

# **A view on history: the Bhutanese diaspora.**

## **Introduction.**

*'It's not our abilities that show what we truly are, it is our choices.'*

According to professor Albus Dumbledore in 'Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets'. The words spoken by the headmaster at the school of Wizardry in the Harry Potter books are for me an absolute truth. Both for how I want to lead my own life, as for how I look at other people. I reckon that the choices made by people like the king and his ministers of the supposed to be Shangri-La, the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, prove how right the words of this fictional headmaster character are. They also tell me that no matter how fictional a story is, it can contain truths of great importance. But then again, reality is in many cases much more vivid or scary than the wildest imagination of a novelist can devise.

Writing about historical events and facts is not without risk. Thorough research is needed and even then, historical facts are always the victim of interpretation. The historical background of the diaspora of the Bhutanese as a result from ethnic / cultural cleansing is a complex background that cannot go without explanation. Within the story as it unfolds in the novel I wrote about a young Bhutanese refugee girl who was resettled to Europe, there was no place for such an account of history. So I have made an effort to explain history and events in this essay to the best of my abilities based on the information I have been able to gather in the year preceding and during the writing of the novel. I wrote this in 2011, some twenty years after the events leading the Bhutanese diaspora unfolded and adjusted some facts and figures in 2017. I sincerely hope that this account of the events does not contain factual errors but I would like to stress that as far as interpretation of history is concerned, the following pages represent my interpretation of that history and might not be inline with that of others. History is seldom undisputed and I am not a historian, I am merely a novelist writing about people and events placed in a historical setting. Still, having spoken to so many people, civilians, politicians and scholars, and having researched so much on this topic, I do have my own analysis of the history of the Bhutanese exiles. Here it is, for what it's worth.

## **How it all started.**

It all started when the mood in the country changed. Bhutan being a closed country, quite inaccessible to foreigners and mostly disconnected from the outside world except from some contacts to the neighbouring countries, Sikkim, Chinese occupied Tibet and India. That mood change started in the late seventies, caused by the overturning of the Sikkim king by the ethnic Nepalese majority in the country and intensified after the assassination of Indira Gandhi

by her own Sikh bodyguards. These events have probably triggered events in Bhutan that followed. When the great leading lady of India was killed, the north of India was kept together by her policy of allowing the indigenous people from the regions and the adjacent Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan to have their rightful places in society. She didn't however allow these powerful ethnic groups in the north of India to form independent states. Indira Gandhi acted as the glue of the nations of the Indian subcontinent. Until she was assassinated.

Much different from her opponents who sought expansion for India or just the opposite by for instance desiring an independent state as the Gurkha's did with Gorkaland. The emotions of the different ethnic groups in the north of the country and in the mountains from Nepal to Bhutan and even Assam were those of a latent desire for independence. Of course the kingdoms had their sovereignty, but the northern states of India were part of that great country inherited by the people and politicians of India from the British. India, the great post-colonial state with at her borders that other post-colonial state Pakistan. The British had in essence glued the nation to one mighty force. A force that in the end proved to be too mighty for the British themselves. Ever since India's independence there had been groups in the north of the country that wanted to either expand India across its borders or disconnect the northern regions from mother India and form independent states, and even today some still do so. Ever since the independence some ethnic groups tried to form their own independent countries and some had succeeded in that, leading to the independence of Pakistan and Bangladesh. And even today some still do so. Political violence has never left India since its independence in 1947 which triggered a remapping of the south Asian continent in the following years. Actually, in 2015 the violence in the northern states of Kashmir and Assam still prove this. Again people fled their homes because of the violence. Again, there is a large number of refugees and again 'freedom fighters' attack civilian and military targets.

Anyway, after that shocking assassination, the son of Indira, Rajiv Gandhi, took over. And his ideas differed from his mother's ideas. He, in a political sense, let the hounds loose. Ten years before 1975 some insurgents from the Gurkha ethnic group and ethnic Nepali's living in Sikkim brought the king of Sikkim down in a more or less democratic manner. The monarchy was simply outvoted in the Sikkim parliament. As a chain reaction events followed in the coming thirty years. Sikkim soon became the latest state of India and with Bangladesh being a sovereign nation there was, and still is, just a small stroke of land that connects the northeastern states of Sikkim, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manupur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya with the main part of the federal nation of India. No wonder peoples in these regions hold on strongly to their ethnic identity and often do not see themselves as India. The demise of Sikkim, the smallest of the Himalayan kingdoms, must have had an enormous impact on the thoughts and policies of the kings and governments of the

adjacent kingdoms Bhutan in the east and Nepal in the west. The Bhutanese king was related to the king of Sikkim by marriage. Surprisingly however, both kings of Sikkim's neighbouring countries took very different routes to follow. They both held tight control over their people being feudal monarchs. But whereas the king of Nepal slowly changed his country into a multi-ethnic country, the fourth king of Bhutan did quite the opposite. He slowly started to push the people living in the south (and even some in the east) out of the country and into exile. To understand why he did so one has to understand the demographics of Bhutan.

### **About Bhutan.**

Bhutan is / was an almost medieval autocratic and buddhist monarchy ruled by the Druk people. They had come to Bhutan from the north, from Tibet and were the descendants of Tibetan monks. Actually Tibetan warrior monks. (One should always take into account that religions tend to conquer land rather than spread through peaceful propagation of ideas and Buddhism is no exception to that rule.) Bhutan, after being conquered by the Tibetans, had long been a lama kingdom and continued to be a theocratical state until after the Duar wars when the British defeated the Bhutan army over a dispute concerning the ruling of that important area in the south of Bhutan. The East India Company desperately wanted the area in its control because of the trade routes that went from the north to the south through the duars (valleys) making Bhutan a giant gate to China. The British won the Duar wars and the area no longer belonged to Bhutan. At that time Sikkim was part of the kingdom of Nepal. A few decades later the theocratical rule of Bhutan came to an end and in 1907 the British selected a few powerful landowners in Bhutan to be the ruling elite. The Wangchuck family was brought to power and the Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan was formed as a British protectorate with a Wangchuck as its king.

Decades later, after two devastating world wars, the British were ousted from the region all together and the Wangchuck kings of Bhutan became the sole rulers of the country. Today these family dynasties still rule the country and are related by marriage. Other ethnic groups that came to Bhutan lived in the east and the south of the country. Bhutan essentially had been a settling country for centuries and many of the ethnic groups like the people from Nepali origin in the south were invited by the ruling elite to come to Bhutan to work the land and build roads, palaces and the infrastructure of the country. The Druk people themselves were simply not having the workforce to do so and the south had been depopulated by Malaria. They were dependent on outside labourers for that and they still do. Most of the immigrants came from the Nepal region and were Hindu, nowadays the labourers come from India.

The Indian raja's and later the Indian states in the north were, and still are, also Hindu. Most ethnic groups in the area are closely related, they share history, religion, culture, their caste system and even caste and family names. Because of

a lack of Hindu's women in Bhutan, many men from the ethnic Nepali's living in the south of Bhutan found their wives in India and the population grew. By the way, people who were living in the south west of Bhutan still have to travel through India to go to the capitol Thimpu as there is no direct route from many areas in the south to the region of the capitol and the main cities in the middle and north of the country.



When one looks at the map of Bhutan one will still question whether that south part of the country actually in practice is part of Bhutan or is only part of Bhutan because of historical reasons. After all if the British after the Duar wars would have seized all of the Duar regions up to the hills in the south, this area would no doubt nowadays be part of Assam and thus India.

### **Migration to Bhutan.**

The people in the south that have migrated to Bhutan from as early as the seventeenth century until the 1950's, they prospered and their number grew. They, like most Nepalis, were hard working people and their power-by-number in Bhutan became significant. Many acquired higher standing jobs and some actually became loyalists to the king. A lot of them joined the army of Bhutan. And even today many surnames of Bhutanese exiles are the same as those of people living in Nepal, underlining their ties. It's all ethnically and historically connected.

After the second world war the communists tried to expand their influence in the Himalaya region. We all know now what China did to Tibet and so in the sixties, seventies and eighties there were communist insurgents coming into Bhutan as well. Most of them came from India to the south and east of Bhutan threatening to overturn the regime. But they were never powerful enough for that. As a result the government connected the insurgents with the Nepalis in the south. And when in '75 Sikkim was overturned they really must have gotten scared. Would Bhutan be next in line to fall? Would its future be that of a second Tibet or a new state of India?

## **India's role.**

India has always played a key role in the history of the region. The Chinese had their hands full with Tibet which through its fundamentalist Buddhist religion had become a darling of the West, the Russians were too far away and the Soviet Union became less and less powerful over the years. So India expanded its influence into Bhutan and tried to do the same in Nepal. Partly because of the natural resources of these countries like relatively cheap hydropower and partly because of the (at least theoretical) need to maintain a buffer between India and China, both being nuclear powers and the two of them also being the two major political players in Asia. Bhutan was to become a protectorate, a vassal state, of India but it was also to retain its sovereignty. So the king of Bhutan and the government of India must have come to some sort of agreement as the army and police force of Bhutan are nowadays trained by the Indian army, India caters for most of the foreign policy of Bhutan and guards the borders of Bhutan against foreign invaders like the Chinese. They also deliver oil to Bhutan and we all know that oil is a main force of power in any geo-political situation. Bhutan as a sovereign nation would simply not exist nowadays if India was not there. India seems not to be interested to have Bhutan as a state within the federation of Indian states, they have control anyhow. The situation in Bhutan is stable and 'contained' and India has a strong influence, so why go any further than that? Inside Bhutan, the king and his government have unlimited freedom to do as they like. Or to exile people as they like. Bhutan is still a feudal state, albeit a very colourful one with strong support from the West.

## **A young king's wrong doings.**

After the fourth king of Bhutan stepped down (in favour of his younger son who was educated as a youngster by the then palace teachers Michael Aris and his wife Aung San Sui Kyi and who at the age he accepted the throne was only to be the old king's puppet on a string) the policy of excluding the southerners - the Bhutan government speaks of Lotshampa's (meaning 'people from the south') - was extended.

The government started to change the laws and in the end a policy of 'one nation, one people' was put into place to 'safeguard' the traditions and culture of Bhutan. A policy that is quite similar *in its statements* as Germany's fascism was in the thirties and forties of the twentieth century. At least that is what the statements of the government of Bhutan suggest when read nowadays. It became the basis of their policy of discrimination and exclusion of the southerners. The culture to be safeguarded was to be only the culture of the northern Druk ethnic minority that six hundred years before had invaded the country and had grown into a economic and political elite of landowners. This policy in essence would safeguard not only the culture of the Druk but also the ruling of the Wangchuck and Gurung families who together with a small elite simply own the country. It is

the way elites in autocratic countries work, they simply change the laws at will to stay on as rulers. They perform powerplay.

### **How the ethnic cleansing policy was deployed.**

So in the nineteen eighties civility laws changed in Bhutan. If one lived in the south and couldn't produce land ownership papers and identity papers from before 1958 (the year in which the previous king decided that the southerners were Bhutanese citizens) one would end up being registered as an illegal immigrant in the censuses held by the government. Censuses used as a political means and which fluctuated enormously in registered number of inhabitants. One anecdote in this respect is one census that pushed up the country's demographic figures to such a level that membership of the United Nations was granted, while the following censuses showed a lesser number of inhabitants adhering more closely to reality (in later censuses the southerners weren't even counted.) Then the Nepali language, the mother tongue of the southerners was abolished from schools and as a formal language. Oddly enough the first constitution of Bhutan was also written in Nepali but few people know that.

Southerners were forced to identify themselves as Bhutanese by wearing the Druk national dress, clothes intended for living in the cold mountainous areas in the north of the country, and not intended for the hot subtropics of the south. And when people opposed that, they were threatened and later abused, beaten, thrown into jail or worse. The rules of the censuses changed. Women from India who married Bhutanese men were no longer regarded as Bhutanese, nor were their children. The result being, that they would no longer have rights of citizenship, health care and education. Families were split along ethnic lines as far as their civil rights were concerned and the government stated that tens of thousands of the southerners were essentially illegal economic and environmental immigrants. The previous prime minister, Mr. Thinley, has always done so and the more liberal (in speech) government continues to do so. And because communist insurgents were active in the south and people protested against the new policies of the government, the army found its reasons to step in fiercely. Many atrocities were done by the army and police in the early 1990's.

### **Resistance and oppression.**

Naturally some people rose against the discriminatory laws and the atrocities by the army and the police, but even more atrocities came as an answer. The government had many people arrested on charges of being subversive and by making smart use of the ongoing insurgence of communists, linking them unjustly to the southerners. The first political prisoners were thrown into jail. Some, if not most, of them were tortured. Some of them tortured to death or simply assassinated. People disappeared and more uprisings came from the south. Public protest started in the country and some southern politicians

started rallying against the government in 1990. Things escalated. The protests became violent giving the government even more reasons to react even harsher.

Most ethnic groups in the region are, as I wrote earlier, closely related. Especially in the south as most of them are Hindu whilst in the north the people were predominantly Buddhist. Civil war wouldn't be a surprise in such a situation. So, after some time the armed forces started arresting people at will, beginning as always with the intellectuals and influential locals as a policy of bringing fear to the people. They all were accused to be subversive. Nearly all of them were severely beaten or worse. The Bhutanese government essentially used fascist methods of scaring the people by these attacks on the more educated, imprisoning and torturing them. In the end they started to force the people out of the country. Sometimes at gunpoint, and in 1990 the ethnic cleansing had become reality.

## **Exodus.**

The exodus started with the escape of some of the local leaders and intellectuals from the south to India and accelerated to enormity when the government forced families to sign papers that they would leave their country and leave behind their belongings and land out of their own free will, knowing that when enough force is being applied people will give in. Many people were scared, many men were beaten hard by the armed forces and women were violently raped. So many of them signed and left the country, scared to death and scared by abuse. Many more saw this happening and were afraid they would be attacked too, so they left 'voluntarily'. Mostly in the dark of night, without letting their neighbours know as no one could be trusted. Others had seen family members go and followed them as they hoped for a safer life across the border in India. In the end some 110.000 people left Bhutan between 1990 and 1992, some historians state them to be roughly twenty percent of the population of Bhutan. It had become, by its percentage, the largest ethnic cleansing since world war two but the international community did not respond at all. So it was also by far the most silent ethnic cleansing ever.

It is a miracle that the southerners didn't start a civil war because with their numbers they would have been a force to reckon with. But they are, for the most, a very peaceful people. Fact is that before the exodus and the sudden change that came with the 1985 census Bhutan was listed at the United Nations with around one million inhabitants while nowadays the Bhutan government states that it inhabits only 700,000 people. The older one million figure was falsified to be allowed to become a full United Nations member. The 700,000 figure is also cooked up by not taking many of the southerners that still inhabit the country into account.

## **From exiles to refugees in camps.**

A number of leading figures in the refugees community sought help from the United Nations resulting in the construction of seven refugee camps in the Terai region in the Southeast of Nepal. The Indian government had taken care to quickly shift refugees entering India from Bhutan to Nepal, leaving their northern neighbour to deal with the 'Nepalis from Bhutan'.

The early years in the camps were extremely difficult for the people. At first they had hoped that their government and king would come to their senses soon. But later frustration grew within the camps population as the king and government obviously didn't change their mind. Young men wanted to resist and many, if not all, wanted to return to Bhutan. Many a plan must have been made to do so, some of them were undertaken. But all of these plans failed. The Nepali government held endless talks with the Bhutan government to bring the situation to an end. To no avail. The prime minister of Bhutan, Thinley, proved to be a very harsh man. At one time the people of the Kununbari camp were evaluated for return to Bhutan. But the Bhutanese government used a very discriminatory way of classification rendering many, even young children, as begin criminals, never to be repatriated. The ones that were recognised as true Bhutanese were not allowed to return. It had all been a fraud and by the time the people from the camp recognised that, the Bhutanese negotiators were attacked which ended that false repatriation effort with the refugees blamed by the Bhutanese government.

## **The indifference of international politics.**

But even then the international community and especially India did not interfere on a political level. So nothing changed. Sometimes men left the camps and tried to reach Bhutan, but they never did reach Bhutan as the Indian army and police wouldn't allow them into India. One incident on de Mechi River bridge on the Indian border gained some international awareness of the situation but even that didn't lead to any political change. Some others took a different road and worked together with the authorities. Some of them even got a grant from the UN or affiliated organisations to study in Darjeeling in India and some fled to the west and requested and gained political asylum. But even those men did not prove to be able to draw the attention of the international community and they too had to witness the west being taken in by the marketing-wise smart policies of the Bhutan government. The west in the meanwhile obviously didn't want to be deprived from the thought of a Himalayan Shangri-La and an amazing nation where Gross National Happiness is a way of thinking and ruling. It embraced Bhutan's deception and today even invests in Bhutan's reforestation projects. Reforestation that is partly taking place in areas destroyed by the Royal Bhutanese Army after ousting the people and renaming mountains, hills, rivers and plains in the early nineties. They simply don't know or don't care about that.

## **The situation in 2018.**

In 2015 the international community seemed not to have too many problems with financing the refugee-camps and executing third country resettling at their cost. And at the same time subsidising the Bhutan government with ecological projects in spite of the continuous human rights violations that have by now grown to epic proportions.

In the meanwhile it has become clear that the politicians in the Bhutanese refugee community have not been able to turn events to the better. They have been lied at by the Bhutanese government and they have been disagreeing on their policies amongst themselves instead of taking care of their people. Most of the politicians are not doing their work from within the camps but from Nepal's capitol Kathmandu or elsewhere. They are basically powerless and without international political allies in their fight with the Bhutanese government. So they cannot alter fate.

Three years later most exiles have now either resettled or opted for resettlement in another country. The United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom are accepting refugees from the camps brought to them by the UNHCR. The process is regarded by some, including the officials of the UNHCR to be a 'durable solution'. Over 95% of the refugees from the camps now no longer live there or anywhere in the region. They've been shifted all over the globe into diaspora as 'invited immigrants'. In a few years from now the Bhutanese exiles will be erased from history. A process that halted for a couple of donorcountries like the US when president Trump took office and the Netherlands when a kabinet could only exist with support by the political and xenophobic far right.

I disagree with the durability of that 'durable solution', together with people like Tek Nath Rizal, a former advisory to the king of Bhutan and a former political prisoner. He is nowadays a human rights activist and politician in exile, with whom I had the honour to speak extensively. I would rather speak from a 'contained situation' from an international political perspective. By taking the major part of the refugees community from the camps to countries elsewhere the problem of the refugee-camps in Nepal draining the Nepalese economy (I doubt if this is really the case but it's used as a ground for the United Nations resettlement project) only gets reduced to a more manageable level.

All know, but few will acknowledge that, now the resettlement process has almost finished and Bhutan policies won't change, there will still be some 5.000 refugees left in the camps. A couple of thousand are actually not even being recognised and counted as refugees because of a variety of rules that the UNHCR used. And it is also excluding the possibly tens of thousands living illegally in Nepal and India. It also excludes the roughly 80.000 people living in the south and east of Bhutan who are still being silently exiled from their country in a

continuous (but far lesser) stream of people or at least are being brutally oppressed by their government and its discriminatory legislation. Every year people still flee Bhutan as a result of this continued oppression. Exact numbers are unknown as they are not any longer allowed to enter the last UNHCR managed refugee-camp in Nepal and who therefore more or less 'evaporate' in the Indian societies of Sikkim, West Bengal and Assam, destined to live a life as an illegal immigrant under extremely poor conditions on the sidelines of society. No one counts, no one registers, no one really knows what's still happening. And most of the people who are still in Bhutan try to assimilate as much as possible to prevent further hardship.

I agree with Mr. Rizal that the tragedy of the situation is that even the salvation by the international community through resettlement will mean that at least one, if not more, generations of people will be lost. Not only for themselves, but also for Bhutan. As it is now, the number of people living in exile or living in hardship might in the end grow to over two hundred thousand with the majority of them having been resettled to other countries. Broken away from their motherland, their culture, their remaining families and any prospect of ever returning to Bhutan. A peoples erased.

What amazes me even more to this day, is that the international community shows no understanding at all of history. History shows that no feudal regime that oppresses its people ever survived and so without a change in its policy and attitude the Bhutan regime is, due to its feudal nature, destined to end some day. With the turmoil the Arab world has been experiencing in recent decades I wonder wether the rulers of Bhutan will be able to sleep quietly in the country that they have abused so gravely. It should be the international community presenting the consequences of the exile to the government of Bhutan by increasing political and economic pressure to return from its path of human rights violations and become a true honourable member of the international community preventing the inevitable downfall of its rulers. The tragedy is that the world does not turn its eyes to the Himalayas except when disaster strikes.

Alice Anna Verheij  
Middelburg, The Netherlands  
author of 'Headwind, Laxmi's Story'