

# The Statesman

## Driven out like cattle

Bhutan is a dot on the world map between two gargantuan neighbours, India and China. Its recent population as per rough estimates of the Druk (Bhutan) government is 6,00,000 after having evicted nearly 1,35,000 Nepali-speaking Bhutanese 1990 onwards.

These people are now stationed at seven refugee camps in Nepal. Some 15,000 have assimilated themselves in Assam, West Bengal,

Sikkim and other parts of India.

This ethnic cleansing started in the late 1980s or the beginning of the 1990s after the Lhotshampas waged a peaceful protest against Dago Tshering, Bhutan's then deputy home minister. The protest was against the deprivation of their fundamental rights and privileges, which are as follows:

■ The right to live in Bhutan where their ancestors had been living since the 18th century;

■ The right of inclusion of the Nepali language in the school curriculum which had been banned by the Bhutan government;

■ The traditional right to wear the Daura Suruwal and Gunju Choli, the dress the Nepali-speaking community had been wearing for a long time and

■ The right to grow long hair by women folk as hair is regarded as an asset by the Hindu religion.

They had even raised their voice against the mandatory dress code of wearing the bakkhu and the kira which is the Bhutanese dress and inappropriate for hotter climes as they cause heat rashes and discomfort.

The population of Bhutan mainly comprises

mises Drukpas, Sharshokpas, Na'ongs, Brokpa and Lhotshampas. The Nepali-speaking community which make up 20 per cent of the Bhutanese population is known as the Lhotshampas.

The southern districts of Bhutan had been allocated for these people and it is the place where the Lhotshampas have been living.

Earlier, it was one of the most backward regions and dangerously prone to malaria. Drukpas (the ruling class) was suggested never to live in these belts because of the malaria risk.

Many generations of Lhotshampas had flourished and perished in this southern zone and despite the risk, continued to live there. They cultivated lands, grew crops, reared cattle, built schools, hospitals and so on. Cardamom, ginger and orange are the chief crops and fruits of southern Bhutan. They

built roads voluntarily where the people had to contribute labour as per government rule. They were not paid for that labour.

Bhutan was the only place they knew because they were born there and it was the only place they could think of living. But the Bhutanese government had other things in mind. It passed an Act accepting only those citizens as Bhutanese who had lived there before 1958. Those who came afterwards were to be deported immediately.

The former had to produce land registration certificates, marriage certificates and ration cards to prove their eligibility. This Act raised a hue and cry in the Nepali-speaking community.

These people have a history of living in Bhutan even before the Wangchuk dynasty came to Bhutan from Tibet.

Special task forces were sent from Thimpu to the southern

zone for the so-called verification process. Administration in the Bhutanese district is monitored by the dzongda (chief district officer) which is directly under the home ministry. Each district has a dzongda and they are employed by the king.

For the Lhotshampas, going to the dzongda was tortuous. One could only speak what the officials wanted to hear. They were often allegedly manhandled. To protest against the mass discrimination and rigorous methods of verification, the Lhotshampas organised a peaceful rally in the 1990s.

As a result, the entire southern region was blocked from transportation, food, electricity, mail and other basic facilities. Within a few days, the Royal Druk Army combed the area and stationed themselves in schools and hospitals. Unnecessary questioning and arrests began.

People were tortured and some of them even died in custody. Relatives were told they died of sicknesses. Some people who couldn't bear the burden of expatriation committed suicide. Young women became victims of rape and abuse. Healthy youths were battered until they gave up hope of living. Many people started disappearing. They were

have been thrown into rivers after having died of relentless torture. Mondals or village heads were made to carry stones from 7 am to 4 pm. These tasks were given in the Dagapela constituency of the former MP, KB Chauhan, and Hari Adhikari of the Gelephug constituency.

Lhotshampas began to flee. Since the government had blocked all roads and transportable access to other parts of Bhutan, the only way to escape was on foot. Mass migration started. Under cover of darkness, people started marching towards India. They had to cross many hills and rivers before reaching the Indo-Bhutanese border.

Those who stayed back were threatened by the Bhutanese army. Most of them were asked to sign the voluntary migration form at gunpoint. The form was printed in Dzongkha. Most of the people did not understand what was written on it.

The form said that they were migrating from Bhutan of their own free will and that they had received adequate compensation from the government for their property.

Refugees in the camps are still hoping to return some day and live in their own house instead of a UNHCR bamboo hut, till their own land, rear cattle, raise crops and die peacefully in their own land.

(The author is a freelance writer.)

### CROSSWORD

NO 291

Yesterday's solution

TABASCO SUNERN  
D S O N E  
HOTSTUFF EATING  
R E G O N E  
ENIGMA RADIKO  
E A R T I A  
MRBIG BYONELE  
A B S G  
EURIPIDES SIML  
M G R C U I  
ABINITIO BOAI  
R O H N E  
NIMROD DANDIE  
A E A D D  
INTRAYS ISARE

- 22 Proof reader's marking oversight with it, briefly (5)  
24 Shift one making rude sign? (4)  
25 As evidence should be, getting misled with bias being out of order (10)  
26 Roll and lean to one side (4)  
27 Franklin - champion after release from tyranny (10)

### DOWN

- 1 With space in train is right to occupy another's place (8)  
2 Somewhat idyllic, a private

- 5 Old tennis player p in as net's shaking (7)  
7 What batsman play pitch is made short  
8 Move noisily like a bus conductor (6)  
11 See 17 across  
15 Almost part sweet they offer greater (9)  
16 A winter kit without (8)  
18 How one of cockn describes them to (7)