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THE LAST EMPEROR?

by Carol Rose

Secreted in the Himalayan mountains between India and China is the world's last Mahayana Buddhist kingdom: Bhutan. It is considered by some to be one of the few remaining unspoiled places on Earth. There are extensive forests, some of the highest mountains in the world, and rivers flowing with the promise of untapped energy. The southern hills are carpeted with fields of cardamom and orange groves. Ruled by the youthful King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, Bhutan has long cultivated its reputation as the "Land of the Peaceful Dragon."

This tranquil image has been shattered in the last two years by the arrival in neighboring India and Nepal of more than 100,000 refugees, escaping what they describe as Bhutan's policy of ethnic cleansing. Virtually all of those fleeing are ethnic Nepalese whose families migrated to Bhutan during the last two centuries. Most are Hindus, farmers and illiterate. They tell stories of how they were stripped of their citizenship by the government and coerced by soldiers to leave Bhutan under threat of imprisonment, beatings, torture and rape.

More than 75,000 of these refugees are crowded in six refugee camps on Nepal's eastern border. Another 100 refugees arrive daily. They live in flimsy bamboo huts with plastic roofing and subsist on United Nations food rations.

"We will make every effort to go home," said Tek Badu, age 40, a farmer who was born in Daifam village in eastern Bhutan. In early January, a local district administrator in Daifam told Badu that he and his family had been declared "non-nationals," the government's word for illegal immigrants. The official gave Badu and his family ten days to leave Bhutan or face arrest. "We had three acres of cardamom and orange groves, but we had to leave everything behind," said Badu. "We want to go back at the earliest possible time."

It could be a long wait. Bhutanese government officials say the "so-called refugees" don't belong in Bhutan. Instead, they say, the camps are full of illegal immigrants from Nepal and India who were deported from Bhutan, former Bhutanese citizens who "voluntarily" forfeited their citizenship, or Nepalese "terrorists" who are plotting to overthrow the monarchy and turn Bhutan into a Nepali-dominated state.

King Wangchuk, age 38, says he will do what it takes to preserve Bhutan's unique position as the last Buddhist kingdom in the world. He has offered to resign if he cannot

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

find a solution to the "southern problem." But such a move is resisted by Bhutan's National Assembly, which noted in the proceedings of its 1992 session that: "Without monarchy there will be anarchy."¹



The forested hills of southern Bhutan as seen from India.

THE INFORMATION GAP

Unravelling the truth about Bhutan is hindered by government controls on information. Criticism of the king is permitted only in the National Assembly, not in public. There is no freedom of speech or assembly in Bhutan, so even retired Bhutanese government officials are afraid to speak to foreigners. Indeed, a 1990 Bhutanese law defines as treasonable: "If with the intention to cause serious harm to the three main elements [King, Kingdom and Government] or any one of them, correspondence is made or conversation is held (whatever the topic may be) with persons within Bhutan or with foreign nationals...(who are not supposed to be conversed with)."

¹ Bhutan's National Assembly members serve a three-year term. There are 151 representatives, 105 of whom are elected by indirect vote. Twelve members are elected by the Buddhist monastic establishment and 33 are appointed by the king. Decisions are reached by consensus.

It also is considered treasonable if a Bhutanese citizen fails to report hearing or seeing anyone else talking against the King, Kingdom or government of Bhutan. The punishment for treason ranges from life imprisonment to death.

Bhutan's obsession with control of information to and from the outside world led to a 1989 government order to dismantle all television satellite dish antennas to prevent people from watching programs originating outside Bhutan. Likewise, the entry of foreigners into Bhutan is rigidly controlled by the government. Only 3,000 tourists are allowed in each year and each is charged \$220 a day in visa fees. Visitors must stick to a government-delineated travel itinerary; few are allowed to visit southern Bhutan, which is populated largely by ethnic Nepalese.

Human rights groups also face restrictions on their attempts to investigate reported abuses in Bhutan. Amnesty International was allowed to send three investigators there in January, 1992, but their request to visit the southern Chirang District, from where many refugees have fled, was denied on the grounds of "security." A scheduled visit to Bhutan by a Jurists Mission representing judges from the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) was blocked at the last minute when confirmed seats on the Bhutanese airline suddenly were canceled. Bhutan also rejected three requests for a visit by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, although the Bhutanese foreign minister agreed to meet with her in Geneva.²

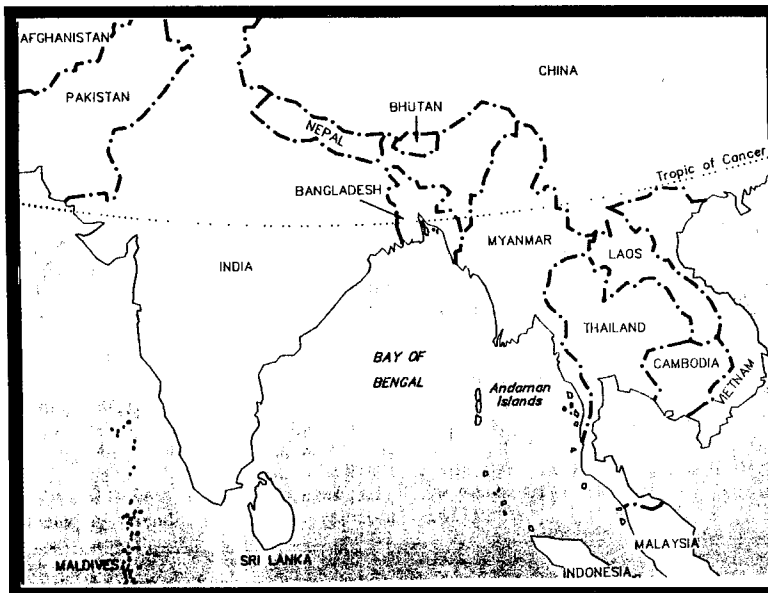
Despite these restrictions, it is possible to piece together the present-day political situation in Bhutan from a variety of sources: interviews with present and former Bhutanese government officials; visits to the refugee camps in Nepal and to West Bengal, India, near the Bhutanese border; and study of Bhutanese government documents, press clippings, and the reports of human rights groups.

THE POLITICS OF POPULATION

Bhutan is a nation of migrants. Its current crisis is best understood in the context of the country's ethnic divisions. The ruling ethnic group is "*Drukpa*," comprised of Buddhists who migrated from Tibet in the 1600s. They were led by a cleric named Ngawang Namgyal, who unified Bhutan and fought off encroachments by Tibet. He then proclaimed himself the spiritual and temporal ruler of Bhutan, promising to rule throughout the ages by appearing in repeated reincarnations, in a form now known as the *Shabdrung*.

After the British defeat of Bhutan in the war of 1864, Bhutan was forced to sign a treaty ceding some of its land in Darjeeling and promising future cooperation with British India. In 1904, the British put their own man on the Bhutanese throne. He was Ugen Wangchuk, the then "penlop" (regional warlord) of Tongsa in central Bhutan. The British liked Wangchuk

² Following publication of my first newsletter on the Bhutanese political situation, in March, 1991, I formally petitioned the Bhutanese government for a visa. To date, I have received no reply.



BHUTAN'S LOCATION IN SOUTH ASIA

[Source: Lonely Planet Guides.]

because he assisted them in military campaigns against Tibet in the late 1800s.³ When Wangchuk became the "Maharajah of Bhutan," the *Shabdrung* was removed from power but retained his religious title. King Jigme Wangchuk, who is the fourth ruler in the Wangchuk dynasty, thus holds absolute power but lacks the theological legitimacy of monarchs in Nepal and Thailand.

The present-day *Shabdrung* lives in exile in India, after his two predecessors met with mysterious deaths -- one "fell" off a building, the other was

strangled with a silk scarf. However, the *Shabdrung* still is worshipped by many Buddhist Bhutanese.

The other major group in Bhutan is ethnic Nepalese, known as "southern Bhutanese" or *Lhotshampa*. *Lhotshampa* refugee leaders say the first *Shabdrung*, Ngawang Namgyal, encouraged immigration of Nepalese Hindus into Bhutan after signing a formal agreement in the year 1624 with Ram Shah, the Gorkha King of Nepal. However, there is no documentation to prove that such an agreement existed. The government of Bhutan denies that it does.

But no one denies that there were thousands of Nepalese settlers in present-day Bhutan by the late 1800s. In his 1909 account of his travels in Sikkim and Bhutan, J. Claude White, a British political officer, wrote that thousands of Nepalese settlers were in southern Bhutan. In 1932, Captain C.J. Marris of the Gorkha Regiment estimated there was a total Nepalese population of 60,000 in southern and eastern Bhutan. Indeed, until the mid-1950s, Nepalese laborers were welcomed in Bhutan to clear and plant the dense malaria-infested forests. It was not until 1959 that the government banned the free flow of ethnic Nepalese into the country. It proclaimed that all Nepalese who were in Bhutan and owned land in 1958 were full Bhutanese citizens.

Since then, the relative proportion of the two major ethnic groups in Bhutan has become a key political issue. The government says that *Lhotshampa* make up about one-third of the total population, with the rest of the population comprised of Buddhist *Drukpa* from

³ *Sikkim and Bhutan*, by J. Claude White, A. Sagar Book House, India, 1992. First published in 1909.

the North and East. Refugee leaders say that ethnic Nepalese actually account for half or more of the total Bhutanese population -- sufficient to make them the majority ethnic group in Bhutan. Such ethnic dominance would be significant if Bhutan ever adopted a one-person, one-vote system of democracy.

Complicating the debate is the government's tendency to alter its population estimates. When Bhutan joined the United Nations in 1971, the government provided an estimate of 1.2 million people, which supposedly was based on a 1969 census. But the government later called this figure inaccurate. Two years ago, the King was quoted as saying the official population estimate was only 600,000.

Refugee leaders say the real population estimate should be 700,000 and that King Wangchuk is leaving out the 100,000 Bhutanese now in exile in India and Nepal. In effect, they argue, he has written off nearly one-seventh of Bhutan's citizens.

The King insists that those in exile are "non-nationals" who never belonged in Bhutan in the first place.

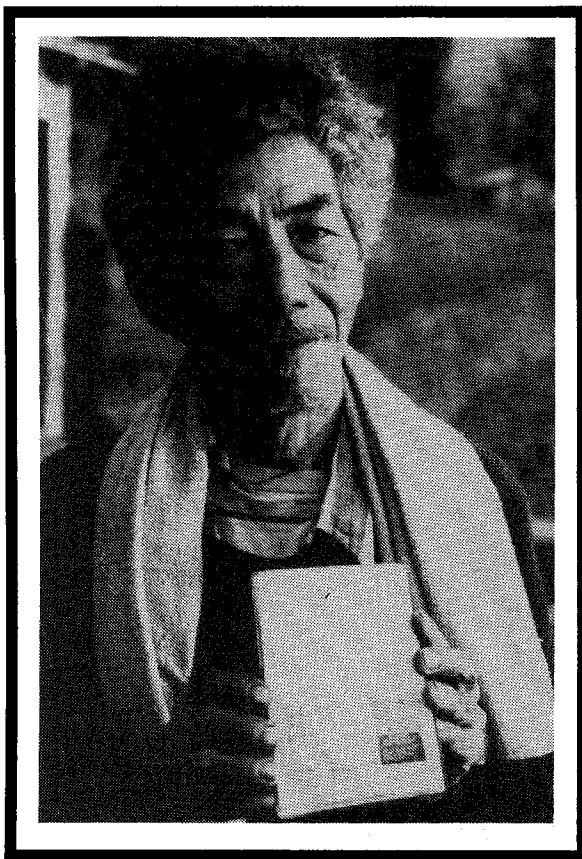
IDENTITY CRISIS

Are the refugees truly Bhutanese citizens? Bhutanese officials say not. The refugees, they say, either are terrorists or illegal migrants who went to Bhutan in search of work, free medical care and government-sponsored education.

"Our unique problem in South Asia is that Bhutan has a shortage of manpower," said Sonam T. Rabgye, First Secretary at the Royal Bhutanese Embassy in Delhi. "We had to be dependent on labor from outside, especially for road construction. Unfortunately, when the projects were completed, they [Nepalese laborers] refused to go back. Bhutan offered them a lot of opportunities. Besides employment, there is land, and really fertile land...The government provides free education, subsidies for farmers, and a stress on agriculture. So, this is the price we have had to pay for development."

The refugees with whom I spoke all said they were born in Bhutan and that their families had lived there for generations. Most carried documents to prove their point: citizenship cards, land tax receipts, medical or marriage certificates -- some dating back to the 1940s. Many showed me their uniquely Bhutanese clothing -- *gho* and *kira*. And while most were illiterate and uneducated, all of them could recite the name of their village, their block number and their district in Bhutan.

Camp registration statistics confirm my findings. Officials from the Nepal government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report that 98 percent of the refugees entering the camps have documentation showing citizenship or long-term residency in Bhutan. Despite such findings, Bhutanese government officials are firm in their insistence that the refugees are impostors.



A newly-arriving refugee in West Bengal, India, displays his Bhutanese national identity card. He and his family were leaving for the refugee camps in Nepal the following day.

"We have reason to believe that they [the refugees] are printing false identity cards," said Rabgye. "The identity card the government issued was printed in Calcutta, so it would be easy to forge."

But Veerapong Vangvarotai, program officer at UNHCR in Kathmandu, says it is unlikely that tens of thousands of people would be able to fake their identity. "If the documents are faked, then everyone would have the same fake document," said Vangvarotai. "But some have land deeds, others have tax receipts, and still others have marriage certificates. It is not possible that so large a number of people could claim to come from Bhutan when it isn't true."

As refugees continued to pour over its border in 1992, the government of Nepal finally threw down the gauntlet on the identity issue. On two separate occasions it submitted a proposal to the Bhutanese government to conduct a "joint survey to determine the status of the refugees and, if Bhutan preferred, to invite UNHCR and India to participate in such a survey," said Shree Kant Regmi, Joint Secretary in Nepal's Ministry of Home Affairs.

Bhutan declined both offers.

ONE NATION, ONE PEOPLE

Whatever the exact ethnic break-down of Bhutan's population, there is no doubt that the government is pursuing a program to make Bhutan culturally homogeneous through a policy it calls: "one nation, one people." This cultural purification policy consists of a series of laws passed in recent years, culminating in a national dress code, a national code of conduct, and uniform language requirements. What follows is a description of these laws:

* Marriage Act

Prior to the mid 1970s, the government of Bhutan encouraged inter-marriage between *Lhotshampa* and *Drukpa*, giving cash incentives to couples who married across ethnic lines. Despite these attempts at integration, large numbers of ethnic Nepalese married non-Bhutanese citizens from across the border in India. This was primarily because of religion.

Most *Lhotshampa* are Hindus and thus are required to marry other Hindus from the same caste. Finding a spouse of the right caste who is not a relative led many *Lhotshampa* to marry ethnic Nepalese from India and Nepal.

The 1980 Marriage act attempted to halt this trend by imposing penalties on Bhutanese *Lhotshampa* who married non-citizens. *Lhotshampa* who married non-Bhutanese were denied promotion in government service. They also became ineligible for medical treatment abroad, study fellowships, business loans or grants given by the government and government-supplied agriculture inputs (seed, fertilizer, etc.). These restrictions were implemented only against *Lhotshampa* and were not applied to *Drukpa* who married western women.⁴

* Citizenship Requirements

In 1985, the government imposed further restrictions on the *Lhotshampa* population by implementing a Nationality Law that significantly tightened the requirements for citizenship. Prior to this law, Bhutanese citizenship had been determined by the 1958 Citizenship Law. The 1958 law granted citizenship to anyone whose father was a Bhutanese citizen, who was born within Bhutan, or who had lived there for ten years and owned agricultural land within the kingdom.

The 1985 citizenship act codified a new basis for citizenship in Bhutan: proof of residence in Bhutan since before December 31, 1958. The new citizenship law also required that both parents be Bhutanese citizens in order to transmit citizenship to their children. Residents who could not prove that both parents were Bhutanese citizens retroactively were declared illegal immigrants, even if they had been citizens under the previous law. In effect, these rules enable the government to claim that the refugees are not Bhutanese citizens, even if they were born and reared in Bhutan.

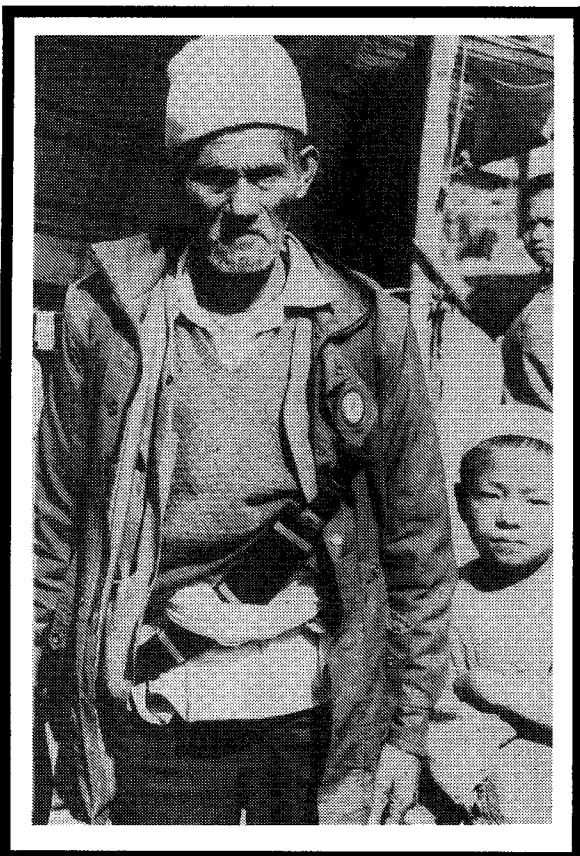
Bhutanese officials are quick to point out that people who lose their citizenship under the 1985 law may apply for naturalization. But, in fact, they must first satisfy a rigorous set of standards, including fluency in speaking, reading and writing the Drukpa mother-tongue, a tonal language similar to Tibetan called *Dzongkha*. Few *Lhotshampas* can pass this test. Indeed, most are illiterate even in their mother-tongue of Nepali. Naturalized citizens must also prove prior residency in Bhutan of 15 to 20 years and have "no record of having spoken or acted against the King, country and people of Bhutan in any manner whatsoever." Even if all these requirements are fulfilled, the government "reserves the right to reject any application for naturalization without assigning any reason."

The 1985 act went into effect in 1988, when the government initiated a census in southern Bhutan. The census set out to determine citizenship status of all *Lhotshampa* by categorizing people into seven groups: from citizens, who were "F1," to those declared "F7" or "non-national." The census provided justification to expel people who no longer met government criteria for citizenship.

⁴ "The Bhutan Tragedy: When Will It End?", First Report of the SAARC Jurists Mission on Bhutan, May 1992, p. 10.

According to a December, 1992, report by Amnesty International, the situation in southern Bhutan has been "exacerbated due to the government's failure to specify and make known in advance what would happen to people in southern Bhutan once they had been categorized under F7, i.e. had been declared non-nationals. From late 1990, many of these people, some of whom were born in Bhutan, and had been resident there throughout their life, were apparently forced to leave the country."⁵

Officially, King Wangchuk has outlawed the forcible eviction of Bhutanese citizens -- even the so-called *ngolops* or terrorists.⁶ Bhutan's spokesman in Delhi, Rabgye, did not know how many Bhutanese have been asked to leave because they were declared "non-nationals." He said, however, that 12,500 *Lhotshampa* had been "reinstated" as citizens after being incorrectly stricken from government citizenship rosters. Others, he said, have left Bhutan voluntarily.



A southern Bhutanese man looks fierce when wearing the traditional Nepali "khukri" knife. But when he spoke of the home and fields he left behind in Bhutan he broke into tears.

In contrast, Amnesty International found that many departures were involuntarily, reporting that, "dozens of heads of families, among them men aged 70 and older ... were forced to write and/or sign statements affirming their voluntary application to leave Bhutan with their families, and [said] that they had unsuccessfully tried to appeal to the authorities about this."⁷

Refugees living in the camps in eastern Nepal confirmed that they were forced to sign "voluntary departure" papers and were expelled as "non-nationals" despite having been born in Bhutan. Monmaya Rai, age 50, said her parents and grandparents were born in Bhutan's Samchi district. "We were compelled by the police to sign documents saying we were leaving voluntarily," said Rai. "If we didn't sign, they said we would have to pay 1,000 rupees per head and that our houses would be

⁵ "Bhutan: Human Rights Violations Against the Nepali-Speaking Population in the South," by Amnesty International, December, 1992.

⁶ "Proceedings and Resolutions of the 71st Session of the National Assembly of Bhutan," printed in Kuensel, November 14, 1992. p. 6.

⁷ Amnesty International, op. cit.

destroyed. There were four families in all who were forced to leave with us. We knew we had to sign because those who left before us had their houses burned down."

* Code of Cultural Etiquette

In 1989, the Bhutanese government adopted a policy to "Promote a Distinct National Identity." This is known as the *Driglam Namzha*, or "code of cultural etiquette." This code requires all Bhutanese to wear the national dress (a *gho* for men and *kira* for women) while visiting local offices, monasteries, government buildings and schools. The woolen *gho* and *kira* are ill-suited for the warm climate of southern Bhutan. In contrast, the clothing norm for southern Bhutanese men is slacks and shirts, while women dress in cotton saris.

The *Driglam Namzha* etiquette code also dictates how people should conduct themselves during various functions, such as religious or state ceremonies, officials meetings, lunches and dinners. It sets forth rules for conduct at work or informal social gatherings, for sending and receiving gifts, for speaking to superiors, and for eating in public places. Failure to abide by the *Driglam Namzha* is punishable by one week in prison or a fine.

According to Bhutanese officials, the code was implemented in an effort to unify Bhutan as "one nation, one people." In a Bhutanese government report entitled, "The Facts Behind Recent Developments in Southern Bhutan," the government argued that cultural diversity:

...is practical only for a larger country where a diversity of customs, traditions and culture enriches that nation. A small country like Bhutan cannot afford the luxury of such diversity which may impede the growth of social harmony and unity among its people. While a larger country can rely upon its economic or military strength to safeguard its national interests, for a small land-locked and developing country like ours, it is the unity of our people and the unique character of our national identity that will always be our greatest strength in promoting and safeguarding our security and well-being as a sovereign, independent nation.⁸

Rabgye insists that the dress and behavior code was an attempt to integrate the southern Bhutanese, rather than exclude them from society. "Before this was introduced there was a referendum held and everybody supported it," said Rabgye. "In fact, the most vociferous support was in southern Bhutan. They felt it was a recognition that they were being integrated into Bhutanese society."

A different reaction is common among the Bhutanese refugees. "I always wore the *kira*, but it was very heavy and didn't suit the climate -- especially when working in the fields," says Dhan Maya, age 60, from Samchi district. "At first, we agreed to wear it. But later some people petitioned the government to not wear the dress, especially during [Hindu] religious

⁸ "The Facts Behind Recent Developments in Southern Bhutan, (A Bhutan Government Report)", reprinted in SAARC Jurists Commission Report, op. cit., Appendix 8.

festivals. I think it was because of that petition they declared us non-nationals and forced us to leave."

The policy of limiting cultural diversity also was extended to language. In late 1990, the speaking of Nepali was banned in public schools. Although all schools are English medium, students are not allowed to pass to the next grade unless they pass the Dzongkha language test -- regardless of how they perform in other subjects.

BACKLASH

Far from promoting integration, the "one nation, one people" policy sparked a series of demonstrations from the southern Bhutanese. In 1988, representatives from southern Bhutan warned King Wangchuk that census officials were using the new law to harass *Lhotshampa*. One of those who presented a petition was Tek Nath Rizal, a National Assembly representative from southern Bhutan and a member of the King's 15-member Royal Advisory Council. In a confidential and extremely deferential petition to the King in 1988, Rizal warned that census teams were threatening citizens, confiscating identity cards, and coercing illiterate people into signing documents.

In response, the government imprisoned Rizal, reportedly tortured him, and then expelled him from the Royal Advisory Council on grounds of spreading false allegations and inciting southern Bhutanese against the government. Rizal left Bhutan for Nepal, where he set up the People's Forum for Human Rights. He was subsequently arrested in Nepal in 1989 (prior to Nepal's democracy movement) and taken to Bhutan's capital, Thimpu, where he has remained in prison for four years without trial or access to a lawyer.

Government officials say Rizal was not tried prior to now because the treason law under which he was charged carried with it a mandatory death sentence. After the mandatory sentencing restrictions were lifted in 1992, the government scheduled a formal trial for Rizal in January, 1993. However, the trial was suspended when Amnesty International petitioned the government to provide legal council to Rizal, according to AHURA, a human rights organization comprised of former Bhutanese political prisoners.

Bhutanese government spokesman, Rabgye, characterized Rizal as the "mastermind of this present problem."

"There is a feeling that he has done nothing wrong, but of course this is not true. He played dirty games," said Rabgye. "On one hand, he told the southern Bhutanese people that the government was using the census to hurt them, but not to worry because he would help them. Then he told the king that the southerners were fomenting rebellion, but not to worry because he could talk to them. Actually, he was creating all of this."

The government charged that Rizal and five other men had committed treason by "writing, publishing and distributing literature critical of the government's policy of cultural integration." The government also said the six men were guilty of "inciting the people against the government through a misinformation campaign, extorting money for guerilla training in

neighboring areas and to purchase arms for terrorist activities and trying to damage relations with ... India by spreading false propaganda."⁹

In 1991, Amnesty International declared the six men "prisoners of conscience" and called for their unconditional release. Just prior to the arrival of the Amnesty investigative team, five of the six "prisoners of conscience" were released. Rizal remains imprisoned.



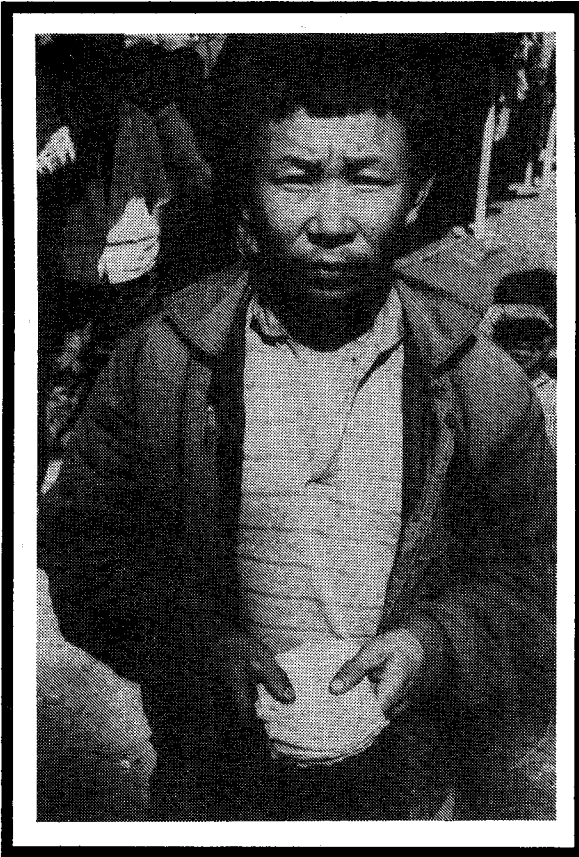
The wife, father and two sons of Tek Nath Rizal, who is imprisoned in Thimpu. Amnesty International has declared Rizal a "prisoner of conscience."

Anger over Rizal's imprisonment and the imposition of the *Driglam Namzha* erupted in a series of public demonstration in September, 1990. Amnesty International reported that as many as 4,000 demonstrators took part in this protest in the Samchi district alone. But it "found no evidence" to support the testimony of many southern Bhutanese that as many as 300 demonstrators were killed during the protest march.

The Bhutanese government was quick to crack down on the demonstrators, labeling them as *ngolops* [terrorists] or "anti-nationals." Hundreds were arrested and thousands more were stripped of their Bhutanese citizenship. Says Amnesty International: "The total number of people arrested since early 1990 for suspected involvement in opposition activities runs into thousands."

Following the demonstrations, the government required a "No Objection Certificate" (NOC) for all Nepali-speaking people who sought employment, admission to schools, trade licenses or permission to leave the country on official work. NOCs were denied to anyone who had a family member suspected of participating in the 1990 demonstrations. Although the NOC requirement was dropped in 1992, following negotiations between the Bhutanese government and Amnesty International, Thimpu continues to expel people on the grounds that a "family member" has participated in the opposition movement. In many instances, refugees say, entire families are expelled from the country because a relative had participated in the September, 1990, protests.

⁹ Amnesty International Report., *op. cit.*, p. 9



A Bhutanese refugee holds receipts for land taxes he paid to the Bhutanese government before being expelled in January 1993.

In 1991, the government also completed a cadastral land survey of the southern districts. Although earlier surveys had consisted merely of "eye-ball" estimates of land holdings, the government concluded that thousands of acres were "illegal landholdings" and seized the property. Some of this land has been offered to *Drukpa*, particularly landless peasants from eastern Bhutan.¹⁰

After the 1990 demonstrations, ethnic tensions arose between *Drukpa* and *Lhotshampa* members of the civil service and bureaucracy in Thimpu. The proceedings of the 1992 Bhutanese National Assembly illustrate the distrust that has grown between the two ethnic groups. Representatives from the southern districts submitted "Genja" -- or "legally binding documents" -- signed by all the people in their districts, vowing loyalty to the government, King and Kingdom. In response, *Drukpa* representatives said: "Although the *Lhotshampa* had pledged their support and loyalty many times before, they had not been sincere in the past... it was very difficult to place any trust and confidence in them and believe in the sincerity of their Genja."¹¹

Under pressure and sometimes surveillance and threat of arrest, hundreds of southern Bhutanese civil servants and high-level bureaucrats have gone into exile. According to the National Assembly minutes, out of 12,732 civil servants in Bhutan, 3,155 were southern Bhutanese in 1990. Since then, 691 *Lhotshampa* have been appointed to the civil service, while 995 have resigned and "absconded" from Bhutan.

"We were doctors, educators, and lawyers," said one former civil servant, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, saying he feared reprisals against his family in Bhutan. "There was very little discrimination before. We could reach high ranks, up to director level, although not in a policy-making body. But today there is not a single southern Bhutanese in the foreign

¹⁰ The 1992 National Assembly called on the government to speed up the transfer of land "left behind by the ngolops [terrorists] who had absconded after the 1990 anti-national uprising and the land vacated by the Lhotshampas who had sold them and legally emigrated to Nepal should be allotted to landless people from all the [districts]." Proceedings, op. cit.

¹¹ ibid.

ministry, none in Druk Air service. In the past it wasn't like that. But these days we are not trusted."

HUMAN RIGHTS AND WRONGS: GROWING VIOLENCE IN SOUTHERN BHUTAN

Amnesty International reported that as of August, 1992, the number of political prisoners in detention in Bhutan was estimated to be between 200 and 300, including 134 who were known by Amnesty International to have been held without charges having been brought against them since January, 1991. In September, 1992, the Bhutanese government reported granting amnesty to 45 prisoners, bringing the total number of political prisoners in Bhutan to around 180.¹²

Amnesty International detailed reports of torture in Bhutanese prisons, including the use of arm and leg shackles and people who reported being forced to drink their own urine and were denied food and water. Other methods of torture reported by Amnesty International included: "suspending a prisoner upside down, beating prisoners on the sides and soles of the feet and on the achilles tendon, and inserting a cane in the anus."

Amnesty also reported that some prisoners had died in prison because they were denied access to medical care. Moreover, the report added: "Concerns that prisoners are not always treated in accordance with international standards is heightened by the Bhutanese Government's consistent refusal to reveal the places of detention where prisoners are held and to grant them regular access to their relatives."

The visit by Amnesty International had a positive impact on the status of political prisoners in Bhutan. In addition to releasing some political prisoners, the government agreed to discontinue the use of shackles on prisoners. The government also permitted a visit in January, 1993 to its prisons by the International Committee of the Red Cross. While welcoming these reforms, however, Amnesty International continues to urge the government: "to immediately release all prisoners of conscience, bring to trial those held on recognizable criminal offenses and take measures to prevent torture and ill-treatment."¹³

Among the 75,000 refugees now living in camps in Eastern Nepal, an estimated 1,500 are victims of torture suffering "severe psychological problems," said Bhogendra Sharma, medical director of the Center for the Victims of Torture, Nepal, which is treating some of the torture survivors. Sharma estimated that another 500 refugee women are victims of gang rape. A number of women have borne children as a result of being raped. At least two rape victims have committed suicide.

Amnesty International confirmed reported testimony by Bhutanese women who were raped -- often gang raped -- by Bhutanese soldiers, adding that, "Amnesty International considers rape by the security forces to be a form of torture."

¹² Amnesty International, op. cit., pp. 14-15

¹³ Ibid., executive summary

In contrast to human rights reports and the testimony of refugees, the Bhutanese government says that "terrorist " attacks by "anti-nationals" are responsible for most human rights abuses and for driving people out of Bhutan:

Ever since anti-national activities were launched in mid-1989, terrorist acts have been perpetrated by the anti-nationals as an integral part of their strategy to mobilize funds and force other Southern Bhutanese to join their terrorist movement. Starting with acts of extortion, dacoity and assault against Bhutanese nationals both inside Bhutan as well as on Indian soil [and] during transit, the anti-nationals soon graduated to outright acts of terrorism, such as sabotage, hijacking, kidnapping and murder. Brutal torture, mutilation and decapitations of victims have become a regular feature of their terrorist activities....Many women have been assaulted and raped while some have even been killed by the terrorists during their frequent raids on villages.¹⁴

"The people are being coerced to leave by the terrorists," said Rabgye. "They say, 'if you don't leave Bhutan, you will be made six inches shorter because I will cut off your head.' And they mean it, too. These are very cruel people."

In response to the growing unrest in southern Bhutan, the government has augmented its 7,000-man Army and 5,000-man police force by training volunteer citizen militia. In the last two years, nearly 10,000 Bhutanese civilians have received government military training as part of the government's strategy to quell the unrest in southern Bhutan. Around 3,000 "volunteer militiamen" have served in the southern districts.¹⁵

According to the government newspaper, Kuensel, since 1990 at least 48 people have died at the hands of the *ngolops* or terrorists. There have been 59 attacks and ambushes on security troops and 190 people have been kidnapped and tortured by terrorists. The newspaper also reports that 245 people have been injured, 349 households robbed, 70 trucks and other vehicles damaged or hijacked, and 30 schools and health centers damaged or destroyed.¹⁶

In September, 1991, and again in August, 1992, the Bhutanese government released glossy magazines entitled: "Anti-National Activities in Southern Bhutan." Each magazine is filled with grisly color photographs, showing the mutilated bodies of alleged victims of "anti-national" violence. The magazines also show photographs of letters signed by leaders of the Bhutanese opposition parties requesting explosive devices and saying "we have decided to resort to violence."¹⁷

¹⁴ "Anti-National Activities in Southern Bhutan: A Terrorist Movement," by the Department of Information, Government of Bhutan, September 1991. p. 27.

¹⁵ Proceedings of the 71st Session of the National Assembly of Bhutan, op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁶ Kuensel, October 2, 1992. p. 1.

¹⁷ "Anti-National Activities in Southern Bhutan: An Update on The Terrorist Movement," August 1992. Department of Information, Government of Bhutan.

Bhutan also has arrested some high-profile southern Bhutanese leaders allegedly in the act of committing serious violent crimes. Last November, for instance, the former general secretary of the opposition Bhutan Peoples Party (BPP), D.K. Rai, was arrested leading a raid inside Bhutan. He was tried and found guilty of murder and treason and sentenced to life imprisonment. BPP leaders in Nepal deny that anyone from their party has been involved in violence and insist that charges against Rai and others are "baseless." But they also say that they don't know what their former general secretary was doing in Bhutan.

Amnesty International confirms that at least some of the allegations of violence by government opponents may be true. Its team of investigators in Bhutan interviewed victims and relatives of victims who "reported incidents of kidnapping, beheading, extortion, torture and other abuses by opposition groups which had occurred in the south mainly during 1990."

However, the Amnesty International report went on to conclude that it could not confirm government reports on the numbers allegedly killed or kidnapped by the opposition movement. "While attacks on civilians in southern Bhutan are consistently attributed to 'anti-nationals'," said the Amnesty report, "it is not always clear that evidence exists to indicate the political motivation behind the acts."¹⁸

Sharma, medical director of the torture center in Kathmandu, confirmed that a few refugees have mentioned beatings and attempts at extortion of money by opposition political parties. "But in most cases, these are not incidents of torture of the kind that is inflicted continuously, but a case of people coming into a house, demanding money and beating people who don't pay," said Sharma. "And such cases number 5 in 100, while 95 cases report that they were tortured by the government."

OPPOSITION MOVEMENT

The "one nation, one people" policy has spawned a multitude of Bhutanese opposition organizations in exile. There are two fledgling political parties: the Bhutan People's Party (BPP) and the Bhutan National Democratic Front (BNDF). There are two human rights organization: the Human Rights Organization of Bhutan (HUROB) and the Association of Human Rights Activities, Bhutan (AHURA). Then there is the Students Union of Bhutan (SUB) and the Bhutan Women's Association (BWA).

Despite the growing number of political organizations, the vast majority of the 75,000 refugees in the camps remain as they were in Bhutan: uneducated villagers who want to live in peace. Not a single refugee with whom I spoke said she or he belonged to a political party.

Nonetheless, as so often happens in refugee situations, a segment of the population -- typically the most educated -- has become extremely politicized by the experience of exile. And the longer the southern Bhutanese remain in camps, the more politicized they are likely to become.

¹⁸ Amnesty International Report, *op. cit.* p. 10.

To date, the existing opposition movement can be described politely as "politically immature." Especially damaging is the constant in-fighting between the various groups, notably the BPP and the BNDP. Both parties say they are dedicated to the same principles: the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Bhutan, multi-party democracy, and an independent judiciary. Both parties say they are opposed to violence. And each party accuses the other of not getting along.

"We are prepared for unity talks with the BNDP," said R.K. Budathoki, whose BPP party was created in June, 1990. "The BNDP is bargaining for time. They are a bit bureaucratic, you see, while we are activists."

Budathoki said the BPP is planning a *Satyagraha*, or a Gandhi-style civil disobedience movement, entailing massive voluntary arrest in an effort to fill Bhutan's prisons and spark a crisis in Thimpu. However, he could not specify a date on when such an undertaking might begin.

In addition to being self-proclaimed "activists," the BPP leaders describe their ideology as "democratic socialist" along the lines of the Congress-I party in India. In contrast, the BNDP, which was founded in 1992 by former Bhutanese civil servants in exile, is considered more "intellectual" and "capitalist" than the BPP.

"Initially we didn't want to open another political front in exile, but we are simply not clear where the BPP philosophy stands," said BNDP president, R.B. Basnet. "They say they are democratic socialists, but their support in Nepal and West Bengal is communist."¹⁹

Basnet said he also was concerned by Bhutan government reports of terrorist attacks by BPP members, some of which he said were true. "We totally condemn incidents of violence," said Basnet. "And we have nothing to gain by integrating with the BPP."

Budathoki denied both the charge of BPP involvement in violence and Basnet's claim that the BPP has links with any communist parties. "They say we are leftist because I enjoy majority support among the Bhutanese people," said Budathoki. "I rose from below. I understand the heart throb of the people. The BNDP ideology matches that of the Bhutanese government."

Budathoki also suggested that the BNDP has links with the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party) in India. The BJP is riding a wave of Hindu sectarian support in India, following the December, 1992, destruction of the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya.

¹⁹ Basnet worked for years at the highest levels of the Bhutanese government, rising to the post of Managing Director for the State Trading Corporation of Bhutan, before he went into exile in May, 1991. After his departure, the government of Bhutan charged Basnet with embezzling \$5 million from the government and has requested his extradition from Nepal. Basnet denies the charges, noting that as the director of the State Trading Corporation he decided policy for the company, but that all actual cash transactions were made by certified Bhutanese government accountants. The government also charges that BPP President Budathoki was "fired for corruption." Similar accusations have been leveled at other opposition political leaders.

"A religious institution created by the BNDP banner had a 'puja' [Hindu religious festival] in December at the former site of the Maidhar refugee camp [in eastern Nepal]," said Budathoki. "They are telling people that when the BJP comes to power in India, it will support the BNDP. The BPP wants a secular Bhutan."

Basnet insists that the BNDP has no formal ties with any Indian political party: "I would not like to see my party too closely affiliated with this [Hindu] fundamentalist element," he said. "The *Drukpa* community's main concern is being swamped by Hindus, and to some extent I fully sympathize with them. We must make sure that doesn't happen, perhaps by reserving seats or something [in the Parliament]."

"But look at Nepal," Basnet added. "This is a Hindu Kingdom and Buddhism is flourishing here."

Bhutanese government leaders reject any calls for democracy or political change. During the 1992 session of the National Assembly, the Home Minister warned: "The real intentions of the *ngolops* [terrorists] was revealed in their four demands. These were the introduction of a multi-party system and a government headed by a prime minister; changing the judiciary system; changing the 1985 citizenship act; and abolishing the Goongda Woola [national labor] system.

"And, if the system of government was also changed as demanded," the Home Minister continued, "the *ngolops* would then be able to take over Bhutan politically as the Northern Bhutanese would soon be reduced to a minority in their own country."

The Home Minister then added: "Some of the other demands, such as 'right to culture, language and script,' 'freedom of religion,' 'freedom of press, speech and expression' and 'freedom of formation of unions, associations, and political parties' were, firstly, mere repetition of popular slogans to win international sympathy and support.

"Secondly, the real objective of these demands was to dilute and weaken the unique national identity which had always been the greatest pillar of strength for the Bhutanese nation in safeguarding and promoting its sovereignty and security over the ages," said the Home Minister. "[These demands were] the calculated aim of the *ngolops* to weaken its [Bhutan's]



"We are not really over-awed or hypnotized by the democracy we see around us," says Bhutan government spokesman, Sonam Rabgye.

age-old identity and social fabric with the introduction of unions, associations and political parties, as well as multiple religions, languages and cultures."²⁰

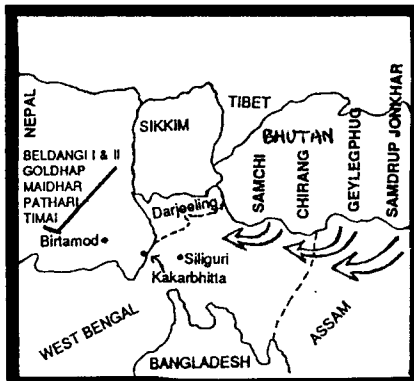
Bhutan's spokesman in Delhi, Sonam Rabgye, echoed this anti-democratic sentiment. "On the question of democracy, we are not really over-awed or hypnotized by the democracy we see around us, particularly in the region," said Rabgye. "The system we have functioning in Bhutan, as of now, has worked."

THREAT OF GREATER NEPAL?

It is not an easy time to be an absolute monarch in South Asia, particularly in a region dominated by ethnic Nepalese. Three times since King Wangchuk came to power in 1972, Bhutan has watched as neighboring kings and governments have been thrown out of power by ethnic Nepalese demanding political power commensurate with their growing numbers.

In the neighboring former Kingdom of Sikkim, the Buddhist king -- a distant relative of King Wangchuk -- was overthrown in 1973 by a populist pro-democracy movement. Within a year, India was "invited" to take over Sikkim. Today, the Indian State of Sikkim is dominated by ethnic Nepalese, who make up more than 80 percent of its total population.

In the mid-1980s, the Darjeeling subdistrict of West Bengal, India, just across the border from Bhutan, was besieged by violent demonstrations as ethnic Nepalese wrested local control from the Communist-led state government after years of clashes. Led by Subhas Ghising, the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) demanded that the Gorkhali language (which is the same as Nepali) be included as an official language in the Indian Constitution. Ghising also called for a "Greater Nepal," that would extend from present-day Nepal, across West Bengal, Sikkim and Assam. Presumably, "Greater Nepal" also would include southern Bhutan.



REFUGEE MIGRATION FROM BHUTAN TO NEPAL. [From Himal]

Most recently, the people of Nepal itself took to the streets of Kathmandu in 1990 demanding democracy. It took only a few weeks of public protest before Nepal's king agreed to become a constitutional monarch. Nepal held its first multi-party democratic elections in 1991. [See ICWA report CVR-11]

Bhutanese officials insist there is a link between Bhutanese political parties in exile and Nepalese leaders in West Bengal and Sikkim who are eager to establish a "greater Nepal."

"There is a nexus between the people who have been acting violently in southern Bhutan and these people who want a Gorkha land," said Rabgye. "Look at Bhutan

²⁰ Proceedings of the 71st National Assembly of Bhutan, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

from this angle: we are a country whose entire population of 600,000 could fit in a football stadium and we are surrounded by some 20 million Nepalese in India, most of them just across the border. So, there is a real danger of our being swamped by outsiders.

"This phenomenon of people seeking a better life as illegal immigrants happens all over the world," he added. "But in the case of Bhutan, it is one large assertive ethnic group that is seeking to do this. It happened in Sikkim that in a short span the population was reduced to a minority. And it happened again in Darjeeling."

Despite these concerns, there have never been calls for a "greater Nepal" by *Lhotshampas* within Bhutan. Moreover, I could find no evidence that the exiled Bhutanese political parties have links with any of the Nepalese-dominated ethnic groups in West Bengal or Sikkim.

"The government has used the 'greater Nepal' bogey to ensure that the Government of Nepal does not give us undue support and also to keep India concerned," said Basnet. "For us to align with the Gorkhaland movement would only facilitate the [Bhutanese] government propaganda. Our argument is that we are Bhutanese, so we don't want the Royal Government [of Bhutan] to think our movement is spearheaded by illegal immigrants from Nepal or Indian states."

Nepal government officials also deny links with the Bhutanese opposition parties or plans to create a "greater Nepal" in the region.

"Nepal has only a ceremonial army," said Nepal's Home Ministry spokesman, Regmi. "India has an army that defeated Pakistan and China. Do you think Nepal is going to fight a war with India? That is what is implied by this talk of 'greater Nepal'."

Perhaps the most direct statement on the "greater Nepal" issue came from a recently retired Bhutanese government official, who generally refused to comment because he remains loyal to the king. But when I raised the issue of a threat to Bhutan from the "pan-Nepali" movement, the official looked me dead in the eye and said: "That's complete bullshit."



A southern Bhutanese woman, dressed in traditional Nepalese dress, sells bangles at a refugee camp in Nepal.

PALACE POLITICS

Some people suggest that Bhutan's "one nation, one people," policy has more to do with palace politics than with regional threats. Generally speaking, there are four major groups vying for power within the ruling class: the Wangchuk or traditional royal family, the Dorji family, the "new royal family" and the Buddhist monastics. Although often related by blood or marriage, these four groups compete for control over political and economic resources in Bhutan.

The Dorjis traditionally were advisers to the Wangchuk kings. Based in Kalimpong (present-day West Bengal), they acted as Bhutan's liaisons to the British. Their economic base has always been in southern Bhutan and they are associated with opening the southern hills to Nepalese labor. Their fortunes began to flag in 1964, when Jigme Palden Dorji, then-Prime Minister, was assassinated. There is no prime minister in Bhutan at present.

As the Dorji family lost influence in Thimpu, the "new royal family" -- relatives of the King's four wives -- expanded their political and economic grip on the Palace. Their Majesties the Queens are four sisters, whom the king married in 1988. Since then, five of the most powerful men to emerge in the ruling oligarchy are members of the new royal family. These include: Foreign Minister Dowa Tshering, Home Minister Dago Tshering, Army Lt. General Gongloen Lam Dorji, and Social Minister Tashi Topgyal. The Joint Secretary in the Planning Commission is the Queens' elder brother. Their youngest brother has the final say in determining Bhutanese citizenship.

The King's father-in-law, once a retail merchant, has benefitted financially from the new marriage, according to D.N.S. Dhakal, the former economic adviser to the Bhutanese Ministry of Trade and Industry, who currently is the General Secretary of the opposition BNDP.

"The Gedu Plywood Project, built in the 1980s at Nu 145 million [\$4.8 million] with grants from UNDP and soft-term loans from Kuwait International Development Fund, has now been sold to Yab Ugen Dorji, father-in-law of the King, at a discount of 80 percent of the book value," wrote Dhakal in the August 1992 issue of Himal magazine.²¹

Dhakal also detailed how the King's father-in-law won a contract for a duty-free import business owned and operated until 1992 by the Bhutan Ministry of Finance, although he offered less royalties to the government than other bidders. Yab Ugen Dorji also recently won a contract to cut the young forest plantations on the southern slopes of the Siwalik foot-hills near the Indian border. Overall, writes Dhakal, Yab Ugen Dorji and his family now own Singye Enterprises, Dhendup Enterprises, Bhutan Engineering Corporation, Lakhi Cement Project and the Bhutan Tourism Corporation.

"The Yab's economic competition with the Dorji clan is also significant in explaining the problems in the south," writes Dhakal. "It was the Dorjis who helped to open up southern Bhutan by inviting in Nepali-speaking settlers. The Yab and his followers hold no brief for the settlers and in fact feel that expelling them would also weaken their Dorji competition."

²¹ "Economic Blueprint for a South Asian Dragon," by D.N.S. Dhakal, Himal, Jul/Aug 1992. pp. 31-33.

Despite these suggestions that Bhutan's economy and the fate of the *Lhotshampas* are hostage to palace politics, the "new royal family" may be motivated by more than money.

"For the new royal family the desire is not for money, of which they have enough, but to ensure the continuation of the monarchy for the Queens' children," said BNDP president Basnet. "They basically want to balance Bhutan's demographics now because they know that, sooner or later, democratic changes must come. They want to ensure that any democratic reforms do not put them into an unduly weak position."

The most romantic theory about why King Wangchuk has allowed the expulsion of *Lhotshampa* revolves around his marriage to four sisters -- with whom he had sired a handful of children before marriage. This was a highly unusual nuptial arrangement in conservative Bhutanese society, leading some to suggest that King Wangchuk was forced to make a deal with the traditional Buddhist monastic leaders in exchange for their blessings on the Royal marriages.

"The institution of the monarchy has always suffered a sense of insecurity," Basnet said. "Two *Shabdrung* have been murdered and a third was evacuated to India by the intelligence services. To make matters worse, the Buddhist traditionalists have all along been uncomfortable with the Nepalese-Hindu factor in southern Bhutan.

"By falling into a trap of these marriages," he added, "The King may have been forced by the monastic institutions to enter into a pact to get rid of the southern Bhutanese."

TOWARD A DURABLE SOLUTION: REPATRIATION OR RESETTLEMENT

No country is more frustrated by the stalled negotiations over the Bhutan crisis than Nepal, which is host to some 75,000 refugees in camps on its eastern border and another 25,000 scattered throughout Nepal.

"These refugees are creating tremendous problems for us," said Regmi. "They are cutting trees day by day. They use 150 metric tons of firewood per day. The camps foster prostitution, gambling and drug trafficking. They have leisure time for unsocial activities because the UNHCR is providing them with food and shelter."

Already there are six camps in eastern Nepal and another camp will open this spring to absorb the influx of some 100 additional refugees each day. The World Food Program (WFP) distributed \$4 million worth of foodstuffs to the refugees in 1992. UNHCR spent \$6.4 million on the Bhutanese refugees in 1992 and has allocated an additional \$5 million for 1993 -- which camp officials say will not be adequate in light of the steady flow of new arrivals.

Officials from both United Nations agencies question how long the international community will continue to finance the refugees in the camps, particularly when there are no negotiations toward reaching a durable solution to the problem.



Nepal government officials say the refugees use 150 metric tons of firewood daily.

"Local integration is not out of the question," said Jock Baker, Head of Field Office for UNHCR in Nepal's eastern Jhapa district. "But it is out of the question to attempt to maintain the people in the camps indefinitely."

As the number of refugees grows, however, Bhutan seems to stiffen its intransigence over negotiating with Nepal. In his January, 1993, visit to Delhi, King Wangchuk told reporters that he "has no intention of allowing non-Bhutanese to settle in Bhutan." He accused Nepal of not yet making known its "intentions" over the issue, adding, "There are tremendous contradictions in their position."

The King said that he regretted that "five refugee camps have been established in eastern Nepal. On one hand they welcome the refugees with open arms and on the other complain about their presence. Why this contradiction?"

King Wangchuk also warned Nepal against pushing out "everybody who claims to be a Bhutanese, despite the fact that the vast majority of them are not Bhutanese," adding that such a move threatened to

reduce Bhutan to a satellite of Nepal. The King also was quoted as saying that all the refugees are communists and that their return would create "for the first time in our history...a pro-communist lobby."

"The issue has to be resolved on a bilateral level," said the King. "We have to first know what Nepal wants."²²

Nepal government officials say they have tried repeatedly to negotiate with the Bhutanese government, only to be rebuffed. At an all-party meeting in 1992, Nepal's political leaders agreed to adopt a three-stage strategy vis-a-vis Bhutan. First, they would attempt quiet diplomacy with the Bhutanese government. If this failed, Nepal would request India's assistance. Finally, if all else failed, Nepal would "internationalize" the issue.

²² "SAARC has failed to meet expectations, says Bhutan King," by Kamalijeet Rattan, The Economic Times, January 8, 1993.

"We have made many attempts to talk bilaterally with Bhutan," said Regmi. "We met with their Foreign Minister in Jakarta, we sent our Prime Minister to Thimpu, and their Foreign Minister came here. We have showed our honest desire to resolve this problem with the help of Bhutan, but there is no perceptual change in Bhutan's policy of evasion."

Regmi added that a solution was possible "only through the concerted efforts of all friendly governments to create such an atmosphere as may be conducive to the peaceful return of the refugees to their country with dignity and honor."

But, said Regmi, such a solution requires the direct involvement of India. "Without India, nothing will be resolved," he said. "And Nepal must have India's tacit approval before we can put the issue before the United Nations."

If repatriation seems remote at present, then what about the option of resettling the refugees permanently in Nepal? After all, the refugees share a common language, religion and customs with the local Nepal people.

"No way," said Regmi. "It would create major difficulties for Nepal. We don't have enough land for our own people, so how can we accept Bhutanese? The sentiment of the local people will be quite negative if we try."

"The international community must understand that Nepal is a newly-democratic nation," he added. "We are trying to manage our own people, to raise them out of poverty. This kind of situation creates tremendous instability within Nepal and that threatens democracy."

Far from accepting the refugees as their own citizens, Nepal has insisted that all new refugee camps be located in Jhapa district so that the Bhutanese remain clustered on the border. The government also is pressing for the camps to be enclosed with barbed wire in an effort to keep the refugees from moving freely within Nepal. To date, UNHCR has opposed proposals to fence the refugees inside the camps.

Not surprisingly, refugee leaders vow to resist attempts to resettle them permanently in Nepal. "If India wants it and Nepal gives up, then I suppose it could happen," said Basnet. "But it doesn't mean the movement will be over. We won't ever agree to settle down here. Our country is Bhutan."

Ultimately, the fate of the refugees may not be decided by Nepal or Bhutan, but by the dominant country in South Asia. "It all comes down to India," said Baker. "If India wants to or is forced to do something, then perhaps the refugees will be allowed to return to Bhutan."

INDIA: BUYING TIME

There is a huge silence emanating from India over the Bhutan issue. In a visit to Kathmandu last October, India's Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, insisted that the crisis must be resolved bi-laterally through Nepal and Bhutan.

But Nepal government officials say that negotiations can't move forward unless India gets involved. "If we are to solve the problem in both our national interests, then we will need India's support," said Regmi. "After all, the foreign policy of Bhutan is conducted by India."

Bhutan and India signed a "Treaty of Friendship" in 1949, under which Bhutan ceded to India its right to conduct its own foreign policy. India also trains Bhutan's army and posts Indian Army troops on Bhutan's northern border with China. In exchange, India permits Bhutan to export its products over Indian territory -- an important concession in light of Bhutan's land-locked position.

Despite these treaty obligations -- and Bhutan's accusation that many of the refugees come from northeast India -- New Delhi has taken no public stance on the refugee crisis. But India does not allow the United Nations to provide aid to refugees on its territory, which effectively pushes the poorest refugees into Nepal. Nor has India forced Bhutan to negotiate with Nepal regarding the repatriation of the refugees.

There are a myriad of reasons why India might want to avoid involvement in the Bhutan crisis. First among these is that India is besieged by internal problems: sectarian rioting in Ayodhya and Bombay; the separatist movements in Kashmir and the Punjab and various ethnic nationalist movements in Assam. Moreover, New Delhi may think that having a pliable monarch on the throne in Bhutan is preferable to dealing with a messy multi-party democratic government in Thimpu.

India also has economic incentives for keeping quiet over Bhutan. Foremost among these is India's need for electric power generation and Bhutan's tremendous potential for generating hydro-electric power.

Bhutan's latest Five-Year Plan, signed in 1992, will be dominated by Indian-built power and industrial projects. Specifically, India has agreed to provide financing for the 60 megawatt Kurichu Hydroelectric Project, the 120 megawatt Bhunakha Reservoir Project, the 45 megawatt Tangsibji Hydroelectric Project and the enormous 1,930 megawatt downstream Chukha II and Chukha II integrated power generation system. It also will finance the construction of the 1,500 ton-per-day Nanglam Cement Plant.²³

By signing these agreements with India, Bhutan seems to be reversing its previous policy of attempting to diversify sources of foreign investment, aid, and technology, and confining itself to heavy reliance on India. Indeed, under Bhutan's latest Five-Year Plan, India doubles its aid contribution to Bhutan, providing \$300 million of the \$800 million total five-year budget. India also will continue to finance and train the 7,000-man Bhutanese military, at a cost of \$6 million annually. The Indian Border Roads Task Force will spend another \$22 million each year to maintain Bhutan's major highways.

King Wangchuk also seems to be going out of his way to woo India politically. In January, 1993, he made a visit to Delhi "primarily to express his country's deep friendship, solidarity and support to India."

²³ Dhakal, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-33.



Recently expelled refugees from Bhutan traveling through India on their way to Nepal.

"India is our closest friend and ally and Bhutan would never be found wanting in its friendship towards India even during the most difficult times," said the King. He added that the Ayodhya dispute was "an internal problem of India" that should not be raised at the SAARC summit. He also said he regretted "criticism and a lot of unpleasant developments in the neighboring region" following the Ayodhya riots. The news article in which the King's remarks appeared added: "Though the King did not name Pakistan and Bangladesh, he was clearly hinting at the two countries."²⁴

Basnet and other former Bhutan government officials say the king's pro-India stance could be the price Thimpu must pay for Indian silence on the southern Bhutan crisis.

"The King and the ruling oligarchy are desperate and, so, are acting strongly pro-India," said Basnet. "But I worked for the King for 15 years. Throughout that time he was strongly anti-Indian. Early in the 1980s, for example, the King used the National Assembly to arouse popular support against India in an effort to oust the Indian border army and road crews. Also, he advocated a policy of diversification, much to the annoyance of Delhi.

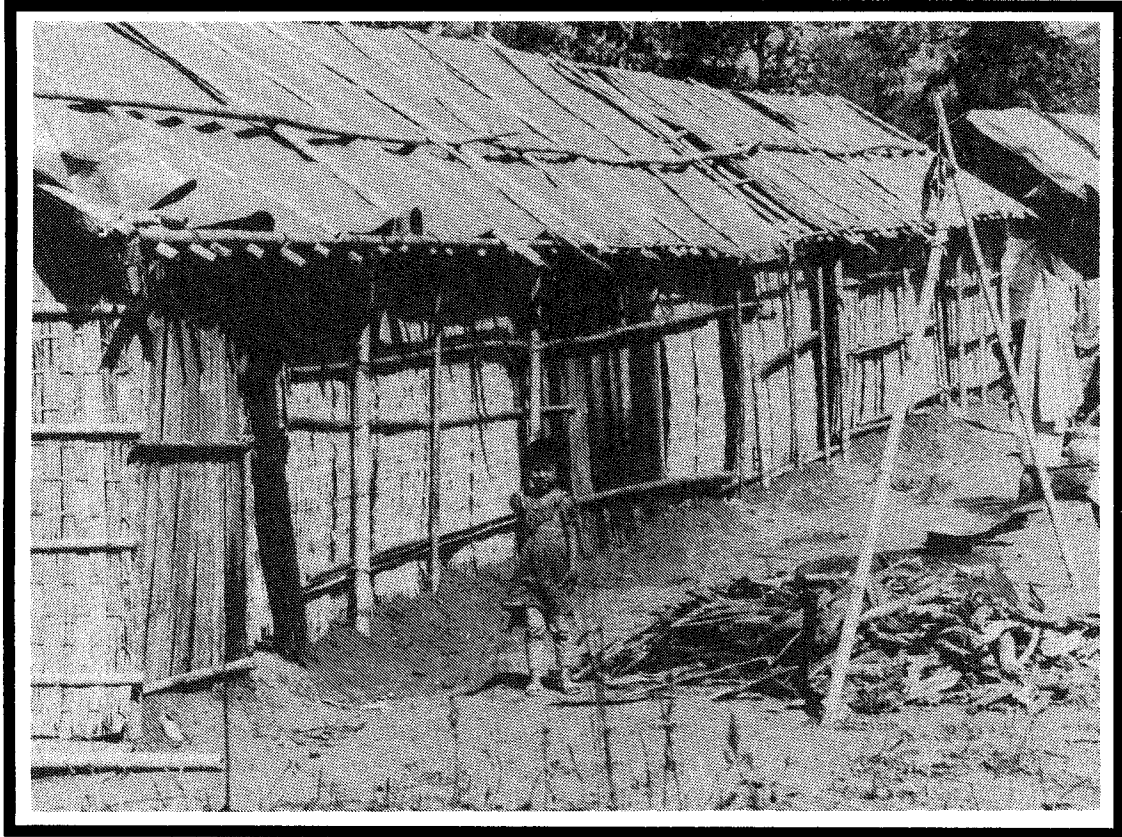
"Now these projects will be carried out totally with Indian laborers and several thousand Indians will be in Bhutan," added Basnet. "These industrial projects will have serious

²⁴ The Economic Times, op. cit.

implications on Bhutan's environment and culture. It goes entirely against the government's idea of Bhutan as Shangri-la."

Concerns about the environmental impact of Bhutan's industrialization plans were echoed in the 1992 Bhutanese National Assembly, where "peoples representatives" warned: "Chukha Hydel Dam proposed for construction between Bunakha and Chena-Tshen on the Pachu-Wangchu river posed serious risk to the villages on both sides of the river. The smoke from the Bhutan Calcium and Carbide factory was affecting nearby villages and the afforestation program of the Department of Forest at Geley was affecting the pasture land of the general public."

The King dismissed these concerns with an assurance that feasibility studies and consultations would be conducted on all proposed projects.²⁵



Young Bhutanese girl alongside bamboo shacks at the Baldungi refugee camp in eastern Nepal.

²⁵ Proceedings of the 71st National Assembly of Bhutan, *op. cit.* It should be noted that a World Bank report estimates that Bhutan's present rate of timber extraction is over two and a half times the ecologically sustainable limit of 13 million cubic meters per annum. See: Dhakal, *op. cit.*

THE MISSING LINK: HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE TO BHUTAN

With India silent and Nepal unable to compel Bhutan to address the refugee issue, it may require pressure from the international community to bring the parties together to talk. Although aid for the Bhutanese refugees has been provided, parallel censure of the Bhutan government's policies against ethnic Nepalese has not been initiated by international donor nations. Despite reported human rights abuses, Bhutan was offered more international financial assistance in 1992 than it was able to absorb.

"It has posed no problem for us with donors at all," said Bhutanese government spokesman, Rabgye. "In fact, at the last round table of donors and public assistance groups there was a large increase in assistance."

The Netherlands, Britain, Australia, Switzerland, Germany and Canada all have development volunteers active in Bhutan. Private international aid organizations working in Bhutan include Save the Children (both U.S. and U.K.) and Helvetas of Switzerland. Bilateral development agencies are DANIDA of Denmark, GTZ of Germany and FINNIDA of Finland.²⁶ The World Bank and Asian Development Bank have started new programs in Bhutan, and the United Nations Development Program sponsors projects there as well.

Major projects completed over the past 15 years include: Chukha power project in 1986, the Penden Cement Plant in 1980, the Gedu Plywood Project in 1984, the Bhutan Calcium Carbide Project in 1988, and the Bhutan Particle Board Project in 1989. Apart from Chukha and Penden, which were built with Indian help, funds for other projects came from bilateral and international sources.²⁷

Nor is there any apparent let-up in international aid. Bhutan received its highest aid package ever in 1992. "Friendly" countries, other than India, pledged \$150 million and U.N. organizations promised \$85 million in 1992 for Bhutan's Five-Year Development plan.²⁸

Fortunately, donor government officials in Austria, Denmark and Japan rejected a proposal two years back by the Bhutanese government to create a kilometer-wide environmental "greenbelt" of forest land along Bhutan's southern border. The Bhutan government tried to sell the idea as an environmental conservation program. In fact, creating such a greenbelt would have allowed the Bhutanese government to oust *Lhotshampas* at international expense.

It isn't clear why the international community continues to pour money into Bhutan despite documentary evidence by Amnesty International, the SAARC Jurists Commission report and others that there are severe human rights violations taking place there.

²⁶ Dixit, op. cit., p. 26.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Proceedings of the 71st National Assembly of Bhutan. op. cit. p. 1.

"You know, development agencies find great satisfaction working in Bhutan because they find it manageable, it is a small country, a small bureaucracy, with virtually no corruption and is fairly efficient. I guess they get job satisfaction," said Rabgye. "So, we have no difficulty getting assistance. In fact, we are becoming rather choosy about accepting aid."

In any case, the unusually high assistance pledged to Bhutan -- amounting to about \$180 per capita per year using the official population figure of 600,000 -- suggests that in the case of Bhutan, Western donors have a high degree of leverage over the Bhutanese government but are ignoring the principle of linking development aid to human rights. Should international donors withdraw or threaten to link financial aid to human rights, they would compel Bhutan either to change its policies or to rely even more heavily on India for economic support.

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

The irony of the Bhutanese political crisis is that the policies adopted by King Wangchuk are creating the very dangers the King says he wants to avoid. Prior to the mid-1980s, for example, there was almost no political agitation in Bhutan. Today, there are two opposition political parties and widespread calls for multi-party democracy.

Prior to the "one nation, one people" policy, Bhutan enjoyed ethnic harmony among its diverse peoples. Today, there is widespread distrust and animosity between the *Drukpa* and *Lhotshampa*.

Likewise, the potential threat from the "greater Nepal" movements in Sikkim and Darjeeling has been increased, rather than diminished, by the expulsion of ethnic Nepalese. Although there is no available evidence that the Bhutanese opposition movement is linked to the pan-Nepalese forces, continued refusal by the Bhutan government to acknowledge its responsibility toward the refugees undoubtedly will push some elements of the opposition movement toward greater extremism.

Thimpu seems also to have traded control over its environment and economy for India's silence on the refugee issue. Bhutan presents itself as a model for the developing world, claiming that it can have both economic development and a pristine environment. Now, it has adopted a rapid industrialization policy, seemingly to satisfy India's demands for construction materials (cement and timber) and hydroelectric power generation. By so doing, Bhutan may lose control over its natural resource base and thus spoil its environment.

Bhutan's disproportionate reliance on India for assistance, technology, labor and markets also gives New Delhi extraordinary political leverage. Indeed, there may soon be an economic "Sikkimization" of Bhutan -- the very historical parallel that so worries Bhutan's rulers.

But there are lessons to be learned from Sikkim's experience. One is that political oppression does not quell popular democratic movements. In Sikkim, the ruling "Chogyal," or

king, attempted to keep his throne by force. By so doing, he lost popular support and was toppled by his own subjects, backed by India.

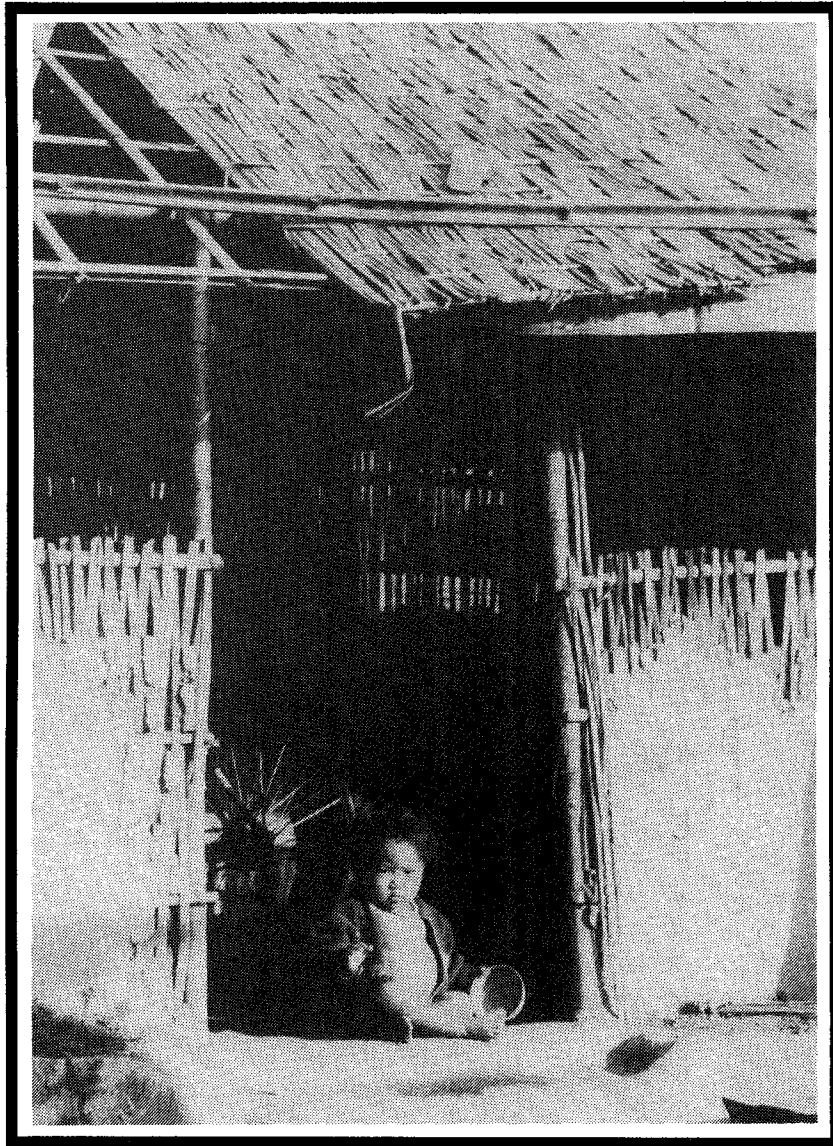
King Wangchuk would do better to follow the path of his own father, King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, who ruled Bhutan from 1952 to 1972. The late King introduced major political reforms, such as the creation of the national assembly, abolition of serfdom and the beginning of development programs. In return, the former Bhutanese king was revered by his subjects -- *Drukpa* and *Lhotshampa* alike. Given such loyalty, there was no threat to Bhutan's unique identity or its monarchy.

It's not too late for King Wangchuk to reverse his policy of over-reliance on India and human rights abuses at home. He can embrace instead the idea that Bhutan's future will be best protected by promoting diversity -- economic and ethnic. The King still has enormous reserves of goodwill among his subjects, including the vast majority of those in exile. He is on good terms with India. He is widely admired by the International Community. The only thing stopping him from acknowledging the aspirations of his diverse subjects and negotiating a solution to the refugee crisis, it seems, is what the historian Barbara Tuchman, describes in her book The March of Folly as "wooden-headedness":

The overall responsibility of power is to govern as reasonably as possible in the interest of the state and its citizens. A duty in that process is to keep well-informed, to heed information, to keep mind and judgement open, and to resist the insidious spell of wooden-headedness. If the mind is open enough to perceive that a given policy is harming rather than serving self-interest, and self-confident enough to acknowledge it, and wise enough to reverse it, that is a summit in the art of government.²⁹

Good advice, it seems, if King Wangchuk is not to become Bhutan's last emperor.

²⁹ The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam, by Barbara W. Tuchman, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1984.



Photographs by Thomas Harrington, Jr.

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