

Diasporic Cultures from the 18th-20th Centuries in Bhutan

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Abstract

Like any other country in South Asia, the Himalayan Buddhist Kingdom of Bhutan too accommodated diasporas at different periods of time in the annals of its history. Bhutan's recorded history that dates back from approximately the fifth century to the twentieth century shows that the country's diaspora came into being mainly because of wars, political turmoil and labour migration. Other pull factors were the serene environment of Bhutan then considered the perfect setting for Buddhist missionary activities and political asylum granted to people from neighbouring countries. Over very long periods, the migrants assimilated into Bhutan so completely that it became their new homeland. The migrants before 19th century assimilated into the main population and they did not feel that they belonged to a diasporic community. The twentieth century saw population mobilisation on a large scale. Some instances were prompted by individual choice. Others occurred to avoid conflict and warfare. The largest Bhutanese diaspora consists of the Tibetan and the ethnic Nepalese communities. The Nepalese community is spread across many regions in southern Bhutan, whereas Tibetan community is concentrated in western and central Bhutan. These two communities, especially the Nepalese community, form part of the larger Bhutanese population that consists of a diverse, heterogeneous and inclusive community representing different languages, cultures, and faiths. This paper explores the nature of diasporas that existed over the centuries in Bhutan with a special focus on the Nepalese

and Tibetan communities. It further seeks to analyse the impact of the cultural traditions of the Nepalese and Tibetan communities on the domestic populace of Bhutan within the larger framework of identity construction.

Introduction

Bhutan lies in the eastern Himalayas at an altitude of 162 meters to 7554 meters above sea level. The population is estimated to be approximately 700,000 and the area of the country is approximately 39000 km². Thimphu is the capital of Bhutan. There are three main ethnic groups in Bhutan. Tibeto-Mongoloids live mainly in the North and West while Burmo-Mongoloids populate the East, and Indo-Aryan (Nepalese) the South. The two major religions prevalent in Bhutan are Buddhism and Hinduism (75 per cent Buddhism and 25 per cent Hinduism). Buddhism which was introduced in the seventh century, is the state religion of Bhutan. There are some 14 languages spoken. Dzongkha is the national language. English is also very widely spoken and is the medium of instruction at educational institutes.

Diasporas

Bhutan has remained independent throughout its history and has preserved its unique cultural identity. Yet as time passed by, Bhutan began to experience an influx of immigrants from neighbouring countries like Tibet, Nepal and India in gradual phases.

The First phase (5th - 8th Centuries): Exiled Indian Princes

Historical texts say that Indian princes like Gyalpo Ukton (fifth - sixth century), Drimi Kuenden (prior to the birth of Lord Buddha), and Sindhu Raja (eighth century), were banished to

Bhutan due to political issues at home. They were likely accompanied by a fleet of attendants and since history does not specifically state that they returned to their country, it could be reasonably deduced that they got assimilated into the Bhutanese population.

Second Phase (8th - 9th Centuries): Exiled Tibetan Princes

Historical records from the fifth – twentieth centuries show that diasporas in Bhutan came into being mainly because of wars, political turmoil and labour migration. Other probable factors that attracted migrants to Bhutan were the serene environment of Bhutan then considered the perfect place for Buddhist missionary activities and political asylum granted to people from neighbouring countries. The earliest surviving records of Bhutan's history show that Tibetan influence existed from the 6th century during the reign of King Songtsen Gempo, who ruled Tibet from 627 to 649 CE. Settlements in Bhutan by people of Tibetan origin happened during this time.

Third phase (10th - 16th Centuries): Buddhist Mission by Tibetan and Nepalese Artisans

Due to its geographical proximity to Tibet, Bhutan was visited by Buddhist missionaries from Tibet, especially from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries, which has left a strong cultural connection between the two countries. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the spiritual leader responsible in creating a unique identity and artistic tradition of Bhutan, invited many master artists and craftsmen from Tibet, Nepal, Ladakh and Cooch Bihar to pass on their skills to the local inhabitants.

Fourth Phase (18th - 20th Centuries): Tibetan and Nepalese Diaspora

This period saw population mobilisation on a large scale. Some instances were prompted by individual choice. Others occurred to avoid conflict and warfare. The largest Bhutanese diaspora comprises the Tibetan and ethnic Nepalese communities. The Nepalese community is spread across many regions in southern Bhutan, whereas Tibetan community is concentrated in western and central Bhutan.

The Tibetan Diaspora

Tibetans came to Bhutan much earlier than the 9th century but in small numbers. A remarkable flow of Tibetan immigrants started in the twentieth century, as a result of the aftermath of the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Many of them who were from the Southern part of Tibet came across Bhutan when fleeing to India and some chose to remain in Bhutan. The people of Bhutan sympathised with the refugees and extended assistance in all possible ways. Those who renounced the right to return to Tibet were granted Bhutanese citizenship. However, the majority of these Tibetans requested Bhutanese authorities that they would like to return to Tibet one day. As a result, this category remained as refugees. According to a survey done by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in 2009, there are 1298 Tibetans who form the Tibetan diasporic community in Bhutan.

Culture and Tradition

Culture and tradition of a race or a nation is bound to be strongly influenced by the religion that is followed by its people. The Bhutanese culture and tradition are shaped by Buddhism which is predominantly followed in Bhutan as the state religion.

Broadly, there seems to be a similarity between Tibetans and Bhutanese as Buddhism is the main religion of both. But the Bhutanese culture and tradition are unique in their own way. One of the most prominent similarities of traditions between Tibetans and Bhutanese is their festivals. Tibet has various festivals which are associated with Buddhism. Similar traditions are practiced in Bhutan but with some uniqueness.

Religion

Bhutan had its own indigenous religion known as 'Bon' which is a Pre-Buddhist religion. People of this faith worshipped the sun, moon, stars and gods of earth, gods of mountains, gods of the sky and gods of under water. Then during 500 to 600 BCE, Bonism infiltrated into Bhutan gradually from the snowy ranges of Tibet. Bonpo priests invoked benign spirits using chants, spells and magic formulas. We see some of the practices of Bonism infiltrated into the tantric core of Buddhism. Tibetan influence is largely visible in Buddhism and its practices since both Tibetans and Bhutanese practice the Vajrayana form of Buddhism. Buddhism followed and practiced by the Bhutanese, though it belongs to the larger family of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition differs slightly from it.

Language

Some similarities can be found in both written scriptures and spoken languages of Tibet and Bhutan. Similarly, Tibetan literature has a strong bearing on Bhutanese Buddhist literature. Both share the same classical form of writing.

Food

Rice is the staple diet usually consumed with meat and vegetables but there are many other dishes influenced by the Tibetans, Nepalese and Indians. Among the most famous

Tibetan influenced cuisines are *Momo*, (flour dumpling with meat stuffed inside) *Suja* (butter tea) and *Thukpa* (noodles).

The Nepalese Diaspora

The first migration of the people of Nepalese origin in Bhutan occurred around 1620 CE when Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (a prominent figure in Bhutan) commissioned a few Newar craftsmen from the Kathmandu valley in Nepal to make a silver stupa to contain the ashes of the body of his deceased father. He also invited many master artists and craftsmen from Tibet, Nepal, Ladakh and Cooch Bihar in India to pass on their skills to the local Bhutanese. During the late nineteenth Century, contractors working for the Bhutanese government began to organise the settlement of Nepali-speaking people in uninhabited areas of southern Bhutan in order to open up those areas for cultivation. Settlement of large numbers of people from Nepal happened for the first time in the early twentieth century. This settlement was encouraged by the Bhutan House in Kalimpong. The Nepalese settled in the southern region and constitute roughly one-third of the country's total population. They are commonly known as Lhotsampa (Southerners) in Bhutan.

Tradition

The Nepalese diaspora typically lives in extended families like the majority of the Bhutanese. The younger generation still possesses the traditional value system of caring and respecting elderly relatives.

Marriage

Traditionally, marriages of this ethnic group take place between members of the same caste which are arranged by the parents of

the bride and groom. However, there are also instances of marriages of choice. Wedding celebrations last for almost a week. The larger Bhutanese population usually does not celebrate marriage but now they solemnise and celebrate at least for a day which is perhaps an influence of the culture of the diasporic Nepalese. Nowadays marriage between the Lhotsampas and other Bhutanese is also prevalent.

Religion

Most of the Southern Bhutanese follow Hinduism. Hindus and Buddhists share similarities in their beliefs such as after life, worship of many Gods and Goddesses, etc. The Nepalese community in Bhutan has a practice of celebrating different ceremonies and festivals like Dasain, Biswakarma, Bai Tika, Dushire and so on. The whole nation takes part in such festivals and the day on which the celebration of Dassain falls is declared as a government holiday.

Food Habits

Rice is the staple food of the Lhotsampas as well. Staunch Hindus among them do not eat beef while some are totally vegetarian for whom rice and vegetable dishes are common. They have a very different way of preparing those dishes which has now been assimilated into the country's palatable cuisines such as Alu Dam, Chicken Curry, Shel Roti etc.

Language

Most of the Lhotshampas are multilingual. They speak Nepali (a language derived from Sanskrit) at home as their vernacular but most of them also speak Dzongkha, the national language. Likewise, the larger population of Bhutan can also speak and understand the Nepali language.

Conclusion

Historically, there have been at least four distinct waves of human migration into Bhutan, two ancient and two since the nineteenth century. These migrant groups have, in varying degrees, shaped Bhutanese society, culture, and politics. Simultaneously, they have in varying degrees assimilated into the Bhutanese culture as well.

References

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