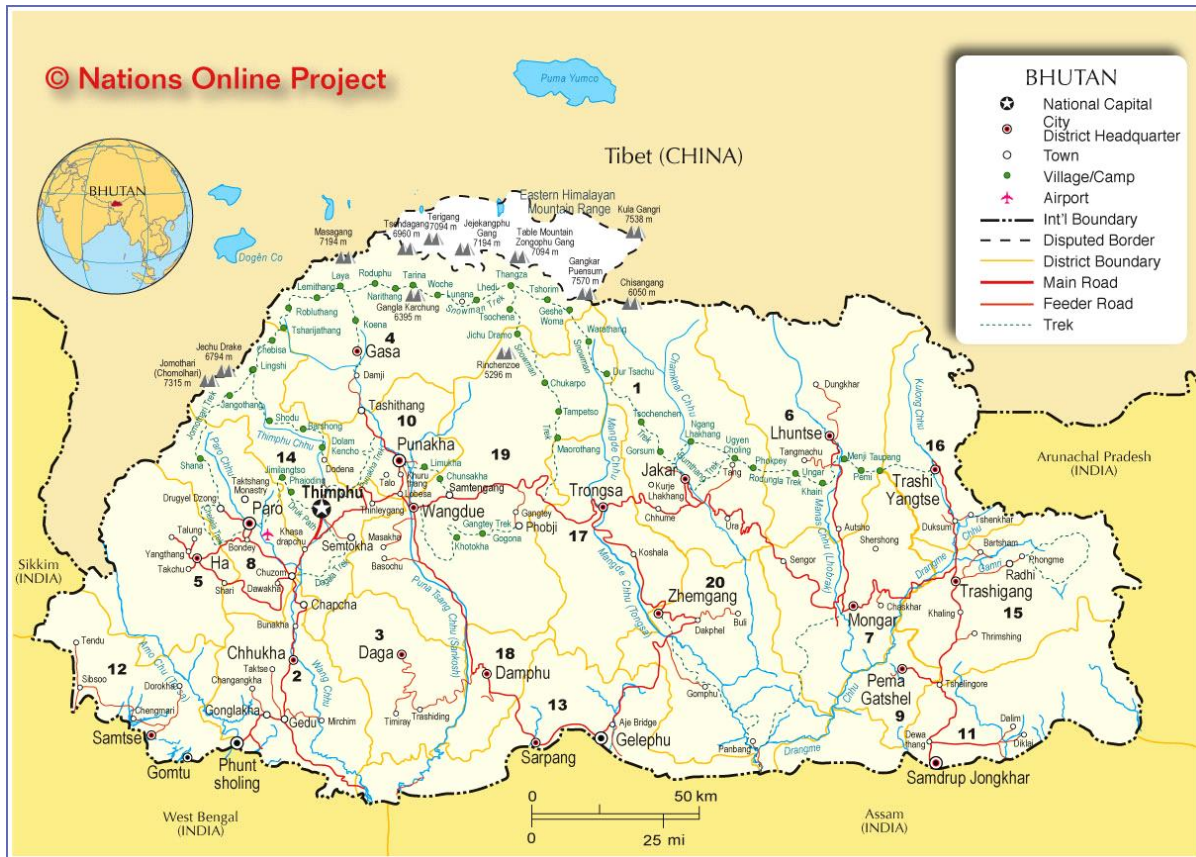


HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN BHUTAN

A REPORT ON THE SOUTHERN BHUTAN PROBLEM AND THE MAKING OF BHUTANESE REFUGEES



Bhutan: An Introduction

Bhutan is a Himalayan Kingdom with an area of 38,117 km square and a population of 819,623, according to recent estimates¹. The country is sandwiched between China to the north and India to the east, west and south.

¹ World Meters. Online reference: <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/bhutan-population/>

Ethnic Composition

Like the United States, Bhutan, too, is a land of immigrants who settled during different times in history. The ruling class are the descendants of Tibetan origin clans called the *Ngalongs*, as known as *Drukpas*, who occupy the north and western part of the country. The other main ethnic group is comprised of easterners known as *Sarchops*. Both the *Ngalongs* or *Drukpas* and *Sarchops* are Buddhists. The Nepali-speaking population, predominantly Hindus, occupy the southern part of the country and are called *Lhotsampas* (meaning “southerners in Dzongkha” in the Ngalung language – the national language).

Government

Kingship, or the hereditary monarchy, started in Bhutan with its first King - King Ugyen Wangchuk in 1907. Since that time, the Wangchuk Dynasty has continued, now with the fifth king - King Jigme Geysar Namgyel Wangchuk - the present reigning monarch. For some years, they have been outwardly projecting that Bhutan is a democracy so as to legitimize the power of the ruling class.

It takes great caution and in-depth investigation into what has happened in Bhutan, particularly the racist repression against the southern Bhutanese in the late-1980s and early-1990s. The monarchy’s prevailing goal is to justify that Bhutan is the land of the *Drukpas* or the Hindu Tibetan-origin clan.

Who are the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese?

The first families of Nepali-speaking Bhutanese can be traced back to 1620 when then-Bhutanese theocratic ruler, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, signed a friendship treaty with King Ram Shah of Gorkha, Nepal². This treaty facilitated the migration of the first 50 Nepali families to Bhutan. In the years that followed, Nepali-speaking population from Nepal and adjoining Indian states moved into Bhutan.

² Bhutan's Dark Secret: The Lhosampa Expulsion. Online reference: The Diplomat <https://thediplomat.com/2016/09/bhutans-dark-secret-the-lhotshampa-expulsion/>

This historical event is reflected in a letter to the Queen of England sent by British Indian Viceroy Lord Curzon, wherein he had mentioned that “Bhutan is fast becoming a Gurkhali state.”

What happened in Bhutan?

In what began as an unprecedented spate of human rights violations targeting Nepali-speakers, Southern Bhutan saw the most horrendous of the state-sponsored crimes in late-80s and early-90s nineties. They came in the form of arrests, imprisonment, rape, looting and plunder, torture, demolition and arson of homes.

Many Southern Bhutanese fled the country fearing persecution while the others were systematically driven out of the country coercing them to sign the so-called 'voluntary migration forms' - mostly at gun-point. The Bhutanese government also extensively used its tool of disenfranchisement (depopulation by design) by retroactively implementing its 1985 Citizenship Act. This act effectively turned citizens into illegal immigrants overnight and enforced the so-called 'One Nation, One People' racist policy since 1989.

Thus, this policy led to the cultural genocide on its Southern Bhutanese masses. This was actualized in the following ways:

- Prohibiting the teaching of Nepali language in schools in South Bhutan;
- Forcing the South Bhutanese to wear the Northern Bhutanese dress all the time - stripping off their cultural dress;
- Curbing religious freedoms;
- Imposing language and culture of the Ngalongs; and
- Banning television

At that time, an American attorney, David Thronson of Harvard University, interning with INHURED International, Kathmandu, concluded in his book, *Bhutan: Cultural Cleansing* that “Bhutan's Citizenship Law is a prescription for statelessness.”³

³ Book: Bhutan: Cultural Cleansing (uncitable)

Influx of Refugees to Nepal

Having been expelled from generations of their ancestral homes in Bhutan, the refugees arrived in Nepal after being pushed away by India. By invitation of the Nepalese government, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) quickly came to provide the much-needed humanitarian assistance. Camps were eventually set up in seven different places in eastern Nepal. The implementing partners of UNHCR included Lutheran World Federation, Save the Children Fund (UK), OXFAM (Nepal), Nepal Red Cross Society, AMDA Nepal, CVICT Nepal, among others.

More than 100,000 Bhutanese in refugee camps resided in Nepal, representing one-sixth of Bhutan's population -- the world's highest per capita flow of refugees from any country.⁴ Again, this flow of Bhutanese refugees took place mainly in the early 1990s. By the standard of population composition of Bhutan with regards to those expelled, it was assumed then that it was the highest.

Initiative for a Solution

There have been numerous attempts on the part of Bhutanese refugees to go back home. Bhutanese refugees organized programs such as lobbying governments for support; pressing the matter through UN; peace marches to Bhutan; rallies in numerous places; peaceful demonstrations and scores of other activities. The Nepalese government held eight rounds of bilateral negotiations while efforts have also been made by the US government including Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, Ms. Robin Raphaels; US Congressmen; the European Union, as well as regional and international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International. Unfortunately, the government of India, which holds the key for the solution of the problem, turned a deaf ear to the entire episode just echoing the line the problem is bilateral.

⁴ Bhutan's Dark Secret: The Lhosampa Expulsion. Online reference: The Diplomat <https://thediplomat.com/2016/09/bhutans-dark-secret-the-lhotshampa-expulsion/>

What is the key held by India? By the [Indo-Bhutan Treaty of 1949](#), Bhutan agrees to be guided by India in matters relating to external affairs. Furthermore, India is a huge donor to Bhutan and traditionally has substantial leverage on Bhutan both politically and strategically.

Bhutanese Refugees' Resettlement

Following a massive diplomatic endeavor in 2007, the UNHCR proposed “third country resettlement” as the most viable option for the resolution of this almost 18 year-old problem. The world governments supported the UNHCR proposal - mainly the United States, Canada, Australia and Denmark. The US offered to take a major chunk of the refugee population. Promptly, the refugees submitted applications for the third country resettlement in countries of their choice.

Equipped with this new perspective from refugees, the UNHCR invited the representatives of the US Department of Homeland Security and international organizations (namely the International Organization for Migration – IOM) for documenting and processing. Medical organizations recruited personnel for smoothly screening and detecting any health issues prior to processing.

By 2008, Bhutanese refugees began exiting from the camps in Nepal. According to a GB television report on 1 February 2018, the status of refugee resettlement was as follows: ⁵

USA: 95,447	Canada: 6,826	Australia: 6,728
New Zealand: 1,094	Denmark: 875	UK: 358
Netherlands: 339		
Left behind in the camps: 7,422		

⁵GB News TV, Feb. 1, 2018, Bhutanese Refugee Resettlement Ends - in Nepali

Nepali-speaking Bhutanese in Iowa

Since 2008, Bhutanese refugees began trickling into Iowa. Today, there is an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 Bhutanese residing in Iowa. Many of them have become productive members of the society. With a new sense of security here, this population has spread into different kinds of entry-level and professional jobs or engaged in self-employment ventures. All children go to school and have kept their parents busy. Many of them have not only become a part of the Iowa family, but have also secured US Citizenship.

The Appeal to the International Community

Accept the fact that crimes committed in the past cannot be ignored as a forgotten human tragedy. It must be brought to justice at least for the sake of our children. Help us regain our lost dignity and free us from the indelible scars of injustice.

Recommendations from the Bhutanese Community in Iowa

1. Raise awareness about the human rights violations in Bhutan which has led to the Bhutanese refugee situation.
2. Send fact-finding missions to Bhutan to investigate the state-sponsored crimes in the late-1980s and early-1990s that expelled one-sixth of the country's population out of the country.
3. Determine the country's population based on ethnicity. A true picture of the demographic composition exposing force majority rule rather than true representation in all branches of government. It would not be surprising if one discovers the degree to which Nepali-speaking population is under-represented.
4. Scrutinize the representation based on ethnicity in the legislative, executive and judiciary.

5. Ask the government to investigate all those responsible for the state-sponsored crimes in the late eighties and early nineties under due process of national law and take concrete and practical steps to bring the main players of the crime to the International Court of Justice at the Hague.

Strong pressure should be exerted - politically, economically or even culturally and socially - on the Bhutanese government by influential governments that can call for the trials of those main players at the UN International Court of Justice at The Hague. To achieve this, sustained efforts must be made by the people, international human rights watch dogs, social media and governments to bring those responsible for the state-sponsored crimes to justice.

6. Evaluate the present human rights situation in the country.
7. Undertake any other appropriate activities to help regain the lost dignity of the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese in Bhutan and in the countries they have been resettled until justice is realized. Here, justice means that the persecuted are relieved from the pain of having to undergo immense sufferings in Bhutan at the hands of the Bhutanese military and police. This can happen only when the perpetrators or the main players are brought before the law.

International Organizations that may be contacted to verify human rights violations in Bhutan:

- [Amnesty International, London](#)
- [Lutheran World Federation, Geneva](#)
- [Human Rights Watch](#)
- [South Asia Human Rights Documentation Center, New Delhi](#)
- [Himal HYPERSLINK "http://himalmag.com/" South Asia, Kathmandu](#)
- [INHURED International, Kathmandu](#)

- David Thronson, Harvard Law School, for his book - Bhutan: Cultural Cleansing.
- [Habitat International Coalition](#)
- [OXFAM UK](#)
- [European Parliament Resolution on Bhutan – Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal](#)
- [Jesuit Refugee Service, Geneva](#)

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