

Protracted Refuge and Ethno-Nationalistic issue of Bhutanese Magar Ethnic Refugee Community in Nepal

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Abstract

This ethnographic study is concerned with Magar ethnic community of Lhotsampas and their pendulant situation in the nationalistic stand. Magars in Bhutan practiced Brahministic ritual tradition before they exiled. After they found refuge in Nepal, they changed their ritual practice from Brahministic one to their original Lamastic tradition of Bonbo sect. Even though actions taken by authorities to repatriate these refugees to Bhutan and the expatriate extremists in refugee camps also compel them to return to their national homeland, Magars refute to return there and stipulate to reintegrate within Nepal population. The study finds that as exiled Magars found their refuge in Nepal, they have changed their ritual tradition in order to adjust their way of life consistent with the Nepal's Magar communities. Such change has its reflections in ethno-nationalistic stand of this community and it eventually let them to stay firm in reintegration strategy among three enduring resolving strategies of refugee problem.

Key words: Forced migration, Refugee, Ritual Tradition, Repatriation, Ethno-nationalism.

1.0. Background

As other refugee producing and hosting regions, South Asia has a significant history of Trans-boundary migration. The notable forced migration in South Asia started in the decolonization period. The partition of British India in 1947 brought about large population to abandon their homes and moved across the newly drawn borders. "Approximately 14 million people moved across the Indo Pak border. Around 10 million people fled to India from East Pakistan following the crackdown by the military regime in 1971". (Chari, 2003, p. 25) In South Asia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal are refugee hosting countries which have refugees from Tibet, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

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In an estimation of 2002, India had 144,000 refugees from Sri Lanka, 110,000 from Tibet, 52,000 from Myanmar, 15,000 from Bhutan, 12,000 from Afghanistan and 5,000 – 20,000 from Bangladesh. (Pandey, 2006, p. 236) In case of Nepal, an estimated 20,000 Tibetan refugees arrived between 1959 -1989 and it was also a long term refuge for Bhutanese refugees. A severe ethnic crackdown towards “Bhutanization” caused the eviction of Lhotsampas of Bhutan during 1990 and they sought refuge in Jhapa and Morang districts of South Eastern Nepal. (Ibid: 241). This paper is much concerned with Magar ethnic community of Lhotsampas and their pendulant situation in the nationalistic stand. And this study prominently analyses on ritual transition of Magar communities after they found refuge in Nepal and on how such transition made the resolving strategies of refugee crisis difficult to be handled by the means of refugee camp management.

2.0. Problem Statement

If the host country has genuine cultural patterns of expatriate mass, then they will show their resistance to return their home country and wishes to integrate with the hosting community. Derivation of Magar cultural identity is rooted in Nepal demography and in Tibetan Buddhist tradition. But Magars in Bhutan practiced Brahministic ritual tradition before they exiled. After they found refuge in Nepal, they changed their ritual practice from Brahministic one to their original Lamastic tradition of Bonbo sect. Even though actions taken by authorities to repatriate these refugees to Bhutan and the expatriate extremists in refugee camps also compel them to return to their national homeland, Magars refute to return there and stipulate to reintegrate within Nepal population. Change in ritual tradition practiced in the country of origin made the resolving strategies of refugee crisis complicated to be dealt, since Magars came to hold their position in reintegration while other two durable solutions are open to them. Their stand in reintegration made them susceptible to the violence directed by expatriate Bhutanese extremists who hold their radical lines towards repatriation. Eventually this results at the outbreak of violent conflict in refugee camps and brings about the complicated situation to those who have been in refugee camp management and in settling refugee crisis.

3.0. Objectives

Overall objective of the study is to describe the formation of ethno-nationalistic dilemma of Bhutanese Magar ethnic refugee community in Nepal by analyzing the standoff in refugee camps. Specific objective are;

- a) To depict the ritual transition of Magars after they found the refuge in Nepal;
- b) To illustrate in which ways this ritual transition made the resolving strategies of refugee crisis difficult to find out solution for the refugee crisis; and
- c) To describe how Magars stand in durable solutions made them susceptible to the violence directed by expatriate Bhutanese extremists.

4.0 Research Questions

- a) What is the hosting area condition that motivated Magars to change their ritual tradition that they practiced in Bhutan?
- b) Why Magars chose to have their stronghold in reintegration among three durable solutions for refugee crisis?
- c) How Magars stand in durable solutions made them susceptible to physical violence directed by expatriate Bhutanese extremist groups?

5.0. Methodology

5.1. Research Method

This anthropological study is mostly based on qualitative method and to a lesser extent quantitative method. This study relies both on primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected by using structured questionnaires, unstructured and focused interviews, focused group discussions and observation. Secondary data was collected from official documents of refugee camp management units, refugee women forums and previous studies of published materials in various books, magazines and newspapers. Several organizations, institutions and web-sites have been visited further to gather primary and secondary data. Questions asked in interviews were focused about their social and cultural patterns, violence and its reasons and respondents' idea of security arrangement. In addition to this, camp managements officers, police officers and rebel movement activists were involved in focused interviews. There were 6 focused group discussions conducted to collect information regarding general issues. Each and every focused group discussion was directed towards getting facts about

changes in their lifestyle after found the refuge, and their attitudes and opinions on causes of violence and security matters. And basic and specific data was gathered through observation.

5.2. Research Area and Population

This study is confined to the Bhutanese refugee camp in Jhapa district of eastern Nepal, three camps, Beldanki-1, Beldanki-11 and Beldanki-11 extension, which could satisfy the maximum requirements of the research methodology, were selected. Beldanki-1 camp that divided into 7 sectors and 25 units has 19083 refugees from 2524 families who are living in 3086 huts. Beldanki-11 camp that has 9 sectors and 36 units comprises 23046 refugees of 3900 families living in 3389 huts. Beldanki-11 extension, generally known as Beldanki-111, has 5 sectors and 20 units that consist of 11859 members of 1654 families living in 1972 huts. In addition, research population includes aid workers of UNHCR, UNICEF, Caritas Nepal and Lutheran World Foundation, police officers and other government refugee workers. Further it comprises of some rebel and political movements like Bhutanese Tiger Forces (BTF) and Bhutanese Maoists.

6.0. Ritual Transition and its Imperatives

Religious origin of Magar ethnic community is embedded in Lamaistic tradition of Buddhism. The term “Lamaism” denotes Tibetan Buddhism, since Lama who is the spiritual master or teacher plays major part in rituals. (Kunwar, 1999(1989), p. 200) . Magar ethnic community in Nepal follows the Lamaistic ritual tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. But Magar ethnic community of Lhotsampa population in Bhutan followed Brahministic ritual tradition of Hinduism. “Lhotsampa” is the word of Bhutanese Dzongkha language and means “southerners”. It is believed that Lhotsampas are those who migrated from Nepal and settled in southern part of Bhutan in an antiquity. Lhotsampa community is comprised of people mainly from Indo-Aryan and Mongolian races and few numbers of Dravidians too. Mongolian race of Lhotsampa can be diversified into several ethnic groups like Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Tamang, Magar, Sherpa, Lepcha, Ghally and so on. It is oversimplified that Lhotsampas are Hindus in religion. There are some Mongolian racial groups like Rai, Tamang and Sherpa following Buddhism. However Magars of Lhotsampa were ritually embraced Hinduism

in Bhutan while their Nepali counterparts are attached with Lamastic tradition of Buddhism.

In 1990, the agitation of Lhotsampas against Drukpa monarchy reached its peak. The response from government was more violent so as to evict them from Bhutan. Approximately 100, 000 Lhotsampas fled to India to save their lives. But the first asylum was not succeeded for them. India didn't allow the Lhotsampas to get refuge in her territory and forcefully brought them to east Nepal border. (Bose, 2006, p. 75). After they found the refuge in Nepal, ethnic communes of Lhotsampa began to recognize their cultural identity with their counterparts in the host region. Extreme resentment towards Bhutanese national bond and concomitant cultural elements in Nepal communities exerted influence on directing elders of Lhotsampa to make their younger generation realized their origin of identity in Nepal populace. Such search of origin brought about drastic change in ritual tradition of magar ethnic communities. Members of Magar ethnic commune found that their Nepali counterparts have been following the ritual tradition of Lamaism while they hold their tradition in Brahmanistic one.

Radical tendency of Lhotsampas towards recognizing cultural similarities with Nepal ethnic groups is one of the major motivation factors that urged Magar commune to change their ritual tradition from Hindu Brahmanistic one to Lamastic one of Tibetan Buddhism. Long term refuge is the other motivation factor that also caused the stand of Magar community to direct their actions so as to intermingle with their host country counterparts.

At this juncture, it should be taken into account that belligerent ignorance of Bhutanese national identity and cultural concomitance in Nepal and extended period of living are not exclusively motivated Magars like other Lhotsampas to search their identification with their host country communes. But there are two other specific imperatives which link with refugee camp condition. Firstly, it is survival or security imperative that induced Magars to make modification in their cultural elements to make their way of life similar to their Nepali equals. Refugee camp condition is not satisfactory to Magars. Living in an overcrowded and unsafe settlement for merely two decades gave Magars to search a solution by integrating themselves into host community. It is apparent that the appalling conditions of refugee camps and the violence against women and children such as torture, sexual abuse, trafficking, slavery

and teenage pregnancy and that poor conditions of camps like lack of firewood and lavatory facilities resulted sexual violence of women. (Hans, 2003, pp. 335-387) . Protecting women and children from violence gave them intention to leave the anomalous refugee camp situation and to search for a concomitant living condition in host communities. Secondly, insufficient supplies of goods for running a manageable life for families have inherent drive for refugees to get additional goods for their self sufficiency of basic needs from host communities. It is not an easy task for refugees to get assistance from hosting community where availability of resources are limited and therefore competition over scarce resources prevails. Thus Magars had to approach their counterparts for assistance.

7.0. Durable Solution Selection and Standoff in Refugee Camps

Research area is not only climatically, but politically also hot in nature. There have been several Terai armed groups attached with the regional political ideology, so active beyond government security control. Among those active armed groups, Terai Defense Army, Terai Liberation Army, Terai Liberation Cobra and Terai Tiger Groups are well-known in armed violence in research area. This hosting area politics and armed violence exerted its influences inside the camps so that there have been some rebel and political movement like Bhutanese Tiger Forces, Black Cobra and Bhutanese Maoists, working against government of Bhutan.

Main demand of expatriate extremist groups of Lhotsampa is to return to Bhutan. Aim of these extremist groups has strong back up of the aged members of Lhotsampa and their offspring. Those aged members were landholders before they exiled. They were enjoying certain economic and political privileges under the feudal system of Bhutan. They were able to exert political influence up to the maximum level of royal hierarchy, since they had authority to direct rest of the Lhotsampas including manual and white collar mass. White collar Lhotsampas were able to hold the prominent power positions in monarchical administration in Bhutan. This was seen impossible for such Lhotsampa political elite mass in Nepal. Therefore they decided to return to Bhutan.

Their intention to return to homeland is one of the durable solutions for refugee crisis. There are three durable solutions for refugee crisis; resettlement (returning to homeland), reintegration (intermingle with host country population) and repatriation

(settle in a third country). (Dixit, June 2007, pp. 41-42) In case of Magars, it is impossible to return to Bhutan, because they have abruptly changed their ritual tradition and embraced the Lamaistic religious way of life. Such ritual conversion led Magars to avoid advocating ideas for resettlement. While other members of Lhotsampa ethnic communities who have also hate to return to Bhutan show their willingness to repatriation Magars express their reluctance to repatriation as well. Magars wish to reintegrate with Nepal Magar community, since Magars of Lhotsampa have almost adjusted their way of life similar to Magars of Nepal. Substantial bulwark of their cultural adoption is the ritual transition. With the transition of ritual tradition, Magars began to share their nationalistic sentiments with their Nepali counterparts. This has caused the resentment of extremist groups on Magars as Magars hold duality in their nationalistic stand. Extremist groups launched actions to resist Magars to maintain associative relationships with Nepali Magar community. Community organizational entities of Magars of Lhotsampa were targeted to violent attacks by extremists groups. Magars were told to back their Braministic ritual tradition and to hold their nationalistic stand with Bhutan. Magars was specifically targeted by extremist groups not just for their denial to resettlement, but for change in ritual and nationalistic stand. Lhotsampas were exiled by Bhutanese Drukpas not because their language, but because of their religious means. Lhotsampas were considered as predominantly Hindus. Therefore Bhutanese Lhotsamba nationalism to a certain extent had collaboration with Brahministic ritual tradition. As Magars of Lhotsampas have changed their ritual tradition to Lamastic ritual of Buddhism, it has inadvertently changed their nationalistic stand. This has further exacerbated the resentment of extremist groups of Lhotsampas.

8.0. Conclusion

Magars of Lhotsampa in Nepal refugee camps are the prominent concern not only with the security issues of refugee camp management but also with the matters of human security. Ensuring human security is seen as the proper way to protect all refugees and it provides a safer environment for vulnerable segments of refugees like women and children. Considering the central issues of security policies can specially be analyzed into the three types of refugee protection policy approaches. The characterization of each approach refers to global security concerns, national interest

concerns in the sense of safety and security issues, and the link to immigration policies in order to include societal and human security concerns. (Selm, 2004, pp. 66-90). Considering limitations and challenges in seeking solutions for refugee crisis in the context of evolving security discourse, societal and cultural sites of human security in terms of the protection of refugees must be taken into focus. (Suhrke, 2004, pp. 93-107). When refugee commune undergo with the process of cultural changes as they encounter new culture in host area and are entangled with the process of cultural assimilation or adaptation, there should be the protection from consequential threats of their human security. In case of Magars of Bhutanese refugees, they underwent with the process of “cultural similarization”. By the term “Cultural similarization”, the study refers the process in which members of an ethnic commune after finding the refuge in a host country where their original elements of culture are believed to be existed undergo transitions of their variability of their elements of the ways of life which they developed in their country of origin in order to bring similarities with them and as to integrate with the host community. In such cases, their community and cultural security has to be ensured so as to eradicate possible means of refugee camp break down. It will help to facilitate the management of refugees as well.

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