

Memory and Migration: Bhutanese Refugee Women and Oral Histories of Self and Nation

Malavika Vartak



WISCOMP

Foundation for
Universal
Responsibility

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Contents

Acknowledgements	5
Preface	7
Nepali Mulkani Bhutani Hami	10
Methodology	12
Introduction	15
<i>Bhutanese Refugee Women</i>	19
The Lhotshampas: Searching for History	21
<i>A brief historical background of Bhutan</i>	22
<i>Tibetan Migration into Bhutan</i>	23
<i>The Establishment of the Wangchuk Dynasty</i>	23
<i>The Lhotshampas: An invisibilised people</i>	25
<i>Citizenship Act of 1958</i>	28
<i>Developments in Bhutan from 1958 – 1988:</i>	
<i>Alienation through Integration</i>	30
<i>The 1977 amendment to the Citizenship Act</i>	30
<i>Bhutan Citizenship Act 1985</i>	32
<i>Policy of One Nation One People</i>	33
<i>Brewing of discontent in Southern Bhutan.</i>	33
<i>From Citizens to Refugees</i>	35
Memories of Forced Migration	38
<i>Life in Bhutan before the ‘Andolan’</i>	39
<i>The ‘Andolan’ and the Forced Eviction</i>	42
<i>Census</i>	44
<i>Forced Eviction: A Journey of Pain</i>	45
<i>Lost Families</i>	53
<i>Maidhar: Makeshift Respite</i>	55

Life in the Refugee Camps	58
<i>Refugee Camps Today</i>	60
<i>Food</i>	62
<i>Housing</i>	63
<i>Employment</i>	65
<i>Health</i>	66
<i>Education</i>	67
<i>Domestic and Sexual Violence</i>	68
<i>Relations with the local community</i>	69
Towards a Resolution	71
<i>A ‘Durable Solution’</i>	73
<i>Women’s Perspectives</i>	74
<i>Marginality within a marginalised group</i>	79
Conclusion	85
<i>History as the first step towards identity formation</i>	86
<i>Endogamy</i>	91
<i>Nation and Nationality</i>	94
End Notes	98
References	108

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Malavika Vartak

Preface

The *Scholar of Peace* Fellowships awarded by WISCOMP for academic research, media projects and special projects are designed to encourage original and innovative work by academics, policy makers, defense, and foreign policy practitioners, NGO workers and others. The series WISCOMP Perspectives in conjunction with WISCOMP Discussion Papers brings the work of some of these scholars to a wider readership.

The twenty eighth in the Perspectives series, this paper focuses on the ‘flight’ and ‘temporary settlement’ of the Bhutanese refugee women – the uncertainties, the sufferings and feelings of rootlessness that assails the affected population. The author attempts to link the historical events with the recent refugee crisis in Bhutan and the impact it continues to have on the social, psychological and economic wellbeing of women.

Most of the debates, policies, legislations and scholarly work on refugees and refugee crisis are centred on rehabilitation, repatriation and political repercussions. The number of refugees all over the world is on the increase and there is a need to explore not only the causes and consequences of forced migration but also to understand and document the pain, trauma and dilemmas faced by the refugees as a consequence of this displacement.

Refugees all over the world face similar problems and in most cases the suddenness of the events catches the people unawares and unprepared. Forced migration consequently leads to loss of jobs, homes and deprivation of education. In addition to this are issues of identity and belonging – where does the refugee belong? They are shunned by both the country from where they were forced to migrate and also by the country to which they migrate. The trauma of the flight and feeling of helplessness over the situation compounds the complexities of the situation for the refugees.

The Bhutanese refugee crisis has been traced to the historical event of the Duar War in 1865 and to the more recent political developments in 1990s. The *Lhotshampas*, originally natives of Nepal, migrated to Bhutan after the Duar War, found themselves increasingly targeted by the Bhutanese government and its restrictive citizenship laws throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Social and cultural rights of the

Lhotshampas were curtailed with the imposition of the Bhutanese way of life- dress, language, religion and even hairstyle. The situation became grim with the Bhutanese government initiating a census by which most *Lhotshampas* were declared illegal and through various means were forced to migrate from Bhutan. Some were made to sign on papers proclaiming them to be illegal migrants, while many others were labelled anti-national elements and thus forced to flee Bhutan.

The events described above had several repercussions in terms of unemployment, health and education but the issue primarily addressed in this work is that of identity and nationhood. As the author aptly puts it – it is a question of who is an outsider and who is not. It is the strength of such reactions to separation from one's home society which has led scholars to recognize the phenomenon of 'cultural bereavement' in refugee populations.

The author looks at the financial, social and psychological implications of being a refugee. Within this larger group of refugees, the author specifically focuses on the women refugees who are faced with the dual burden of dealing with the crisis at hand and looking after the family. Incidentally, the women among the *Lhotshampas* were often the last ones to migrate and were left to deal with the armed forces and the local political leaders. They had to fend for themselves braving both threats of and actual physical violence and sexual abuse.

The author uses the method of indepth interviews with women in the refugee camps in Nepal. These interviews with women from diverse backgrounds and age groups were not only a source of valuable information on causes and actual processes of forced migration but also point to the methodological importance of using ethnographic resources to construct an imaginative understanding the refugee problematique.

The monograph has been divided into several chapters, the first chapter deals with the methodology, followed by an introduction to the entire monograph. The author then moves on to the historical background of the present crisis in the third chapter. Chapters four and five deal exclusively with the author's experience in the camps and the issues at the familial and community level that women in the refugee camps have to deal with. The last two chapters deal with the reactions of the refugee women to possible solutions and concluding observations.

The author has woven together the historical-political background with the dilemma of identity and nationhood. Through her interviews of the women in the camps she has drawn out the memories of past atrocities, the immediacy of current concerns and the uncertainties of images of the future to grapple with the complexities of identity formation. One cannot emphasize enough the contemporary relevance of such a study which delves into the implications of marginality and exclusion of women's experiences from the accepted and official narratives of refugees in the region. An important insight that emerges from this study is to remain alive to the manner in which women's stories get subsumed under larger rubrics of citizenship and national identity. In fact, Bhutanese refugee women in their representations of self as well as their articulation of their identity represent many of the dilemmas and paradoxes that several minority communities face in the processes of nation-building.

The WISCOMP Team

Nepali Mulkani Bhutani Hami

A song written and composed by Til Maya Sapkota of Chirang District
Bhutan

Nepali Mulkani Bhutani Hami
Durdasya bhogyu hai rama
Durdasya bhogyu hai

We are Bhutanese of Nepali origin
We are undergoing great suffering oh God!
We are undergoing great suffering

Ghar hamro chhai na ni thar hamro chhai na
Banayo Sharanarathi hai rama
Banayo Sharanarathi

We have neither a home nor our titles
They have made us refugees oh God!
They have made us refugees

Des bhakti bhaeni bikasai garyo ni...
Ragatai bagara hai rama
Ragatai bagara

With a sense of patriotism we developed our country
We even shed our blood oh God!
We even shed our blood

Daju bhai maryo ni Desai nikal garyo ni..
Sainikai lagara hai rama
Sainikai lagara

They killed our brothers and banished us from our country
They sent soldiers against us oh God!
They sent soldiers against us.

Nirankush Raja ni tanasai sarkar ni...
Jaat maan na diye na hai rama
Dharma maan na diye na

A brutal king and his autocratic government
They did not let us practice our customs oh God!
They did not let us practice our religion

Ritto haath bhagyun ni Sena lay khedo
Sahara thiye na hai rama
Sahara thiye na

We fled empty handed when the soldiers came to evict us
There was no one to help us oh God!
There was no one to help us

Sawun ko bhelani andheri raata
Ghar chhodi bhagyun hai ni rama
Ghar chhodi bhagyun hai

It was in the rainy season and the in darkness of the night
When we left our homes and fled oh God!
When we left our homes and fled

Aates ko belani nani bo kay bhani
Seerani bokay chhu hai rama
Seerani bokay chhu

In a state of panic, instead of picking up my baby
I picked up a pillow and ran oh God!
I picked a pillow and ran

Dukha ni Sakdi na bhanna ni tyo din ko ni
Ro e ko belama hai rama
Ro e ko belama

I cannot express the sorrow of those days
When I was crying for help oh God!
When I was crying for help

Akha ko aasuni nadhi jhai bhagyu ni...
Basay ko thalama hai rama
Basay ko thalama

My tears have flooded like a river
For the land where I have lived oh God!
For the land where I have lived.

Methodology

As this research study aims to bring forth or amplify Bhutanese refugee women's voices, a bulk of the material was collected from in-depth interviews with 58 refugee women living (including four girls) in the seven refugee camps in south-eastern Nepal. In addition to interviews, secondary sources have been used for the study. Secondary sources referred to include academic works on the issue as well as reports of Bhutanese and international human rights organisations.

The interviews involved open-ended questions about women's personal memories and experiences of their lives in Bhutan, their eviction from Bhutan and the circumstances that led to it, the journey to Nepal and life as a refugee in the UNHCR refugee camps. Questions were also asked about their opinions on the ongoing discussions on a resolution of the refugee crisis and on the three options of repatriation, third country resettlement and local integration. Given the nature of the questions posed, each interview typically took one and a half to two hours. Additionally, information was also obtained through three group meetings. The interviews and meetings were conducted between 28th October 2006 and 16th November 2006 and 4th to 9th May 2007.

In the first phase of the fieldwork, interviews were conducted in Nepal with office bearers of organisations working with the refugee community which included the Field Directors of Caritas, Nepal and UNHCR as well as office bearers of the Lutheran World Federation, and Bhutanese Refugees Aiding Victims of Violence (BRAVVE). These interviews were designed for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the current situation in the camps with a special focus on issues of repatriation, local integration and third country resettlement and concerns specific to refugee women. Advice was also sought from them regarding methods of information gathering in the camps as well as on identifying individual women for interviews. The interactions provided a useful insight into administrative systems at the camp level as well as the basic services provided to camp residents. Interviews were also conducted with representatives of refugee organisations like Association of Human Rights Activists of Bhutan (AHURA) and office bearers of the newly formed Durable Solution Committee – a representative group of refugees from each of the seven camps that

was committed to working on issues related to third country resettlement.

Having worked with some of the representatives of the refugee community as well as with a few of the women interviewed since 2003, gaining access to refugee women was relatively easy. Each refugee camp had an active and elected women's body called the Bhutanese Refugee Women's Forum (BRWF). These fora were useful not only for contacting individual women but also in understanding camp-related women's concerns including housing, food, health and gender based violence. Interviews conducted with the Gender Focal Point – an integral part of BRWF were especially useful in this regard. In most cases the modus operandi involved establishing contact with the BRWF and through them contacting women for interviews. However, to avoid a possibility of interviewing women with a similar point of view (especially on the durable solution issue) and to have as diverse a pool as possible, care was taken to ensure that not all the women interviewed were those suggested by BRWF and contacts made through sources outside the BRWF were also relied upon. In the absence of easily available data, disaggregated by caste and ethnicity, the researcher used advice and inputs of community representatives, officials of implementing agencies and NGO contacts to ensure the sample was as representative as possible.

Of the 58 interviewees, four belonged to the age group of 11–15 and had been born in the refugee camps; 13 were between 19 and 29 and had been born in Bhutan and had come to the camps as girls, some even as toddlers; 26 belonged to the 30 – 45 age group having spent their childhood and some a significant part of their adulthood in Bhutan; ten were between 46 and 60; and five belonged to the 60 to 80 age group that had spent a bulk of their years in Bhutan. Among the interviewees, 29 belonged to the high caste *Bahun-Chhetri* (*Brahmin* and *Kshatriya*) groups, nine to the so-called lower castes, 15 to what are generally referred to as *Mongol* communities (*Gurung, Rai, Tamang* etc), two categorised as 'Other High Caste',¹ one *Khengpa* and two from the *Sarchop* community. Out of the total number of women/girls interviewed 20 had not attended school; five had attended primary school and two were currently in primary school; 15 had not studied beyond middle school, three had been to high school; ten had gone up to the 'plus two' level; one had graduated and two were studying for their graduation.² Eleven out of the total of 58 were unmarried and

were below the age of 26 (three of these were school going girls); ten had been widowed with the youngest among them being 24 years old; and 37 were married.

In presenting the material, care has been taken to ensure as far as possible, that women's voices are not drowned out by compulsions of syntax in the English language. As far as possible the syntax used while narration, has been maintained. The use of terms such as 'army' in women's narratives to denote, broadly, personnel belonging to the security forces, has been retained. The term Lhotshampa in Bhutan means southerners and is used to identify people of Nepali origin. This term has been used in those sections of the study where it refers to the community while it was still in Bhutan. When referring to the community after its eviction, the term Bhutanese refugee has been used. While the use of these different terms presents a more accurate picture of the persons concerned, this research study also suggests that identity formation among the refugee community has led to the formation of two independent categories – the Lhotshampas being those Bhutanese of Nepali origin who continue to reside in Bhutan and Bhutanese refugees being those living in Nepal, India and elsewhere.

Although the Government of Bhutan has changed names of districts like Samchi, Sarbhang and Chirang to Samtse, Sarpang and Tsirang respectively, the former names have been used in this study as these are the ones that refugees are familiar with and have been used in the narratives.

The names of the Bhutanese refugee women interviewed have not been used in the study to maintain confidentiality with a view to protecting their privacy and a concern that including their names would not only lead to possible harassment within the community but would also endanger their relatives residing in Bhutan.

Introduction

More than 16 years ago, the first wave of Bhutanese refugees arrived through India to south-eastern Nepal. As Lhotshampas (people living in the South) or Bhutanese of Nepali origin living in southern Bhutan, they were fleeing persecution and ethnic violence that resulted from a series of systematically executed policies by the Royal Government of Bhutan.

Despite the fact that many Lhotshampas had been living in Bhutan for several generations and had been awarded citizenship of Bhutan in 1958, many found themselves being targeted as non-citizens in the mid to late eighties. Beginning in 1977 and through the 1980s the Government of Bhutan enacted several legislations that threatened the social and cultural freedoms the Lhotshampas had enjoyed thus far. In 1985 the Government of Bhutan amended citizenship laws to tighten norms for citizenship through naturalisation. Some of the features of the amended law included loss of citizenship on grounds of voluntary migration from the country and disloyalty to ‘King Country and People’ or *Tsa-Wa-Sum*. The imposition of *Drighlam Namza* or the ‘Bhutanese way of life’ followed suit. This included the imposition of the language (Dzongkha) and dress code (*Gho* for men and *Kira* for women) of the dominant Drukpa community of western and central Bhutan.

The strict imposition of these laws and policies led to widespread discontent among the Lhotshampa community as many felt their religion, culture, identity and way of life were under grave threat. Further, a census conducted only in the Lhotshampa dominated southern districts of Bhutan in 1988 led to large-scale disenfranchisement among the Lhotshampa community as many were declared non-nationals based on insignificant and minor irregularities or lapses in the necessary documents. Expressions of dissent were met with arrests of Lhotshampa leaders, which in turn fuelled the pro-democracy movement in Southern Bhutan in September –October 1990. Pro-democracy demonstrations spread quickly in the southern districts of Samchi, Sarbhang, Dagana, Chirang and Samdrup Jongkhar and although they drew great crowds (18,000 according to some sources), they were crushed with a heavy hand. Schools in areas where demonstrations took place were shut down and converted into army barracks. Any person remotely connected with

the demonstrations or suspected of harbouring people who had participated in the demonstrations was arrested. Reports of torture of arrested persons and rape of women by Bhutanese security forces grew. (Association of Human Rights Activists 2000)

Soon after the demonstrations, a large number of Lhotshampas were evicted forcefully from their homes and lands. Many others were forced to sign voluntary migration forms and then made to leave the country or harassed, intimidated and mentally and physically abused into fleeing Bhutan.

In the early days of flight, refugees set up camps in Assam and West Bengal on the Indo-Bhutan border in and around Garganda, Devsurey, Luksan, Mooday and Saralpada. However, due to harassment by the Indian security forces and the absence of support structures, they were forced to leave for Nepal.

As of November 2006 there were around one lakh seven thousand refugees in the seven UNHCR refugee camps in Nepal and thousands more spread over India, Western Europe and North America.

Dialogue for a resolution of the refugee crisis between Nepal and Bhutan began in early 1993. Bhutan maintained that the people in the refugee camps were not Bhutanese citizens but in fact illegal immigrants from Nepal and India to Bhutan. In December 2000 a joint verification exercise was undertaken by Nepal and Bhutan. It was decided that people in the camps would be categorised into four groups –

- (i) Bonafide Bhutanese if they had been forcefully evicted;
- (ii) Bhutanese who emigrated;
- (iii) Non-Bhutanese people; and
- (iv) Bhutanese who had committed criminal acts.

The team began the verification process with the residents of Khudunabari camp. Results of the verification in this camp showed that around 75% of the people (despite the stringent criteria) belonged to category (i), (ii) and (iv) i.e. one way or another were Bhutanese citizens. In December 2003 the verification, however, came to a standstill after an alleged incident of violence by some refugees against the Bhutanese part of the Joint Verification Team.

Fifteen rounds of talks later, there was very little progress with regard to a resolution of the crisis. Given the slow progress of talks and severe budget constraints, UNHCR started exploring the resettlement option with some donor countries. In late 2005 the US offered to settle up to 60,000 refugees. Over a period of time, other countries including Australia, Canada and Denmark followed suit with the number going up to an estimated 85,000 refugees. In November 2006 UNHCR initiated a re-registration process in the camps to update its information, an exercise that was considered to be key to the process of resettlement.

Research showed that the refugees, however, were deeply divided on the issue of resettlement. Most would have opted for voluntary repatriation provided they were granted full citizenship rights, their human rights were guaranteed and their homes and lands restored. On the other hand, many, tired of a seemingly endless wait, preferred to let go of their demand for dignified return to Bhutan in lieu of a life with dignity elsewhere. Either way, they said that they did not want to be refugees any longer. There was also one part of the refugee community that preferred local integration in Nepal if repatriation on their terms was not possible. They preferred to remain in Nepal due to the socio-cultural proximity they enjoyed vis-à-vis Nepali society.

As per international law and practice, refugees have the right to choose between the three options of repatriation, resettlement and local integration. There is, however, a significant section of the refugee population that is fiercely opposed to anything other than repatriation. Led by the Bhutan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist) this group believes that by offering resettlement, the international community is releasing Bhutan from its role and responsibility in the crisis. Further, many fear that encouraged by this form of leniency, Bhutan may push out the remainder of the Lhotshampas from its territories. The 2005 census in Bhutan recorded a high percentage of foreigners (13% according to some reports) within its territory. Bhutanese refugee leaders opined that there is a good chance that these include the remaining Lhotshampa community, which would be sent out in a second wave of evictions.

Refugee Camps

The earliest camps to be set up were Timai and Goldhap followed by Beldangi I and II and later Beldangi Extension, and Khudunabari in Jhapa district and Sanischare in Morang districts of Nepal.

The Government of Nepal set up a Refugee Coordination Unit (RCU) under the Ministry of Home Affairs to look into the administrative requirements of the camps. Before the monsoon of 1992, refugees were shifted to the seven UNHCR run camps in Jhapa and Morang districts. Life in the refugee camps continued to be extremely tough. In the early days of the exodus from Bhutan, emergency refugee camps were set up at Maidhar on the riverbed of the Maikhola or Mai river. Ill equipped to deal with such large numbers; the camps were short of adequate material for shelter, adequate food and health care facilities. Due to an outbreak of cholera, many refugees especially children and the elderly died at Maidhar. At the peak of the crisis, according to some, there were 15-20 deaths recorded everyday. In September 1991 the government of Nepal asked UNHCR to coordinate relief activity. Various implementing partners including the Lutheran World Federation, Caritas- Nepal, the World Food Programme, Centre for Victims of Torture, Nepal Red Cross etc joined in the efforts.

The refugee camps by 2006 had a seemingly well-oiled administrative structure represented by elected Camp Management Committees (CMC) and various other sub-committees that are entrusted with a variety of tasks essential for the day to day running of the camps. Besides, organisations like the Bhutanese Refugee Women's Forum and Bhutanese Refugee Aiding Victims of Violence, looked into the needs of specific vulnerable groups. Each camp had at least one school up to the 10th standard.

There were, however, innumerable problems that refugees faced on a day-to-day basis. Not least among their problems were the severe budget cuts for UNHCR that have had a severe impact on the provision of basic necessities including the repair of huts, cutback on kerosene supplied for lighting purposes, provision of uniforms to students etc. Combined with the inability to seek employment in Nepal, the cutbacks in aid and assistance have led to a high degree of desperation and frustration. In this context, for some the offer of resettlement may come as a welcome development. For others, it may mean a dispersal of a community and dissolution of a dream.

The mood in the refugee camps changed dramatically in one year. After the break down of the verification process, a strong sense of hopelessness set in. With the announcement of resettlement the disposition seemed very different. There was a distinct sense of

uncertainty, fear and confusion. While there seemed to be a solution in sight, due to the absence of clear and credible information, the camps were rife with rumours about not only resettlement but also repatriation and local integration. This led to deep divisions within the community, with a lot of people caught in the middle, not knowing which way to turn. UNHCR's information campaign was a step towards allaying some of these fears.

Bhutanese Refugee Women

While the refugee issue has festered for more than a decade and half, there is relatively very little research and writing on the issue. In an invisibilised community, women and their issues are invariably pushed further into the shadows. During the course of the research it was clear that women have featured in the Bhutanese refugee discourse only in the case of sexual and gender based violence whether in Bhutan or in the camps, as if these are the only gendered aspects of refugee life. Very little has been documented on women's experience of life in Bhutan, the forced migration that followed, their experience of the journey to Nepal and life in the camps. There is a glaring gap created by the absence of a gendered analysis of the situation. Further, in the din created by the highly polarised debate for and against resettlement, women's voices are hardly ever heard.

Women form almost 50% of the Bhutanese refugee community. Pushing a solution forward without their active and informed participation will not only be inadequate but also inherently unjust. As pointed out by Abdou (2000), a gender analysis especially in refugee situations is necessary to 'unmask' the differential experiences of men and women in the process of being made refugees and the differential impact various policies and programmes have on men and women. As Abdou points out in the case of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Bhutanese refugee women are discriminated against and find themselves at a disadvantage in almost every sphere-being excluded in the social, political and economic spheres as well as within the family and community. The gross neglect of their experiences and day-to-day struggles has resulted in robbing women of their role and agency in community building.

This paper therefore attempts to document women's voices as refugees. The aim is to document their experiences in the process of being made refugees and recognise their agency by documenting their struggles as well as their coping mechanisms. In fact, as is evident from interviews

conducted during the course of the research, when trouble started in southern Bhutan, in many cases, the men escaped to India in fear of arrest and it was women, who stayed back to face the army and police, look after the young and the old in the family and take care of the fields and cattle. Many women were also targets of sexual and gender based violence during this period in Bhutan.

Although admittedly life in the refugee camps has been difficult for all, research for this study points out that often women, have had to absorb and shoulder a bulk of the financial, social and psychological impacts of becoming refugees for the entire family. For instance, women have been the main targets of the growing alcoholism among men, which, many believe is the result of frustration and the lack of control over one's life. For single women or women headed households, living on meagre rations coupled with the lack of access to even the informal job markets has made survival a daily quest. This paper therefore also attempts to document women's experiences in the camps – those of marginality and exclusion and community and identity.

As in the case of a number of migrant communities, refugee families often only have mnemonic capital to rely on. This, combined with their experience of life in the refugee camps, forms some of the main components that shape identity formation. For instance, in the case of refugee women, it is the overwhelming sense of loss and injustice, deprivation and desperation that have contributed to the construction of a Bhutanese refugee identity.

How do these notions of identity and nationhood influence refugee women's choice of repatriation, third country resettlement or local integration? What are the specific conditions under which any of the above options would be acceptable to them? Answers to these and other questions are sought to be documented in the present paper not merely with a view to drawing women out of the shadows but also because of an inherent belief that without women's voices being heard, and their notions, fears and concerns being considered, there really cannot be a just and durable solution to the Bhutanese refugee crisis.

Ultimately, this paper attempts to highlight the strength and suffering, despair and determination and agency and resilience that make up the Bhutanese refugee woman. It has been a very long and arduous journey for them and the hope is that this research study might in some way help in taking them closer to their desired solution.

The Lhotshampas: Searching for History

In comparison with other South Asian countries, very little is known about Bhutan within or outside the South Asian region. For a significant majority of those who have heard about the country, the mention of Bhutan conjures up images of high snow capped mountains, gurgling streams, pristine forests and a quaint people, loyal to their king and happy with their unexposed, unspoilt and 'low ecological impact' lives.³ The credit for this well cultivated image goes mainly to the government of Bhutan that has maintained a safe distance from the vagaries of global tourism and to some extent, global capital.⁴ Barring North Korea and Burma, there are few states that maintain a comparable closed-door policy. Bhutan's closed-door policy is explained as the only way for a small Himalayan, Buddhist kingdom to survive and maintain its separate national and cultural identity. The need for this 'separateness' is expressed in the context of Bhutan's location both geographically and politically as a country land locked between two of the region's giants - India on the eastern, southern and western boundaries and China (Tibet) on its northern frontier.

Few, however, know that Bhutan has not always been the closely guarded Shangri-la it is made out to be but in fact has been as exposed to a series of migrations as any other country in the region.

The major ethnic groups that have made Bhutan their home include the Ngalongs who are numerically dominant in the west and politically and economically dominant throughout Bhutan, the Sarchops or 'Easterners' who, as the name suggests are concentrated in the eastern districts and the Lhotshampas or 'Southern Borderlander' who once again are concentrated in the southern districts. (Hutt 2003) Lesser known communities include the Khengpas mostly found in Mongar district, Monpas, Doyas, Toktops and Brokpas who occupy small pockets of land in eastern, central and northern Bhutan.

The Ngalongs and Sarchops together make up what is known as the Drukpa community. While both practice a Tibetan form of Mahayana Buddhism, the Ngalongs belong to the Drukpa Kagyu school, while the Sarchops follow the Nyingma school. Linguistically as well,

the two communities differ. The Ngalongs speak Dzongkha known to be of Tibetan derivative while the Sarchops speak Tshangla belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family. (Ibid, 5) The Lhotshampas or Southern Bhutanese on the other hand are of Nepali origin and speak the Nepali language. It is important to note that like in Nepal, there are several communities within the ethnic Nepali community of Southern Bhutan and while it may appear that the Lhotshampas are a homogenous Hindu community, in reality, they are quite diverse and include those who speak Tibeto-Burman languages and practice Buddhism as well as a few who practice Christianity.⁵

Bhutan is a Buddhist Kingdom, with the dominant position occupied by the Ngalongs in Bhutanese political and economic life. The Drukpa Kagyu school of Buddhism followed by the Ngalongs has been accorded the status of 'state religion' and the language of the Ngalongs, Dzongkha is the national language.

There exist huge discrepancies in the various estimates of Bhutan's population and consequently the percentage of Ngalongs, Sarchops and Lhotshampas, three numerically dominant ethno-linguistic communities. In 1971 when Bhutan became a member of the UN it declared its population to be 1.2 million but later in 1991 the figure came down to 600,000.⁶ The latest census conducted in 2005 recorded a figure of 672,425, which includes a 'floating population' of 37,443 comprising of visitors and migrant labour from neighbouring countries.⁷ With regard to disaggregated data on the ethno-linguistic communities, the available figures swing dramatically. According to the estimates used by Michael Hutt cited by Tessa Piper (1995), the Ngalongs make up 10-28%, the Sharchops 30-40% and the Lhotshampas 25-52% of the Bhutanese population. Official figures are 20% Ngalong, 37% Sharchop, and 30% Lhotshampas. Lhotshampa refugees however assert that they formed close to 50% of the population of Bhutan. (Lee 1998, 120)

A brief historical background of Bhutan

Irrespective of the estimates, the ethnic break up clearly indicates that rather than a homogenous society; Bhutan is a mosaic of a variety of ethnicities that migrated to the country at different stages of its history. As notions of 'outsider' and 'indigenous Bhutanese' lie at the centre of the Bhutanese refugee crisis, and the roots of its birth lie in the privileging of one culture over other existing cultures, it becomes

necessary to briefly discuss the documented history of Bhutan. The following section also brings out some of the problematic areas in much of documented Bhutanese history, which, generally speaking, provides very little information on communities other than the Ngalongs. Scholars like Dhakal and Strawn (1994) and Hutt (2003), have attempted to delve into the depths of Bhutan's history and draw out its multi-layered past. What follows is a summary of the work available in this context.

Tibetan Migration into Bhutan

Some the earliest instances of migration into Bhutan from Tibet can be traced to the time following the advent of Tibetan King Songsten Gampo and the Padmasambhava also known as Guru Rinpoche to Bhutan, both credited with introducing Buddhism in the country. As noted by Michael Hutt (2003, 17) the 10th century marks the development of Buddhism in Bhutan, particularly the Drukpa Kagyu school which was backed by the powerful ruling family of Ralung in Tibet. While the Drukpa Kagyu school dominated the west, the Nyingma order prevailed in central and eastern Bhutan. Bhutan was thus carved between the powerful families of the two orders both claiming Tibetan descent.

The next phase of Bhutanese political history begins with the arrival in 1616 of the Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594 –1651).⁸ Ngawang Namgyel is said to have established himself in western Bhutan and after repelling a series of Tibetan and Mongol invasions he was able to put in place administrative structures that continue to influence Bhutan's present administrative systems.⁹ The position of the *Shabdrung* was to be passed on to successive reincarnations.¹⁰ The *Shabdrungs* that followed were merely symbolic heads and power, especially temporal began to be increasingly concentrated in the hands of *Penlops* or regional chiefs who belonged to some of the prominent families of Bhutan and represented politically and economically powerful regions within Bhutan like Paro and Tongsa.

The Establishment of the Wangchuk Dynasty

The establishment of the present day Wangchuk monarchy in Bhutan is closely connected with the involvement of the British in Bhutanese affairs particularly when the British and the Bhutanese clashed over the Assam Duars in what is known as the Anglo-Bhutan Duar war. (Hutt 2003; Sreeja 2006) The British annexed the Duars and the

Sinchula Treaty of 1865 followed suit. (Ibid) The Duar wars are a landmark in Bhutan's political history not only for establishing British influence in Bhutanese affairs but also because, according to many, they mark the beginnings of significant Nepali migration into Bhutan.

This period also bore witness to serious competition for ascendancy and after three civil wars, by 1885 the *Penlop* of Tongsa region, Ugyen Wangchuk established himself as the superior power. His ascent to the position of King of Bhutan, however, came after his support to the British incursion into Tibet in 1904-05 following which he was appointed the first hereditary King of Bhutan or Druk Gyalpo on 17th December 1907. (Hutt 2003, 20)

The Wangchuk Kings set about consolidating power and subjugating the various hitherto powerful families by concentrating power in the monarchy. It was during the reign of Jigme Wangchuk, Bhutan's second king that the Indo-Bhutan Friendship Treaty was signed in 1949. Most of the reforms and attempts at modernisation came during the reign of the third King, Jigme Dorje Wangchuk. Some of the reforms included the establishment of the Tshogdu or the National Assembly in 1953 as well as the Lodoi Tshogde or Royal Advisory Council in 1965 (Joseph 2006). His term also saw the initiation of Five-Year Plans, the abolition of serfdom and land reforms including a ceiling on land holding. (Hutt 2003)

In the context of the present study, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk's reign is particularly significant for granting citizenship to the Nepali settlers in southern Bhutan through the 1958 Nationality Act. This enactment is significant as it not only, for the first time recognised members of the Lhotshampa community as legitimate Bhutanese citizens but also became the only benchmark for ascertaining the citizenship status of Lhotshampas both in the 1985 Citizenship Act and the census carried out in 1988.

Jigme Dorji Wangchuk ruled till 1972 and was succeeded by his son Jigme Singye Wangchuk at the age of 17. King Jigme Singye Wangchuk's rule, for the purposes of the study, is possibly the most significant as it ushered in a series of exclusionary laws and policies that alienated a large majority of the Lhotshampa population and ultimately resulted in their exile.¹¹

The Lhotshampas: An invisibilised people

As noted by Michael Hutt (2003) in his introduction to '*Unbecoming Citizens*' few scholars on Bhutanese history have studied and documented the history of the people of southern Bhutan or the Bhutanese of Nepali origin. Although the works of some scholars certainly shed a certain amount of light on this issue, most of it focuses on the recent past, at best beginning in the 1950s. (See Sinha 1991; Rose 1979; Dhakal and Strawn 1994) As a result there is very little and often patchy primary and secondary material available on the early settlements of the Lhotshampas, their lives and their politics.

In the present context where one of the main concerns of the Bhutanese refugee community has been to establish their existence in Bhutan for several generations and to refute the claim of the Bhutanese government that they are recent migrants from India and Nepal, the need for an established historical record for the Lhotshampas becomes more urgent than ever before. In such a situation, and given the subordinate position that women occupy in societies the world over, it is hardly surprising that even cases where the recent history of the Lhotshampas has been documented, precious little is available on the experience and agency of Lhotshampa women in the past as well as in the present.¹²

As in the sections above, the following is an attempt to summarise the available historical accounts of Lhotshampa settlers.

In tracing the history of the Lhotshampas in Bhutan, Hutt refers to friendly relations between the King of Gorkha (a small principality in central Nepal) Ram Shah and the Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. Stating that further research is required for establishing the chronology of Bhutanese-Nepali relations, he draws three main inferences from the available material. Firstly that Bhutanese lamas were summoned to Nepali courts on at least two occasions to perform rites for births of sons and that they were highly revered; that donations to and maintenance of particular religious sites were customary tasks of Bhutanese Shabdrungs and that Nepali kings had granted rights over Swayambhu and other religious establishments and the revenue from some villages in Nepal for the ritual services rendered by the Shabdrungs in the past. (Hutt 2003, 29)

Further, Hutt refers to sources that suggest an agreement between Ram Shah and the Shabdrung where some 40 or 50 families from Nepal were sent to “populate and protect the Shabdrung or Dharmadeva’s lands”.

Conversations with Bhutanese refugee women about Lhotshampa history often bring up references were made to a “*Tamapatra* [copper plate] agreement between the Shabdrung and the Nepali king to send Nepalis to Bhutan to develop their land” adding that they were required to go to Bhutan because the “*Bhotay*”¹³ were incapable of developing their lands as they were of *jungle jaat* [akin to aboriginal communities used in a manner that signifies ‘under development’].”¹⁴

Regardless of these earlier migrations, most historians agree that Nepali migration to Darjeeling and then southern Bhutan started around early to mid 19th century. As pointed out by Hutt (1996) Nepali migration started with the establishment of Darjeeling as a hill station on the land gifted to the British by the rulers of Sikkim in 1835. With the rapidly growing tea industry in Darjeeling there was a growing demand for tens of thousands of workers.

Further, according to D.N.S. Dhakal and Strawn (1994) in 1900 the responsibility of collecting revenue from the southern districts was entrusted with the Dorji family of Ha Valley. Ugyen Dorji had supported the King Ugyen Wangchuk and therefore after Ugyen Wangchuk’s ascent to the throne, Dorji was rewarded with the position of agent for liaison with the British and was also given the task of recruiting and settling Nepali immigrants in Southern Bhutan as *taungya* villagers or settlers in forest villages.¹⁵ Recruitment of Nepali settlers by Dorji was done mainly through *Thikadars* or contractors who were given permission to carry out their tasks through a royal decree or *Kasho*. The earliest *Kasho* available dates to 1887 and was given to one of the better-known figures in Lhotshampa history – Garjaman Gurung. (Dhakal and Strawn 1994)

Additionally, as Hutt points to correspondence of Charles Bell the British settlement officer in Kalimpong in 1903 which refers to a ‘mistake’ in the boundary line between Bhutan and Darjeeling established in 1866-67 where approximately 70 to 80 square miles of land had been wrongly incorporated into Bhutanese territory. Referring to this ‘mistake’ Bell notes that settlers, of whom at least 4/5th were Nepali, occupied this land in question. Hutt also records observations made by John Claude

White, the British Political Officer in Sikkim that refers to the existence of Nepali settlers in southern Bhutan. (Hutt 2003, 40)

As a result while there may be grounds for challenging the claim that people of Nepali origin existed in Bhutan in the 17th century. There is evidence to establish that migration in significant numbers of ethnic Nepalis to southern Bhutan started in the mid to late 19th century. Further, the fact that the Dorji family actively recruited Nepalis lends credence to the commonly held Lhotshampa belief that they did not go to Bhutan in search of a better life alone but were in fact ‘invited’ to develop southern Bhutan.

However, with the meagre references to Lhotshampas, there is little known about the people, their lives and even their leaders. In this near vacuum Garjaman Gurung and Mahasur Chhetri emerge as key figures.

The legend of Garjaman Gurung and his father Dalchan Gurung involves a story of a *Thikadar* who rose to great wealth and power and occupied an important position in the Lhotshampa community.¹⁶ The legend touches upon the early life of Dalchan Gurung and his rise to prominence as a supplier of wood, bamboo, thatch, rubber and lime to the newly emerging tea gardens in Darjeeling. The legend goes on to state that Dalchan Gurung and Garjaman Gurung rose to prominence as *Thikadars* and were granted a free hold lease in most of Samchi by the *Penlop* of Paro in 1887. Narratives on the life of Garjaman Gurung describe his rise to power leading to his murder at the hands of the *Penlop* of Paro supposedly due to jealousy. As Hutt points out, one of the most important aspects of the narrative of Garjaman Gurung is that it is used to strengthen Lhotshampa claims of bringing development and ‘modern’ cash based economy to Bhutan. (Hutt 2003, 54)

Mahasur Chhetri is the other persona who occupies a prominent place in Lhotshampa historical consciousness. As a Bhutanese refugee woman pointed out “he was the first martyr to our cause”.¹⁷ Information on Mahasur Chhetri, although patchy, points towards his close association with the formation of the Jai Gorkha, affiliated to the All India Gorkha League. He is thus credited as one of the earliest Lhotshampas to articulate the need for political change. His death at the hands of Jigme Palden Dorji, the then Prime Minister of Bhutan has acquired the status of folklore.

However, the history of political activity among the Lhotshampa community is not restricted to a few individuals. Around the same time as the formation of Jai Gorkha, was the formation of the Bhutan State Congress in 1950 along the lines of the Indian National Congress. (Dhakal and Strawn 1994) Among the founding members of the Bhutan State Congress was D.B. Gurung, the grandson of Garjaman Gurung. The main aims of the Congress were to highlight the grievances of the Southern Bhutanese especially on issues of taxation and citizenship.¹⁸ In March 1954 a demonstration was organised in Sarbhong where some demonstrators were shot dead.¹⁹ While members of the Bhutan State Congress were exiled, several reforms including the granting of citizenship to Lhotshampas, were introduced after the agitations of 1954.

Citizenship Act of 1958

The enactment in 1958 marks a defining moment in the history of the Bhutanese refugees.

Some important features of the Citizenship Act of 1958²⁰

Articles 3, 4 and 5 of the 1958 Nationality Law set out the conditions for obtaining Bhutanese citizenship, as follows:

3 Any person can become a Bhutanese national:

- a) If his/her father is a Bhutanese National and is a resident of the Kingdom of Bhutan; or
- b) If any person is born within or outside Bhutan after the commencement of this law provided the previous father is a Bhutanese National at the time of his/her birth.

4 (1) If any foreigner who has reached the age of majority and is otherwise eligible, presents a petition to an official appointed by His Majesty and takes an oath of loyalty according to the rules laid down by the Government to the satisfaction of the concerned official, he may be enrolled as a Bhutanese National, provided that:

- a) The person is a resident of the Kingdom of Bhutan for more than ten years; and

b) Owns agricultural land within the Kingdom.

4 (2) If a woman, married to a Bhutanese National, submits a petition and takes the oath of loyalty as stated above to the satisfaction of the concerned official, and provided that she has reached the age of majority and is otherwise eligible, her name may be enrolled as a Bhutanese National.

4 (3) If any person has been deprived of his Bhutanese Nationality or has renounced his Bhutanese Nationality or forfeited his Bhutanese Nationality, the person cannot become a Bhutanese National again unless His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo grants approval to do so.

5 (1) If any foreigner submits petition to His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo according to rules described in the above sections, and provided the person has reached the age of majority and is otherwise eligible, and has performed satisfactorily in Government service for at least five years and has been residing in the Kingdom of Bhutan for at least 10 years, he may receive a Bhutanese Nationality Certificate. Once the certificate is received, such a person has to take the oath of loyalty according to the rules laid down by the Government and from that day onwards, his name will be enrolled as a Bhutanese National.

5 (2) Any foreigner who has reached the age of majority and is otherwise eligible, can receive a Nationality Certificate provided that in the opinion of His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo his conduct and his performance as a Government servant is satisfactory.

A condition for revocation of citizenship included the acquisition of nationality of another country; the renunciation of citizenship and immigration to another country; upon pledge of loyalty to another country; and is registered as a Bhutanese national but has left his agricultural land and stopped residing in Bhutan.²¹ Among other reasons citizenship was liable to be cancelled for acting and/or speaking against the King or people of Bhutan.

The granting of citizenship in 1958 was notified by royal proclamation. It was not, however, accompanied by any special certification process and there is little evidence that the enactment of the 1958 law made any real practical difference to the population. (Thronson 1993)

As mentioned earlier, the 1958 enactment is significant not only because it bestowed citizenship on Nepali settlers who had arrived in Bhutan more than half a century ago but it also signifies the recognition of these settlers or Lhotshampas as a legitimate ethnic group in Bhutan.

Developments in Bhutan from 1958 – 1988: Alienation through Integration

From the beginning of the 1950s, Bhutan distinctively aligned itself increasingly with India and adopted to a certain extent the Indian systems of governance including the system of a planned economy.²² One of the fall outs of planning, according to the Bhutanese authorities, was the implementation of development activities under the Five-Year Plans which brought with it large influx of migrant labour from India and Nepal. This labour, after having settled down as illegal immigrants, they contend, formed the bulk of the Lhotshampa population and therefore, had to be deported from Bhutan.²³

Possibly due to the growth of southern Bhutanese towns as centres for agriculture and commerce, and to counter any potential threat of secessionist sentiments among the Lhotshampas, the Bhutanese Government set up the National Council for Social and Commercial Promotion with a view towards national integration.²⁴ The stated aim of the council was to promote a feeling of nationalism that went beyond regional loyalties and to instill in the youth, through programmatic activities a feeling of national identity and dedicated service to the King and country.²⁵ Notably, the amendment to the 1958 Act followed suit. The 1977 amendment to the Citizenship Act was enacted to make the eligibility criteria for citizenship more stringent.

The 1977 amendment to the Citizenship Act

Under the 1977 amendment the length of “unblemished service required before citizenship may be granted” was increased to 15 years. For persons not in Government service, citizenship would be granted after twenty years of residency in Bhutan. The criteria for spouses of Bhutanese nationals to acquire citizenship were also tightened under

the 1977 amendment. Spouses who were not Bhutanese nationals were allowed to live in Bhutan, but would have to apply for citizenship. The children of a Bhutanese father and a non-national mother were automatically granted citizenship, but the children of a Bhutanese mother and a non-national father had to apply for citizenship. Additionally, as per the 1977 legislation, all applicants needed to have some knowledge of both written and spoken Dzongkha, as well as some knowledge of the country's history. (Piper 1995)

Most of the Lhotshampas found this last criterion particularly difficult to comply with since Nepali was the language of communication in the southern districts and very few spoke or found it necessary to learn Dzongkha. The restrictions placed on citizenship for non-Bhutanese spouses meant that marriage across the border with Nepalis from Nepal, Sikkim or Darjeeling, as was often the practice to keep intact caste and community requirements, became increasingly difficult. The impacts of restrictions on marriage with non-Bhutanese nationals were obvious and several refugees found themselves and their families disenfranchised in the 1988 census. Close at the heels of the 1977 Act came the Bhutan Marriage Act 1980. (Ibid)

This Act laid down a number of conditions concerning marriage between Bhutanese citizens and non-nationals thus making marriage to non-Bhutanese nationals highly undesirable. Under the 1980 Act, a Bhutanese citizen who married a foreigner lost the right to government assistance in the form of land, seed, loans and livestock, as well as health benefits. In case of government service, promotion would be denied from the day of marriage, and Bhutanese citizens working in defence or foreign affairs would be removed from service. All government funding for education and training would terminate upon marriage to a non-national and any expenses incurred up to the day of the marriage would have to be refunded.

Many Bhutanese refugees claim that the act was specifically targeted towards them. As a large percentage of Lhotshampas were agriculturalists the loss of access to seeds, land, and loans had a direct impact on their occupations. Many felt that the Act was used only against the Lhotshampas, as there were several Drukpa officials with foreign wives who continued to occupy high positions in various important government departments including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Bhutan Citizenship Act 1985

The most contentious of the Acts affecting the Lhotshampa community and one that has been held directly responsible for de-nationalising the Lhotshampas and leading to their eviction, was the 1985 citizenship enactment. The Bhutan Citizenship Act, 1985 tightened the already rigid criteria for citizenship. Under this, citizenship by birth was only available to persons whose parents were both Bhutanese citizens. Those with only one parent as a Bhutanese citizen were required to apply for citizenship by naturalization. Additionally unlike the requirement of some knowledge of Dzongkha in 1977 amendment, the 1985 Act required applicants to demonstrate proficiency in speaking, writing and reading Dzongkha and good knowledge of the culture, customs, traditions and history of Bhutan. Further, anyone who had been imprisoned for criminal offences in Bhutan or elsewhere or had spoken or acted against the King, country and people of Bhutan (*Tsa-Wa-Sum*) was not eligible to apply for citizenship. The most contentious provision was one that retroactively made 1958 the cut- off year for determining citizenship and limited the granting of citizenship to those who could prove residence since before 31 December of that year. (Ibid)

Soon after the enactment, a census was conducted in 1988 only in the southern districts of Bhutan. Many refugees allege that the census was a means of using the draconian provisions of the 1985 Act against the Lhotshampa population.

Residents of southern Bhutan were classified into seven categories. F1 was for the genuine Bhutanese citizens; F2 for returned migrants (people who left Bhutan and then returned); F3 “Drop out” cases, or people who were not around at the time of the census; F4 for non-national woman married to a Bhutanese man; F5 for a non-national man married to a Bhutanese woman; F6 for adoption cases (children who had been legally adopted); and F7 non-nationals or migrants and illegal settlers.

The way in which the census was conducted was found to be highly problematic for most Lhotshampas for a variety of reasons including lack of clear information on the implication of being placed in certain categories. Since the census required documentary proof of residence of 1958, census teams often refused to consider proof that dated prior to 1958.²⁶ As per the narratives of some Bhutanese refugee women,

census teams were unduly rigid and penalised people by declaring them as non-citizens on the smallest pretext.

Policy of One Nation One People

In 1989 by a royal decree, *Drighlam Namza* or the ‘traditional way of life’ was introduced. This mainly included the imposition of the language (Dzongkha) and dress code (*Gho* for men and *Kira* for women) of the politically dominant Drukpas of western and central Bhutan. *Drighlam Namza* was introduced as a part of the Sixth Five- Year plan and was intended to promote and project a unique national identity. The thrust of this policy is clearly stated in a document of the Department of Information which explains that “due to the close geographical proximity and common racial origin, there has, however, been a tendency among some of the southern Bhutanese people to feel a greater affinity with the Nepali people living in Nepal and India than with their fellow countrymen or identify more closely with people of other nationalities.”²⁷

The imposition of *Drighlam Namza* drew sharp reactions from the Lhotshampa community as its imposition was rigid and violation of the dress code attracted a fine of Nu 150. The fine was vigorously levied as it allowed the policeman who collected the fine to keep half the amount. Many Bhutanese refugee women complained that under *Drighlam Namza* they were required to cut their hair short. This was once again taken as a direct affront to Nepali culture, which required women to keep their hair long. According to some refugee women, they heard that under this policy, priests were not being allowed to perform even the most key rituals and rites and that their religion was under threat.²⁸

Based on the series of enactments and the *Drighlam Namza* it would be correct to conclude that from the mid 70s onwards there were concerted efforts to contain the Lhotshampa population as their growth and their ties with Nepali communities in India were seen as a potential threat to the Bhutanese Monarchy.²⁹

Brewing of discontent in Southern Bhutan³⁰

The Lhotshampa community perceived many of the laws and policies introduced in the 1970s and through the 1980s, as instruments of marginalisation. Discontent grew not only against the inherently

discriminatory nature of the laws and policies but also the methods of implementation (for example, the methods of census collection), which resulted in a heightened sense of insecurity and vulnerability. The suicide of Sita Mothe Darjee apparently triggered by her being counted as a foreigner in the 1988 census further fanned these flames of resentment (Hutt 2003, 198).

In 1989 Tek Nath Rizal and B.P. Bhandari the two Lhotshampa members of the Royal Advisory Council petitioned the King with regard to the stringent citizenship laws and the excesses of the census teams which involved the use of threats and coercion. King Jigme Singye Wangchuk then toured Chirang, Samchi and Geylephug but since he did not find claims in the petition corroborated in his interactions with the local people, Rizal was dismissed from the Royal Advisory Council and jailed for three days following which he left Bhutan for Nepal. In Birtamod in Nepal, Rizal along with other Lhotshampa dissidents formed the People's Forum Human Rights Bhutan (PFHRB). One of PFHRB's earliest public statements was made through a strongly worded pamphlet printed in September 1989 entitled 'Bhutan: We Want Justice' which spoke of political change and specifically the end of monarchy.

Arrests of many of those involved in producing and distributing the pamphlet followed suit. In November 1989 Tek Nath Rizal along with his two associates was captured by the Nepali police and handed over to the Bhutanese authorities to be imprisoned in Wangdi Phodrang.

In March 1990, the National Assembly passed a resolution that any action against the *Tsa Wa Sum*, the King, Country and the People was treasonable and was punishable by death. (Sreeja 2006) In response to the wave of arrests, several Lhotshampas – mostly young men fled across the border into India. In June 1990 the Bhutan's People Party (BPP) was formed in the Garganda Tea Estate in India.

September-October 1990 saw large-scale protests in the southern districts of Samchi, Sarbhang, Chirang and Dagana organised by the Student's Union of Bhutan (SUB), BPP and PFHRB. Official and the dissidents' accounts of these protests differ greatly. Government accounts portray the protestors as a violent armed crowd and the dissidents speak of an innocent people peacefully protesting against an autocratic regime. There are also huge discrepancies between government accounts and those of the dissidents about the number of

casualties as a result of firing by the Bhutanese security forces. The King dismissed the accusations that 327 people were killed during the demonstrations. He claimed that only 10 shots were fired at the demonstrators by the security forces from September 20-25, and that no firing was resorted to, at any other place, and that not more than 3 persons died in the firing.³¹

Both sides, however, agree that the revolt was on a massive scale. The protests involved burning of the Gho and Kira and as well as hoisting of the BPP flag alongside the national flag at various Dzongkhag or district headquarters. The term *Ngolop* was first used to refer to activists who congregated at the Garganda Tea Estate in 1989. (Sreeja 2006) From late 1990 onwards the term *Ngolop* or anti-national was frequently used while referring to Lhotshampas.

Soon after the demonstration there was a massive military and police crackdown in Southern Bhutan. As per refugee accounts, anyone suspected of participating in the demonstrations was hauled up, taken for questioning and often arrested. Tales of torture from those arrested and later released spread through out the community and many fled to avoid similar fate. By a circular issued by the Home Minister, anyone who had left the country to assist the *Ngolops* or anti-nationals would be deemed to have lost his citizenship. Further, it added that the family members of such persons would also forfeit their citizenship and would have to leave the country. (Thronson 1993, 18) Rumours of rape of women and the use of Lhotshampa women as sex slaves for the army camps that were set up in the area were another reason why many families preferred to leave their homes. Schools, health care facilities and development projects were shut down in the southern districts. Lhotshampa students and applicants for scholarship were required to obtain a 'No Objection Certificate' to continue their studies. The NOC was given only if the candidate was able to prove that neither he nor anyone in the family had any links with the demonstration or the *Ngolops*.

From Citizens to Refugees

Every effort from regular harassment by the army to restricting Lhotshampas from selling their produce in the markets was made to push them out of the country. Further, many were made to sign voluntary migration forms before they left Bhutan, as this would make revocation of their citizenship legitimate as per the provisions of the 1977

Citizenship Act. Refugee accounts describe that even though some money was provided in lieu of handing over ones land by signing the voluntary migration form; the amount given was almost one third of the value of the land. Additionally, according to some refugees, some more money was cut from this amount on the pretext of a loan taken by one of the family members at an earlier date. Needless to say, no documentary proof was provided. Far from being in a position to negotiate, Lhotshampas had no choice but to accept what was given to them.

The mass eviction of Lhotshampas started with the arrest and eviction of senior Lhotshampa bureaucrats and members of the National Assembly.³² Discouraged by the treatment meted out to their leaders, many lost hope of any justice and decided to leave before they too were arrested, tortured and/or raped.

The influx of refugees into Nepal started in 1991 and it steadily increased through 1992. Reports of torture and intimidation also increased. It was reported that by mid 1992 there were as many as a thousand refugees arriving per day. By late 1994 this steady stream was slowly reduced to a trickle of around one or two families per day. The exodus was mainly from the southern districts of Samchi, Sarbhang, Dagana, Chirang and Samdrup Jongkhar. Many Lhotshampas living in the town of Phuntshoeling in Chukha district were also forced into exile. In the early days refugees set up camps in Assam and West Bengal on the Indo-Bhutan border in and around Garganda, Devsurey, Luksan, Mooday and Saralpada. However, due to harassment by the Indian security forces they were forced to leave for Nepal.³³

Unable to handle the growing number of refugees, the Government of Nepal requested UNHCR's intervention. The UN Refugee Agency stepped in to set up camps and up until June 1993 all incoming evictees from Bhutan were treated as prima facie refugees. It was only from June 1993 onwards that UNHCR undertook a refugee screening process with the help of the Government of Nepal.

The first camp was set up in Maidhar, the riverbed of the Maikhola River. By May 1992, Maidhar was home to more than 24,000 refugees. The pitiful conditions at Maidhar, and that many refugees especially the elderly and children died here due to a cholera epidemic and the lack of adequate food and access to health care, is etched permanently in the memories of the refugees. Before the 1992 monsoons, more

camps were set up and the refugee population was shifted to Timai, Goldhap, Beldangi I, Beldangi II, Beldangi Ext, Khudunabari³⁴ in Jhapa district and Sanischare or Pathri in Morang district.

The camps now house around 105,000 Bhutanese women, men and children.

Although admittedly, the above account is merely a brief summary of some of the available material of Bhutanese history and events that led to the creation of the Bhutanese refugee crisis, it would be fair to say that women have remained largely absent from these accounts.

What follows is therefore an attempt to not merely document Bhutanese refugee women's narratives with a view to "constructing their history" but more importantly to document women's experiences while attempting to bring to the fore their roles both as subjects and agents of change.

Memories of Forced Migration

What can she tell you? I spent the money, I was arranging everything... she just sat in the bus and came.

A refugee man from Samchi district in response to my request to document his wife's experience of forced eviction from Bhutan³⁵

The oft-repeated phrase about women in marginalised and particularly displaced communities being caught in a “double-bind” (Mehta 2002) comes to mind when documenting Bhutanese refugee women's narratives of their lives in Bhutan. Persecution, harassment and in some cases physical torture including rape by the Bhutanese authorities, the forced eviction and their lives in the camps are part of the narratives of the refugee women. In a situation where the Bhutanese refugee community ranks among the most neglected in the world, Bhutanese refugee women find themselves at the bottom of the pecking order as far as attention and participation is concerned. At best, Bhutanese women's narratives are given space when recounting the atrocities, especially rape, committed by the Bhutanese army against the Lhotshampa population.³⁶

Although it is well known and well documented that women and men within a community experience the impact of emergency situations differently there is often an attempt by representatives of the affected community and their advocates to gloss over differences of caste, class or gender within the community, and present ‘one voice’ to the outside world. This posturing is not only negligent of the experience and suffering of a significant section of the community but is also dangerous because in its attempt to project one voice and a shared experience, it drowns out certain crucial aspects and grievances without which a just resolution and reconciliation cannot be possible.

This study therefore attempts to bring to the fore Bhutanese women's stories of strength, suffering, agency and resilience. As mentioned in the section on methodology, women's accounts have been collected through detailed interviews of randomly selected refugee women. Large parts of these narratives are drawn from the depths of women's memories and are no doubt a mediated account of their lives. It is also true that memory and its narration is constantly rearranged and

structured by the narrator depending on the exigencies of the situation and her perceived purpose of the narration. Mediation also takes place at the level of the person who documents the narration as she often has the freedom to privilege certain parts of the narratives over others.³⁷ At the same time, as Hutt suggests, "...it would be profligate to dismiss a life story narrative as merely a window on an individual psyche which can tell us nothing about broader social realities and processes." (Hutt 2003, 232) In fact as pointed out by Tonkin, "memories with which people interpret the present and go on to make the future are also social in that we recall social relationships, and scenes experienced along with other people; so that memories are less individual than is commonly supposed."³⁸

What follows is therefore a weaving together of a number of narratives in an attempt to bring out the diverse experiences and voices of women – of life in Bhutan, the forced eviction and life in the camps towards contributing to a social history of the Lhotshampa community.

Life in Bhutan before the ‘Andolan’

When I think of Bhutan, I see my land – because that is where I worked.

A 39-year old refugee woman from Sarbhang district³⁹

Most of the women, except those who were very young when they left Bhutan, when asked what they remembered about their life in Bhutan were quick to respond with "Oh I remember everything". With memory as the only capital, it was evident that memories of Bhutan were not only closely guarded and preserved but also in many ways treated like an inheritance to be passed down the generations.

Given that the Lhotshampas or Bhutanese of Nepali origin were an essentially agricultural community, when recounting their life in Bhutan and what they remember about it, almost all women began their conversations with accounts of the land they owned and worked upon. Most gave details of the kind and the amount of land they had, how much was *khet* or land for growing paddy and how much of was *bari* or land for other types of cultivation. Vivid pictures were painted of the landscape, nature of the land and the kind of cultivation. That cultivation of paddy, maize, millets, vegetables, betel nut, oranges, ginger and cardamom was evident from the accounts of the women interviewed. Many also reared cattle and goat. The detailed descriptions

of the land, cattle and produce largely point to a life of comfort and prosperity, recounted with a deep sense of loss and injustice especially when juxtaposed with the poverty that they had been forced to live in for the last 16 years. As a 49-year old woman from Sarbhang narrated, “[m]y parents were farmers. We had 21 acres of land. Apart from paddy, millet and oranges, we also grew lemon, peaches and pears. We had a very happy childhood and did not lack anything”.⁴⁰

Often such narratives are treated with caution, as there is, sometimes, a tendency to exaggerate what used to be and what was lost. It is important however, to note that not all the accounts of life in Bhutan spoke of great wealth and comfort. Women’s narratives ranged from “I know we had land but not much, we grew paddy and also vegetables. We were happy”⁴¹ to “[w]e had a lot of land around 17 acres... I had to do a lot of work and even work in the neighbour’s field. Sometimes the paddy that we cultivated was not enough for us so I had to work and earn money”⁴². Further, there were also a few who did not claim to own land. For instance, a 70-year old woman from Samchi explained “[w]e did not have our own land but worked as share-croppers. In Bhutan we had to work very hard but we had enough to eat and lived happily. Compared to that it is very relaxed here but there is nothing to call my own. Here, if we run short of food we cannot work, we just have to sit. There is nothing we can do about it”.⁴³

Most women also spoke in great detail about their houses in Bhutan. Many described the structure of their house, the material used, the number of rooms and the fact that they had access to facilities like running water and electricity.⁴⁴ Once again, while talking about their homes, in several cases there was an effort to ensure that it was amply clear to the listener that the women had not always lived in huts and in fact were accustomed to a much more comfortable lifestyle. Here again, as in the case of land, it is important to note that not all spoke of large comfortable houses and some women described their homes as small but sufficient. “I remember the house a little. It was a small house and the door was on the western side. We had a beautiful flower garden,” recalled a 22-year old woman from Dagona.⁴⁵

Generally speaking, however, the women’s accounts of life in Bhutan present a typical picture of a harmonious agriculture based existence, replete with stories of honest hard work that bore fruit. The great amount of emphasis on the kind of food available and the variety of fruits and

vegetables that they ate has to be understood in the context of the refugee camps where eating vegetables is often a once-a-week event and eating fruit is a luxury that most cannot afford.⁴⁶ Further, since a majority of women view their roles primarily as providers and managers of food within the family, the recurring appearance of “plenty and delicious food”, in women’s accounts of themselves can be seen as a reflection of their frustration with not being able to perform this role adequately in camp conditions.

While most women’s lives in Bhutan revolved around working in the fields and tending to cattle, there were a significant number of those interviewed who had attended school and had aspired for higher studies. Among these, a large number of women had attended school up to the sixth or seventh standards but had to discontinue their schooling because of marriage, the ‘*Andolan*’⁴⁷ and the shutting down of schools that followed. Memories of school were often recounted with great fondness for the schools, the activities and the teachers. “I remember our schools – they were of better quality than what we have here. I was good at sports – I used to play football, volleyball, skipping and table tennis. I also took part in cultural programmes. I represented Chirang district in girl’s football. We won only once. I went to school up to class six after which due to the demonstration, the school had to close down. I would have been a good football player if I had stayed on.”⁴⁸ In a similar vein another woman recalled “a few years ago I met a classmate of mine in Jaigaon, (a village bordering the Bhutanese border town of Phuntshoeling). She said that she was a nurse now. I felt very bad. Had I been allowed to stay on and not been forced out, I too could have become a nurse, could have made something out of my life.”⁴⁹ Thus women’s narratives not only spoke of their loss in terms of homes, land and lifestyle but also the loss of opportunity.

Generally speaking, from the narratives collected, there emerges a picture of a vibrant and rich social and cultural life for Lhotshampa women in Bhutan. Women remembered very fondly the sowing season and the “Asari Geet” that was sung while planting paddy but noted rather sadly that they had not sung the song ever since they left Bhutan. Talk of weddings was another topic that invoked a descriptive response. Women spoke of ‘Ratauli’ a ‘women’s only’ celebration that took place after the wedding in the bridegroom’s house. “Ratauli needs a lot of space and privacy – we cannot have it in the camps”⁵⁰ noted a woman from Sarbhang. Once again, described with a distinct sense of loss,

a 58-year old woman from Dagana noted, “I remember in my wedding they cut a pig and a goat – now they don’t do it here. Now in a daughter’s wedding they won’t have any meat at all. In a son’s wedding only those who can afford serve a little”.⁵¹

Women’s accounts of their lives in Bhutan also project a largely linguistically if not ethnically homogenous society in Southern Bhutan.⁵² From their accounts it seems that in most cases entire hamlets within villages if not entire villages were made up of ethnic Nepalis. In some accounts, however, there are references to Drukpa neighbours or Drukpa friends in school. Once again, many of the women talked very enthusiastically about community life in Bhutan and about the grand manner in which they celebrated the *Dassai* and *Tihar* festivals⁵³. Harmonious relations with the Drukpa community are highlighted in a few accounts and as a 43-year old woman from Samchi remembers, “...earlier in *Dassai* even the Raja gave *Tika* to the people. We used to share our special food with the Drukpas in *Dassai* and they used to share their food with us in *Losar*. All this used to happen till around 1990 after which everything changed”.⁵⁴

The ‘*Andolan*’ and the Forced Eviction

In the women’s narration of their past, the census and the *Andolan* (or the demonstration of 1990) that followed marks a sharp break and turn of events that finally leads to their refugee status.⁵⁵

As observed by Michael Hutt (2003), in the interviews conducted as a part of this study too most of the women who were interviewed did not seem to have actively participated in the demonstrations and at best had a male member of the family attend a meeting of the ‘party’. As per the interviews, the women who took part in the ‘*andolan*’ were mostly taken from their schools and had little choice in the matter.⁵⁶ Further, in most cases, except a few, women said that none of their family members were actively involved while others said that they were not sure of such involvement. Some women narrated instances of being threatened into joining the demonstrations.⁵⁷ Recalling the time around the protests, a 53-year old woman from Sarbhanga said, “[w]e were asked to join it – they said that they would behead us otherwise. So my husband went with the *andolankaris* [protestors]. We were harassed and threatened from all sides”.⁵⁸

Similarly a 30 year old woman from Samdrup Jhongkar said, “[w]e were forced to participate in the demonstration by the party people. They took us to India where we stayed for a week and when we came back my brother was arrested. We did not do anything in India but the elders were electing a party representative. They were planning to do work like control alcoholism. One day we went up to Newli to protest. We were proceeding but the *Bhote* [Drukpas] broke the bridge. After that the soldiers came and occupied the schools and hospitals in our village”.⁵⁹ On the other hand a 28-year old woman from Sarbhang expressed great anger at the memory of being locked up in their classrooms and not being allowed to join or even see the *Andolan*.

For a bulk of the women, however, the 1990s and especially the period around the demonstrations marks a time of instability and uncertainty and therefore a time of great stress. As schools were shut down and converted into army barracks, many were forced to discontinue their education. As a 37 year old woman from Samchi remembers, “After marriage, when I was in Phuntshoeling I joined a typing class – I used to go to class with my friends. My life was happy. If I had learnt typing I could have got a private or government job but I could not because the *andolan* had started by that time”.⁶⁰

As in several situations of conflict there are a large number of people who seem to get caught between the two warring sides while trying to continue with their daily activities. According to a schoolteacher in Geylephug, “Our people in the *andolan* would insist on us wearing *sarees* but we could not enter the school in a *saree* so we would carry our Kira in a bag and change before entering school. It was very difficult”.⁶¹

While the *Andolan* might have been at a distance for most of the women interviewed, the imposition of the Drukpa dress code, the insistence on women wearing their hair short, the burning of Nepali books, the shutting down of Nepali schools in the late eighties and the harassment by the police while enforcing the *Driglam Namza* policy is remembered in great detail. While some remember being reprimanded and fined for not wearing the Kira, one woman recalled an incident when her niece was ridiculed and humiliated in school as her teacher cut her hair in the classroom.⁶² Apart from the harassment and intimidation that followed, most women regarded the imposition of Drukpa culture one of the major reasons for their discontent.

Census

At the time of census I thought they were doing it for a good cause but I don't know what they ended up doing.

An 80-year old woman from Sarbhang district⁶³

The census conducted only in the southern districts in 1988 turned out to be one of the most effective tools for stripping Lhotshampas of their citizenship. While all the women interviewed knew about the census, many seemed unaware of the exact categories that they were put in. Memories of the census involved a sense of helplessness caused presumably by the lack of information on the process and purpose of the census as well as the high handedness in the way in which it was conducted with little room for appeal. Many suffered due to its rigid rules and the determination of the census teams to not allow even the slightest flexibility. “There was a difference in the name of my grandfather in the census records in Chirang and Geylephug. During the census they asked us to bring the original census order – when doing the tally they realised that the names are not matching. My father’s brother had the original census order from Chirang so he was placed in category one. We could not produce the census order so we were put in category 7 [non-nationals]” said a 39 year old woman from Sarbhang.⁶⁴

Several narratives pointed out that far from being an exercise to enumerate the population of the country, the census, was essentially a tool to harass the Lhotshampas into leaving Bhutan. As a 30-year old woman from Sarbhang remembers “My uncle’s daughter was staying with us at the time of the census since her father had passed away and her mother had remarried. My father asked the *Mandal* [village headman] if we could include her as a part of our family and he said yes. But when the census was done, we were all placed in F1 and she was in F4. The *Mandal* accused my father of lying and passing off my cousin as a part of the family and from then on he started harassing us”.⁶⁵

The census was particularly difficult on non-Bhutanese women married to Bhutanese men. In several instances and as is seen in any diaspora, marriages between members of the diaspora (in this case Bhutanese of Nepali origin) and people of the country of origin (Nepal) or diaspora settled in other countries, for example, India, is very common. Caste and community requirements often encourage such marriages. The census and the manner in which it was conducted rendered many such women, who had been married to Bhutanese nationals for decades,

as non-nationals. As a 50-year old woman from Sarbhang recalls, “[w]hen I was married and I went there [Bhutan] we had to get our marriage registered. At the registration office they told me that I would have to obey all the laws of the land and then one year later they gave me my marriage certificate, which I had to renew every year. But that year when we left, when I went to renew it, they kept the certificate with them and said that they would send it later. They did not give me any submission receipt. My husband was born in Bhutan – his family had been there for 3-4 generations. My census did not get recorded as I had only a marriage certificate and that too was with the officials. I don’t know what category they put us in – they did not show us the file. I don’t know which category others in my family were kept in but they all, unlike me, had citizenship cards.”⁶⁶

The manner in which the census was conducted made those already vulnerable even more susceptible to abuse and exploitation. In the words of a 70-year old woman from Sarbhang, “I had been a widow for six years when I left Bhutan. My father-in-law disowned us in the census and the government officials alleged that my son had participated in the demonstrations. When I went to the panchayat for help with my problems, they mocked me and said – just go and have sex with some Drukpa man and all will be okay. I was humiliated and I walked away. Then some panchayat members asked me to send my daughter with firewood to the police camp – that would solve the problem they said. How could I send my disabled daughter there? I was later told that in the census I was categorised as a Bhutanese citizen but my children were categorised as non-nationals. I was told that I must leave or else pay Nu 1000 per child. The Gaonbudha (village elder), who was in fact a relation of mine, started coming everyday and asking me to leave. By this time the army had also started coming to my house at night. I used to hide under the bed when they came. Then one day when we could bear it no longer, we left.”⁶⁷

Forced Eviction: A Journey of Pain

...the day I left home I lost everything – my identity and my dignity.

A 40-year old woman from Sarbhang⁶⁸

Although most of the refugees had some kind of proof of citizenship or land tax receipts they were stripped off their citizenship on a variety of grounds including leaving the country, taking part in anti-national

activity, sheltering anti-national elements or simply being deemed as illegal immigrants.⁶⁹

Apart from a few cases where the police by order of the King sealed the homes of people who were thought to be leaders of the pro-democracy movement, from the accounts of the women interviewed as well as interactions with other refugees it is evident that the evictions followed a pattern. Soon after the demonstrations of September-October 1990, there was a concerted effort to track down all those (mostly male members) who had participated in the protests. As news of arrests and torture as well as the death in custody of a youth spread, an increasing number of men started crossing over to India to avoid arrests. Consequently, their escape to India was treated as proof of their 'guilt' of having participated in the protests. Following this, the remaining members of the family were harassed and intimidated by the administration and the army into leaving. Cases of rape and sexual exploitation of women by the locally stationed army was another reason why many families opted to leave. In other cases, the *Dungpa* (sub divisional officer) would regularly call meetings and urge certain families to leave. In some cases, families were forced to sign a 'voluntary migration form' in exchange for an amount of money, which was often less than one third of the market price of the property.

Generally speaking, while the men left Bhutan to avoid arrests, it was the women who stayed back to face the administration, deal with the army, look after the fields and as well as the children and the elderly in the family. Some were even arrested during the course of events and had to face beatings and other forms of violence from the army and the police.

Several women broke down while recounting this part of their lives and a few stated that they preferred not to talk about it. While it is not possible to recount all the narratives of physical and sexual threat, intimidation and alienation that southern Bhutanese women had to suffer in the years just before their forced migration, the narratives presented bring out a vivid picture of the scale and depth of their victimisation.

In the words of a 45-year old woman from Samchi "In 1990 March when the Bhutanese government stopped teaching Nepali in schools, there was a protest in the local school. As a response to the protests, many students were beaten and some were arrested. Fearing this, my eldest son who was only 13 left Bhutan for India. Soon after, the *Dungpa*

called my husband and asked him to bring back our son. He said that since our son was a minor, he would not be punished. My husband left that day for India on his bicycle. After that I did not see him for six months. In the meanwhile the *Dungpa* called a meeting and asked me to bring my husband and son back to Bhutan. I said I would if I had his and the government's help at which point he started verbally abusing me and went further to say, "you are beautiful, why don't you forget about your husband and marry me instead. We got into a big fight and it was only because the *Mandal* [village headman] intervened that the situation did not get worse. After this incident the *Dungpa* continued to ask me to marry him or live with him on every occasion. He even went as far as to say that he would educate my younger son and daughter if I agreed to live with him". The worst, according to the narrator, was that because of the fear of being targeted by the authorities, her parents as well as her neighbours stopped talking to her. "I felt very alone", she remembered.⁷⁰

Several women spoke of the stress and trauma during the time just prior to eviction. "I am the eldest daughter in law in the family, all my relatives lived very far away and I had no support. Also my younger sister-in-law had her own problems. Our house was near a jungle and I lived on my own with my 8 little children. ...I left Bhutan one and a half years after my husband was taken to Chemgang jail. I stayed for all that time because I felt that this was my land and my country. But the army would come very often and tell me to leave. I used to be very scared and couldn't sleep since the soldiers would almost always come at night. It was only after coming to the camps and sleeping regularly for three years here that I felt that I had caught up with my sleep."⁷¹

A 35-year old woman from Samchi district recalled "[m]y husband was arrested because they thought that he was with the 'party' and had taken part in the '*andolan*'. I was 8 months pregnant. When I went to jail to visit my husband, the *Dungpa* said that if I wanted to 'eat my husband's flesh'⁷² I should come to tomorrow or else I should convince him to leave the country. I was very shocked to hear that and also very stressed as a result of which I had a premature delivery and my child died within 26 days because I was unable to take care of him or myself."⁷³

While accounts of refugees often describe the arrests of the men folk, several women were also arrested. Of the women interviewed, two said that they had been arrested. According to a 45-year old woman from Sarbhang, "[a]fter my husband left Bhutan, soldiers started coming

to our house and breaking windows and doors. They arrested my father-in-law and brother-in-law. On 25th December around 500 soldiers raided our village. An army officer came to my house and asked for my identity card. I said I did not have it; the soldiers had destroyed our house and had taken my identity card at that time. The officer then showed me a photograph of my husband in some party – he was looking different and I was also scared at that time and so I did not recognise him. The officer hit me and yelled at me for not recognising my husband. I screamed back and said that I did not have my identity card, the soldiers had taken it and he could do what he liked about it. So then they tied my hands although they did let me carry my crying child and took my husband's first wife and me with them. We were made to walk through the forest and it was full of thorns – my child had scratches on his arms and legs. On reaching Norbuling we stopped. There were no other women there. Ten soldiers were guarding us – there was no water, no toilet, nothing. I was sure that I would get raped and killed that day. They started dumping all the men who were arrested in a truck when someone with a walky-talky came and said that they did not have orders to take us. The soldiers then brought a tape recorder and asked where my husband was – I said I did not know and that there was a letter from the King to meet all *Mandals* – he might have gone there. They told me to inform them when he returns and if I didn't they would kill us both. I asked to go home because I had another child at home. They put off the recorder and beat me with a rifle butt on my back and set us free so that we could walk back home."⁷⁴

As stories of women undergoing numerous forms of harassment, intimidation and mental and physical violence including those mentioned above, spread, many families felt that it was prudent to leave rather than risk life and personal safety. For some, especially those living close to the border, the journey to India was relatively simple. For others, however, it was once again fraught with dangers of getting caught and the sheer physical hardship of leaving in distress. Most of the women who were interviewed said that since their departure was not planned, they could not carry anything with them, except in some cases a few clothes, some rice and a few utensils. Since many had to walk to the border, it was also physically difficult to carry their possessions with them. Several women lamented that they had to leave standing crop in the field and set their cattle free in the hope that a neighbour would take them in and look after them.

Some women however, managed to carry a photograph or two of their homes in Bhutan, which are often proudly displayed in the huts; others only have their memories. Having suffered deep and intense loss, for many women, anything that they could salvage is now of greatest value. For instance, an 80-year old woman from Sarbhang proudly showed off a cane case and a tin trunk that she had brought along with her from Bhutan. “My parents had given these to me in my wedding – I have taken them everywhere” she said.⁷⁵ On the other hand the most enduring memory of loss for a 25-year old woman from Samchi was having to see her neighbour wearing one of her dresses. “We stayed for a month in Luksan. I used to help my parents in household work and sometimes used to help my father in selling vegetables and *momos* [dumplings]. We had a small vegetable and *momo* shop. One day when I was sitting at the shop, I saw my next-door neighbour walking in the street and wearing one of my dresses. I held her hand and kept asking her to give me my dress back. Soon my mother arrived and took me home. I cried the whole day”, she recounted.⁷⁶

As the only adult in one of the first families to be officially evicted from Bhutan a 50-year old woman and wife of a National Assembly member recalls,

“[w]hen my husband heard that Tek Nath Rizal was arrested, he left Bhutan. Before he left he told me that he was going to take over the work that Tek Nath Rizal did. He also told me not to leave the house at any cost... I didn’t feel like all the responsibility was on me or that I should have left with my husband. I felt like I was a partner in all this with my husband. I had to support my children’s studies and I continued to manage the contractor work like I used to. But the army started coming day and night asking for my husband. This continued for ten months. One day around 60 soldiers came and surrounded the house at about 3 in the afternoon. The *Dungpa* and 15-20 people came inside our living room. I remember I gave orange squash to all – I thought the soldiers had come because a minister from Thimpu and *Dungpa* were visiting. I also served *Doma*.⁷⁷ They sat for one and a half hours and said that the King had sent them. They said that my husband was against the King and therefore they could not allow me to live there and they would have to seal my house. My younger children had chicken pox at that time. I said that I would not leave the house and they could kill us there. They

said that they did not have orders to kill so they asked me to give the keys and leave.

I could not take anything with me – they asked me about my jewellery – I just gave them the key. I was sitting outside the house with only the clothes I was wearing. The soldiers gave me one briefcase with *sarees* and my husband's clothes and an id card. I took the card but not the briefcase. I felt that they had taken everything – what good was one brief case. My brother's daughter was with us – she arranged a handcart for us. I put the children and my husband's clothes in the cart. It was five in the evening at this time. I asked to stay for the night near the mill but they did not let me. I had to push the handcart to the border, followed by police. The whole village was watching us. The *Dungpa* who knew us well accompanied us but did not talk much except about how much gold and silver we had left behind.”⁷⁸

Not everyone, however, was escorted to the border and most were either given an ultimatum to leave or face arrest or in fact many when they left, were escaping imminent arrest.

As a 37-year old woman from Dagona recalls, “I didn't want to leave till my husband was released but they [the army] would not let me stay. One day I just had to leave. I picked up my child, a little rice and started walking with my parents and my sister. I remember it was raining and it was very difficult for us to walk. We found a cave to cook food in but were unable to cook it well and had to eat half cooked rice. At night we were forced to sleep on the wet ground. Finally we reached Sunkoshi after which we hired a vehicle and made our way to Nepal.”⁷⁹

A 27-year old woman from Chirang described a similar experience. “The *Dungpa* of our village was friendly with us so he warned us of arrest the next day and said that this time [unlike the earlier times when the father was arrested] we would not be released. As a result father decided to leave Bhutan. We left at 8 at night. We couldn't carry anything with us – there was nothing left for us there since our shop was sealed. We were very scared of arrest so we came through the jungle. It took us four days to reach India. We just survived on *chivra* [puffed rice] and water.”⁸⁰

In other cases, even where people wanted to leave, the authorities would only let them go once they had sold their land thus supposedly waiving

any right to return. As an 80-year old woman from Samchi recounted, "...then I started hearing that the police and soldiers were snatching *potis*⁸¹ and forcing women to cut their hair. Children were also not allowed to go to school. At that time I took two of my grandchildren...to Kalimpong [India] and admitted them into school there. My daughter-in-law and the youngest grand child stayed back in Bhutan. We had tried to leave all together by private bus once but the bus used to stop in the market where the police kept a watch. When they saw us leave, they stopped us and said that we could not go if unless we sold our land – that way we would not come back they said. So we returned home. Ultimately we had to sell our land – it was worth [Nu] 3 lakhs but we got only 8000/- for it after they cut 12,000/- because they said to her that my son had taken a loan from them for the amount".⁸²

From the sample of women interviewed I found that despite being harassed and intimidated into leaving Bhutan, there was a very small minority of women who wanted to stay on but who left Bhutan because of the decision made by their husbands. As a 45-year old woman from Chirang bitterly recalled, "the army would come to my house and ask for my husband – he would hide and I would say that he had gone to the *bazaar*. He was afraid of being arrested. Our neighbours started leaving – I didn't want to leave but my husband said that we should – I was helpless so we left. Only I know how much I had to suffer – I was pregnant – my husband carried one child and I carried another. We carried clothes, utensils and some rice. One of my children had diarrhoea on the way and since there was no hospital at Mooday [in Assam, India] and we could not get him treated – he died".⁸³

The absence of a 'choice'⁸⁴ within the family while leaving Bhutan was also seen in the case of a Khengpa woman who was married to a Lhotshampa man. "I am not sure why exactly we left Bhutan. My husband's family was leaving and my husband did not want to stay here while his parents left and I did not want to stay without my children so we came. I tell him we should have stayed back – I have to – there is nothing here".⁸⁵ In two cases women said that they preferred not to talk about their passage out of Bhutan and to the refugee camps in Nepal as it was too painful a part of their lives to recount and thereby relive.

Pushed out of Bhutan through various means, many found themselves in ad hoc camps along the Indo-Bhutan border in Assam and West Bengal. According to Sreeja (2006) there were around 2000 people

living in Assam and around 5000 in West Bengal before they were moved out to Nepal with the help of the All Assam Nepali Students Union and the All Assam Gorkha Sammelan. Many of the women interviewed did not seem to recollect whether the camps on the Indian border were set up by the Indian government. At least three of the women interviewed mentioned the involvement of the Indian security forces in setting up of camps and the subsequent eviction from India.

Understandably, for several women, the time spent in India was the most difficult. Pushed out of their homes and left to fend for themselves, some women counted their time in India as the most difficult among all their experiences of eviction. Unlike in Nepal there was neither the Red Cross nor UNHCR to take care of the refugees' basic needs or protection issues. Many said that their stay in India was heavily reliant on the kindness of local people and relatives. While some lived in temporary and highly insecure camps, others had to live in cattle sheds and back yards of strangers.

A 32-year old woman from Sarbhang described her life in Assam in Patgaon as one of the worst times of her life. "Life in Patgaon was very hard. We had nothing and therefore were forced to separate out and live and work as domestic servants in people's houses. I don't like talking about those times. It was only seven months later that my mother was able to find a place to stay in Saralpada and we were able to live together again. However, soon after moving to Sarlapada, around August 1991 we were evicted by the Indian security forces, put into trucks which brought us to Maidhar".⁸⁶

Another woman, 22-year old from Samchi district remembered the year as a very dark period. "We stayed in India with relatives for one year in Nagarkatta in West Bengal. I did not go to school at that time but went for tuitions, looked after our relatives goats and cows. We weren't very happy there – it was not comfortable and our relatives were very stern and strict so it was very restrictive environment. I remember my parents being very ill at that time. We could not go to school and my sister had to work as a manual labourer in road construction. Our relatives also later told us about camps in Jhapa – they said that we would get rations, food and education there. We discussed this with other Bhutanese families living in the area, decided to hire a truck and left for Nepal", she recounted.⁸⁷

Troubles did not, however, ebb even after leaving Bhutan and India. The journey to Nepal itself was harrowing. From most women's narratives, it was an arduous journey, many had little money or food, and some remember being very sick. Since many had come with only the clothes that they were wearing, the inability to change or wash made the journey even more unbearable. As a 30-year old woman from Sarbhang remembers, "we stayed in Assam for one night and the next day my brother and a neighbour who was in the *andolan* and had come to Devsurey helped us look for a vehicle and we left for Nepal. The place was not safe at all because the Indian Central Reserve Police Force would look for Bhutanese and send them back. By the time we came to Siliguri, my aunt's baby died. The bus was packed and he probably died of congestion."⁸⁸

Lost Families

I miss my brothers and sisters... I see them in my dreams sometimes.

43-year old woman from Chirang⁸⁹

It was evident that for refugee women, representations of the self almost always revolved around loss. This loss was not only in terms of home and land but also in terms of family and community. While southern Bhutanese came in large groups and sometimes entire villages were emptied, there were a large number of women in camps whose parents, siblings, in laws and children continue to live in Bhutan. Like any other migrant community, the fact of having left family behind had its impact in multiple ways on the Bhutanese refugee women. On the one hand, there was a deep sense of estrangement and many worried if they would ever get to meet those they left behind, while on the other hand, because they had family members in Bhutan many believed that their link with their country of origin, no matter how long since they left it, had not been severed.

Regardless, the fact that they were not with their families continued to be a cause of pain for many. A 33-year old woman from Samchi who left Bhutan with neighbours and friends and not with family in 1990 at the age of 16 recalled, "there was a camp in Chengmari established by the evicted people. I stayed there with a group of people. That is where I met my brother. For one year I stayed in the camp and then in the tea garden with some relatives. I used to miss my parents a lot. I haven't got a chance to live with my parents since then. I wasn't even there when my father died."⁹⁰

In another case, a 53-year old woman from Sarbhang recounted, “[a]ll my family is in Bhutan. They don’t keep in touch with us, as they are afraid that the Bhutanese army will harass them. Eight years ago we went to Assam and called our family members to the border. My mother and brother came but with great difficulty. They said that they were being harassed because of us and they asked us to go back to the camp. I started crying and came back crying. Most of my husband’s family is also in Bhutan. They disowned us. We feel bad that there is no family here. Now neighbours have become family.”⁹¹

While some had given up on meeting family members who they left behind, others still hoped that they would be united some day. As a 55-year old woman from Chirang narrated, “[m]y second son is still in Bhutan. When we were leaving he was in Thimpu and he sent us a letter saying that if there was tension we should all go ahead and that he would join us later. I have heard that he married a Drukpa woman and maybe that is why he was able to stay on. My daughter says that we should go to Jaigaon and call my son – maybe he will be able to help us with education and with the house but we don’t have a number for him so how will we call? We wait for him even today.”⁹²

Some others have managed to keep in touch with their families and hear from them every once in a while. Most of the news is about their homes and lands that were left behind. In many cases people have news that Drukpas have been settled on their lands. “In 2000 my husband went to the border and met with a neighbour. He came to know that some Drukpas are residing on our land even though the *thram* [title or plot number] is in my husband’s grandfather’s name. Because Drukpas have been relocated on our land, my husband heard that his brother is facing a lot of problems. If a new person or someone from India visits then the Drukpas ask for explanations and details and if they are not satisfied then he has to pay them Nu. 10,000 as fine. The land where the Drukpas are staying is grazing land and this has created problems for everyone in the village”, said a 35-year old woman from Samchi.⁹³

When talking about occupation of their land, many expressed grief and anger and even hopelessness as they had worked hard on the land and it hurt them to see others enjoying the benefits. In a rare case, a 46-year old woman from Sarbhang said that she managed to cross the border with some of her Indian relatives on the pretext of a picnic.

“I said I was Indian and therefore I did not have to show any identity card. I was not scared because there were three or four of us and some were Indian. I knew some people were living in the house so I went to see. I felt very bad. I had worked hard on the house and now someone else was staying there. It was a Nepali family. Had it been a Drukpa family I would not have had the courage to go. Also I heard that some Drukpas had been given our agricultural land.⁹⁴

Maidhar: Makeshift Respite

The first wave of Bhutanese refugees started arriving in southeastern Nepal in early 1991 around the same time when a make shift camp was set up on the riverbed of the Maikhola or the Kankai river. Maidhar had a strong emotive resonance in Bhutanese refugee consciousness and ranked very high as a marker of their victimhood. For the Bhutanese refugee women, Maidhar seemed like a realisation of their worst fears. While those who lived in Maidhar spoke of it with a sense of great gravity, it was obvious that those who arrived after the camps had been set up and when the Maidhar camp was dismantled, considered themselves fortunate to have missed one of the bigger hurdles in their journey to the camps.

A bulk of the Bhutanese refugees who came to Maidhar had reached after an intense struggle for personal security and survival. Having escaped violence and harassment in Bhutan and survived some very inhospitable conditions on the Indo-Bhutan border in Assam and West Bengal they came to Nepal in search of some respite, something that Maidhar was ill equipped to provide.

All the women who had spent some time in Maidhar talked about the inadequacy of housing conditions – the huts were tiny and cramped together, there were severe food shortages, the absence of schools and most importantly a large number of deaths due to cholera, dysentery, malnutrition and the lack of proper health care. Women also related that because the tents did not provide adequate shelter from the rain, very often all their belongings as well as the meagre rations that were given would get wet.

The estimates of deaths per day, from women’s narratives, range from 10-12 per day to as high as 30 persons every day in a particular period. A 48-year old woman from Sarbhang while speaking of the poor living

conditions in Maidhar said “[w]e were in Maidhar for a month. We were given little oil and rice and we survived on it. My mother-in-law, however, died in Maidhar, also my husband’s first wife’s daughter died of cholera.”⁹⁵

References to Maidhar always evoked a strong response. Many women said that they started crying when they first saw the place. According to a 27-year old woman from Chirang, “there were tiny huts in Maidhar, there used to be very little food and long queues for everything. Only children and old persons got food – there wasn’t enough for other people. There were other girls there like me so we got together and asked the older children to start teaching us. They refused saying that they were busy working to go to Bhutan. But we kept asking so they arranged a small school. There were open classrooms with just a roof overhead. Local people would stand on the bridge above and throw stones at us.”⁹⁶

For a refugee community, the memory and experience of being pushed out from ones homes and lands, from familiar surroundings and systems forms the key ingredient of identity formation. In the case of the Bhutanese refugees too, the memories of forced eviction, living in India and later in Nepal up to the formation of the camps significantly informed women’s representations of themselves not only as individuals but also as a community. Listening to the women recount their days of struggle and strife made it amply clear that women, unlike what is often implied if not actively projected, equally shouldered the burden of marginalisation and eviction whether in the family or in the community during the days of the *Andolan* and the repression that followed.

It was obvious from the detailed narratives that women shared, memories of flight from Bhutan were still fresh in the minds of many refugee women. Further, these memories had been handed over to successive generations with a view that the trials and tribulations experienced were not forgotten with the passage of time. The telling and retelling of stories of eviction and flight only strengthened them as was seen in the Bhutanese refugee women’s context. Several young women who may not remember the exact flow of events as they were toddlers or children during the time around the eviction were able to recount their mothers’ and grandmothers’ experiences with a great amount of detail and clarity. Narratives of eviction and deprivation

had ensured that refugee women continued to represent themselves through the medium of victimhood. Their deep grief and sense of loss – material, social, political and psychological would possibly only be alleviated through a careful and sensitively devised resolution.

Life in the Refugee Camps

Our life in Bhutan and in camps is as different as heaven and hell.

A 32-year old woman from Samchi district⁹⁷

In September 1991, the Government of Nepal asked UNHCR to coordinate all relief activity as number of people at Maidhar kept growing and consequently living conditions kept deteriorating. Various implementing partners were engaged in the process including the Lutheran World Federation, Caritas, Nepal, the World Food Programme, Centre for Victims of Torture, Nepal Red Cross etc. (Hutt 2003, 257) The earliest camps were set up in Timai and Goldhap followed by Beldangi I and II and later Beldangi Extension, and Khudunabari in Jhapa district and Sanischare in Morang district. On its part the government of Nepal established the National Unit for Coordination of Refugee Affairs as part of the Home Ministry in Kathmandu with the Refugee Coordination Unit's officers being stationed in every camp and responsible for administration (registration of births, deaths and marriages and to issue out passes⁹⁸ if refugees wished to travel out of the camps) and law and order in the camps. By the end of 1993 the refugee population in the camps had gone up to 80,000 and in 2003 the total population recorded was 102,892. (WFP and UNHCR 2003)

The camps in 2006 looked organized and orderly with neat rows of bamboo huts, each with its own tiny garden and clean pathways that connected rows to sectors in the camps. The women pointed out that the camps did not always look like this. Instead many recalled that when they first came to the camps, everything was in disarray. "When I came to the campsite I remember there was a lot of jungle everywhere, the surroundings were dirty, there were no proper huts, it was all very dark" recalls a 32-year old woman from Samchi district.⁹⁹ Further, as narrated by an 80 year old woman from Geylegphu, "[w]hen I came here there was a lot of insecurity and rumours of thieves. I had a little money with us and so [on the first few nights] I sat awake all night with a *khukri* and *khurpa* [a Nepali dagger and a sickle] in my hand. Only I know what I felt when I saw the huts – they were so tiny and the camps looked much worse than they do now".¹⁰⁰ Another 80-year old woman from Sarbhang said "[w]hen we came to the camp – I was worried about where we would stay and what we would eat. We were

taken to a house after some time and given food. But it was very little. Rations that were given to us initially were far from sufficient – later they increased. It was only after some time had passed that I felt reassured that we would not die of hunger.”¹⁰¹

Having left behind their homes and fields in Bhutan, several women said that they started crying when they first saw the camps. “We reached the camp at night – I saw small huts and smoke coming out of the kitchens and felt suffocated. I wondered how I would live here. We had no utensils, water would be available once a day – there was nothing to carry the water in. I cried a lot. I thought I might die here. There was no toilet and jungle everywhere. There were toilets only in Beldangi II and I had some relatives there – so I used to go there”, related a 43-year old woman from Samchi.¹⁰²

The setting up of camps, inadequate as they were and continue to be, appeared to have given the refugees and particularly women a sense of community. As reported by a 32-year old woman from Samchi “first we went to Beldangi. I was shocked to see so many people. I thought we were the only ones evicted from Bhutan”.¹⁰³ Further, as a 43-year old woman from Chirang pointed out, “we decided to come to live in the camps because we felt that if we stay together we can fight together and go back to Bhutan together. If we have to die we will all die together.”¹⁰⁴

Almost all refugee women said that initially they all felt that the camps were only a temporary measure and it was only a matter of months before they would return to their homes and lands in Bhutan. In the words of an 80-year old refugee woman from Sarbhang, “I did not think that we would be here for so long. I felt that soon the *Bhotay* [Drukpas] would take us back and that one day the King would be good to us and accept us.”¹⁰⁵ The sense of hopelessness was evident in the commonly heard refrain about the fact that everyone believed that it would be only a matter of months if not weeks before they were allowed to go back to their homes.

One woman, however felt differently. “Everyone talked about being here for a maximum period of two years – I did not believe it. I saw so many people working here, plotting land, there were UNHCR staff; everything was being done in an organised way. It felt like it was for the long term. I had seen Bangladeshi refugee huts in similar neat lines in Siliguri. When I saw the Bangladeshi Refugees in Siliguri I found

out that they were staying in camps for 15 years. So when I saw our camps here starting to look like the Bangladeshi camps I felt that we would be here for 15 years or then die here. I was very worried then... I am broken now.”¹⁰⁶

When families first came to the camps, they were allotted plastic sheets and bamboo to make their huts. While friends and families helped many, single women who had come without their husbands found it especially difficult. A 19-year old woman from Chirang recalled that when they came to Nepal, they did not know where their father was. “Our mother had to construct the house on her own. We were too little to be of any help. A few months after settling down, we got news that our father was in Budhabare in Nepal, working as a domestic servant”.¹⁰⁷ Further, as seen in the case of several displaced communities the absence of adequate toilets often resulted in increasing women’s risk to sexual and gender based violence. As a 28-year old woman from Chirang remembered, “we used to have group toilets which were often very dirty and so we used to go to the jungle. But we would often get harassed on the way by boys.”¹⁰⁸

The camps as seen in 2006/2007 were vastly different from the way they were in the initial stages. While credit was given to UNHCR and its various implementing partners, a bulk of the credit should also have gone to the refugee community and especially its women in building their lives and community both physically and psychologically.

Refugee Camps Today

The camps are organised according to units and sectors. Around 60-100 families made up a unit or a sub-sector, while roughly 3-4 units or sub-sectors make a sector and there are around 12 sectors in each camp. Each camp has a Camp Secretary and an Assistant Camp Secretary; each sector has a Sector Head and Sub-Sector Head and an Assistant Sub-Sector Head. Each camp has a Camp Management Committee (CMC), which is elected annually. The CMC is composed of the Camp Secretary, his/her Deputy, Gender Focal Point, Sector Heads and Sub-Sector Heads, and six sub-committees. Office bearers are elected annually. The Committees and their tasks are as follows:

- Administration: Co-ordinate UNHCR’s material support to the CMC and is responsible for coordinating any registration issues with the RCU and UNHCR.

- **Project Service:** Instrumental in the area of infrastructure maintenance. All refugees, with the exception of extremely vulnerable individuals, are expected to do basic maintenance and repair of their own huts and latrines. This sub-committee also supervises the work of sanitation volunteers who ensure that basic hygienic standards are maintained in each Sector of the camp.
- **Distribution:** Co-ordinate with the Sector and Sub-Sector Heads and mobilises volunteer labour for each scheduled distribution of relief items.
- **Social Service:** Co-ordinate actions in favor of vulnerable groups with agency staff and refugee organisations such as the Bhutanese Refugees Aiding Victims of Violence (BRAVVE), BRWF, etc.
- **Health:** Promote refugee self-management within the health sector and work closely with Association of Medical Doctors of Asia (AMDA) and the Bhutanese Health Association (BHA).
- **Counseling Board:** Settle minor disputes among the refugee community members.

The sub-sector is the unit for distribution of food in the camps. Food rations are allotted at the rate of 1,985 Kcal per person per day. The ration is composed of 410 grams of par boiled rice, 60 grams of pulses which includes lentils and chickpeas, 25 grams of vegetable oil, 20 grams of sugar and 7.5 grams of salt. (WFP and UNHCR 2003) In addition UNHCR provides a complementary ration accounting for 100 Kcal a day. This includes potatoes, pumpkin, cabbage, onions, plantains, and spices. In effect the complementary rations add up to 220 grams of vegetables per person per week. Milk is provided as treatment for severe malnutrition only. Pregnant women receive iron-folate supplementation from the second trimester of the pregnancy until 6th week after postpartum.

Primary and secondary education is offered free of charge to all refugee children in the camps. Schools are built of local materials and managed by Caritas, Nepal. All teachers are refugees. The boy to girl ratio is 51% and 49% respectively.

The Bhutanese refugee community also has refugee run organisations like the Bhutanese Refugees Aiding Victims of Violence (BRAVVE) and the Bhutanese Refugee Women's Forum (BRWF). BRAVVE looks

specifically at the rehabilitation needs of the victims of torture and rape among the refugees through counseling and vocational training and skill development programmes.

The Bhutanese Refugee Women Forum is an unregistered NGO focusing on the needs and requirements of women and girls in the community. Run by refugee women, it has more than 2,000 members and 200 voluntary workers. Specific programs managed by the Forum include literacy programmes, anti-domestic violence training, skills development, leadership courses and income generation trainings. BRWF's income generation activities are aimed at producing goods that can be used within the camps, including jute mats and chalk for use in schools, baby blankets and sanitary napkins.

The last 16 years has also seen the growth of a large number of political parties, human rights groups and groups working towards a resolution of the crisis from among the refugee community. These include Bhutan Peoples Party (BPP), Bhutan National Democratic Party (BNDP), the Druk National Congress (DNC), Bhutan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist) and the umbrella group for a variety of political parties, The National Front for Democracy, Bhutan. Human rights and groups working on resolution issues include Peoples Forum for Human Rights Bhutan (PFHRB), Peoples Forum for Human Rights and Democracy (PFHRD) Associations of Human Rights Activists (AHURA) Bhutan, the Bhutanese Refugee Representative Repatriation Council (BRRRC), the Human Rights Council (HRC) of Bhutan, Voice for Change, and the Bhutanese Refugee Durable Solution Coordinating Committee (BRDSCC).

Despite the high degree of organisation and participation of refugees in the running of the camps, every aspect of their life including housing, fuel, food, health care, education was found to be lacking.

Food

A complaint that was heard across the board was that the rations provided to the refugees were far from adequate and of low quality. One of the main concerns voiced by women was their inability to provide nutritious and adequate food for their children. Similar concerns were expressed for pregnant and lactating mothers. Women with adolescent children especially said that it was very difficult for them to feed their families. Most women said that they worried about food all the time.

Further, for a largely agricultural community that also had a lot of cattle wealth, the absence of milk as a part of their daily diet was difficult for many to get used to. An 80-year old woman from Samchi lamented “children born in camps have no idea about our life, they feel that the cycle (on which the milkman arrives) gives milk. The other day my grandchild asked me – which tree do you get butter from? I felt very bad.”¹⁰⁹

In 2006, coal briquettes were introduced in the camps due to the dramatic rise in the price of kerosene. A report by the Women’s Commission noted the reluctance of refugees to use these briquettes and their dissatisfaction with the new fuel was obvious. According to a 38-year old woman from Dagana who had also been the Gender Focal Point in her camp, “Briquettes take a long time to start burning and because of that we find it hard to cook as it takes very long. As a result food is often raw. Because it takes so long to cook, food is not ready by the time children go to school or people leave for work and this is a major cause of stress for the women. Many suffer from nausea and headache caused by briquettes”.¹¹⁰

Several women lamented the fact that they could not even provide “good and special” food on festivals. In the words of a 48-year old woman from Sarbhang, “[d]uring Dassai we used to get a goat and cook it along with a lot of other delicious food. Here we can afford only half a kilo of meat. Earlier I would tell the children about the way in which we celebrated these festivals in Bhutan and when they were little, they would insist on celebrating exactly that way and I would cry. But now things are better – they are older, they understand. I tell them that we are refugees but one day we will go back and celebrate like we used to.”¹¹¹

Housing

I feel very hot here...it maybe because I am not living in my own house.

A 28-year old woman from Sarbhang district¹¹²

Forced out of the homes they remembered most vividly, most women said that they found the huts far from adequate. Some of the common complaints were that the houses were flimsy and would often not be able to withstand heavy winds or rain. Many houses, they said were leaking and needed to be repaired. They were told, however, that due

to budget cuts, only one third of the demand could be met every year. During the summer months, in the absence of electricity the huts were uninhabitable.

The lack of electricity also hampered children's ability to study and complete their homework in the evenings. With the change over to briquettes, each family was given one litre of kerosene per month for lighting purposes. Needless to say most found it highly inadequate. "During our exams we study till 12 and 1 at night. Our parents don't allow us to sleep. They say we did not get a chance to study so you must study and become a 'big' person. When we run out of kerosene we use cooking oil to light the lamp to study. As a result sometimes we have to eat boiled food", explained an 11-year old girl from Dagona district.¹¹³

The lack of electricity has also heightened women's vulnerability to sexual and gender based violence. As pointed out by a 15-year old girl from Chirang, "...there is no street lighting and therefore it is very unsafe for us to walk around at night".¹¹⁴ Similarly, the 'social animator' in charge of addressing issues concerning women and violence in one of the camps said, "[b]efore, I used to go to the victims house as soon as I heard about any violence even in the night time. But I don't go anymore, its awkward to go at that time and also I feel insecure. I am a woman and there are lots of men hanging around at night. There is no street lighting."¹¹⁵

Most women also complained that the camps were very congested with huts being packed close together there was no privacy. One of the major problems that a 28-year old woman from Chirang faced was the lack of privacy even to change one's clothes.¹¹⁶ Women also spoke of the problem of teenage pregnancies due to the lack of privacy and the need to keep their daughters from being 'spoiled'. "I don't want my daughter to grow up in the camps. If she does, I fear that she will fall prey to this phenomenon of teenage pregnancy and then will have to get married really early. I want her to study and become something," said a 32-year old woman from Sarbhang.¹¹⁷

The close proximity of the huts to each other also posed a serious fire hazard. As a 50-year old woman from Chirang pointed out, "...since the huts are so close together, once something catches fire, it spreads very easily and before you know it, several houses have been burnt."¹¹⁸

Employment

One of the biggest problems that both women and men faced because of their refugee status was the inability to legally earn money. As a result few were able to supplement the food rations that they got, access better health care, or send their children for further studies.

A reduction in funds for UNHCR meant severe cut backs for the refugees. Funds for clothes had been discontinued for the last four years. In order to meet their basic needs many tried to work illegally but the wages they got were also much lower than those given to Nepali citizens. Additionally there was no job security in any such employment. Further, not everyone, however, was able to join the labour force. Single women and older women found it particularly difficult due to lack of support. As a 40-year old woman from Sarbhang pointed out, “at least for those who have a husband they get some financial support. For me there is no one to help when there is a problem. They give one litre of kerosene and briquette and it is not enough. *Daal* [lentils] and rice is also less and we hardly get any vegetables. To fire briquette you need firewood, which we need to buy, and where do I get the money for it?”¹¹⁹ Similarly, a 55-year old woman from Chirang reported, “women are vulnerable and face a lot of problems. My husband is disabled – he cannot speak and I have to handle everything in the house. In my life I have lost many family members – first my former husband, then my mother in law and now my son. There is no one who can earn in my family. I try to educate my younger children but I have to do it all on my own.”¹²⁰

A sense of getting less than what one deserved was apparent when interacting with a number of refugee men and women leading to increased levels of frustration and depression. Several women lamented the fact that being illiterate, they could not take up work outside the camps. In order to earn a little bit of money, a large number of women were engaged in spinning yarn for local contractors using the *charkha* or the spinning wheel. This too, however, had its problems as many complained of respiratory problems as a result of the spinning. The desperate need for money and the inability to access the job market has also given rise to a few cases of trafficking and prostitution in the camps.

Health

The Association of Medical Doctors of Asia (AMDA) worked closely with the Bhutanese Health Association (BHA), an organisation formed by the refugees with medical and public health background, to address health issues in the camps.

Women said that although AMDA looked after their primary health needs, they did not refer them to larger hospitals in Dharan or Kathmandu due to shortage of funds. That there were often long lines to meet the doctor was a common complaint. The absence of women doctors was also a cause of concern for most women. In a group meeting in the camps women complained that their gynaecological ailments did not get adequate attention and many felt uncomfortable in talking to a male doctor about such ailments. They narrated an incident when some women complained of an itching in the uterus; the doctor treated it with utmost disdain and asked them to use a twig to scratch it and get rid of the discomfort. Pregnant women were taken to hospital only in cases of emergency; in all other cases births took place in the huts as there were plenty of midwives in the camps. For their menstrual needs women were given two meters of cloth per year to be used as sanitary napkins which, all the women said was very far from adequate.

Many felt that especially in the case of the elderly, AMDA doctors were highly negligent and would not even give medicines if the patients were old.

Among women, psychological problems were quite common. An office bearer of Bhutanese Refugees Aiding the Victims of Violence (BRAVVE) noted that a lot of women suffered from depression. According to a 38-year old woman from Dagana who had also been the social animator and gender focal point in her camp, “mental illness has increased due to hopelessness. The pressure is a lot on women – they have to manage everything”.¹²¹ Many women had been victims of rape and violence in Bhutan but couldn’t speak of it because of the social stigma attached to rape. Further a feeling of isolation and alienation with the loss of ties with family members was cited as another reason for the incidence of mental illness among women.

When speaking about refugee life, most women felt that the major cause for stress was that they often had to absorb the stress and frustration of the rest of the family. Whether it was their husband’s

frustration about not being able to work or that of their children with regard to pursuing their ambitions or even something as immediate as wanting better clothes, better food or a new school bag, women felt that they were expected to deal with all such issues and often found it very frustrating. In the words of a 43-year old woman from Sarbhang, “[w]omen have to handle everything. The children are closest to their mother and they make demands mainly on the mother and it is very difficult when you know you cannot fulfil their basic needs, let alone desires”.¹²²

Education

Given the large number of young people in the refugee camps primary and secondary education up to class ten was provided with the help of UNHCR as well as Caritas. Enrolment in schools was very high and the drop out rate, comparatively low¹²³. According to a woman, who was a ‘social animator’ in one of the camps, since 2004 or so, however, at least 5% of school-going children had dropped out of school due to the inability of their parents to provide them with uniforms, school books, pens etc. “Caritas said that they were going to give uniforms but then their budget was diverted for the tsunami and so they have stopped providing uniforms”, she said.¹²⁴ It was also significant that the percentage of boys to girls in the camp schools was 51% and 49% respectively. However, once again due to a shortage of funds, some schools were in a state of disrepair. Girls especially found it very difficult to go to school because some schools did not have toilets for girls. As a 15-year old student pointed out, “There is no toilet for girls in the school. There is one for boys. We have to go home so we can only go to the toilet in the interval.”¹²⁵ Additionally there were also a significant number of girls who had dropped out of school due to the lack of adequate underwear.¹²⁶

As schooling in the camps ended at class ten most students, despite their capabilities were unable to pursue their studies further due to lack of financial resources. When talking about their children, the absence of a ‘future’ in terms of a career was a concern deeply felt by a lot of women. It once again brought to the fore their statelessness and a resulting helplessness with the situation. As a result for most women, it was not only the loss of a home and land that they lamented but that it also impacted their future. “My daughter talks big – says that she wants to do an MA in economics, says that I should make the money

available. I tell her not to dream such big dreams – we are refugees. This life is really hell. We cannot fulfil our children’s desires and we cannot bear to see their futures destroyed because of our refugee status,” lamented a 45-year old woman from Sarbhang.¹²⁷

Some women also felt that their refugee status and their inability to fulfil their family’s basic needs had in some cases dashed their children’s hopes and killed ambition. According to a 31-year old woman from Geylephug, “the camp situation has spoiled my son. He used to say that he wanted to become a doctor but now he says he wants to be a driver and earn money. I tell him that this is the time to study, that we will try and support him as much as possible and he can earn money once he becomes a doctor but he does not listen.”¹²⁸

Domestic and Sexual Violence

For women, conditions of distress almost always take on a gendered face. Whether it is the lack of adequate food, space and privacy, adequate lighting, or employment opportunities, it invariably ends up with women’s vulnerability to violence increasing manifold. A detailed documentation of sexual and gender based violence in the refugee camps was undertaken by Human Rights Watch in 2003. (Human Rights Watch 2003). Its findings led to some significant changes in the ways in which UNHCR proceeded to address this phenomenon. Domestic violence, however like in several other communities, continues to live on.

While none of the women interviewed said that they were victims of domestic violence, everyone knew that it existed in the camps.¹²⁹ According to the women interviewed, the main reasons for domestic violence were poverty, frustration, alcoholism and suspicion or “eye putting” as they called it. Most blamed their refugee status and the congested nature of the camps for it. Other reasons cited were conditions prevailing in the camp, polygamy and inability of the woman to bear a male child.

Other forms of gender-based violence also abounded in the camps. Most of the gender focal points and social animators interviewed spoke of the existence of rape and attempt to rape as some of the major gender based crimes in the camps. “Security is one of our biggest problems,” pointed out a 37-year old single woman from Samchi. “One boy beat my son up. When I went to him to ask why he did this, the boy beat me

too. After that I have been very scared. He hit me on my chest. Some of these boys are very big and very strong and I am very scared of them. I am very scared of that they will rape me. As a widow I feel very unsafe here. I complained about the boy to the Camp Management Committee and the case was referred to UNHCR and RCU [Refugee Coordination Unit].”¹³⁰

Refugee women spoke of their vulnerability to violence not only in the context of the home or the camps but also vis-à-vis the local population. A 25-year old woman from Samchi spoke of the lack of security in the camps, which made it easy for local men to enter and sexually harass or exploit the refugee women. She cited a recent incident, which involved the rape of a seven-year old child allegedly by a local Nepali man. “Sometimes they follow us around in the camps and at other times they come directly to our huts”, she said.¹³¹

Relations with the local community

Unlike in the case of several other refugee communities, the Bhutanese refugee community being of Nepali origin, was not necessarily in an ‘alien’ land. Knowing the language and practicing a common religion had possibly made it easier for the refugees to live in Nepal for the past sixteen years. A few even had distant relatives in Nepal. As one 30-year old refugee woman from Chirang district noted, “there is no difference between us and the Nepalis here. We have been able to stay for such a long time maybe only because we are so culturally similar. The main difference is citizenship and that we cannot do what we like and our children will not get what they deserve.”¹³²

Not all, however, subscribed to the idea of the absence of difference between the local Nepalis and Bhutanese Nepalis. Many maintained that there were several dissimilarities between them. In fact it seemed like the broad similarities between the locals and the refugees had exerted extra pressure on the refugee community to maintain their distinct socio-cultural identity. “Nepalis speak literary or formal Nepali, we don’t. Our language is simple. Our jewellery is different. We wear our *poti* differently. Nepali women wear lots of jewellery – we don’t. We have our own symbols. We used to make these bags [pointing to a cloth shoulder bag] in Bhutan and we use them here as well. We knit the caps that our men wear, they buy the caps”, said a 32-year old woman from Samchi district.¹³³ Similarly a 30-year old woman from Chirang opined “our festivals are not different but our language is more

simple. Here, the Nepali is very difficult. The Nepalis from Nepal can tell that we are different. Earlier our clothes were different – when we came from Bhutan we were not used to wearing sarees and mostly wore lungis so they could tell the difference.”¹³⁴

To a large extent it became increasingly evident that at the core of the differences refugee women experienced between the two communities, lay issues of citizenship and statelessness, of access and deprivation. In other words, it would probably be correct to assume that in a scenario where Bhutanese refugee women had equal access as the local Nepali women to opportunities for social and economic mobility and political participation, the differences between the two communities would not have been experienced with as much intensity or as bitterly as was the case.

Almost all the women interviewed felt that the local Nepalis looked down upon them and discriminated against them. In the words of a 38-year old woman from Dagana, “[t]he local Nepalis don’t accept us as one of them. I feel that Nepalis from Darjeeling and Bhutanese Nepalis have more in common with each other than with the local Nepalis. Here the locals call ‘*Bhutangay Chor*’ [Bhutangay being a derogatory term for Bhutanese or Bhutanese thieves] and also call us ‘*Bagaday*’, because we take *Bagad* or rations. They accuse us of having loose morals because they say that we don’t have proper marriages. We do have some cases of polygamy but its not like our marriages are not proper.”¹³⁵

Younger women who went out of the refugee camps for education or in search of work complained that the locals would often treat them badly. As a result, most of the younger women preferred not to disclose that they were refugees on such occasions. In the words of a 22-year old from Dagana, “local Nepalis discriminate against us when we go to college. I go by bus and so while travelling they call me *Bhutangay* and say that I always bargain. Schoolmates laugh at us because we don’t have nice clothes or different clothes. Teachers also discriminate – like when we go to library they give preference to the Nepali students and give us the books last. I don’t hide my identity. Also we have studied in English medium while most of the Nepalis are from Nepali medium so they can tell the difference”.¹³⁶ Similarly, a 19-year old woman from Chirang said, “sometimes when we tell people outside the camps that we are Bhutanese refugees, their attitude towards us changes. And therefore sometimes we lie. We won’t get jobs otherwise.”¹³⁷

Towards a Resolution

When Bhutanese refugees first started pouring into Nepal, many felt that it was matter of months if not weeks before Bhutan would take them back. The incoming refugees also had the support of the newly elected government in Nepal. As Prime Minister, G.P. Koirala stated that the Bhutanese refugees would be granted asylum in Nepal but would not be allowed to undertake any activities from Nepali territory, which would harm Nepal's friendly relations with Bhutan.¹³⁸

In October 1993, the Governments of Nepal and Bhutan agreed to classify all of the people in the camps into four categories. (Hutt 2003, 259)

- (i) Bonafide Bhutanese if they have been forcefully evicted;
- (ii) Bhutanese who emigrated;
- (iii) Non-Bhutanese people;
- (iv) Bhutanese who have committed criminal acts.

In April 1994, in the third meeting a Joint Verification Team was planned to verify the status of the refugees in the camps according to the four categories mentioned above. Subsequent rounds of talks of the Committee focused on 'harmonising positions' of the two sides with regard to each category. As per Bhutanese laws most people would easily fall into the 2nd, 3rd and 4th categories. While it was felt among refugees and Nepalis that India could play a decisive role in the negotiations and in influencing Bhutan, India continued to maintain a cool distance reiterating that this was a bilateral issue between Nepal and Bhutan and it did not wish to interfere.¹³⁹

Finally, after intense negotiations and pressure from various sectors of the international community, a joint verification team was set up in the tenth round of talks in December 2000 and the verification process started with Khudunabari camp in March 2001.

The Joint Verification Team released its report on 17 June, 2003 following its approval by the 14th Ministerial Joint Committee (MJC). According to the results, of the 12,183 refugees interviewed in the Khudunabari camp. Only 2.4 per cent were placed in 'category one'

(Bhutanese who had been forcibly evicted) and had the right to return home; 70.5 per cent were categorised as Bhutanese that had emigrated voluntarily and who would have a chance to return and reapply for Bhutanese citizenship after two years; 24 per cent were categorised as non-Bhutanese and would be returned to their respective countries; and 3 per cent (375) as ‘criminals’ who would have to stand trial in Bhutanese courts.¹⁴⁰

As far as the refugees were concerned there were a number of problems with the Joint Verification team, its terms of verification, the four categories as well as the conditions of return. Sharing her experience about the process of verification a 55-year old woman from Chirang district said “during the JVT [Joint Verification Team] my leg was fractured and I could not go to Damak to register. Someone came and took my photograph. They did not ask any questions but put me in category II.”¹⁴¹ From a women’s perspective too the process was found to be lacking. The Team had only one woman member who was soon replaced thus making it an all men team. In most cases only the heads of households were questioned as a result there was little space for women to speak about their experiences and the atrocities committed which led to their eviction. As a 50-year old woman from Sarbhang reported, “When the verification was underway they had asked the head of the household to complete the form. But when it came to my turn they said that from today only the man of the house should fill the form. In our case, I was the registered head of the household since my husband came to the camps three years later. My husband left Bhutan due to fear of arrest – he left 10 months earlier but I was the one who was forced out of my house by the police and dropped to the Indian border. But they recorded only my husband’s experience and I was put in category II.”¹⁴²

While discussions in the international community and non-governmental organisations raged on about the ramifications of a highly flawed process, the verification process came to a grinding halt in December 2003 based on allegations by the Bhutanese part of the Team that refugees had physically attacked them.

Many women said that their hopes of a resolution had been raised with the beginning of the joint verification process. Most of the women we met were placed in category II (voluntary migrants) and for them merely the assurance that they would be able to go back to Bhutan, regardless

of the obviously problematic condition that they would need to reapply for citizenship after a two year probation period, seemed like a ray of light at the end of an exceedingly long and dark tunnel. The stalling of the verification process once again dashed their hopes for a resolution and an escape from refugee life.

A ‘Durable Solution’

After suspension of the verification process, and as hopes for a resolution once again seemed out of reach, the refugee situation seemed to be spiralling downwards. There were huge budget cuts for UNHCR, which had a direct impact on the life and living standards of the refugees. The Agency also stated that they would explore options of local integration and third country resettlement as it was getting more and more difficult to keep the camps running.

In late 2005, the US announced its offer of resettling more than 50,000 refugees and once again the lull and hopelessness in the refugee camps was broken. Soon more and more information started trickling in about the US offer of resettlement and similar yet smaller offers from Australia and Canada followed suit. UNHCR welcomed these offers as a part of a ‘durable solution’ that involved pursuing the three options of voluntary repatriation, local integration and third country resettlement.

All through 2006 to the present, the refugee camps have been rife with rumours and questions regarding third country resettlement, which seemed to be the only option among the three that was moving forward, at the time of conclusion of this study. The refugees, however, seemed to be deeply divided on the issue of resettlement. Spear headed by the Bhutan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist), some sections of the refugee community were opposed to resettlement as an appropriate option. They believed that once dispersed, their cause and struggle for their rights as Bhutanese citizens would be lost. Another section of the refugee community was of the opinion that 16 years has been long enough and there was really little hope for repatriation. The camps had been split vertically and were highly radicalised with tensions running high. There had also been cases of violence and the loss of life in the clashes, against those who advocated for third country resettlement.¹⁴³

The situation seemed to be made worse by the confusion and lack of information on each of the options considered as a part of durable solutions. With little credible information available, refugees were

forced to take one side or another. In this context, one of the last groups to have adequate information was women. One of the aims of this study was to document women's voices on the three options that were being contemplated as a part of a 'durable solution' because without their concerns being raised and addressed, no solution to this longstanding crisis could be truly durable.

Women's Perspectives

I would like to be repatriated, because Bhutan is the only place I know.

48-year old woman from Sarbhang¹⁴⁴

Speaking to women in October – November 2006 and May 2007 about the question of a durable solution and particularly third country resettlement was a tricky task. The situation in the camps at both times was very tense and a question could spark a series of rumours. The attempt was to keep the question for a time when there was no one or very few people around or when there was a level of comfort that had been achieved between the narrator and researcher.¹⁴⁵ More so in October-November, when news of third country resettlement was merely trickling in and neither UNHCR nor the Government of Nepal had publicly taken a stand on the issue, the researcher's identity as an Indian and asking questions on resettlement made many wonder about the actual motive and whether the responses were meant for an Indian audience. Some, at the end of the interaction expressed the hope that the researcher would help them with repatriation.

Based on the interviews, it would be correct to state that all women were tired of refugee life and wanted a change. Almost all the women said that their first choice would be to go back to Bhutan. While some were willing to consider resettlement in case of lack of any other options, others felt that repatriation was the only acceptable resolution. As a 50-year old woman from Chirang district said "I have heard that there is a chance of going to Bhutan but I don't know when. I have also heard about resettlement in America. Although I would prefer to go to Bhutan, if that is not possible, then I don't mind settling anywhere else. I just don't want to be a refugee any more."¹⁴⁶

For several women, going back to Bhutan was not simply going back to their country of origin but it meant recognition of the injustice that was meted out to them 16 years ago. One of the women, a 32-year old

from Samchi district clearly stated “I am very proud of what I had in Bhutan. We are not refugees from disaster we are political refugees. We have enough land there. We have been living here for 16 years with the hope of going back. We are not criminals, why should we be persecuted against? They evicted us forcefully – how dare they treat us badly”. She further went on to say “Everyone has his or her own individual rights. I want repatriation and no one can thrust resettlement on me. But if others want resettlement they should get what they want.”¹⁴⁷ Or as a 27-year old woman from Chirang bitterly said, “I want to go to Bhutan. The organisation (UNHCR) should take us to Bhutan rather than anywhere else. I don’t want my children to grow up with this refugee tag. Let my children go to Bhutan and get what they deserve – this refugee life is certainly not what they deserve.”¹⁴⁸

The perception of Bhutan as their ‘*janmabhoomi*’ (land of birth) or *matrubhoomi* (motherland) made repatriation the first choice for everybody. Additionally, for many, it was also the fact that they had family, land and homes in Bhutan and in several cases the *thram* number (title and plot number) continued to be in their name, that made repatriation preferable. The belief that they could go back to a life they knew and loved and be able to work there, as opposed to the uncertainty that lay ahead of them in the case of third country resettlement, made their demand for repatriation even stronger. As a result many women’s opinions included viewpoints such as, “I don’t want to go to America. I know nothing about the country. In the third country, if their government pushes us out – where will we go? I only want to go to Bhutan and nowhere else.”¹⁴⁹ On a similar note, a 22-year old woman from Chirang stated, “my first option would be to go to Bhutan because I know I can work there – it is my country. I heard that there are some educated refugees in America but that they are doing some low level work – it might be the same for us as we won’t be able to compete with people there. So it would be better if we went back to our own country. I would be happy to have the life my parents had.”¹⁵⁰

After the results of the joint verification exercise undertaken in Khudunabari were announced, there were rumours that even if Bhutan did take back those that it considered citizens, the repatriated people would not be able to go back to their homes and lands and would instead be dispersed in the sparsely populated areas of eastern and northern Bhutan. Additionally reports from human rights groups (Habitat International Coalition 2002) as well as news from family and friends

inside Bhutan confirmed the suspicion that the Bhutanese government was actively encouraging and even facilitating the resettlement of Ngalongs on the lands left behind by the Lhotshampas. As a 45-year old woman from Sarbhang narrated, “[w]e heard that some Drukpas have occupied our land. My son went into Bhutan once and saw the land and said that there was a house on our land. I felt bad that others were staying on our land”. Speaking of a possibility of return in the context of her land being occupied by others she said, “I feel that if they give us alternative land then it will be alright but if they disperse us and rehabilitate us in remote areas it will not be acceptable to us.”¹⁵¹

Bhutan’s rigid stance against third party involvement especially that of UNHCR to oversee the repatriation process had done little to instil confidence in the refugees as well as the international community that the repatriated people’s rights would be respected and protected on return. This fear and lack of confidence was reflected in many women’s opinions on repatriation and the conditions under which it would be acceptable. For instance, a 53-year old woman from Sarbhang said “My son says he wants to go back but we know that our house has been auctioned off. We want to go but there is no place for us there. My younger daughter says that she will go back to Bhutan only if we get everything like it was. I fear that if we go back now we will be slaves of the Drukpas. We had lots of property and all the luxuries. We must get it all back”.¹⁵² While some considerations were restricted to land and property others felt that there needed to be more holistic changes for them to be able to go back to Bhutan. For a 48-year old woman from Chirang, it was very clear that she would only be willing to go back if the laws changed and that there was a ‘nice new Bhutan’ that they would be going back to. If not, she was willing to consider third country resettlement.¹⁵³

For some, who continued to have families in Bhutan, going to a third country or settling down in Nepal was not an option. In another case which brought out the pain and suffering of refugee life, a 45-year old woman from Chirang said, “I have heard about the three options but since my parents are in Bhutan and I love my country, I would like to go back. I don’t know what UNHCR will do but if they take us back to Bhutan we will be very thankful. It was because of fear and harassment that we left Bhutan but I’d rather put up with all that than live like a refugee because I have my own land. Here I have nothing.”¹⁵⁴ Adopting a more radical approach in favour of repatriation, a 28-year old woman

from Sarbhang said, “Repatriation must happen and it must happen before the 2008 elections. Bhutan must ensure that everyone’s human rights are guaranteed. We want to warn Bhutan not invite an armed revolt but it seems inevitable”.¹⁵⁵ Some other women felt that even if their rights were not guaranteed at the time of repatriation, once they were inside the country they could organise and fight for their rights. A 43-year old woman from Samchi said, “if repatriation is not possible then resettlement is an option. But in my view we should look at India. Gandhi fought for building a democratic secular India. He did not go to America. My husband’s family has been in Bhutan for four generations – my children were born there and have full rights as Bhutanese citizens. There is a court in Bhutan, we might get justice there. Once we get an opportunity to step in then we can fight for our rights. We might even be able to buy new land.”¹⁵⁶

From the interviews it is possible to suggest that it was mainly those who had suffered arrest and torture or whose close family members who had been exposed to the same, were the ones who were very clear that conditions in Bhutan would have to change before they went back. However, it is not possible to make the reverse conclusion that those who had not been arrested or tortured or whose close relatives had not suffered similarly were willing to go back under any circumstances.

Several others felt quite differently and were keen on third country resettlement as they were desperate to get out of their seemingly hopeless situation and wanted to secure a future at least for their children if not for themselves. In the words of a 40-year old woman from Sarbhang district, “I am fed up here. I lost my husband here and I want a solution. I need citizenship, land and a life with dignity. A lot of people have died here just waiting for Bhutan. We have chanted ‘Bhutan Bhutan’ for 16 years and nothing has happened. At least if we settle anywhere in the world we shall have a life with dignity.”¹⁵⁷ On a similar note a 46-year old woman from Sarbhang said, “[i]nitially I believed that I would go back to Bhutan soon. Now I want to go where I can lead a life with dignity. If this tag of refugee is removed I am willing to go wherever they will take me. I am willing to abide by whatever the UNHCR or Nepali government says – they will look after us. For 16 years the Bhutanese government has not accepted us. Not once has the Bhutanese government said that these are our people we will take them back. I want an environment where I can live like a human being.”¹⁵⁸

However, given how deeply divided the camps were on the issue of resettlement, some women said that they found it hard to express their opinions freely. Those who had done so like the women who had formed the committee on durable solutions had been targeted for their positions. In late April, a meeting organised by UNHCR to disseminate information on third country resettlement was disrupted and a woman in the meeting physically attacked another woman who declared that she wanted to be resettled. Others who had expressed their desire to resettle were threatened with violence. As a 22-year old woman from Samchi described, “I am very worried about the future. Whatever happens, I don’t want to be a refugee any longer. Everyone knows about repatriation but they all only know the word – they have no idea of the conditions. The problem is that with resettlement the culture would be very different. I don’t know what people think about resettlement but if we ask, then we will be targeted for mobilising for resettlement.”¹⁵⁹

While the debate had raged on between repatriation and resettlement relatively less attention had been paid to issues of local integration. In any discussion on the issue of durable solution most women dwelled only briefly on the prospect of local integration. Many said that based on the way the local people treated the refugees it was unlikely that they would want them to settle down in Nepal. Others also mentioned that Nepal was too poor a country and therefore getting integrated here was not a preferred option. For some, however, the fact that in terms of culture and language they felt relatively more comfortable in Nepal was a major reason why they preferred local integration to resettlement. As a 30-year old woman from Samdrup Jhongkar said, “my first priority would be to go back to Bhutan. If this is not possible I would prefer Nepal because our language and culture is the same. If they can’t give us our property back in Bhutan I would prefer to stay here. It would be good if we could get citizenship and land like we did in Bhutan and also a house.”¹⁶⁰

Given Nepal’s own economic condition and the high degree of landlessness such expectations seem unreal. However, in the imagination of an agricultural community, the provision of land is an integral part of rehabilitation whether locally, in the country of origin or in another country. A few older women, once again for reasons of culture said that if repatriation was not possible, local integration would be their preferred option. In the words of a 45-year old woman from

Sarbhag, “[a]t least we have some documents of Bhutan, we have land there. In America we will not have anything – no citizenship and no land. Citizenship is very important for a person and therefore I would like to go back. If we had Nepali citizenship things would be okay but since they know we are refugees they call us derogatory names and humiliate us. Some younger people say forget about Bhutan – let us go to America if we are getting the opportunity. If I don’t get land there why should I go? I’d rather stay here if they give us citizenship. The children feel that maybe they should go to America, work there, earn money and come back after 5-6 years.”¹⁶¹

It was evident that women, like the men, had a variety of views and opinions regarding the nature of resolution and the conditions under which each of the options that were to be pursued as ‘durable solution’ would be acceptable to them. Given the highly patriarchal character of the society in which women found themselves, all except one seemed to have an independent opinion on what the future should be and the conditions under which it would be acceptable.¹⁶² It was also evident that women, like the men, had several doubts and questions with regard to each of the options and were desperately seeking answers in order to be able to make their choices in an informed manner. The all women’s group – Voice for Change, had to some extent been able to make themselves heard but there was a huge majority whose opinions continued to remain in the form of murmurs on the margins. It is now for the UNHCR, donor countries as well as the various groups/political parties from within the refugee community to take account of women’s voices and give them their due place in the negotiations on a resolution that follows. There is no doubt that without women’s voices being heard and their concerns being addressed no solution can be truly durable.

Marginality within a marginalised group

The Sarchop community rarely features in the available discourse on the Bhutanese Refugee crisis. In a situation where there was very little space for the Bhutanese refugee crisis to be heard, written about and discussed, attention on the Sarchop community was at best fleeting. Given their relatively small numbers and to some extent the prevalent understanding of the Bhutanese refugee crisis in terms of an inter-ethnic (Drukpa versus Nepali) or inter religious (Buddhist versus Hindu) conflict, this oversight was hardly surprising. Any study on marginality

in the Bhutanese refugee context would be incomplete and in some sense inadequate if this silence on the Sarchop community were allowed to continue.

As mentioned earlier in the study, the Sarchops are believed to belong to the Tibeto-Burman stock and are regarded as one of the earliest inhabitants of Bhutan. Sarchop or Easterners as their name suggests mainly inhabit the eastern part of Bhutan. Although the Sarchops follow the Nyingma school of Mahayana Buddhism and speak Tshangla, they together with the dominant Ngalongs of western Bhutan form the Drukpa community.

The Sarchops like the Lhotshampas (although fewer in number) were violently forced out of Bhutan. There are references to the involvement of some Sarchop community members in the Lhotshampa agitation in the 1990s and consequent imprisonment of some its community members. (Dixit 1992) Further, there were serious concerns that combined revolts in the south and east would lead to a loss of control for Thimphu. This concern was reflected in the Seventh Five Year Plan, which emphasised on development programmes in the east. Reportedly the King also visited the east to conduct “Seventh Plan Meetings”, which also contain a heavy dose of “public information” regarding the situation in the south and the treachery of the “ngolops”.

In 1994 a Sarchop businessman Rongthong Kuenley Dorji founded the Druk National Congress in Nepal. Dorji had left Bhutan in 1991 after his two month long detention on charges of business malpractice and treason. In 1997, the Druk National Congress was engaged in organising a number of protests in eastern Bhutan. According to the Amnesty International Annual Report of 1998, the protests were followed by a severe crackdown in the Sarchop majority areas and close to 150 men women and children were detained. Many of them were kept incommunicado and were also severely beaten and tortured.

Some of those who had been arrested and others facing imminent arrest managed to escape out of the country and found their way to Nepal. During the time of this research, there were around 15 Sarchop families living in the Bhutanese refugee camps.

Most of the Lhotshampas referred to the few Sarchops in their midst as Drukpas. While technically correct, since the term Drukpa was often used in interviews to refer to the Ngalong community in Bhutan, the

community that many held responsible for their plight, it presented a curious paradox and in some ways brought out an interesting relationship that went beyond terminology and was built on a common experience of victimhood.

The women interviewed were from the community were from Samdrup Jhongkar and Mongar districts. Like the Lhotshampa women, when speaking of their memories of Bhutan, they spoke of their land, what they grew and how they worked in the fields, they also spoke about the landscape which was very different from the present. In the words of a 28-year old woman, “we did not go to school in Bhutan. We had our own land. I don’t know how much it was but was quite a bit. We grew maize, potatoes and vegetables. Mongar is hilly – very high mountains and through out the year it is very cold. It snows in winter. We grow red rice there. I remember playing with friends and working in the fields, taking a bag and planting maize with the villagers. My father was a Lama. I learnt weaving as a little girl – all women in our area weave.”¹⁶³

Describing the situation in the times just before their flight from Bhutan, a 40-year old woman from Samdrup Jonghkar said, “there was discrimination in jobs, those involved in the democracy movement could not get jobs. I wasn’t too aware of the movement – sometimes my husband used to tell me about it and the problems with the government. My husband might have been involved in the pro-democracy movement, I don’t know. I know my brother in law was involved. I didn’t know enough but I felt that there should be democracy in Bhutan and there were lots of human rights violations going on.”¹⁶⁴

The protests in 1997 featured very prominently in the women’s narratives of Bhutan. From the conversations it was clear that the protests were met with a very severe response. Amnesty International records numerous incidents of torture and cruel and degrading treatment. (Amnesty International Annual Report 1998)

“There was a movement for democracy in 1997 in eastern Bhutan. Many had got arrested and our entire family came away. There were a lot of arbitrary arrests at this time”, said a 40-year old woman.¹⁶⁵ Speaking of her memories of the protest, the 28-year old woman said, “Dudjum Rinpoche is the Guru of our Nyingma Sect. The King invited the Rinpoche to Bhutan but did not allow him to preach. Our community leaders protested and asked for both sects to be allowed in Bhutan but

the King did not agree and all Nyingma monasteries were closed down. Since my father and three brothers were in the monastery they protested against this in 1997 and all were taken to jail. My mother was arrested for a month. We all were also arrested and beaten in jail. They beat my mother very badly and she fractured her tailbone. Her spinal chord also gives a lot of trouble because of the beatings. They also beat her on the head, which affected her mentally.” Further she added that upon their release the Karbhari told them that they would be arrested as soon as their mother was better. As a result they left one night on the pretext that they were taking their mother to a Lama for treatment. “We could not carry anything with us – we came empty handed” she recalled.¹⁶⁶

Like their experience of harassment and intimidation, the Sarchop women’s narratives of the journey into Nepal were also similar to those experienced by the Lhotshampa women around six years earlier. As a 40-year old woman from Samdrup Jongkhar recounted, “we heard that the police were searching for us – they could not find us because we lived in a very remote village in the hills. We came to Thimpu first and then from there we came to Phuntshoeling. I was very scared at the check post. My elder son showed our bags to the police – they did not see my husband. From Phuntshoeling we went to Jaigaon and stayed there for a day and then moved on to Birtamod.”¹⁶⁷

Both the women interviewed had left behind most of their families in Bhutan. While one had her entire maternal side in Bhutan, another said that she had heard that her father had been released after eight years in prison although she had not been able to contact him. Her brother on the other hand had been sentenced for 18 years. “I fear that I won’t be able to recognise my brother when I go back”, she said.¹⁶⁸

As in the case of some Lhotshampa women, Sarchop women remembered the period spent outside the camps (India and Maidhar in the Lhotshampa case) in Birtamod or Kakarbhitta as the most terrible part of their lives. They said that they had neither food, nor clothes nor access to education. Not knowing the language made things even more difficult. “We only had *Kira* and we were afraid that if we wore it people would recognise us. There were some bed covers where we were staying and we made clothes out of them,” said the 28-year old woman.¹⁶⁹

It was much later (one year in the case of one and three years in the case of the other) that they heard about the refugee camps and decided to apply for registration. However, moving to the camps did not immediately alleviate their situation dramatically. “Even here we did not get ration for a month. People around us gave us rice and vegetables. I feel very ashamed when I think of those days,” recalled a 40-year old woman.¹⁷⁰ Living as a minority in a refugee camps mainly for ethnic Nepalis had its problems including those of language and food. Initially none of the women knew how to speak Nepali and communicating with neighbours was difficult. Food was also a problem. The rations catered to Nepali food habits. “Our food is very different from the type given here. We normally eat Ema Dachi and red rice. I don’t like this food but we don’t have a choice. If we refuse the food we will die of hunger”, said the woman from Samdrup Jongkhar. Upon being asked, both women, said that they had no complaints with the Lhotshampa community and in fact enjoyed their friendship and support.

The one time when the 40-year old woman felt particularly marginalised was during the verification conducted by the Joint Verification Team (JVT). “During the JVT we were put in category 2. I don’t know how they classified us like this. At that time I was still new to the place. The questions they asked were in Nepali and I could not understand fully or explain properly. My elder son spoke on our behalf but I felt bad that I could not explain my position or say all that I wanted to. I asked if I could speak in Tshangla but the Nepali delegates objected saying that they would not understand. They stopped me from speaking in my own language”, she described.¹⁷¹

As in the case of the Lhotshampa women, the struggle to retain their distinct cultural and ethnic identity loomed large in their lives too. Both women said that they worried about their children who had only Nepali friends, would forget who they are. “My youngest child speaks only English and Nepali – he was small when he came here and is in the 7th now. The children spend 12 hours outside the house and they hear only Nepali. So now I have made a rule that inside the house you can only speak Tshangla”, said the 40-year old woman from Samdrup Jongkhar.¹⁷²

The need to keep ones identity alive is expressed in various protective measures in the case of language, food habits, festivals etc. Endogamy plays a major role in such situations. In some cases, practical

considerations demand a loosening of rules regarding occupation, language and even appearance or dress. In such cases endogamy, more so here than otherwise, is expected to cover for these lapses. As the 28-year old woman said “I feel that the Nepali Bhutanese are like us – we are all from Bhutan and we are all refugees. I would however want my brothers and sisters to marry within the Sarchop community”.¹⁷³

With regard to the ongoing discussion on a durable solution to the crisis and the various options being considered, both women said that they would not want anything less than repatriation. “If anyone takes me to Bhutan I will go right away. But things need to change in Bhutan”, said the 40-year old woman from Samdrup Jongkhar.¹⁷⁴ Disregarding the steps being taken towards democracy as merely wash, the 28-year old woman from Mongar said, “the King is giving power to his son – democracy means giving power to the people. It will take time before the desired change comes. I feel that we will be in the camps for a long time. Maybe I will die here.”¹⁷⁵

Conclusion

*My children will never forget that they are Bhutanese –
I will make sure.*

45-year old woman from Chirang¹⁷⁶

With 16 long and difficult years behind them and an uncertain if not unstable future ahead, the purpose of the interviews conducted with 58 refugee women was to document and bring to the fore their experiences of the forced eviction and life in the camps and the ways in which their existential realities have shaped their understanding of their situation and representations of the self.

As mentioned earlier, it is important to recognise at the outset that the women's narratives and memories collected as a part of the research study fit very much within what Kaviraj (1992) calls the "Narrative Contract", in which the narrative of the self is being told to the listener based on an understanding of the listener's motives and the purpose of the exercise. Thus the transaction between the narrator and the listener occurs within the parameters of this contract. This nevertheless does not cast a shadow on the 'authenticity' of the narratives itself but presents in fact a rich, textured and layered account of Bhutanese refugee women's past, present and their vision of a future.

As noted by Chamberlain and Laydesdorff (2004), "Migrants perhaps more than many other people, are made by their memories of their birthplace, their homeland, and those they left behind". And while recognising that these memories are often resequenced, mediated and even censored and silenced on the one hand, and to some extent individualised and exclusive on the other, they nevertheless serve as a unique and rich experiential resource for enabling a deeper understanding of communal as well as individual experiences and histories.

The case of the Bhutanese refugees is particularly interesting as their identity is essentially a product of two major migrations. Generally speaking, the first migration took place from Nepal to Bhutan in the mid to late 19th century and the second more recent migration albeit forced and reversed, from Bhutan to Nepal in 1990s. The Lhotshampa/Bhutanese refugee identity is therefore delicately balanced on these

two migrations and the inherited memory of one and the experiential memory of the other. Both are structured and presented in a manner that can serve the formation of a composite identity. As it has been suggested in women's narratives, living in the refugee camps for more than 16 years has made its indelible mark on their identity which is shaped as separate from the Lhotshampa identity – those who left and those who stayed on. Further, being of Nepali ethnicity but Bhutanese nationality and living in Nepal, Bhutanese refugee identity is also shaped in opposition to the local Nepali communities, with refugee statelessness and marginality being contrasted with the privileges and rights local Nepalis enjoy. This is not to suggest, however, that refugees, because of their experiences and shared memories form a homogenous group in terms of identity formation. Caste and religion continues to segregate the community as is common in most of South Asia.¹⁷⁷

History as the first step towards identity formation

While notions of the self based on lived experience certainly influence identity formation, historical accounts of a people, their achievements and the reasons assigned to their present condition is key to the building of the self in a number of marginalised communities fighting for recognition and legitimacy. As pointed out by Partha Chatterji, in the context of growing nationalism in colonial India the articulation that “we must have a history ” has also occurred in the Bhutanese refugee community. (Chatterjee 1994)

In the words of a 28-year old woman from Sarbhang, who is evidently involved in mobilising for larger and more structural political changes in Bhutan, “I worry that the generation that is born here will forget about who we are – there is no written history of the Lhotshampas. You need to know your political history to be politically aware. And without political awareness there can be no political change”.¹⁷⁸ In this context, figures like Garjaman Gurung and Mahsur Chhetri become significant in Lhotshampa historical consciousness as they were men of wealth and power who stood up to the Drukpa authorities and were tragically murdered. It is worth mentioning that the first major account of Lhotshampa history by Lhotshampas was written soon after their eviction from Bhutan. (Dhakal and Strawn 1994)

Sixteen years later, the history of Bhutan taught in the refugee camp schools predictably, has little or nothing about the forced eviction and

the events that led up to it or even on the existence of Lhotshampas in Bhutan. “In schools we are taught history of Bhutan but there is nothing on Lhotshampas or on the eviction. It is more about the Sinchula Treaty; the Punakha treaty. Our history is yet to be made,” said a 24-year old woman from Sarbhang.¹⁷⁹ Further, the contradictions between taught history and experienced history are brought out by a 15-year old school girl when she says that they are taught the history of Bhutan but the books say that the King is a very good man and has introduced many reforms. She finds such statements confusing because her parents have told her that the King of Bhutan is cruel.¹⁸⁰

Regardless of whether the migration of Nepalis to Bhutan took place in the time of the Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel in the mid 17th century, or after the Duar Wars of 1865, in the Lhotshampa narratives of the self, Nepalis went to Bhutan to ‘develop’ southern Bhutan from a jungle to the rich agricultural area that it has become. In this context, most of the women said that their families whether marital or natal went back at least 3-4 generations in Bhutan. Phrases such as having worked hard to develop the land or as a 14-year old girl said “our parents have shed their blood and sweat in Bhutan” are common in the Lhotshampa narratives of the self.¹⁸¹

As a community that associates its history to bringing agriculture to southern Bhutan, land played a very important role in shaping women’s notions of self. The fact that they had land, which they owned and cultivated, evidently enhanced their sense of belonging. To some extent, the ‘land-belonging’ connect could have been strengthened as possession of land tax receipts from 1958 was made the criteria for determining citizenship status. Speaking in the context of citizenship rights in Bhutan an 80-year old woman from Samchi said “we want both our identity and property back as they go hand in hand. To have identity [citizenship] is to have property. Only when there is land and when I can say that this land is my land, will I have my identity. If there is no land, nothing of my own – what will I do with identity [citizenship].”¹⁸²

As is evident in the recounting of many of the women’s memories, the Bhutanese refugee identity heavily draws upon a settled, prosperous past possibly not only to remember loss and contrast it against the current deprivation but also in order to deal with a grim present and an uncertain future. As mentioned earlier, having lost everything, for most

women, the memory of their loss serves as the only capital and is preserved and judiciously handed over to the next generation. In the words of an 80- year old woman from Samchi, “I worry that my grandchildren who grow up in the camps will forget who we are. I am very old now and my grandchildren have the refugee tag. I fear that if I die without telling them who we really are, they will think of themselves only as refugees.”¹⁸³

Most women very categorically answered in the positive when asked if they talk to their children about Bhutan. A common theme during the narrations was the sharing of memories of the place where they lived, their home, their land, the type of cultivation, their cattle, their school and the games they played as children in Bhutan. When speaking of their land in the interview or with their children, women would also talk about the boundaries of the land, how far it stretched and where it was located in relation to the land of some of the neighbours that the children knew. During the course of the interaction a few women also brought out carefully preserved photographs of their home and land in Bhutan. “My sister-in-law had sent photos of our house and the children laminated it – they were very proud to know that this was their house. Our house was very big – I heard that its been made into a monastery now”, said a 45-year old woman from Sarbhang.¹⁸⁴

A settled and prosperous community is often defined by the richness of its cultural and communal practices. As a result, oral histories of the self for many of the refugee women included detailed descriptions of various festivals and fairs, the special rituals that were performed in each of the festival as well as the special food that was prepared. “I tell my grandchildren about our life in Bhutan, about how we celebrated our festivals and on *Diwali* how we would sing *Deusi Bhaili*¹⁸⁵. We used to play *Ratauli* at weddings, which used to be a lot of fun. During the planting season we would be in the paddy fields singing *Asari geet*. As refugees we cannot do any of those things anymore,” reminisced another 80-year old woman from Sarbhang district.¹⁸⁶ Thus typically, for a large number of women, memories of life in Bhutan are of relative prosperity and stability along with an active community life.

The narration of these memories over and over again with a clear purpose of keeping alive a distinct identity has made its mark on the younger generation. Many, whether they were toddlers when they left Bhutan or whether they were born in the camps, are able to articulate

who they are and what their parents did in Bhutan. Speaking about her seven-year old daughter, a 30-year old woman from Chirang said, “my husband and I both talk to our children about Bhutan all the time. From our stories, our daughter [who was born in the refugee camps] makes up her own stories and says, my father used to carry me in his arms and roam in the flower garden in Bhutan.”¹⁸⁷

These, however, are only certain select aspects of memories that shape Bhutanese women’s representations of the self. Apart from the memories it is the notion of collective victimhood, a condition of loss and injustice that also plays a very strong role. The reasons and the process of losing become as important as what was lost. Thus the experience of forced evictions, the harassment and intimidation by the Bhutanese authorities including the security forces becomes very much a part of the self and its representation. As a result, even where women may not have directly experienced the violence and discrimination that led to their forced eviction, the experience of a community member takes on the role of the experience of the community. Several such experiences are then internalised as a part of the communal shared memory. The pain of the individual often becomes the pain of the community especially in the case of identity formation. For instance, the rape/ sexual abuse of some women becomes a part of the shared memory and although the women who spoke about it were quick to mention that it did not happen in their case (specifically in the case of sexual violence), it was still very much a part of their personal narratives. This is not merely because it was one of the reasons that forced them to leave their villages but also because at some level these acts of violence are seen as acts against the larger community both by the perpetrator and the victim. Thus it is difficult in such situations to de-link what happened to the community from what happened to the self.

While identity formation in this case draws upon the memory of migration, material conditions in the camps too play their role in contributing to it. The deep sense of deprivation is then juxtaposed against an idealised past to once again contribute to the notion of victimhood. The frustration of not being able to earn a living and not have a say in the course of ones life was evident in all the women’s narratives and was also very clearly passed down to the children. As an 11-year old girl narrated, “my mother says that in Bhutan we did not have to beg like we do here. In Bhutan we had our own vegetable garden and we did not have to pay for vegetables.”

It has been observed in some cases that eviction, migration or situations of conflict inadvertently opens spaces for women's agency that contributes to their empowerment and in cases even takes them towards emancipation. (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001) In the case of Bhutanese refugee women, generally speaking, this opening up does not seem to have occurred. In fact unlike what was pointed out by Maria Holt in the case of Palestinian refugee women, Bhutanese refugee women see themselves very much within the traditional gendered spaces of "marriage and childbearing". (Holt 2006). Most interactions with women on their gendered experiences of life in the refugee camps invariably focussed on their roles and responsibilities as mothers and their inability to fulfil this role to their satisfaction or as they would have done in Bhutan. On the other hand, women's narratives of their lives in Bhutan focussed much more on their land and their work in the fields rather than their roles as mothers or daughters. Similarly women's narratives of events leading to the eviction and the journey to the camps once again bring out their role beyond a typical gendered construct. In this particular case, evidently, the experience of loss and the reality of living in refugee camps and therefore being unable to work had pushed women deeper into gendered roles than before.

A sense of victimhood was palpable also in the context of the relationship that Bhutanese refugee women said they shared with the local community. Feeling deeply marginalised by their refugee status, most women were quick to point out that they were different from the local Nepali population although their language and culture was similar. For some, the primary difference between the two communities was that the local community had citizenship, which enabled their access to better economic prospects. Refugees are not legally permitted to work and as a result they often have to settle for wages that are far lower than those paid to the local population. Tensions have also erupted from time to time with the local community on the issue of access to resources. Faced with severe aid cuts especially in the case of fuel, refugees have often gone to the nearby jungles to collect firewood and thus have come in direct conflict with the forest guards. Like in the cases of refugees around the world, collecting firewood has invited the wrath of the local community. In the context of women it has often resulted in sexual assault and rape.¹⁸⁸ The most recent example is the clash between the local community and the refugees in February 2006 in Morang district when the refugees were found to be taking firewood

from the community forest nearby. The clashes took on a violent turn with more than 150 people injured and the death of one refugee man.

Some narratives bring out a deep sense of alienation, exclusion, vulnerability and exploitation vis-à-vis the local population. Referring to the local Nepalis, a 28-year old woman from Sarbhang said, “our face and dress is the same but when we go out of the camps they don’t treat us well. They say that we are *Khatan* or bad people and that is why we were thrown out by the King.” There are also cases of refugee women who were married to local men, left the camps only to return after being deserted by the men. Such incidences only further entrench the refugee view that the local Nepali community uses and abuses them and does not treat them with the respect they deserve.

Endogamy

Although marriage between Nepalis and Bhutanese Nepalis have been common in the past, the present situation influenced by the refugees’ perceptions of loss and victimhood seems to have brought to the fore a change in attitudes. A significant number of women categorically stated that they would not like their children to get married to local Nepalis. The reasons that they gave were varied, ranging from difference in culture and upbringing to the need to maintain a cohesive community based on a shared history. The feeling that marriage outside the refugee community would mean inviting humiliation was mentioned several times in the course of the interviews. For others, it was the prospect of going back to Bhutan, fighting collectively for their rights and also the concern that a marriage outside the community would hamper chances of being recognised as a citizen in case of repatriation that influenced their choice in favour of endogamy.

“It will be good if my children marry within the community. We all have suffered so my daughter and daughter in law will have something in common and will get along. If my daughter marries outside the refugee community she might be discriminated against. We are culturally distinct. We don’t have a dowry system here”, said a 32-year old woman from Samchi district.¹⁸⁹

While some women said that it was up to their children to choose their spouses, only one woman from Sarbhang said, “I worry about my children’s future. I also worry about their marriages. We don’t have any money we are refugees. I want them to marry outside the

community. If they marry a Bhutanese refugee they will suffer like us – if they meet someone outside then it will be good.”¹⁹⁰

The Lhotshampa community has, however, had a long history of cross-border marriages with both the Nepalis of Darjeeling as well as the Nepalis in Nepal. In fact the 1977 amendment and the 1985 Bhutan Citizenship Act were apparently a result of perceived threat by the Bhutanese authorities of growing numbers among the Lhotshampas due to the practice of cross border marriages. During the course of the study at least three women were interviewed who were born in India but had been married to Lhotshampa men in Bhutan. Despite them having married Bhutanese citizens, having lived in Bhutan for a major part of their lives, and giving birth to their children in Bhutan, they were not treated as Bhutanese citizens in the 1988 census. Many families were thus forced to migrate out of Bhutan. For these women, their peculiar identity was a heavy cross to bear both in Bhutan as well as in the refugee camps.

For instance, for a 43-year old woman from Samchi who was born in India but married a Lhotshampa man and moved to Bhutan at 19, her categorisation as an F4 (non-national woman married to a Bhutanese Citizen) and therefore a non-citizen came as a rude shock. Not only were her husband and children, although citizens of Bhutan, placed in F7, (categorised as non-nationals) because of her status, but her extended family also asked them to leave as their presence and her status would jeopardise their position and jobs. “I felt very bad and I was very angry. ...I felt that they wanted me to go for no fault of mine – it was not my fault that I was from India”, she said. To add to her sense of alienation and desertion, her husband’s brothers in Bhutan recently asked for a letter bequeathing their claim to Bhutanese citizenship and stating that they had come to Bhutan merely for a visit. This they said would help them in regaining their jobs and admission to school for their children. “I refused to give such a letter”, she said. “If I do, what will be the future of my children? I sent back a message saying I will rather die than send such a letter.”

Despite her natal family being in Kalimpong, for her, staying in the camps with her husband and children became a gesture of confirming her identity as a Bhutanese woman. Unfortunately, she continues to be seen as the ‘other’ in the camps. In situations where the focus on creating and preserving a particular ‘self’ is strong, where the claim to an identity

defined by loss is dependent on how deep your roots are, such alienation seems inevitable. “There is a lot of backbiting about my identity”, she says. “I know that I got this identity from my marriage but I have done everything to prove myself as a Bhutanese.” Referring to her work in various capacities in the camp management structure, she points out, “I am doing this as a Bhutanese woman and I want to give back to the community. I am also doing all this for my children. I have been working in a voluntary capacity since 1993 and it shows my commitment to the community.”¹⁹¹

A community with shared history as well as shared expressions of representation often inadvertently excludes those who do not fit in perfectly within their discourse. Similar although converse to the case of a non-Bhutanese citizen woman married to a Bhutanese citizen, is the case of a Khengpa woman married to a Lhotshampa man. For the Khengpa woman, exile came as a result of marriage to a man who belonged to a community that was being pushed out. Despite her unwillingness to leave Bhutan she said that she was left with little choice, as she did not want to live without her children. Unlike other women in the camps, she had to face a peculiar problem. “We ran away from Bhutan but I had to face problems in Kakarbhita [the entry point for Nepal]. They did not allow me to enter as they were only allowing Nepalis. I look different and unlike Nepali women I have short hair. No Drukpa had arrived [as a refugee] before me so they did not know what to do. Finally my husband and children entered through the main gate and I came walking from another route.”¹⁹² As the only Khengpa in the refugee camps it took her a long time to adjust to the changed environment and community. “There is no other Khengpa here. Our language is different – it is called Kheng. I found it very difficult to adjust but my children were here so I had to. I knew a little bit of Nepali from my days in Bhutan but I picked up the rest here. I still can’t speak Nepali very well”, she said.

Having left behind friends and family, she worries that her children will forget one part of their heritage. “I tell my children about Bhutan and what it is to be Khengpa. They even knew the language earlier but now it looks like they are forgetting. All their friends are Nepali,” she lamented. As a non-ethnic Nepali, she has had to get used to not only very different climatic conditions but also to the food, which is very different from the type that Khenpas ate in Bhutan (mainly red rice and meat). Due to the absence of any other Khengpas celebrating

Khengpa festivals and performing specific rituals is impossible. Her loneliness and sadness were evident but the feeling of being trapped between choosing one part of the family over another, and thus being forced to live outside ones original community seemed to weigh on here tremendously.

Loss of property, citizenship and the perceived loss of dignity manifest themselves in varied forms. Marginality and exclusion make a community look inward finding the much-needed sense of security and stability amongst themselves. For the refugee women, the identity formation process involved not only the careful preservation and passing down of memories of loss but also a constant consolidation and strengthening so that individual memories would increasingly take on the shape of shared communal memories. For many, therefore, the prospect of a family member who could not partake in this shared sense of loss, victimhood, marginality and exclusion as well as a shared vision for a community in exile, possibly meant the dilution of a dream.

Nation and Nationality

I have lived here for 16 years now but I don't consider this my home. For me Bhutan is paradise, my home and my motherland.

A 45-year old woman from Samchi district¹⁹³

For a community that was unjustly stripped of its citizenship and rendered stateless, terms such as nation and nationality are often loaded with concerns and compulsions of the present as well as a vision for the future. If marginality, exclusion and deprivation are some of the main components of identity formation, how is this identity reconciled with the strong sense of belonging that most refugees expressed towards Bhutan as their nation or motherland? Bhutanese refugee women's articulation of nation and nationality did not come across as simply a means to recover their material losses but went much deeper to represent a quest for belonging.

In the narratives of many Bhutanese refugee women, as brought out earlier in the study, Bhutan signifies their land, the area that they called home and the place that gave them a national identity.¹⁹⁴ In the context of an agricultural community, such expressions do not appear as incongruent. And, therefore, when asked about feelings of resentment given their experience of injustice in Bhutan it is common to hear views similar to those expressed by a 43-year old woman from Sarbhong

emerge. “Yes we were evicted from Bhutan but I love my soil and property. The *Bhotay* [Drukpas mainly Ngalongs] tortured us but our soil is blameless.”¹⁹⁵ The linking of land and property to the notion of the motherland is also evident in the words of a 15-year old girl from Chirang district. “The elders say that although you are refugee you must have good feelings for Bhutan because you will return one day. It is our motherland and we should not be living like this”. Further, she said, “I identify myself as Bhutanese because even though I was born here my property and land is there – Bhutan is my motherland.”¹⁹⁶

A few women rationalised the atrocities committed by the Bhutanese army and police against them and other Lhotshampa members as excesses of the local authorities. For them, the King was far removed from the events, if not blameless. One of the women interviewed (much to my surprise) had a photograph of the King in a prominent place in her house. “Yes I like to keep a photo of the king because the king did not commit any of the violations. It was his ministers,” she said.¹⁹⁷ There is no doubt however, that among the women interviewed, those who subscribe to this belief, form a minority.

The day in the schools in the refugee camps begins with the singing of the national anthem. According to some, they also chanted a Bhutanese prayer every morning at assembly.¹⁹⁸ Dzongkha, Bhutan’s national language is taught in schools even though Dzongkha teachers are very hard to find. Further, women said that till a few years ago, 17th December, Bhutan’s National Day, was celebrated diligently in the camps. Was this not paradoxical, did people not feel angry? The answers to these questions were both varied and insightful.

Although many had found the imposition of Dzongkha and the ban on Nepali objectionable and alienating, in the present situation, most women accepted Dzongkha as their National Language and therefore they felt a strong need to learn it. While some women said that sometimes they felt angry that their children were learning the language of the oppressors, they rationalised these thoughts by saying, “Sometimes I feel angry and wonder why I should utter names and words in Dzongkha. But then, I feel its only a language. The language has not done me any harm. I feel we should learn Dzongkha because when we go to Bhutan we can speak in their language.”¹⁹⁹ In the current context of statelessness for many Bhutanese refugee women, Dzongkha has grown to signify more than simply a language of the dominant

Ngalongs. As a 'national symbol' of Bhutan it has assumed attributes that make it acquirable as a qualifier for Bhutanese nationality. The use of the phrase "their language" when referring to Dzongkha by several refugee women also signifies a tacit acceptance of the imposition of the language of the dominant, an act that was bitterly resisted in the late eighties. It is also important to note that while most accept Dzongkha, they do so in an environment where they are free to speak and learn their mother tongue, a condition that was not available to them in Bhutan. And thus many women share the views of a 32-year old woman from Samchi when she says, "[p]ersonally I don't feel angry when I sing the national anthem, celebrate national day or when children learn Dzongkha – I feel that these are the things that make me feel Bhutanese."²⁰⁰ A 28-year old woman from Sarbhang takes a similar if more practical view. According to her, "our national anthem praises the king but we have to sing it to prove our nationality as Bhutanese. As far as language is concerned it is useful and since we know that even Drukpas want a change inside Bhutan, if we need to talk to them and work together we need to be able to communicate."²⁰¹

Nation and nationality are dynamic concepts that take on different hues depending on the compulsions of the times. For Bhutanese refugee women, their particular condition required a negotiated articulation, delicately balanced to accommodate aspirations for cultural and religious expressions, political participation as well as acceptance of the Bhutanese realpolitik. At a very practical day-to-day level, nationality and statelessness is understood in terms of denial in the field of education, work, participation and voice and the possibility of gaining all these. At a level of identity, nation and nationality are closely linked to the concept of 'motherland', which in very many ways is the land that they know, owned and worked upon. At the level of politics, for some having a nationality is essentially a legitimising tool to enter into a discourse on larger political change in Bhutan.

It is a difficult terrain that the Bhutanese refugee women straddle and negotiate on a daily basis. While surviving the daily struggles of providing food for their families, keeping children safe from abuse and ensuring that their children study so that one day they might be able to pull the family out of their present desperate situation, they are also continually concerned about retaining a distinct identity and ensuring that their memories of life and loss in Bhutan as well as their hopes of an eventual return are carried with as much care and pride by

the future generations as they have done for a large part of their lives. The prospect of dispersal through resettlement in several countries, in a completely different culture makes their work even harder and ever more important.

Bhutanese refugee women in their representations of self as well as their articulation of their identity represent many of the dilemmas and paradoxes that several minority communities face as an impact of exclusive nation-building. A 22-year old woman's dilemmas sum up the turmoil and conflicts that several Bhutanese refugee women are dealing with. "I am proud of Bhutan", she said. "Yes I know that our government tortured us but compared to other countries it is a peaceful country. I want to be Bhutanese and to be recognised as one but what is the process? How do I go about doing this? I am Bhutanese but I am also Nepali... I am young, I don't know how I can establish and preserve my specific separate identity but I know that I want to. I want to be known as a Bhutanese Nepali woman. I will never be Bhutia or Drukpa."²⁰²

End Notes

- ¹ Considered to be among the higher castes, their exact status is unclear as they do not fall within the Bahun-Chhetri group.
- ² The categories have been formed according to the systems of education in Bhutan and Nepal. Primary school is up to class five; middle school from class six to class eight; high school includes classes 9th and 10th and ‘plus two’ is classes 11th and 12th usually completed in a separate institution from the school also called junior college.
- ³ This image takes on even more importance in the recent alarm over the ever-growing menace of global warming. Of late, there is also growing interest in the upcoming first ever elections to be held in 2008 and the country’s preparations including the setting up of political parties and conducting mock elections to familiarise its people to a hitherto alien concept.
- ⁴ The Bhutanese Government allows only an unknown fixed number of tourists into the country every year. Tourists must register with an authorised and approved agency, which organises their schedules, and for a fixed cover charge (approximately 200 – 250 USD per day). Indians are exempt from these restrictions.
- ⁵ The Lhotshampa and Bhutanese refugee community consists of a variety of ethnic groups including the Kirat, Tamang, Rai, Gurung and Magar communities.
- ⁶ Several works on Bhutan discuss these huge population swings. These include Dhakal and Strawn 1994. Also see Lee 1998.
- ⁷ Census fact sheet of the Royal Government of Bhutan, 2005.
- ⁸ Ngawang Namgyel was the grandson of the 17th prince-abbot of the Ralung Monastery, the Drukpa’s most important establishment. He took on the title of Shabdrung which translates as “To Whom One Submits”. (Hutt 2003, 17)
- ⁹ While a lot has been written on the reign of Ngawang Namgyal by scholars mentioned above, there is a useful collation of the various works in Sreeja (2006). It was in the years of the Shabdrung that the dual system of governance where religious authority lay with the *Dharma Raja* or the *Shabdrung* and the temporal powers were vested in the *Deb Raja* or the *Desi*.
- ¹⁰ The Shabdrung’s death in 1651 was kept a secret for 54 years. After this for the next 40 years various powerful families in the west put up their candidates for the position of the Shabdrung. (Hutt 2003)

- ¹¹ In 2006 King Jigme Singye Wangchuk announced that he would abdicate in favour of his son Jigme Khesar Namgyel soon after the country's first ever elections to be held in 2008.
- ¹² See for instance Dil Maya's extensive interview in Michael Hutt's '*Unbecoming Citizens*' 2003 and Human Rights Watch report '*Trapped by Inequality: Bhutanese Refugee Women in Nepal*' 2003.
- ¹³ This is a Nepali term used to denote Drukpas and is therefore not synonymous with Bhutanese which is used to signify a nationality and not merely an ethnicity.
- ¹⁴ Interview with D2. Apart from this, there are also some accounts that point to Newari craftsman from Nepal going to Bhutan for the construction of temples and monasteries in the mid 17th century. However, there seems to be no evidence of these craftsmen having settled down in Bhutan. (Sreeja, 2006)
- ¹⁵ In India, Taungya is a term for forest villages that were set up with the British taking control of forestland. Labour was encouraged to these uninhabited areas for clearing of forests for timber. In return and as an incentive they were awarded rights to settle and cultivate land in the area.
- ¹⁶ Hutt has attempted to document the story of the two *thikadars* based on the incomplete memoirs of Garjaman Gurung's grandson D.B. Gurung who began writing the memoirs in 1989.
- ¹⁷ Interview with I1
- ¹⁸ Members of the Congress are said to have met Jawaharlal Nehru and appealed to him for support.
- ¹⁹ There is no agreement on the numbers – they range from four to 25. (Sreeja 2006)
- ²⁰ Material for this sub-section has been summarised from the paper of Tessa Piper. (UNHCR)
- ²¹ With reference to the last mentioned clause, as noted by Thronson (1993) under Article 6 (d) most Bhutanese refugees would qualify for revocation of their citizenship.
- ²² This, to some extent was also influenced by the Chinese occupation of Tibet, which led to on the one hand weakening of ancient trade and political ties with Tibet as well as a conscious policy of alignment with India as protection from China.
- ²³ In response to this allegation, Bhutanese refugees contend that illegal immigrants who came to Bhutan in the 60s and 70s were deported in the mid 80s. See Dixit 1992.

- ²⁴ For details on the integration policy see Sreeja 2006.
- ²⁵ The national integration efforts also included a cash incentive of Nu 5000 for inter-ethnic marriages between Lhotshampas and Drukpas, which was increased to Nu. 10,000 if the marriage lasted five years. As many refugees in the camps remember, very often members of the royalty participated in the Dassai and Tikka celebrations (both Hindu celebrations equivalent to Dusshera and Diwali festivals in India) of the Lhotshampas.
- ²⁶ The problems with the rules as well as the conduct of the census have been well documented in numerous documents of human rights groups as well as the UNHCR e.g. by Tessa Piper. Some of the problems experienced by women will be discussed in the following chapter.
- ²⁷ *Anti-National Activities in Southern Bhutan : A Terrorist Movement* as cited in Sreeja (2006).
- ²⁸ The part about the restrictions on priests has not been confirmed.
- ²⁹ As noted by Sreeja (2006) many believe that the ‘Sons of the Soil’ movement that started in Meghalaya by the Khasi Student’s Union and led to the eviction of Nepalis living in Meghalaya, and parts of Manipur and Nagaland also had an impact on the Bhutanese levels of threat perception as it was believed that many of Lhotshampas were encouraging their evicted relatives from these parts to immigrate to southern Bhutan. Further, the merger of Sikkim with India in 1975 aided by the active support of the local Nepali population had a significant adverse impact on the way in which the Lhotshampas came to be viewed by the ruling elite in Bhutan. In fact the point that had the Bhutanese government not evicted illegal Nepali migrants, Bhutan would have been ‘Sikkimised’ is made several times in conversations with Bhutanese officials. It also needs to be kept in mind that this period coincided with the Gorkha uprising in Darjeeling and Kalimpong and the demand for Gorkhaland and the violent turn of events from 1986 to 1988 contributes further to the diminishing trust in the Lhotshampa population.
- ³⁰ For a detailed account of the various developments and incidents that led up to the large-scale evictions in the early 1990s see Hutt (2003) and Dhakal and Strawn (1994). This section also draws upon literature produced from time to time by the various Bhutanese refugee human rights bodies.
- ³¹ S N M Abidi as cited in Sreeja (2006).
- ³² Some of these include R.B. Basnet, Bhim Subba and Hari Chhetri.
- ³³ According to the senior refugee leaders as noted in the SAARC Jurists Mission, the West Bengal police pushed back and handed over more than 800 refugees to the Bhutanese police. See Sreeja (2006)
- ³⁴ Khudunabari initially started off as two camps – North and South but was later merged as a single camp.

- ³⁵ Husband of C7 during the course of the interview.
- ³⁶ One of the few exceptions is ‘*Trapped by Inequality: Bhutanese Refugee Women in Nepal*’ (2003).
- ³⁷ See Newman (2003).
- ³⁸ As cited in *Holt* (2006).
- ³⁹ Interview with C4V
- ⁴⁰ Interview with G5
- ⁴¹ A 22-year old woman from Samchi district. (C1)
- ⁴² A 43-year old woman from Sarbhang district. (G6)
- ⁴³ Interview with C3
- ⁴⁴ The mention of running water and electricity has to be seen in the context of the refugee camps where water is provided twice day at public outlets and no one has access to electricity supply. Lighting is supposed to be taken care of through the provision of one litre of kerosene per family per month.
- ⁴⁵ Interview with F2
- ⁴⁶ Each person is entitled to 220 grams of vegetables per week as per the rations provided by UNHCR. Fruits are not provided at all.
- ⁴⁷ In all the narratives Andolan is used to describe the pro-democracy demonstrations that took place in 1990.
- ⁴⁸ A 30-year old woman from Chirang. (A1)
- ⁴⁹ Interview with a 32 year old woman from Sarbhang district. (J1)
- ⁵⁰ Interview with C4
- ⁵¹ Interview with F6V
- ⁵² Nepali society consists of a variety of ethnic groups. While a large majority come from the Indo-Nepali stock, the Newaris from western Nepal belong to a different ethnic grouping as do Rais, Limbus, Tamangs etc. The community comprises of Hindus, Buddhists and Christians. As a result, the Nepali language plays a major role in binding them together as a community.
- ⁵³ Equivalent to the Dushehra and Diwali festivals celebrated among Hindus in India.
- ⁵⁴ Interview with C6
- ⁵⁵ Hardly any of the interviews conducted mention the citizenship acts and the amendments although many mention the coercive imposition of *Driglam Namza*.

- ⁵⁶ Most of the time ‘party’ refers to the Bhutan People’s Party (BPP) and *Andolan* refers to the people’s movement for democracy that took place in September and October 1990.
- ⁵⁷ There is a possibility that the group of women interviewed for this study may not have been part of the demonstrations and this is not sufficient to conclude that women and the masses generally stayed away. It is also possible that women preferred not to disclose their involvement or the involvement of their family members for fear of adverse consequences.
- ⁵⁸ Interview with B1. *Andolankaris* refers to people who were actively involved in organising and mobilising for the pro-democracy movement of 1990.
- ⁵⁹ Interview with H5
- ⁶⁰ Interview with D4
- ⁶¹ Interview with G5
- ⁶² A 45 year old woman from Sarbhang.(D3)
- ⁶³ Interview with G2
- ⁶⁴ Interview with C4
- ⁶⁵ Interview with G1
- ⁶⁶ Interview with D3
- ⁶⁷ Interview with B2
- ⁶⁸ Interview with E3
- ⁶⁹ In fact according to the Nepal Government in 10, 073 families with citizenship documents, 1762 families with records pertaining to land ownership, 251 families with health documents 40 families with education certificates, 2490 families with documents such as the service in the government, marriage certificates and court documents, 368 families who do not have any documents. (Sreeja 2006)
- ⁷⁰ Interview with J2
- ⁷¹ A 45-year old woman from Sarbhang district. (D6)
- ⁷² A phrase used to mean to see someone dead.
- ⁷³ Interview with C7
- ⁷⁴ Interview with G6
- ⁷⁵ Interview with E5
- ⁷⁶ Interview with J3

- ⁷⁷ Also known as *Paan* in Hindi is a betel leaf wrapped around a variety of fillings including betel nut and is often served at the end of the meal.
- ⁷⁸ Interview with E2
- ⁷⁹ Interview with F4
- ⁸⁰ Interview with D5
- ⁸¹ A beaded necklace worn by married Nepali women. A *Poti* is symbol of marriage and is therefore considered sacred.
- ⁸² Interview with C5
- ⁸³ Interview with F7
- ⁸⁴ This does not in anyway imply that others had a choice while leaving Bhutan. Given that they were literally driven out, most women indicated that they felt that at that time it was the best they could do to keep their personal safety intact.
- ⁸⁵ Interview with G7
- ⁸⁶ Interview with J1
- ⁸⁷ Interview with C1
- ⁸⁸ Interview with G1
- ⁸⁹ Interview with G7
- ⁹⁰ Interview with H1
- ⁹¹ Interview with B1
- ⁹² Interview with E4
- ⁹³ Interview with C7
- ⁹⁴ Interview with D2
- ⁹⁵ Interview with H3
- ⁹⁶ Interview with D5
- ⁹⁷ Interview with E1
- ⁹⁸ These are mainly used when refugees travel out of Nepal and not for local use.
- ⁹⁹ Interview with B7
- ¹⁰⁰ Interview with E5
- ¹⁰¹ Interview with G2
- ¹⁰² Interview with C6

- ¹⁰³ Interview with E1
- ¹⁰⁴ Interview with C6
- ¹⁰⁵ Interview with G2
- ¹⁰⁶ Interview with C6
- ¹⁰⁷ Interview with B5
- ¹⁰⁸ Interview with H6
- ¹⁰⁹ Interview with C5
- ¹¹⁰ Interview with C2
- ¹¹¹ Interview with D2
- ¹¹² Interview with B8
- ¹¹³ Interview with F8
- ¹¹⁴ Interview with F3
- ¹¹⁵ Interview with D1
- ¹¹⁶ Interview with H6
- ¹¹⁷ Interview with J1
- ¹¹⁸ Interview with H2
- ¹¹⁹ Interview with E3
- ¹²⁰ Interview with E4
- ¹²¹ Interview with C2
- ¹²² Interview with F5
- ¹²³ WFP/UNHCR Joint Assessment Mission Report, September 2003.
- ¹²⁴ Interview with C2
- ¹²⁵ Interview with F3
- ¹²⁶ Interview with Field Director of Caritas and C2.
- ¹²⁷ Interview with D3
- ¹²⁸ Interview with G3
- ¹²⁹ Domestic violence continues to be pushed into the most ‘private spaces’ of women’s lives. As a result there is often reluctance to talk about having experienced this form of violence.
- ¹³⁰ Interview with D4
- ¹³¹ Interview with J3

- ¹³² Interview with F1
- ¹³³ Interview with E1
- ¹³⁴ Interview with A1
- ¹³⁵ Interview with C2
- ¹³⁶ Interview with F5
- ¹³⁷ Interview with B6
- ¹³⁸ The Rising Nepal (Kathmandu) as cited in Sreeja 2006.
- ¹³⁹ It was only on the 10th of June 2007 following a violent clash and the resultant death of two refugee men between some refugees wanting enter Bhutan and the Indian security forces on the Indo-Nepal border, that India's Minister for External Affairs Mr. Pranab Mukherjee said that the refugee crisis is an "international one". The implications of such a statement are yet to be seen.
- ¹⁴⁰ See statement issued by Joint NGO Mission to India, Nepal and Bhutan, 2003.
- ¹⁴¹ Interview with E4
- ¹⁴² Interview with E2
- ¹⁴³ End May 2007 saw violent attacks by those opposing resettlement, on those in favour of it. One person lost his life in the police firing that ensued and many others were injured in the clash.
- ¹⁴⁴ Interview with H3
- ¹⁴⁵ While most interviews were conducted in the homes of the women, during the day when most of the family members would be out, camp conditions ensured that there was a lot of curiosity from neighbours who would sometimes 'drop in' or then stand at the window. Some interviews also took place at the office of the Bhutanese Refugee Women's Organisation.
- ¹⁴⁶ Interview with H2
- ¹⁴⁷ Interview with E1
- ¹⁴⁸ Interview with D5
- ¹⁴⁹ Interview with B7
- ¹⁵⁰ Interview with D7
- ¹⁵¹ Interview with D3
- ¹⁵² Interview with B1
- ¹⁵³ Interview with B3
- ¹⁵⁴ Interview with F7

- ¹⁵⁵ Interview with I1
- ¹⁵⁶ Interview with C6
- ¹⁵⁷ Interview with E3
- ¹⁵⁸ Interview with D2
- ¹⁵⁹ Interview with C1
- ¹⁶⁰ Interview with H5
- ¹⁶¹ Interview with D6
- ¹⁶² Interview with A2 where she said that her choice would depend on the choice of her husband on the issue of a resolution because, practically speaking, it was the integrity and the unity of the family that was most important to her. This does not mean that it was not for others, just that no one else articulated it in this manner.
- ¹⁶³ Interview with G8
- ¹⁶⁴ Interview with E6
- ¹⁶⁵ Interview with E6
- ¹⁶⁶ Interview with G8
- ¹⁶⁷ Interview with E6
- ¹⁶⁸ Interview with G8
- ¹⁶⁹ Interview with G8
- ¹⁷⁰ Interview with E6
- ¹⁷¹ Ibid
- ¹⁷² Ibid
- ¹⁷³ Interview with G8
- ¹⁷⁴ Interview with E6
- ¹⁷⁵ Interview with G8
- ¹⁷⁶ Interview with A2
- ¹⁷⁷ In fact till a few years ago, the caste divisions seemed to run deep in the refugee community with alliances being formed along caste lines. The practice of endogamy, as in the case of most South Asian communities ensures that caste barriers are perpetuated.
- ¹⁷⁸ Interview with I1
- ¹⁷⁹ Interview with D1
- ¹⁸⁰ Interview with F3

- ¹⁸¹ Interview with G4
- ¹⁸² Interview with C5. In the narratives of the Bhutanese refugee women, the use of the word identity was mainly in the context of statelessness and therefore needs to be understood more as citizenship rather than identity formation.
- ¹⁸³ Interview with C5
- ¹⁸⁴ Interview with D6
- ¹⁸⁵ A practice, involving going door to door singing a particular song (it is different for boys and girls) and collecting sweets or money from the neighbours, friends etc.
- ¹⁸⁶ Interview with G2
- ¹⁸⁷ Interview with A1
- ¹⁸⁸ Mary A. Fitzgerald and Shep Lowman, Protect Refugee Women as They Gather Firewood, International Herald Tribune, August 27, 1998.
<http://www.iht.com/articles/1998/08/27/edmary.t.php>
- ¹⁸⁹ Interview with E1. Her position that she would prefer her children to marry within the community is particularly interesting given that she had a “love-marriage” outside the community much to the unhappiness and anger of family members, especially her father.
- ¹⁹⁰ Interview with B1
- ¹⁹¹ Interview with C6
- ¹⁹² Interview with G7
- ¹⁹³ Interview with J2
- ¹⁹⁴ Evidently the awareness of national identity has grown significantly after their exile. A natural phenomenon experienced by most communities.
- ¹⁹⁵ Interview with F5
- ¹⁹⁶ Interview with F3
- ¹⁹⁷ Interview with H1
- ¹⁹⁸ That a separate prayer praising the King was also sung has not been confirmed.
- ¹⁹⁹ Interview with D5
- ²⁰⁰ Interview with E1
- ²⁰¹ Interview with I1
- ²⁰² Interview with C1

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Initiated in 1999, WISCOMP is a project of the FOUNDATION FOR UNIVERSAL RESPONSIBILITY, in New Delhi, India. It is a South Asian initiative that works at the confluence of peacebuilding and security studies. Gender concerns provide the leitmotif of its programs.

Memory and Migration: Bhutanese Refugee Women and Oral Histories of Self and Nation

Awarded by WISCOMP for academic research, media projects and special projects, the *Scholar of Peace* Fellowships are designed to encourage innovative work by academics, policymakers, defence and foreign affairs practitioners, journalists, NGO workers, creative artists and others.

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The twenty eighth in the Perspectives series, this paper focuses on the 'flight' and 'temporary settlement' of the Bhutanese refugee women living in Nepal – the uncertainties, the sufferings and feelings of rootlessness that overwhelm them. Based on in-depth interviews conducted with the refugees, the office bearers of humanitarian organizations working in the area and field observations of the author the paper provides a comprehensive assessment of the social, psychological and economic wellbeing of the refugee women. The author links the Duar War of 1865 with the 1990s refugee crisis in Bhutan to raise important questions about citizenship and identity.

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