



ETHNIC MINORITIES OF BHUTAN: RIGHTS AND HAPPINESS

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There are multiple conceptions of the concept of minority. Generally, however, the term 'minority' means a group which is numerically smaller to the rest of the population of the state (or the dominant majority), having a non-dominant status, whose members, who are the nationals of the state, show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity toward the preservation of its ethnic, religious, or linguistic characteristics (Ramaga, 1992: 104). This definition implies that minority groups are numerically inferior groups who do not control the structures of the power of the state and can be vulnerable to the dominance of other groups. Nonetheless, this is not always the case; there are cases where the minority groups have taken control over other numerically larger groups. For instance, the Blacks in South Africa under apartheid were numerically larger but subordinate to the Whites.

Apart from the numerical aspect, minorities are defined on the basis of ethnic, religious, and linguistic identity. Under these criteria, the minority groups are given special provisions as can be seen in Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights (ICCPR):

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language (United Nations General Assembly, 1976: 179).

In almost every case, indigenous peoples also come under the concept of minorities. Indigenous peoples are descendants of the peoples who inhabited the land or territory prior to the establishment of State borders; they possess distinct social, economic and political systems, languages, cultures and beliefs, and are determined to maintain and develop this distinct identity; they exhibit strong attachment to their ancestral lands and the natural resources contained therein; and/or they belong to the non-dominant groups of a society and identify themselves as indigenous peoples (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2010: 3). As such, both indigenous peoples and national, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities are usually in a non-dominant position in the society and their cultures, languages or religious beliefs may be different from the majority or the dominant groups.

In the case of Bhutan, there are various ethnic groups and subgroups of different racial, social and cultural roots living in the country. There are four geographic regions which has greatly influenced the formation of ethnic groups and their society in Bhutan. Firstly, Tibet contributed to the formation of the ethnic and cultural elements of western, northern and central parts of Bhutan (Upreti, 2005: 28). The culture of the people of eastern Bhutan was influenced by South-East Asia and more so, the North-East India (Upreti, 2005: 28). Nepal and Indian states like Sikkim and West Bengal contributed in the formation of the ethnic, social and cultural elements of Southern Bhutan (Upreti, 2005: 28). The majority of Bhutanese population is of Mongoloid stock, belonging to Tibeto-Mongoloid and Indo-Mongoloid varieties or a mixture of them, along with some Aryans, including the Chettris and Bahuns (Upreti, 2005, 28). Since the time of the Zhabdrung, Bhutan had succeeded to an extent to achieve religious, political and social assimilation and the entire social structure reflected almost the same features (Sinha, 1998: 23). There is, however, a small and less assimilated section of society which is different from the mainstream of the Bhutanese society (Sinha, 1998: 23).

The ethnic base of Bhutan can be segregated into four main categories: (a) the Ngalongs, (b) the Sharchops, (c) the Lhotshampas, and (d) various other tribal groups of relatively smaller numbers, like Bodos, Birmis, Khens, Lepchas and Mons. The Ngalongs and Sharchops, collectively known as Bhote¹, make up to 50 per cent of the entire population; the ethnic Nepalese make up to 35 per cent and; the indigenous and migrant tribes make up to 15 per cent of the total population.² 75 per cent of the population practice Lamaistic³ Buddhism whereas 25 per cent practice Indian and Nepalese

¹Orientalists adopted the term "Bhote" or Bhotiya, meaning "people of Bod (Tibet), a term also applied to the Tibetan people leading to confusion, and now is rarely used in reference to the Ngalong.

²See: <http://www.countrywatch.com/Intelligence/CountryReviews?CountryId=20>

³ Pertaining to Lamaism; Lamaism is a reformation of Buddhism in Tibet intended to bring about stricter discipline in the monasteries; the dominant sect of Gelup-Ka (The Virtuous Way), with the patron deity Chen-re-zi (the Bodhisattva of Great Mercy), who is reincarnated as the successive Dalai Lamas. Also called Gelup-Ka.



influenced Hinduism (ibid). The ethnic minorities of Bhutan as such include the Sharchops, the Lhotshampas and the various indigenous people. The Ngalongs on the other hand are the dominant majority, both numerically and influence-wise.

The Ngalongs consist of the mainstream indigenous ethnic group of the Bhutanese population who also form the majority ethnic group in the country. They are also the most dominant ethnic group and consist of mostly elites who control various political structures and institutions. They are mostly Buddhists who are spread across the western part of Bhutan. The Ngalongs are considered as one of the earliest settlers of Bhutan and they are believed to have been of Tibetan origin, some of whom may have migrated to Bhutan as early as the ninth century (Sinha, 1998: 23). The term 'Ngalong' literally means 'those risen earliest or converted first' (Wolf, 2013: 8). They are followers of the Drukpa school and speak Dzongkha (meaning, 'language of the palace/Dzong'), which is also the official language of Bhutan.

The Sharchops are another ethnic group of Bhutan who are mainly settled in the eastern part of Bhutan. Like the Ngalongs, the Sharchops also follow Mahayana Buddhism. However, while the Ngalongs follow the Drukpa Kargyu⁴ school, the Nyingma⁵ school is dominant among the Sharchops (Hutt, 2003: 5). The Drukpa Kargyu has statutory representation in the state's recommendatory and consultative institutions, while the Nyingma does not. The Buddhist people of Bhutan are collectively known as 'Drukpas'. It is argued that because Bhutan is called 'DrukYul' (Dragon Country) in Dzongkha, all Bhutanese are 'Drukpa' (people of DrukYul), and that the term has no sectarian religious or ethnic connotations. The Sharchop are of Indo-Mongoloid stock and speak Tsangla (Wolf, 2013: 8). Many of them have been assimilated into the Drukpa culture of the Ngalongs, nonetheless, there are sections of the Sharchops who still retain their close cultural and socio-economic ties with North East India and Myanmar.

The southern part of Bhutan is mostly inhabited by Nepali-speaking Bhutanese. They are also called the "Lhotshampas" which means the southerners, a name given by the Drukpas. They are of Indo-Aryan or Nepalese origin (Wolf, 2013: 8). They mostly follow Hinduism and few Christianity and even Buddhism, but the vast majority of them speak the Nepali language. They migrated from Nepal to southern Bhutan since 1865, after the Anglo-Bhutanese war (Hutt, 2005: 45). The successive generations who settled in southern Bhutan in 1890s were recruited by the Government of Bhutan to clear the forests and they also formed agrarian communities that quickly became Bhutan's main producers of food (Hutt, 2005: 45). The main causes of migration may be identified as the following: (a) British imperialist policy; (b) Economic opportunity of the Lhotshampas in Bhutan; (c) Lhotshampas' psyche to living in Hill area; (d) the Policy of Nepal Governments, Bhutan and India and other concerns; (e) External influences; (f) Educational and Cultural awareness of the Lhotshampas, etc.

In this study, the Lhotshampas, who were evicted from Bhutan after the 1985 citizenship law and the 1988 census, are also brought under the term minorities, simply for the fact that they were once citizens of Bhutan and were de-nationalized on the grounds of bearing no proof of their existence in before 1958, which was the year the Bhutanese government enacted the Nationality Law. These evicted Nepali-Bhutanese are refugees who live in camps set up in Nepal, however, most of them have been resettling in third countries since 2008. When it comes to the question of legitimacy of the Gross National Happiness policy of Bhutan, the issue of the de-nationalized Nepali-Bhutanese is important and hence is brought forward in this study. These refugees who were once rightfully Bhutanese nationals cannot be avoided in the argument of the rights of minorities of Bhutan. Excluding them from the narrative would only mean turning a blind eye to their human rights and this is crucial since the narrative of happiness on which the GNH policy is built on is intrinsically linked with human rights. Human rights and happiness go hand in hand.

The United Nations Minorities Declaration adopted in 1992 states in its article 1 that minorities are based on national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity, and it is the duty of the States to protect their existence.⁶ As such, under the provisions of human rights instruments, States have an obligation to protect the rights of all persons subject to or under their jurisdictions, with the exception of political rights. The Working Group on Minorities considers that while "some State argue that 'national minorities' only comprise groups composed of citizens of the State.. it would not apply to the United Nations

⁴ The *Drukpa Kargyu* tradition was founded in the 12th century by Tsangpa Gyare, a disciple of Lingrepa, himself a student of *Pakmodrupa*. The tradition draws its name from a vision Tsangpa Gyare had nine dragons –*druk* in Tibetan.

⁵ The *Nyingma* school of Tibetan Buddhism traces its origin back to the Buddha Samatabhadra, *Vajrasattva*, and Garab Dorje of Uddiyana. The most important source of the *Nyingma* order is the Indian Guru, Padmasambhava, the founder of the *Nyingma* lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, who came to Tibet in the eighth century C.E.

⁶ For details, see: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/Minorities.aspx> .



Declaration on Minorities because it has a much wider scope that ‘national minorities’”. As such, “persons who are not (yet) citizens of the country in which they reside can form part of or belong to a minority in that country” Therefore, “citizenship should not be a distinguishing criterion that excludes some persons or groups from enjoying minority rights under the Declaration”.

Among the various smaller indigenous groups, there are Brokpas (who are a nomadic group living in central Bhutan and of Tibetan origin), Mons (also known as Monpas, who live in the east and south east, and consider themselves to be the oldest inhabitants), Khens (who are located in central Bhutan and has Indo-Mongoloid features), Birmis (another nomadic group settled in the east), Lhops or Dayas (who are tribes settled in the south-east and claim to be aboriginal inhabitants), Lepchas (who are mostly settled in the west and are of Sikkimese or Indian-Nepali origin), Bodos (living in the south), Kochs (who are primarily settled in south Bhutan, and are of Indo-Mongoloid origin), Tephos (who are a group settled in north Bhutan and are of Indian origin). In addition to these, there are few Indian immigrants and others. They constitute of varied socioeconomic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Wolf, 2016).

The evolution of ethnic groups can be traced along historical lines which coincided with the state formation. The early history of Bhutan is obscure and enveloped in mystery and one of the main reasons for that is that the country lacks authentic history as it was predominantly a pastoral-nomadic community, who were rich only in oral tradition due to the absence of materials to document in written form (Sinha, 1998: 48). In such cases, the facts and fiction get “inseparably mixed up, causing damage to historical authenticity” (Sinha, 1998: 48). Secondly, in 1832, Bhutan suffered a calamity which resulted in the burning down of Punakha, which was followed by the widespread destruction of building in 1897 earthquake in Bhutan. During these incidents, whatever archival materials they had stored got entirely destroyed (White, 1909: 99). As such, prior to the establishment of the Drukpa theocracy, there is no authentic chronological historical account of Bhutan’s early history.

Nonetheless, J. C. White in his book, Sikkim and Bhutan, writes of one Sangaldip, who emerged from Kooch (Cooch Behar) and subdued Bengal and Bihar and also extended his control over Bhutan (White, 1909: 99). This was around the seventh century before the Christian era (ibid: 99). In the following years, Bhutan was ruled by several India rulers under the tutelage of the kingdom Kamarupa⁷ till the middle of seventh century. However, in 650 A.D., after the death of Bhaskervaram⁸, the centuries old arrangement was disrupted and Kamarupa was disintegrated, which led to the incursions from Tibet (Sinha, 1998: 50). Bhutan split into small factions as no one king could emerge, capable of controlling the entire country which made Tibetan incursions easier during 861-900 A.D. However, the advent of Buddhism in Bhutan during the eighth century, followed by the development of Drukpa Kargyu in Bhutan marked the beginning of political dominance of the Ngalongs who were the adherents of the Drukpa Kargyu sect as well as the sidelining of the small political factions made of various other ethnic groups.

The Advent of Guru Padmasambhava in Bhutan

During this period of political fragmentation in the eighth century, Guru Padmasambhava entered Bhutan and converted Bhutan to the Buddhist faith. Bhutan was under the rule of the Khiji-khar-thod of Khempalung at that time, in Upper Bumthang and Nagucchi, King of Sindhu⁹ (Claude, 1909: 99) Nagicchi, the second son of King Singhala of Serkhya, founded the kingdom of Sindhu, and during a course of war with Raja Nabudara who ruled the Indian plains, he lost his eldest son. The incident caused a lot of grief to the king and it was at this juncture that the saint Padmasambhava arrived at the scene and along with the aid of the king’s daughter, Menmo Jashi Kyeden, saved his life and converted him to Buddhist faith of Nyingmapa. King Nabudara also converted himself to Buddhist faith and as such peace was restored to the land and a boundary pillar was set up at Mna-tong. (Claude, 1909: 100) Over time, Buddhism provided a cultural unity in Bhutan. (Sinha, 1998: 50)

The Development of Drukpa Kargyu in Bhutan

⁷ Kingdom Kamarupa existed during the Late Classical period on the Indian subcontinent; and along with Davaka, the first historical kingdom of Assam. Though Kamarupa existed from 350 CE to 1140 CE, Davaka was absorbed by Kamarupa in the 5th century CE. Ruled by three dynasties from their capitals in present-day Guwahati, North Guwahati and Tezpur, Kamarupa at its height covered the entire Brahmaputra Valley, North Bengal, Bhutan and parts of Bangladesh, and at times portions of West Bengal and Bihar.

⁸Bhaskervarman was the ruler of Kamarupa kingdom during the seventh century.

⁹Sindhu was a kingdom of India which stretched along the banks of river Sindhu (Indus) in the ancient era in Modern Pakistan. It is believed that Sindhu kingdom was founded by Vrsadarbh, one of the sons of Sivi. Sindhu literally means ‘sea’.



From the tenth century until the early seventeenth, the History of Bhutan was mainly about the development of Buddhism, in particular, the Drukpa sub-order of the Kargyupa school which came to prevail in Bhutan's western valleys. From around the twelfth century A.D., many Lamas started entering Bhutan (Singh, 1972: 19). Gyalwa Lhanangpa¹⁰ of the Nyo¹¹ lineage was one the first Lamas who entered Bhutan. Lhanangpa was the originator of the LhapaKargyupa, which is a sub-sect of the Drikung Kargyupa¹² (ibid: 19). The Lhapa Kargyupa brought the dzong¹³ system of Tibet and applied it in Bhutan. Subsequently, Lamas of the Drukpa (Red Hat Sect) also started entering Bhutan partly for missionary work and partly due to persecution suffered by them at the hands of the rival Yellow Hat Sect (Gelukpa) in Tibet. The Drukpa is an off-shoot of the Nyingmapa sect and was founded by Yeses Dorji at Ralung, a famous monastery about 30 miles east of Gyantse. His successor, Phajo Drukgom Shigpo (1184-1251) is credited with the introduction of the Drukpa Kargyupa in Bhutan (Hutt, 2003:17). His descendants came to be pre-eminent in western Bhutan, backed by the powerful family which ruled in Ralung, just over the border in Tibet. Although pitted against the powerful adherents of the rival Lhapha Kargyupa, Phajo-Drukgom-Shigpo and his companions succeeded in establishing themselves in Bhutan and by the end of the thirteenth century, Shigpo had built a small dzong named Dongon Dzong (Blue Stone Dzong) on the right side of the upper Wang Chu¹⁴ (Singh, 1972: 20). With this started the emergence of a separate and distinct church of Bhutan which persisted through the centuries and is witnessed today. The period between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries witnessed the rise and consolidation of the Drukpa sect notwithstanding the rivalry of the Lhapha Kargyupa (Singh, 1972: 20). There was a great religious fervor and many monasteries and temples were founded during the period. Bhutan thus came to have a religious identity distinctly its own though it continued to draw inspiration from its neighbours specially India (ibid: 20). This school of Buddhism focused mainly on meditation and experience. Branches of most of the other main Tibetan monastic orders also came to be represented in western Bhutan after the dissolution of the early Tibetan empire (Hutt, 2003: 17).

Central and eastern Bhutan remained largely the preserve of the Nyingma¹⁵ order (Hutt, 2003: 17). In and around Bumthang, the Dung¹⁶ nobilities had legendary origins which derived from an early Tibetan conception of divine royalty (Aris, 1994: 18). The central region produced several famous tertons (Tib. Gterston¹⁷, 'treasure-revealers') such as Dorje Lingpa (1346-1405) and Pema Lingpa (1450-1521), from whom the Wangchuk kings of Bhutan now trace a line of descent, while eastern Bhutan appears to have been carved up among the descendants of a Tibetan prince known as Tsangma who arrived there during the ninth century. In both central and eastern Bhutan, families claiming descent from prestigious religious figures began to challenge the political dominance of the old clan elites during the sixteenth century.

The Rise of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in Bhutan

Bhutan then witnessed the arrival of the figure of Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651), also known as Dugom Dorji. Born of a noble family, he was the son of Dorji Lenpa Mephram Tempai Nymia and Deba Kyishopa who belonged to the house of Gya of Druk and Ralung (Singh, 1972: 20). Hethen assumed the title of Zhabdrung.¹⁸ His grandfather was the seventeenth prince-abbot of Ralung Monastery in Tibet, the Drukpas' most important establishment, and was expected to succeed him. He was also recognized as the reincarnation of the Drukpa scholar, Pema Karpo (1527-92), himself the reincarnation of the founder

¹⁰GyalwaLhnangpa was a student of Drikig Jigten Gonpo.

¹¹It is one of the lineages in Buddhism. The origin of the Nyo lineage dates back to a very long time ago in Tibet much before the spread of Buddhism there.

¹²Drikung Kargyu is one of the eight "minor" lineages of the Kargyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. Like with all other Kargyu lineages, origins of Drikung Kargyu can be traced back to the Great Indian master Tipola who passed on his teachings to Mahasiddha Naropa who lived around tenth and eleventh century. The founder of the Drikung Kargyu lineage was Jigten Sumgon (1143-1217) of the Kyura clan, who was the disciple of Phagmo Drupa.

¹³Dzong is a distinctive type of fortress which serves as the religious, military, administrative, and social centres in Bhutan.

¹⁴ Also called the Raidak River, is a tributary of the Brahmaputra River, and a trans-boundary river. It flows through Bhutan, India and Bangladesh.

¹⁵ The Nyingma tradition is the oldest of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. 'Nyingma' literally means 'ancient', and is often referred to as Ngangyur ('school of the ancient translations' or 'old school') because it is founded on the first translations of Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit into Old Tibetan in the eighth century.

¹⁶ 'Dung' refers to the patrilineal noble families of Bumthang, Kheng and Kurtoe. The term was used either as a title of an adult male noble or referred to a noble's household.

¹⁷ The unique process of 'text discoveries' in Bhutan and Tibet went on from 11th to 17th century as a distinct movement associated with the Nyingma-pa. Gter-ston tradition includes a long list of names, texts, places, prophecy and unbelievable myths, the tradition was carried through real historical beings.

¹⁸ In Tibetan, Zhabdrung literally means 'In front of the foot', but often translated as 'To whom one submits'.



of the Drukpa Kargyu school (Hutt, 2003: 17). However, another individual Karma Tenkgong Wangpo was also recognized as the reincarnation of Pema Karpo, supported by the Desi (temporal ruler) of the important Tibetan province of Tsang. This rival was installed in Pema Karpo's monastery, but Ngawang Namgyal continued to act as if he himself was installed at Ralung. In 1606, after his grandfather died, Ngawang Namgyal was installed at Ralung. His enthronement was attended by representatives of all the religious schools of Tibet and of the major temporal powers, with the sole exception of the Gelugpas. Several missions also came from Bhutan.

Inevitably, Ngawang Namgyal soon entered into a conflict the Tsang Desi. The two met at Shigatse in a fruitless attempt to settle the matter of the true reincarnation of Pema Karpo, and on the return journey Ngawang Namgyal's followers quarreled with the retinue of a Karmapa lama at a ferry crossing over the Tsangpo river. A boat capsized, some of the Karmapa lama's men drowned, and the Tsang Desi ruled that Ngawang Namgyal should pay a fine and relinquish a certain bone relic which was preserved at Ralung (Hutt, 2003: 18). The Tsang Desi planned to attack Ralung at that point. Ngawang Namgyal fled to Bhutan, a decision he took due to various omens and prophecies suggesting him to do so (Hutt, 2003: 18). For example, he dreamt about a black raven, a form of the protective deity Mahakala¹⁹, flying south to a land where he knew there were many Drukpa monasteries (Hutt, 2003: 18). Therefore, in 1616, at the age of 23, Ngawang Namgyal left Ralung for Bhutan, where he settled at the monastery of Druk Choding in Paro (Hutt, 2003: 18). He took over the authority that the Lhapa Kargyupa and other sects enjoyed and established himself as the theocratic ruler of Bhutan with the title of Zhabdrung Rimpoche or Dharma Raja (Singh, 1972: 21). He ruled for about 35 years, during which he untied all the leading families of western Bhutan under his authority.

During his rule over Bhutan, there were repeated attempts by a host of rivals to conquer Bhutan from him. Tsang Desi attempted to invade his new realm several times. Among other rivals were the Lhapa Kargyupa and other sects, who were opposed to Drukpa hegemony. Even Dalai Lama V attempted incursions into Bhutan but the Bhutanese refused to recognize his authority over their remote valleys and as such maintained her independence (Singh, 1972: 21). The Tibetans continued to try to invade Bhutan after the Gelugpa school of the Dalai Lamas took control of Tibet in 1642. However, he repulsed every repeated attempts made to capture Bhutan from his hold. The Zhabdrung made his base at a fortified monastery which he build for himself and a body of 30 monks at Cheri, and began to build the first of his dzongs, the colossal monastery-fortresses which housed a monk body and administrative offices in each district (Hutt, 2003: 18). The first dzong was built at Simtokha in 1629, followed by the dzongs of Punakha in 1637, Wangdi Phodrang in 1638, Thimpu (Tashicho Dzong) in 1641, Paro in 1645, and Daga in 1650 (ibid: 18). The Zhabdrung took over the existing dzongs while building new ones.

Bhutan was thus governed under a code of laws promulgated by the Zhabdrung. The monk body came to be organized along the same lines as at Ralung and was headed by an abbot known as the Je Khenpo (Hutt, 2003: 19). The monks ensured the spiritual wellbeing of the lay community, while the laity had their names and properties recorded in a register (sathram) kept at the dzong, and paid an 'initiation fee' in the form of taxes, labour and transport. During the early phase of the theocracy, all high-ranking officials were monks. Later, laymen took office but only after taking minor monastic vows. From the last years of Ngawang Namgyal's reign onward, the administration of political affairs was entrusted to an official or regent called the Druk Desi²⁰ and a 'dual system' of government developed, known as chosi (Tib. Chos-srid from chos 'religion' and srid, 'politics'). He bifurcated the duties of the ruler by creating two separate offices –one to look after the spiritual and religious affairs to be known as Dharma Raja (Zhabdrung), and the other to be called Deb Raja (Desi) to look after the general administration of the State revenue and expenditure and dealing with foreign powers (Singh, 1972: 22). The Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal himself became the Dharma Raja and was vested with superior powers which included matters of both foreign and domestic affairs of the State and each of these matters required his signature (Singh, 1972: 24). In few decades after the establishment of these two institutions, Dharma Raja wielded extensive powers and became the symbol of law and justice, while Deb Raja had then the functions of a mere Regent (Singh, 1972: 24). "This distinction becomes clearer in view of the fact that while Dharma Raja followed the incarnations of the predecessor, the Deb Raja was elected by the Council of permanent members who were chosen from amongst the principal officers of the country" (Singh, 1972: 24). However, the

¹⁹ *Mahakala* is a deity common to Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism; also appears as a protector deity known as *dharmapala* in *Vajrayana* Buddhism, particularly most Tibetan traditions.

²⁰ The *Druk Desi* was the title of the secular (administrative) rulers of Bhutan under the dual system of government between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Under this system, government authority was divided among secular and religious administrations, both unified under a single leader. *Druk*, meaning 'thunder dragon', refers symbolically to Bhutan, whose most ancient name is *Druk-yul*. *Desi*, meaning 'regent', was the chief secular office in realms under this system of government.



Deb Raja, in the course of history, developed strength and the two became separate heads of State, one in matters spiritual and the other in things temporal. This led to continuous conflict and intrigue and consequent weakness of the State machine (Singh, 1972: 24).

In 1651, the Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal remained in retreat and secluded himself at Punakha dzong for another 54 years, after which he died, but the fact of his death was not revealed for 54 years (Sinha, 1998: 88). This was due to the fact that his sickly son was not seen capable of succeeding him and Bhutan still was under threat from hostile neighbours and also from internal disruption. (Sinha, 1988: 88). The first Zhabdrung's death marked the end of the old Drukpa tradition of succession through blood descendants (Hutt, 2003: 19). For about 40 years at the beginning of the eighteenth century, rival factions in western Bhutan advanced the claims of five different candidates, and Chinese mediation and the 'convenient deaths of some of the main Bhutanese protagonists' required before peace could be restored. Subsequently, the succession of the Zhabdrung took place through the reincarnation of the Zhabdrung's 'mind' element were (Aris, 1994: 40). However, the six Zhabdrungs who succeeded Ngawang Namgyal played little more than a symbolic political role, while various other stringmen vied with one another for power (Hutt, 2003: 19).

The Administration

The administrative structure set up by the Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal centuries ago "live on in their essential forms in modern government structures in Bhutan" (Hutt, 2003: 19). He is credited with introducing the dzong system in Bhutan. The country was divided into three regions, centred on the dzongs at Paro, Tsongsa and Daga. Each of these was ruled over by a 'universal lama' (Chila) who was also called a Penlop (chief of provinces or governor) (Hutt, 2003: 20). The Penlops were the senior members of a Central Council known as the Lenchen and they were expected to attend the Council whenever they happened to be present at the seat of the Government (Singh, 1972: 24). The commanders of other dzongs were known as Dzongpons (chief of districts); they are now known as 'fort-masters' (dzongda) (Hutt, 2003: 20). Some districts within the three regions were administered by minor Penlops or Dungpas. Modern Bhutan is divided into districts called Dzongkhags, each of which is governed by its own Dzongda, and sub-districts known as Dungkhags. East Dungkhag has its own Dungpa who is answerable to the district Dzongda. At a lower level, a block of villages (gewog or geog) is represented by a gap or, in the south, a Mandal.

Internal conflict and Civil War

By the early nineteenth century two Penlops had achieved positions of dominance. These were the Penlop of Tsongsa, who ruled Bhutan to the east of the Black Mountain range, and the Penlop of Paro, who administered the west and controlled the trade routes to Tibet. Bhutan witnessed intermittent internal conflict during this period as the two Penlops were usually at war with each other (Singh, 1972: 27). The Wangchuk family made the governorship of Tsongsa its exclusive preserve during the nineteenth century, but the governorship of Paro was often disputed. The DrukDesi of the day was usually the pawn of whichever of the Penlops had engineered his appointment (Rose, 1977: 31-32). The dualism of the Deb Raja and the Dharma Raja, one elective and the other hereditary in theory but depending on appearance of reincarnation in practice, brought weakness all round and consequent deterioration of authority which in turn led to endless strife. Whoever could manage to come into power and authority, assumed the title of Penlop and appointed the Deb Raja of his choice, his sway lasting only till he was ousted by a still more powerful adversary. Consequently, the country came to be without a system of government which could be said to be lasting or effective. As a result, there were frequent outbreaks of civil war among the contending chieftans in which even the Tibetans joined hands as such in 1717 and 1730. This led to political instability in Bhutan.

The Conflict with Cooch Behar

Cooch Behar had been the target of Bhutanese incursions ever since its establishment in 1510 A.D. Vishwas Singh, the brother and successor of Chandan, who was the founder of the state, demanded a tribute from the rulers of Bhutan, to which the Bhutanese ignored and this led to the declaration of war by Cooch Behar. The Bhutanese were forced to acknowledge the supremacy of Vishwa Singh and agreed to pay an annual tribute. He was also successful in occupying the territory of Bhutan between the Hindola and Sankosh rivers. However, this encroachment was short-lived when Bhutan left its allegiance to Cooch Behar during the rule of Maharaja Bir Narayan (1621-25) and ceased to pay the tribute. Thereafter Cooch Behar was gradually on the decline until in 1661, it was conquered by Mir Jumla when Maharaja Prana Narayan (1625-1665) fled for safety to Bhutan.

Between 1711 and 1768, the Bhutanese played a significant amount of role in the internal politics of Cooch Behar and in settling factional feuds between two contending rulers in conflict over the throne in Cooch Behar (Singh, 1972: 29). In 1778, Shidar became the Deb Raja of Bhutan. He was an aggressive ruler who sought to suppress the influence and power of the clergy and tried to strengthen his external position by seeking friendly relations with Tibet and Nepal and forging alliances



with Panchen Lama III and Raja Prithvi Narayan Shah of Nepal (1742-72) (Singh, 1972: 29). When he was in power, Bhutan kept Cooch Behar under control and carried out raids when necessary. In 1771, they kidnapped the Crown Prince and the Queen of Raja Dhairjendra Narayan of Cooch Behar, and later in 1772, they also abducted the Raja (Singh, 1972: 29). It was then when Nazir Dev of Cooch Behar approached the British for help (Singh, 1972: 29). The British intervention in 1772 opened up a new era in Bhutan's history leading to ever-increasing relations between British India and Bhutan which is death hereafter.

The British and Bhutan

During the late eighteenth century, the British entered the picture when they and the Bhutanese backed opposing factions were in dispute over the accession to the throne of Cooch Behar (Hutt, 2003: 20). Prior to this, there is little record to show if the British and Bhutan were engaged in any political relations. From 1772 A.D. until 1947, the British had major influence in Bhutan and their policies gave shape to the development of Bhutan as a distinct political entity with the establishment of hereditary monarchy in 1907 (Singh, 1972: 30). In the beginning, however, the Bhutanese and the British were in regular disagreement over their respective rights in the Duars region of the southern Bhutan (Hutt, 2003: 20). The Bhutanese lost this territory to the British under the terms of the Sinchula Treaty in 1865, concluding the hostilities which had broken out between them; the British colonial power in India would henceforth be an important factor shaping internal developments in Bhutan (Hutt, 2003: 20).

Bhutan was split apart by three recurring internal conflicts between 1868 and 1885 (Hutt, 2003: 20). In 1869, the first civil war broke out in Bhutan in which the Tsongsa and Paro Penlops and the Punakha Jongpen rebelled against the Deb Raja who was supported by the Wangdu Phodran Jongpen (Singh, 1972: 48). Any approaches made for assistance was rejected by the British and kept from intervening into the internal matters of Bhutan.

Another civil war broke out in 1877, and Jigme Namgyal assumed supreme authority to crush the rebels. In 1880, there was yet another contest for office of Deb Raja (Singh, 1972: 48). However, in 1885, the Tsongpo Penlop and Ugyen Wangchuk emerged as the virtual ruler of Bhutan (ibid: 49). The rivalry between Tongsa and Paro finally ended when the British resolved to march into Tibet to counter a supposed Russian threat. While the Wangchuks and the influential Dorje family of Ha supported the British during this, the Younghusband 'expedition' of 1903-4, the Parop Ponlop chose to support the Tibetan government (Hutt, 2003: 20). In 1905, during the negotiations that followed the British incursion into Tibet, Ugyen Wangchuk afforded the British valuable assistance (ibid: 20). The friendly relations between Bhutan and the British were further strengthened and in the same year, a Political Agent was appointed by the centre in direct relationship with Bhutan (Singh, 1972: 49). The Parop Penlop was superseded by a supporter of the Wangchuk family and Bhutan came at last to be dominated by a single family. Ugyen Wangchuk was unanimously elected by the Bhutan Chiefs and the principal Lamas as hereditary Maharaja of Bhutan (Druk Gyalpo) at Punakha on 17 December 1907 (Singh, 1972: 50; Hutt, Michael, 2003: 20). The British, and particularly the Political Agent John Claude White, helped in the establishment of the hereditary monarchy and bestowed honours on Ugyen Wangchuk (Singh, 1972: 50; Hutt, Michael, 2003: 20). In 1908, Ugyen Dorje was awarded the post of Gongzim (chamberlain) and the post became hereditary, its title changing to Lonchen (Prime Minister) in 1958 (Hutt, 2003: 21). The post of governorship of Ha and commissioner of the southern Dzongkhags had become hereditary within the Dorje family some time around 1900. Until the assassination of the Prime Minister, Jigme Dorje, in 1964, the Wangchuk and Dorje family lies intermarried and made common political cause.

The establishment of the monarchy hence led to power becoming concentrated in the King's hands. The Wangchuk kings maintained cordial relations with the British, dealing with the colonial power through the offices of Dorjes, their agents in Kalimpong, but when the British left India in 1947 and the Chinese annexed Tibet a few years later, the external environment changed radically. After the Lhasa revolt in 1959, there were no trade and cultural links with Tibet and India came closer, offering development aid, building a road which linked Thimpu with India, and training the Royal Bhutanese Army (Hutt, 2003: 21). This marked the beginning of the process of modernization in Bhutan. Internally, the third King, Jigme Dorje Wangchuk (1928-72), presided over a number of reforms: a ceiling was fixed on land holdings, a police force was established, serfdom was abolished, a National Assembly and a Royal Advisory Council were established, Five-Year Plans were initiated, and a national newspaper, Kuensel, was established (Hutt, 2003: 22). Externally, the kingdom forged important new relations: Bhutan joined the Colombo Plan in 1962, the International Postal Union in 1969, the United Nations in 1971, and established missions in New Delhi and at the UN in New York (Hutt, 2003: 22).

As such, the history of Bhutan revolves around several key figures. First, there are those who brought Buddhism to the kingdom and fostered and developed it there: these include semi-mythical transnational personalities such as



Padmasambhava and Bhutanese saints such as Dorje Lingpa and Pema Lingpa. Next, there comes the important figure of the first Zhabdrung, Ngawang Namgyal, who established Bhutan as a sovereign state, created many of its national institutions, and invested it with its Drukpa personality. After an interregnum marked by long periods of internal turmoil there come the Wangchuk kings who first reach an accommodation with the British and restore peace and stability to the kingdom, and then bring Bhutan into the modern era. This is the central historical narrative, in which the arrival of Nepali settlers in Bhutan barely figures. The fact that their presence in Bhutan later became politically problematic and its history contested requires us to reappraise the position of their history along with that of Bhutan as a whole.

Ethnic Groups of Bhutan

As mentioned earlier, Bhutanese population consists of diverse ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups. Among the ethnic communities, Drukpas are the most important ethnic communities, which basically include the Ngalongs and the Sharchops. Various other indigenous communities include Birmis, Bodos, Dayas, Khens, Lepchas, Mons, Tephos and many others. Nepalese have emerged as a significant ethnic community in Bhutan. In addition to these there are some Indian immigrants and others.

The Ngalongs (Tibetans), the Sharchops (Indo-Mongoloids) and the Lhotshampas (Nepalese) constituted the three major ethnic categories in Bhutan and within the three broad categories there are several small ethnic communities. In order to have a better understanding of the ethnic profile of the country, some of the ethnic and tribal groups are discussed separately in the following paragraphs. The following are the most important ethnic and tribal groups of Bhutan.

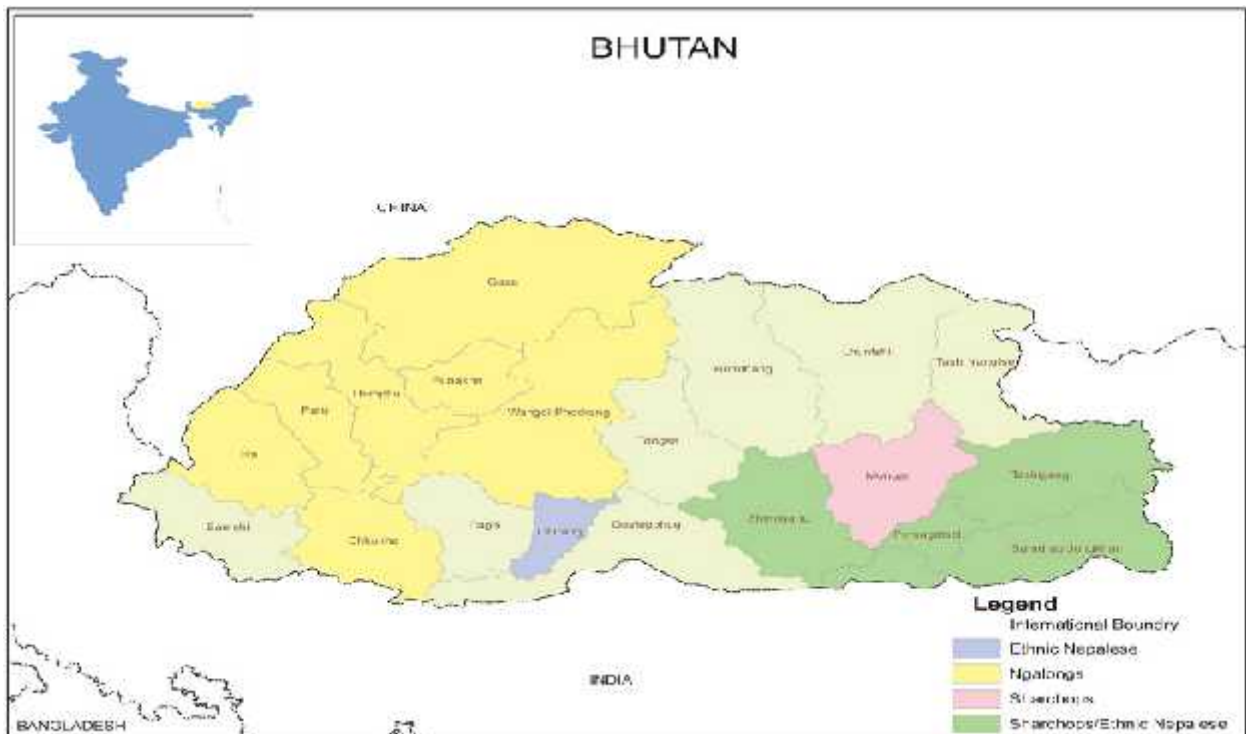


Figure 3.1 Bhutan's ethnic composition region-wise representation. (Map not to scale)
(Source: Country Brief, 2010)

Drukpas

Drukpas are the politically dominant community of Bhutan and they are spread over all the districts of the country. Considered to have been originally migrated from the North in the ninth century A.D. onwards, they are of Tibeto-Mongoloid background. "They represent the distinctive features of Tibetan culture, religion and language" (Khanal, 1998: 147). The language they speak is known as Dzongkha which has been accepted as the national language of the country now. They are also known as the Ngalongs which literally means 'the earliest risen' (Sinha, 1998: 28). "With the establishment of Zhabdrung's theocracy initially in western Bhutan and subsequently to the eastern and southern regions, his followers came



to be known as Drukpas” (Sinha: 1998: 28). They are also often referred to as Bhote, as they came from Tibet or Bhot. The king and his lineage belong to this ethnic community.

Brokpas

According to their oral history, the Brokpa originate from Tibet and came to Bhutan after they beheaded a tyrannical king in their ancestral village. Led through the mountains by the deity Aum Jomo and the guru Lam Jarepa, they brought with them scores of religious texts, their form of Mahayana Buddhism, and their distinct culture.

Brokpas are one of the most significant semi-nomadic, indigenous communities of Bhutan (Chand, 2017). They are pastoralists who practice transhumance, herding and trade with neighboring communities. Brokpas are a Tibetan stock and still retain their own customs and languages. Brokpas have many social-cultural similarities with the Drukpas. Due to their remote position, the Brokpa’s language and customs are very unique to other Bhutanese ethnic groups.

Mons

Mons, also known as Monpas, is an ethnic group who share close affinity with the Sharchops, and are spread in the eastern and south-eastern parts of Bhutan. They are considered as one of the oldest community of Bhutan. Like the Sharchops, “they exhibit Indo-Mongoloid characteristics and speak in Mon dialect or Sharchok-kha”, which makes them inherently different from Tibetans or Drukpas (Upreti, 2004: 30).

In Tibetan terminology, the term Mon is a general name for different nations and tribes living between Tibet and Indian plains (Chand, 2009). Mons is one of the earliest pre-Buddhist settlers of Bhutan. They were strong adherents of nature worship and Bon religion, before the spread of Buddhism. Mons are not ethnologically Tibetan in origin as they are also believed to be a wave of religious and cultural missionaries who moved from the plains to the Himalayan hills (Chand, 2009)

Agriculture is the main occupation of the Monpas. Traditionally, their primary occupation consisted of the weaving of bamboo and cane products. This was followed by the practice of shifting cultivation later and today their primary occupation is cultivation. Animal husbandry is also one of the major means of livelihood. The level of education among the Monpas is very low (Chand, 2009). Monpa society is very well knit. Each village has a council of village elders. The petty village cases are settled by them. The Lama is considered to be the priest, who performs the rituals. Gumpha is a sacred place to them. They are culturally very advanced, but backward in modern education.

Khens

Khen is one among the ancient communities having pre-Drukpa history in Bhutan. They are mainly spread across central Bhutan. Khens speak in Khen dialect, called Khen-ka, which is an “archaic form of Austric language” (Sinha, 1998: 29). Khens characterizes distinct Indo-Mongoloid affinity. They used to represent the intermediary relationship between Tibet on one hand and Assam-Bengal on the other.

Traditionally, Khens were pastoralists and warriors (Sinha, 1998: 29). They brought their sheep and cattle down to plains for grazing in winter and bartered goods like butter, Yak-tail, blankets and other products (Sinha, 1998: 29)

Many Khens nowadays reside in North-Bengal and associated areas. A great majority of the Khens moved from Bhutan and now has been absorbed with other communities. When the Khens were in power many of them had a considerable infusion of Aryan blood. A section of Khen became Hinduized (Upreti, 2004: 30)

The 1991 Bhutan census listed a population of 40,000 Khens living in south-central Bhutan.²¹ They mainly profess Tibetan Buddhism, although the pre-Buddhist religion of Bon has also remained greatly influential among the community.

Birmis

Birmis is a minor community in Bhutan. They are a nomadic group found in high altitude of the eastern Bhutan. They graze cattle between their summer and winter pastures and carry out the barter of commodities between eastern Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. Beside animal husbandry the Birmis resort to some cultivation and handicrafts of bamboo made articles. They are of Indo-Mongoloid stock.

²¹ https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12658/BT



Dayas

Dayas constituted one another minor community of Bhutan and their main concentration is in Samchi. Dayas had once ruled a part of Bhutan. They are agriculturalists and their economy centering around cultivation and animal husbandry. Orange is their main cash crop. Their life style is semi sedentary and semi-nomadic. They earn their livelihood partly by cultivation and partly by taking cattle of others for grazing to distant pastures. This necessitates transhumance. Some Dayas associated with trade and barter. Dayas are animists. The chief deity is Dzibdak, who is worshipped at the beginning of all religious festivals. The priest in Daya society is called Gangupama, who play a vital socio-religious role in their community. Recently efforts are being taken to preach Buddhism among the Dayas.

Inside the territory of Bhutan, Dayas were the zapo or slaves of Bhutanese government in the past and they were required to render free labour for the need of the Royal Government. After abolishing slavery from Bhutan, the Dayas started enjoying free life.

Lepchas

Lepchas constitute a very small community inhabiting particularly the Ha valley. In fact they are the extension of Sikkimese ethnic group, but now replaced by the Drukpas. They are subjugated and their population is limited. Lepchas are a Palaeo-Mongoloid stock. The community follows Jhum or tseni i.e. shifting cultivation and some are engaged in horticulture, agriculture, trade and animal husbandry. Lepcha villages are small in size, controlled by the council of village elders with a head at the top. They primarily follow Buddhism of Tibetan variety along with their indigenous beliefs and rituals.

Bodos

The Bodos who live in the foot hills of adjoining areas of Bhutan seem to have several politico-socio-cultural encounters with the Bhutanese. The political encounters between Bhutanese and Bodos led to two groups of people to exchange their beliefs and customs and other elements of culture. Bodos are agriculturist and Hinduized. The Kochs, Mechs, Rajbanis and many other indigenous groups of Assam and North-Bengal seem to have emerged from Bodo race, but they moved away from the parent stock and too different names because of different nature of acculturation and social change.

Kochs

The Koch community also claims a historical affiliation to Bhutan. The legendary king Sangaldip was a Koch who ruled over the Bhutanese territories during the seventh century (White, 1909: 99). However, his descendants lost the territories to the Tibetan immigrants. Historical evidence suggests that there were long struggles between Kochs and Bhutanese for primacy over the plains of Duars which led to a confrontation between the two groups of people in the territory of Bhutan (Sinha, 1998: 30). During Duars was between 4th and 5th decades of 19th century a number of slaves of Koch community were found in the vicinity of the forts of central Bhutan. (ibid: 30) The Kochs who once expanded their rule to several valleys of Bhutan are held to be a sub-group of the great Bodo community (Upreti, 2004: 30). They mostly reside in the southern part of Bhutan. Ethnically Koch are Indo-Mongoloid Bodo-group of people and culturally more closer to Mechs and Rajbanis of Assam and North Bengal. Kochs are agriculturalists and much Hinduized.

Tephoos

Tephoos constitute an indigenous group settled in Punakha of north Bhutan. They were of Indian extraction and had branched out from the Koch tribe. The Tephoos are considered as the descendants of the Raja of Kuch Behar near Padmanarayana. The members of Koch community who were settled in Punakha called Tephoo and are believed to had migrated from adjoining Bengal plains either at the time of BokhtiyarKhiji's invasion or during the subsequent invasions of Iiiyas Shah and Sekundar Shah and Mughals. Many members of ruling communities of Bengal and Assam Duars, such as Khen and Tephoo, had retreated in the neighbouring hills of Bhutan in the wake of Muslim invasions in the region.

Musalmans

It seems that some Musalman communities from the plains had settled in south Bhutan. During Duars war, a number of people belonging to Muslim community were found in the vicinity of the forts of central Bhutan. Some Tibetan Muslims were settled in the towns and urban centres of Bhutan, particularly after Chinese occupation of Tibet. Many Muslims of Indian origin had moved to Bhutan for the sake of trade, business and professional works. Royal kings also invited many Muslim occupational groups to come and reside in Bhutan for their specialized services to fulfill the needs of Bhutanese people. Kashmiri traders are considered to be the oldest Muslim settlers in Bhutan. The descendants of the earlier Muslim settlers who were the products of marriages between Muslim males and local females continued to live in the country as inseparable part of Bhutanese population.



Migrants from India

People of Indian origin have been living along the foot of Bhutan hills since the early eighteenth century, not always by choice but mostly for political and administrative and professional reasons. Among the people of Indian origin there are the descendants of Indian slaves in Bhutan of late seventeenth century. In addition to them there are later migrants from various parts of India, specially after its independence. Due to closeness between India and Bhutan for economic regeneration, a large number of Indians have migrated to Bhutan from the neighbouring as well as far away places from India. They have been residing mostly in towns of Bhutan along the Indian-Bhutan border. The most important places, where they have been living are Samchi, Phuntsoling, Hatishar, Dewangiri and Sandrup Jonkhar, etc. Of the Indian migrants in Bhutan, there are also Nepalese who migrated from neighbouring Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas. The non Nepalese Indian migrants consist of Bengalis, Cochs, Mechs, and others who moved to Bhutan from various parts of India viz. West Bengal, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Rajasthan. The Indian communities in Bhutan by profession are wage earners, merchants, shopkeepers, clerks, teachers and professionals. They are not homogenous group but have different ethnic, social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The socio-cultural life of the Indians in Bhutan continues to be dominated by Indian ethos. They are usually not the permanent residents of Bhutan.

Lhotshampas

The Lhotshampas are the Nepali-speaking ethnic community who live in southern Bhutan. Their population is concentrated in two regions of Bhutan, namely, south western and south eastern. The Nepalese of Bhutan are not a homogenous social category, rather they are differentiated into many groups and sub-groups. They retain the caste system. Among the castes of Nepalese origin who settled in Bhutan are Bahuns, Thakuris, Chettris etc. who are regarded as higher castes of Nepal. While among the lower castes there are Kamis, Sarkis and Damis. In addition to this, there are many Hinduized tribal groups known as Kiratis. Among them are Limbus, Gurungs, Rais, Mangars and many others.

So far the place of origin is concerned, the Nepalese society in Bhutan originate from almost all regions of Nepal. There are Thakuris of Western Nepal, Newaris of Kathmandu valley and eastern Nepal and hill Kiratis of eastern Nepal and Sikkim. The Thakuris strictly follow Hindu caste system and their social interaction is regulated by the notion of purity and pollution. Newaris are divided into different occupational groups and follow both Hinduism and Buddhism or a combination of both. The Kiratis are animist, lamaist and Hinduized tribes.

The Lhotshampas are primarily agriculturalists. They constitute a large segment of the labour force which is employed in road construction and other works. They practice Hinduism mixed with certain traits of Tibetan derived Buddhism. The Nepalese ethnic community in Bhutan is inclusive of various sub-cultural stocks of Nepal. Though the various Nepalese groups represent cultural diversity among them, yet Nepali language, dress, food and way of life have unified them into a single ethnic community. They have developed a sense of unity and have retained their own cultural identity distinct from Ngalongs and Sharchops. Considering the national ethos of Bhutan they are seen to wear Bhutanese dress, speak in Dzongkha and claim themselves as southern Bhutanese.

Nepali Migration to Bhutan

The Nepali speaking people, also known as the Lhotshampas, have settled in the southern part of Bhutan, mainly due to the accessibility of immigration through India. There are, however, contestations regarding the issue of origin of Nepali community in Bhutan. The time of their arrival is also a subject of controversy and has become “the political and legal basis for exclusion from citizenship of a substantial percentage of the population and even for a form of ‘ethnic cleansing’” (Varenes, 2009). There are some who claim that Nepali immigration to and settlement in Bhutan started in the eighteenth century, when it was encouraged by the British to check the growing Tibetan influence in the Himalayas, as Nepalese were considered to be hereditary enemies of Tibet. After the British left from the subcontinent, the influx of the immigrants continued, which forced Bhutan to introduce a nationality law in 1959 banning further Nepali immigration to Bhutan. There are also others who claim that the Nepali presence in Bhutan starts from the seventeenth century, before the recorded history of the British or the government. Meanwhile the Drukpa rulers claim that the southern Nepali speaking Bhutanese are recent settlers, or economic migrants (Hutt, 2003: 24). According to official records, they entered Bhutan after the conclusion of the Sinchula treaty between British India and Bhutan which brought an end to the Duars wars (Pal and Banerjee, 2017: 182). However, most of the Nepalese Bhutanese have migrated during nineteenth and early twentieth century in order to meet the labour demands for plantation works and various development projects in Bhutan (Khanal, 1998: 150). The implementation of the first Five Year plan in 1961 called for a steady labour supply to fill in the labour shortage, which led Bhutan to recruit foreign skilled workers from India and Nepal. In 1995, the non-national workers were estimated to be 30,000 including 10,000 Nepalese ethnic people (Pal and Banerjee, 2017: 182).



Despite their presence in Bhutan for more than a century, the Nepalis have retained their distinctive culture and language, and are the least-integrated community in Bhutan (Khanal, 1998). The reason for this is the distinct nature of their religious, lingual and socio-cultural background that sets them apart as a distinct ethnic group, as well as “a strong cultural and linguistic ties with the people of their common ethnic bond in neighbouring India and Nepal” (Khanal, 1998). Till the mid 1980s, the Lhotshampas lived peacefully and enjoyed comfortable status both in state and society. Their language was widely used in southern Bhutan and also had a semi-official status (Khanal, 1998).

Contention between the Lhotshampas and the Bhutanese Government

Various factors like their numerical strength, non-conformist nature of their culture, occasional expression for political reforms, events in the neighbourhood like the merger of Sikkim with India, the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling fueled the Drukpas concern over the presence of the Lhotshampas in Bhutan. The formation of the Bhutan State Congress political party in 1952 and the aspirations they showed was not welcomed by the ruling Drukpa elites. In 1958, the Bhutanese government adopted the Citizenship Act which was the government’s first “attempt to define Bhutanese citizens” (Khanal, 1998). Under this Act, the Lhotshampas required “to submit a bond of agreement affirming their allegiance to the king and country, pledging not to serve any other authority”. Only then the Nepalis were granted citizenship and national treatment” (Khanal, 1998). In 1977 and 1985, the Act was revised to introduce more stringent clauses which required to re-qualify for Bhutanese citizenship with documentary evidence of their residence in Bhutan in the year of 1958 or to be born from the parents who could produce the required proof (Khanal, 1998). The rest were required to go through the procedure laid down in the new Act in order to be enumerated in the census. The procedure consisted of additional clauses like fluency in Dzongkha, good knowledge of culture, customs, traditions and history of Bhutan, etc. The Nepali community feared that such a change in the Citizenship Act was likely to forfeit many Nepalis of their Bhutanese citizenship” (Khanal, 1998).

In 1988, a fresh census was conducted which resulted in many Lhotshampas forfeiting the status of citizenship and eventual eviction from the country. The 1988 census along with the 1985 Citizenship Act posed a serious threat to the ethnic Nepali community settled in Bhutan. A member of National Assembly, Teknath Rizal, representing southern Bhutan and a nominee to the Royal Advisory Council, submitted a memorandum to the king expressing the concern with the census. But he was arrested and relieved of his position.

The 1988 census was then followed by an introduction of Driglam Namzha and it was vigorously implemented in the name of national integration and identity. This policy required for all Bhutanese, irrespective of their ethnicity, to follow a unified code of conduct which contains the details of citizens behavior with respect to eating, dressing, speaking, etc. wearing the traditional Drukpa dress, Gho and Kira and, all these became mandatory for everyone. The Nepali community felt a sense of imposition of the Drukpa culture and tradition upon them since their culture and tradition was different from the one being forcefully imposed on them. Initially, the Nepalis tried to resist it politically and dissident movement took shape in Bhutan. Teknath Rizal, who had been in exile in Nepal following his release by the Bhutanese government, and other dissidents, formed the People’s Forum for Human Right (PFHR) which started protesting the government policies. Various other political organizations like Bhutan Peoples Party, Bhutan National Democratic Party were formed. In September and October 1990, Lhotshampa activists orchestrated mass public demonstration, in which demands for civil and cultural rights were presented to district headquarters all across southern Bhutan (Hutt, 2005: 47). The massive suppression of the Nepalis was undertaken by the government alleging the protest as a “terrorist movement” of the “anti-nationals”. Many participants and supporters were arrested and held for months without trial. Those who were released left Bhutan and joined relatives into the refugee camps in Nepal. They claimed they were released only in the condition that they pledge in writing to leave the country, and they would be forcefully evicted if they did not leave immediately (Hutt, 2005: 47). The Bhutanese government introduced many new rules and procedures in the south. There were restrictions placed on transportation of essential commodities like salt, people had to produce a ‘No Objection Certificate’ (N.O.C) from the Royal Bhutan Police in order to apply for scholarships and civil service appointments (Hutt, 2005: 47). This certified that the holder had a clean record. Even children seeking admissions to school required to produce an N.O.C.

While Bhutan continued its development programs, the ‘anti-national problem’ was the greatest cause for the 1991 census (Shaw, 1992). The Bhutanese government declared that its census operations had detected the presence of over 100,000 illegal immigrants living in southern Bhutan (Hutt, 2005: 48). The census operation soon became a tool for “dispossession and banishment of dissidents, the wealthy, the educated and various other categories of Lhotshampa citizens” (Hutt, 2005: 48). The stringent measures imposed on southern Bhutan, which included the closure of almost every school, were justified in terms of national security.



In September 1991, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) assumed responsibility for the coordination of emergency relief assistance for Bhutanese refugees. Bhutanese refugee camps were established at five different sites: Timai, Goldhap, Beldangi and Khudunabari in Jhapa district, and Sanishchare (Pathri) in Morang, and by late 1994, 2,331 survivors of physical torture had been identified in these camps (Hutt, 2005: 48). The Bhutanese government emphasized that the Nepalese government did not screen arrivals until June 1993, when the main influx had all but ceased, and adopted a hostile attitude to UNHCR's operations in Nepal. It maintained consistently for ten years that few, if any, of the people in the camps were genuine refugees from Bhutan, and dismissed the citizenship cards and tax receipts that many of them held as forgeries or stolen documents. Meanwhile, Nepalese politicians of every persuasion repeatedly referred to the presence of 100,000 Bhutanese refugees in their country, and declared that they would ensure that all of them would soon return to Bhutan 'with honour and dignity'.

The Refugee Crisis

According to the 1951 UN Convention, the term 'refugee' means a person who has a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such event is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it' (UNHCR, Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1967). Starting from the mid-twentieth century, the international community has been confronted with a large amount of flow of political refugees across international borders. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) which was formed in 1951, took care of around 2 million refugees. The number of refugees has been growing ever since and the end of cold war and the events that followed not only accelerated the number of refugees, but also defined the causes of the refugee situation on different terms, which was the division of the states along ethnic lines (Khanal, 1998: 144). There are various factors which triggers the flow of refugees, also called "new humanitarian crises". Communist states like former Yugoslavia and CIS countries constitute the first category where the struggle for power and territory amongst warring parties took the form of "ethnic cleansing" (Khanal, 1998: 144). The second category includes countries like Somalia, Liberia, Rwanda, etc. where "existing political and administrative structures have been destroyed, society has fragmented and power has passed into the hands of local warlords and military leaders" (Khanal, 1998: 144). In the third category includes countries like Bhutan, Myanmar, etc., where the refugee flows was caused "not by the break-up of the countries, but by the efforts to impose the authority of the state on minority groups, opposition movements and secessionist forces" (Khanal, 1998: 144-145).

Exodus of people from the country of their own seeking shelter across the border is a testimony of conditions in which human rights are either absent or grossly violated. A vast number of refugees are driven from their home mainly due to human rights abuses. The effective safeguarding of human rights is possible only when a democratic framework of the state is set up. However, holding state-controlled elections alone does not represent a democratic transition, which is exactly the case of Bhutan. Bhutan transitioned from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy in 2008. However, all occurrences in the country's history and politics are still largely determined by the kings.

As such, in the 1990s there was a huge influx of refugees into Nepal from Bhutan. The citizenship policies that the Bhutanese government adopted following the 1986 census caused a large number of Nepali-speaking Bhutanese to evict their home and seek asylum in Nepal where they had common ethnic and linguistic bond.

Started from the late 1990 with a few hundred asylum seekers, the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal had reached over 70,000 by the end of 1992 (Khanal, 1998: 152). Since September 1991, the UNHCR undertook the work of assistance to the refugees on the request of the government of Nepal. The year 1992 witnessed the largest influx of refugees averaging 300-600 new arrivals a day. In 2006, some 108,000 Bhutanese asylum seekers resided in the camps of Jhapa and Morang Districts of eastern Nepal. The UN refugee agency and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) launched a resettlement programme of over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees from Nepal to third countries in 2007. These refugees are resettled in countries like Australia (5,554), Canada (6,500), Denmark (874), New Zealand (1002), the Netherlands (327), Norway (566), the United Kingdom (358) and the United States of America (84,819).²² At present, there are only two camps in Nepal and the refugee population stands at less than 18,000 people (ibid).

²² <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2015/11/564dded46/resettlement-bhutanese-refugees-surpasses-100000-mark.html>



Besides, there are also those who have taken refuge in India's West Bengal and Assam states. Although the Bhutanese refugees mostly constitute the Nepali ethnic group there are reports that they also include few families belonging to the Indian ethnic groups such as Jhagar, Santhal, Urou and Bengali (Khanal, 1998)

The problem of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal is genuinely a human rights issue and has been a topic of much debate (Khanal, 1998:156). There were various human rights organizations including the London-based Amnesty International that carried out an in-depth exploration of the status of human rights in Bhutan and came out with the fact that "Nepali-speaking people from southern Bhutan...have been systematically driven out because of their ethnic origin or political beliefs".²³ In August 1994, Amnesty International also concluded in one of its reports that "in keeping with international law, Bhutan should be recognized as their 'own country' and they should have the right to return to live in safety from human violations" (Amnesty International, 1994). The refugee crisis of Bhutan is the result of human rights abuses which accelerated since the late 1980s particularly with regard to the Lhotshampas in the south (Khanal, 1998: 156). There is a direct link between the repatriation of the refugees and human rights situation in Bhutan. More than 80,000 people endured a tragic fate when the Bhutanese government forcibly expelled ethnic Nepalis in an act of "forceful eviction". The series of official acts implemented between 1977 and 1989 curbed immigration as well as defining a Bhutanese national according to the values, customs, dress, religion and language of the dominant Drukpa culture. In light of the "growing sense of cultural marginalization among the Nepali Bhutanese," dissent grew in the following years, leading to violence and demonstrations. Ethnic Nepalis responded to these acts by engaging in public demonstrations and protests in defense of their culture. The government in turn responded to massive protests held in September and October 1990 by launching a military crackdown. Because the Citizenship Act allowed the termination of citizenship of any person who showed disloyalty "in any manner whatsoever", even those who had been classified as full citizens found themselves denationalized for assisting dissident "anti-nationals" in their protests. Those ethnic Nepalis critical of the government's policies were labeled ngolops, or 'anti-national', and accused of perpetrating acts of terrorism.

In the early 1990s, Bhutan resorted into state terrorism. There were countless incidents of killing, murder, rape, burning of houses, arrest, torture, kidnap, beating, misbehaviour in the southern Bhutan by army personnel deployed by the government.²⁴ Immediately after the 1990 demonstrations, the Bhutanese governments shut down most of the schools in southern Bhutan (Hutt, 2003: 220). According to Amnesty International, these schools were turned into army bases or prisons.²⁵ Raids were conducted by the military and police throughout the region and people were detained for up to a year without being charged with a crime, and some were forced to endure torture and rape. According to the official data, by the end of 1992, some 60,000 ethnic Nepalis, which formed almost twenty per cent of the country's total population, had been dispossessed of their lands and forced to flee to Nepal (Sunilam, 2007: 3087). The Bhutanese government tried to systematically eradicate the cultural practices of the Lhotshampas through various official acts and military repression.

The Bhutanese refugees were housed in seven camps established by the UNHCR because Bhutan refused to allow them to their homes and the Nepal government would not permit them to become residents of that country. As mentioned earlier, the UNHCR started its refugee resettlement programme in 2007, along with the cooperation of eight countries including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. However, many refugees experienced difficulties in adjusting to life in their new countries. For example, Bhutanese refugee communities in the United States have experienced abnormally high suicide rates.²⁶ Meanwhile, there are still some Bhutanese refugees who remain in the camps in Nepal, where they have now lived for more than 20 years.

The Bhutanese government has refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing regarding the country's treatment of ethnic Nepalis and continues to deny the right to return to any of the refugees. The government has instead sought to keep the international spotlight on its efforts to promote Bhutan as a country concerned with both the spiritual and material well-being of its citizens through its concept of Gross National Happiness. GNH and human rights are intrinsically linked, as such, turning a blind eye to Bhutan's human rights violations might contribute to discrediting the concept of Gross National Happiness.

As the efforts of developing and achieving Gross National Happiness remains the country's prime goal, the issue of refugee crisis is to be kept within the GNH debate. While there are clearly many merits to the concept of GNH, the promotion of

²³ <https://www.amnestyusa.org/countries/bhutan>.

²⁴ http://www.apfanews.com/media/upload/final_report.pdf.

²⁵ <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/03/25/happiness-and-human-rights-in-shangri-la/>.

²⁶ <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/03/25/happiness-and-human-rights-in-shangri-la/>.



Bhutan as the model to follow is troubling given the gross violations of human rights perpetrated by that country's government. Despite "cultural vitality and diversity" being among the nine indicators the government uses to determine the country's Gross National Happiness, a series of official laws and acts implemented since the late-1970s have sought to narrowly define Bhutanese nationals as only those citizens who adhere to the customs, values, dress, religion and language of the Ngalongs.

Conclusion

The issue of minorities and the refugee crisis is therefore an imperative concern in the success of the GNH development model in Bhutan. Bhutan's development model evolved from the desire of the kingdom's rulers to keep its people happy. Bhutan is predominantly a Buddhist country. The Bhutanese society is built upon Buddhist teachings and although the country is modernizing slowly, traditional ways of life and sentiments are still ingrained deeply in the minds of the people of Bhutan. This however is speaking for only a little over half of the population of Bhutan. The Ngalongs being the majority ethnic group take control of the governance of the country. The rest of the population living in Bhutan comes from an altogether different social background. Bhutan is a multicultural, multilingual, and multireligious country, but all the other ethnic groups, speaking languages other than Dzongkha and following religion other than Buddhism are not represented in the country on equal terms. Although there is a constitution and there are provisions to safeguard people's rights, and the country is marching on the path of development by prioritizing 'happiness of the people' over material accumulation, these constitutional provisions reflect biasness favouring the Ngalongs over other ethnic groups.

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