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**BHUTAN'S ETHNIC PROBLEM : A CASE OF A FRAGILE
ETHNIC MOSAIC IN SOUTH ASIA**

Ethnic problems have always been a source of tension and conflict in interstate relations among the countries of South Asia. Since independence these countries have been vulnerable to ethnic tensions arising out of the colonial policy of 'divide and rule' accentuated by the controversial demarcation of boundaries by the British on the eve of their departure. New ethnic tensions also emerged because of migration of ethnic groups, that has continued for decades, from one territory to another in search of better economic opportunities. The process of accommodation and assimilation of the migrants with the local people is most often very complex and leads to various tensions. The cross-border ramification of these tensions tend to encourage external interference in the affairs of the concerned states, thus leading to the deterioration of mutual relations.

Recently, a long standing and heretofore 'low-intensity' ethnic problem prevailing between Bhutan and Nepal has caused considerable concern in the region of South Asia. This ethnic problem had actually been dormant for a number of years. Its eruption has caused relations to strain between Nepal and Bhutan. This particular imbroglio concerns the plight of the ethnic Nepalese population in Bhutan. In the past months several thousands of these people have crossed into Nepal and Indian territory. Their primary reason for fleeing Bhutan according to these people is that they are being persecuted by the Bhutanese authorities for their different ethnic identity.

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At the root of the ethnic Nepali problem in Bhutan is the fact that in comparison to people of Bhutanese origin the Nepali population in Bhutan has increased greatly over the past few years. Bhutan which has a per capita GNP of \$415 US dollars¹ is one of the richer countries of South Asia. On the other hand high unemployment rate and poverty has led thousands of Nepalese to cross into Bhutan to seek employment, in most cases illegally. The Bhutanese fear that if influx of Nepalese into Bhutan continues, in the next few years, Bhutan may become a Nepali majority state. Therefore, adoption of stringent immigration measures became imperative. It resulted in the expulsion of thousands of illegal immigrants who then crossed over to Nepal. The inflow of these people into Nepal from Bhutan has created a massive refugee problem straining relations between Bhutan and Nepal.

This situation has been taken advantage of by the ethnic Nepalese in India and the outlawed BPP (Bhutan Peoples Party) to demand the establishment of democracy in Bhutan. Although the ethnic problem itself has left Bhutanese authorities in a quandary, their real worry concerns not only the remote possibility of the creation of a "Greater Nepal" but also the intensification of the movement for democratisation of Bhutan which is being supported by Nepal and ethnic Nepalese in Bhutan and India. Against the backdrop of these developments the purpose of this article is to study the ethnic problem in Bhutan. It will analyse the factors that have contributed to the present problem; the status and position of the concerned states will also be studied. The 'Greater Nepal' issue and its linkage with the present problem will also be examined. And finally, the paper will highlight the possible implications arising out of this situation in the future.

I. BHUTAN: A PROFILE

The Kingdom of Bhutan with an area of 18,000 square miles has a population of 600,000. Until the beginning of the century it was a theocracy.² Despite being one of the oldest countries in the world it has

1. *Asiaweek*, January 7, 1993.

2. FEER, *Asia Yearbook* 1985, p. 65.

one of the newest monarchies. It was only in 1907 that the present King's Great-Great Grandfather Uygen Wangchuk re-established absolute rule when the theocratic system collapsed into chaos and anarchy.

Modern Bhutan draws its roots from an autonomous polity that emerged in the country's western region during the 17th century.³ The Tibetans who migrated to the region subjugated the local tribes and established their supremacy in the 12th century and thus founded origins of Bhutan as a nation state. It took four centuries for the feuding migrant Tibetans to establish clear cut geographical boundaries of Bhutan and set-up a politico-religious system of governance and thus an ethnically, politically and culturally homogenous entity was established. Its existence as a unified state dominated by a politically and militarily active Buddhist theocracy dates back to three centuries.⁴

After the death of Ngawang Namgyal, under whose leadership geographical and political identity of the country was formed, the struggle for power intensified and continued till the establishment of monarchy in 1907. The reincarnate Shabdrungs⁵ (title given to the reincarnations of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal), were eliminated one by one by the civilian power that had emerged through the Druk Desi (the secular head), the Penlops (Governors) and other powerful local officials. However the Druk himself became weak and became more dependent on the Penlops who were also fighting among themselves. Against this chaotic situation it was the Governor of Tongsa, Uygen Wangchuk who emerged as the most powerful to become the first king of Bhutan in 1907 with the support of the British.⁶

3. FEER, *Asia Yearbook*, 1992 p.

4. B.S. Das, "Bhutan", *World Focus*, November-December 1985, cited in Shaheen Afroze, "Foreign Policy of Small States" *Biiss Journal* Vol. 8, No. 2, 1987.

5. Some decades after the death of Ngawang Namgyal in 1652, three reincarnations of the first Shabdrung The spiritual and temporal sovereign of Bhutan (1650-1907) i.e. Ngawang Namgyal were found - the Ku (body), the Sung (Speech) and the Thu (mind) incarnations. By the mid 18th century the Ku reincarnation had died out but the Thu and the Sung incarnation continued to reappear into the 20th century. The traditional practice was to recognize the Thu reincarnation as the Shabdrung and the seven Shabdrungs who held power one after another were all of this incarnation. See, Leo E. Rose, *Politics of Bhutan*, Cornell University Press Ltd. London, 1977, p. 26-27.)

6. B.S. Das, "Bhutan" cited in V.S. Bajpai, *India and its Neighbourhood*, Lancer International, New Delhi, 1986, p. 299.

It was in 1865 that Bhutan had come under the suzerainty of the British and the Treaty of Punakha of 1910 confirmed the status. By this treaty Bhutan could have no external relations independent of the British Government and in return Bhutan was assured internal autonomy. With Indian independence in 1947 and with the departure of the British from this region, Indo-Bhutan relations did not change. In fact, Bhutan signed a treaty with India in 1949 with few deviations from the Anglo-Bhutanese Treaty or the Treaty of Punakha (1910).

The first two Kings of Bhutan were engaged in consolidating and centralization of their power by integrating the various factions. It was only under the third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk that Bhutan began to take initiatives towards liberalisation and modernisation and began to adopt policies aimed at seeking recognition of Bhutan as a sovereign independent country.

Bhutan is now a hereditary monarchy. King Ugyen Wangchuk was succeeded by his son Jigme Wangchuk in 1926, who ruled until 1952. His son Jigme Dorji Wangchuk then became the King and remained so until his death in 1972 and was succeeded by his son King Jigme Singye Wangchuk the same year.⁷

For centuries Bhutan had deliberately isolated itself from the rest of the world. Its inaccessibility led to the successful implementation of this policy. Although its isolation was once regarded as its surest protection Bhutan gradually began to come out of isolation with the Independence of India. In 1958 Prime Minister Nehru of India visited Bhutan. Talks between him and the Bhutanese ruler led to the formulation of the first development plan for Bhutan for the period 1961-66. During this period India agreed to sponsor Bhutan for membership of the Colombo Plan Organisation, which led to its regular membership in 1963 and also for membership in the Universal Postal Union in 1966.⁸ The next milestone was the establishment of diplomatic relations with Bangladesh (1979) and Nepal (1983). Bhutan

7. FEER, *Asia Yearbook*, 1992 p. 82.

8. V.H. Coelho, *Sikkim and Bhutan*, Vikas publications, New Delhi, 1971, p. 73.

also became an active member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) ever since the association was launched.⁹

The principal aim of both the present King of Bhutan and his father has been that of modernisation and 'controlled liberalization'. The first step to this effect was taken by the present King's late father King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk. He established a National Assembly, the Tshongdu, 30 years ago and in the last year of his reign in 1971 Bhutan became a member of the United Nations. This helped Bhutan to receive technical assistance and funds for economic development. Other than the Tshongdu the present King also relies on the Royal Advisory Council and the Council of Ministers to execute his duties. There are two other vital organs of the government of Bhutan: the judiciary and the armed forces. The army's strength is estimated to be about 7000 men and is a separate entity from the Royal Bodyguard which is responsible for the King's security.¹⁰ The judiciary which is separated from the executive, also has a pyramidal structure. The King is the highest court of appeal against the decisions of the lower courts. The Bhutanese administration is a three tier system: central, district and village. The King controls the various departments through the royal representatives (his sisters), ministers and secretaries. Although the King is the executive head and unequivocally the Head of the state, the 150-member Tshongdu (National Assembly) established in 1953 has been vested with certain powers. In 1969 it was empowered to select and remove the King and veto his legislations. The King can be removed by a two-thirds vote of the Tshongdu and must secure a vote of confidence every three years. The Royal Advisory Council, in which most legislation now originates, is responsible to the Tshongdu. Majority of the members, i.e., 100, of the Tshongdu are chosen through public consensus from villages of the nation's 18 districts, 10 members are chosen by the regional monastic bodies and the rest 40 members are appointed by the King.¹¹

9. Partha S. Ghosh, *Cooperation and Conflict in South Asia*, Manohar Publications, New Delhi 1989, p. 144.

10. *Asiaweek*, September 27, 1985.

11. A. C. Sinha, *Bhutan: Ethnic Identity and National Dilemma*, Reliance Publishing House, New Delhi, 1991, p. 200.

The Kingdom of Bhutan can be geographically divided into three regions, namely, Southern Bhutan, The Central Himalayas and Northern Bhutan.¹² Each of these regions is characterised by unique culture and ethnic groups. The southern regions of Bhutan is inhabited mainly by peasants of Nepalese origin, high caste people and tribal populations who continued to immigrate from the end of the 19th century until about 1950. They are full Bhutanese citizens, officially designated as Southern Bhutanese.

The Central Himalayas is divided into three parts. It has very different characteristics, enhanced by the fact that each part has its own distinct language mutually incomprehensible to others. The region of Western Bhutan, is the home of the Drukpa people, they are of Mongoloid stock and speak languages of the Tibeto-Burman family. They are Buddhist and their language is called Dzongkha-"language of the Dzong" (fortress) which is now the official language of Bhutan. In Central Bhutan the people speak 'Kha' a language with local variations.

Eastern Bhutan is inhabited by the 'Sharchopas' (People of the east) who speak their own language. This region has close proximity to South East-Asia. This region also contains semi-nomadic people who belong to a special ethnic group the 'Dakpas'. The Northern region is inhabited by semi-nomadic Yak traders.

II. HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE ETHNIC PROBLEM

According to the 1988 population census conducted in Bhutan, its population was 600,000 of whom Bhutanese Buddhist comprised 48%, Nepalese Hindus 45% and others 7%.¹³ The newest and most easily identified ethnic group in Bhutan is that of Nepali origin in Southern Bhutan. Most of them have been resident in Bhutan for only three or four generations, representing a new still somewhat alien element in the population structure.¹⁴

12. Françoise Pommaret, *An Illustrated Guide to Bhutan*, The Guide Book Company Ltd., Hongkong, pp. 44-50.

13. *FEER*, July 23, 1992.

14. Leo E. Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

Large scale migration of the Nepalese first into Darjeeling, then to Sikkim and Duars was followed by migration to the southern foot-hills of Bhutan as these regions were inhabited by a few Mech tribesmen with a distant Bhutanese control. This migration had been prompted by the signing of the Treaty of Sinchula in 1865 by which the Duars war between India and Bhutan came to an end. As a result the entire Duar tract from Sikkim to Arunachal borders and Dalimkot region separating Sikkim from Bhutan was annexed by the British and annual allowance of Rs. 50,000 was fixed for the Bhutanese loss leading to the establishment of peace in that region. An interesting development during this time was the emergence of Kazi Ugyen Dorji as a significant person in the Bhutanese power structure particularly in the western and south-western Bhutan, who also played an important role in shaping the Indo-Bhutanese relationship. As Kazi Ugyen Dorji was related to the then Bhutanese strong man, the Tongsa Penlop (Ugyen Wangchuk) the British gave him administrative responsibilities and in 1898 he was appointed the chief of Ha with rights over the whole of Southern Bhutan and vested in him the right to settle immigrant Nepalese in his territories. The principal purpose of Kazi Ugyen Dorji in settling the Nepalese in his territory was that as an enlightened person he had closely observed the industrious Nepalese who had brought about economic transformation in Sikkim, Darjeeling and Kalimpong district.¹⁵

Over the last hundred years the Nepalese have developed the South-Western belt of Bhutan. In 1904 there were already 14,000 Nepalese in Bhutan. It was when they organised themselves as cultivators in the Southern Area, after clearing the thick vegetation, that brought them into conflict with the Bhotia's who were herdsman. The main factor behind the conflict was that they were opposed to each other's vital interest. By 1905, gradually the winter grazing grounds began to diminish with the increase in Nepalese settlers resulting in the failure of the Bhotia's chief source of wealth cattle rearing and dairy produce further aggravating the already worsening relations between the Nepalese settlers and the Bhotias.¹⁶

15. A.C. Sinha, *op.cit.*, p. 37.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

An estimate of Nepalese migrants in Bhutan was provided by Captain C. J. Morris of the Gurkha Rifles who was sent in 1932 to investigate the possibility of the Bhutanese recruits for the British armed forces. While making an extensive tour of Bhutan's South-western and South-eastern regions where the Nepalese are a majority he gave a crude estimate of these people. According to him there was an estimated 60,000 Nepalese in Bhutan.¹⁷ Immigration has continued as most of the Nepalese arrive as guest workers for building various projects in Bhutan but they tend to settle down. This has resulted in the shortage of arable land in the region. Though Nepalese immigration to Bhutan has been officially banned since 1959 the influx continued.

The Nepalese in Bhutan are comprised of three important social and cultural groups, e.g., the 'Takuris' of predominantly western Nepal; the 'Newaris' of both Kathmandu valley and eastern Nepal and the 'Kiratis' of eastern Nepal and Sikkim. They may also be broadly divided into two groups: ¹⁸ the 'Tagadharis' who wear the sacred thread such as the Brahmins and 'Matwalis' who are by tradition permitted to drink intoxicant drinks. The 'Tagadharis' had considered Bhutan to be inhabited by rude barbarians, who were a beef eating pastoral community. However political alignments between the Nepalese and the Bhutanese continued especially during the last days of the Nepalese King Prithvi Narain Shah's reign. Bhutanese theocracy was granted estates in Nepal which continued to be governed by Bhutanese officials upto Rana Jang Bahadur's emergence in the 1940's. The Bhutanese Shabdrungs were the patrons of the famous Swambhunath temple in Kathmandu.

III. PRESENT ETHNIC PROBLEM IN BHUTAN: THE 1990 PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN BHUTAN AND ITS AFTERMATH

The establishment of multi-party democracy in Nepal in September 1990 had a profound impact on the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan. The pro-democracy movement in Bhutan, in August and September 1990,

17. *Ibid* p.39.

18. *Ibid*, p. 38.

though not of the same magnitude as that of Nepal's was spearheaded mostly by Non-Drukpa people or rather people of Nepalese origin. The ethnic Nepalese put forward several demands for demanding the change of government of Bhutan. However, these factors are the result of numerous problems that Bhutan has been facing for a long time. These factors are as follows:

Problem of National Integration in Bhutan

To understand the problem of national integration in Bhutan several aspects of Bhutanese National identity must be taken into account. In this respect the reasons for their conflict will also be discussed.

There are three distinguishable aspects of the Bhutanese identity.¹⁹ Firstly, the Drukpa Church of Lamaism distinct from other forms of Buddhism. Secondly, the inseparable identity of the Druk-Gyalpo (title given to Wangchuk Monarchs since 1907) and the Bhutanese national identity and thirdly, the role of the National Assembly or the Tshongdu which acts as the "dual sovereign" along with the King of Bhutan.

Bhutan is the only Lamaist monarchy in the world. Founded in 534 BC Buddhism in Bhutan survives in its oldest form as Mahayana Buddhism.²⁰ The Drukpa Church of Lamaism is distinct from other forms of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism. For Centuries Bhutan was ruled by the "Prince Abbots". It was a theocratic state. The Shabdrungs laid the foundations of the present day Bhutanese nation in the seventeenth century. It was through their achievements that the Drukpa sect found their footing in Bhutan.

The Dzong (as the seat of civil, defence cum administrative and religious power) played a crucial role. The Drukpa sect of Lamaism gradually became the state religion of Bhutan. Although the institution of the Shabdrungs is non-existent the Je Khempo (Head Abbot of Bhutan; head of the religions Drukpa Kagyupa school of Bhutan) plays a very important

19. *Ibid*, p. 212.

20. The latter forms of Buddhism, known as Mahayana, often worship a pantheon of divine Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (future Buddhas). The Mahayanas view the traditional way of seeking Nirvana as a lesser carrier (hinayana) of salvation and their teaching as a more advanced or greater vehicle (Mahayana). (*Asiaweek* September 27, 1985).

role. The Tshongdu also consists of representatives of the monastic order. Their membership also extends to the royal advisory council and other state institutions. All state functions begin with the Drukpa rituals. The Druk Gyalpo has to be crowned by the Je Khempo otherwise his reign would not be regarded as legitimate. Guru Padma Sambhava, the Indian Buddhist missionary to Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan is held as the guardian spirit of the Kingdom. The national emblems of Bhutan, the national flag the national anthem etc., have all been taken from religious symbols and Buddhist beliefs. Buddhism is woven into Bhutan's national psyche and culture. While citizens in Bhutan are free to hold their own views on religion and faith, preaching of any religion outside of Buddhism is not allowed. It is not surprising that the educated elite are well-grounded both in their religion and history. Even those educated abroad in Christian missionary schools in India or at colleges in Europe or in the United States, have to undergo a mandatory orientation course so that they can easily fit into their culture and traditions when they return to Bhutan. Nearly all Bhutanese are Buddhist and the faith has not only moulded the country's history but also become an intrinsic part of the Bhutanese way of life. On the other hand, there are in Bhutan different ethnic groups who have their own distinct culture, religion or rather a totally different way of life. These tribal and other communities include the Lepchas, Doyer, Ken, etc., and of course the Nepalese in Southern Bhutan. The Nepalese are mostly hindus and are by tradition divided into three cultural groups. They are composed of the 'Thakuris', the 'Newaris' and the 'Kiratis'.²¹ These groups are divided into castes and subcastes. The Thakuris are strictly divided among themselves into a number of castes based on the Hindu concept of purity and pollution. The caste structure of the Newaris are dependent on the basis of their religion as they may be Hindu or Lamaist. The Kiratis are also divided along religious lines as there are a number of Animistic, Lamaist and Hindunized tribes among them. Their dialect is also different from the majority Drukpa. They

21. A.C. Sinha, *op.cit.*, p. 227.

have their distinct dialect apart from the Nepali or the Gorkhali as their lingua franca. Their food habit, dress habit, industriousness etc., are totally opposite to that of the Bhutanese. The Nepalese elite class is also opposed to various practices of the Drukpas which is in contradistinction to their religious beliefs such as eating beef, polyandry, widow remarriage, etc. On the other hand, the ethnic Nepalese mostly hindus practice rituals prevalent in the hindu culture. They look towards Nepal and India as the centre of their civilisation, historical achievements and religious pilgrimage. As a result, the ethnic Nepalese in Bhutan maintain close cultural and social links with both these countries especially, Nepal. This attitude has created misgivings in Bhutan especially as many of the Nepalese maintain their establishments in India, Nepal and sometimes in Sikkim.

Secondly, Prior to his coronation the Crown Prince of Bhutan visits the shrine of the Shabdrung's in the Punakha Dzong and borrows the holy scarf of the first Shabdrung. Although the King is in practice taken to be the secular ruler of the state his position is seen by many as representing the absolute sovereignty of the first Shabdrung, therefore giving his position a communal colour, i.e., Buddhist Bhutanese. Moreover, the King as the absolute monarch represents the Bhutanese nation in totality.

Thirdly, The Tshongdu is also a symbol of Bhutanese national identity. It represents all the Bhutanese. However, it is felt that as the people's representatives are either the traditional ethnic chiefs or village headmen or the subjects of southern Bhutan they usually do not take a critical stand on the royal command which can go against the interest of other ethnic groups in Bhutan, especially the Nepalese.

Attempts at Modernisation

Upto the 1950's administration in Bhutan was simple. Terms of appointments and accountability of the officials, as well as their functions, etc., were not clearly mentioned. Responsibility of the local militia, state police force, limited adjudication and maintenance of order was vested in the local administration. They were assisted by the village headmen who carried out their duties faithfully in accordance to the wishes of the government. However, in Southern Bhutan the situation was slightly different in the

sense that the Dorjjs were responsible for administering South and Western Bhutan. The Sipchu Kazi (the head administrative office in Southern Bhutan until 1955) helped the Dorjjs in administering this region to provide certain amount of the revenue and maintain all the obligations to the state. The Dorjjs and the Sipchu Kazi ruled together over the Nepalese villages through the village Mandals. Being a feudal system secular control over the resources was not possible as the monasteries used to function as the local feudal units. It was the monasteries who controlled the land, forests, pasture land, trade, farmers, graziers, slaves and other commoners. In a way the system was a theocratic feudalism. It was an administration to serve the needs of the royalty and the total functioning was paternalistic.²² It was in the 1960's that the third Druk-Gyalpo decided that Bhutan in order to be transformed into a nation state required changes in the administrative structure. It was felt that only then Bhutan could retain its independent identity and self-sufficiency as a nation. Therefore, the policy of modernization was adopted. The first step to this effect was the realization that ascriptive administrative structure was inadequate to meet the requirements of a nation-state engaged in economic development. Secondly, a strategy had to be adopted for economic development and modernization. Towards this Bhutan decided to draw upon the Indian experience of mixed economic system and development planning. Its entire development planning was aimed at planning for rural development. Priority was given to agriculture, education and communication. An aspect of the policy of modernisation of Bhutan has been the process of rapid development of the southern districts of Bhutan over the past decade. This policy increased the demand for labour. The void was filled by labourers from neighbouring countries of India and Nepal. These people were attracted by wages reportedly 400 percent higher than in their own countries. This opportunity of increased income along with free health and education led to large scale immigration which was not always legal. According to the Bhutanese authorities some 47,000 acres of government owned land are under illegal occupation.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

The King of Bhutan in order to provide a structural base to the nation building programmes took a number of steps to streamline the administration.²³ Ecclesiastic, Military, Constitutional, Royal Intelligence and Judiciary department have been retained by the King as has been done in the past. On the other hand, the Royal Advisory Council, the Council of Ministers and the Ministries of Development, Home, Communication, Finance, Foreign Relations, Trade, Industry and Forests were created, including a Planning Commission. The administration has now been institutionalized from the Royal Advisory Council to the village headman.

In order to bring about overall socio-economic development of both rural and urban masses Bhutan has adopted three principal objectives as its strategy of development.²⁴

(i) To develop agriculture and animal husbandry so that production in these sectors increase.

(ii) Creating Conditions for people in the rural areas to have higher cash incomes so that they are able to meet basic needs, to increase the consumption level of food and other essential items.

(iii) Providing important social services and amenities like drinking water, health, education, etc., so that the people are properly equipped to engage themselves in the important productive task of rural development.

The present Bhutanese bureaucracy can be classified into two categories.²⁵ The personal data of 20 top state functionaries reveal that from age, place of birth, education and positions held there are two distinct sets of the bureaucrats. About one-third of them were born before 1930 in Western or Central Bhutan, educated through the traditional monastic schooling. They belong to the orthodox school of the bureaucrats who are steeped in the Drukpa tradition and are hard core nationalists and extremely loyal to the King. Two thirds were born after 1940 in Southern, Central and Western Bhutan. These bureaucrats are composed of two ethnic groups. Of them six

23. *Ibid*, p. 218.

24. *Ibid*, p. 220.

25. *Ibid*, p. 222.

are Nepali born in Southern Bhutan, educated in West Bengal, occupy lower to middle position in the administrative structure and of them to Drukpa ladies. No one among them has risen to the rank of a minister. These bureaucrats belong to a social, cultural and religious bloc that is different from that of the Drukpas. However, as in many instances they are highly educated they are much sought-after by the Bhutanese administration.

The genesis of the present problem is the result of accumulated hatred which the Nepalese immigrants have harbored for many years. The Nepalese who began to settle in Bhutan over a century ago claim parity with the Drukpas who form the core of the people. The political freedom and power which their brethren enjoy in neighbouring Sikkim and Darjeeling compared to their restricted political participation and comparative inferior status to the Drukpas have created resentment among them. Since no political activity is permitted in Bhutan there is hardly any outlet for their grievances.

Despite sincere attempts by the present government of Bhutan to integrate the Nepalese into the mainstream of Bhutan's national life through economic development and increased participation in the administrative structure, it is not being very successful. Their grievances have not yet been redressed, in fact more have emerged over the past few years.

The present situation has reached a critical stage in the sense that the growing discontent of the Nepali-Bhutanese is being linked to human rights abuse and possible democratic change in that country. The ruling elite have been accused of deliberately harboring malice against the Nepalese who constitute 45 percent (as per 1988 census) of Bhutan's population. The Nepali immigrants allege that they have always been treated as aliens and the Bhutanese policy was to isolate them by confining them to Southern Bhutan. In 1952 the Nepali-Bhutanese formed the Bhutan State Congress under the leadership of D.B Gurung, D.B. Chetri and G.P. Sharma. The main goal of the party was to change the discriminatory policies of the Bhutanese government against the Nepali Bhutanese.²⁶

26. M. D. Dharamdasani (ed.) *Contemporary South Asia*, Shalimar Publishing House, Varanasi, 1985, p. 139.

When King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk ascended the throne in 1952 efforts were made to integrate the Nepalese into the political system of the Kingdom. They were given representation in the National Assembly when it was established in 1953. They were and are recruited in the army and civil services on the same basis as other Bhutanese and he also announced a liberal policy towards land ownership and taxation in Southern Bhutan. However, in the 1960's the Bhutan State Congress was outlawed. Since then no political party is permitted in Bhutan. After the dissolution of the Bhutan State Congress the BPP (Bhutan Peoples Party) was formed in 1990 with bases in Nepal and India. Since then this party has carried on the work of the now defunct Bhutan State Congress. Despite attempts at integrating the Nepalese into the mainstream of national life political development outside Bhutan in the 1970s, the merger of the Nepalese majority state of Sikkim with India again changed the attitude of the ruling authorities towards the Nepalese and their attitude towards the Bhutanese. The emergence of a Nepalese speaking State within India gave a national identity to the Nepalese settlers all over the Northeast as it visibly meets their linguistic and cultural aspirations.

In 1988 when the first detailed population census was carried out it was found that more than 100,000 economic migrants had entered Bhutan in the past few years. As a result immigration laws were immediately reinforced and all recent immigration was declared illegal. This sparked off protests followed by violent demonstrations by those declared illegal. The protesters mostly Nepalese, were supported by a section of Bhutan's other ethnic minorities, who the government says form one third of the country's 600,000 people.²⁷ As a result, the Bhutanese felt that they would lose their distinct Buddhist-Bhutanese identity to the growing number of Nepali immigrants.

The first signs of discontent in Bhutan was felt when it was declared in the 1985 citizenship act that those non-Bhutanese who had entered Bhutan after 1958 would not be given citizenship rights. This policy was vigorously enforced resulting in the statelessness of some 30,000 Nepalese.²⁸ Since then the problem with the Nepalese have continued.

27. *Dialogue*, Dhaka, August 7, 1992.

28. *FEER*, October 3, 1991.

Gradually other factors emerged that exacerbated the already complicated situation. These factors are as follows: The policy of "Driglam Namzha," which is an elaborate code of conduct governing private life and public behaviour made compulsory for all to wear the Drukpa dress and also for all women to adopt the Druk hair style (cropped hair). Moreover, teaching of the Nepali language was dropped from schools and the Bhutanese language was enforced as the official language. Expression of Nepalese hindu culture had also been banned and emphasis had been put on Bhutanese-Bhuddhist culture. The non-Bhutanese people were termed as illegal immigrants, anti-nationals and terrorists, who were motivated by a desire to turn Bhutan into a Nepali dominated state by increasing their demographic size and establishing a multi-party political system.²⁹

The King's action to assert Bhutanese culture led to the outflow of thousands of people into Nepal and India. In Nepal there are about 60,000 refugees and it was presumed that the number would reach 100,000 by October 1992.³⁰ Many have also taken refuge in West Bengal's Jalpaiguri district since the problem began.

The Nepalese have other grievances. According to them the Bhutanese from Southern Bhutan elect their representatives through the indirect method in which heads of the households cast their votes, while the highlanders follow the direct election procedure by raising their hands in a gathering of adult voters and state functionaries. This procedure is usually manipulated by the orthodox landed gentry and the clergy. The King of Bhutan had wanted to introduce the limited indirect voting system for the Nepalese in all the regions. However, this was rejected on the pretext that it would break age old Bhutanese tradition of national consensus through direct debating.³¹

Another grievance is that the Nepalese and other critics of the present government of Bhutan feel that while Tibetan ethnic groups are still encouraged to have children the government's population control programme, although voluntary, is directed towards the regions were the

29. *Dialogue*, Dhaka, October 25, 1991.

30. *Holiday*, Dhaka, August 7, 1992.

31. A.C. Sinha, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

Nepalese population predominates.³² Moreover, when the government of Bhutan announced an incentive of Ngultrum 10,000 to couples going in for ethnic intermarriages,³³ especially between Bhutanese and Nepalese it was not well-taken, neither was the attempt to give land to the Southern Bhutanese (Nepalese) in order to encourage them to settle in other regions of Bhutan. As these policies were aimed at integrating ethnic Nepalese into Bhutan's national life it was viewed with contempt and suspicion by them.

The Nepalese also complain about the restriction on their movement to other parts of Bhutan. Moreover, educated Nepalese point out that in many instances they are passed over for jobs and promotion even when they are better qualified and experienced than the Drukpas. They also point out that they are harassed at checkpoints and asked to produce travel documents, although the Drukpas are not asked for such documents.³⁴

"Gorkhaland" or the Greater Nepal Issue

The greatest concern of the King of Bhutan is that if the Bhutanese authority is not careful and the influx of Nepalese continue, the demand for a separate state within Bhutan would intensify and it would be a matter of time - 10, 15 or 20 years - that Bhutan would cease to be a Bhutanese nation, and as he points out it will become a Nepali state like Sikkim.³⁵

The integration of Sikkim into the Indian Union in 1975 is still fresh in the minds of the Bhutanese monarchy, the government and the people of Bhutan. The gradual infiltration of Nepalese people into Sikkim had rendered the people of Sikkimese origin minority status in their own land and finally it was the so called 'desire' of the Nepalese people of Sikkim to become a part of the Indian Union that ultimately resulted in its merger with India. The Bhutanese, after the 1988 population census began to view the increased number of illegal Nepali immigrants as a threat to their survival as an independent nation and felt that the "Sikkimese Syndrome" may once again be repeated.

32. *Asiaweek*, September 27, 1992.

33. *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. XIII, No.2, 1991, p. 1415.

34. *Asia Yearbook*, 1979, p. 147-148..

35. *Bangkok Post*, February 6, 1991.

In Southern Bhutan the Nepalese people are a majority. Southern Bhutan is ideal for Nepali migration because of its close proximity to Nepal and also because of its free education, free health services, higher wages and good land as available for cash crops and cereals as in other parts of Bhutan. Today an estimated five million Nepalese live in settlements on the Indian side of Bhutan's border. This area bordering Assam and West Bengal has dense forest and as a result it becomes very difficult for the Bhutanese authorities to check the illegal influx of these people. Apart from the Sikkimese parallel another issue haunts the Bhutanese authorities which is known as the "Gorkha Land" or "The Greater Nepal Issue".

The concept of "Greater Nepal" is not new, it was the dream of Nepalese monarchs down the ages. In the eighteenth century Prithvi Narayan Shah and later his successors, launched an ambitious programme of expansion trying to bring the entire hill area from Kashmir to Bhutan under its sway. However, this massive plan was frustrated due to the wars with China, Tibet, Punjab and British India. At one time the country did expand quite successfully grabbing adjoining territories in India and Sikkim although the desired Kingdom from Sulej to the Brahmaputra was never fully realized. As a result the British had to keep Nepal under constant surveillance by continuously signing pacts and treaties with it. Finally the British took away some territories, by the Treaty of Sigowli in 1815, from Nepal. These territories included parts of Sikkim, including Darjeeling in the East and the Simla Hills, Kumaon and Garhwal in the West. The British then handed back the territory of Darjeeling and adjoining parts to the King of the then independent Kingdom of Sikkim. However, twenty years later the Raj forced the King of Sikkim into gifting this territory to India.³⁶

For a while movement for the creation of a "Greater Nepal" had remained dormant. However, in 1986 Subash Ghishingh called upon all Gorkhas to begin their war for a Gorkhaland. According to him clause eight of the Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1950, "cancels all previous treaties, agreements and arrangements entered into on behalf of India, between the British

36. *Sunday*, November 17-23, 1992.

government and the government of Nepal." As a result the "Greater Nepal" activists point out that this declaration in the 1950 treaty nullifies the Treaty of Sigowli of 1815 under which Nepal had given back conquered territories to British-India and Sikkim.³⁷ Therefore, the greater Nepal supporters point out that if one looks at it logically then Darjeeling as a part of Sikkim still belongs to Nepal. The proponents of the 'Greater Nepal' concept which include the politicians of Sikkim and Darjeeling supported by external forces hope to include Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling with adjoining Nepalese settlements in West Bengal if a "Greater Nepal" ever becomes a reality. On the other hand Sikkim strongman Nar Bahadur Bhandari has also been championing the cause of the Nepalese.

In 1991 Subash Ghising, president of the Gorkha National Liberation Front along with Inderjeet, Congress (I) MP from Darjeeling warned the Prime Minister of India that movement for 'Greater Nepal' was again afoot apparently aimed at taking over Darjeeling, Sikkim, the Duars and South Bhutan.³⁸ Although Ghising and Bhandari lay blame on each other for conspiring to form a "Greater Nepal," there are considerable evidences of such design as has been mentioned earlier.

In the 1960's another concept was mooted by some quarters of the Nepalese Royal family known as the 'Himalayan Federation'.³⁹ This federation was to be formed with the three mountain Kingdoms of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. The principal reason behind its proposed formation was that the Indian threat, with its allegedly hegemonistic attitude in the Himalayas, could only be contained through the formation of such a union. For Nepal, it had meant several things. Firstly, Nepal would be the dominant partner by virtue of its size and population. Secondly, as majority of the population of Sikkim was of Nepalese origin it would gain politically. Thirdly, as Western Sikkim was once under the occupation of a substantial Nepalese population, Nepal would thus emerge as the key power in the Federation. While the Chogyal of Sikkim agreed to play along with

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. *The Pioneer*, June 24, 1992.

this proposal, if it was ever materialized despite the impending danger to his Kingdom, as it could be used as a bargaining chip with India. The late King of Bhutan Jigme Dorji Wangchuk refused to agree to such a proposal. During that time he was already facing problems with his Nepalese subjects. He had felt that involvement of foreign states in such a Federation aimed against India would undermine Bhutan's independence. As a result this concept has not yet become a reality.

At present Subash Ghisingh already maintains that the "Gorkha Hill Council" formalised through a tripartite agreement known as the "Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Accord" of August 1988 is already a step closer to the realization of a 'Greater Nepal.' Moreover, the pro-democracy movement in Bhutan had renewed the blood bond between ethnic Nepalese in India, Bhutan and Nepal. Both the Nepali Congress and the UML supported their "blood brothers" in Bhutan, just as the Gorkhas of North Bengal and Sikkim gave them food, shelter and the Gorkha Liberation Organisation reportedly supplied them with arms.⁴⁰

IV. RESPONSES OF NEPAL AND INDIA AND BHUTAN TO THE ETHNIC PROBLEM IN BHUTAN

Nepal's Response

The prodemocracy movement in Bhutan was spearheaded by the success of the 50 day Jana Andalan of 1990 in Nepal by which democracy entered Nepalese politics once again. Nepal has been quite vocal about the ethnic problem in Bhutan. Nepalese political leaders have expressed their support for democracy in Bhutan from the very beginning saying that they were in favour of peaceful struggle for democracy and human rights anywhere in the world including Bhutan.

Before becoming the Prime Minister of Nepal G.P. Koirala had appealed to the Bhutanese monarchy to pave the way for the establishment of multi-party democracy in Bhutan and had stated that the barbarous repression of unarmed Bhutanese waging peaceful struggle for multi-party democracy and human rights had shocked all who had learned of it.⁴¹

40. *Sunday*, November 17-23, 1991.

41. *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. XII, No. 12, March 1991, p. 1418.

On July 1, 1992 Nepal's King Birendra made the refugees a matter of immediate national concern by voicing it in his address to the joint session of the two houses of parliament. A week later Prime Minister Koirala convened a meeting of all major political parties to seek a policy consensus on the issue, where the recourse to Indian mediation was decided upon.⁴²

The Prime Minister of Nepal took up the issue silently when he visited New Delhi in December 1991. Then again at the SAARC Summit in December 1991 Prime Minister Koirala raised the matter. The Nepalese Foreign Secretary Narendra Bikram Shah was sent to Thimpu in April 1992 to meet the royal government in order to find a solution to the refugee problem. However, the outcome of the meeting was inconclusive. The main reason being that the Bhutanese government, in spite of Nepal's claims that all refugees are from Bhutan, refuses to acknowledge that these refugees now numbering over 70,000 as citizens of Bhutan and maintains that many of them entered the refugee camps in Nepal from Indian states bordering Nepal. During the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 Koirala also discussed the problem with the Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao.⁴³

During the 1991 Nepalese parliamentary elections the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist), along with raising anti-Indian slogans during the election campaign, was very vocal on the Greater Nepal Issue and demanded that the Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1950 be scrapped. Moreover, the Nepalese politicians maintain that the situation that has emerged out of the ethnic problem in Bhutan is one of democracy and human rights. They allege that the Bhutanese army has raped, looted and burned down homes of ethnic Nepalese living in Bhutan.⁴⁴

Nepal has proposed an "impartial" assessment of identity papers to uncover forgeries and questioning of refugees, as Nepali and UNHCR officials maintain that the refugees are carrying Bhutanese documents which proves their Bhutanese citizenship. Moreover, in the middle of the budget session of parliament Nepali Prime Minister Koirala convened an all party

42. *FEER*, July 23, 1992.

43. *Sunday*, November 17-23, 1992.

44. *Holiday*, August 7, 1992.

meeting at which modalities for solving the refugee problem with Bhutan was discussed. It was agreed that Nepal would have direct urgent bilateral talks with Bhutan and would ask India to mediate and also approach the international community for involvement. On the other hand a member of the main opposition communist party of Nepal (UML) Madhan Kumar Nepal who had participated at the all party meet said that the safe return of the refugees and their right to life with dignity at their houses is possible only when there is political freedom in Bhutan.⁴⁵

Nepali officials have said that they have not attached any string on Bhutan during their negotiations on the safe return of the refugees to Bhutan. Nepal is also very much interested to raise the issue at international forums like the United Nations, NAM and also SAARC. Although the SAARC charter prohibits the member states from raising bilateral matters at its forum Nepalese officials maintain that the Bhutanese refugee problem is a humanitarian issue and not a bilateral problem.

India's Response

India's response to the problem facing Bhutan and Nepal has been very cautious. Both countries have excellent relations with India, which also guides Bhutan's foreign and defense policies. At the Earth Summit held at Rio De Janiro in June 1992 the Indian Prime Minister Rao told his Nepalese counterpart that Nepal's problem with Bhutan should be resolved through "direct contact".⁴⁶

After the fifth SAARC summit in Male November 1990 both the then interim Prime Minister of Nepal Bhattarai as well as King Jigme Singhe Wangchuk of Bhutan were guests of the then Indian Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar in New Dehli where the first tentative moves for a peaceful settlement was initiated. On the other hand the BPP (Bhutan Peoples Party) delegations met with Chandra Shekhar to gain support for the possible establishment of constitutional democracy in Bhutan. The refugee problem also involves the West Bengal government. Chief Minister of West Bengal

⁴⁶. *ibid.*

Jyoti Basu refrained from supporting the pro-democracy movement in Bhutan despite the support extended by the rest of his party to the movement possibly because the "Greater Nepal" movement had gained momentum along with the prodemocracy movement in Bhutan.⁴⁷

India's present attitude towards the ethnic problem in Bhutan is, therefore, being guided by its special relations with Bhutan. However, many academicians over the years have pointed out that an ethnic crisis in Bhutan may be instigated by India if Bhutan aims at pursuing policies that may be viewed as jeopardizing India's interest. An example of such a policy may be the reaction to the type of relation Bhutan develops with China as had Nepal, which had led to the trade embargo in 1988. Although relations between China and India is at present improving, in the long term, however, relations may again deteriorate particularly on the question of their influence on the Himalyan Kingdoms. Apart from age old mutual rivalry one of the principal reason is that China had claims over Bhutan and has unsettled boundaries with Bhutan which is still being negotiated. Also in the fifties China had included Bhutan as a part of its territory in a map as a result of which relations had become strained with Bhutan.

Bhutan's Response

Ever since the ethnic problem in Bhutan began the King visited the disturbed districts over 24 times. He also requested the people who were leaving Bhutan to think about their decision. The King also granted amnesty to 1,035 Southern Bhutanese detained by the security forces. The anti-government activists Rathan Gazmere a former lecturer at the National Educational Institute in Samchi and Bhakti Prasad Sharma - were among those released in December 1991 and reinstated in the civil service as of January 1, 1992. This amnesty policy of the King has been criticized by most of the Chimis (people's representatives) in the Bhutan National Assembly. The seventieth session held in October 1991 concentrated mostly on "the southern problem". The peoples representatives from Northern Bhutan are virtually unanimous in their desire for an immediate end to all

47. *Dialogue*, August 7, 1992.

development activities in the Southern Bhutan and severe restrictions on all southern Bhutanese officials. The Assembly also agreed to give total authority to the King to find "a permanent solution to the 'ngolop' (anti-national) problem". On the other hand the King reiterated an earlier pledge to abdicate if he could not find a solution within two years to the problem of ethnic Nepalese.⁴⁸

Moreover, in response to complaints lodged by many people residing in the southern districts that Bhutanese officials in those areas were terrorizing the people and that violation of human rights was rampant, the Bhutanese government sent high level team to the affected districts in order to evaluate and investigate the real situation. Amnesty International was also invited to Bhutan to observe the real situation in Southern Bhutan.

The King also repeated his edict that no Bhutanese citizen would be evicted from the Kingdom and that the people had the right to apply to the judiciary establishments, the government, or to the King himself if they felt that they were being unjustly treated. All rural taxes and labour requirements of the government were exempted in the five Southern district which would be of great benefit to the Nepalese citizens. The King also ordered the renovation and reopening of many schools in Southern Bhutan. The security forces were also instructed to hand over schools which they had taken over when the institutions were being regularly raided and destroyed during the height of terrorist activities in 1991. Government officials and security officers responsible for excesses against the people were removed from office and tried in court. The King also announced major development projects for Southern Bhutan insisting on a balanced development throughout the country. The King in order to decentralize decision making during 1991 began to establish Gewog Yargye Tshogpas (GYTs or block development committees) in all 192 Gewogs in the country. The King gave up the chairmanship of the Planning Commission which he had held for 19 years in order to devote himself to Bhutan's political problems and to encourage greater responsibility for decision-making by government officials.⁴⁹ The King also agreed with the Nepalese of Southern Bhutan that

48. *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, February 1992.

49. *Ibid.*

representation in the Tshongdu must be in accordance with demographic distribution in the districts and said that when it was established in 1953-1954 the seat representation was done on an adhoc basis. He further stated that the system of representation in the Tshongdu must be changed. According to the Bhutanese officials the guerrilla wing of the foreign based Bhutan People's Party (BPP) carried out raids in southern Bhutan destroying property, looting villages, kidnaping and killing those refusing to join or support the movement. They further pointed out that other Kathmandu based groups also stepped up an anti-Bhutan propoganda campaign, with support from political parties and a section of the Nepalese press. Development in the area was virtually brought to a standstill. However, the King of Bhutan despite opposition by some representatives of the National Assembly has ordered the resumption of development activities in the South.

CONCLUDING REMARKS :

The problem of ethnic minorities that aggravated over the past couple of years the world over seems to have made its forays in the South Asian region with renewed intensity. It has affected many countries of South Asia and has also become a major problem for Bhutan, known as the last Shangri-La, with the exodus of thousands of refugees from Bhutan into Nepal leading to strained relations between the two. This situation had also sparked off pro-democracy movements which spelled serious consequences for the Bhutanese monarchy.

The pro-democracy movement of August and September 1990 in Bhutan failed mostly because it was instigated by ethnic Nepalese in Bhutan with little or no support from the Bhutanese majority. Support rendered by Nepal and ethnic Nepalese in India to this upsurge in Bhutan was viewed by the Bhutanese as an attempt to undermine the Kingdom's sovereignty. Other factors that contributed to its failure lies in the fact that the general Bhutanese population are not as politicized as the ethnic Nepalese particularly because of the latter's link with political parties in both India and Nepal. Moreover, the Bhutanese elite are cautious and conservative

modernizers. These elites also feel that Bhutan with its self sufficient subsistent economy and quiet polity has no utility for democracy.⁵⁰ However, with the gradual political awareness of the educated and enlightened younger generation a time may come when the King may have to make way for political liberalisation paving the way for democracy in Bhutan.

Although the demonstrations of September 1990 in Southern Bhutan have not repeated again, this does not mean, however, that the problem between the ethnic Nepalese and the Bhutanese is over, it is far from so. Despite the King of Bhutan granting amnesty to all 'anti-national elements' and trying to redress the grievances of the Nepalese the refugee problem is yet to be solved. As long as the fate of the refugees are not decided relations between Nepal and Bhutan will remain strained.

Other problems that emerged out of the ethnic problem in Bhutan such as the "Greater Nepal Issue" and the fear of the "Sikkimese Syndrome" have perhaps been the greatest challenges the Bhutanese monarch has to counter in the present time. The future recurrence of these factors cannot be totally ruled out. They may be used as political weapons for destabilizing the Bhutanese monarchy. In an interview GLO (Gorkha Liberation Organisation) Supremo Chatre Subha had stated that the realization of "Greater Nepal is not impossible since the political atmosphere of the world is changing.. it is a logical possibility because blood has no citizenship".⁵¹

The presence of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal and India have already led to the involvement of foreign countries and donor agencies which may also in the long run prove to be disastrous for the Bhutanese government as they may try to impose their views in order to influence decisions to be taken by the Bhutanese authorities. While Bhutan maintains that all refugees are not Bhutanese and that many are from India as well, the UNCHR and Nepal claim otherwise. This may result in the deadlock in talks regarding the repatriation of refugees. Moreover, it will also be a security problem for

50. Leo. E. Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 223-224.

51. *Sunday*, November 17-23 1992.

Bhutan as the refugees may be used to destabilize the security of the region especially with the assistance of outlawed political groupings such as the 'Bhutan People's Party,' 'People's Forum For Human Rights' and 'People's United Liberation Front'. Infact, they have already carried out acts of terrorism from across the border into Southern Bhutan.

For the Bhutanese government the problem of ethnic minorities, particularly, Bhutanese of Nepalese origin is a reality which it has to learn to live with through accommodation rather than enforcement of measures to subdue the identity and culture of these people. The Nepalese in Bhutan, on the other hand, also need to sufficiently project their allegiance to their country of domicile and refrain from contributing to the instabilities that have surfaced in the past few years. Respect for each other's culture and heritage and refraining from forcing one another's socio-cultural and religious beliefs and practices over the other will be important in the solution of the crisis facing the two conflicting communities in Bhutan.