

# THINKING THROUGH NEPAL'S BHUTAN PROBLEM\*

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Already faced with a trouble caused by the ecological refugees, Nepal is bleeding under the increasing pressure of political refugees from Bhutan. Preoccupied with its exclusivist nationalist urge, Bhutan is forcibly evicting a large number of apparently permanent refugees on a scale that the receiving country Nepal has never experienced before. No end to the flow is in sight or any political solution visible.

Refugees are not an unprecedented or new phenomenon in Nepal. A sizable number of Tibetan refugees is still a reality. Nepal has absorbed refugees of Nepali origin from Burma. A repatriation of refugees from one third country (Bangladesh) to other third country (Pakistan) was successfully achieved by Nepal. On the account of the Bhutanese refugees Nepal is neither prepared to absorb them nor able to repatriate them successfully to their home country.

The reason for this in large part lies in the characteristics of the refugees, and it has significantly influenced the relationship between the host and the home countries. For Nepal, ethnic affinity is a conspicuous reason for receiving the refugees, whereas for Bhutan the threat of ethnicity has determined its policy to evict the domiciles. Second, the people who have been forcibly evicted from Bhutan are generally considered anti-regime. Third, these people are also assumed to be illegal migrants to Bhutan and, therefore, are not the responsibility of the Thimpu government. The conclusion is that Bhutan is reluctant to recognize the refugees in Nepal as being its citizens.

This view was predominant in the thinking of the Bhutanese king who had spoken in an interview to the Indian press about the Bhutanese "struggle for

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survival" while pointing an accusing finger towards Nepal for giving shelters to "anti-nationals" from Bhutan. At the same breadth, he refused to recognize most of the people having refugee status in Nepal to be from Bhutan. Rather, they are the people who had returned from north-east India, he said.

The above narrative suggests that king Jigme was astute in making his points. The king appears to be unamenable to the offers made by Nepal to settle a problem which could creep into their bilateral relations. The king had clearly steered his country away from being a party in the issue of negotiating the refugee problem because he seems to be less inclined to recognize the trouble he himself has created.

While appraising the refugee situation in Nepal, these remarks were both unfortunate and uncalled for in view of the talks that the Bhutanese foreign minister had with the Nepalese officials and Prime Minister in Kathmandu in November 1992. Nepal has taken exception to the King's remarks implying that Nepal had become a sanctuary for the Bhutanese "anti-nationals", which, if stretched, could be subject to interpretation for encouraging terrorism in Bhutan.

This has further complicated the attempts of the policymakers in Nepal to evolve amenable strategies for negotiating a resolution to the refugee problem. Negotiations could start from the point of a mutual sharing of the problem, something which appears to be virtually absent from the Bhutanese mindset. It could be said that Bhutan is driven by the urge to (a) force Nepal to accept that the majority of the refugees are indeed illegal immigrants to Bhutan from Nepal and (b) force Nepal to negotiate on these Bhutanese terms in exchange for stopping the flow. Nepal is not in a position to accept either refugees as fait accompli or negotiate on the Bhutanese terms before Bhutan accepts that all the refugees are indeed from Bhutan.

Nepal's "quiet diplomacy" in this respect has still to bear fruit. If King Jigme's words were to be taken as any guide, Nepal has to rethink its muted responses to the issue. Assumptions that have led to the adoption of "quiet diplomacy" as a strategy to deal with the problem have already been proven as unfounded. Bhutan is unavailable for talk. An earlier illusion that Nepal could use its good ties with India to restrain the Bhutanese behaviour was unrealistic. A misreading of India's national interests has made Nepal postponed taking up its own national interests with Bhutan. Meanwhile Bhutan has successfully exercised its choice in favour of its regime interests which are apparently tied up with the Indian geostrategic and socioeconomic interests in sustaining Bhutan's prime facie requirements of political stability. Nepal should understand that unless India decides to dissuade Bhutan from its present course, the humanitarian measures and the world opinion could do precious little to change Thimpu's policy. Aid from the

international agencies and humanitarian efforts are going to be solely confined to easing the pressure of the refugees on the host nation and containing them to where they are, in order to prevent their flow to other prosperous areas or even say to the industrialized world. Already preoccupied with even bigger refugee problems elsewhere, the Western world would be less forthcoming to this problem emerging on the fringe of South Asia. Hence Nepal has to deal with its problem within the region by assessing the likely implications of refugees on its socioeconomic and political health.

- Irrespective of their ancestral link with Nepal, the refugees are a threat when the country is increasingly becoming unable to withstand their pressure. For a country which is already overpopulated, and which has a high incidence of unemployment and extremely limited resources, the increasing number of refugees could become socially and economically destabilizing. In Nepal's case the volume of refugees really matters. A plausible risk of permitting the influx of refugees to last too long could make the refugee problem expand to the political dimension of the relationship not only between the home and the host country but also between and among different refugee groups and the host country as well. Bhutan is on the record to have accused Nepal of providing military training to its rebels. It has also held Nepal responsible for a number of activities that the Bhutanese of Nepali ethnicity commit inside Bhutan. Likewise the existence of politically contentious groups among the refugees could probably lead them to take advantage of the democratic setting of the host country and exploit the situation to support their cause. If they fail to do so, there is a probability of turning themselves against the host country. If the refugees become a divisive force, they can muster support from the internal dynamics of the domestic politics in the host country or even involve themselves in certain untoward activities which could be damaging to the interests of the host country. Numerous examples drawn from the international refugee situations support this contention. Refugees are being used for terrorism, sabotage, arms smuggling, drug traffickings and so on. Even opposition parties to the host government could provide a fertile ground for refugees to indulge in such activities to discredit the ruling party.
- The risk to the host government can be independent of the social, ethnic and economic characteristics of the refugees. Such a threat becomes acute when the home country adopts an unwanted population dumping policy and the host government finds itself in a dilemma of having to cope with the challenge.

As the time lapses, these perceived risks could become the reality in the country. Unfortunately, it seems that Nepal is drawing closer to this reality than any hope of settling the problem. Bhutan's attitude towards Nepal has clearly indicated that there is not going to be any type of settlement if refugees are to be repatriated to Bhutan. But for Nepal, Bhutan is still relevant to its refugee problem, and negotiations with the king are imperative. To settle the problem, Bhutan needs to change its attitude. The question is whether this could be brought about through persuasion or appeasement. Nepal has to balance its role between diplomatic efficacy and merely giving in to the terms that Bhutan poses. This leads to the questions of how Nepal should respond to the seemingly unsettled refugee problem.

### **How Should Nepal Respond?**

Nepal's interests could not be more than a systematic repatriation of refugees to their home country. The problem is how should Nepal pursue this policy. Initially, a national consensus emerged on three strategies. A direct leadership contact, seek help from India or failing this, internationalize the issue. Bhutan's refusal to recognize the problem, India's refusal to be a party to the problem, and Nepal's second thought on drawing global attention to the problem has contained the issue within scanty debating circles in Nepal.

The emerging debates in Nepal are also inconclusive and uninfluential in national policy making. At the one extreme of the debate there are democratic enthusiasts and human right activists who argue in favour of endorsing the democratic aspirations of the Bhutanese people and advocate that the Nepalese value premises should not be compromised on any term. The Bhutanese king must compromise with reality and must honour the democratic urge of his people. Reverence for absolute monarchical rule has lost currency in Nepal, and this is also reflected in the general Nepalese attitude towards the monarchy in Bhutan. This has complicated the issue further as Bhutan fears that any opening up or liberalization could tax the monarchy. It dubbed the exiled people in Nepal as anti-monarchists and anti-nationals.

Others — in Nepal suggest less emotively that the refugee issue has its origin in the ethnic problem created by the cultural cleansing policy in Bhutan. The problem arises out of Bhutan's preference for preserving its Buddhist tradition, maintaining ethno-cultural homogeneity, retaining the dominance of the ruling ethnic community over another. The Nepali domiciles as being different and distinct religious stock in their sociocultural formation and their sizable population, which is comparable or even more than the ruling Drupka community, has been perceived as a threat that made Bhutan to undertake fundamental decisions to revise Citizenship act, distort census, articulate Drupka identity, transmitting it to the singular notion of

"land, race and faith" by advocating exclusivist nationalism. A reflection of this could be found in the Bhutanese King's assertion that his people are "struggling for their survival." This perception is surely to lead towards an intensification of the problem as Bhutan will continue to evict the Nepali ethnic people, and Nepal, as a receiving and host country, will find it increasingly difficult to deal with the refugee problem. The conclusion is that both will lose due to their strained relations.

The third argument is that Nepal has initially failed to take the refugee problem seriously because its attention is elsewhere. The refugee problem has made little impact on its foreign policy pursuit. Occasional rhetorics were made with little relevance to its policy except to draw charitable external fundings. The government did not care.

All these views, however, run counter to the widespread feelings in certain circles whose perspective on the issue is shaped by the constraints of state-centric international relationships more than anything else. What can a country like Nepal do in such a situation? This is a more critical problem from a nation-state perspective than the actual plight of the refugee, as that reality could not be belied. There are instances of critical damage to the relationships between the sending and the receiving countries. The embattled Indo-Sri Lankan situation over the Tamils and the Indo-Pak War of 1971 under the pretext of the refugee exodus from the then East Pakistan are two crucial examples fresh in the memory of the South Asian leadership. Nepal is not in a situation of moving to that extreme to repatriate the refugees. It can argue to stop the exodus, but this needs a policy which was sorely lacking previously. The postponement of developing policy initially had its own disadvantage. And as the trickle of refugees has now become a torrent, the situation is becoming internally explosive and externally conflictual with the sending country. It is time for Nepal to seriously take up the issue with Bhutan, because conflicts are not avoided by refusing to discuss their implications.

Cashing in on the troubles of a neighbour should not be a prime dictum of any policy. Nepal has never indulged in such a practice. If the policy were to follow such premises, it should be recognized that the refugee problem facing Nepal is not confined to the country alone. The problem should be shared mutually by both the sending and receiving countries. What happens in Nepal and Bhutan is not without repercussion at the regional level too. Hence, apart from the mutual responsibility of both receiving and sending countries, there is a third dimension to the problem which should be reassessed and considered. This way the problem could be addressed systematically. The following loosely structured propositions should be

taken into consideration while formulating Nepal's Bhutan policy in the context of the refugee problem.

- Nepal needs to make a basic and adequate policy decision for the negotiation vital to its national interests. It is essential to precisely read and obtain a correct assessment of circumstances in which the leadership in Nepal and Bhutan are placed. The question is whether Bhutan intends to receive back the refugees and if so whether that return will be conditional.
- If so, Nepal could push for the existing proposal, to begin with, for the commissioning of the joint investigating team to verify the authenticity of the refugee nationality—bilaterally or with the assistance of a third party.
- Nepal should also try to persuade the Bhutanese leadership to understand the reality that democracy and revolution are not exportable. This requires building rapport between the leadership to which Nepal has been particularly interested. Further contacts are still considered, and reassurance from the Nepali side on this point would be the best bet to read Bhutanese response.
- If Bhutan insists on the previous point that the people having refugee status in Nepal are not indeed Bhutanese or even refuses to recognize all of them to be Bhutanese, Nepal obtains two choices to pursue from the above context:
  - i. As the problem tends to imply multiplicity about the origin of refugees, the problem transforms itself to be of multilateral dimension. It provides Nepal a chance to persuade both India and Bhutan to consider the problem by evolving negotiation strategies.
  - ii. If both Bhutan and India were not available to discuss the issue bilaterally or in the multilateral context, the situation then does not prevent Nepal from raising this peculiar issue of population implosion in the country and request for the cooperation and assistance from all the friendly SAARC countries in finding out the way out to help resolve the problem through SAARC undertaking. This way, Nepal could avoid the so-called internationalization of the problem at once by drawing immediate attention of the SAARC nations to address the situation.

- As a last resort, under the pretext of monitoring refugee behaviour and their systematic rehabilitation inside Nepal, the government must prevent further influx of refugees at their entry points. Certain social tension could arise out of this act but it might discourage the influx from the third country in future.
- Nepal should take initiatives in negotiating separately with Bhutan to persuade it to agree on the point that no further eviction of the people of Nepali ethnic stock under the pretext of their self-decision to leave the country would eventuate.
- Nepal should also persuade Bhutan to make 1958 as a cut off point to determine Bhutanese citizenship or illegal migration.
- Nepal should take the case with India separately, initially negotiating on the point of discouraging the transportation of the Nepali ethnic people from across the Bhutanese border for off-loading at the Nepal-India border. This should be done in the context of addressing the Bhutanese attention to the refugee problem in Nepal and make it recognize that the refugees in Nepal are actually from Bhutan, not elsewhere. Otherwise, as Bhutan maintains, it will have no business to be a party to negotiation.

The question Nepal must address at this juncture, therefore, is how to proceed from this dead-end to achieve its ultimate objective. To my mind, Nepal must recognize the need of an unconventional approach to the refugee problem. Nepal must take an initiative to develop a regional approach to its refugee problem by linking it with the environmental protection venture for which the SAARC countries had previously decided to pull their resources together to help each other by declaring the year 1992 as the "SAARC Year of Environment." It is advisable to Nepal to try to incorporate the refugee issue as an agenda for the "Regional Studies on the causes and consequences of Natural Disasters and the Protection and Preservation of Environment", a study the SAARC has jointly undertaken. This way, Nepal could raise the refugee issue at the SAARC summit, and if courage be there, Nepal could also request for the immediate action for the establishment of a 'green army' to prevent further refugee flow from Bhutan which could become a cause of national disaster in Nepal.

It may not be easy. It may even prove to be futile. But no task is easily done. This attempt, therefore, should not be left untried. Although it would be better never to say what option Nepal may be considering, it should, however, try to take the initiative by making Bhutan think seriously about the step that Nepal might take next.