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Citation

Shrestha-Schipper, S. (2006). Bhutanese Nepalis or Nepali Bhutanese? Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12742>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Bhutanese Nepalis or Nepali Bhutanese?

Since 1990 Bhutanese of Nepali descent have been forced to leave Bhutan and live as refugees in their ancestral land. Currently, more than 100,000 live in seven UNHCR-assisted refugee camps in the border districts of Jhapa and Morang in eastern Nepal. The Bhutanese government sees them as 'Nepali' and wants them to stay in Nepal, while the Nepalis call them 'Bhutanese' and want them to return. In the midst of this identity crisis, the refugees call themselves 'Bhutanese' – many possess Bhutanese citizenship cards, and want to return. Despite several rounds of talks between Nepal and Bhutan, the refugees remain stateless and their identity remains as obscure as ever.

Satya Shrestha-Schipper

Media attention on Bhutan rarely transcends its image as Shangri-la, and it only gets worse when it comes to the Bhutanese Nepali: reliable data is simply not available. The government's role in the mass exodus remains shrouded in secrecy; it claims that despite its pleas to Bhutanese Nepalis to stay in the country, many left after signing a 'voluntary emigration form' to reside in UNHCR-managed camps in Nepal. Signing the form meant the person was leaving willingly, and had received compensation for property left behind. The government filmed and photographed people signing these forms, as evidence that the mass exit of a single ethnic group was not 'ethnic cleansing' but rather 'voluntary emigration'. Voluntary or not, the question remains: Why have so many Bhutanese Nepalis left their country to reside in refugee camps? Finding an answer requires a look at the beginning of Nepali migration to Bhutan and the government's efforts to alternately segregate them and to integrate or assimilate them into mainstream Bhutanese culture.

Shrouded in clouds

Bhutan, known as 'Druk Yul' (the Land of the Dragon), is a small Himalayan kingdom bordered to the north by the Tibetan Autonomous Region and to the east, west and south by India. Mountains dominate, but there is a narrow strip of lowland in the south, where much of the dense subtropical forest has been cleared to create farmland. As with all information from Bhutan, it is hard

to come up with reliable population figures. The last national census in 1969 counted just over 1m people and was subsequently revised down to 930,617 (Rose 1977: 41). Government documents continued to assume the population numbered over 1m, but in 1990 King Jigme Sigmé Singye Wangchuck declared that it was only 600,000. The first National Human Development Report, published in 2000, estimated the 1998 population to be 636,499.

Although its origin and heritage is Buddhist, Bhutan is a multi-ethnic country. Information on the population's ethnic division is also unreliable. Recent estimates for the Ngalongs in the West, whose origin can be traced back to Tibet, vary from 10% to 28%; for the Sharchops (Easterners), from 30% to 40%; and for the Bhutanese Nepalis (Lhotshampa, 'Southerner'), from 25% to 52% (Hutt, 2003: 7). Both the Ngalongs and Sharchops practise Tibetan-style Mahayan Buddhism and speak Tibeto-Burman languages and are collectively known as Drukpas. Dzongkha, originally spoken by the Ngalongs, has been the national language since 1961. The Bhutanese Nepalis are predominantly Hindu; most have their own language, but Nepali has been their lingua franca.

Into the mainstream

The Nepali arrival in Bhutan remains controversial. According to the refugees, the Nepali presence dates back to the 17th century (Dhakal and Strawn, 1994: 115), whereas the Bhutanese government claims Nepalis were allowed into Bhutan only in 1900 (Hutt, 2003:

25). It is likely that the first major migration from Nepal began after the Anglo-Nepalese war of 1814-1816 (Regmi 1999). A century later British officers observed the Nepali presence in southern Bhutan: Bell mentioned in 1904 that the Nepalis might have migrated there many years earlier, and Captain Morris in 1933 believed that Nepali settlements had been there already for 60 or 70 years (Hutt, 2003: 41, 58).

Despite the large number of Bhutanese Nepalis living in southern Bhutan, government policy in the mid-20th century was ambivalent. It isolated the Bhutanese Nepali by restricting their settlement to southern Bhutan (Rose, 1977: 47). Although this restriction was lifted in 1974 by the 43rd National Assembly (Thinley 1994: 55), geographical isolation (the south is separated from mid-mountain Bhutan by a 25-mile-wide forest belt) discouraged most Bhutanese Nepalis from moving farther north (Rose, 1977: 42). Both geographical circumstances and government policy helped maintain customs and practices, but also alienated immigrants from mainstream Bhutanese culture.

After its initial policy of isolation, the government took measures to integrate Bhutanese Nepalis into mainstream Bhutanese culture. The first land reform programme was implemented in 1952 and allowed tenant farmers, most of whom were Bhutanese Nepalis, to acquire up to 25-30 acres (ibid: 128). In 1958, the government ruled that citizenship could be obtained at birth if the father was a Bhutanese national, and that land-owning foreigners could obtain citizenship after having lived in Bhutan for ten years. Nepali culture and dress were officially recognised, the Nepali language was taught in schools and inter-ethnic marriage was encouraged. In 1980 the government introduced the national integration programme. Little information is available on what this programme entailed and it faded away without official explanation in the wake of a 1985 revision of the Citizenship Act. According to this act, citizenship could be obtained at birth only if both parents were Bhutanese, while a child of one Bhutanese parent could obtain citizenship only by proving 15 years of in-country residence. By

1988, all Bhutanese deemed citizens had received their citizenship cards.

The coming crisis

Immediately after the citizenship cards were distributed, the government conducted a census confined to the south, which divided southern Bhutanese into seven categories: genuine Bhutanese citizens (F1); returned migrants, meaning people who had left Bhutan and then returned (F2); drop-outs, meaning people unavailable during the census-taking (F3); non-national women married to Bhutanese men (F4); non-national men married to Bhutanese women (F5); legally adopted children (F6); and migrants and illegal settlers (F7) (AI 1992: 5-6). The year of enactment of Bhutan's first nationality law, 1958, was taken as the cut-off year to be recorded in the census as a genuine Bhutanese. The citizenship cards issued by 1988 were no longer accepted in the south as proof of being Bhutanese. Genuine citizen, or F1 status required the submission of a 1958 tax receipt in either one's own or an ancestor's name, and convincing the census team that both of one's parents were Bhutanese. If one could not show a 1958 tax receipt but could show receipts from both before and after the cut-off year, one was categorised F2 on the assumption that the person had left Bhutan during the interim. If the place of birth differed from a person's place of residence, a Certificate of Origin was required in addition to the 1958 tax receipt. In the end, the census reported that 100,000 illegal immigrants had flocked into southern Bhutan to take advantage of the country's economic prosperity.

This census was followed by the introduction of Driglam Namzah, an ancient dress and language code of the Drukpa community, to promote a distinct Bhutanese national identity. This code stated that all Bhutanese citizens should wear national dress at all times. If found without national dress, a person would be penalised. Nepali language was discontinued from the school curriculum. Two years later, in 1990, the government once again organised another south-only census. Those categorised as genuine Bhutanese citizens (F1) in the previous census were now put in

categories with fewer rights based on their Certificate of Origin; sometimes even members of the same family were placed in separate categories. As the census progressed, tensions mounted. Bhutanese Nepalis demonstrated en masse to protest their treatment. The government responded by introducing the 'No Objection Certificate'. Essential for an individual to conduct business and enrol his children in school, the certificate was issued only to individuals who, according to police records, had not taken part in the demonstration. Police raids and intimidation increased throughout the south and by late 1990 Bhutanese Nepalis were being expelled or forced to flee to India. The Indian government provided them not with food and shelter but with transportation to Kakarbhitta, on the eastern border, where it told them to leave India and enter Nepal.

India's transportation to Nepal of the first wave of expelled Bhutanese Nepalis only encouraged the Bhutanese government to label those still residing in Bhutan as 'illegal Nepali immigrants'. In reality, they were Bhutanese and had been for generations, but government pressure and Indian collusion forced them into the country of their ancestors, a country they themselves had never known. Meanwhile, in 1997 Bhutan passed the New Citizenship Act, introducing still stricter requirements for obtaining citizenship. But even today, after having lived in the camps for over 14 years, refugees still consider themselves Bhutanese citizens.

As Bhutanese Nepalis fled Bhutan in the tens of thousands, international development organisations providing aid to Bhutan and the international media remained silent on the state persecution of a single ethnic group. The right to citizenship is one of the basic principles of democracy; the international community, otherwise actively engaged in promoting democracy in Asia, cannot ignore the plight of refugees abandoned in one of the world's poorest nations. ◀

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