if Bhutan is to be saved, it cannot allow itself to be swamped by ‘illegal’ migrants from Nepal. It is true that these areas are dominated by ‘Nepalese people’ but Thimphu’s anxiety is not more than a political bogey.¹⁰⁷ The *Ngalung* rulers probably suspect that ethnic and cultural parochialism is everywhere a stronger political force than cosmopolitanism.¹⁰⁸ Technically, however, Thimphu uses superfluous data to substantiate its arguments. While New Delhi notes that the Nepalese population in its territory is around 5-6 million, Bhutan cites a figure of 10 million seeking to emphasise the threat of mass migration.¹⁰⁹ According to the Nepalese sources, there are about 6.5 million people of Nepalese origin in India.¹¹⁰ In 1982, the World Bank had estimated that some 35,000 non-Bhutanese citizens were working in various parts of Bhutan but Thimphu’s 1988 census shadily claims that it discovered 100,000 non-nationals in the work-force.¹¹¹ This leads to several questions. If Bhutan did not have strict immigration rules and did not have accurate census data, how did the *Ngalung* rulers know that there were 100,000 illegal migrants in the country? If it did have the measures in place, how did the illegal migrants enter the country in the first place? Around 100,000 illegals out of 600,000 officially claimed inhabitants is a very noticeable number, is it not so? Did Thimphu have a premeditated plan to throw out about 100,000 of the *Lhotshampa* peoples to prevent the demographic overthrow of the absolute monarchy? If not, why did the eviction stop at the stipulated number of around 100,000?¹¹² Clearly, legal arguments are advanced to justify the expulsion of the *Lhotshampa* members from Bhutan. In practice, they have often occurred on a purely ethnic basis, which also happened from northeast India in the 1970s and 1980s.¹¹³

Many authors argue that the Citizenship Act of 1985 would not have posed a problem for most of the *Lhotshampa* peoples who were accustomed to retaining documents such as land tax receipts if it had been implemented fairly during the census.¹¹⁴ Many of the *Lhotshampa* members who could not provide documents that proved they resided in Bhutan in the specific year of 1958 itself were apparently categorised as returned emigrants (F2) or non-nationals (F7). It did not matter whether or not they had citizenship cards, land tax receipts etc. In this regard, the Amnesty International (or AI) judged that the current situation in the southern

¹⁰⁶ Buzan 1991: 99

¹⁰⁷ See Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 463-79 for a detailed analysis

¹⁰⁸ Buzan 1991: 94

¹⁰⁹ Hutt 1997: 107, see also Government of Bhutan 1993

¹¹⁰ The *Kathmandu Post* 27/1/2002

¹¹¹ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 186

¹¹² Acharya, *e-mail* 4/2/2002, Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 533-34

¹¹³ Hutt 1997: 124

¹¹⁴ Das 1996, Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 179-82, Joseph C. 1999: 136-40, Sinha 2001: 183-85

Bhutan had been exacerbated due to Thimphu’s failure to specify and make known in advance what would happen to people in southern Bhutan once they had been categorised as non-nationals.¹¹⁵ According to one author, it was not in the intention of the present king *J. S. Wangchuck* to strictly apply these laws but it was the over enthusiastic bureaucracy and the strong-arm methods used by the police to implement the new directives; excesses were committed and even the bona fide *Lhotshampa* community settled for over a century felt threatened.¹¹⁶ Yet since the King is not only the Chief of State but also the Commander-in-Chief of its army, the highest Court of Appeal and the wielder of commanding influence in religious and spiritual matters,¹¹⁷ it is simply incorrect to shift the blame just to a few bureaucrats and army and police personnel.

The *Ngalung* rulers are said to possess better diplomatic skills than the leaders of Nepal. If that is so, Thimphu must also know that ideas are far more stable and cost effective means of governing than coercion, and any states that drains off resources merely to sustain itself risks long term decline in relation to those that are more effectively organised.¹¹⁸ That is probably why the authority of Bhutan began to suppress the *Lhotshampa* community in varied forms, including a) through containment prior to 1950s, b) through Citizenship Acts and censuses in the 1970s, and c) through *driglamnamja* since the 1980s. All these efforts, (un)fortunately, became unavailing by the late 1980s, which has led Thimphu to believe in direct use of force. If authority (which involves a mutually recognised right for an actor to engage in specific kinds of activities) is effective, force or compulsion never has to be exercised.¹¹⁹ The fact that the *Ngalung* rulers resorted to force and eventually evicted a large number of people illustrates that Bhutan’s authority is in serious crisis, which can also be expounded by using the paradigm of ‘modalities of compromise’ developed by Stephen D. Krasner.¹²⁰

		P A R E T O I M P R O V I N G	
		Yes	No
C O N T I N G E N T	Yes	Contract	Coercion
	No	Convention	Imposition

Modalities of Compromise

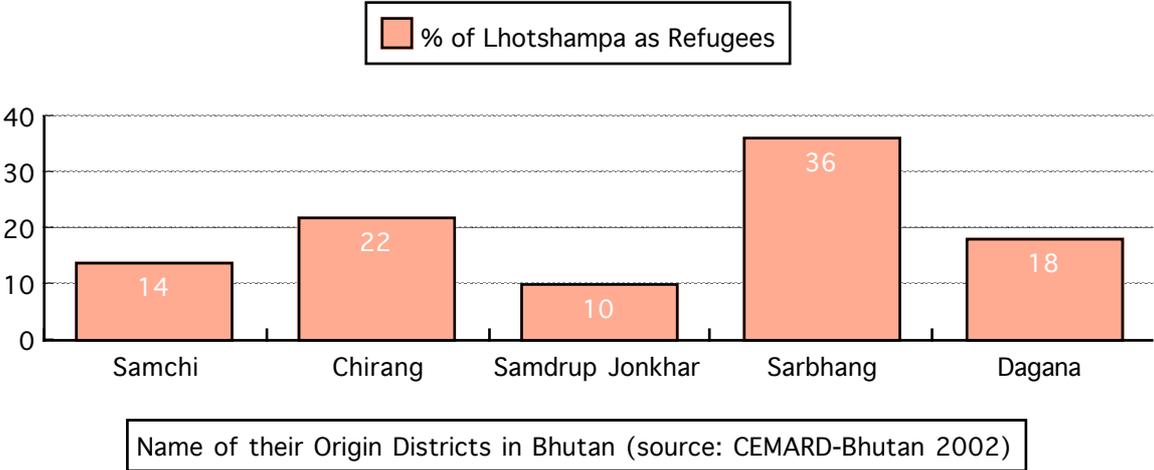
In the post 1964 Bhutan, the *Ngalung* authority never considered the first two options,

¹¹⁵ AI Report 1992: 6, Thronson 1993
¹¹⁶ Das 1996: 120
¹¹⁷ Joseph C. 1999: 63
¹¹⁸ Buzan 1991: 85
¹¹⁹ Krasner 1999: 11
¹²⁰ Ibid. 27

namely convention and contracts. The first makes both Thimphu and the *Lhotshampa* members better off. The second makes the *Ngalung* rulers better off but the *Lhotshampa* community would not be worse off. However, the authority of Bhutan premeditated coercion as their first option by threatening to impose sanctions on *Lhotshampa* peoples if they did not abide by the exclusivist policies. Even though the *status quo ante* was no longer an option, the *Lhotshampa* group still hoped that through demonstrations Thimphu will revoke its *driglamnamja* craze. On the contrary, the *Ngalung* rulers initiated the fourth option of imposition in which a large number of *Lhotshampa* members had no choice but to face armed crackdown and ultimately flee Bhutan.

From Homes to Huts:

After their expulsion from Bhutan, the *Lhotshampa* refugees did not want to leave India for Nepal but their situation got so bad that they were forced to make their decisions in 1991. Not only were the refugees denied of settlement in camps in Assam, which Indian police destroyed, but also some refugees were abducted from there. The police and the civil administration of Assam visited Bhutan frequently where they were bribed by Thimphu. In return, Bhutan’s police officers were allowed to come to Assam and arrest dissidents freely. Although Kathmandu initially expressed its unwillingness to allow asylum seekers into the country, responding to the appeals made by activists the border was opened in February 1991.¹²¹ The following chart indicates where the *Lhotshampa* peoples used to live in and how many of them (in %) were evicted.



Today there are 101,283 *Lhotshampa* refugees at Beldangi, Goldhap, Timai and Khudunabari camps of Jhapa district and Pathari camp of Morang district.¹²² The UNHCR and other relief agencies including the World Health Organisation, Lutheran World Federation, World Food Programme, Nepal Red Cross Society, CARITAS and the Association of Medical Doctors of

¹²¹ CEMARD-Bhutan 2002, Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 267-73, Giri 1999: 19, Joseph C. 1999: 149
¹²² *The Rising Nepal* 20/7/2002

Asia have been providing the humanitarian assistance.¹²³ Over 25,000 *Lhotshampa* refugees are living in Indian territories without any help. Since one in every sixth Bhutan's national lives in exile, this has made the country one of the highest per capita refugee generators in the world.¹²⁴

Even in the crowded camps, the *Lhotshampa* refugee population growth rate of 2.2 percent has been found to be double that of the local people. About 80,000 *Lhotshampa* members including children have taken refuge since 12 years ago but today the number has reached over 100,000. The latest report of the UNHCR-Nepal states that 21 percent of the total refugee population has been born in the camps. Among the total refugee population 44,783 are women, 46,022 men and 10,487 children are below the age of five. The refugees seldom use family planning methods as they wish to get maximum relief and facilities,¹²⁵ which has become a major concern for the aid agencies as well as Kathmandu. Already in the year 1999, the Lutheran World Federation had added 1,300 more huts because of the population pressure in the camps.¹²⁶

It is argued that the rapid population growth in today's developing world is largely a result of the impact of European culture, which destroyed indigenous values and practices such as abortion and infanticide that once helped prevent overpopulation.¹²⁷ As early as in the third quarter of 18th century, a missionary in Paraguay had claimed that Christianity had led to the abolition of abortion and infanticide among the Abipones while the same person also remarked on how plentiful food had been as if fact was unrelated to the existence of local practices.¹²⁸ Added to that, the colonial era implanted several new factors in the indigenous societies including diseases, introduction of new plants/animals and technological changes. As noted earlier, a 'vicious circle' was well under way, especially in today's world that exaggerates the triumph of capitalism or even worse corporatism at the expense of a rapidly degrading environment. The cycle continues to reoccur in Bhutan as well.

From the vicious circle perspective, it is not surprising that the massive population growth and subsequent signs of impending social conflict have already been encountered in which refugees are found working outside the refugee camps at very low wages and thereby displacing the local labourers. When there are too many mouths to be fed and no jobs or resources, people must look for alternatives even if it means going to the extremes (i.e. the scarcity of means of survival leads to competition, conflicts or even deadly warfare). That is why the peoples living close to the camps have attempted to prohibit *Lhotshampa* refugees from leaving for jobs, arguing that they were forced to take such a harsh step as the refugees worked at cheaper wages badly affecting their job opportunities. Prior to this event, about two thousand refugee youths used to work outside the camp in different sectors. In addition, over a decade of psychological vulnerability (e.g. humiliation, frustration) has created a deep sense of anger among the *Lhotshampa* members, which is exemplified by the murder of the

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ CEMARD-Bhutan 2002

¹²⁵ *The Rising Nepal* 20/7/2002

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Dilworth 1998: 126-27

¹²⁸ Ibid.

BPP (Bhutan People's Party) president *R. K. Budhathoki* on the 9th of September 2001 by a number of refugees. *Mr Budhathoki* had been vehemently opposing the autocratic regime at Thimphu and its policies towards minority communities. It is also argued that the exiled leader's murder in the broad daylight has also tarnished Nepal's image, which seems to be an attempt to divide the refugee community in the camps and sabotage a possible repatriation process itself. However, these events can be considered as minor; worse forms of conflict are yet to come when the 21 percent of camps-born children reach their teenage age.

Ngalung Rulers' Assertions:

When a section of *Lhotshampa* community began their opposition to Thimphu's 'one nation, one people' policy, the *Ngalung* rulers initiated countervailing reports such as anti-national activity and terrorism in southern Bhutan. The demonstrators were suddenly categorised as terrorists. In an effort to justify its claim, Thimphu started off by saying that the anti-nationals were harassing people wearing *gho* and *kira* but it soon announced that the terrorists were decapitating government and census officials. The *Ngalung* rulers further charged that most of the terrorist raids have been carried out by terrorist groups sent from the refugee camps in Nepal.¹²⁹ For instance, the severed heads of two government officials were reportedly found in Samchi district on 2nd of June 1990. Almost a year later, Thimphu published photography of these deaths and claimed to have become victim of a concerted movement initiated by anti-national terrorists.¹³⁰ It has been pointed out that these events seem to be more from outside movements and are isolated.¹³¹

However, Bhutan's official publications including the *Kuensel* have kept up a steady barrage of accusations and graphic photos of victims.¹³² The irony is that while almost all of the sufferers are *Lhotshampa* peoples, the criminals are also the *Lhotshampa* refugees. Soon after the eviction process began, the crimes attributed to alleged terrorists cover a wide range from robbery to murder to destruction of government facilities and bridges.¹³³ Even the simple robbery is still the most commonly reported crime. For instance, the *Kuensel* reported that anti-nationals felled and stole more than 200 hardwood trees from the Jhari Forest Plantation at Samchi district on 2nd of February 1993.¹³⁴ In reality, Thimphu reacted with more force after the peaceful protest demonstrations. In a fresh wave of crackdowns perpetrated by the *Ngalung* rulers, all people who participated in the demonstrations were immediately reprimanded, civil servants were terminated without any payment of pension benefits and other benefits and most of the participants were imprisoned.¹³⁵ Most of all, arbitrary arrest, degrading treatment, loot, plunder, rape of women and burning down of their houses had become the order of the day. Many villages were razed to the ground by Bhutan's security forces. Several dozen *Lhotshampa* activists were killed in police custody under torture. The *Ngalung* authority confiscated citizenship and property documents and also forced many

¹²⁹ See Government of Bhutan 1993a

¹³⁰ Thronson 1993

¹³¹ E.g. Lintner 1996

¹³² Thronson 1993

¹³³ Joseph C. 1999: 146-50, see Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 125-28, 233-36 & 269-70 for counter representations

¹³⁴ Thronson 1993

¹³⁵ CEMARD-Bhutan 2002

Lhotshampa peoples to sign papers renouncing Bhutanese citizenship.¹³⁶ In fact, the southern belt of Bhutan was declared as a ‘disturbed’ area and undeclared martial law was imposed. It is also argued that the resources allocated for southern Bhutan were diverted to northern Bhutan and to the upkeep of the security forces and the training of ‘militia’ - the conscripted volunteers from eastern and northern Bhutan.¹³⁷

Scrutinising Thimphu:

The UNHCR-Nepal office permitted sociologist Cindy Dubble to evaluate the extent of the *Lhotshampa* problem and assess the needs of victims of violence in the camps. She interviewed a random sample of 100 men from a composite list of 850 reported male victims in the camps.¹³⁸ Dubble verified torture in 95 of the 100 reported torture cases with the consideration of corroborating evidence like medical reports and cross-checking for consistency between interviews.¹³⁹ She found that common forms of torture included the wearing of shackles welded onto the victims’ legs, solitary confinement and exposure to severe cold weather. Other methods of torture involve degrading behaviours such as being paraded naked or being made to imitate animals and combat each other in mock ‘bull-fights’ for the guards’ entertainment. Dubble’s report includes a thorough listing of commonly used methods of torture sorted by the various places of detention where they are practised.¹⁴⁰

A researcher and co-ordinator for the Center for Victims of Torture (Kathmandu) recently identified and documented 2402 cases¹⁴¹ of physical torture among 90,000 refugees. The most commonly reported techniques were threats, verbal sexual humiliations, social isolation, hygienic deprivation, nutritional deprivations, sleep deprivation, forced incongruent acts, being tied down and severe beating. Incongruent acts are acts that are a violation of one’s cultural or religious norms. For example, being forced to eat pork or beef is used as a spiritual torture for most *Brahmin* and *Chhetri* Hindus.¹⁴² Actually, Dubble had already found that all *Lhotshampa* refugees had reported horrendous conditions of confinement in small or crowded spaces with inadequate sanitation facilities and minimal or purposely polluted food.¹⁴³

Immediately after the protest rallies, the plight of *Lhotshampa* women was most inhuman. The villages were left only with women and children when most of the male members fled the country for fear of persecution by Thimphu. As a result, many women were subjected to rape while some were tortured to death in custody.¹⁴⁴ Although the more personally and culturally sensitive issue of rape was less easily verifiable, Dubble confirmed that 63 percent of the victims of violence were raped.¹⁴⁵ Especially for Hindu women, the trauma of rape and torture

¹³⁶ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 258-64

¹³⁷ CEMARD-Bhutan 2002

¹³⁸ Thronson 1993

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, see also Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 261-63

¹⁴⁰ Thronson 1993, see also Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 609-24 for a detailed report on torture

¹⁴¹ *These numbers however do not take into account of the people who were victim to having had their houses demolished or burned and who had lost their jobs.*

¹⁴² van Ommeren 2000: 25

¹⁴³ Thronson 1993

¹⁴⁴ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 625-26

¹⁴⁵ Thronson 1993

could be compounded with great shame and stigmatisation. While some women were rejected by their husbands and families, many others had to deal with pregnancies and children resulting from rapes. A refugee woman reported that her husband had been involved in the demonstrations. When the Bhutan army was dispatched to arrest the demonstrators, he had already fled to the hills. While she was staying with her parents, the army came and dragged her away and raped her. She became pregnant. In the refugee camp, she gave birth to a daughter. When she found out that her husband had managed to escape to Nepal and was living in another refugee camp, she tried to contact him but he refused to visit her due to the illegitimate child. The excruciating fact is that even the UNHCR aid workers have been accused of almost two dozen cases of rapes and child abuses in the camps. A senior official of the UNHCR-Asia-Pacific recently visited Nepal to investigate the charges¹⁴⁶ in which sixteen persons were immediately dismissed from their jobs.¹⁴⁷ Under such circumstances, it is understandable that many women suffer from psychological disturbances such as sleeplessness, flash backs, depressions and anxiety.¹⁴⁸ Probably worst of all, many children are orphans who have often witnessed the murder, torture and rape of their parents.

Meanwhile, Thimphu continues to argue that most of the *Lhotshampa* members have left Bhutan by their own free will or have been enticed into leaving for the camps by the dissident political parties operating in exile. Also, the *Ngalung* rulers claim to have many proofs of this voluntary emigration. For instance, Thimphu showed that 34 families left their land in 1994 for the camps having signed 'voluntary emigration' forms. Their emigration was carefully choreographed and émigrés were videotaped as they declared that they were departing of their own free will.¹⁴⁹ In contrast, the *Lhotshampa* refugees assert that they had been forced to sign this form or to leave. They had been told to leave Bhutan by Thimphu's authorities under pretexts like their families had already left or they had been served with a notice to leave because they were unable to produce certificates of origin or their relatives had left Bhutan and taken such documents with them or their family members were 'antinationals.'

Indeed, the AI team argues that what seem to be ordinary criminal acts are reported as being the responsibility of anti-nationals despite the apparent lack of evidence to confirm that political opponents of the *Ngalung* rulers rather than common criminals were responsible. The team further concluded that the individual crimes for which the six *prisoners of conscience*¹⁵⁰ were held responsible were all committed six or more months after they were detained; such charges are simply not credible.¹⁵¹ The only evidence of terrorist connections that Thimphu has is the reported confession of captured perpetrators, which are dubious given the conditions of detention confirmed above.¹⁵² The AI team asserts that it is definitely probable that some of the reported crimes are politically motivated. Independent verification of terrorist charges has not been possible since access to southern Bhutan is limited. For example, Bhutan did not allow the AI team to visit Chirang district in southern Bhutan 'for

¹⁴⁶ The *BBC World News* 25/11/2002

¹⁴⁷ The *Kathmandu Post* 2/12/2002

¹⁴⁸ CEMARD-Bhutan 2002, Thronson 1993

¹⁴⁹ Sinha 2001: 241

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 226

¹⁵¹ Thronson 1993

¹⁵² Ibid.

security reasons' and denied a request to visit Bhutan from the UNHCR. However, the *Ngalung* rulers do allow authors sympathetic to their idea of unique Buddhist Bhutan.¹⁵³ Certainly, the *Ngalung* authority realises that international legal sovereignty (which is defined as the mutual recognition of states or other entities) is essential to maintain its autocratic regime. That is because a ruler attempting to strengthen his own position by creating or reinforcing a particular national identity (e.g. *driglamnamja*) is more likely to be successful if his state/government enjoys international recognition.¹⁵⁴ Thimphu has so far managed to do so.

Needless to say, Thimphu claims that they have done everything to convince the *Lhotshampa* peoples to stay. At the same time, they had stepped up the processing of so-called 'voluntary emigration' paper. The *Ngalung* rulers further argue that most of the *Lhotshampa* members had left Bhutan to demonstrate their support 'in principe' to a political movement - a nationalism movement for the protection of Nepalese culture. Once again, this declaration brings several questions because it does not take into account the politically conservative nature of the *Lhotshampa* community, who are mostly farmers, and their dependence on land. It is far less probable that these people would give up their citizenship, lands and home simply to express their disagreement with Thimphu's policy.¹⁵⁵ It is, moreover, argued that when the controversy over dress, language and culture started, only a few *Lhotshampa* peoples were willing participants in the demonstrations. Most of the refugees now languishing in the camps had nothing to do with such controversies.¹⁵⁶

Bhutan's Smart Solution:

In 1992, Bhutan's National Assembly debated sixteen proposals for the resettlement of northerners in the land of the *Lhotshampa* peoples. These proposals were partly justified as a counterpoint to an unsuccessful plan two years earlier to provide incentives to the *Lhotshampa* members who would settle in the north.¹⁵⁷ In June 1997, Thimphu easily obtained legislative mandate from the *Ngalung* dominated Assembly, which resolved to develop a suitable resettlement plan co-ordinating with all concerned departments. Finally, a high level National Resettlement Committee was constituted to implement the resettlement project. Ever since, Thimphu has been trying to transfer people from other parts in its south. The smart idea of Bhutan is that if there are no lands, the *Lhotshampa* refugees cannot return. It also means that resettlement in the lands vacated by the fleeing *Lhotshampa* people will be a major complication to any future repatriation.¹⁵⁸

At first, Thimphu tried to implement its newly acquired legislative mandate by trying to invite 60,000 Bangladeshi Buddhist *Chakma* refugees residing in India to permanently settle down. However, the refusal by the *Chakmas* made Bhutan's rulers turn to the *Sarchhop* community, which is an attempt to create a rift between the *Lhotshampa* and the *Sarchhop*

¹⁵³ Sinha 2001: 223-24

¹⁵⁴ Krasner 1999: 17-18

¹⁵⁵ Joseph C. 1999: 203-05, Sinha 2001: 242-44

¹⁵⁶ Chandrasekharan, *The Kathmandu Post* 29/11/2001

¹⁵⁷ CEMARD-Bhutan 2002

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Joseph C. 1999: 146-48, Thronson 1993

groups.¹⁵⁹ As a pilot project, Thimphu announced to settle 370 landless *Sarchhop* families from Tashigang in the south in the first phase. Bhutan's authorities distributed land left behind by the *Lhotshampa* peoples in Chirangdara, Changkha, Khibisha and Surey blocks of Chirang, Dagana and Sharbhang districts in the last week of December 1997. Likewise, the *Ngalung* authority started allotting ten acres of land of the *Lhotshampa* refugees to each household. Thimphu reportedly paid Nu 10,000 to each selected household as an incentive for resettlement because the highlander *Sarchhop* members were reluctant to settle in the tropical south. The second instalment of Nu 100,000 is payable when the *Ngalung* rulers are convinced of full establishment of the household. Moreover, the *Ngalung* establishment started intimidating the *Sarchhop* peoples in hushed tone that if they did not support Thimphu's resettlement project, they would be shown the exit door too.¹⁶⁰ The *Lhotshampa* refugees argue that the real objective is not of resettling the landless but of preventing the repatriation of refugees permanently and to force them to get assimilated in Nepal at all cost.¹⁶¹ Until recently, Thimphu had denied having done anything of the sort.

In the long run, it became unquestionably difficult for the *Ngalung* rulers to hide the truth. For instance, the Habitat International Coalition conducted a fact-finding mission to southern Bhutan from 23rd of September to 1st of October 2001. The team was specially sent to verify the claims of the *Lhotshampa* refugees that their lands were given away to northern Bhutanese settlers under Thimphu's resettlement project. Beside questioning 25 *Lhotshampa* refugee families in the camps, the team actually visited selected villages in south Bhutan to verify the claims. Their preliminary findings included: a) Bhutan's government has been settling northern Bhutanese (who were not happy at their new homes) in the lands of the refugees as physically seen in the cases studied, b) not all the north Bhutanese settled in the southern districts are landless as Thimphu was claiming, and c) land has been given to army and police officers and/or their relatives especially the land close to the road or the big houses.¹⁶² Meanwhile, a Nepalese delegation just back from Thimphu said that the *Ngalung* rulers have admitted that they did resettle northern citizens in the homelands of the refugees. This is the first ever confession made by Bhutan's government on the resettlement issue but it still attached the tag that the land was already sold out by the refugees. In contrast, the *Lhotshampa* refugees disagree that they had sold their homes and lands. Instead they charge Thimphu of forceful eviction by making them fill a voluntary migration form at gunpoint.¹⁶³

Post-1990 South Bhutan:

As already mentioned, southern Bhutan is still not accessible to the outside world and descriptions of current conditions come from latest refugee arrivals to the camps and Thimphu's publications. The main focus of the *Ngalung* rulers still revolves around anti-national activities. The *Kuensel* and the debates of the National Assembly give the impression of growing popular sentiment against the *Lhotshampa* community but these sources largely

¹⁵⁹ CEMARD-Bhutan 2002

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, see also Joseph C. 1999: 146-47

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Chandrasekharan 22/1/2002

¹⁶³ *The Rising Nepal* 25/4/2002

reflect official bias. Refugees report that arrests have decreased or changed in nature. Such a claim is confirmed by Dubble's random sample of victims showing a peak arrests in 1990 and 1991. However it is not known how many prisoners are still held. Only since January 1993, the International Red Cross Society has been allowed to visit a few places of detention in Bhutan.¹⁶⁴ Although Thimphu reports that sixty schools have reopened in southern Bhutan, other sources including that of the exiled *Lhotshampa* members state that all seventy-six schools in the region were closed and still remain closed.¹⁶⁵ At one point, the Human Rights Organization of Bhutan reported that twenty-four schools were reopened but only for the children of security forces, National Assembly members and other persons of influence. If true, the current situation would be a continuation of the earlier officially announced policy of Thimphu by which schools will only admit the direct children of the government employees, security forces and public officials in active service.¹⁶⁶ In September 2002, an editor of New York-based Bhutan Online News confirmed that the schools in southern Bhutan remain closed for the children of the *Lhotshampa* community.¹⁶⁷

Refugees or Illegals?

As Thimphu keeps on arguing that the *Lhotshampa* refugees are non-Bhutanese, it naturally panics Nepal's leaders who have their own unsolved national issues. That is why Nepal has also carried out a number of surveys. Of the total of 1563 individual asylum seekers screened at the Kakarvitta screening post on the Nepal-India border between June 1993 and March 1994, 43.7 percent held Bhutanese citizenship cards and 20.2 percent held land documents.¹⁶⁸ Likewise, the occupants of every hut in the refugee camps where Dr Hutt visited for four days, were able to produce old land tax receipts, citizenship cards or both.¹⁶⁹ Another survey conducted together with the UNHCR reported that there were 10,073 families with citizenship documents; 1762 families with records pertaining to land ownership; 251 families with health documents; 40 families with education certificates; 2494 families with documents pertaining to [sic] service in the government, marriage certificates and court documents; and only 368 families without any documents.¹⁷⁰ In addition, Nepal's Home Ministry again carried out a sample survey in the camps between 14-22 February 1995. A total of 883 households were surveyed and the sample drawn from each of the camps was in proportion to that particular camp's share of the total refugee population. The survey results showed 794 households (89.92 percent of the sample) holding Bhutanese citizenship cards and 81 households (9.18 percent of the sample) holding land tax receipts or proof of land ownership. Nearly half of the sample reported having signed 'voluntary migration' forms, which in many cases involved surrendering documents to Bhutan's authorities. The latest field study, covering 51 percent of the total refugees in different camps, has found that 99.83 percent of the surveyed peoples having documentary evidences to prove their Bhutanese citizenship.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁴ Thronson 1993

¹⁶⁵ CEMARD-Bhutan 2002

¹⁶⁶ Thronson 1993

¹⁶⁷ Drukpa, e-mail 18/9/2002

¹⁶⁸ Hutt 1996

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 540

¹⁷¹ The *Spotlight* 14-20/4/2000

Pro-Ngalung Biases:

According to a South Asia specialist, Thimphu's perception of its national identity revolves around the mongoloid race, practising *Drukpa Kagyu* Mahayana Buddhism and wearing *gho* and *kira* by all ethnic groups irrespective of their culture and religion. Over 40 percent of Bhutan's total population who are ethnic Nepalese and overwhelming numbers of Hindus have been relegated to a footnotes¹⁷² description in Bhutan. For this, the blame should go not only to the *Ngalung* establishment but also to visiting international dignitaries and scholars who have helped to portray Bhutan that way. While *Lhotshampa* intellectuals seem to emphasise too much on their plight for obvious reasons, almost all prominent scholars have written profusely on Buddhist Bhutan giving lesser importance to other ethnic groups, their culture, tradition and their socioeconomic conditions. This has encouraged Thimphu to become more protectionist about its core concepts of national identity, which has enormously influenced its attitude towards over 100,000 *Lhotshampa* refugees.¹⁷³ Many (Western) scholars have been critical about the 'democratically elected' leaders of Nepal for their failure to enfranchise the most backward communities. In fact, some groundlessly argue that Nepal's ongoing Maoists paradox is resulted from the caste system. However, with regard to Bhutan, a young exiled intellectual had this to say: Minorities, near extinct communities etc. are the buzzword of today; when Thimphu projects that the *Lhotshampa* peoples are trying to overcome and subdue the culture of the poor *Ngalung* people, the West seems to see all the actions of Bhutan's government as justified.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, many authors (such as Michael Aris, George van Driem, Bhawanisen Gupta, K. Kirby, Terry Mathou, Tim McGirk, Françoise Pommert, Leo Rose, Brian Shaw) have not hesitated to praise Thimphu's autocratic regime, which proudly talks about 'Gross National Happiness' for the *Ngalung* group while denies the basic human and political rights of other groups such as the *Lhotshampa* community.¹⁷⁵ Even after 12 years of refugees crisis, no extensive research concerning southern inhabitants has been conducted. Some author's opinions concerning the *Lhotshampa* peoples will be discussed briefly.

Denying the reports of around 100,000 conformed *Lhotshampa* refugees in Nepal alone, Brian Shaw argues that it is certain that the numbers have been greatly augmented by the Nepalese from India. These Nepalese claiming to be Bhutanese citizens can receive limited but useful contributions of food, medicines and clothing distributed by aid organisations.¹⁷⁶ This is a biased opinion, which cannot disqualify the above presented facts. Yet suppose that Shaw was really telling the truth (i.e. the *Lhotshampa* peoples in the camps may be more fortunate than refugees in other parts the world in terms of the facilities and provisions), is it imaginable that they are prepared to spend their entire life in the detention-center-like camps? Quite unlikely. Recently, a chief of the Lutheran World Federation expressed that the free meal and a

¹⁷² For instance, Terry Mathou (1999) indeed treats *Lhotshampa* issue in a footnote of less than a paragraph.

¹⁷³ Chandrasekharan, The *Kathmandu Post* 29/11/2001, Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 353-57, 369-74 & 397-403, Joseph C. 1999: 167-70

¹⁷⁴ Acharya, e-mail 4/2/2002

¹⁷⁵ See Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 376-84 & 397-99 for biased opinions of some of these authors

¹⁷⁶ Shaw 1992: 187

place to live are no compensation for the pains of being refugees coupled with uncertain present and gloomy future,¹⁷⁷ which the grim picture below notes.



source: *Spotlight*

A prominent scholar Leo E. Rose argues that many of the *Lhotshampa* peoples who were expelled from the tribal hill states of the Indian northeast during the *bhumiputra* ('sons of the soil') movements of the late 1970s and early 1980s came to settle illegally in southern Bhutan. There they joined others who had entered Bhutan to work on infrastructural development projects in the 1960s and 1970s and then stayed on formally illegally but with the tacit consent of Thimphu.¹⁷⁸ During the 1988-98, the *Ngalung* rulers asked the 'illegals' as well as those Nepalese who had lived in the country for ten or more years and had made major contributions to Bhutan's development programs.¹⁷⁹ In contrast, other authors¹⁸⁰ agree that in line with the objectives of Bhutan's sixth Five Year Plan, non-national workers were either evicted or encouraged to leave the country but they date this to the period 1986-88. Rose also states that after the Thimphu's introduction of its dress and language policies a substantial number of illegal *Lhotshampa* members decided to leave Bhutan and also supported in principle at least the violent resistance movement based across the border.¹⁸¹ Like Shaw, Rose is strangely supporting the *Ngalung* establishment begging many questions. As mentioned elsewhere, his claim simply does not take into account the politically conservative nature of the *Lhotshampa* peasants and their total dependence on land. It is rather unlikely that such people would give up their fields, orchards, homes and citizenship simply to express their support 'in principle' for a political movement. According to the UNHCR, some 77 percent of refugees (at the end of 1993) were farmers in Bhutan and many had left behind land and property of considerable value of which they often had photographs.¹⁸²

When an article titled *Bhutanese Refugees: Middle of Nowhere* appeared in the newsletter of

¹⁷⁷ *The Rising Nepal* 12/7/2002

¹⁷⁸ Rose 1994: 112

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ E.g. Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 186-87

¹⁸¹ Rose 1994: 113

¹⁸² Hutt 1996, Sinha 2001: 81-82

Leiden (Netherlands)-based International Institute for Asian Studies, Dr Françoise Pommert's reaction was swift and clear. She brusquely claimed that the work was an undisguised attack on Bhutan and ridden with errors and historical and ethnic fact. For Pommert, there was/is no such thing as *Sarchhop* community¹⁸³ because they are called Drukpa for sure and it is impossible to brand the *Lhotshampa* group as 'ethnic Nepalese.' Likewise denying the report that Thimphu committed excesses in south Bhutan, she argued that the *Lhotshampa* peoples are treated well by the *Ngalung* rulers; they have representative in the National Assembly and the Nepalese language is not banned. Pommert, moreover, claimed that various organisations including Amnesty International and the Red Cross Society have frequently visited southern Bhutan.¹⁸⁴ On the contrary, several authors and NGOs have consistently illustrated that this is not at all the reality. Since Pommert admits that she is devoted to Tibet and especially Bhutan, would it be difficult to imagine the depth of biases?

Yet another author¹⁸⁵ romanticises Thimphu's so-called Gross National Happiness (or GNH), which is actually aimed at preventing a further crisis of authority. He argues that the GNH term is a popularisation of the distinct Bhutanese perception of the fundamental purpose of development that can be traced throughout the Five Year Plans. He also claims that it is a translation of a cultural and social consciousness into development priorities in a country which perceives itself as a kind of *Mandala* - a place where *Men* can transform their infrastructure, polity and social organisations to create the GNH.¹⁸⁶ Moreover, Mathou quotes Leo Rose as saying: The main reason explaining why Bhutan does not follow Huntington's model (which provides evidences that the struggle between a *pro-status quo* traditional elite and a pro-change modernising elite is likely to be fatal to any monarchical system lacking the western European politicocultural background) is the absence of a strong traditional elite bitterly opposed to programs of change.¹⁸⁷ For Mathou, an additional factor, which is the promotion of GNH, works as a strong support for the regime.¹⁸⁸ He, however, totally ignores the renewed rivalry between reformists and traditionalist elites within the *Ngalung* government at least since the 1970s.¹⁸⁹ The latter had won the struggle for over two decades but the differences have once again erupted since the mid-1990s. This, added to the ongoing *Lhotshampa* refugees crisis and the north Indian rebels making use of its southern jungles, has meant that Bhutan is no longer a 'peaceful dragon'¹⁹⁰ to materialise its much propagandised GNH. Therefore, Bhutan has become a weak and penetrated state whose authority is on the verge of collapse.

Bilateral Parleys:

After several diplomatic attempts, Thimphu and Kathmandu finally agreed to establish a Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC) in July 1993 to work towards a resolution of the refugee

¹⁸³ Cf. Joseph C. 1999: 23

¹⁸⁴ See Issue 19, 1999: 20 for details

¹⁸⁵ Terry Mathou 2000

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Sinha 2001: 238

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Kaushik, *The Kathmandu Post* 4/4/2002

¹⁸⁸ Mathou 2000

¹⁸⁹ Joseph C. 1999: 67-72, Sinha 2001 227-28

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Hasrat 1980

problem. During the first Kathmandu meeting held in October 1993, the JMC agreed to verify the status of the *Lhotshampa* refugees on four categories: a) bona fide Bhutanese if they have been evicted forcibly, b) Bhutanese who emigrated, c) non-Bhutanese people and d) Bhutanese who have committed criminal acts.¹⁹¹ It appears that Nepal took the view that an overwhelming majority of the refugees have documentary evidence of residence in Bhutan and had given affidavits of forcible expulsion from Bhutan. Therefore, there could be no distinction between category, namely Bhutanese citizens unlawfully evicted and those who ‘voluntarily’ migrated. As for those involved in criminal courts, Bhutan should deal with those who violated its laws and Nepal has nothing to do with this.¹⁹²

Of course, Thimphu is playing a totally different game in this process. Bhutan has been insisting that it would take back only the first category refugees citing its 1985 Citizenship Act for its inability to take back the other three categories of refugees.¹⁹³ The subsequent implication is that the *Ngalung* rulers are using tactics to prolong the repatriation process by insisting on the verification of individual refugees, which is diametrically opposed to Nepal’s stand.¹⁹⁴ Thimphu’s position is unacceptable to Kathmandu as well as to the *Lhotshampa* refugees since more than half of the refugees will be disqualified to return. This is because Bhutan keeps census records of all its citizens on the basis of the land records kept in the name of the head of the household. Likewise, the *Lhotshampa* children of below five years age who were evicted along with their parents will not find their names recorded in the 1995 census record of Bhutan and hence will be automatically disqualified, if refugees are individually verified. In the same way, over 17,000 children born in the camps will also be disqualified.¹⁹⁵ This is a serious issue since the laws of Bhutan and its neighbours do not form a seamless web and the combination creates vast potential for statelessness. For a simple example, Nepalese citizenship by descent comes through the father as was the case in Bhutan’s laws until 1985. Now that Bhutan requires both parents to be Bhutanese, the children of Bhutanese fathers and Nepalese mothers are apparently citizens of neither Nepal nor Bhutan.¹⁹⁶ This is particularly why the identity and verification must be done through the head of a family and not on the individual basis.

Curiously, the snail paced verification living at Khudunabari camp undertaken by the Nepal-Bhutan Joint Verification Team (JVT) was completed on 15th of December 2001. The Khudunabari camp is the smallest of seven camps that has 12,447 refugees in 1,963 families. The scrutiny process started on 26th of March 2001. The JVT has completed verification of 12,090 refugees in 1,935 families of the Khudunabari camp in 264 days (153 working days). The team was mandated to verify the status of refugees on the basis of oral and written interviews and documents held by them. It checked and examined all documents available with the refugees including citizenship cards, government appointment letters, tax receipts, house numbers, driving and gun licences etc. The JVT disclosed that almost all interviewed refugees

¹⁹¹ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 539-44, Hutt 1996, Joseph C. 1999: 154-56, Sinha 2001: 233-35

¹⁹² Chandrasekharan 22/1/2002, Joseph C. 1999: 155-56, Sinha 2001: 234

¹⁹³ The *Spotlight* 24-30/3/2000

¹⁹⁴ The *Kathmandu Post* 22/12/2000

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Thronson 1993 cit. Hutt 1997: 147

possessed some kind of document issued to them by Bhutanese authority. This was proof of their origin or their last legal habitual residence in Bhutan.¹⁹⁷ During the second round of verification, which place in June 2003, has verified only 368 heads out of some 12,000 refugees as genuine Bhutanese. The critics have stressed that such an extremely low turnout shows that the Ngalung authorities are not prepared to take the refugees back.

On the one hand, Thimphu is interviewing refugees for their eventual repatriation through the creation of JVT. On the other, it is also continuing its resettlement project in the south. Can the *Lhotshampa* refugees really trust that the *Ngalung* rulers are not playing a game? Where will the refugees go if the resettlement is not stopped?¹⁹⁸ Also, Nepal's government has recently expressed utter disbelief towards the comments of some high officials at Thimphu. The *Kuensel* reported that Bhutan's dignitaries have put the blame on Nepal for the slow pace of scrutiny of refugees. In response, Kathmandu reiterated its full commitment to all the understandings and agreements reached between the two governments in the process of finding a resolution to the *Lhotshampa* refugees. The statement added that Nepal has always been frank and forthright in the bilateral talks with Bhutan on finding a just and lasting solution; Kathmandu is waiting for the 12th round of JMC meeting to be held as early as possible and is even open for discussing the issue at other levels if Thimphu so wishes.¹⁹⁹ When the government of Nepal made such a stern public articulation, Bhutanese authorities seemed to show a kind of diplomatic flexibility. As a result, three rounds of JMC level talks were held in Kathmandu and Thimphu by the end of May 2003. Yet, the negotiations concluded without any concrete decision to solve the lingering *Lhotshampa* refugees issue.

The main reason behind Thimphu being able to dictate anything it wishes is because of the continuous political instabilities in Nepal. It is argued that Nepal has a multiparty democracy but it still has great problems in implementing it. The *Ngalung* rulers are free from daily infighting of Nepal's politicians; moreover, they seem to be more clever in diplomatic affairs compared to the Nepalese side.²⁰⁰ Despite everything, the refugee problem needs to be solved both for Bhutan's security and political stability in the region. As a weak state, it cannot address its long-term security problem by embarking upon 'ethnic cleansing'²⁰¹ with a well established people in the region. Or will Thimphu be assured of its long-term security by keeping away over 100,000 refugees of whom many would be young and restless youths in a couple of years time?²⁰²

Vested Interests?

As a regional power, if India would take part, the *Lhotshampa* refugees crisis could be solved in no time at all. India has refused thus far because it has a treaty agreement with Bhutan according to which it has to guide Bhutan in its foreign affairs. In practice, India rules Bhutan,

¹⁹⁷ Chhetri, *The Kathmandu Post* 5/1/2002

¹⁹⁸ CEMARD-Bhutan 2002

¹⁹⁹ *The Rising Nepal* 12/7/2002

²⁰⁰ Krämer, *e-mail* 31/1/2002

²⁰¹ Cf. Hutt 1996

²⁰² Chandrasekharan, *The Kathmandu Post* 29/11/2001

which is only as good as one Indian state.²⁰³ Today, defence-wise, Bhutan is more important to India than ever before. New Delhi undoubtedly wants power from Thimphu and it wants support to fight against the rebels in its northeast who take shelter and have bases in Bhutan. Moreover, India has a claim to hegemony in the region. It wants to keep the smaller nations like Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka dependent on it.²⁰⁴ The fact is that Indian intelligence including some scholars²⁰⁵ have often bullied around Nepal and its peoples. For example, the so-called 'Nepal Gameplan' document prepared by Indian intelligence agencies and published on 12th of June 2000 implicated Nepal's top politicians as well as rising officials and the media of entertaining the Pakistani intelligence agency ISI. It was probably the most ridiculous political propaganda, which Kathmandu summarily rejected stating that the accusations were totally baseless and false. Likewise, Nepal's intellectuals also contended that if India has such a strong network of intelligence how the ISI is functioning within Nepal is a matter for investigation?²⁰⁶ It should be asked that if Nepal had treated the people of Indian origin in a similar fashion by evicting them from their hearths and homes in a deliberate policy of ethnic cleansing, would New Delhi have been a silent spectator?²⁰⁷ Obviously not. For instance, during the apartheid regime in South Africa, India was the first country to lobby the United Nations and impose sanctions against the White-led government. It was mainly due to the treatment of migrant Indians who constitute about three percent of South Africa's total population.²⁰⁸ Recently, when Fiji's opposition leader *George Speight* took hostage of several people and demanded Prime Minister *Mahendra Chaudhry* (a migrant from India) to hand-over political powers to indigenous peoples of the island, India was swift in condemning the act as illegal and even mobilising other countries until *Speight* was eventually sent to jail. However, it has so far remained deaf in the case of the *Lhotshampa* peoples. Therefore, without much sensationalism, it could be said that the rhetoric about mutual understanding for the benefits of common people is valueless as more powerful countries seek to advance their own politicoeconomic agenda.

Similarly, the European Union (EU) leaders quickly condemned and imposed sanctions against Zimbabwe's president *Robert Mugabe* when he allowed White-owned farms to be distributed to the deprived Blacks. However, it is a well known fact that the EU governments were all quiet until the last days of South Africa's apartheid regime. Although the EU Parliament so far passed two resolutions supporting the *Lhotshampa* refugees, the member nations of the EU continue to provide financial as well as political support to Thimphu. For example, on 29th of November 2001, a Danida aid co-ordinator (*Mrs Ellen Buch-Hansen*) lectured at Amsterdam University regarding Bhutan's success in effectively utilising Danish development aid. She also mentioned that the least developed countries' rulers must have a record of good governance and respect for human rights. Then, this author asked: How is it possible then that Denmark gives foreign aid to Bhutan while the *Ngalung* rulers have disregarded the basic human rights of other ethnic communities, especially that of the *Lhotshampa* group? Her

²⁰³ Acharya, e-mail 4/2/2002

²⁰⁴ Krämer, e-mail 31/1/2002

²⁰⁵ See Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 380-83

²⁰⁶ The *Spotlight* 15/6/2000

²⁰⁷ Chandrasekharan 22/1/2002

²⁰⁸ See Hengeveld & Rodenburg 1995

reply was that Bhutan is a special case and it is impossible to answer such a ‘complex’ question.²⁰⁹ In June 2003, the government of Nepal deported back some eighteen Tibetans who had illegally entered Nepal. The governments of Britain and the United States as well as the European Union immediately issued separate statements expressing regrets at what they called Nepal’s ignorance of pleas by these respective authorities to hand over the refugees to the UNHCR in accordance with the prevalent international norms instead of deporting them to China. However, it is well-known that the same spokespersons remained deaf when *Ngalung* rulers of Bhutan began to evict thousands of bona fide *Lhotshampa* peoples in the early 1990s. In short, no state in the world supports democracy in another country for the sake of principle.²¹⁰

Finally, even the Christian missionaries reportedly acted against the *Lhotshampa* peoples in the late 1980s. For instance, Father Mackay, a private tutor of King *J. S. Wangchuck* family, played a dubious role in the crackdown on southern Bhutan and mistreated the *Lhotshampa* students. He was used by Thimphu as the tool to inform people of the discontinuation of the Nepalese language in the schools as well as burning Nepalese books. Meanwhile, after Thimphu evicted many *Lhotshampa* members for their participation in demonstrations, the Jesuits are providing some humanitarian aid to them - a sinister game aimed at spreading Christianity in whatever ways they possibly can.²¹¹

Section III

Bhutan: Isolated or Interconnected?

As mentioned elsewhere, some scholars seem to claim Bhutan’s current problem as a result of the rise of ethnonationalism, which can simply be defined as nationalism based on ethnicity. This concept indeed has become quite popular in the post-Cold War world. The sources of ethnonationalism have always been multi-cultural and hence it is also called the ‘politics of recognition’²¹² or the ‘cultural politics.’²¹³ However, such dictums do not explain why ethnonationalism should suddenly spring into prominence bringing with it far reaching implications at different levels. The fact is that it goes beyond a cultural resurgence with strong political as well as economic connotations. If an ethnic community or group of people are long deprived

²⁰⁹ See Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 391-97 for donor’s pro-Thimphu views including that of Denmark

²¹⁰ Acharya, *e-mail* 4/2/2002

²¹¹ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 399-400

²¹² See Taylor 1992

²¹³ See Kahn 1998

of their politicoeconomic opportunities, they will rebel. The time and nature of the rebellion might be determined by the intensity of people's interconnection with other intra/inter-communities. Since no society can develop in total segregation, the disadvantaged peoples gain their consciousness through 'interconnection' and especially when they are exposed to mass media information. Nevertheless, some authors not only use the idea of ethnonationalism to discuss the social problems in the least developed societies like Bhutan but also still mystify such societies existing in complete isolation. For instance, Dr Michael Hutt writes that Bhutan was isolated for 300 years. It gradually established links with the outside world in the 1900s while preserving its culture and tradition.²¹⁴ This argument may be correct in some way. Even then, from the outside the image of Bhutan is often starkly in contrast with the reality within. That is because Bhutan's isolation has usually hidden it from the scrutiny of the foreign press and its internal crisis like that of 1964 are sometimes impenetrable.²¹⁵ The fact is that Bhutan is 'interconnected' with the outside world at the very least since the British took control of India.

It is stressed that there are two reactive historical processes, which explain many problems that the world faces today: The peer polity competition, which is the pattern of rivalry that forms when polities (e.g. European colonial powers) with equivalent military abilities contend for dominance. The other is the pattern by which much of the world has reacted to 500 years of European expansion and 150 years of Euramerican domination.²¹⁶ When the peer polity competition (i.e. land warfare) in Europe produced no lasting advantages, it was expanded to the global arena to include trade, capturing of overseas territories, establishing colonies, attacking adversaries' colonies and intercepting the wealth that flowed from them.²¹⁷ At the local level, European expansion transformed indigenous societies from the outset (through diseases, introduction of new plants/animals and technological changes). Like other post-colonial states around the globe, Bhutan could not escape this tragedy.

Fending Ephemeral Frontiers:

It is stressed that attributes of the conflict-ridden countries (topology, climate, population) as well as characteristics of the conflicts (severity, duration, goal of rebel group) have only to a limited extent been investigated.²¹⁸ In like manner, researchers on Bhutan ignore such factors by mystifying the country as a peaceful Buddhist Shangri-La that has remained isolated from the rest of the world. The reality indicates the opposite. Prior to the ninth century, Bhutan was probably a conglomeration of petty states with Tibetan influences predominating in the west, Indian in the south and indigenous or 'tribal' in the east.²¹⁹ Only in the 17th century, a religious refugee *Ngawang Namgyal* experimented to forge a unified Bhutan. For this he allowed many people who had become the victims of religious persecution in Tibet to settle in Bhutan. That is why, apart from the Tibetan soldiers who defeated the Indian army and

²¹⁴ Hutt 1996

²¹⁵ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 348

²¹⁶ Tainter 1998: 176

²¹⁷ Ibid. 182

²¹⁸ Buhaug & Gates 2002: 419

²¹⁹ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 59

settled in western Bhutan, traders and farmers as well as forcefully evicted religious peoples also arrived in Bhutan for safety and better economic prospects.²²⁰ However, *Namgyal* totally failed to establish a harmonious society.²²¹ This is because each society was made up of people with a variety of interests contending for advantage within it and the resulting struggles had already produced much social variety around the world. Moreover, the Europeans became an additional party to these struggles, which resulted in some societies disappearing while others rose or fundamentally transformed. As a result, the modern world system was a product of interaction with Europeans and the ‘people without history’ both playing an active part.²²² In an already conflict ridden multicultural Bhutan, the British unquestionably became an additional problem in the mid-19th century. Since the people of Nepal had proved their bravery in warfare and working in harsh conditions, the British India rulers began a permanent recruitment of the Nepalese in its armed forces under the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli. They also invited other Nepalese to work as timber cutters and tea gardens workers in Darjeeling and its surrounding areas. Over the years, the immigrants settled in southern Bhutan transforming the inhospitable and malarial tracts into fertile farmlands.

In fact, as noted elsewhere, the British encouraged Nepalese immigration to Bhutan as a counterpoise to northern influences of Bhutanese, Tibetan and Chinese seeping down to the plains. This encouraged further migrations and forged the region into a Nepalese dominated area. Ever since, the political economy of southern Bhutan has become indispensable for the well-being of that country.²²³ Colonial Britain was not only interested in preventing external influence on Bhutan but it also wanted a politically divided Bhutan, which would guarantee their total dominance over Thimphu as well as secure a trade route to Tibet. This is how *Kazi Ugyen* of the *Dorji* family emerged in the late 1860s as a significant person in Thimphu’s power structure, in Indo-Bhutanese relationship and in the authority system of western and south-western Bhutan.²²⁴ In 1898, *Kazi* was appointed as the chief of the Haa district with rights over the whole of southern Bhutan. He was also empowered with the rights to settle the immigrant Nepalese in his territories. Moreover, the first king *Ugyen Wangchuck* (1907-26) offered *Kazi* as the chief chamberlain (*Gongzim*) in 1908. The *Dorji* family kept all the positions within themselves by way of hereditary until the 1960s.²²⁵ In this sense, Colonial Britain not only made economic and cultural penetration by drawing the borders of traditional Bhutan but also invoked the formation of tribes and ethnic groups, which previously had not existed. Therefore, many of today’s conflicts trace their origins to the expansion, domination and the meddling of the great powers.²²⁶

Failed Rejuvenation:

In the 1950s, Bhutan succumbed to the pressure of the outside world to become increasingly globalised and hence deeply interconnected. As already mentioned, when China annexed Tibet,

²²⁰ Ibid. 61, Joseph C. 1999: 56-58

²²¹ Sinha 2001: 42

²²² Cole 1994: 2-3

²²³ Joseph C. 1999: 48-49, Sinha 2001: 237-38

²²⁴ Sinha 2001: 27-28

²²⁵ Joseph C. 1999: 46 & 60, Sinha 2001: 177

²²⁶ Tainter 1998: 185

the third king *Jigme Dorji Wangchuck* felt that it was inevitable to become a part of the world before Bhutan was taken over by either India or China - the behemoths that sandwich the small kingdom. In this context, Thimphu initiated drastic administrative reforms and gradually developed its direct political relations with countries other than India as well as international organisations like the United Nations. The sudden 'u' turn in the political modernization process was not only because of political development in the region but also because of his compulsion to please the hardline *Ngalung* coterie.²²⁷ As Tainter rightly observes, continued poverty, lack of access to power and disillusionment with the Western derived model of 'modernity' have contributed to political upheavals in the post-colonial developing societies²²⁸ like Bhutan. Yet one positive aspect of Thimphu's project of modernization was that it expanded the operational arena of politics for other disadvantaged groups in which new sociopolitical forces standing for reforms entered into a protracted struggle with the traditional forces represented largely by *Ngalung* religious orthodoxy emerged. This, unfortunately, led to the political crisis in 1964 in which the symbol of modernization *J. P. Dorji* was assassinated. This was followed by an alleged *coup d'état* against the then crown prince by a group of dissident officials. Although it was foiled, the crisis left a lasting impact among Thimphu's ruling circle.

The current King was compelled to enter into an alliance with the traditionalists (i.e. Drukpa Lamas, disgruntled members of the royal family and the loyalists of the traditional politico-administrative system). This did rescue the regime with its legitimacy emergency but the integration of different ethnosocial groups into the mainstream, which is a vital part of the modernisation process, was forgotten and as a result the state became a *Ngalung* dominated one.²²⁹ Even then, Thimphu was still under constant pressure to find different ways to maintain its monopoly power. In the 1970s, the emphasis was placed in controlling the economic arena as well. Thimphu began to apply various means to achieve its ultimate goal: dominating politicoeconomic resources. As indicated earlier, in the post-1964 Bhutan the *Ngalung* rulers retained their political power through the process of elimination or assimilation; while the institution of marriage is the medium for assimilation, intrigue is the means for elimination.²³⁰ Once again, Tainter succinctly argues that an aura of antagonism in South Asia is often created by unscrupulous leaders who manipulate certain group(s) of people to further their political ambitions.²³¹ This is exactly what the *Ngalung* centric government at Thimphu has been doing by implanting the fear of *Lhotshampa* chauvinism to hold the *Ngalung* community from joining the dissidence.²³² How long is it going to last?

Landless/Stateless Peoples:

Like in any least developed societies, the control of farmland is considered to be the key to wealth, status and power by the people of Bhutan. However, the land reforms initiated in the

²²⁷ Kaushik, *The Kathmandu Post* 4/4/2002

²²⁸ Tainter 1998: 186-87

²²⁹ Joseph C. 1999: 24-25, 67-68 & 196

²³⁰ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 320

²³¹ Tainter 1998: 187

²³² Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 549

1950s failed to satisfy the rapidly growing population especially in its south. Even today, the royal family, elites families and the numerous monasteries own large tracts of land functioning simultaneously as landlords, lenders and employers. According to a scholar, the land tenure system in Bhutan unless otherwise disproved has still remained old, pre-feudal or feudal. A common feature of such a system is to create a privileged class whose commitment to rural development is minimal. Comprehensive land reform is only talked about. While a few individuals and monasteries own a large proportion of the land and dominate the local people through varied roles as landlords, lenders and employers, many Bhutanese farmers lack secure access to the basis of economic life: farmland.²³³ Unfortunately, the statistics showing the pattern of land ownership among different ethnosocial groups of Bhutan could not be found.

It should be stated that not only does the monastic establishment own huge tracts of land but it also exerts sufficient political power to assert the *Ngalung* cultural identity and its religious values as paramount. In 1984, a Council of Ecclesiastic Affairs (*Dratshang Lhentshög*) was formed. Ever since, it has been expanding existing religious institutions. Similarly, religious ceremonies of collective blessing and prayer which are conducted nationwide are the occasion to exhort the monks to become raw models for society. Moreover, the monastic establishment was able to reimpose the early 1970s' civil officials wear traditional *Ngalung* dress while on duty in 1989 under the name of *driglamnamja*.²³⁴ As already described in Sections I and II, it actually became obligatory for each and every citizens to wear *gho* and *kira* whereas other ethnic groups are deprived of performing their religious beliefs.

By now, it should also be clear that a feudal form of coalition between the landed aristocracy, clergy and the royal elites continues to dominate not only Bhutan's politics but also key economic resources. Besides, Thimphu has a very primitive system of taxing its citizens. According to a Bhutan expert, a typical taxpayer would pay annually the following items to the state functionaries: 426 kg of paddy, 28 kg of butter, 120 pairs of wooden shingles. This excludes other items such as textiles, baskets, paddy straw, mustard, dry chillies, dry sliced pumpkins, bark for the paper and ash for the field.²³⁵ In the late-1950s, most of the tax payment was lowered as well as converted into cash but the *Ngalung* rulers continue to demand free and compulsory labour from its people throughout the year irrespective of age and gender. Failing to do so calls for punitive action. In fact, the 16th session of the National Assembly held on July 1961 prescribed to use police force in the event of people refusing to provide free labour.²³⁶ The peasant communities till the land for the monasteries and local officials in varying man-days between summer and winter without payment; a farmer on average spends half of his time working for the state without an express benefit to himself.²³⁷

Indeed, several varieties of economic, political, religious and social ideologies can serve as an idea of state and will be closely linked to the state's institutional structure.²³⁸ Some examples

²³³ M. D. Gupta cit. Joseph C. 1999: 84-85

²³⁴ See Mathou 2000 for a lengthy pro-monk opine

²³⁵ Sinha 2001: 34

²³⁶ INHURED cit. Joseph C. 1999: 183

²³⁷ Sinha 2001: 34

²³⁸ Buzan 1991: 60

are as follows: the idea of the United States involves capitalism and pluralist democracy, Saudi Arabia with Islam, Israel with zionism and post-1970 Bhutan with *driglamnamja* (or one nation, one people). In this context, ideologies not only address the bases of relations between government and society but also define the arena for both peace and conflict in domestic politics. Like in many underdeveloped states, however, organising ideologies in Bhutan have only shallow roots and large changes in official orientation occur frequently. As such, Bhutan's concept of *driglamnamja* is not only weak in itself or weakly held within society but also strongly opposed by at least one section of its peoples (i.e. *Lhotshampa*). Because the idea of *driglamnamja* competes with the multicultural Bhutan, the state stands on fragile political foundations.²³⁹

The Thimphu-based High Court of Bhutan does not play a pro-people role in such injustice. That is because Bhutan's judicial establishment is there to implement an antiquated legal system that is based on mediaeval theocratic *Drukpa Kagyu* precepts.²⁴⁰ Although the High Court with six judges functions as a single bench and district court have one lone judge, the king and his government are above law (i.e. supreme in legal system). Hence the judiciary system hardly declares any government actions as unlawful. The judges are neither trained as lawyers nor possess a university degree but are a mixture of civil servants transferred by the senior ruling elites. The provisions for defence attorney or jury trials are largely unheard of while the arbitrary arrest and detention is the rule rather than exception. Moreover, there is a complete ban on the formation of associations, organisations, political parties and unions. People do not even enjoy the basic human rights as Bhutan does not have a Constitution that guarantees such rights. The *Ngalung* authority treats the dissidence and opposition to its regime as treason and punishable by death penalty. In short, Bhutan violates 20 out of 30 Articles enshrined in the universal declaration of Human Rights.²⁴¹

Thimphu's Begrudge:

Being hard-working farmers and their proximity to Indian markets, the *Lhotshampa* community transformed the disease prone southern Bhutan into the granary of the entire country. This led to the development of infrastructural facilities and preference to cash crop cultivation in the region. Steadily rising economic and consequently educational power of the *Lhotshampa* community in the resource rich and strategically important south began to haunt the ruling nexus of traditionalists at Thimphu.²⁴² In terms of a vicious circle, it was the rapid population growth that led to scarcity of arable land, which stimulated a search for better farming techniques, which resulted in surplus production and need for markets, which eventually steered the competition between the ruling *Ngalung* and the farming *Lhotshampa* communities. As mentioned elsewhere, by the 1970s, southern Bhutan was not only of strategic importance as the gateway to India but also in itself a storehouse of riches for the modern economy: 'It was the southern districts that had the cardamom plantations, orange

²³⁹ Ibid. 79

²⁴⁰ Chhetri, *The Spacetime Today* 23/5/2001

²⁴¹ Chhetri, *e-mail* 20/4/2002

²⁴² Joseph C. 1999: 97-98

groves, ginger crop, minerals and hardwood forests. Even the snow-fed rivers had to traverse to the south before their flows were substantial enough to be tapped by hydropower projects. While south had almost all factories and necessary markets, the *Ngalung* dominated north had two resources: conifer timber and tourism, with possibilities of the latter held in check by a cautious clergy. The realisation that the south had become a potential economic powerhouse must explain in part why the *Ngalung* elites turned against the *Lhotshampa* community. The Chukha Hydropower Corporation (CHC) exemplifies the issue. Soon after its competition in 1988 the CHC plant suddenly started injecting a large sum of money into national revenue. The CHC bonanza clearly provided Thimphu with the self-confidence to move ahead with its plans for the south because it showed the rulers that the riches lay within their grasp. For the *Lhotshampa* peoples it obviously had the potential of agitating for their share.²⁴³ In this sense, Thimphu had commenced an overenthusiastic policy since the 1970s, targeting the *Lhotshampa* community first through assimilation and later with coercion. When the oppressive course of actions were questioned in the 1980s, a stage arrived in which the direct control of politicoeconomics of south Bhutan became unavoidable to help maintain the *Ngalung* dominance of the state establishment. The method was the *Ngalungization* project, which inevitably meant demonstrations. This subsequently resulted in the eviction of many *Lhotshampa* members.²⁴⁴ It is certain that the scope of conflict is associated with such geographical factors as the total area of land of the country, whether or not the conflict zone is adjacent to the border of a neighbouring country, whether there are natural resources in the conflict zone²⁴⁵ has played an eminent role in Bhutan.

It should be emphasised, however, the beginning of the widespread protest against Thimphu's policy was not so much of increased political awareness or solidarity on the part of the *Lhotshampa* community. Instead it was a reflection of the sudden changes in the *Ngalung* rulers' attitude towards a significant group.²⁴⁶ Citizenship to the *Lhotshampa* peoples was finally granted in 1958. Even then, Thimphu viewed them with suspicions and their mobility and right to own property in the north were restricted. Most of all, the representation of the *Lhotshampa* group in the economic and political institutions were consistently kept away. For instance, while the Haa district with 17,000 mainly *Ngalung* settlers has five representatives in the National Assembly, the Samchi district with 138,000 predominantly *Lhotshampa* peoples has merely four.²⁴⁷ Ironically, Thimphu claims that the *Ngalung* community has been deprived at the expense of the *Lhotshampa* peoples in its south. The reality shows the opposite. In real terms, the high population density and comparatively higher birth rate in southern Bhutan, which are the realities underlying the myth of '*Lhotshampa* prosperity' have been camouflaged in deceptive statistics.²⁴⁸ Thus it is unquestionable that the *Ngalung* rulers interpret the diversity challenge of *Lhotshampa* peoples in Bhutan's society in increasingly radical ways: a) through fear and resentment, b) through the construction and enforcement of exclusionary boundaries, and c) through outright

²⁴³ K. M. Dixit cit. Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 308-09, Sinha 2001: 238

²⁴⁴ Joseph C. 1999: 183-84

²⁴⁵ Buhaug & Gates 2002: 430

²⁴⁶ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 537

²⁴⁷ Joseph C. 1999: 121

²⁴⁸ Ibid. 177, Sinha 2001: 220

removal. While these views have become the general principles, the necessary conditions for Thimphu's *driglamnamja* ideology, a lapse in institutional strength is likely to bring the whole structure crashing down in the long run.²⁴⁹

Impact of Information Age:

In the past two decades, the unprecedented result of the information technology revolution and consequent greater telecommunications from other countries came into contact with Bhutan taking root in the traditional society. Despite Thimphu's desperate attempt to control freedom of speech and press including the outlawing of satellite television to protect its population from Western culture, many Bhutanese illegally hold dishes and receive broadcasts from all over the world. Even the government media including the *Kuensel* admits that there are more harmful effects of 'crime, environmental pressures, juvenile delinquency, the video culture, housing and urban problems, illegal immigration, rural-urban migration and numerous other problems.' Above all, a major effect of the surge in communications is its catalysing effect on social/ethnic relations in Bhutan. Ethnicity is therefore a product of contact - not isolation. The increase in the level of information exchange has had a different effect on the *Lhotshampa* community. This is because political mobilisation may result simply from increases in communication, which can stimulate major increases in aspirations that may be partially, if at all, satisfied. Likewise, what Huntington said in general also applies to Bhutan. That is the monarchical system is always in a complex situation created by pro-status traditional elites and pro-change modernising elite, which lack western European politicocultural background. The *pro status quo* Bhutanese traditionalists were the ones who blew out of proportion the fear of being swamped by *Lhotshampa*'s Hindu culture and persuaded the present king *J. S. Wangchuck* to impose 'one nation, one people' policy, destroying the fabric of multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious society.²⁵⁰ In this sense, the *Ngalung* rulers wish to protect the so-called 'unique Buddhist culture' from other cultures, which is why they have been extremely intense in implementing the *driglamnamja* doctrine and suppressing the *Lhotshampa* social etiquette. Bhutan's government seems ignore the fact that almost 59 percent of today's conflicts are related to identity.²⁵¹ As such, the *Lhotshampa* peoples became more sensitive to the way they were treated by Thimphu and by seeing other ethnic struggles through communications, perceived their situation to be one of injustice. Most of all, the 1989-90's *jana aandolan* (or people's uprising) in Nepal finally led to the formation of a multiparty constitutional system at Kathmandu and the waves of democracy, which swept over erstwhile Soviet republics in the late 1980s, acted as catalysts in promoting the ethnic upsurge of the *Lhotshampa* and *Sarchhop* groups.²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Buzan 1991: 82

²⁵⁰ Kaushik, *The Kathmandu Post* 4/4/2002

²⁵¹ Buhaug & Gates 2002: 424

²⁵² Joseph C. 1999: 203-05, Krämer, *e-mail* 31/1/2002

Multiplying Social Wildfire:

Peculiarly, Thimphu implies that only the *Lhotshampa* members were/are the trouble makers for its absolutist regime. This obviously is not true. Already in 1959, the *Sarchhop* community protested against Thimphu's policy of mandatory conscription in the army and in the labour force. When the *Ngalung* rulers used police force to squash the protest, it resulted in eviction of some 10,000 *Sarchhop* peoples to bordering towns of India.²⁵³ Likewise, the past three decades of planned development has failed to uplift the overall well-being of Bhutanese peoples. Especially the *Sarchhop* who dominated eastern Bhutan got neglected in the process where most villagers continue to be in the pre-modernisation period.²⁵⁴ This logically has caused a great amount of discontent among *Sarchhop* members. Since the early 1990s, these people have once again shown signs of disquiet, which may be symbolised by *R. K. Dorji*, the president of the Druk National Congress. *Dorji* expressed his sympathy with the *Lhotshampa* people's cause for which he was arrested, convicted, pardoned and again being sought to be extradited from India to be tried for treason.

As aforementioned, one among other reasons for the *Sarchhop* community's political unease is the *Ngalung* ruler's disregard for faiths of other religious groups. For instance, a former home minister *Jamji Jagar* who followed the *Nyingmapa* practices and built a shrine at Kunglung, Tashigang but presently it is taken over by the *Drukpa Kagyu* group by forcing to officiate the presiding lama.²⁵⁵ Besides, several *Sarchhop* peoples have fled Bhutan in the wake of the *Lhotshampa* problem. Most were not active in opposing Thimphu's policy but were protesting to being indiscriminately arrested or forced into the army and probably were suspected of being sympathetic to the *Lhotshampa* cause as well.²⁵⁶ In 1999, the High Court of Bhutan imprisoned many *Nyingmapa* Buddhist monks of the *Sarchhop* community with the aim of imposing the ruling *Ngalung* norms on a distinct religious and linguistic group: The *Sarchhop* peoples.²⁵⁷ So, the *Ngalung* centric political evolution in post 1964 Bhutan alienated the *Lhotshampa* and *Sarchhop* communities thereby spurring the negations beneath the peaceful dragon's ethnosocial mosaic.²⁵⁸

The problem, however, does not end here. The *Ngalung* peoples have also remained politically conscious down through the centuries. Earlier, the feudal politics had centred around the valleys of Paro, Punakha and Thimphu. Even in the 1964 crisis, of the six defectors five were *Ngalung* members. Two of them, Colonel *Wangdi* and *Rinchen Dorji*, are still living in Kathmandu. It is argued that Thimphu has implanted the fear of *Lhotshampa* chauvinism to hold the *Ngalung* community from joining the dissidence but as soon as such a fear is overcome, they might become the staunchest allies in the 'war' with the current regime.²⁵⁹

Perhaps the first organised political movement among the *Lhotshampa* group was that of 'Jai

²⁵³ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 577

²⁵⁴ Joseph C. 1999: 98

²⁵⁵ Sinha 2001: 31-32

²⁵⁶ Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 577

²⁵⁷ Chhetri, *The Spacetime Today* 23/5/2001

²⁵⁸ Joseph C. 1999: 123-24

²⁵⁹ E.g. Dhakal & Strawn 1994: 549

Gorkha' in 1947 to protest against the oppressive laws. However, when *J. P. Dorji* sent armed forces, all the activists were forced to flee Bhutan except one member *Mahasur Chhetri* who was captured and thrown into the river as a death sentence.²⁶⁰ Once again, some *Lhotshampa* members demonstrated in the late 1950s demanding their politicoeconomic rights under the banner of Bhutan State Congress party. When a part of their demands like granting citizenship were fulfilled, they were pretty much quiet. They rose again in the 1980s when the *Ngalungization* process intensified. Today, about a dozen political parties and human rights groups are established with a variety of agendas and missions. Some them are as follows: Human Rights Organisation of Bhutan (HUROB), Association of Human Rights Activists (AHURA), Students Union of Bhutan (SUB), Youth Organisation of Bhutan (YOB), Appeal Movement Co-ordination Council (AMCC), Bhutanese Coalition for Democratic Movement (BCMD), Bhutan Peoples Party (BPP), Bhutan National Democratic Party (BNDP), Bhutan Congress Party (BCP), United Front for Democracy in Bhutan (UFDPA), Druk National Congress (DNC) etc.²⁶¹

The main problem with these organisations is that each party consists of a handful of members. Therefore, the array is confusing not just to outsiders but also to many of the refugees who are simple farmers with no experience or interest in active participatory politics.²⁶² For instance, the AMCC which is a political forum views the *Lhotshampa* problems originating from political crisis leading to arbitrary deprivation of subject-hood, the BCMD which is a human rights group regards the issue as basically that of a violation of human rights.²⁶³ Without the wider organisational capacity and co-operation among different political parties, including the *Sarchhop* peoples and those unhappy *Ngalung* members, such small parties will not be productive in pressuring the reluctant *Ngalung* regime. Lately, the party leaders appear to have discerned that only when this is achieved will Thimphu be forced to come to terms with the deprived peoples as willing partners in shaping up a common destiny.²⁶⁴

Most critical of all, there are insurgencies in almost all states of northern India namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura. The NDFB and the ULFA rebels have not only disturbed the local ethnic and socioeconomic equations in Bhutan but also have posed a serious administrative challenge to the small, ill-equipped Bhutan's security forces. As mentioned earlier, the domestic security problems of weak states such as Bhutan are often hopelessly entangled with their external relations; hence such states will almost by definition be chronically insecure.²⁶⁵ Moreover, Thimphu has had no experience in handling this unprecedented development in armed insurgency.²⁶⁶ It is because 'the rough terrain is ideal for guerrilla warfare and difficult for Bhutan's army to control because mountain areas, giving advantage to rebel troops, allow the rebels to expand the scope of conflict, whereas forests provide cover, particularly against the detection or aerial attack. This adds in the freedom of

²⁶⁰ Sinha 2001: 171

²⁶¹ Ibid. 179

²⁶² Thronson 1993

²⁶³ Sinha 2001: 246

²⁶⁴ Ibid. 187

²⁶⁵ Buzan 1991: 106

²⁶⁶ Sinha 1998

movement and shipment of arms, thereby wider zone of conflict.²⁶⁷ The *Ngalung* rulers openly admit this issue. A security bureaucrat from Thimphu writes: The two rounds of talks with the ULFA and one with the NDFB rebels requesting them to leave Bhutan have been fruitless. Apparently, the ULFA militants insist on staying on until Assam attains independence, a chimera in the present circumstances.²⁶⁸ After the summer 2001 agreement, the ULFA rebel leaders reportedly vacated and closed four out of nine camps in southern Bhutan but armed confrontation between the militants and Bhutan's forces is still more likely. For this, Bhutan will need help from India, which is the worst case scenario for the *Ngalung* rulers for several reasons including: a) Indian military presence does not guarantee peace in the country, just look at Sri Lanka, instead Bhutan's sovereign status might be at stake, b) if conflicts occur, reprisals against Bhutan's civilians travelling through Assam is acute, which is exemplified by the slaying of ten Bhutanese in December 2000.²⁶⁹ Thus while Thimphu has so far stuck to the traditionalist politics, the cumulative effect of its unhappy communities and Indian rebels is dragging the country into a major cataclysm.

In the latest 80th session of the National Assembly, the king *J. S. Wangchuck* has reportedly offered the so-called 'guided democracy' through promulgation of 'a new constitution.'²⁷⁰ This rhetoric is seen by many pro-Thimphu authors including Brian Shaw as a 'significant' development in Bhutan's politics. On the contrary, many critics argue that the *Ngalung* authority is attempting a smart move to shield the country from growing international pressure to take back nearly one sixth of its own citizens. Since the Assembly session states that people who have fled Bhutan will not be allowed to take part in this exercise, the chances of an early and dignified repatriation of the refugees has further receded.²⁷¹ Such analysis also indicates that Thimphu is still experimenting with anything it could possibly think to maintain absolute dominance. In this context, the *Lhotshampa* refugees are not the root cause of themselves. They are the effects or symptom of the deep-rooted crisis of Thimphu's polity, which stresses the need for a distinct identity but does not envision forging this identity to encompass the diversity of its cultures.²⁷²

²⁶⁷ Buhaug & Gates 2002: 422

²⁶⁸ Ura 2001

²⁶⁹ Ibid., *Himal* 1/2001

²⁷⁰ The *BBC World News* 7/12/2002

²⁷¹ The *Spotlight* 9-15/9/2002

²⁷² Chandrasekharan 22/1/2002

Conclusion:

This paper unravels the mysterious idea that Bhutan is a ‘peaceful dragon’ hidden somewhere in the high Himalayas without many repercussions from the outside world. It makes clear that Bhutan is a country of immigrants much like Canada. In fact, the whole Himalayan region (e.g. Bhutan, Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim) has been an area of migration for thousands of years - almost all population groups have migrated to this area at any time in history. In the 18th century and beyond, the religious refugees from Tibet probably assimilated or eliminated sparsely populated ‘indigenous’ peoples of Bhutan. When colonial Britain came to India, their conquests turned Bhutan’s religious infighting into political skirmishes. After the Duar War of 1865, Bhutan became a kind of satellite state of the British India. Colonial governor also played an eminent role in dividing Bhutan’s political realm between *Dorji* family in the south and *Wangchuck* family in the north. In such process, the religious and temporal rules established by *Ngawang Namgyal* was dismissed and his family was eventually evicted. Subsequently, the British India rulers became Bhutan's guru in its national planning who advised *Kazi Ugyen Dorji* to encourage Nepalese people to come to Bhutan in order to generate the required economic surplus for the ‘state.’ However, since colonial Britain had divided Bhutan between the northern royal family and the southern *Dorji* family, it is difficult to say whether Bhutan was a state in the way it is understood today. Nevertheless, the immigrant Nepalese were promoted to clear the unhealthy Duar (southern mountain passes) forests and to plant cereals and cash crops. Over the years, the *Lhotshampa* settlements developed into an organised, compact agrarian system similar to the Hindu society of Nepal.²⁷³ This thesis thus opposes statements like Bhutan was isolated for centuries and is only recently facing its first ethnic problem.

In the 1950s, when the *Wangchuck* principality decided to transform Bhutan into a nation state, it found itself confronted by the problem of ethnic identity posed by the *Lhotshampa* settlers.²⁷⁴ It was also the time where Sino-Indian rivalry was at its height, which forced the third king *J. D. Wangchuck* to initiate drastic administrative reforms including granting of citizenship to the *Lhotshampa* peoples for the first time and developing direct political relations with countries other than India. Once again, the assassination of *J. P. Dorji* in 1964 and an alleged *coup d’état* against the then crown prince some years later plunged Bhutan into an internal conflict. The theocratic outfit wrestling for *Ngalung* supremacy effectively brought the fourth king *J. S. Wangchuck* into their fold. Ever since, the process of assimilation intensified in order to force various distinct communities under the *Ngalung* cultural norms. Initially, several Citizenship Acts and censuses were used as weapons for amalgamation. In 1988, Thimphu officially adopted the policy of ‘one nation, one people’ under which, irrespective of differences of ethnicity, language, culture, tradition and religion, everyone had to follow the *driglamnamja* of the ruling elites.

In the meantime, the political circumstances around the globe were changing drastically. The

²⁷³ Sinha 1998

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

breakdown of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union also sprouted a wave of democratic movements. Likewise, the late Nepalese king *Birendra* who had enjoyed absolute power for decades, was compelled to agree in 1990 with the popular demand for a multiparty government following people's uprising that lasted for many months. Under such a situation, a handful of educated *Lhotshampa* members began to criticise Bhutan's monarchy as dictatorial and despotic. As soon as demonstrations began, realising that their ideologies had crumbled, the *Ngalung* rulers resorted to direct force evicting many *Lhotshampa* peoples. This is because the defenders of orthodoxy must carry their message into an ever larger number of instrumental domains in order to sustain ideological hegemony, while curtailing the ability of subaltern groups to advance viable alternatives. Where redundancy falters and ideology making fails, the deficit may be made up by force.²⁷⁵ This has precisely been the case in Bhutan. In this sense, today Bhutan represents itself as the 'image of a maximal state' in which the *Ngalung* ruling circle commands the machinery of government, particularly its armed enforcement agencies, to use coercive powers against its citizens. This has so far preserved the coherence of state. However, while Thimphu is commanding obedience rather than loyalty, the fear has been replaced by more positive ideas as the primary unifying element.²⁷⁶

The fact that Thimphu practically used coercion and sometimes brute force to maintain its effective control indicates that there is a grave political crisis in the country. This also means a loss of authority because the loss of control over both internal and external problems that began in the mid-1960s remain today. Likewise, the enormous wealth of the recently created middle class resulting in centres of power are emerging within the bureaucracy that wield clout detrimental to the country's interests.²⁷⁷ Because of the non-existence of political parties or non governmental institutions Bhutan has no checks and balances or in-built safety valves in the institutional system. Hence, as Bhutan struggles to adjust and fit into the post-1990 world order, the advantage of controllability afforded by a one-man institutional set up (i.e. the King) will become flash points in the coming years. In this sense, the present *Lhotshampa* refugees crisis is only a manifestation of this larger problem afflicting Bhutan.²⁷⁸ The sheer use of armed force, therefore, cannot solve the domestic sociopolitical problems. In a mountainous country like Bhutan, as two authors argue, it seems safe to predict that the pertinence of spatial relationships will remain undiminished indefinitely concerning the capabilities, limitations, and vulnerabilities of armed forces.²⁷⁹

Bhutan's government seems to be conscious of the demographic threat posed by its southern inhabitants and believes that an effective solution comes through containing and suppressing the *Lhotshampa* farmers. However, recent studies have found that 'population density, total inhabitants, and dispersion of peoples all proved to be insignificant with respect to both scope and location of conflict.'²⁸⁰ It also means that the issue of 'vicious circle,' combined with the use of armed force, only adds fuel to the fire. This is particularly so when the *Ngalung*

²⁷⁵ Wolf 1997: 390

²⁷⁶ Buzan 1991: 83

²⁷⁷ Das 1996

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Buhaug & Gates 2002: 420

²⁸⁰ Ibid. 427

rulers have brought the question ‘who came to Bhutan first?’ into the game. The ethnic issues are far deeper in their origins than mere semantics about the dates of migrant settlements or in terms of indigenous people and migrants.²⁸¹ The current crisis is not difficult to solve provided that Bhutan appreciates or understand its multi-ethnic, lingual and multi-religious personality. Likewise, Thimphu will have to sanction a fair share of economic resources and political representations to the underprivileged communities. Seeing Bhutan’s sensitive geopolitics and ongoing rebel resurrections in its border areas, any other attempts or delays by the *Ngalung* rulers is likely to become cancerous to the country’s survival.

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²⁸¹ Das 1996

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