

*Agony Continues*

## Refugee Women of Bhutan

Bhutan became a party to the UN convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women on 31 August 1981. But the situation of Bhutanese refugee women is appalling. Among the 100,000 Bhutanese refugees, around 50% of the population in the refugee camps are women, most of these women are illiterate and they participate less in social activities. In the cultural sphere the southern Bhutanese women had to bear the brunt of the government's cultural policy. The Bhutanese government forgetting its responsibility towards improving the status of women has deliberately attacked them in this campaign of ethnic cleansing. Some of the discriminatory policies of the government are, inter-ethnic marriage policy, the 1985 Citizenship Act and the Census of 1988 and the one nation one people policy. Under one nation one people policy the culture of ruling elite was imposed on others thus banning the cultural pluralism in Bhutan. Southern Bhutanese women were deprived of their right to wear their dress; their ceremonial marriage necklaces were stripped off; they were made to cut short their hair. Instead, they were forced to adopt the dress and culture of the northern Bhutanese.

The women have always been the worst hit by government repression. In most cases, their husbands were imprisoned or had to flee the country for fear of persecution. The security forces plundered their homes, tortured, intimidated and raped these helpless women. There are 156 rape victims in Bhutanese refugee camps as per the records of *CVICT Nepal*. According to *Shangri-La Without Human Rights* eight women were raped to death. The following testimonies exemplify the extent to which women's rights have been violated by the Bhutanese government.

### **Demand for Girls to be Supplied to the Army**

"My father was born in Bhutan and his age is 63. Every day the office bearers used to come and threaten me to leave the village. They not only intimidated me, but the Bhutanese army one day suddenly came and burnt all the 27 houses of the village. They accused me of being a Nepali citizen and asked me to hand over our girls and wives to serve them. They demanded that 15-20 ladies be handed over. In these circumstances we left our village. Our relatives are still there and we have our registered land there.

*A statement by Mr. A (Voices of Pain/The Bhutan tragedy when will it end - report of the SAARC jurist*

*Mission on Bhutan, May 1992)*

### **Rape and Torture by Security Personnel**

A 23-year-old woman from Phibsoo, Sarbhang district, gave the following account of her and her husband's arrest and treatment in detention at an army camp in Sarbhang in November 1990.

"My husband and I had heard that the armies were coming to confiscate our goods, so we both went to take our valuables to my parents' house. On the way back, we were arrested on the banks of the Thulopinkwa river by about ten army personnel. The soldiers started beating us, asking us if we had gone to see the party people and where the leaders were. They asked us about the campsites of our party people. We said we did not know. The soldiers tied our hands behind our backs and dragged us along. We were beaten all the time. We were taken to Sarbhang, about 30 km away and kept in a school that had been turned into an army barrack for about a month. I was locked inside a room and my husband was tied to a pillar in the compound. I could see him through the window. He was beaten until he vomited blood. He was also made to sit on the ground and was kicked. He was refused food for one week. Every night two or three soldiers came and raped me. This happened every night for a whole month. I was given food every night at about midnight. If I asked for water, I was beaten with chains that the soldiers used to tie on their guns. When I was released... I stayed for one month until I realised I was pregnant. I was so ashamed that I could not face the other villagers so I left Bhutan in early January 1991. I left my children with my mother-in-law in Bhutan. I went to jungle hoping I would die there. Then I went to Kachugoan in Kokrajhar, Assam where I stayed with some relatives. My sister and a male relative came to Kachugoan by chance and I bumped into them there. They paid for me to come to Maidhar. As a result of rape, I had twins, one of which died and one survived. I do not know if I will see my husband again."

*From Amnesty International Report, Dec. 1992*

### **Forceful Eviction**

*From Shangrila without Human Rights, AHURA, Bhutan, Ms. Bachala Maya Acharya narrates her story*

One day in January 1992, Mr. Uday Bhattra, a local court official, came to my house accompanied by twelve army personnel, asked me to list my property and ordered me to leave the country within four days. The next day army personnel came and took me to the village headman (Gup). They harassed and threatened me by telling me of the dire consequences I'd have to

face if I did not leave the country. They made me wait at the Gup office till mid-night.

Two days later, the "Gup" took me to Dungkhaig Court at Damphu, Chirang Bhutan, and handed me to the "Thrimpon" (Chief district court official). The "Thrimpon" ordered me to leave the country within four days, saying that it was an order from the King and the Royal Bodyguards. I refused to leave my motherland and told him that I was a bona-fide citizen of Bhutan who had landed property since generations.

Moreover, I told him that my son Mr. Narayan Sharma had been arrested by the government and was imprisoned in Chemgang central prison because of his involvement in the human rights movement. When I repeatedly refused to comply with his order to leave the country, he took me to a court room and kept me in solitary confinement for the rest of the day. At dusk, he ordered me to return home in Lamidara which is about 35 kms from Damphu, I went home on foot, reaching there at midnight.

After three days, army personal once again came to my home. They threatened me and looted all my movable household belongings. When the complaint of the Civil Administrators' excesses reached Thimphu, a high level delegation led by Home Minister Dago Tshering reached Chirang on January 13, 1992 for investigations. (Vide below: report in Kuensel, dated January 25, 1992). We were informed that we could express our grievances to the visiting minister.

Accordingly, I wrote a petition, met the minister and submitted the same. The minister assured me that I could stay in Bhutan. However, as soon as he left for Thimphu, army personnel entered my house and ordered me to leave the country. I steadfastly refused to do so.

However, as they continued to threaten me I ultimately told them that if it was the command of the King to evict me from the country and if I were to be penalized for refusing to do so, then I would appeal to the Royal government to release my son from the Thimphu central jail, where he had since been transferred from Chemgang, and was undergoing rigorous imprisonment since a peaceful demonstration in September 1990.

The court official told me that my son would be released only on the condition that I leave the country. After a few days, my son was released. The very day that he came home, at mid-night, army personnel came to my house, threatened my family, then threw us out of our home which they proceeded to lock up.

At mid-night, I along with the helpless members of my family left my beloved homeland. After a difficult four days trek, we reached the Indian border town, along with my son, my daughter-in-law and my 17 month old grandson. We were joined by other forcibly evicted Bhutanese nationals who helped us reach a refugee camp in Jhapa, eastern Nepal.

### **Refugee Women exercise the Right to Return**

The Bhutanese refugees under the aegis of Appeal Movement Coordinating Council demanded their right to return. The Bhutanese refugee women played a very active role in the Peace March both as peace marchers and organisers. There were female representation from all the camps in the Appeal Movement. Exercising the right to return and the right to peaceful assembly and association as enshrined in articles 13 and 20 respectively of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, altogether around 1333 refugee women, in sixteen batches undertook the peace march to Bhutan from the vicinity of the refugee camps and from different places in India.

There were tens of thousands of other refugee women who were involved in the demonstration, mass meetings and other activities. But the peace marchers were intercepted, arrested and imprisoned by the Indian authorities as they entered the Indian soil after crossing over the Indo-Nepal border. The Indian authorities promulgated prohibitory orders although the refugees were peacefully traversing the land route through which they were driven to Nepal following forcible eviction from Bhutan.

After a prolonged detention in Indian jails of Siliguri, Jalpaiguri and Baharampur in West Bengal, Bhutanese refugees entered Bhutan. But the Bhutanese security forces deported them back to India and from there they were sent back to Nepal by the Indian police.

### **Women in Bhutan**

With the schools and the health services remaining closed for the last ten years in south Bhutan, women and children have no access to these facilities. The harassment in south and eastern Bhutan continues. Amnesty International's report on Bhutan in 1998, states that, 'Ms. Kinzang Chozam, who was pregnant, was among those arrested and was not allowed to see her children. Other women were arrested, apparently in an attempt to force their husband to give themselves up to the authorities.' The most serious problems that the women in Bhutan are facing is the risk of rape, sexual humiliation, imprisonment and eviction from the country. Women of all ages have been the target of

the police, army and even the civilian repressions.

### Women in the Camps

Women in the camps continue to be subjected to various forms of torture and suppression. Many women have become the victims of local toughs and the authorities working in the camps. The harassment of women within the family is no less inside the camps. But the women have become active in the awareness programmes within and outside the camps. The role of women in running camp-life is often greater than men, their activities start from early morning until late night.

Now many women in the camps with the help of OXFAM (UK) know how to read and write. They write poems and short stories, and many of them who did not earlier know how to read and write are teachers and social activists. They now say that if they had known reading and writing before, they would have never left the country, and would have rather fought back to remain within their country Bhutan.

**Jagat Acharya**

### Rohingya Women

## Stateless and Oppressed from Burma

*(The following report is based on the document "Trafficked from Hell to Hades", Images Asia, November 1999, and "Discrimination in Arakan", Human Rights Watch, [hrw.org](http://hrw.org) - Ed.)*

While the conflicts that cause women to flee often make news headlines, the plight of women who become refugees and displaced persons frequently remains unpublicized. In many cases, refugee and displaced women flee conflict after being terrorized with rape and other sexual and physical abuse. Although they seek refuge to escape these dangers, many are subjected to similar abuse as refugees. Refugee and displaced women, uprooted from their homes and countries by war, internal strife, or natural catastrophe are vulnerable to violence both as a result of the surrounding problem and because of their dependency on outsiders for relief provisions. The internally displaced are further at risk because the abuses they seek to escape are often being committed by the very government that should afford them protection.

### The Rohingyas in Burma

The most critical issue remains the legal status of the Rohingyas in Burma and the implications that it carries

in practice. While they have been permitted to reside in Burma, most Rohingyas are considered by the Burmese authorities to be "resident foreigners," not citizens. This lack of full citizenship rights means that the Rohingyas are subject to other abuses, including restrictions on their freedom of movement, discriminatory limitations on access to education, and arbitrary confiscation of property. Denial of citizenship, and of the rights that go with it, inevitably pose serious obstacles to the achievement of a durable solution to the refugee flows.

The 1982 Burma Citizenship Law, promulgated not long after the mass return of Rohingyas who fled in 1978, distinguishes between three categories of citizenship: citizenship, associate citizenship, and naturalized citizenship. A person is issued a colour-coded Citizenship Scrutiny Card consistent with his or her citizenship status - pink, blue, and green respectively. Citizens are persons who belong to one of the national races (Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), Karen, Chin, Burman, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, Kaman, or Zerbadee) or whose ancestors settled in the country before 1823, the beginning of British occupation of Arakan State. If a person cannot provide evidence that his ancestors settled in Burma before 1823, he or she can be classified as an associate citizen if one grandparent, or pre-1823 ancestor, was a citizen of another country. The stipulations of the Burma Citizenship Law governing the right to one of the three types of Burmese citizenship effectively deny to the Rohingyas the possibility of acquiring a nationality. Despite being able to trace Rohingyas history to the eighth century, Burmese law does not recognize the ethnic minority as one of the national races. Many Rohingyas families migrated to and settled in Arakan during the British colonial period which would immediately exclude them from citizenship. They are vulnerable to atrocities by the Burmese government, which includes restrictions on freedom of movement, forced labour and arbitrary confiscation of property.

As a consequence to the disastrous economic situation, forced labour and harassment by the military, migration and human trafficking from Burma to neighbouring countries have flourished. In Thailand, in addition to over 120,000 refugees living in camps established along the border, up to one million Burmese migrants, most of them undocumented, are seeking a better means of livelihood.

### Rohingya Women: Oppressed in Burma

Interviews with Rohingyas women from different social backgrounds reveal the subordinate status of these women in their own community. They live under a

relatively conservative interpretation of Islam. Their level of economic and political participation is almost non-existent. Women, even those belonging to the upper class, were not aware of any women's organisations. Multiple marriages are common, especially in the poor strata of the community. Most women are confined to their houses, and are only able to go out covered with a burka. During the interviewing process the researcher frequently encountered difficulties in hearing the women's voices as often men present would interfere and answer for them. Similar experiences were shared by other colleagues.

The subordinate status of Rohingya women is also exacerbated by the current situation in Burma. Sajda, a 19-year old educated Rohingya woman, commented: "The major problem is rape. Rape is very common. We are not respected. That is why women are too afraid to leave their homes and even work outside. Often the military kidnaps girls and takes them to their camps. UNHCR has initiated programmes to improve education in Northern Arakan and felt compelled to offer an additional rice allowance to families with daughters in order to increase female attendance in the classrooms.

Health care is grossly lacking in the villages in Northern Arakan. Rohingya women are often reluctant to visit government facilities, if any, as they are usually treated with contempt. Furthermore, the restrictions on their freedom of movement prevent them from reaching clinics or hospitals outside their village tracts. Zainab, the wife of a wealthy trader from Maungdaw, had just given birth and faced medical complications: "We face many problems for child delivery. My sister-in-law died after giving birth in Maungdaw. I decided to go to Akyab for medical treatment. For us, it is so difficult to travel anywhere, even to Akyab. We have to pay so much money for a pass. This treatment costs me 20,000 Kyats: 5000 Kyats for medical expenses, but the remaining 15,000 Kyats were for travelling costs."

Women usually do not have employment outside of their homes, and it is uncommon to see women working in the fields. However, as an economic necessity, widows and women heading a household do take jobs as day labourers or housemaids.

Some women have been expelled by their own relatives who could not afford to feed them. Zobida is a 24 years old widow, mother of 4 children. She was interviewed in Bangladesh: "My husband was always ordered to do forced labour. About 5 months ago, my son was sick, so he refused to go. The military came to

pick him up and took him to the Chittapurika army camp where they shot at him. Then the soldiers called me to carry him to the hospital, but he died on the way. After he died, I stayed with my parents-in-law, but they could no longer wanted to see me if I did not find a job. The worst tool of oppression used against Rohingya women consists of rape and sexual assault. A UNHCR staffperson in Bangladesh told the researcher that "selective rape" triggered the 1991/92 mass exodus of refugees to Bangladesh. Many women, in particular widows, stated that the safety of their teenage daughters led them to flee their homes in Arakan. Yasmin, a woman of 35, undressed to expose the scars on the lower part of her body, a stab wound in the pubis area, a large injury on her right buttock and another knife cut on her leg. "I was raped by non-Muslims. I was 12 or 13 years old at that time. I had been working in the field and I was returning to my sister's house. On the way, 2 or 3 men assaulted me and they did this to me."

Forced relocation, usually without compensation, is another push factor for departure described by Rahima, a widow with two sons, who arrived in Pakistan in 1997. "The army took my husband as a porter and for two weeks did not give him any food. He died of beatings and starvation. Other porters brought his dead body and I buried him. After his death I worked cleaning houses. But within a few months the government took everything, our land and our house, to give to the Maghs (Rakhine Buddhists). "You are not our people," they told me, "You have no right to have land in Burma. You should go away!" I had some relatives in Pakistan and they invited me to join them."

All Rohingya women, as well as men, who have been trafficked to Pakistan, have first come to Bangladesh. In some cases women were coerced right from their villages in Northern Arakan, but the majority fell into the clutches of the trafficking network in Bangladesh. Thousands of Rohingyas who escaped across Bangladesh did not settle in the refugee camps. After the UNHCR repatriation process started new arrivals were no longer admitted in the camps. They went to swell the slum population of Cox's Bazar or stayed in hiding in the jungle areas, totally deprived of any humanitarian assistance. Abductions of young women, rape and sexual assaults are not uncommon. The local press has reported cases when the police 'rescued' Rohingya refugees on the verge of being trafficked to India. In an interview with Images Asia, a staffperson from Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), a Dhaka-based NGO, related a specific case in which they got involved, "In May 1998, a bus carrying 71 passengers, mostly women and children of various



ages, was driving from Cox's Bazar to Benapole (Indian border). The driver got suspicious about the passengers he was carrying and when the bus stopped at a petrol station, he informed the police. The police organised a road block near Jessore and intercepted the bus. This way they found that all the passengers were going to be trafficked illegally to India. DAM is running a shelter for women and children rescued from trafficking near Jessore.

### **The Journey across the Sub-Continent**

The journey across the sub-continent starts in the Rohingya's homes in Arakan or in Bangladesh. Once the group sets out on the journey, the participants have to do whatever the trafficker orders them to do. They are completely at his mercy. The traffickers always have contact with the border police. The group usually travels by bus to a location near the Indo-Bangladesh border. They arrive at the border at night, usually on foot, and the trafficker orders the people to wait quietly behind while he negotiates with the border police to let the group through. Once in India, they are herded to Calcutta and board a train to New Delhi, or to Ajmer in Rajasthan. From there they continue their journey to the Pakistan border.

The Rohingya population in Pakistan is mostly concentrated in the suburbs of Karachi, including Korangi, Orangi, Landhi. In these areas some of the Rohingya settlements are named after their place of origin, such as "Arakanabad", "Burmi Colony", "Arakan Colony". All these settlements receive regular visits from law-enforcement agencies extorting money from their undocumented inhabitants.

In relation to trafficking, Pakistan is known as a sending, receiving as well as transit country. However, the Government has remained insensitive to the plight of illegal migrants, and has largely ignored the issue of trafficking. Since they are not recognised as citizens of Burma, and are consequently deprived of any form of documentation, it is reasonable to say that 200,000 or more Rohingya Muslims have been smuggled in one way or another into Pakistan. Unfortunately, no reliable data is available to give any approximation of the trafficking business.

Following its survey in Karachi, the Sindh police has expressed concern over the impact of illegal immigration on law and order, and while it has identified the Afghans with arms smuggling and drug trafficking, it has associated Bangladeshis and Burmese with the flesh trade and prostitution.

When a group of Rohingyas finally arrive in Karachi, the traffickers usually take them to a den. Language barriers increase their vulnerability. Those who have relatives in the city are sent to stay with them, and it is not unusual that the trafficker will first demand more money from the relatives before handing them over. Women and children with no relatives are often sold into sexual slavery or domestic servitude after being married to legitimise their enslavement.

When the woman is auctioned off on the flesh market, she is paraded as a "commodity" in front of potential buyers, her physical attributes are appraised, her skills assessed, and the bargaining begins. The selling price of a woman generally ranges from US\$1,285 to US\$2,428 depending on her age, beauty, virginity, education, etc. A pimp earns on average between US\$200 and US\$229 net for each woman, and can make over 100 of such sales a month. Thereafter, the woman might be sold to someone else, forced into prostitution, or serving as concubine or slave to rural landlords.

Besides the risk of being sold, many Rohingya women become victims of slavery through debt bondage. Those too poor to pay their passage have to reimburse the trafficker for the costs of the journey. He places them and their children in carpet factories or other industries where they are forced to work for little or no pay until their debt is recovered. Because of their undocumented status, Rohingya women constantly face arrest and imprisonment as illegal immigrants.

Female prisoners in Pakistan are often detained in the same jails as men in violation of Pakistani law, in overcrowded conditions and with inadequate facilities for women. They do not have even access to legal assistance. They are further victimised by police and pimps while in detention. The Human Rights Watch, reported in 1992 that more than 72% of women in police custody in Pakistan are subjected to sexual or physical violence.

Until now, the voices of Rohingya women have been muffled, but with more exposure of the situations they face, we hope their cries will no longer be left unheard. Measures need to be implemented urgently, and systems put in place to allow them to live in full human dignity, including programs that address their basic needs. Their sufferings can no longer be ignored. It is the international community's responsibility to ensure that their fundamental rights are respected and guaranteed.

*Soma Ghosal*