



A Personal View

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A Personal View

Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal

More than 130,000 Bhutanese people of Nepali ethnicity have been compelled to live in exile for more than 10 years. About 100,000 of them live at present in the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)-organized refugee camps in Morang and Jhapa districts of eastern Nepal. These people were forced to leave Bhutan in the aftermath of peaceful mass demonstrations that took place in September and October 1990 in southern Bhutan. The demonstrations were in response to a new policy imposed by the Government that severely curtailed the cultural and religious liberties of Bhutanese people of Nepali ethnicity. Bilateral talks between the Bhutanese and Nepali governments were initiated in 1993 in an attempt to resolve what had become an international problem for the two Himalayan countries.

After repeated delays, a Joint Verification Team (JVT) was established in March 2001 in an attempt to resolve the overriding question of the “Bhutanese identity” of the people living in the camps. The JVT had completed the processing of 12,600 individuals from one of the 7 refugee camps by November 2001, although the findings were not made public. Nevertheless, it has been estimated that more than 95% of the people who were subjected to this process have been able to produce some documentary evidence as proof of their long-term residence in

Bhutan. This effectively disqualifies Bhutan’s earlier claim that the overwhelming majority of the people living in the camps had no claim on Bhutanese citizenship.

Bhutan and the international community

M.L., one of the students who were to assist as guides during a conference in West Bengal in 1968, was the first Bhutanese I met. She came from Samchi District in southern Bhutan; both her father and mother were influential persons—her mother later became the first woman Assembly Member from the Nepali community in Bhutan. In 1968 Bhutan was not even a member of the United Nations. For Westerners it was a romantic mountain kingdom. Moreover, at that time and like most Westerners, I was under the impression that the Bhutanese people were ethnically homogeneous and that practically all were Buddhists. Nevertheless, my interaction with M.L. kept alive my interest in Bhutan.

These early, half-awakened thoughts about Bhutan deepened upon meeting Dinesh Dhakal. He had written to the United Nations University (UNU) in Tokyo to enquire about the possibility of obtaining a UNU fellowship. It was easy for me to justify a UNU fellowship for him because we had no fellow from Bhutan. He also brought with him a wealth of experience of those humble farmers whose contributions we wished to have reflected in our eventual recommendations.

My fascination with Bhutan increased from the day I watched a documentary movie on the coronation of the present King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. It portrayed Bhutan as a friendly, exclusive Buddhist state with people wearing colorful, hand-woven costumes and practicing the Drukpa Khagyu type of Mahayana Buddhism. The impression created

was that Bhutan was not the multicultural, multireligious, or multiethnic society that we have since discovered it to be. The documentary movie of such an important occasion did not capture any Bhutanese resembling the tradition and culture to which M.L. or Dhakal belonged, nor do the coffee-table books—available today for tourist propaganda and produced for Western consumption since Bhutan joined the United Nations in 1971—include information on minorities, particularly those of Nepali ethnicity.

Dhakal stayed in Colorado for a year-long training program in mountain geoecology, returning to Bhutan in 1986. He came back 6 months later to enroll as a graduate student at the Colorado School of Mines and later at Harvard University. In July 1990, Dhakal returned to Bhutan with a PhD in mining economics from the Colorado School of Mines and a Master’s in Public Administration from Harvard University. He was obviously a highly qualified young man in rapport with several members of the Bhutan royal family. With the prospects of a senior government position in Thimphu, his career seemed set for a rapid rise, but, more important to him, he was convinced that he would be able to use his hard-won education and experience for the good of his country and his people. I had no doubt about his ability to succeed.

It was a shock when, 6 months later, I received a telephone call from Seattle, WA, USA, to inform me that he had been obliged to leave his position and sneak out of Thimphu by night and even flee his beloved country under threat of death or at least imprisonment and torture. After many vicissitudes he came to join the refugee community in exile in Nepal to help organize the human rights and democracy movement for protection of democratic and minority rights in Bhutan. Our

contact was reestablished, although for a time his whereabouts had to be kept secret. My family has worked with him in a modest way ever since.

The refugee problem

In 1994, Dhakal stayed a few days at our home in Davis, CA, USA, when he returned to the United States to campaign for the cause of the Bhutanese refugees and to serve as a resource person for the Harvard Institute for International Development (Project Investment and Appraisal Management workshop). He presented me with his book, *Bhutan: A Movement in Exile* (coauthored with Christopher Strawn), which describes in detail the genesis of the problem, the atrocities perpetuated on innocent people, their escape to safety and security in the refugee camps, and the relief operation that was in progress under the aegis of the UNHCR.

Dhakal had well-documented records, evidence of certification by human rights groups, Amnesty International, and the United States Department of State, which demonstrated that thousands of Bhutanese people of Nepali ethnicity had been forcibly evicted from southern Bhutan in the aftermath of the peaceful demonstrations. These were reports by professional institutions. The Bhutanese authorities, in contrast, had depicted them as “antinationalists,” “terrorists,” and “illegal immigrants.” My earlier close association with Dhakal had left me in no doubt about his absolute integrity. Thus, I learned to accept the claim that the Royal Government of Bhutan had behaved against the norm of accepted international conduct and, in fact, stood liable to charges of a form of ethnic cleansing.

The Western media had not been helpful. Some of the leading newspapers, for example, *The Los Angeles Times*, carried a story on

Bhutan alleging the refugees to be conspirators for creation of a pan-Nepali state, comprising the Kingdom of Nepal, the erstwhile Kingdom of Sikkim, the Kingdom of Bhutan, and regions in the eastern and western Indian Himalaya, where people of Nepali ethnicity often form local majorities. The Bhutan government is on record as stating that “the refugee population in Jhapa and Morang districts of eastern Nepal are poor Nepalese of Nepal, or Nepalis of India, congregated there with the sole objective of establishing the pan-Nepali state, known as Greater Nepal.” This was quite a convincing argument, even for those familiar with the region, given the bloody history of the “Gorkhaland” agitation in the mid-1980s and the aspiration of the Nepali people in India for a Nepali state within the Indian Union.

Most Westerners view Bhutan as one of the last bastions of a surviving Buddhist culture and the loss of an independent Tibet to China and of Sikkim to India as a tragedy. There is widespread acceptance of the need to build international consciousness to promote the sovereign rights of smaller states, particularly those in politically fragile regions. Bhutan’s geopolitical situation in the region and the presence of Indian militant groups on its territory add to its political vulnerability. The present status of the refugees makes the problem that much more complex. Even Dhakal had nothing to say on my conservative position, although he always invited me to visit the refugee camps in Nepal to meet the people who are providing relief services and to find out personally the actual situation from the victims in the UNHCR camps, who then numbered about 90,000.

My visit to the camps

Throughout the long period of my professional mountain involvement,

I have been privileged to work in southwestern and northwestern China, Tibet, Central Asia, the Himalaya, northern Thailand, the Caucasus, and the Andes. I have met, worked with, and lived among often extremely poor mountain minority people. I was confident, therefore, that no personal emotion would cloud my assessment of the refugee situation in eastern Nepal. I also believed that what was at stake here was not only the now 100,000 refugees but also the Kingdom of Bhutan itself.

Immediately before my arrival several important international dignitaries had paid visits to the refugee camps. Her Royal Highness (HRH) Princess Anne of Great Britain and Madame Sadako Ogata, head of UNHCR, had raised the hopes of the refugees for their return to Bhutan. Whereas the visit of Princess Anne was a symbol of solidarity with the suffering people, Madame Ogata had also met with the King of Bhutan, the Prime Minister of Nepal, and officials of the Indian government before coming to the camps. She declared during her visit: “I have talked to your King and the officials in Bhutan; they are ready to welcome you; you will all return to Bhutan.” Dhakal and his colleagues working with BRAVVE (Bhutanese Refugees Aiding the Victims of Violence, a refugee social organization based in the camps) were excited about the new development. They also had obtained permission from His Majesty’s Government (HMG) of Nepal and the Field Office of the UNHCR so that I could make a tour of inspection.

Of the 7 camps managed by UNHCR, I visited Timai and Beldangi-II. I was a guest of BRAVVE. I inspected their training centers, talked to the trainees, and walked through other areas at random. At Timai, where Dhakal’s elder brother lives, I spent more than 1 hour talking with the elderly people, particularly those from the

Chirang, Gylegphug, and Samdrup Jongkher districts. All the people that I met had possessed land and houses in Bhutan. They told me that there had been no problem for them before 1988. Schools permitted their children to be taught in Nepali, their home language, they were allowed to wear the common dress that was customary in the hot and humid climate of southern Bhutan, and the government was not opposed to the practice of their culture and traditions. They insisted that they were not opposed to learning the Dzongkha language (the official language of Bhutan) or wearing the national dress on official occasions, but what had humiliated them the most was the government's arbitrary decision to impose the highly inconvenient and restrictive dress code and to ban teaching in the Nepali language. They had participated in the peaceful mass demonstration in 1990 in the hope that the government would rescind its language and culture policy.

I learned that the government had not responded aggressively toward the common people until a year after the demonstrations. Initially, the government appeared to be identifying those individuals who had connections with people across the border in India, who were believed to have provoked or compelled the people to participate in the mass demonstrations. It was understood that there had been a small group of agitators operating from across the border in India, but they did not number more than a couple of hundred. In fact, within 3 months of the demonstrations, the government had already contained the force behind them. The common people from all parts of southern Bhutan were then asked to write an appeal to His Majesty the King seeking royal pardon for the disturbance. Led by the village elders and prominent citizens, all the people of southern Bhutan,

particularly those of Nepali ethnicity, had submitted a written appeal through the district administrators who had organized this operation. Dhakal's elder brother, who was then *Mondal* (village headman) of the Lamidara block, was one of the individuals involved in organizing this appeal. Two months later he was arrested and tortured until he agreed to accept responsibility for fabricated charges. These included admission that he had paid money to Teknath Rizal (the leader of the human rights movement, who was released in December 1999 after serving 10 years in prison); this led to a prison term. He was released after 8 months, but by that time all his family members had been forced to flee the country and to take refuge in eastern Nepal.

Although the refugee populations in the camps are all of Nepali ethnicity, and they would face no difficulty as permanent settlers in Nepal, there must be a determined effort to achieve repatriation to their original homes, where all their possessions accumulated over several generations are located. It would also be a serious miscarriage of justice to allow Bhutan to disguise this treatment of its ethnic Nepali population, in effect, to perpetrate a form of ethnic cleansing devised to deprive them of their citizenship rights. In the camps there are more than 1800 people who have served prison terms in Bhutan. Some of them tell stories of atrocities, such as rape, torture, and custodial death.

The most recent development is that the royal government has sponsored the transfer of Buddhist farming people from eastern and western Bhutan to the lands formerly occupied by the refugees (mostly Hindus). The official names of the districts, divisions, and even villages have been changed with the apparent objective of totally erasing the traces of the original inhabitants.

Bilateral talks

The Bhutan–Nepal bilateral talks, which began in April 1993, started on the unfortunate premise that the refugees should be classified into 4 groups: (1) Bhutanese who were forcibly evicted, (2) Bhutanese who had emigrated voluntarily, (3) non-Bhutanese people—in effect, illegal immigrants, and (4) Bhutanese with criminal records. Bhutan has repeatedly claimed that Nepal was encouraging people from northeastern India or from within Nepal at the refugee camps to agitate for a pan-Nepali movement and creation of a “Greater Nepal.” HMG Nepal felt compelled to agree to the classification process to ensure that Bhutan, in turn, would agree to initiate the so-called verification of the refugees in the camps.

This appears to have been a serious miscalculation. After signing of the agreement for classification of the refugees, it took almost 8 years to bring Bhutan to participate in the verification process. It had required a great amount of pressure on the part of the international community, particularly the United States, the European Union, and the UNHCR, to induce Bhutan to begin the joint verification exercise in March 2001. The verification process began very slowly, at an average of only 10 families a day. This was severely criticized by human rights groups and the refugee communities themselves because, at this rate, the process would be extended over a decade. Furthermore, the Bhutan government had insisted that even the first to be classified would not be told of the result until the last person had been examined, that no independent third party could be present, and that any appeal would be handled solely by Thimphu. Later, the rate of verification was increased, although only the verification at Khudunabari camp, which holds about 12,600 people, was completed by November 2001.

The diplomatic drag on the negotiations over the Bhutanese refugee issue is partly attributed to the political instability in Nepal. The frequent change of government, the inconsistency in the policy of succeeding governments on the issue of Bhutanese refugees, the royal tragedy of 2001, and the Maoist insurgency problem, all have served as excuses for Bhutan to evade engaging in serious dialogue with Nepal. The long-expected Joint Ministerial Level Committee Meeting that was to take place in the first half of 2002 has not yet been announced.

Conclusions

It is time for the international community to devise a strategy to bring all the actors together, so that their moral responsibility for solving this humanitarian problem is no longer ignored.

India, as the major power of the region, has apparently absolved itself from the responsibility of finding an amicable solution. This in itself exacerbates the lingering problem. There is a need to build moral pressure on India to fulfill the responsibility of a country with a billion people, nuclear capability, and the status of an economic powerhouse in South Asia to address the humanitarian needs that reside at its doorstep in Bhutan.

The international community, which foots the bills of UNHCR, must take a more determined stand, which should include sanctions at the levels of bilateral and multilateral assistance to Bhutan.

Considering its strategic location between its powerful Asian neighbors, and bearing in mind the history of their dealing with smaller countries in the zone of their influence, Bhutan is bound to respond positively to this step. However, it will have to be a holistic approach, coordinating cooperation among UN organizations, international financial institutions, the European Union, and Japan—the main contributors to Bhutan's socioeconomic development. Given that 2002 is the International Year of Mountains and that one of IYM's principal goals is improvement in the welfare of mountain peoples and, through that, sustainable development and environmental stability, surely the problem of Bhutan (for the long-term prospect certainly includes a threat to the continued viability of Bhutan) can be solved in a way that makes it a shining model of success.

It has already been expressed to Bhutan, during the last aid consortium meeting in Thimphu, that its short-term success in postponing resolution of this problem in itself will be the cause of political crisis in the future. The people of Nepali ethnicity are probably the largest minority community of the Kingdom. Given the presence of ethnic Nepali people in the neighboring Indian states and the tested prowess of this community in the history of military warfare, modest external pressure could easily trigger a militant reaction in the south with the potential for disaster. The presence of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and Bodo militants

in southern Bhutan, their political missions, and the history of insurgency in the wider region should lead the government of Bhutan itself to realize that resolution of this decade-old refugee problem is a matter of the highest urgency.

On the other hand, the refugees in general, and their leadership in particular, must realize that gradual change in Bhutan might be better than any sudden opening of the society to a full-fledged democracy. Experimentation with the democratic system of governance has not been particularly successful in Nepal, and there are many other sad examples around the world. Bhutan's population base, its favorable population-land ratio, and the enormous international goodwill for contribution of resources to its socioeconomic development should lead to recognition that it would be in the interest of the country and all its people for the refugees to return. This could strengthen the hands of the present leadership and enable Bhutan to move more rapidly along the path of socioeconomic development.

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