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Normally, in a country where population figures are compiled and extrapolated on two different sets of data, discrepancies are bound to arise. But if the discrepancy is over 15 percent and that too in a country that is sensitive to "ethnic balance" like Bhutan, there should be cause for worry as one would not wish another round of ethnic cleansing, when the current refugee problem is almost coming to an end.

Kuensel of October 7, 2013 came out with the news that Bhutan's population could be about 100,000 less than the projections of the National Statistics Bureau, according to the figures maintained by the Home ministry's department of civil registration and census.

As per the civil registry's records and as on September 11 this year, Bhutan's population stood at 633,607.

But the projections made by the National Statistics Bureau give a figure of 733,004-a difference of 99397 that comes to 15.68 percent. By any measure, the difference is too high to be explained away. The source of information of the NSB was the 2005 population and housing census conducted in May that year and updated by what is claimed to be defacto and de jure methods.

The defacto method counts people where they are at the time of census while the other method counts people in their usual place of residence although they may have moved out for other reasons.

The NSB officials claim that it is standard international practice to use the defacto population figures to measure key economic indicators such as per capita income, levels of poverty etc.

The civil registry records also indicate that as of September 11 this year, 56,444 non Bhutanese were in the country with valid permits. If this is true, can the balance 42953 be considered as illegals?

One cannot but recall the past history of Bhutan juggling with the population figures. At the time of entry into UN in 1969, Bhutan's population was placed at an inflated figure of 1.3 million!

The census operations in 1985 and 1988 are supposed to have revealed the presence of a large number of illegal immigrants in the southern regions, which resulted in an "ethnic cleansing" that resulted in the refugee crisis with camps in eastern Nepal bringing untold miseries to the unfortunate Lhotsampas of southern Bhutan.

Having followed the ethnic crisis, it appeared to me that Bhutan was more concerned about ethnic balancing between the northerners and southern Lhotsampas who at one point of time there were rumours that they exceeded fifty percent. This may not be correct but this was the impression many had.

One can understand Bhutan's anxiety to have an ethnic balance of 25 percent of Lhotsampas to the rest (this is my guess, but confirmed by many to be fairly accurate). After all, it is there for all to see that in neighbouring Sikkim, the Lepcha and the Bhutias have been reduced to a minority! We have another example where in Tripura the migrant Bengalis have over the years overwhelmed the local population. Another classic case is that of Chittagong hill tracts!

The need of the hour is for Bhutan to examine how this difference of 42953 (almost 6.8 percent) has risen. It should not be presumed that they are illegals who have settled in southern Bhutan and let not Bhutan embark on another round of cleansing that would bring another round of misery to those poor Lhotsampas who have suffered enough.

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