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Rethinking South Asia: TheBhutanese Refugee Embarrassment

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Abstract

Nepal and Bhutan, while geographically similar, diverge significantly in their approaches to ethnic inclusion. Bhutan's transition to parliamentary democracy in 2008 retained exclusionary features, failing to accommodate minority aspirations. Since the early 1990s, approximately 107,000 Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees, exiled from Bhutan and demanding Bhutanese citizenship based on historical residence, have spent years in camps in the Terai region of Nepal to resolve their status. Despite repeated bilateral discussions between Nepal and the refugees who expressed their desire to return home, Bhutan did not for Refugees (UNHCR) facilitated this process, with over 91,000 refugees resettled in the United States alone. This article adopts the theoretical framework of Hutt's '*Unbecoming the Citizens*…' and Anderson's '*Imagined Communities'* to analyze the decade-long displacement of the Lhotshampas, who were denied repatriation. Hutt views that citizenship is not a fixed or secure status for people, and the state can withdraw it at any time. Anderson's assumption is that nations are constructed communities, and the power of the state can exclude the groups, as the rejection of repatriation remained an unresolved crisis in the Bhutanese case.

Keywords: Bhutan, ethnic, Lhotshampas, refugees, South Asia

Rethinking South Asia: The Bhutanese Refugee Embarrassment

Migration has become a global phenomenon, and it fits even in the South Asian context. The people moving and living in temporary, shifting places. As a result, national identities and boundaries have grown fluid and complex, no longer fixed or easily defined. In South Asia, conflict is the major feature of state formation, and South Asia has a common problem in resolving cultural issues. The longing for connection and belonging endures, shaping the politics of displacement within South Asian diasporas. For centuries, the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, nestled between India and China, has mesmerized Western imaginations, often represented as timeless and unchanging sanctuaries. Bhutan, remembered as the fabulous and mythical 'last Shangri-La,'[1] has long endured global transformations and culturally marginalized its people. Its previous image was disrupted in the late twentieth century when the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGB) approved a series of state guidelines to consolidate a singular national identity under the banner of "one nation, one people" (Rijal, 2004, p. 9).' These policies primarily beleaguered the Lhotshampas —Nepali-speaking people of southern Bhutan—on the cultural and linguistic pretexts of addressing concerns over illegal immigration and safeguarding national unity[2]. Nepal's constitution 2015 marked "cultural solidarity, tolerance and harmony" (Preamble), and Bhutan's parliamentary democracy in 2008 accepted "The Chhoe-sid-nyi of Bhutan shall be unified in the person of the Druk Gyalpo" (Article 2.1), and failed to accommodate the rights of Nepali-speaking Bhutanese people.

The RGB passed legislative resolutions and administrative measures to curtail the rights of Lhotshampas. Rijal (2004, p. 9) states, "Bhutanese population, banishment of over one-sixth of population as refugees, requirement of No Objection Certificate" (NOC) was contingent to access to public services such as education, healthcare, and employment in the civil sector. In 1991, a directive allowed for the eviction of individuals involved in peaceful protests of political rebellion. Kharat (2003) states that this coercive strategy was further institutionalized through the use of "Voluntary Migration Forms (VMFs)" (p. 285), which, although presented as instruments of choice, were written in Dzongkha—a language that the Lhotshampas could not understand. A

[1]Shangri- La is an imaginary, mythical, and beautiful place, often far away, where everything is pleasant, and you can feel the natural beauty.

[2]*See Rijal (2004) for a more detailed analysis of this approach. p. 8-9*

huge number of Bhutanese people signed these forms under intimidation or without full comprehension, unintentionally relinquishing their Bhutanese citizenship.

Lhotshampas contend that the RGB's actions constituted a deliberate ethnic cleansing effort to reshape the demographic and cultural landscape of Bhutan to favor the ruling Drukpa elites. It resisted the fact that many Lhotshampas were undocumented migrants whose presence was revealed during the 1988 census. Hutt (2003) opines, "…the claim of RGB that the [Lhotshampas] migrated from Nepal and northeast India into southern Bhutan" (p. 275) had reached unsustainable levels, creating demographic imbalances. The Bhutanese state depicted the crisis as a national security concern, citing the emergence of the Bhutan People's Party (BPP) in 1990. Hutt (2003) writes that the government accused the BPP of coordinating an international campaign to destabilize the country by inspiring mass departures from Bhutan to apply diplomatic pressure for repatriation under favorable political terms. Despite numerous rounds of bilateral discussions between Bhutan and Nepal to facilitate repatriation, meaningful progress remained intangible and elusive. Bhutan consistently refused to allow the repatriation of refugees, and third-country resettlement became the most viable, albeit imperfect solution.

Ethnically and linguistically, Bhutan is a diverse nation, and its population is commonly divided into three principal groups: the Ngalongs of the west, the Sharchhops of the east, and the Lhotshampas in the south. The Ngalongs, though a numerical minority, wield disproportionate influence within the state apparatus. *van Driem (1998) states that* Dzongkha, derived from Tibetan, is recognized as the national language, and along with the Sharchhops, the Ngalongs follow Vajrayana Buddhism, which is a state-supported cultural identity. Lhotshampas, in contrast, are predominantly Hindu and Nepali-speaking people. This cultural distinction—reinforced by language, religion, and geography—has historically shaped Bhutan's changing socio-political dynamics. Unlike Bhabha's phraseology of borderland, there was no negotiation between RBG and BPP "…the overlap and displacement of domains of difference … the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (1994, p. 2). The RGB has used it selectively to distinguish between 'loyal' Nepali-speaking citizens and those who were displaced. Rijal (2004) argued, "the citizenship status of Lhotshampas by randomly categorizing them into seven categories" (p. 48), practised in the mid-1980s as a strategic move to downplay broader Nepali ethnic consciousness.

Nepali-speaking populations in Bhutan have traced their roots to a series of migrations. Rijal (2004) opines, "Lhotshampas have traced their history of migration to Bhutan to 1624 A.D, the year the then King of Gorkha, Ram Shah, had dispatched some Nepalese artisan/agricultural families under the leadership of Bishnu Thapa Magar" (p. 5). These settlers, primarily agrarian peasants, contributed significantly to the economy by engaging in agriculture, logging, and trade. Despite their contributions, tensions simmered under the surface. Hutt (1996) states that British colonial records estimated that by 1,932, around 60,000 Nepali settlers lived in southwestern Bhutan. He views that the demographic transformation of southern Bhutan, along with regional political events such as the Gorkhaland movement and the annexation of Sikkim, likely exacerbated fears among Bhutan's ruling elites. The rise of democratic rhetoric among expatriate Lhotshampas in 1989—mirroring events in Nepal—further fueled concerns that Bhutan's fragile political equilibrium could be upended. Therefore, the Bhutanese refugee imbroglio results from complex historical migrations, ethnic policies, and concerns over national identity and political stability. The primary concern of this paper is how Bhutanese state policies on citizenship and nationhood deal with the exclusion of Lhotshampas, as seen in the unresolved repatriation crisis. For this, Bhutan sought to assert a cohesive national identity, which came at the cost of disenfranchising a substantial segment of its population.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

In this paper, first and foremost, content analysis is the methodological core in which Krippendorff (2012) tries to establish a link between varieties of documents to contextualize the meaning. This document-based methodology is useful for designing the content associated with refugee literature in the Bhutanese context. This study is grounded in postcolonial concept, nationalism studies, and theories of citizenship and belonging. At its core, Hutt's *Unbecoming Citizens: Culture, Nationhood, and the Flight of Refugees from Bhutan* connects the exclusionary procedures through which the Bhutanese state forms a singular national identity rooted in Drukpa cultural norms to downgrade and eventually exorcize Lhotshampas. Hutt (2003*)* has mirrored the common picture of the immigration history from the purpose-oriented constraints of both the Bhutanese state and the refugees, for "'real' life and 'real' history are inherently more complex than any myth can allow, regardless of whether it is propagated by a nation-state or by dispossessed refugees" (p. 57). The Lhotshampa movement challenged the moral and legal boundaries of belonging, pointing to the fragility of citizenship when it is rooted in rigid cultural

homogeneity. Drawing from the work of Anderson (1993), Hutt (2005) states that the Bhutanese state's project of nation-building entailed defining citizens and non-citizens. Anderson assumes nations are socially constructed, "Nation, nationality, nationalism – all have proved notoriously difficult to define, … In contrast to the immense influence that nationalism has exerted on the modern world, plausible theories about it are conspicuously meagre" (p. 3). Anderson's concept of *imagined communities* raises the idea that nations are socially constructed communities, imagined by the people who regard themselves as part of any group. He argues that the growth of print capitalism empowered this sense of communal but collective belonging by disseminating shared narratives to help people. He perceives the same connotation, "The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing … living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (p. 7). This framework emphasizes the performative nature of nationhood—how state-sanctioned narratives and cultural policies are used to reconfigure ethnic belonging and loyalty to the nation.

This construction of the citizen in the Bhutanese context incorporates the socially shared values with the international community, which comprises a silent and forgetful behavior towards its people. Misztal (2017) observes that silence or forgetting is part of a society's "need to eliminate segments of its social memory which are interfering with the society's present functions" (p. 30). This theoretical lens has accentuated the intersection of state power, identity, and displacement in the making—and unmaking—of citizens in Bhutan. The Bhutanese case shows how nationalist ideologies can render populations 'unbecoming' or unworthy of citizenship through bureaucratic classification and cultural assimilation, leading to statelessness and forced migration.

Review of Citizenship Policy

In 1958, the RGB formally documented the citizenship and land tenure rights of the Lhotshampas. It marked a significant turning point in Bhutan's efforts to integrate this community into national life. Over the following decades, Lhotshampas played an influential role in the economic renovation of southern Bhutan, turning previously underutilized regions into productive agricultural zones. The state even invigorated greater integration by empowering Lhotshampas for public service and promoting interethnic marriage through financial incentives. Despite their increasing contribution to the state, they remained excluded from the highest political and military power, including the Royal Advisory Council, National Assembly, and

senior bureaucratic positions. In the 1980s, Lhotshampas reportedly made up a significant portion of Bhutan's population, and their proximity to democratic movements in neighboring Nepal and India heightened perceptions of them as politically subversive (Franz, 1992). This concern materialized in legislative and administrative responses that gradually reversed earlier efforts at inclusion.

In 1977, under Jigme Singye Wangchuck's rule, state policies were declared to restrict further migration from other places to Bhutan. Rijal (2004) has endorsed that laborers of Nepali origin were required to possess valid passports and obtain prior government approval for employment. These measures were followed by the Marriage Act of 1980, which sought to discourage marriages between Bhutanese and non-nationals. The Marriage Act endorses, "A non-Bhutanese married to a Bhutanese citizen if domiciled in the Kingdom of Bhutan shall, except for following the state religion of Bhutan, be strictly prohibited from propagating any other religion or introducing any new religion" (*Kha* 2.9). Those entering such unions were ineligible for certain state benefits, such as government promotions and scholarships, a policy widely seen as directing Lhotshampas. The 1985 Citizenship Act marked a further escalation in the exclusionary policies. It replaced the more inclusive provisions of the 1958 citizenship law with the new requirements: individuals now had to prove both parents were Bhutanese citizens and provide evidence of residency in Bhutan before 31 December 1958. The Act imposed stringent conditions for naturalization, including proficiency in Dzongkha. As a result, many Lhotshampas, who did not speak or read fluently Dzongkha fluently, were classified as non-nationals. Carrick (2008) asserts that the 1985 law led to the denaturalization of tens of thousands of Lhotshampas, including children and women born of mixed marriages. By the government's own admission, over 100,000 individuals were identified as 'illegal' or 'economic migrants.'

The situation further deteriorated in 1988, when the government undertook a controversial census in southern Bhutan. Unlike conventional censuses, which gather demographic data, the 1988 exercise focused primarily on verifying citizenship status. Rijal (2004) emphasizes, "The Citizenship Act 1985 came into force in 1988" (p. 45) categorized Bhutanese into seven sub-sects as: F1 (genuine Bhutanese), F2 (people who left Bhutan and then returned), F3 (people who were not around at the time of the census), F4 (non-national women married to Bhutanese men, and their children), F5 (non-national men married to Bhutanese

women, and their children), F6 (legally adopted children), and F7 (non-nationals) (Rijal, p. 46). Universal Declaration of Human Rights states - Article 13(2), "everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country". The census provisioned retroactive criteria and ignored existing legal documents, such as land tax receipts and citizenship cards. The practice of F1 to F7 citizens violated international legal standards, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which endorses, "…discrimination against women shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction" (Article 1), as Bhutan has ratified it.

The RGB's cultural policies supplemented this legal framework of exclusion. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bhutan announced a national campaign to endorse a singular cultural identity to enforce the *Driglam Namzha*, a code of conduct based on traditional Drukpa Buddhist values. Rijal (2004) points out that a royal decree in 1989 mandated the compulsory observance of the cultural code, including the wearing of traditional dress—"the *gho* for men and *kira* for women" (p. 28)—during official activities, school attendance, and public gatherings. The Buddhist ruler used this "as a political tool to victimize the Nepali-speaking Hindus … for protecting the vested interests of the ruler and the Ngalong community" (Rijal, p. 9). The enforcement of the dress code was reported to be selective and punitive, with fines imposed for non-compliance even in informal settings such as marketplaces. Human Rights Watch (2006) reported that RGB used to discriminate against Lhotshampas for their language, religion, and dress. The promotion of Dzongkha as the national language was systematically pursued, resulting in the removal of Nepali from school curricula in 1990. Hutt (2003) writes, "…the removal of Nepali from the school curriculum as a highly symbolic and deliberately provocative part of a more generalized attack on their culture" (p. 185). Previously, the Nepali language was part of the national education system, and students from Lhotshampa communities were encouraged to study Nepali and Sanskrit. The official rationale for removing Nepali from schools, the citizenship policy, and cultural decrees deepened the sense of marginalization among the Lhotshampas.

The government defended these policies by arguing that national unity required cultural cohesion and Bhutan's sovereignty was at risk due to unchecked immigration and external political influences. The 1990 pro-democracy movement in southern Bhutan, inspired by political reforms in Nepal and India, further escalated the crisis. Thousands of Lhotshampas were

charged as ‘anti-nationals’ and forcibly expelled or fled to refugee camps in Nepal. It led to one of the most significant and protracted refugee crises in South Asia, the resolution of which remained incomplete. While third-country resettlement has provided relief for some refugees, the deeper issues of statelessness, cultural erasure, and political exclusion within Bhutan persist as sources of ongoing concern.

Critical Analysis of Refugee Embarrassment

Refugee embarrassment is an expression describing the deep sense of shame, humiliation, or inadequacy that many refugees experience. These feelings often arise from both past trauma and current struggles, including dehumanizing asylum procedures, cultural dislocation, or the painful inability to meet family and societal expectations in their new environments. The ethnic rift in Bhutan intensified into open conflict during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The root of this disharmony lies in cultural imposition, political marginalization, and the systematic rejection of basic civil rights. The Bhutanese government's implementation of policies to underpin Drukpa cultural identity was perceived by Lhotshampas as an aggressive attempt at cultural assimilation, undermining their distinct heritage and identity. In 1989, the Bhutanese government launched a cultural campaign under the one nation, one culture policy. Lhotshampas had their language, religion, and customs, and the state forced them to adopt cultural homogenization. This escalating cultural problem was soon met with political resistance. The People’s Forum for Human Rights Bhutan (PFHRB), founded in 1989 in Nepal by Rizal—a former member of Bhutan’s Royal Advisory Council—became the first major platform for expressing dissent against state discrimination. The PFHRB highlighted the government's antagonistic policies and called for the protection of the cultural and civil rights of the Nepali-speaking population. Anderson has perceived, “The nation is imagined as limited … (1993, p. 7), which provoked Rizal’s arrest and extradition to Bhutan, where he was imprisoned until 1999, signaling the state’s zero-tolerance stance toward opposition.

In June 1990, another political organization, the Bhutan People’s Party (BPP), was formed in India to champion democratic reforms, including the establishment of a constitutional monarchy and multiparty democracy in Bhutan. The BPP, in coordination with PFHRB and the Students’ Union of Bhutan, organized mass protests across southern Bhutan in September and October of 1990. These demonstrations, unprecedented in Bhutanese history, aimed to challenge discriminatory practices and advocate for civil liberties. The state implemented measures that

further curtailed the rights of Lhotshampas. Rijal (2004) states that those applying for civil services or educational opportunities were required to obtain a NOC from the Royal Bhutan Police (RBP). This document was a tool to screen individuals based on their perceived loyalty to the regime and their associations with opposition movements. In the wake of this repression, a large number of Lhotshampas fled Bhutan to seek refugee status in India and finally relocated to eastern Nepal. Kharat (2003) states it was the beginning of a refugee crisis, and the government's introduction of VMFs in 1991 played a crucial role in outnumbering them within their homeland. There were widespread allegations of forced evictions, with many individuals and families pressured or tricked into signing away their legal status.

The displacement of Lhotshampas triggered further political mobilization among exiled communities. Organizations such as the Bhutan National Democratic Party (BNDP), Human Rights Organization of Bhutan (HUROB), Association of Human Rights Activists (AHURA Bhutan), Bhutan Congress Party (BCP), and Druk National Congress (DNC) emerged throughout the early 1990s. While most of these were led by Nepali-speaking Bhutanese, the DNC stood out as a non-Nepali political entity. Rongthong Kunley Dorji, a Sharchop from eastern Bhutan, advocated for a democratic Bhutan founded on multi-ethnic and multilingual inclusivity under a constitutional monarchy. The release of Rizal in December 1999 revitalized the pro-democracy movement. By 2003, several political and human rights groups reunited under the Human Rights Council of Bhutan (HRCB). Meanwhile, the rise of Maoist politics in neighboring Nepal influenced segments of the refugee population. A radical faction, the Bhutanese Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist), was formed in early 2003, reflecting growing frustration with the lack of progress through peaceful advocacy.

The social structure in southern Bhutan was also severely affected. The economic livelihood of the region was targeted, with restrictions on trade and transport of essential goods like salt. Policies such as the proposed 'Green Belt' along the southern border led to the demolition of homes, which was later discontinued following international concern. To represent the same situation, the following lines by Dahal (2018) in the poem "*Banda dhokaa*" (closed door) incorporate the sense of loss:

Roof lost, and roof found
Life lost, and life found
Smile, sadness, love, and lifelessness

If life I learn, take it lightly.[3] (9-12)

These lines depict the condition of impunity. It acknowledges that being a refugee is not a single feeling — it is an ongoing tension between despair and resilience. The verse can be read as a mental reflection on displacement and resilience. It captures the movement from loss to renewal, from grief to acceptance. The poem transforms tragedy into insight — showing how a people who lost their homes found new meaning and strength through suffering.

The government-controlled newspaper *Kuensel* consistently portrayed Lhotshampas as criminals or terrorists, blaming them for rising crime rates and the destruction of infrastructure. It frequently alleged connections between violence in Bhutan and dissidents operating from refugee camps in Nepal, further stigmatizing the displaced population (Hutt,1996, pp. 407-408). The conflict over identity, culture, and citizenship led to one of the most significant refugee crises in South Asia. Although Bhutan maintained that many of the refugees were either illegal immigrants or had voluntarily emigrated, international observers and humanitarian agencies have challenged this narrative. Lhotshampas continued to live in exile, with many awaiting recognition, repatriation, or resettlement.

In March 1994, the king issued a decree urging Lhotshampas, who had been fleeing the southern regions of Bhutan because of discriminatory policies, to remain in the country. The decree, which was reportedly read to a group of refugees on April 7, 1994, although dated March 26, was an attempt by the Bhutanese government to prevent further exodus from the country. However, the refugees, many of whom had already witnessed the demolition of their homes, rejected the decree. The *Kuensel*, Bhutan's national newspaper, reported on April 9, 1994, that 39 families and seven individuals from Samtse had voluntarily relinquished their citizenship and opted to leave Bhutan (Hutt, 1996, pp. 407-408). It attributed the refugees' decision to leave as incomprehensible, despite the government's efforts to persuade them to stay. This narrative echoed the Bhutanese government's long-standing stance that the individuals in the refugee camps in Nepal were not legitimate Bhutanese citizens but rather illegal immigrants or anti-national elements.

The Bhutanese government consistently argued that those people living in the camps should not be regarded as refugees. The king suggested that the Bhutanese government had made significant efforts to provide for the welfare of its citizens, stating it was hard to understand why

[3] All the texts cited here are the author's translation

they had chosen to leave. The refugees were not just economic migrants. They were individuals who faced political and cultural persecution in Bhutan. Bhutan asserted that they were not Bhutanese citizens based on they claimed and many of the refugees had entered Bhutan illegally. The Bhutanese government claimed that many of these individuals were illegal Nepali laborers who had settled in Bhutan during the 1960s and 1970s when they had been brought in to work on various development projects. However, these individuals were eventually targeted during the government's efforts to implement the policy of the 1980s to enforce Drukpa culture and language.

The Bhutanese government also questioned the validity of the refugees' citizenship claims, such as national identity cards and documents confirming land ownership. Bhutan's narrative was that anti-national elements had destroyed or forged official documents in an attempt to falsify their identities. The evidence provided by the government of Nepal and the UNHCR contradicted Bhutan's claims. A 1993 survey by the Nepali government, with the assistance of UNHCR, found that thousands of refugees had valid documents, including citizenship cards, land ownership records, and educational certificates. The UNHCR did not take a position on the matter of citizenship; its report acknowledged that many refugees had legitimate claims to Bhutanese nationality. The situation in the refugee camps in Nepal became dire, and the flow of refugees increased. Ajnabee's poem "Fear Fears with Fearlessness" (2009) depicts the same situation:

Shackled was your father
With a tyrannous chain.
Tearful was your mother
With angst and sharp pain.
With thine eyes closed
You did keep on seeing. (pp. 1-6)

This verse reflects the suffering of Bhutanese refugees. The father's chain symbolizes oppression and exile, while the mother's tears show grief and fear. Despite closed eyes, the speaker continues to 'see,' representing inherited trauma and the haunting memory of a lost homeland that endures across generations. As a result, the first wave of refugees arrived in Nepal in late 1990, with several hundred more following each month. By September 1991, the total number of refugees had reached around 5,000. The situation worsened in 1992, with an average of 300 to

600 arrivals per day, leading to a peak of nearly 50,000 refugees (Hutt, 1996, p. 407). Many of these refugees had already been living in exile for months, facing harassment from both Indian and Bhutanese police while trying to cross the border into Nepal. The Nepali government formally requested assistance from UNHCR in 1991, and the refugee organization began coordinating relief efforts. The refugees were placed in camps primarily in the Jhapa district of eastern Nepal, with a smaller number in the Morang district.

Hutt (1996) asserts that by 1995, there were a total of 88,880 registered refugees in the camps, with additional unregistered individuals living outside the camps. The conditions in the camps were basic but adequate. The camps were set up on marginal forest land, with refugees living in bamboo huts covered with plastic sheeting. The huts, which lasted only about three years, were often dilapidated, and the refugees faced difficult living conditions, especially during the monsoon season. The UNHCR provided essential supplies, including food, clothing, and household items, and refugees were allowed to engage in limited income-generating activities. Many refugees were unable to work outside the camps or farm their land, and many faced psychological distress due to the loss of their property and homeland. The largest camp in Nepal was Beldangi, which housed over 43,000 people by 1995. Other camps included Timai, Goldhap, Sanishchare, and Khudunabari, and life was still difficult. The refugee community in the camps continued to demand recognition and the right to return to Bhutan, where they had once been citizens.

The Bhutanese refugee crisis is a complex issue involving questions of citizenship, and the Bhutanese government has consistently argued that the refugees are not legitimate citizens of the country. The evidence provided by both the refugees and international organizations suggests that many of the displaced individuals were citizens of Bhutan. They fled the country due to discriminatory policies, and the situation remained unresolved. They actively participated in managing their daily lives. Despite achieving comparatively high levels of primary, secondary, and even tertiary education, many refugees found themselves constrained within the camps, where the skills they developed could not be fully utilized. The education programs, while providing valuable knowledge, inadvertently raised expectations that could not be met given the limitations imposed by the camps' confinement. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) acknowledged the considerable frustration among the refugees, with an especially pronounced sense of disillusionment among the youth. The frustration was

compounded by the involvement of external organizations, such as the Nepalese government's agencies and the Happy Nepal TPO (Trans Psycho-Social Organization), which were tasked with addressing psychological and social issues within the camps. As a result, the quality of the interventions was often perceived as insufficient, which contributed to a rise in social issues within the camps, such as domestic violence, substance abuse, child marriage, and trafficking of women and children. Many refugee families were also dispersed across different camps, and a significant portion of the youth population lacked identity documents. These factors combined to exacerbate the refugees' sense of helplessness and frustration.

To resolve the refugee crisis, the governments of Bhutan and Nepal established a Ministerial Joint Committee (MJC) in July 1993. The committee's initial goal was to verify the status of the refugees in the camps and classify them into four categories: bona fide Bhutanese forcibly evicted from the country, Bhutanese who had emigrated voluntarily, non-Bhutanese individuals, and Bhutanese who had committed criminal acts. While this agreement represented a potential step forward, negotiations between the two governments were hampered by differing positions. This idea has a connection with the cultural geography of Mitchell (2000):

> … the practices and exercises of power through which these bonds are produced and reproduced. The questions this raises are ones about who defines the nation, how it is defined, how that definition is reproduced and contested, and, crucially, how the nation has developed and hanged over time ...The question is not what common imagination exists, but what common imagination is forged. (p. 269)

It connects how national identity and belonging are shaped, controlled, and redefined through power, culture, and historical refugee experiences. The ideas of Hutt and Anderson's proposal overlook how national imagination is produced, maintained, and enforced, shaping lives and behaviors over time. Hutt's observation on the ethnic conflicts of Nepali-speaking people is rooted in the same sense of cultural cleansing and ethnic domination.

Bhutan insisted that Nepal and Bhutan harmonize their positions on the categories before proceeding. This deadlock persisted throughout the mid-1990s, exacerbated by political instability in Nepal and Bhutan's reluctance to engage with a third-party mediator. By 1996, the negotiations had stagnated, and the situation remained unresolved until the eighth round of talks in September 1999, which was catalyzed by pressure from international human rights organizations. These talks did not yield any substantive outcomes. In March 2001, the Joint

Verification Team (JVT), consisting of five Nepali and five Bhutanese officials, began its work in Khudunabari, one of the smaller camps. After completing the verification process in December 2001, the findings were not disclosed until 2003 (Hutt, 1996, p. 412). The JVT report categorized only 293 individuals as bona fide Bhutanese who had been forcibly evicted, while other refugees who had emigrated voluntarily were given the option to apply for Bhutanese citizenship under a liberal interpretation of Bhutanese immigration laws. Those who had committed criminal acts were allowed to prove their innocence in court. The outcome of the verification process was a significant point of contention.

Bhutan's reluctance to involve third-party organizations, such as UNHCR, in monitoring the repatriation process further fueled mistrust. The refugee leaders argued that Bhutan's policies of discrimination against Lhotshampas within the country, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and freedom of movement, undermined the prospects for meaningful repatriation. The refugee crisis stemming from Bhutan's treatment of Lhotshampas has remained unresolved for decades. Although there have been various attempts at diplomatic resolution, the political complexities, competing interests, and lingering mistrust between Bhutan and Nepal continue to impede a lasting solution. The UNHCR has faced considerable challenges in finding a durable solution for the Bhutanese refugees residing in Nepal. Despite repeated efforts to facilitate repatriation to Bhutan, these attempts have largely been unsuccessful, with Bhutan refusing to allow the refugees to return. The Nepali government also opposed the integration of the Bhutanese into the local community, citing concerns about the potential dangers of setting a precedent for local integration in refugee situations. By 2006, the UNHCR acknowledged the dire situation, stating that many Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, who had been stripped of their citizenship, faced the grim reality of remaining part of the UNHCR casebook for the coming years. They expressed little hope for repatriation or the reacquisition of citizenship. In response to the stalemate surrounding repatriation, the UNHCR shifted its focus in 2007, opening applications for third-country resettlement. By mid-2008, the UNHCR had formally recognized the failure of repatriation efforts and acknowledged the impossibility of brokering a solution. As a result, the UNHCR decided to phase out aid and promote third-country resettlement as a solution to the refugee problem.

Bhutanese refugees in Nepal were designated as a priority group for resettlement. If we borrow the ideas of Anderson (1993), "The two most significant factors generating nationalism

and ethnicity are both closely linked to the rise of capitalism" (p. 7). Over nearly a decade, more than 105,000 Bhutanese refugees were resettled in various countries, with the majority relocating to the United States. The third-country resettlement of refugees was influenced by several factors, including the lack of political will of Bhutan, the reluctance of the international community to pressure Bhutan, and India's strategic hesitations due to its geopolitical interests in the region. By 2007, the Bhutanese refugee population in Nepal had dwindled, with most residing in seven camps located in Jhapa and Morang districts in eastern Nepal. However, by 2015, only two camps remained, with the refugee population reduced to fewer than 18,000 individuals (Ferguson, 2011). A coalition of eight countries—Australia, Canada, Denmark, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States—formed a group in 2007 to facilitate the resettlement of Bhutanese refugees. This effort is widely considered one of the most successful refugee resettlement programs of its kind. By the end of 2008, the first Bhutanese refugees began arriving in the United States, and by 2011, over 47,000 Bhutanese had been resettled there. The United States was the primary destination, accepting around 91,700 Bhutanese refugees by 2016, with significant populations residing in states such as Texas, New York, Indiana, North Carolina, and Georgia (Ferguson, 2011). Despite the success of the resettlement program, the experience of Bhutanese refugees in their new homes has been far from easy. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) coordinates the resettlement efforts in collaboration with the US State Department. However, one of the most significant issues faced by resettled refugees has been the high suicide rate. The psychological problem of resettlement was compounded by the challenges of adapting to a new country, as many refugees struggled with the cultural and social transition. Krämer and Honnef (2003) perceive, "Michael Hutt's extremely well-founded study successfully analyses the Bhutanese refugee issue. He has not missed any aspect that could be important for a better understanding of the problem" (p. 160). In addition to the psychological challenges, the resettlement process has fractured the community bonds that had been formed in the refugee camps. Many refugees who had spent decades in the camps found that their skills and roles were devalued in their new homes, leading to feelings of alienation. These lines by Regmi (2025) state the statelessness of refugees living in Nepal and abroad.

For three decades
On a land not their own
With incomplete identity and unfinished dreams
Living without papers
Like lifeless bodies without souls
Beyond them
Stand the youths carrying dreams. (17-23).

The verse reflects the long exile, statelessness, and loss of identity of Bhutanese refugees, and highlights the younger generation's resilience and hope for a dignified future. The gap between expectations and reality in the United States, exacerbated by the economic crisis, added further stress. The concept of home carries multiple meanings and remains fluid, as refugees experience and define it differently (hooks, 2009). It is shaped through everyday practices, memories, and emotions that construct personal and collective identities (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). For some, home represents comfort and belonging, while for others, it embodies control or displacement (Hall, 1990). Therefore, understanding home requires recognizing its diverse, complex, and context-dependent nature, calling for continued exploration of how people relate to place and belonging (Windsong, 2010). Many refugees felt disappointed by the lack of support and integration into American society, which did not align with the hopes they had when they first arrived.

In Nepal, India's involvement in the refugee issue was considered pivotal, as the Indian government had significant influence over Bhutan's foreign relations. India maintained that the matter was a bilateral issue between Bhutan and Nepal and refused to intervene. India's stance was shaped by its obligations under the 1949 Indo-Bhutan treaty, which prohibits interference in Bhutan's internal affairs, as well as its geopolitical concerns regarding its relationship with Bhutan and China. Of the remaining 11,000 refugees, approximately 2,000 have expressed a desire to repatriate. However, the repatriation campaign has lost momentum with many leaders who once advocated for repatriation opting for resettlement instead[4]. The UNHCR's resettlement program is expected to conclude by 2017, marking the end of a long chapter in the lives of Bhutanese refugees. Despite the success of resettlement in providing new opportunities for

[4]"Bhutanese Refugees," *Refugee Resettlement Watch*

many, the refugee community continues to grapple with the emotional and psychological challenges of displacement, which have followed them even after relocation. The entire observation depicts that citizenship cannot be a fixed status of people, and the idea of Benedict assumes that imagined communities constructed on shared collective values based on language, symbols, cultures, history, etc., cannot justify the people's rights if they do not fit with the dominant narratives.

Conclusion

Refugee embarrassment in Nepal after 1990 occurred due to the ethnic division between the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese community in the south and the Drukpa ethnic group in the north, which was recognized by the Bhutanese elites as a significant political challenge. The southern Bhutanese, whose ethnicity was closely linked to a larger cross-border ethnic group, had become politically mobilized in neighboring regions. It led to fears among the northern elites that the southern ethnic nationalism could eventually overpower their own. In response, the government sought to assimilate the southern population into a Drukpa-centered identity, which included enforcing the Driglam Namzhag social code, banning satellite dishes, promoting the national language Dzongkha, and imposing restrictive citizenship and marriage laws. This policy, known as Bhutanization, led to resistance from the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese, who had until then remained a relatively passive and accommodated group.

The differing perspectives between the exiled Nepali Bhutanese leaders and the RGB highlighted the complexity of the issue. The refugees demanded political reforms in Bhutan, seeking greater representation and the protection of their civil and cultural rights. On the other hand, the government emphasized security concerns, portraying the resistance as violent and presenting the issue as a 'southern problem' or an existential threat to the nation. The situation cannot be simplistically categorized as a 'clash of cultures' or 'ethnic cleansing.' It is the result of a dominant ethnic group seeking to suppress a previously marginalized community that had begun to challenge the political status quo. The southern Bhutanese were effectively given a stark choice: either adopt the Drukpa identity or forfeit their rights to remain in Bhutan. The refugee crisis exacerbated the ethnic divisions between the Drukpa and Nepali-speaking communities, making any potential accommodation more difficult. The search for a resolution requires balancing the fears of the dominant Drukpa community and addressing the grievances and aspirations of the southern Nepali Bhutanese. The Bhutanese elite has made it clear that they

cannot accept the return of significant numbers of refugees unless it does not threaten the political dominance of the Drukpa community. In response to international calls for repatriation and family reunification, the Bhutanese Government refused to recognize the refugees at its citizens and labeled them as 'illegal immigrants.' This stance is that citizenship cannot be a fixed status of people, and it cannot justify the people's rights. The rejection of the vast majority of repatriation requests of Bhutanese refugees left it unresolved.

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