

Ethnic cleansing : The Enigma of Bhutan

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Dilli Ram Dhimal, 73, sits cross-legged on his bed in a bamboo shack in Goldhap, a camp that once housed some 5,000 Bhutanese refugees in southeastern Nepal. In a month he will arrive in America, a citizen of the New World. He stares at me through eyeglasses thick as a magnifying glass. He must be half-blind. He is dressed in a Nepali-style kurta shirt and baggy pants. His full beard is white and his brown skin is gnarled and wrinkled from decades of laboring in his rice paddy. He once owned six acres of paddy and a wooden house in Lali, a small village in the southeastern lowlands of the Kingdom of Bhutan. Dhimal's father and grandfather were both born in Bhutan. As a young man he had worked on building the road to Thimphu, the kingdom's capital in the mountains to the north. "I can remember when the king rode a donkey," Dhimal says in Nepali, the only language he knows. "Now he rides in a car over the roads we built."

Dhimal describes the day in June 1992 when Tshring Togbe, the district magistrate, arrived in Lali accompanied by Bhutanese soldiers. Togbe called the villagers to assemble and then announced over a loudspeaker that they had seven days to pack up their belongings and leave the country. He spoke to them in Nepali. When a few of the peasants protested, an army officer shouted, "This is a hunting ground, and we can take you like monkeys."

Dhimal, his wife and five young children decided to leave. They had heard of people being killed in neighboring villages. He thought he would return in a few weeks, when things settled down. Before trekking toward the Indian border, he released his cattle.

By 1992 an estimated 80,000 Bhutanese of Nepali ancestry had been pushed across the Bhutanese border into Indian territory. There, Indian army trucks immediately transported them to the Mechi River and pushed them across the border into Nepal. These refugees constituted at least 15 percent of Bhutan's estimated population of 550,000.

Stranded in the open on the Mechi River bank just inside Nepal, the refugees were not exactly welcomed by their ancestral compatriots. The government in Kathmandu deemed the refugees citizens of Bhutan and requested assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Eventually, seven refugee camps were built in the southeastern districts of Jhapa and Morang, where the UN's World Food Program fed them a daily ration. But the government of Nepal declined to issue work permits to the refugees. And so there the Bhutanese refugees languished for nearly two decades.

By 2007, because of natural population growth, approximately 108,000 refugees lived in the seven camps. In that year, the US ambassador to Nepal, James Moriarty, brokered an agreement to resettle them in several Western countries. Astonishingly, more than 60,000 Bhutanese—many of them peasants like Dilli Ram Dhimal and his family—have already been resettled abroad. The vast majority, more than 50,000, have gone to the United States, with the rest resettling in Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and Britain.

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By any definition, what happened in Bhutan in the years 1989-93 was ethnic cleansing. The

Bhutanese government denies this and has refused to repatriate any of those forcibly expelled.

By all accounts, the problem began when the royal family was startled to learn from a government census in 1988 that the Nepali-speaking Lhotshampas (literally, “southern people”) of southern Bhutan were threatening to become a majority. In response, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck promulgated a series of edicts that he said would preserve Bhutan’s cultural heritage. He defined this national culture, however, as Drukpa—the culture of the descendants of migrants from Tibet who practice Mahayana Buddhism and speak the Dzongkha language. The Drukpas have certainly been the dominant, ruling ethnic group in Bhutan for hundreds of years, but up until the 1980s Bhutan was a multiethnic society that included the Sharchops (also originally from Tibet), the Lhotshampas and more than a dozen other linguistic, ethnic and religious groups.

On January 6, 1989, the 33-year-old king proclaimed a policy of “One Nation, One People.” Henceforth, it seemed that by virtue of a royal edict all Bhutanese would have to dress and speak like Drukpas. The teaching of Nepali to Lhotshampa schoolchildren was banned. They would have to learn Dzongkha. All citizens would also have to wear Drukpa attire, the gho coat for men and the kira for women. A recent citizenship law had required the Lhotshampas to produce pre-1958 tax receipts to prove that they were not illegal immigrants.

Naturally, these royal edicts aroused opposition. A few of the king’s advisers appealed to him to modify his policies toward his Nepali-speaking subjects. One of the king’s physicians, D^r. Bhampa Rai, approached the king’s second maternal uncle and warned him that the situation was going “to earn a bad name for the king.” Rai was told by the uncle, “The king is not listening to his advisers.” Rai is a Lhotshampa himself. “Everyone in Bhutan is an immigrant,” he told me. “The king who first united Bhutan came from Tibet. And when the first Wangchuck king was crowned in 1907, my great-grandfather was already there.”

Initial peaceful protests in southern Bhutan eventually escalated into incidents of vandalism and attacks on policemen. Young Lhotshampas made a public show of burning their Drukpa clothing. The king’s security apparatus responded to these protests with arrests. And then anyone associated with the protests was branded a traitor and expelled. It was a gradual process, but by the summer of 1992 tens of thousands of Lhotshampas were being forcibly expelled. According to a 1995 report commissioned by the UNHCR and published by the human rights group WriteNet :

For approximately eighteen months after the demonstrations ethnic Nepalis were at the greatest risk of gross physical abuse. Experience of such treatment, or the threat or fear of being subjected to it, was commonly cited by refugees who left the country during this period as the primary motivation for doing so. Since then, the level of serious physical abuse has declined significantly, although cases of torture and ill-treatment in police stations and prisons in the south continue to be reported. The arrest of ethnic Nepalis also continues, albeit on a much smaller scale, but refugees state that many of those who are detained are released only after specifically agreeing to leave the country.

At the time, the plight of the Bhutanese refugees garnered little attention. Far more serious ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Rwanda was grabbing the headlines. There were no massacres in Bhutan, only arbitrary arrests, violent interrogations and some disappearances. Officially, the Bhutanese simply claim that these refugees were recent—by their definition, post-1958—illegal immigrants, squatters if you will, who never had any claim to Bhutanese citizenship. (Last year I interviewed dozens of people in the camps and nearly everyone pulled out a dog-eared copy of their Bhutanese citizenship card, sometimes carefully laminated in plastic.) There’s no doubt that most of these people were forcibly expelled on the express orders of Bhutan’s then-reigning absolute monarch, King Wangchuck. Nor is there any doubt that the Indian government facilitated these expulsions.

(Why ? is another question, but New Delhi has long valued its close alliance with the Wangchuck dynasty.)

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With the international community preoccupied with other crises, King Wangchuck escaped any real censure from the international community. How did he get so lucky ?

Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, one of his four queens—all sisters—described her husband in her 2006 book, *Treasures of the Thunder Dragon : A Portrait of Bhutan*. He was, she wrote, a “wise king whose unique philosophy of governance measures the country’s progress and development not by its gross domestic product...but its gross national happiness (GNH)—this is the stuff of which legends, and romantic flights of fancy, are born.” Quite so. And the king’s remarkable public relations machine has indeed used the GNH moniker to garner worldwide praise for Bhutan’s rapid economic development. (No one, of course, knows how to measure happiness, but Bhutan’s GDP is about \$4.3 billion and it has a per capita income of around \$1,900, making it relatively prosperous compared with its neighbors. And largely because of its efficient exploitation of hydropower resources, Bhutan’s economy has been growing in the double digits for many years.)

On a recent trip to Bhutan I had the good fortune to sit next to Queen Wangchuck at India House, the elegant official residence of Indian Ambassador Pavan Varma. She was so lovely, so charming and so articulate that it would have been rude to inquire about the events of twenty years ago. Neither did I have the courage to query the new king, His Majesty Dasho Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, when we were briefly introduced a few minutes later at the same party. Moreover, I thought to myself, it would have seemed as though I was interrogating him for the sins of his father.

At 31, the young king is even more charismatic than the Queen Mother. Educated at Phillips Academy in Andover, Wheaton College and Oxford, Khesar Wangchuck became king in 2006 when his father abruptly decided to abdicate at the age of only 50. Both father and son—colloquially referred to as K4 and K5 because they are respectively the fourth and fifth in the Wangchuck dynasty dating back to 1907—have guided the country toward a quasi-constitutional monarchy. Fair National Assembly elections were held in 2008—the royalist party captured forty-four out of the forty-seven seats, even though the very loyal opposition polled about 33 percent of the popular vote in a first-past-the-post electoral system. The monarchy still wields enormous influence.

On the same day I met Khesar, I watched him give a speech that morning in the National Assembly in which he announced his engagement to Jetsun Pema, 21, a stunningly beautiful daughter of a Druk Air pilot. K5 is down-to-earth and extremely personable. In our brief conversation he told me he loves to work in his vegetable garden, and like his father, he is an avid mountain-bike enthusiast. People talk about the day he walked up and down Thimphu’s main business boulevard, stopping to chat inside each shop with the customers. Recently he spent six days visiting one of Thimphu’s universities, where he sat in on various classes and mingled with students. A professor observed afterward that K5 was “extremely impressive—articulate, warm, smart, responsive and funny.” The king is obviously working hard to become a “people’s king.”

The Wangchuck dynasty thus seems a model of good governance. Over the past half-century the monarchy has implemented methodical and transparently rational steps to develop the kingdom’s economy. It has pragmatically allowed corporations from India, its giant neighbor to the south, to exploit its tremendous hydropower resources. The literacy rate is above 60 percent—nearly everyone in Thimphu seems to speak flawless English. The streets of Thimphu and other towns are clean, and the tap water is potable—a rarity in South Asia. Relatively few tourists visit, but that’s because the Wangchucks decided long ago that they want only the high-spending, boutique tourist trade. To get

a tourist visa one must plunk down in advance more than \$200 per day. As developing countries go, Bhutan seems to be doing everything smartly.

And yet, there is this little matter of forcibly expelling nearly one-sixth of your population. How could such nice people do this ? I spoke with Tenzing Yonten, the director of the Royal Thimphu College, who was once married to one of the daughters of K4. I asked him what he thought most people think today about what happened in the early 1990s. When Yonten hesitated, his American colleague interrupted to say, "Well, that's a difficult topic." Yonten then replied, "I think most people have forgotten about it. The issue has faded away."

I responded, "But do you understand that all these refugees are going to America, where their sons and daughters are going to get educated ? And then some of them are going to start speaking out about what happened to their families. Some of them are going to want to come back here on their American passports. And then many of the elderly refugees I interviewed in the camps say they won't go to America. They are waiting, hoping that someday the Bhutanese government will relent and allow a few of them to come home." Yonten sat in silence, and then he said, "Yes, but they will find that there is nothing to come back to. Their homes and lands are gone."

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Bhutanese officials are quick to point out that there are still Nepali-speaking Lhotshampas in their midst. The government won't specify, but they probably still constitute 20-25 percent of the population. In public, these Lhotshampas conform to the Drukpa attire, and if they are at all educated they speak both Dzongkha and English. A handful of Lhotshampas were elected to the National Assembly in 2008. But the Nepali speakers I talked with indicate that there is a glass ceiling. They feel culturally and politically discriminated against by the ruling Drukpas. "They don't like us," one young man told me.

With at least 50,000 Lhotshampas becoming American citizens, it may someday be harder for the Wangchuck dynasty to ignore this difficult history. They have proudly sold themselves in the West as guardians of an idyllic Buddhist culture. The unspoken implication is that it was necessary to purge these people in order to save the last Buddhist kingdom. The Chinese destroyed Tibet, and the Indians absorbed Sikkim. Bhutanese (Drukpa) culture is unique and tough measures were needed to preserve it. Evidently, this was the former king's cold calculus.

And then again, let's put this in perspective. A hundred thousand refugees is a paltry number compared with the number of Palestinian, Congolese, Darfuri and Bihari refugees. After all, the modern history of forced expulsions by one ethnic group against another involves millions of victims. And why are these particular refugees coming to America ? If the UNHCR had never built the refugee camps, would the government of Nepal have felt compelled to give these ancestral Nepalese work permits or even citizenship ? Not very likely. Isn't this like the Israelis arguing that Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Egypt should have absorbed the Palestinian refugees of 1948 and '56 and '67 ? So maybe America should have offered refuge to the Palestinians sixty years ago ? But these are just teasing counter-factuals. Millions of refugees around the world remain refugees for decades or more.

The story of the Bhutanese refugees is thus unusual in that it has an ending. Most of them are going to find a new home in America or elsewhere. This brings some measure of closure for the refugees—but ironically, also for the Wangchucks. They hope the unhappy story of what they did twenty years ago will disappear with the closing down of the refugee camps in southern Nepal. It is as if it didn't happen. Now they can get on with Gross National Happiness.

But there is another specter haunting the Wangchuck dynasty's Shangri-La : globalization. Internet, television, Bollywood and rock and roll have invaded the kingdom. Thimphu has a free press. But it is a press that observes two cultural taboos : criticism of the royal family, and discussion of what happened to the Lhotshampas. How long can that last ?

Bhutan is a beautiful place. High-end tourists love it. Here is my revealed prejudice : I have lived in Nepal for the past four years. In contrast with Bhutan, nothing works in Kathmandu. The electricity is off as much as eighteen hours a day in the winter months. The streets are jammed with unimaginable traffic. The Bagmati River is clogged with plastic bags and other refuse. The drinking water is sickly. But in 2006 there was a people's uprising that threw out a truly decadent and inefficient royal family. The royal palace is now a national museum. The newspapers are filled with scurrilous attacks on anything and everybody. Anyone can say anything he or she wants. The politicians dawdle irresponsibly, and the Brahmin elite shamelessly does everything it can to perpetuate a Hindu caste culture that holds the country back. Every month or so one of the twenty-four political parties declares a bandh—a strike—and the city comes to a screeching halt. Chaos reigns in Kathmandu. But I like it. It smells of freedom. And I dare say, someday the Bhutanese will get a whiff of it.

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