

## **Chapter III**

### **Bhutan and its Ethnic Minorities**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter traces a brief history of Bhutan touching upon the ethnic situation before and after the 1985 Citizenship Act of Bhutan. The first part of the chapter tries to define minorities and identifies the various ethnic groups of Bhutan as well as the ethnic minorities of the country. The chapter traces the evolution of the state of Bhutan in detail as it is important in understanding the evolution of the current ethnic majority-minority dichotomy and power-relations. The second part of the chapter draws attention to the plight of minorities of Bhutan and forms the background of critique of Bhutan's Gross National Happiness policy. Since most of the other ethnic minorities of Bhutan are of insignificant numbers and do not play a major role when it comes to the contention between the GNH policy and minority rights, the case of the *Lhotshampas* is discussed at length making it focus of the chapter. However, it should in no case be interpreted that all the other ethnic minorities of Bhutan are not significant when it comes to the question of minority rights. The chapter makes a special case of the Nepali-Bhutanese and their situation in relation to the validity of the happiness policy of Bhutan.

#### **3.2 Defining Minorities: Minorities of Bhutan**

There are multiple conceptions of the concept of minority. Generally, however, the term 'minority' means a group which is numerically smaller to the rest of the population of the state (or the dominant majority), having a non-dominant status, whose members, who are the nationals of the state, show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity toward the preservation of its ethnic, religious, or linguistic characteristics (Ramaga, 1992: 104). This definition implies that minority groups are numerically inferior groups who do not control the structures of the power of the state and can be vulnerable to the dominance of other groups. Nonetheless, this is not always the case; there are cases where the minority groups have taken control over other numerically larger groups. For instance, the Blacks in South Africa under apartheid were numerically larger but subordinate to the Whites.

Apart from the numerical aspect, minorities are defined on the basis of ethnic, religious, and linguistic identity. Under these criteria, the minority groups are given special provisions as can be seen in Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights (ICCPR):

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language (United Nations General Assembly, 1966: 179).

In almost every case, indigenous peoples also come under the concept of minorities. Indigenous peoples are descendants of the peoples who inhabited the land or territory prior to the establishment of State borders; they possess distinct social, economic and political systems, languages, cultures and beliefs, and are determined to maintain and develop this distinct identity; they exhibit strong attachment to their ancestral lands and the natural resources contained therein; and/or they belong to the non-dominant groups of a society and identify themselves as indigenous peoples (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2010: 3). As such, both indigenous peoples and national, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities are usually in a non-dominant position in the society and their cultures, languages or religious beliefs may be different from the majority or the dominant groups.

In the case of Bhutan, there are various ethnic groups and subgroups of different racial, social and cultural roots living in the country. There are four geographic regions which has greatly influenced the formation of ethnic groups and their society in Bhutan. Firstly, Tibet contributed to the formation of the ethnic and cultural elements of western, northern and central parts of Bhutan (Upreti, 2005: 28). The culture of the people of eastern Bhutan was influenced by South-East Asia and more so, the North-East India (Upreti, 2005: 28). Nepal and Indian states like Sikkim and West Bengal contributed in the formation of the ethnic, social and cultural elements of Southern Bhutan (Upreti, 2005: 28). The majority of Bhutanese population is of Mongoloid stock, belonging to Tibeto-Mongoloid and Indo-Mongoloid varieties or a mixture of them, along with some Aryans, including the *Chettris and Bahuns* (Upreti, 2005, 28). Since the time of the *Zhabdrung*,

Bhutan had succeeded to an extent to achieve religious, political and social assimilation and the entire social structure reflected almost the same features (Sinha, 1998: 23). There is, however, a small and less assimilated section of society which is different from the mainstream of the Bhutanese society (Sinha, 1998: 23).

The ethnic base of Bhutan can be segregated into four main categories: (a) the *Ngalongs*, (b) the *Sharchops*, (c) the *Lhotshampas*, and (d) various other tribal groups of relatively smaller numbers, like *Bodos*, *Birmis*, *Khens*, *Lepchas* and *Mons*. The *Ngalongs* and *Sharchops*, collectively known as *Bhote*<sup>1</sup>, make up to 50 per cent of the entire population; the ethnic Nepalese make up to 35 per cent and; the indigenous and migrant tribes make up to 15 per cent of the total population.<sup>2</sup> 75 per cent of the population practice *Lamaistic*<sup>3</sup> Buddhism whereas 25 per cent practice Indian and Nepalese influenced Hinduism (ibid). The ethnic minorities of Bhutan as such include the *Sharchops*, the *Lhotshampas* and the various indigenous people. The *Ngalongs* on the other hand are the dominant majority, both numerically and influence-wise.

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<sup>1</sup>Orientalists adopted the term “*Bhote*” or *Bhotiya*, meaning “people of *Bod* (Tibet), a term also applied to the Tibetan people leading to confusion, and now is rarely used in reference to the *Ngalong*.

<sup>2</sup>See: <http://www.countrywatch.com/Intelligence/CountryReviews?CountryId=20> accessed on 23/09/2015

<sup>3</sup> Pertaining to Lamaism; Lamaism is a reformation of Buddhism in Tibet intended to bring about stricter discipline in the monasteries; the dominant sect of *Gelup-Ka* (The Virtuous Way), with the patron deity Chen-re-zi (the Bodhisattva of Great Mercy), who is reincarnated as the successive Dalai Lamas. Also called *Gelup-Ka*.

**Table 2. Region-wise representation of ethnic groups of Bhutan**

Serial no.	Ethnic groups	Spread across (region)
1.	Drukpas	Spread throughout the country, but mainly western Bhutan
2.	Brokpas	(Merak Sakten region) Eastern Bhutan
3.	Mons	Eastern and southern parts of Bhutan
4.	Khens	Central Bhutan
5.	Birmis	Eastern Bhutan
6.	Dayas	Samchi (South West Bhutan)
7.	Lepchas	The <i>Ha</i> valley (Western border of Bhutan )
8.	Bodos	Adjoining areas of Bhutan
9.	Kochs	Southern parts of Bhutan
10.	Tephoos	North Bhutan
11.	Musalmans	South Bhutan
12.	Indian migrants	Towns along the India-Bhutan border
13.	Lhotshampas	Southern Bhutan

The *Ngalongs* consist of the mainstream indigenous ethnic group of the Bhutanese population who also form the majority ethnic group in the country. They are also the most dominant ethnic group and consist of mostly elites who control various political structures and institutions. They are mostly Buddhists who are spread across the western part of Bhutan. The *Ngalongs* are considered as one of the earliest settlers of Bhutan and they are believed to have been of Tibetan origin, some of whom may have migrated to Bhutan as early as the ninth century (Sinha, 1998: 23). The term ‘*Ngalong*’ literally means ‘those risen earliest or converted first’ (Wolf, 2013). They are followers of the *Drukpa* school and speak *Dzongkha* (meaning, ‘language of the palace/*Dzong*’), which is also the official language of Bhutan.

The *Sharchops* are another ethnic group of Bhutan who are mainly settled in the eastern part of Bhutan. Like the *Ngalongs*, the *Sharchops* also follow Mahayana

Buddhism. However, while the *Ngalongs* follow the *Drukpa Kargyu*<sup>4</sup> school, the *Nyingma*<sup>5</sup> school is dominant among the *Sharchops* (Hutt, 2003: 5). The *Drukpa Kargyu* has statutory representation in the state's recommendatory and consultative institutions, while the *Nyingma* does not. The Buddhist people of Bhutan are collectively known as '*Drukpas*'. It is argued that because Bhutan is called '*Druk Yul*' (Dragon Country) in *Dzongkha*, all Bhutanese are '*Drukpa*' (people of *Druk Yul*), and that the term has no sectarian religious or ethnic connotations. The *Sharchop* are of Indo-Mongoloid stock and speak *Tsangla* (Wolf, 2013). Many of them have been assimilated into the *Drukpa* culture of the *Ngalongs*, nonetheless, there are sections of the *Sharchops* who still retain their close cultural and socio-economic ties with North East India and Myanmar.

The southern part of Bhutan is mostly inhabited by Nepali-speaking Bhutanese. They are also called the "*Lhotshampas*" which means the southerners, a name given by the *Drukpas*. They are of Indo-Aryan or Nepalese origin (Wolf, 2013). They mostly follow Hinduism and few Christianity and even Buddhism, but the vast majority of them speak the Nepali language. They migrated from Nepal to southern Bhutan since 1865, after the Anglo-Bhutanese war (Hutt, 2005: 45). The successive generations who settled in southern Bhutan in 1890s were recruited by the Government of Bhutan to clear the forests (Khan, 2016) and they also formed agrarian communities that quickly became Bhutan's main producers of food (Hutt, 2005: 45). The main causes of migration may be identified as the following: (a) British imperialist policy; (b) Economic opportunity of the *Lhotshampas* in Bhutan; (c) *Lhotshampas*' psyche to living in Hill area; (d) the Policy of Nepal Governments, Bhutan and India and other concerns; (e) External influences; (f) Educational and Cultural awareness of the *Lhotshampas*, etc. (Khan, 2016).

In this study, the *Lhotshampas*, who were evicted from Bhutan after the 1985 citizenship law and the 1988 census, are also brought under the term minorities, simply for the fact that they were once citizens of Bhutan and were de-nationalized on the grounds of

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<sup>4</sup> The *Drukpa Kargyu* tradition was founded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century by Tsangpa Gyare, a disciple of Lingrepa, himself a student of Pakmodrupa. The tradition draws its name from a vision Tsangpa Gyare had nine dragons –*druk* in Tibetan.

<sup>5</sup> The *Nyingma* school of Tibetan Buddhism traces its origin back to the Buddha Samatabhadra, Vajrasattva, and Garab Dorje of Uddiyana. The most important source of the *Nyingma* order is the Indian Guru, Padmasambhava, the founder of the *Nyingma* lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, who came to Tibet in the eighth century C.E.

bearing no proof of their existence in before 1958, which was the year the Bhutanese government enacted the Nationality Law. These evicted Nepali-Bhutanese are refugees who live in camps set up in Nepal, however, most of them have been resettling in third countries since 2008. When it comes to the question of legitimacy of the Gross National Happiness policy of Bhutan, the issue of the de-nationalized Nepali-Bhutanese is important and hence is brought forward in this study. These refugees who were once rightfully Bhutanese nationals cannot be avoided in the argument of the rights of minorities of Bhutan. Excluding them from the narrative would only mean turning a blind eye to their human rights and this is crucial since the narrative of happiness on which the GNH policy is built on is intrinsically linked with human rights. Human rights and happiness go hand in hand.

The United Nations Minorities Declaration adopted in 1992 states in its article 1 that minorities are based on national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity, and it is the duty of the States to protect their existence.<sup>6</sup> As such, under the provisions of human rights instruments, States have an obligation to protect the rights of all persons subject to or under their jurisdictions, with the exception of political rights. The Working Group on Minorities considers that while “some State argue that ‘national minorities’ only comprise groups composed of citizens of the State. It would not apply to the United Nations Declaration on Minorities because it has a much wider scope that ‘national minorities’” (United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 2005: 3). As such, “persons who are not (yet) citizens of the country in which they reside can form part of or belong to a minority in that country” (United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 2005: 4). Therefore, “citizenship should not be a distinguishing criterion that excludes some persons or groups from enjoying minority rights under the Declaration” (United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 2005: 4)

Among the various smaller indigenous groups, there are *Brokpas* (who are a nomadic group living in central Bhutan and of Tibetan origin), *Mons* (also known as *Monpas*, who live in the east and south east, and consider themselves to be the oldest

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/Minorities.aspx> accessed on 12/03/2017

inhabitants), *Khens* (who are located in central Bhutan and has Indo-Mongoloid features), *Birmis* (another nomadic group settled in the east), *Lhops* or *Dayas* (who are tribes settled in the south-east and claim to be aboriginal inhabitants), *Lepchas* (who are mostly settled in the west and are of Sikkimese or Indian-Nepali origin), *Bodos* (living in the south), *Kochs* (who are primarily settled in south Bhutan, and are of Indo-Mongoloid origin), *Tephoos* (who are a group settled in north Bhutan and are of Indian origin). In addition to these, there are few Indian immigrants and others. They constitute of varied socioeconomic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Wolf, 2016).

### **3.3 State Formation of Bhutan**

The evolution of ethnic groups can be traced along historical lines which coincided with the state formation. The early history of Bhutan is obscure and enveloped in mystery and one of the main reasons for that is that the country lacks authentic history as it was predominantly a pastoral-nomadic community, who were rich only in oral tradition due to the absence of materials to document in written form (Sinha, 1998: 48). In such cases, the facts and fiction get “inseparably mixed up, causing damage to historical authenticity” (Sinha, 1998: 48). Secondly, in 1832, Bhutan suffered a calamity which resulted in the burning down of Punakha, which was followed by the widespread destruction of building in 1897 earthquake in Bhutan. During these incidents, whatever archival materials they had stored got entirely destroyed (White, 1909: 99). As such, prior to the establishment of the *Drukpa* theocracy, there is no authentic chronological historical account of Bhutan’s early history.

Nonetheless, J. C. White in his book, *Sikkim and Bhutan*, writes of one Sangaldip, who emerged from Kooch(Cooch Behar) and subdued Bengal and Bihar and also extended his control over Bhutan (White, 1909: 99). This was around the seventh century before the Christian era (ibid: 99). In the following years, Bhutan was ruled by several India rulers under the tutelage of the kingdom *Kamarupa*<sup>7</sup> till the middle of seventh century. However,

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<sup>7</sup> Kingdom *Kamarupa* existed during the Late Classical period on the Indian subcontinent; and along with *Davaka*, the first historical kingdom of Assam. Though *Kamarupa* existed from 350 CE to 1140 CE, *Davaka* as absorbed by *Kamarupa* in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Ruled by three dynasties from their capitals in present-day Guwahati, North Guwahati and Tezpur, *Kamarupa* at its height covered the entire Brahmaputra Valley, North Bengal, Bhutan and parts of Bangladesh, and at times portions of West Bengal and Bihar.

in 650 A.D., after the death of *Bhaskervaram*<sup>8</sup>, the centuries old arrangement was disrupted and *Kamarupa* was disintegrated, which led to the incursions from Tibet (Sinha, 1998: 50). Bhutan split into small factions as no one king could emerge, capable of controlling the entire country which made Tibetan incursions easier during 861-900 A.D. However, the advent of Buddhism in Bhutan during the eighth century, followed by the development of *Drukpa Kargyu* in Bhutan marked the beginning of political dominance of the *Ngalongs* who were the adherents of the *Drukpa Kargyu* sect as well as the sidelining of the small political factions made of various other ethnic groups.

### ***3.3.a The Advent of Guru Padmasambhava in Bhutan***

During this period of political fragmentation in the eighth century, Guru Padmasambhava entered Bhutan and converted Bhutan to the Buddhist faith. Bhutan was under the rule of the Khiji-khar-thod of Khempalung at that time, in Upper Bumthang and Nagucchi, King of Sindhu<sup>9</sup> (Claude, 1909: 99). Nagicchi, the second son of King Singhala of Serkhya, founded the kingdom of Sindhu, and during a course of war with Raja Nabudara who ruled the Indian plains, he lost his eldest son. The incident caused a lot of grief to the king and it was at this juncture that the saint Padmasambhava arrived at the scene and along with the aid of the king's daughter, Menmo Jashi Kyeden, saved his life and converted him to Buddhist faith of Nyingmapa. King Nabudara also converted himself to Buddhist faith and as such peace was restored to the land and a boundary pillar was set up at Mna-tong (Claude, 1909: 100). Over time, Buddhism provided a cultural unity in Bhutan (Sinha, 1998: 50).

### ***3.3.b The Development of Drukpa Kargyu in Bhutan***

From the tenth century until the early seventeenth, the History of Bhutan was mainly about the development of Buddhism, in particular, the *Drukpa* sub-order of the *Kargyupaschool* which came to prevail in Bhutan's western valleys. From around the twelfth century A.D., many Lamas started entering Bhutan (Singh, 1972: 19). Gyalwa

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<sup>8</sup>Bhaskervarman was the ruler of *Kamarupa* kingdom during the seventh century.

<sup>9</sup>Sindhu was a kingdom of India which stretched along the banks of river Sindhu (Indus) in the ancient era in Modern Pakistan. It is believed that Sindhu kingdom was founded by Vrsadarbh, one of the sons of Sivi. Sindhu literally means 'sea'.

Lhanangpa<sup>10</sup> of the *Nyo*<sup>11</sup> lineage was one the first Lamas who entered Bhutan. Lhanangpa was the originator of the *Lhapa Kargyupa*, which is a sub-sect of the *Drikung Kargyupa*<sup>12</sup> (ibid: 19). The *Lhapa Kargyupa* brought the *dzong*<sup>13</sup> system of Tibet and applied it in Bhutan. Subsequently, Lamas of the *Drukpa* (Red Hat Sect) also started entering Bhutan partly for missionary work and partly due to persecution suffered by them at the hands of the rival Yellow Hat Sect (*Gelukpa*) in Tibet. The *Drukpa* is an off-shoot of the *Nyingmapa* sect and was founded by Yeses Dorji at Ralung, a famous monastery about 30 miles east of Gyantse. His successor, Phajo Drukgom Shigpo (1184-1251) is credited with the introduction of the *Drukpa Kargyupain* Bhutan (Hutt, 2003:17). His descendants came to be pre-eminent in western Bhutan, backed by the powerful family which ruled in Ralung, just over the border in Tibet. Although pitted against the powerful adherents of the rival *Lhapha Kargyupa*, Phajo-Drukgom-Shigpo and his companions succeeded in establishing themselves in Bhutan and by the end of the thirteenth century, Shigpo had built a small *dzong* named *Dongon Dzong* (Blue Stone *Dzong*) on the right side of the upper Wang Chu<sup>14</sup> (Singh, 1972: 20). With this started the emergence of a separate and distinct church of Bhutan which persisted through the centuries and is witnessed today. The period between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries witnessed the rise and consolidation of the *Drukpa* sect notwithstanding the rivalry of the *Lhapha Kargyupa* (Singh, 1972: 20). There was a great religious fervor and many monasteries and temples were founded during the period. Bhutan thus came to have a religious identity distinctly its own though it continued to draw inspiration from its neighbours specially India (ibid: 20). This school of Buddhism focused mainly on meditation and experience. Branches of most of the other main Tibetan monastic orders also came to be represented in western Bhutan after the dissolution of the early Tibetan empire (Hutt, Michael, 2003: 17).

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<sup>10</sup>Gyalwa Lhnangpa was a student of Drikig Jigten Gonpo.

<sup>11</sup>It is one of the lineages in Buddhism. The origin of the *Nyo* lineage dates back to a very long time ago in Tibet much before the spread of Buddhism there.

<sup>12</sup>*Drikung Kagyu* is one of the eight “minor” lineages of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. Like with all other Kagyu lineages, origins of *Drikung Kagyu* can be traced back to the Great Indian master Tipola who passed on his teachings to Mahasiddha Naropa who lived around tenth and eleventh century. The founder of the *Drikung Kagyu* lineage was Jigten Sumgon (1143-1217) of the Kyura clan, who was the disciple of PhagmoDrupa.

<sup>13</sup>*Dzong* is a distinctive type of fortress which serves as the religious, military, administrative, and social centres in Bhutan.

<sup>14</sup> Also called the Raidak River, is a tributary of the Brahmaputra River, and a trans-boundary river. It flows through Bhutan, India and Bangladesh.

Central and eastern Bhutan remained largely the preserve of the *Nyingma*<sup>15</sup> order (Hutt, 2003: 17). In and around Bumthang, the *Dung*<sup>16</sup> nobilities had legendary origins which derived from an early Tibetan conception of divine royalty (Aris, 1994: 18). The central region produced several famous *tertons* (Tib. *Gterston*<sup>17</sup>, ‘treasure-revealers’) such as Dorje Lingpa (1346-1405) and Pema Lingpa (1450-1521), from whom the Wangchuk kings of Bhutan now trace a line of descent, while eastern Bhutan appears to have been carved up among the descendants of a Tibetan prince known as Tsangma who arrived there during the ninth century. In both central and eastern Bhutan, families claiming descent from prestigious religious figures began to challenge the political dominance of the old clan elites during the sixteenth century.

### ***3.3.c The Rise of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in Bhutan***

Bhutan then witnessed the arrival of the figure of Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651), also known as Dugom Dorji. Born of a noble family, he was the son of Dorji Lenpa Mephram Tempai Nymia and Deba Kyishopa who belonged to the house of *Gya* of Druk and Ralung (Singh, 1972: 20). He then assumed the title of *Zhabdrung*. His grandfather was the seventeenth prince-abbot of Ralung Monastery in Tibet, the *Drukpas*’ most important establishment, and was expected to succeed him. He was also recognized as the reincarnation of the *Drukpa* scholar, Pema Karpo (1527-92), himself the reincarnation of the founder of the *Drukpa Kargyu* school (Hutt, 2003, p. 17). However, another individual Karma Tenkgong Wangpo was also recognized as the reincarnation of Pema Karpo, supported by the *Desi* (temporal ruler) of the important Tibetan province of Tsang. This rival was installed in Pema Karpo’s monastery, but Ngawang Namgyal continued to act as if he himself was installed at Ralung. In 1606, after his grandfather died, Ngawang Namgyal was installed at Ralung. His enthronement was attended by representatives of all

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<sup>15</sup> The *Nyingma* tradition is the oldest of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. ‘*Nyingma*’ literally means ‘ancient’, and is often referred to as *Ngangyur* (‘school of the ancient translations’ or ‘old school’) because it is founded on the first translations of Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit into Old Tibetan in the eighth century.

<sup>16</sup> ‘*Dung*’ refers to the patrilineal noble families of Bumthang, Kheng and Kurtoe. The term was used either as a title of an adult male noble or referred to a noble’s household.

<sup>17</sup> The unique process of ‘text discoveries’ in Bhutan and Tibet went on from 11<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century as a distinct movement associated with the *Nyingma-pa*. *Gter-ston* tradition includes a long list of names, texts, places, prophecy and unbelievable myths, the tradition was carried through real historical beings.

the religious schools of Tibet and of the major temporal powers, with the sole exception of the *Gelugpas*. Several missions also came from Bhutan.

Inevitably, Ngawang Namgyal soon entered into a conflict with the Tsang *Desi*. The two met at Shigatse in a fruitless attempt to settle the matter of the true reincarnation of Pema Karpo, and on the return journey Ngawang Namgyal's followers quarreled with the retinue of a *Karmapa* lama at a ferry crossing over the Tsangpo river. A boat capsized, some of the *Karmapa* lama's men drowned, and the Tsang *Desi* ruled that Ngawang Namgyal should pay a fine and relinquish a certain bone relic which was preserved at Ralung (Hutt, 2003: 18). The Tsang *Desi* planned to attack Ralung at that point. Ngawang Namgyal fled to Bhutan, a decision he took due to various omens and prophecies suggesting him to do so (Hutt, 2003: 18). For example, he dreamt about a black raven, a form of the protective deity *Mahakala*<sup>18</sup>, flying south to a land where he knew there were many *Drukpa* monasteries (Hutt, 2003: 18). Therefore, in 1616, at the age of 23, Ngawang Namgyal left Ralung for Bhutan, where he settled at the monastery of *Druk Choding* in Paro (Hutt, 2003: 18). He took over the authority that the *Lhapa Kargyupa* and other sects enjoyed and established himself as the theocratic ruler of Bhutan with the title of *Zhabdrung Rimpoche* or *Dharma Raja* (Singh, 1972: 21). He ruled for about 35 years, during which he united all the leading families of western Bhutan under his authority.

During his rule over Bhutan, there were repeated attempts by a host of rivals to conquer Bhutan from him. Tsang *Desi* attempted to invade his new realm several times. Among other rivals were the *Lhapa Kargyupa* and other sects, who were opposed to *Drukpa* hegemony. Even Dalai Lama V attempted incursions into Bhutan but the Bhutanese refused to recognize his authority over their remote valleys and as such maintained their independence (Singh, 1972: 21). The Tibetans continued to try to invade Bhutan after the *Gelugpa* school of the Dalai Lamas took control of Tibet in 1642. However, he repulsed every repeated attempt made to capture Bhutan from his hold. The *Zhabdrung* made his base at a fortified monastery which he built for himself and a body of 30 monks at Cheri, and began to build the first of his *dzongs*, the colossal monastery-

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<sup>18</sup>*Mahakala* is a deity common to Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism; also appears as a protector deity known as *dharmapala* in *Vajrayana* Buddhism, particularly most Tibetan traditions.

fortresses which housed a monk body and administrative offices in each district (Hutt, 2003: 18). The first *dzong* was built at Simtokha in 1629, followed by the *dzongs* of Punakha in 1637, Wangdi Phodrang in 1638, Thimpu (Tashicho Dzong) in 1641, Paro in 1645, and Daga in 1650 (Hutt, 2003: 18). The *Zhabdrung* took over the existing *dzongs* while building new ones.

Bhutan was thus governed under a code of laws promulgated by the *Zhabdrung*. The monk body came to be organized along the same lines as at Ralung and was headed by an abbot known as the *Je Khenpo* (Hutt, 2003: 19). The monks ensured the spiritual wellbeing of the lay community, while the laity had their names and properties recorded in a register (*sathram*) kept at the *dzong*, and paid an ‘initiation fee’ in the form of taxes, labour and transport. During the early phase of the theocracy, all high-ranking officials were monks. Later, laymen took office but only after taking minor monastic vows. From the last years of Ngawang Namgyal’s reign onward, the administration of political affairs was entrusted to an official or regent called the *Druk Desi*<sup>19</sup> and a ‘dual system’ of government developed, known as *chosi* (Tib. *Chos-srid* from *chos* ‘religion’ and *srid*, ‘politics’). He bifurcated the duties of the ruler by creating two separate offices –one to look after the spiritual and religious affairs to be known as Dharma Raja (*Zhabdrung*), and the other to be called Deb Raja (*Desi*) to look after the general administration of the State revenue and expenditure and dealing with foreign powers (Singh, 1972: 22). The *Zhabdrung* Ngawang Namgyal himself became the Dharma Raja and was vested with superior powers which included matters of both foreign and domestic affairs of the State and each of these matters required his signature (Singh, 1972: 24). In few decades after the establishment of these two institutions, Dharma Raja wielded extensive powers and became the symbol of law and justice, while Deb Raja had then the functions of a mere Regent (Singh, 1972: 24). “This distinction becomes clearer in view of the fact that while Dharma Raja followed the incarnations of the predecessor, the Deb Raja was elected by the Council of permanent members who were chosen from amongst the principal officers of

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<sup>19</sup> The *Druk Desi* was the title of the secular (administrative) rulers of Bhutan under the dual system of government between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Under this system, government authority was divided among secular and religious administrations, both unified under a single leader. *Druk*, meaning ‘thunder dragon’, refers symbolically to Bhutan, whose most ancient name is *Druk-yul*. *Desi*, meaning ‘regent’, was the chief secular office in realms under this system of government.

the country” (Singh, 1972: 24). However, the Deb Raja, in the course of history, developed strength and the two became separate heads of State, one in matters spiritual and the other in things temporal. This led to continuous conflict and intrigue and consequent weakness of the State machine (Singh, 1972: 24).

In 1651, the *Zhabdrung* Ngawang Namgyal remained in retreat and secluded himself at Punakha *dzong* for another 54 years, after which he died, but the fact of his death was not revealed for 54 years (Sinha, 1998: 88). This was due to the fact that his sickly son was not seen capable of succeeding him and Bhutan still was under threat from hostile neighbours and also from internal disruption. (Sinha, 1988: 88). The first *Zhabdrung*'s death marked the end of the old *Drukpa* tradition of succession through blood descendants (Hutt, 2003: 19). For about 40 years at the beginning of the eighteenth century, rival factions in western Bhutan advanced the claims of five different candidates, and Chinese mediation and the ‘convenient deaths of some of the main Bhutanese protagonists’ required before peace could be restored. Subsequently, the succession of the *Zhabdrung* took place through the reincarnation of the *Zhabdrung*'s ‘mind’ element were (Aris, 1994: 40). However, the six *Zhabdrungs* who succeeded Ngawang Namgyal played little more than a symbolic political role, while various other stringmen vied with one another for power (Hutt, 2003: 19).

### ***3.3.d The Administration***

The administrative structure set up by the *Zhabdrung* Ngawang Namgyal centuries ago “live on in their essential forms in modern government structures in Bhutan” (Hutt, 2003: 19). He is credited with introducing the *dzong* system in Bhutan. The country was divided into three regions, centred on the *dzongs* at Paro, Tsongsa and Daga. Each of these was ruled over by a ‘universal lama’ (*Chila*) who was also called a *Penlop* (chief of provinces or governor) (Hutt, 2003: 20). The *Penlops* were the senior members of a Central Council known as the *Lenchen* and they were expected to attend the Council whenever they happened to be present at the seat of the Government (Singh, 1972: 24). The commanders of other *dzongs* were known as *Dzongpons* (chief of districts); they are now known as ‘fort-masters’ (*dzongda*) (Hutt, Michael, 2003: 20). Some districts within the three regions were administered by minor *Penlops* or *Dungpas*. Modern Bhutan is divided into districts

called *Dzongkhags*, each of which is governed by its own *Dzongda*, and sub-districts known as *Dungkhags*. East *Dungkhag* has its own *Dungpa* who is answerable to the district *Dzongda*. At a lower level, a block of villages (*gewog* or *geog*) is represented by a *gap* or, in the south, a *Mandal*.

### ***3.3.e Internal conflict and Civil War***

By the early nineteenth century two *Penlops* had achieved positions of dominance. These were the *Penlop* of Tsonga, who ruled Bhutan to the east of the Black Mountain range, and the *Penlop* of Paro, who administered the west and controlled the trade routes to Tibet. Bhutan witnessed intermittent internal conflict during this period as the two *Penlops* were usually at war with each other (Singh, 1972: 27). The Wangchuk family made the governorship of Tsonga its exclusive preserve during the nineteenth century, but the governorship of Paro was often disputed. The *Druk Desi* of the day was usually the pawn of whichever of the *Penlops* had engineered his appointment (Rose, 1977: 31-32). The dualism of the Deb Raja and the Dharma Raja, one elective and the other hereditary in theory but depending on appearance of reincarnation in practice, brought weakness all round and consequent deterioration of authority which in turn led to endless strife. Whoever could manage to come into power and authority, assumed the title of *Penlop* and appointed the Deb Raja of his choice, his sway lasting only till he was ousted by a still more powerful adversary. Consequently, the country came to be without a system of government which could be said to be lasting or effective. As a result, there were frequent outbreaks of civil war among the contending chieftans in which even the Tibetans joined hands as such in 1717 and 1730. This led to political instability in Bhutan.

### ***3.3.f The Conflict with Cooch Behar***

Cooch Behar had been the target of Bhutanese incursions ever since its establishment in 1510 A.D. Vishwas Singh, the brother and successor of Chandan, who was the founder of the state, demanded a tribute from the rulers of Bhutan, to which the Bhutanese ignored and this led to the declaration of war by Cooch Behar. The Bhutanese were forced to acknowledge the supremacy of Vishwa Singh and agreed to pay an annual tribute. He was also successful in occupying the territory of Bhutan between the Hindola and Sankosh

rivers. However, this encroachment was short-lived when Bhutan left its allegiance to Cooch Behar during the rule of Maharaja Bir Narayan (1621-25) and ceased to pay the tribute. Thereafter Cooch Behar was gradually on the decline until in 1661, it was conquered by Mir Jumla when Maharaja Prana Narayan (1625-1665) fled for safety to Bhutan.

Between 1711 and 1768, the Bhutanese played a significant amount of role in the internal politics of Cooch Behar and in settling factional feuds between two contending rulers in conflict over the throne in Cooch Behar (Singh, 1972: 29). In 1778, Shidar became the Deb Raja of Bhutan. He was an aggressive ruler who sought to suppress the influence and power of the clergy and tried to strengthen his external position by seeking friendly relations with Tibet and Nepal and forging alliances with Panchen Lama III and Raja Prithvi Narayan Shah of Nepal (1742-72) (Singh, 1972: 29). When he was in power, Bhutan kept Cooch Behar under control and carried out raids when necessary. In 1771, they kidnapped the Crown Prince and the Queen of Raja Dhairjendra Narayan of Cooch Behar, and later in 1772, they also abducted the Raja (Singh, 1972: 29). It was then when Nazir Dev of Cooch Behar approached the British for help (Singh, 1972: 29). The British intervention in 1772 opened up a new era in Bhutan's history leading to ever-increasing relations between British India and Bhutan which is death hereafter.

### ***3.3.g The British and Bhutan***

During the late eighteenth century, the British entered the picture when they and the Bhutanese backed opposing factions were in dispute over the accession to the throne of Cooch Behar (Hutt, 2003: 20). Prior to this, there is little record to show if the British and Bhutan were engaged in any political relations. From 1772 A.D. until 1947, the British had major influence in Bhutan and their policies gave shape to the development of Bhutan as a distinct political entity with the establishment of hereditary monarchy in 1907 (Singh, 1972: 30). In the beginning, however, the Bhutanese and the British were in regular disagreement over their respective rights in the Duars region of the southern Bhutan (Hutt, 2003: 20). The Bhutanese lost this territory to the British under the terms of the Sinchula Treaty in 1865, concluding the hostilities which had broken out between them; the British

colonial power in India would henceforth be an important factor shaping internal developments in Bhutan (Hutt, 2003: 20).

Bhutan was split apart by three recurring internal conflicts between 1868 and 1885 (Hutt, Michael, 2003: 20). In 1869, the first civil war broke out in Bhutan in which the *Tsongsa* and *Paro Penlops* and the *Punakha Jongpen* rebelled against the *Deb Raja* who was supported by the *Wangdu Phodran Jongpen* (Singh, 1972: 48). Any approaches made for assistance was rejected by the British and kept from intervening into the internal matters of Bhutan.

Another civil war broke out in 1877, and *Jigme Namgyal* assumed supreme authority to crush the rebels. In 1880, there was yet another contest for office of *Deb Raja* (Singh, 1972: 48). However, in 1885, the *Tsongpo Penlop* and *Ugyen Wangchek* emerged as the virtual ruler of Bhutan (ibid: 49). The rivalry between *Tongsa* and *Paro* finally ended when the British resolved to march into Tibet to counter a supposed Russian threat. While the *Wangchuks* and the influential *Dorje* family of *Ha* supported the British during this, the *Younghusband* 'expedition' of 1903-4, the *Parop Ponlop* chose to support the Tibetan government (Hutt, 1972: 20). In 1905, during the negotiations that followed the British incursion into Tibet, *Ugyen Wangchuk* afforded the British valuable assistance (ibid: 20). The friendly relations between Bhutan and the British were further strengthened and in the same year, a *Political Agent* was appointed by the centre in direct relationship with Bhutan (Singh, 1972: 49). The *Parop Penlop* was superseded by a supporter of the *Wangchuk* family and Bhutan came at last to be dominated by a single family. *Ugyen Wangchuk* was unanimously elected by the *Bhutan Chiefs* and the *principal Lamas* as hereditary *Maharaja* of Bhutan (*Druk Gyalpo*) at *Punakha* on 17 December 1907 (Singh, 1972: 50; Hutt, Michael, 2003: 20). The British, and particularly the *Political Agent John Claude White*, helped in the establishment of the hereditary monarchy and bestowed honours on *Ugyen Wangchuk* (Singh, 1972: 50; Hutt, Michael, 2003: 20). In 1908, *Ugyen Dorje* was awarded the post of *Gongzim* (chamberlain) and the post became hereditary, its title changing to *Lonchen* (Prime Minister) in 1958 (Hutt, 2003: 21). The post of governorship of *Ha* and commissioner of the southern *Dzongkhags* had become hereditary within the *Dorje* family

sometime around 1900. Until the assassination of the Prime Minister, Jigme Dorje, in 1964, the Wangchuk and Dorje family lies intermarried and made common political cause.

The establishment of the monarchy hence led to power becoming concentrated in the King's hands. The Wangchuk kings maintained cordial relations with the British, dealing with the colonial power through the offices of Dorjes, their agents in Kalimpong, but when the British left India in 1947 and the Chinese annexed Tibet a few years later, the external environment changed radically. After the Lhasa revolt in 1959, there were no trade and cultural links with Tibet and India came closer, offering development aid, building a road which linked Thimpu with India, and training the Royal Bhutanese Army (Hutt, 2003: 21). This marked the beginning of the process of modernization in Bhutan. Internally, the third King, Jigme Dorje Wangchuk (1928-72), presided over a number of reforms: a ceiling was fixed on land holdings, a police force was established, serfdom was abolished, a National Assembly and a Royal Advisory Council were established, Five-Year Plans were initiated, and a national newspaper, *Kuensel*, was established (Hutt, 2003: 22). Externally, the kingdom forged important new relations: Bhutan joined the Colombo Plan in 1962, the International Postal Union in 1969, the United Nations in 1971, and established missions in New Delhi and at the UN in New York (Hutt, 2003: 22).

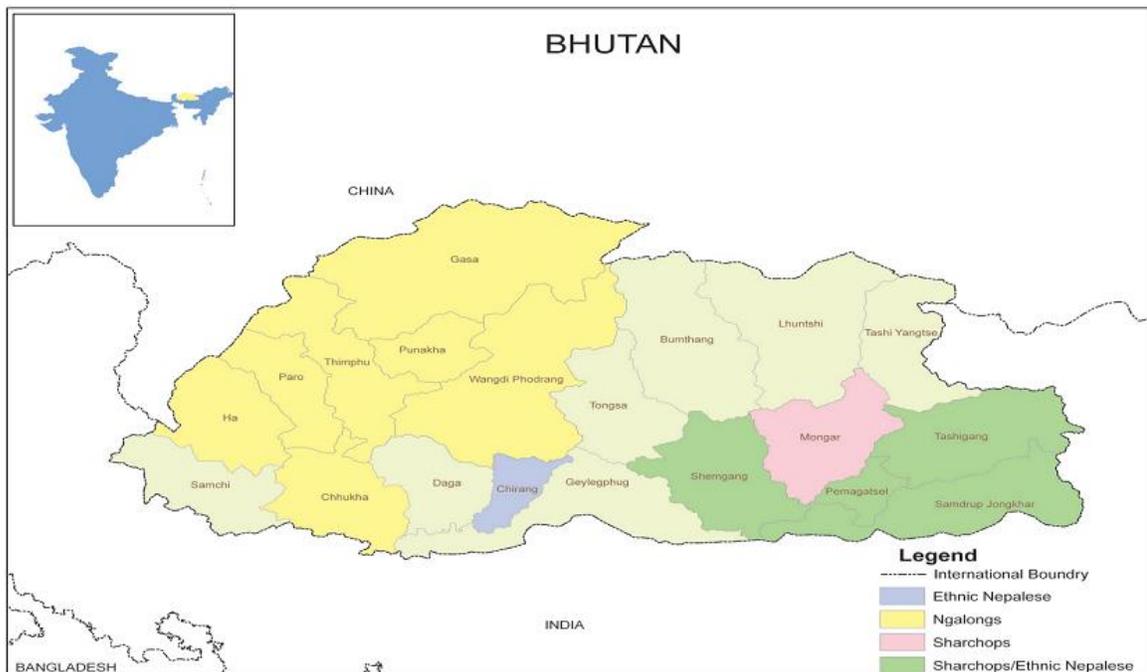
As such, the history of Bhutan revolves around several key figures. First, there are those who brought Buddhism to the kingdom and fostered and developed it there: these include semi-mythical transnational personalities such as *Padmasambhava* and Bhutanese saints such as *Dorje Lingpa* and *Pema Lingpa*. Next, there comes the important figure of the first *Zhabdrung*, Ngawang Namgyal, who established Bhutan as a sovereign state, created many of its national institutions, and invested it with its *Drukpa* personality. After an interregnum marked by long periods of internal turmoil there come the Wangchuk kings who first reach an accommodation with the British and restore peace and stability to the kingdom, and then bring Bhutan into the modern era. This is the central historical narrative, in which the arrival of Nepali settlers in Bhutan barely figures. The fact that their presence in Bhutan later became politically problematic and its history contested requires us to reappraise the position of their history along with that of Bhutan as a whole.

### 3.4 Ethnic Groups of Bhutan

As mentioned earlier, Bhutanese population consists of diverse ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups. Among the ethnic communities, *Drukpas* are the most important ethnic communities, which basically include the *Ngalongs* and the *Sharchops*. Various other indigenous communities include *Birmis*, *Bodos*, *Dayas*, *Khens*, *Lepchas*, *Mons*, *Tephoos* and many others. Nepalese have emerged as a significant ethnic community in Bhutan. In addition to these there are some Indian immigrants and others.

The *Ngalongs* (Tibetans), the *Sharchops* (Indo-Mongoloids) and the *Lhotshampas* (Nepalese) constituted the three major ethnic categories in Bhutan and within the three broad categories there are several small ethnic communities. In order to have a better understanding of the ethnic profile of the country, some of the ethnic and tribal groups are discussed separately in the following paragraphs. The following are the most important ethnic and tribal groups of Bhutan.

**Figure 4. Bhutan's ethnic composition region-wise representation. (Map not to scale)**



Source: Country Brief, 2010

### **3.4.a Drukpas**

*Drukpas* are the politically dominant community of Bhutan and they are spread over all the districts of the country. Considered to have been originally migrated from the North in the ninth century A.D. onwards, they are of Tibeto-Mongoloid background. “They represent the distinctive features of Tibetan culture, religion and language” (Khanal, 1998: 147). The language they speak is known as *Dzongkha* which has been accepted as the national language of the country now. They are also known as the *Ngalongs* which literally means ‘the earliest risen’ (Sinha, 1998: 28). “With the establishment of *Zhabdrung*’s theocracy initially in western Bhutan and subsequently to the eastern and southern regions, his followers came to be known as *Drukpas*” (Sinha, 1998, 28). They are also often referred to as *Bhote*, as they came from Tibet or *Bhot*. The king and his lineage belong to this ethnic community.

### **3.4.b Brokpas**

According to their oral history, the *Brokpa* originate from Tibet and came to Bhutan after they beheaded a tyrannical king in their ancestral village. Led through the mountains by the deity *Aum Jomo* and the guru *Lam Jarepa*, they brought with them scores of religious texts, their form of Mahayana Buddhism, and their distinct culture.

*Brokpas* are one of the most significant semi-nomadic, indigenous communities of Bhutan (Chand, 2017). They are pastoralists who practice transhumance, herding and trade with neighboring communities. *Brokpas* are a Tibetan stock and still retain their own customs and languages. *Brokpas* have many social-cultural similarities with the *Drukpas*. Due to their remote position, the *Brokpa*’s language and customs are very unique to other Bhutanese ethnic groups.

### **3.4.c Mons**

*Mons*, also known as *Monpas*, is an ethnic group who share close affinity with the *Sharchops*, and are spread in the eastern and south-eastern parts of Bhutan. They are considered as one of the oldest community of Bhutan. Like the *Sharchops*, “they exhibit

Indo-Mongoloid characteristics and speak in *Mon* dialect or *Sharchok-kha*”, which makes them inherently different from Tibetans or *Drukpas* (Upreti, 2004: 30).

In Tibetan terminology, the term *Mon* is a general name for different nations and tribes living between Tibet and Indian plains (Chand, 2009). *Mons* is one of the earliest pre-Buddhist settlers of Bhutan. They were strong adherents of nature worship and Bon religion, before the spread of Buddhism. *Mons* are not ethnologically Tibetan in origin as they are also believed to be a wave of religious and cultural missionaries who moved from the plains to the Himalayan hills (Chand, 2009)

Agriculture is the main occupation of the *Monpas*. Traditionally, their primary occupation consisted of the weaving of bamboo and cane products. This was followed by the practice of shifting cultivation later and today their primary occupation is cultivation. Animal husbandry is also one of the major means of livelihood. The level of education among the *Monpas* is very low (Chand, 2009: 25-37). *Monpa* society is very well knit. Each village has a council of village elders. The petty village cases are settled by them. The Lama is considered to be the priest, who performs the rituals. *Gumpha* is a sacred place to them. They are culturally very advanced, but backward in modern education.

#### **3.4.d Khens**

*Khens* is one among the ancient communities having pre-Drukpa history in Bhutan. They are mainly spread across central Bhutan. *Khens* speak in *Khen* dialect, called *Khen-ka*, which is an “archaic form of Austric language” (Sinha, 1998: 29). *Khens* characterizes distinct Indo-Mongoloid affinity. They used to represent the intermediary relationship between Tibet on one hand and Assam-Bengal on the other.

Traditionally, *Khens* were pastoralists and warriors (Sinha, 1998: 29). They brought their sheep and cattle down to plains for grazing in winter and bartered goods like butter, Yak-tail, blankets and other products (Sinha, 1998: 29)

Many *Khens* nowadays reside in North-Bengal and associated areas. A great majority of the *Khens* moved from Bhutan and now has been absorbed with other

communities. When the *Khens* were in power many of them had a considerable infusion of Aryan blood. A section of *Khen* became Hinduized (Upreti, 2004: 30)

The 1991 Bhutan census listed a population of 40,000 *Khens* living in south-central Bhutan.<sup>20</sup> They mainly profess Tibetan Buddhism, although the pre-Buddhist religion of Bon has also remained greatly influential among the community.

#### **3.4.e *Birmis***

*Birmis* is a minor community in Bhutan. They are a nomadic group found in high altitude of the eastern Bhutan. They graze cattle between their summer and winter pastures and carry out the barter of commodities between eastern Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. Beside animal husbandry the *Birmis* resort to some cultivation and handicrafts of bamboo made articles. They are a Indo-Mongoloid stock.

#### **3.4.f *Dayas***

*Dayas* constituted one another minor community of Bhutan and their main concentration is in Samchi. *Dayas* had once ruled a part of Bhutan. They are agriculturalists and their economy centering around cultivation and animal husbandry. Orange is their main cash crop. Their life style is semi sedentary and semi-nomadic. They earn their livelihood partly by cultivation and partly by taking cattle of others for grazing to distant pastures. This necessitates transhumance. Some *Dayas* associated with trade and barter. *Dayas* are animists. The chief deity is *Dzibdak*, who is worshipped at the beginning of all religious festivals. The priest in *Daya* society is called *Gangupama*, who play a vital socio-religious role in their community. Recently efforts are being taken to preach Buddhism among the *Dayas*.

Inside the territory of Bhutan, *Dayas* were the *zapo* or slaves of Bhutanese government in the past and they were required to render free labour for the need of the Royal Government. After abolishing slavery from Bhutan, the *Dayas* started enjoying free life.

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<sup>20</sup>See: [https://joshuaproject.net/people\\_groups/12658/BT](https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12658/BT) accessed on 06/09/2016

### **3.4.g Lepchas**

*Lepchas* constitute a very small community inhabiting particularly the *Ha* valley. In fact they are the extension of Sikkimese ethnic group, but now replaced by the *Drukpas*. They are subjugated and their population is limited. *Lepchas* are a Palaeo-Mongoloid stock. The community follows *Jhum* or *tсени* i.e. shifting cultivation and some are engaged in horticulture, agriculture, trade and animal husbandry. *Lepcha* villages are small in size, controlled by the council of village elders with a head at the top. They primarily follow Buddhism of Tibetan variety along with their indigenous beliefs and rituals.

### **3.4.h Bodos**

The *Bodos* who live in the foot hills of adjoining areas of Bhutan seem to have several politico-socio-cultural encounters with the Bhutanese. The political encounters between Bhutanese and *Bodos* led to two groups of people to exchange their beliefs and customs and other elements of culture. *Bodos* are agriculturist and Hinduized. The *Kochs*, *Mechs*, *Rajbanis* and many other indigenous groups of Assam and North-Bengal seem to have emerged from *Bodo* race, but they moved away from the parent stock and too different names because of different nature of acculturation and social change.

### **3.4.i Kochs**

The Koch community also claims a historical affiliation to Bhutan. The legendary king Sangaldip was a Koch who ruled over the Bhutanese territories during the seventh century (White, 1909: 99). However, his descendants lost the territories to the Tibetan immigrants. Historical evidence suggests that there were long struggles between *Kochs* and Bhutanese for primacy over the plains of *Duars* which led to a confrontation between the two groups of people in the territory of Bhutan (Sinha, 1998: 30). During *Duars* was between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century a number of slaves of Koch community were found in the vicinity of the forts of central Bhutan. (Sinha, 1998: 30) The *Kochs* who once expanded their rule to several valleys of Bhutan are held to be a sub-group of the great *Bodo* community (Upreti, 2004: 30). They mostly reside in the southern part of Bhutan. Ethnically *Koch* are Indo-Mongoloid Bodo-group of people and culturally more closer to

*Mechs* and *Rajbansis* of Assam and North Bengal. *Kochs* are agriculturalists and much Hinduized.

#### **3.4.j Tephos**

*Tephos* constitute an indigenous group settled in *Punakha* of north Bhutan. They were of Indian extraction and had branched out from the *Koch* tribe. The *Tephos* are considered as the descendants of the Raja of Kuch Behar near Padmanarayana. The members of Koch community who were settled in *Punakha* called *Tephoo* and are believed to have migrated from adjoining Bengal plains either at the time of *Bokhtiyar Khiji's* invasion or during the subsequent invasions of *Iiyyas Shah* and *Sekundar Shah* and Mughals. Many members of ruling communities of Bengal and Assam *Duars*, such as *Khen* and *Tephoo*, had retreated in the neighbouring hills of Bhutan in the wake of Muslim invasions in the region.

#### **3.4.k Musalmans**

It seems that some *Musalman* communities from the plains had settled in south Bhutan. During *Duars* war, a number of people belonging to Muslim community were found in the vicinity of the forts of central Bhutan. Some Tibetan Muslims were settled in the towns and urban centres of Bhutan, particularly after Chinese occupation of Tibet. Many Muslims of Indian origin had moved to Bhutan for the sake of trade, business and professional works. Royal kings also invited many Muslim occupational groups to come and reside in Bhutan for their specialized services to fulfill the needs of Bhutanese people. Kashmiri traders are considered to be the oldest Muslim settlers in Bhutan. The descendants of the earlier Muslim settlers who were the products of marriages between Muslim males and local females continued to live in the country as inseparable part of Bhutanese population.

#### **3.4.l Migrants from India**

People of Indian origin have been living along the foot of Bhutan hills since the early eighteenth century, not always by choice but mostly for political and administrative and professional reasons. Among the people of Indian origin there are the descendants of Indian slaves in Bhutan of late seventeenth century. In addition to them there are later

migrants from various parts of India, specially after its independence. Due to closeness between India and Bhutan for economic regeneration, a large number of Indians have migrated to Bhutan from the neighbouring as well as far away places from India. They have been residing mostly in towns of Bhutan along the Indian-Bhutan border. The most important places, where they have been living are *Samchi*, *Phuntsoling*, *Hatishar*, *Dewangiri* and *Sandrup Jonkhar*, etc. Of the Indian migrants in Bhutan, there are also Nepalese who migrated from neighbouring Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas. The non Nepalese Indian migrants consist of *Bengalis*, *Cochs*, *Mechs*, and others who moved to Bhutan from various parts of India viz. West Bengal, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Rajasthan. The Indian communities in Bhutan by profession are wage earners, merchants, shopkeepers, clerks, teachers and professionals. They are not homogenous group but have different ethnic, social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The socio-cultural life of the Indians in Bhutan continues to be dominated by Indian ethos. They are usually not the permanent residents of Bhutan.

#### ***3.4.m Lhotshampas***

The *Lhotshampas* are the Nepali-speaking ethnic community who live in southern Bhutan. Their population is concentrated in two regions of Bhutan, namely, south western and south eastern. The Nepalese of Bhutan are not a homogenous social category, rather they are differentiated into many groups and sub-groups. They retain the caste system. Among the castes of Nepalese origin who settled in Bhutan are *Bahun*s, *Thakuris*, *Chettris* etc. who are regarded as higher castes of Nepal. While among the lower castes there are *Kamis*, *Sarkis* and *Damis*. In addition to this, there are many Hinduized tribal groups known as *Kiratis*. Among them are *Limbus*, *Gurungs*, *Rais*, *Mangars* and many others.

So far the place of origin is concerned, the Nepalese society in Bhutan originate from almost all regions of Nepal. There are *Thakuris* of Western Nepal, *Newaris* of Kathmandu valley and eastern Nepal and hill *Kiratis* of eastern Nepal and Sikkim. The *Thakuris* strictly follow Hindu caste system and their social interaction is regulated by the notion of purity and pollution. *Newaris* are divided into different occupational groups and follow both Hinduism and Buddhism or a combination of both. The *Kiratis* are animist, *lamaist* and Hinduized tribes.

The *Lhotshampas* are primarily agriculturalists. They constitute a large segment of the labour force which is employed in road construction and other works. They practice Hinduism mixed with certain traits of Tibetan derived Buddhism. The Nepalese ethnic community in Bhutan is inclusive of various sub-cultural stocks of Nepal. Though the various Nepalese groups represent cultural diversity among them, yet Nepali language, dress, food and way of life have unified them into a single ethnic community. They have developed a sense of unity and have retained their own cultural identity distinct from *Ngalongs* and *Sharchops*. Considering the national ethos of Bhutan they are seen to wear Bhutanese dress, speak in *Dzongkha* and claim themselves as southern Bhutanese.

### **3.5 Nepali Migration to Bhutan**

The Nepali speaking people, also known as the *Lhotshampas*, have settled in the southern part of Bhutan, mainly due to the accessibility of immigration through India. There are, however, contestations regarding the issue of origin of Nepali community in Bhutan. The time of their arrival is also a subject of controversy and has become “the political and legal basis for exclusion from citizenship of a substantial percentage of the population and even for a form of ‘ethnic cleansing’” (Varenes, 2009: 47-76). There are some who claim that Nepali immigration to and settlement in Bhutan started in the eighteenth century, when it was encouraged by the British to check the growing Tibetan influence in the Himalayas, as Nepalese were considered to be hereditary enemies of Tibet (Shakoor, 1995: 34). After the British left from the subcontinent, the influx of the immigrants continued, which forced Bhutan to introduce a nationality law in 1959 banning further Nepali immigration to Bhutan. There are also others who claim that the Nepali presence in Bhutan starts from the seventeenth century, before the recorded history of the British or the government. Meanwhile the *Drukpa* rulers claim that the southern Nepali speaking Bhutanese are recent settlers, or economic migrants (Hutt, 2003: 24). According to official records, they entered Bhutan after the conclusion of the Sinchula treaty between British India and Bhutan which brought an end to the Duars wars (Pal and Banerjee, 2017: 182). However, most of the Nepalese Bhutanese have migrated during nineteenth and early twentieth century in order to meet the labour demands for plantation works and various development projects in Bhutan (Khanal, 1998: 150). The implementation of the first Five Year plan in 1961 called

for a steady labour supply to fill in the labour shortage, which led Bhutan to recruit foreign skilled workers from India and Nepal. In 1995, the non-national workers were estimated to be 30,000 including 10,000 Nepalese ethnic people (Pal and Banerjee, 2017: 182).

Despite their presence in Bhutan for more than a century, the Nepalis have retained their distinctive culture and language, and are the least-integrated community in Bhutan (Khanal, 1998). The reason for this is the distinct nature of their religious, lingual and socio-cultural background that sets them apart as a distinct ethnic group, as well as “a strong cultural and linguistic ties with the people of their common ethnic bond in neighbouring India and Nepal” (Khanal, 1998). Till the mid 1980s, the *Lhotshampas* lived peacefully and enjoyed comfortable status both in state and society. Their language was widely used in southern Bhutan and also had a semi-official status (Khanal, 1998).

### **3.6 Contention between the *Lhotshampas* and the Bhutanese Government**

Various factors like their numerical strength, non-conformist nature of their culture, occasional expression for political reforms, events in the neighbourhood like the merger of Sikkim with India, the *Gorkhaland* movement in Darjeeling fueled the *Drukpas* concern over the presence of the *Lhotshampas* in Bhutan. The formation of the Bhutan State Congress political party in 1952 and the aspirations they showed was not welcomed by the ruling *Drukpa* elites. In 1958, the Bhutanese government adopted the Citizenship Act which was the government’s first “attempt to define Bhutanese citizens” (Khanal, 1998). Under this Act, the *Lhotshampas* required “to submit a bond of agreement affirming their allegiance to the king and country, pledging not to serve any other authority”. Only then the Nepalis were granted citizenship and national treatment” (Khanal, 1998). In 1977 and 1985, the Act was revised to introduce more stringent clauses which required to re-qualify for Bhutanese citizenship with documentary evidence of their residence in Bhutan in the year of 1958 or to be born from the parents who could produce the required proof (Khanal, 1998). The rest were required to go through the procedure laid down in the new Act in order to be enumerated in the census. The procedure consisted of additional clauses like fluency in Dzongkha, good knowledge of culture, customs, traditions and history of Bhutan, etc. The Nepali community feared that such a change in the Citizenship Act was likely to forfeit many Nepalis of their Bhutanese citizenship” (Khanal, 1998).

In 1988, a fresh census was conducted which resulted in many *Lhotshampas* forfeiting the status of citizenship and eventual eviction from the country. The 1988 census along with the 1985 Citizenship Act posed a serious threat to the ethnic Nepali community settled in Bhutan. A member of National Assembly, Teknath Rizal, representing southern Bhutan and a nominee to the Royal Advisory Council, submitted a memorandum to the king expressing the concern with the census. But he was arrested and relieved of his position.

The 1988 census was then followed by an introduction of *Driglam Namzha* and it was vigorously implemented in the name of national integration and identity. This policy required for all Bhutanese, irrespective of their ethnicity, to follow a unified code of conduct which contains the details of citizens behavior with respect to eating, dressing, speaking, etc. wearing the traditional *Drukpa* dress, *Gho* and *Kira* and, all these became mandatory for everyone. The Nepali community felt a sense of imposition of the *Drukpa* culture and tradition upon them since their culture and tradition was different from the one being forcefully imposed on them. Initially, the Nepalis tried to resist it politically and dissident movement took shape in Bhutan. Teknath Rizal, who had been in exile in Nepal following his release by the Bhutanese government, and other dissidents, formed the People's Forum for Human Rights (PFHR) which started protesting the government policies. Various other political organizations like Bhutan Peoples Party, Bhutan National Democratic Party were formed. In September and October 1990, *Lhotshampa* activists orchestrated mass public demonstration, in which demands for civil and cultural rights were presented to district headquarters all across southern Bhutan (Hutt, 2005: 47). The massive suppression of the Nepalis was undertaken by the government alleging the protest as a "terrorist movement" of the "anti-nationals". Many participants and supporters were arrested and held for months without trial. Those who were released left Bhutan and joined relatives into the refugee camps in Nepal. They claimed they were released only in the condition that they pledge in writing to leave the country, and they would be forcefully evicted if they did not leave immediately (Hutt, 2005: 47). The Bhutanese government introduced many new rules and procedures in the south. There were restrictions placed on transportation of essential commodities like salt, people had to produce a 'No Objection Certificate' (N.O.C) from the Royal Bhutan Police in order to apply for scholarships and

civil service appointments (Hutt, 2005: 47). This certified that the holder had a clean record. Even children seeking admissions to school required to produce an N.O.C.

While Bhutan continued its development programs, the ‘anti-national problem’ was the greatest cause for the 1991 census (Shaw, 1992: 184-188). The Bhutanese government declared that its census operations had detected the presence of over 100,000 illegal immigrants living in southern Bhutan (Hutt, 2005: 48). The census operation soon became a tool for “dispossession and banishment of dissidents, the wealthy, the educated and various other categories of *Lhotshampa* citizens” (Hutt, 2005: 48). Table 3.2 represents the Bhutan’s population history from 1950 to 2017. According to the figure, the growth rate of Bhutan’s population has significantly dropped from 535,505 in 1990 to 508,897 in 1995. This drop in population is due to a large number of *Lhotshampas* getting exiled from the country after the 1988 census. The stringent measures imposed on southern Bhutan, which included the closure of almost every school, were justified in terms of national security.

**Table 3. Bhutan’s Population (1950-2017)**

Year	Population	% Male	% Female	Density(km <sup>2</sup> )	Growth Rate
1950	176,795	51.28%	48.72%	5	2.62%
1955	200,089	50.97%	49.03%	5	2.30%
1960	224,108	50.84%	49.16%	6	2.29%
1965	252,629	50.80%	49.20%	7	2.59%
1970	291,457	50.79%	49.21%	8	3.44%
1975	349,146	51.64%	48.36%	9	3.58%
1980	412,561	52.05%	47.95%	11	2.71%
1985	469,010	51.88%	48.12%	12	3.18%
1990	535,505	51.75%	48.25%	14	-0.15%
1995	508,897	51.53%	48.47%	13	0.68%
2000	564,163	51.41%	48.59%	15	2.90%
2005	651,163	53.27%	46.73%	17	2.39%
2010	720,246	53.64%	46.36%	19	1.65%
2015	774,830	53.73%	46.27%	20	1.19%
2017	792,877	53.64%	46.36%	21	1.05%

Source: <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/bhutan-population/>

In September 1991, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) assumed responsibility for the coordination of emergency relief assistance for Bhutanese refugees. Bhutanese refugee camps were established at five different sites: Timai, Goldhap, Beldangi and Khudunabari in Jhapa district, and Sanishchare (Pathri) in Morang, and by late 1994, 2,331 survivors of physical torture had been identified in these camps (Hutt, 2005: 48). The Bhutanese government emphasized that the Nepalese government did not screen arrivals until June 1993, when the main influx had all but ceased, and adopted a hostile attitude to UNHCR's operations in Nepal. It maintained consistently for ten years that few, if any, of the people in the camps were genuine refugees from Bhutan, and dismissed the citizenship cards and tax receipts that many of them held as forgeries or stolen documents. Meanwhile, Nepalese politicians of every persuasion repeatedly referred to the presence of 100,000 Bhutanese refugees in their country, and declared that they would ensure that all of them would soon return to Bhutan 'with honour and dignity'.

### **3.7 The Refugee Crisis**

According to the 1951 UN Convention, the term 'refugee' means a person who has a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such event is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it' (UNHCR, Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees). Starting from the mid-twentieth century, the international community has been confronted with a large amount of flow of political refugees across international borders. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) which was formed in 1951, took care of around 2 million refugees. The number of refugees has been growing ever since and the end of cold war and the events that followed not only accelerated the number of refugees, but also defined the causes of the refugee situation on different terms, which was the division of the states along ethnic lines (Khanal, 1998: 144). There are various factors which triggers the flow of refugees, also called "new humanitarian crises"

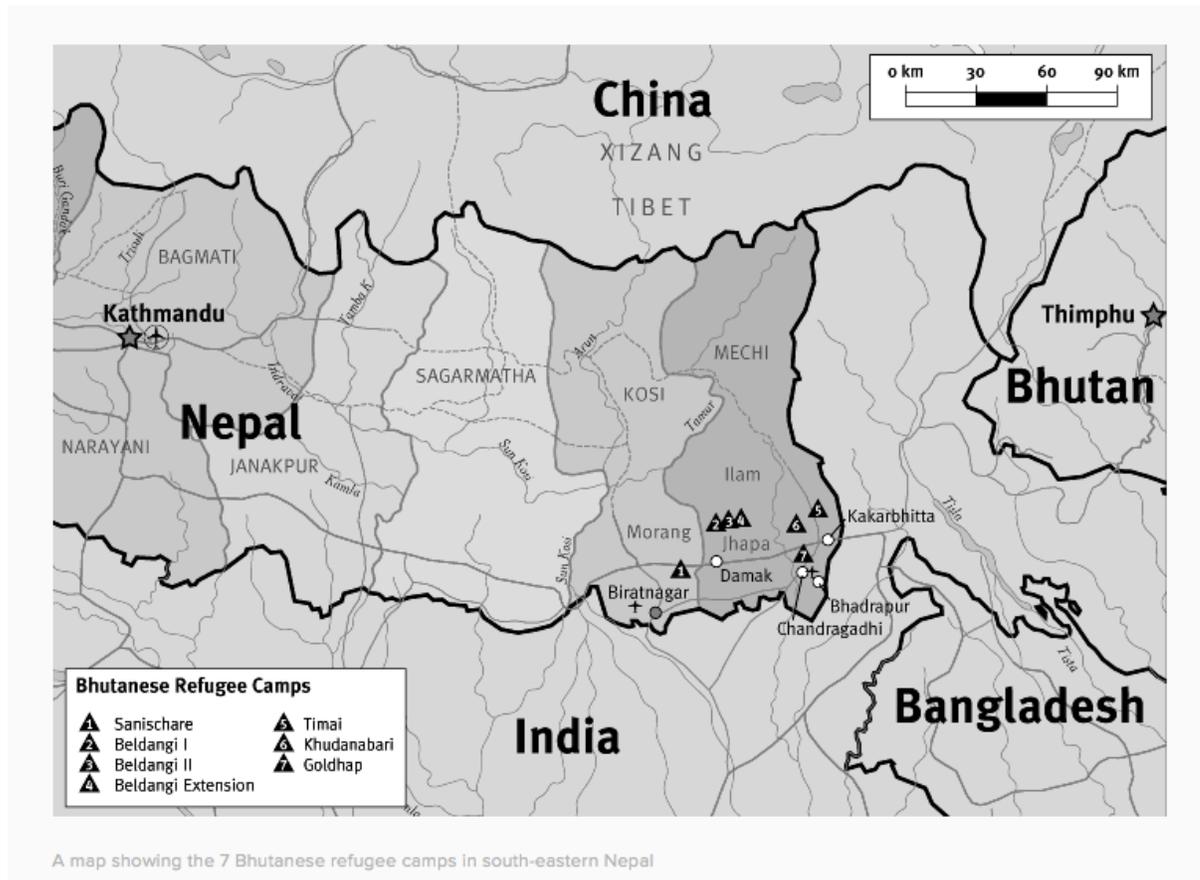
(UNHCR, 1995). Communist states like former Yugoslavia and CIS countries constitute the first category where the struggle for power and territory amongst warring parties took the form of “ethnic cleansing” (Khanal, 1998: 144). The second category includes countries like Somalia, Liberia, Rwanda, etc. where “existing political and administrative structures have been destroyed, society has fragmented and power has passed into the hands of local warlords and military leaders” (Khanal, 1998: 144). In the third category includes countries like Bhutan, Myanmar, etc., where the refugee flows was caused “not by the break-up of the countries, but by the efforts to impose the authority of the state on minority groups, opposition movements and secessionist forces” (Khanal, 1998: 144-145).

Exodus of people from the country of their own seeking shelter across the border is a testimony of conditions in which human rights are either absent or grossly violated. A vast number of refugees are driven from their home mainly due to human rights abuses. The effective safeguarding of human rights is possible only when a democratic framework of the state is set up. However, holding state-controlled elections alone does not represent a democratic transition, which is exactly the case of Bhutan. Bhutan transitioned from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy in 2008. However, all occurrences in the country’s history and politics are still largely determined by the kings.

As such, in the 1990s there was a huge influx of refugees into Nepal from Bhutan. The citizenship policies that the Bhutanese government adopted following the 1986 census caused a large number of Nepali-speaking Bhutanese to evict their home and seek asylum in Nepal where they had common ethnic and linguistic bond.

Started from the late 1990 with a few hundred asylum seekers, the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal had reached over 70,000 by the end of 1992 (Khanal, 1998: 152). Since September 1991, the UNHCR undertook the work of assistance to the refugees on the request of the government of Nepal. The year 1992 witnessed the largest influx of refugees averaging 300-600 new arrivals a day. In 2006, some 108,000 Bhutanese asylum seekers resided in the camps of Jhapa and Morang Districts of eastern Nepal.

## Map 2. Bhutanese refugees camps in Nepal



Source: <http://bhutaneserefugees.com/in-camps/>

There is a significant population of Bhutanese refugees, ranging from 15,000 to 30,000 in India as well.<sup>21</sup> India has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol and therefore does not have a national refugee legislation. India is a member of UNHCR's Executive Committee and the UNHCR undertakes refugee status determination under its mandate for refugees from countries other than Tibet, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. However, UNHCR has not considered any Bhutanese refugees in India for refugee status.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See: <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/bhutan0507/12.htm> accessed on 12/08/2016

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

**Table 4. Camps population figures in 1999, 2006**

	<b>1999</b>	<b>2006</b>
Beldangi 1	16,672	18,335
Beldangi 2	20,856	22,542
Beldangi 3	10,561	11,594
Goldhap	8,674	9,513
Khundunbari	12,194	13,392
Sanischare	18,951	20,993
Timai	9,249	10,293
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>97,157</b>	<b>106,662</b>

Source:<http://bhutanese-refugees.com/life-in-the-camps;>  
[http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/contributions/pdf/CNAS\\_28\\_01\\_05.pdf](http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/contributions/pdf/CNAS_28_01_05.pdf)

The UN refugee agency and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) launched a resettlement programme of over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees from Nepal to third countries in 2007. These refugees are resettled in countries like Australia (5,554), Canada (6,500), Denmark (874), New Zealand (1002), the Netherlands (327), Norway (566), the United Kingdom (358) and the United States of America (84,819) (UNHCR, 2015 a). At present, there were only two camps in Nepal and the refugee population stands at less than 18,000 people (UNHCR, 2015 a).

**Table 5. No of Bhutanese Refugees (*Lhotshampas*) resettled in third country as of 2015**

<b>Third Country Name</b>	<b>No of Resettled Refugees</b>
Australia	5,554
Canada	6,500
Denmark	874
New Zealand	1002
the Netherlands	327
Norway	566
the United Kingdom	358
United States of America (84,819)	84,819
<b>Total</b>	<b>100,000</b>

Source: UNHCR (2015), The UN Refugee Agency, “Resettlement of Bhutanese refugees surpasses 100,000 mark”, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2015/11/564dded46/resettlement-bhutanese-refugees-surpasses-100000-mark.html>

Besides, there are also those who have taken refuge in India’s West Bengal and Assam states. Although the Bhutanese refugees mostly constitute the Nepali ethnic group there are reports that they also include few families belonging to the Indian ethnic groups such as *Jhagar*, *Santhal*, *Urou* and Bengali (Khanal, 1998)

The problem of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal is genuinely a human rights issue and has been a topic of much debate (Khanal, 1998:156). There were various human rights organizations including the London-based Amnesty International that carried out an in-depth exploration of the status of human rights in Bhutan and came out with the fact that “Nepali-speaking people from southern Bhutan...have been systematically driven out because of their ethnic origin or political beliefs” (Amnesty International, 1994). In August 1994, Amnesty International also concluded in one of its reports that “in keeping with international law, Bhutan should be recognized as their ‘own country’ and they should have the right to return to live in safety from human violations” (Amnesty International,

1994). The refugee crisis of Bhutan is the result of human rights abuses which accelerated since the late 1980s particularly with regard to the *Lhotshampas* in the south (Khanal, 1998: 156). There is a direct link between the repatriation of the refugees and human rights situation in Bhutan. More than 80,000 people endured a tragic fate when the Bhutanese government forcibly expelled ethnic Nepalis in an act of “forceful eviction”. The series of official acts implemented between 1977 and 1989 curbed immigration as well as defining a Bhutanese national according to the values, customs, dress, religion and language of the dominant *Drukpa* culture. In light of the “growing sense of cultural marginalization among the Nepali Bhutanese,” dissent grew in the following years, leading to violence and demonstrations. Ethnic Nepalis responded to these acts by engaging in public demonstrations and protests in defense of their culture. The government in turn responded to massive protests held in September and October 1990 by launching a military crackdown. Because the Citizenship Act allowed the termination of citizenship of any person who showed disloyalty “in any manner whatsoever”, even those who had been classified as full citizens found themselves denationalized for assisting dissident “anti-nationals” in their protests. Those ethnic Nepalis critical of the government’s policies were labeled *ngolops*, or ‘anti-national’, and accused of perpetrating acts of terrorism.

In the early 1990s, Bhutan resorted into state terrorism. There were countless incidents of killing, murder, rape, burning of houses, arrest, torture, kidnap, beating, misbehaviour in the southern Bhutan by army personnel deployed by the government (Human Rights without Frontiers, Nepal and Association of Press Freedom Activists, Bhutan, 2009). Immediately after the 1990 demonstrations, the Bhutanese governments shut down most of the schools in southern Bhutan (Hutt, 2003: 220). According to Amnesty International, these schools were turned into army bases or prisons (Leech, 2013). Raids were conducted by the military and police throughout the region and people were detained for up to a year without being charged with a crime, and some were forced to endure torture and rape. According to the official data, by the end of 1992, some 60,000 ethnic Nepalis, which formed almost twenty per cent of the country’s total population, had been dispossessed of their lands and forced to flee to Nepal (Sunilam, 2007: 3087). The Bhutanese government tried to systematically eradicate the cultural practices of the *Lhotshampa s* through various official acts and military repression.

The Bhutanese refugees were housed in seven camps established by the UNHCR because Bhutan refused to allow them to their homes and the Nepal government would not permit them to become residents of that country. As mentioned earlier, the UNHCR started its refugee resettlement programme in 2007, along with the cooperation of eight countries including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. However, many refugees experienced difficulties in adjusting to life in their new countries. For example, Bhutanese refugee communities in the United States have experienced abnormally high suicide rates (Leech, 2013). Meanwhile, there are still some Bhutanese refugees who remain in the camps in Nepal, where they have now lived for more than 20 years.

The Bhutanese government has refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing regarding the country's treatment of ethnic Nepalis and continues to deny the right to return to any of the refugees. The government has instead sought to keep the international spotlight on its efforts to promote Bhutan as a country concerned with both the spiritual and material well-being of its citizens through its concept of Gross National Happiness. The two issues – GNH and human rights are intrinsically linked, as such, turning a blind eye to Bhutan's human rights violations might contribute to discrediting the concept of Gross National Happiness.

As the efforts of developing and achieving Gross National Happiness remains the country's prime goal, the issue of refugee crisis is to be kept within the GNH debate. While there are clearly many merits to the concept of GNH, the promotion of Bhutan as the model to follow is troubling given the gross violations of human rights perpetrated by that country's government. Despite "cultural vitality and diversity" being among the nine indicators the government uses to determine the country's Gross National Happiness, a series of official laws and acts implemented since the late-1970s have sought to narrowly define Bhutanese nationals as only those citizens who adhere to the customs, values, dress, religion and language of the *Ngalongs*.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

The issue of minorities and the refugee crisis is therefore interlinked with the success of the GNH development model in Bhutan. Minorities in case of Bhutan include the various indigenous peoples as well as the *Lhotshampas*, who belong to the ethnic Nepali origin. These ethnic minority groups do not have any influence in the power structures of the country nor are they numerically superior to the *Ngalongs*, who are the dominant, both numerically and influence-wise, ethnic group of Bhutan. There are also *Lhotshampas* living in refugee camps in Nepal as well as resettled in third countries who have been systematically driven out from Bhutan and denied citizenship on the grounds that there are immigrants from another country and belong to different ethnicity, religion and language. These *Lhotshampas*, although having allegedly been living the country for decades, have been forcibly exiled from Bhutan since the late 1980s and have not been allowed to return home ever since. A closer look at the constitutional provisions of Bhutan as well as the various acts regarding citizenship is necessary to find out the gaps in those provisions regarding the rights of minorities, which will be dealt with the next chapter.