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Migration in South Asia: Poverty and Vulnerability

Bhutan Poverty Report 2020

AUTHOR

DNS Dhakal

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South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) Secretariat
288 Gairidhara Marg, Gairidhara, Kathmandu, Nepal
Telephone :977-1-4004976, 4004985
Email: saape@saape.org
Website: www.saape.org

Author's Introduction

Dr. DNS Dhakal is a senior fellow at Duke Center for International Development and Acting President of Bhutan National Democratic Party.

MIGRATION: COMPLEX ISSUE IN BHUTAN¹

Introduction

Bhutan is a country of migrants. The Sharecrops came from the east, the Ngalongs from the north and Lhotshampas from the South. They have come to Bhutan at different period of the nation building processes. Of the three major ethnic groups the Sharecrops are considered the earliest immigrants.

The Lhotshampas (people of Nepali ethnicity) are considered to be the recent immigrants though some authors traced their migration with the entourage of Guru Padmasambhava (eight century religious teacher) and Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the founding father of Bhutan. The bulk majority of the Lhotshampas, known earlier as Nepali settlers, were inducted into Bhutan before the establishment of Wangchuck Dynasty in 1907 AD. The Nepali settlers were recognized as Lhotshampa, citizen of South Bhutan, by the National Assembly of Bhutan in 1958.

Bhutan has been always conscious of inbound migration. When it started the First Five Year Development Plan in 1961 the National Assembly of Bhutan instituted stringent rules and regulations for hiring of expatriate workers. In fact the first few years of the construction work at roads, dzongs, schools and hospitals was done with conscripted labors. Ngalongs, Sharecrops and Lhotshamps—all worked in the construction of Thimphu-Phuntsholing, Trongsa-Gelephu and Tashigang-Samdrup Jong kharnorth-south highways and construction of main administrative building—Tashichho Dzong. The government decided to recruit expatriate laborers only when it realized that the excess withdrawal of rural labors had negative impact on the subsistence economy.

The skilled and semi-skilled labors were primarily recruited from India and Nepal on work permit. The Ministry of Home Affairs maintained a strict vigilance on who were employed where and when they needed to renew the work permit. In rare cases such workers would qualify for permanent residence or Bhutanese citizenship. A few qualified expats primarily from Darjeeling District, that also who had accessibility to the members of the royal family, secured permanent residence in Bhutan. The population of such individuals or families could not have exceeded a couple of dozens.

Neither was there was a case of rural to urban migration. There was no urban employment opportunities except for rudimentary government service or in the management of monk bodies. The rural community was contended with subsistence living, and there existed hardly any urban centers in the country to provide sustenance outside the subsistence farming.

The border towns of Phuntsholing, Sarbang, Gelephu, Samdrup Jongkhar, Sibsoo and Samchi served as trading outposts for the interior parts of Bhutan, mostly managed by the Indian

¹ I gratefully acknowledge the research support provided by Karma Dupthob. The opinions expressed here are my own and does not reflect the viewpoints of Karma Dupthob, General Secretary of Druk National Congress.

business community. Thimphu, Paro, Punakha, Tashigang, Damphu were not developed as trading centers. Hardly, any commercial activities, including trading, existed in these towns until the 1980s. The agents based on the border towns directly supplied to consumption centers, particularly the construction sites of roads and buildings.

Nor was there any outbound migration in Bhutan. Prior to the commencement of the development plan almost everyone in the countryside was a subsistence farmer. A few individuals, that also from south Bhutan, were recruited by the British India authority for its Gurkha regiments. Some families, notably those related to reincarnation of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, were compelled to migrate to Kalimpong in Darjeeling District to avoid political persecution.

After the commencement of the development plan plenty of job opportunities were available for the Bhutanese in the construction projects, department of development, administration and security services. In fact job openings for the management of development activities were so plenty that the government recruited Indian skilled manpower either as regular employees or on contract basis. Senior position in the development portfolio were managed by staffs on deputation from the government of India.

The government's manpower development plans were well organized to produce trained manpower. Every district had schools, vocational training schools and polytechnic training centers were also established. Such development initiatives provided opportunities to rural school pass outs either to take jobs in development projects or pursue for higher education. Slowly the teaching, medical, engineering, accounting and clerical positions, occupied earlier by Indian recruits, were substituted by Bhutanese manpower. The government made sure that every trained individual returned to Bhutan and put in some years of service in the country before given permission to seek employment elsewhere.

However, there existed a provision for outmigration of the rural Lhotshampa population. The Lhotshampa could sell their properties and migrate to India or Nepal. There are cases of outbound migration of Lhotshampa families to Assam, Meghalaya, and Manipur in India and Jhapa and Morang districts in Nepal. This process was accelerated particularly in the early 1960s to escape labor conscription. During the same period there was also migration from the Shar chop community to Bomdilla area in Arunachal Pradesh and Shillong in Meghalaya to avoid labor conscription.

These were sporadic outbound migration relatively in small scale. More recently Bhutan engineered forcible outbound migration of Lhotshampa population and undertook massive relocation of Sharecrops and Ngalongs in the land owned by the fleeing population. This happened in the aftermath of peaceful mass demonstration of 1990.

Also, the government is encouraging now educated people to find job outside the country because of the lack of employment opportunities in Bhutan. Expert believes that the lack of employment opportunity in Bhutan is due to mismatched of education and skills.

Forcible Migration

The root cause of forcible migration was the highhanded implementation of the controversial 1985 Citizenship Act which was not passed by the National Assembly of Bhutan.

Towards the end of 1980s the Ministry of Home Affairs decided to conduct census re-enumeration exercise in Southern Bhutan and pigeon holed people from F1 to F7. The seven categories were: F1: Bhutanese citizen; F2: a returned migrant; F3: an absentee during the census; F4: a non-national woman married to a Bhutanese man; F5: a non-national man married to a Bhutanese woman; F6: an adopted child; and F7: a non-national. Reportedly, the new census “revealed” that some 18,000 Lhotshampas did not fall within requirements of F1 category.

This was followed by the implementation of “One-Nation One-People” policy which required wearing of “Gho” and “Kira” in all occasions, dropping the Nepali language from school curriculum and restriction on the practice of Hindu culture and Nepali tradition. An appeal to redress the census enumeration and restrictive cultural policy by the elected royal advisory councillors to the government on behalf of the Lhotshampa community was misunderstood.

Tek Nath Rizal, who submitted an appeal to the King urging redress for the citizenship issue, was stripped of his position, imprisoned for three days, and released on the condition that he not meet with more than five people at any time in any location. Feeling frustrated with the situation, he left the country for exile. The royal government of Bhutan and His Majesty’s Government of Nepal collaborated for abduction for Rizal to Thimphu where he was sentenced to prison.

The census issue, language issue and imprisonment of Rizal served as the rallying point for the human rights and political activists who were working with Rizal for political reforms. The newly formed Bhutan People’s Party (BPP) projected Rizal as the rallying figure and mobilized the Lhotshampa population on language and culture issue. The BPP organized the mass demonstration in September of 1990 which served as the cue for forcible eviction.

Following the demonstrations, the government closed down all schools in the southern districts, suspended ongoing development activities and mobilized security forces to restore government control. The national radio and the government-run weekly *Kuensel* newspaper began campaigning against the Lhotshampas, labelling them as conspirators and terrorists working to seize power in Thimphu, repeatedly reminding the Buddhist north about the recent violent Gorkha uprising in India’s Darjeeling province and India’s annexation of Sikkim in 1975.

In May 1991, eight months after the demonstrations, the Royal Government of Bhutan began enforcing the citizenship laws retroactively: intimidating, terrorizing and evicting large numbers of the Lhotshampa population. The whole of southern Bhutan was put under army administration. The official news bulletins of *Kuensel* began publishing harsh criticism of the Lhotsampas, claiming that their presence in Bhutan was as dangerous as sleeping in bed with a venomous snake.

The Bhutanese army arrived in towns and villages, arresting and jailing anyone whom local officials identified as participants in the demonstrations. Army soldiers began forcefully evicting families, burning their crops and homes. Army battalions set up camp in the villages and required the evicted families to send their young daughters or daughters-in-law to cook, clean and wash for the soldiers. Arrested men were tortured and released on the condition that they left the country. The government carefully planned the eviction process so as to conceal all its activities from the eyes of the outsiders.

The flow of refugees into eastern Nepal began shortly after, in June 1991. Initially it started with a couple hundred people a month, principally those whom the Bhutanese government had identified as leaders or instigators of the protest movement. The refugee flow peaked in 1992, when tens of thousands of migrants reached Nepal every month. It tapered off to smaller numbers near the end of 1993, when the visiting Austrian ambassador to Bhutan made an explicit statement in *Kuensel* that the eviction process would end once the government felt comfortable with the reduced Lhotshampa population. Later Foreign Minister Dawa Tshering, speaking to foreign media, explicitly stated that the government was taking action "to maintain demographic equilibrium."

By the end of the exodus, the proportion of Lhotshampas still in Bhutan had decreased from 40 percent of the country's population to 26 percent. The Sarbang population had decreased by 36 percent; the Chirang population by 22 percent; the Daga population by 18 percent; the Samchi population by 14 percent; the Samdrup Jongkhar population by 10 percent and the remaining *dzongkhags* by one percent.

Bhutan also changed the names of districts, sub-divisions, blocks and villages to remove any trace of Nepali names written in earlier official documents, including on all national identity cards issued by the royal government. These were all intended to erase the claims of the evictees that they were from Bhutan and giving impression in the minds of refugees they have no place in Bhutan.

The total number of refugees who arrived in Nepal was about 84000 by the end of 1993. This number increased to more than 100000 due to natural growth in the span of over two decades. The UNHCR which fed the refugee population became increasingly impatient with the progress of Bhutan-Nepal Talks which hadem broiledat the categorization of the refugees into four groups: (a) Bhutanese forcibly evicted, (b) Bhutanese who left the country, (c) Bhutanese with criminal records and (d) Non-Bhutanese people. This categorization which was proposed by Bhutan and accepted by Nepal was installing any chances of refugees for repatriation to Bhutan.

The international community was footing the bills for upkeeps of the refugees. India, the regional power, was clearly siding Bhutan on the repatriation issue insisting on the point that the refugee problem be resolved under the bilateral framework. Seeing no hope of immediate resolution of the refugee problem under the bilateral framework and indifferent attitude of India towards resolution of the refugee problem compelled the international community under the leadership of the United States of America to decide on third country resettlement option.

The third country resettlement began from March 2008 and ended in December 2016. Till date more than 110000 Bhutanese refugees are resettled in overseas countries, the overwhelming majority finding safe sanctuary in the United States of America. The other countries absorbing more than 1000 Bhutanese refugees are Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The third country resettlement of Bhutanese refugees is the largest refugee resettlement undertaking after World War II. The UNHCR considers this operation as the successful operation to end manmade humanitarian problem.

Bhutan has managed thus far to conceal the forcible migration of the Lhotshampa population with smart international diplomacy and leveraging its strategic location vis-à-vis India and China. It used the bogy of Greater Nepal, illegal economic immigrants, and the campaign of last surviving Buddhist kingdom, which believes on gross national happiness than gross national product, as per the convenience. It is a unique case in which major democratic countries have been overpowered with Bhutan brand of diplomacy to succumb their uprightness to gross violation of human rights of ordinary Bhutanese citizens.

Rural to Rural Migration

There had been always rural to rural migration from one dzongkhag to another or within dzongkhags. Sometimes the migration is triggered because of the natural calamity (landslides), pest and wildlife problem or when families become wealthier to acquire better land for higher crop productivity. But there was hardly any migration between the north to south or from south to the east.

The Sharchops from the east would migrate to the north. In fact the Wangchuck Dynasty, which is mistakenly considered as Ngalong, traces its roots to Kurtoe in east Bhutan. The south, which is inhabited predominantly by the Hindu Nepalis, was kept separated from Buddhist north by creating imaginary boundary line across the country as *seemana*. No southerners were allowed to purchase land in Buddhist dominated areas in the north or the east, and yet there are no Hindu rural settlement in Buddhist Bhutan.

However, there was transfer of population in the 1960s and 70s from densely populated Chirang and Samchidzongkhags. Bhutan wanted to expand agriculture production so it decided to open up the virgin area of Kalikhola, Danabari, Lalai, Taklai and Jhangkhurung of Sarbang Dzongkhag and Bakuli, Dalim, Samrang and Daifam of Samdrup Jongkhar Dzongkhag for cultivation. The government chooses the Lhotshampa population for resettlement. Not that Bhutan was making special favor to the Lhotshmapas; the areas are in the south, hot, humid and malaria infested. The eastern or northern populations which live in cooler climate would not have the area suitable for habitation. During this period some 5000 families from Chirang and Samtchidzongkhags were resettled, making rural to rural planned migration of 30000 population.

In the late 1990s Bhutan decided to distribute the land belonging to the refugee population to people from the east or north Bhutan. This was a move to punish the refugees who protested against the government policy and also to bring homogeneity in the country the settlement of

Buddhist and Hindus population. Simultaneously, the government also opened up migration of Lhotshampa to municipality areas of north or east Bhutan, thus breaking the concept of the imaginary boundary line (*seemana*) which was instituted in the late 1880s at the time of mass induction of Nepali population in south Bhutan. There is no officially published statistics. But the post 1990s political development in Bhutan has moved some 50000 Buddhists from the east or north Bhutan to in the lands belonging to the refugee population.

The agrarian rural population of Bhutan is basically subsistence farmers. Until recently they were contented with subsistence living, cultivating small parcel of land, tending cattle and growing potatoes, ginger, oranges, cardamom and apple as cash crops.

Rural to Urban Migration

As discussed above Bhutan had hardly any urban dwellers at the start of five year development plan. The migration of people in search of employment opportunities began after the coronation of the fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck in 1974. The coronation event required building of high quality accommodation facilities for the visiting dignitaries. Once the event was over the government decided to open the country for tourism, for which the newly created accommodation facilities became handy. This opened up employment opportunities for school dropouts as tourist operators, tourist guides, waiters, cooks and drivers.

Concurrently, Bhutan started construction of 300 MT Penden Cement Plant in Gomtu Bhutan to supply cement for construction of 336 MW Chukha Hydel Project. Construction of these projects was done by imported labors. Upon their completion these projects opened up employment opportunities for educated Bhutanese as clerks, accountants, and technicians. Also, the availability of cheap power encouraged investors to establish wood processing industries, calcium carbide industries and ferrosilicon industries. These industries provided more openings for employment opportunities. Thus the skilled manpower, particularly those with modern education, became first group of rural-urban migrants together with government servants involved in administration of the country.

Migrant Workers

There are three factors that have contributed towards rural to urban migration. The first one is the push factor due to the Lhotshampa problem in the 1990s; second is the construction boom due to expansion of hydropower industry, and the third is the increase in plus secondary educated youths from the villages who are compelled to seek job opportunities in urban areas as workers or entrepreneurs managing their own businesses.

The post 1990 demonstration created fear psychology due to imposition of army rules and restrictive movement of goods and services. Those Lhotshampas who opted to remain within the country had to seek survival outside their dzongkhags particularly those who had business acumen and some level of education. Bhutan government though it used government controlled media to create fear psychology of ethnic conflict in Bhutan in practice it maintained

communal harmony in Thimphu, Phuents holing and other urban centers. The Lhotshampa population whom it considered loyal to the government was encouraged to move to urban centers notably in northern Bhutan and replace the expatriate workers, mostly Indians, to carry out the menial jobs. Earlier Indian entrepreneurs were active as hair dressers, cooks, washers and floor cleaners and owner of grocery stores on renewable business permits. The government withdrew such business licenses upon the expiry and encouraged the recently migrated Lhotshampas from Sarbang, Chirang, Dagana, Samdrup Jongkhar and Samchi Dzongkhags to build entrepreneurship for delivery of such services.

After successful commissioning of 336 MW Chukha Hydel project Bhutan executed a number of hydropower projects since the 1990s. The completed ones are 60 MW Kurichu Project in Monger Dzongkhag, 40 MW Basachu Project in Wangdue Phodrang Dzongkhag, 1020 MW Tala Project in Chukha Dzongkhag and 126 MW Dagachu Project in Dagana Dzongkhag. Construction work is going on in 1200 MW Punatsangchhu-I and 1020 MW Punatsangchhu II in Wangdue Phodrang Dzongkhag, 720 MW Mangdechhu Project in Trongsa Dzongkhag, 600 MW Kholongchhu Project in Bumthang Dzongkhag, 570 MW Wangchu Project in Chukha Dzongkhag and 118 MW Nikachu Project in Trongsa Dzongkhag.

Upon completion of these projects the country would have invested nearly 4 billion USD in nominal dollar, which is a huge amount for a small country like Bhutan. While the hydroelectric revenue flows maybe significant for the size of Bhutan's economy, the debt servicing requirement will be equally large. These projects sites are likely to develop mini urban centers primarily for residence of maintenance and management crew spurring some migration of skilled workers. These projects are unlikely to create downstream industries since the outputs are contracted output for export to India and Bangladesh.

During the construction phase employment of Bhutanese national is limited to clerical and administrative jobs. Most of the skilled workers are imported from India. The National Assembly of Bhutan has prescribed 45000 as upper limit for foreign workers at any time in the country; there are some 50000 in residence as of January 2019.

Bhutan is not a member of the Internal Labor Organization (ILO). It is also not signatory of the 1990 United Nations International Convention on the protection of rights of migrant workers and their families. There was one labor protest organized by the construction workers of Chukha Hydel project in the early 1980s. Since such protests are sine quo none in Bhutan, the then Indira Gandhi government had to intervene on behalf of the project authority to resolve the dispute. There are no transparent rules in Bhutan on how construction workers are compensated for accident or loss of life at the project sites. No labor was paid any compensation who lost their lives during the construction of roads in Bhutan, of whom many were imported laborers from Nepal and India. The border road organization of India (DANTAK) which had installed stone inscription at the site of the accidents in the name of those who lost their lives were systematically destroyed by Bhutan government. The Indian construction companies which are engaged at hydropower construction sites take advantage of such a policy of Bhutan government to protect from labor rights persecution.

In 2007 the National Assembly of Bhutan has enacted Labor and Employment Act which permits local workers to form their own association. This act governs the professional associations and not construction workers. The Act does not mention anything about the expatriate workers. In 2007 the National Assembly also enacted the Immigration Act. The preamble of the Act aims to ensure that the Kingdom of Bhutan will be free of illegal immigrants, and there is hardly any chance for a migrant worker to qualify for permanent residence in Bhutan.

Migration to Thromde

As per the 2017 census the urban population of Bhutan is about 17% of the total including those who are residing outside the country. About 48% of the urban dwellers live in Thimphu Municipality (Thromde) putting extreme pressure on the availability of space.

The urban expansion that could happen in the Thimphu valley is from Dechencholing in the north to Babesa in the south, hardly area of 13 kilometers in length and 1 kilometer width. With inclusion of side expansion the total available area for urbanization is estimated at 26.13 square kilometers. With the projected population of Thimphu Municipality at 150000 by 2027, the per capita availability of space will reduce to 174 square meters. That would put immense pressure on housing, water and sanitation facilities. The other municipality in Bhutan has 12000 for Phuntsholing, 5143 for Samdrup Jongkhar and 7000 for Gelephu. Phuntsholing and Samdrup Jongkar have limited open area for expansion. Gelephu has more open flat space, and it is considered the future mega urbanization site in Bhutan.

About 101908 population migrated from the rural areas to Thimphu and Phuntsholing areas since the beginning of the development process. About 12% of migrants were from Tashigang and 13% from Samchidzongkhags—the most populous dzongkhags in Bhutan. There is yet no slum development in the municipality. Most of the migrants are either work as employees or have established their own businesses which were catered earlier by the Indian immigrants.

There is, however, emerging law and order problem in Thimphu Municipality. With some 10.6% of unemployed youths, mostly belonging to the higher echelon of Bhutanese society there is rise in crime rate, drug use and alcohol related abuses. The other three municipalities are located in the border area and there is better control of crime, drug and alcohol related abuses since the police in Bhutan work in coordination with the Indian counterparts, and the percentages of unemployed youths are less.

International Migration

In 2017 Bhutan had 5.5% of the total population living outside the country if the resettled Bhutanese are excluded from the refugee camps. These were Bhutanese nationals working privately, for the international organizations or posted in the country's diplomatic missions. With resettlement of plus 110000 Bhutanese in Australia, Britain, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Netherlands, New Zealand and the United States, the Bhutanese Diaspora is now some 150000

strong. This constitutes almost 19% of the total Bhutanese population if we considered population base of Bhutan at 800000.

The third country resettlement of Bhutanese refugee is a recent phenomenon which started from 2008 only. Earlier even those from inside the country had not ventured to the outside world since it was relatively easy to find jobs within the country. Only a select few did join the service of the United Nations and international financial institutions in which Bhutan has the membership. Now Bhutan reaching its saturation point on employment opportunities in both public and private sectors more and more educated Bhutanese are migrating abroad for jobs, and the government itself has drawn up a plan to export skilled manpower in the near future. There had been cases in the past that Bhutanese nationals have used Nepalese or Indian manpower agents to get placement abroad particularly in Dubai, Qatar and Kuwait.

The driving force behind this trend is education. Since the 1960s Bhutan had been sending students for studies to India. During the process it built good quality schools in each district with English as the medium of instructions. Education became the ladder to enter into the modern economy for Bhutanese children who are overwhelming from subsistence farming families. Over the years Bhutanese diversified the education destination in addition to building its own infrastructure for higher education. More recently Bhutanese students are getting education in India, Australia, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, United Kingdom, United States and Canada. Many of them are going abroad with scholarships and some on their own expenses. Upon completion of the education they are staying behind for job opportunities particularly in developed countries like Australia, Canada and the United States. The resettlement of the refugees in these counties has facilitated children of their relatives in Bhutan for higher education in overseas counties.

In 2017, Bhutan had 8426 individuals with post graduate education, 41785 with bachelor degrees, 8841 with diploma degree and 60219 with higher secondary education. The private sector in Bhutan is not well developed; the government employs some 28000 in administrative services and some 16000 in security forces. That leaves a large chunk of educated people seeking active employment opportunities in overseas. Because of this situation Bhutan is following the example of Nepal to export manpower for earning hard currency. Earlier there were stringent requirements to enter into lower secondary school. In 2017 of the 170895 primary school pass outs only 51652 were permitted to enter into the lower secondary schools, only 30% of the total qualifying for high school enrollment. This was intentionally designed to control the educated unemployment problem. From 2019 onward the government has removed this restriction making it possible for everyone with higher than 35% passing grade to continue with education into the middle schools, high schools, higher secondary schools and colleges in government run educational institutions.

In Nepal, the remittances contributes nearly one-third of the gross domestic product. Bhutan is aiming to emulate Nepal and boost its hard currency earning through manpower export. In 2006, Bhutan received US\$ 1.54 million in remittances. It increased to US\$ 8 million in 2010 primarily due to remittances by the resettled Bhutanese to their relatives back in Bhutan. This

further increased to US\$ 10 million in 2012 and reached US\$ 40 million in 2017, making the contribution from remittances about 1.7% of the GDP. Interestingly, the government has also relaxed the stringent requirement of 4 members' family units particularly for Lhotshampa families. Bhutan has clearly seized the concept that manpower in general is an asset to the nation and not a liability if managed properly. Because of the large spread-out diaspora and with focus at exporting manpower, Bhutan is likely to anchor expansion of its economy based on outbound migration.

Problem and Concerns of Migration

There are evidences that rural out-migration is creating rural labor shortage, abandonment of the land and elderly population, and potential discontinuity of age-old cultural practices. Tashigang, Lhuntse and Bumthang are out-migration dzongkhags; Thimphu, Paro, Punakha and Chukha are in-migration dzongkhags. The migrant receiving dzongkhags are facing increasing youth unemployment, alcoholism and use of drugs and crimes. Some 4500 households have become empty in the rural areas due to rural-urban migration.

Lhuntshe Dzongkhag. Seventy-two year old Aum Dumda from Wambur village of Tshen khargewog is one of the many left behind to shoulder the burden of surviving in the village without children to look after her. She has difficulty carrying out farming chores and is becoming increasingly dependent on her neighbours. The land the family owned for generation has remained fallow.

Ura village in Bumthang Dzongkhag. This village used to home some 1000 villagers who participated actively in Ura Yakchoe—the traditional festival of Ura community. At present there are only 200 people mostly children and elderly people. The rest have moved out in search of better livelihood in urban centers, throwing question about the continuity of age old tradition. Tshewang Jigme, former Ura Gup said, “We don't have many people left back to be part of the festival. All the galleries are empty. We only have children and old people just enough to run the errands and conduct the festival.”

Bartsham Gewog in Tashigang Dzongkhag. This gewog is producer of rice, maize, potato and chilli and the crop productivity has been rising. Because of out-migration the gewog is experiencing farm labor shortages. As a result crop production has declined, which used to be a food surplus gewog.

According to Lhuntse villager Tsheten Wangdisome of the main causes of rural-urban migration are small landholdings, lack of employment opportunities, limited cultural and social amenities and better schools. Years of Thimphu centric development has neglected many of the far away dzongkhags in eastern, central and south central regions. The developmental activities were concentrated in western Bhutan which comprise of Ha, Thimphu, Chukha, Paro and Samchidzongkhags.

Most of the migrant receiving districts are in western region where Thimphu is located. Thimphu Municipality has become as big in size of population as Tashigang and Samchidzongkhags which were considered the most populated districts in Bhutan. The population of Thimphu in 1986 was 16000. It has swollen today over 70000.

As per the survey of 2017, rural to urban migration accounted 21.7% of all population born in Bhutan and almost one half of all migrant population. Such migration could have long-term economic impact on utilization of land and infrastructure resources in the country. As per the 2017 survey report, the main reason cited for migration are family reunion (17.8%), employment (12.7%) and education (8.3%).

Triggering such a level of migration is attributed to deliberate or shortsighted government policy during formulation and implementation of past development plans. The government of Bhutan has realized this mistake and has begun recently the rectifying process.

A comprehensive National Development Plan (CNDP) is being envisioned to tackle the problem of rural-urban migration. The focus is at creating employment opportunities, maximizing local resources and rich culture, improving the standard of living in rural communities, rural tourism, educational institutions, and empowerment of local governance. This concept is being borrowed from Japan's experience of achieving balanced land development. Interestingly the project is supported by Japan International Cooperation Agency.

Interestingly the fertility rate of Bhutanese population is expected to slide to 1.8%. It is projected that Bhutan's population will be 808000 by 2030, 950000 by 2040 and 980000 by 2050. Given the size of the country and natural endowment it has, Bhutan would be in good shape as far as population management is concern. But the issue is what percentage of this will remain in the villages and what percentage will migrate to urban areas. The management of urban population will be a challenge for Bhutan as opportunities for job creations are limited and creation of urban infrastructure is lagging behind.

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