

## **Bhutanese Refugee Cultural Complex: An Outsider-Insider's Perspective**

Susan Banki<sup>1</sup>

### **ABSTRACT**

The Bhutanese Refugee Cultural Complex (BRCC), housed in Jhapa in eastern Nepal, is a centre devoted to the memory and study of Bhutanese refugees. As the BRCC develops into a fully functioning centre, it is worth asking about its purpose(s). Building on research conducted on other memorialisation initiatives, in this article I suggest five possible purposes for what I called commemorative structures: documenting history; preventing future problem events; reconciliation; individual healing; and tourism. I analyse the potential for the BRCC to fulfill these roles, and suggest the questions that might need to be answered to make this a reality.

**Keywords:** Culture, history, memorialisation, memory, persecution, reconciliation

### **Introduction**

In March 2019, I visited the as-yet-unfinished Bhutanese Refugee Cultural Complex (BRCC). The BRCC sits next to a bright golden Hindu Temple on a quiet road in Charali, a small town relatively close to Kakarvitta on the Indo-Nepal border; the Bhadrapur airport; and the seven refugee camps (of which all but two are now closed) that at one time housed more than 100,000 Bhutanese refugees. Telling the story of those refugees is the function of the BRCC, which has areas dedicated to museum-like displays, memorialisation, an office for a future Bhutan-Nepal Foundation (BNF), and, most recently, a library (Dhakal, 2020).

Locally known as 'Bhotangay Mandir', the BRCC was founded, funded, and built by Dr. DNS Dhakal, the Acting President of the Bhutan

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Susan Banki is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Sydney. She conducts research on human rights, refugees, and transnational activism. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9203-4106

National Democratic Party (BNDP). As a scholar of forced migration, who has studied the roots and outcomes of the Bhutanese refugee issue for more than a decade, I find the BRCC a valuable asset, which hopes to bring together many points of a contested history for those who were affected by Bhutan's relationships with its ethnic minorities – primarily, although not exclusively, its treatment of its Bhutanese Nepalis, or Lhotshampas.<sup>2</sup>

There are many compelling elements within the BRCC. The black marble memorial, listing those who died, serves as a reminder of the long-term persecution narrative that Bhutanese Nepalis carry with them, as it begins with the martyrdom of the famed Masur Chettri who was drowned in a leather bag in the early 1950s. The framed articles along the walls recall not just the tactics of the exile organisations and the activism that they carried out, but also the coverage of that activism in local and regional newspapers. The fading photographs of activist leaders meeting with important stakeholders over the past two decades illuminate the people and personalities that have influenced the events of this important conflict in South Asia. Although still incomplete, there is much about the BRCC that promises to be increasingly useful in the future.

I also found that there were some stimulating questions that arose from my visit. For example, I took great interest in the photographs of Bhutan's kings that occupy a central place on one balcony overlooking nearby fields. From the perspective of an outsider, this is unusual: in what other museum meant to commemorate a painful past would you find revered photographs of the nobility of the oppressor's side? And what should we make of the huge sign presumably rescued from Beldangi-II (one of the refugee camps) announcing the offices of one of the community-based organisations that was active in the camps, Bhutanese Refugees Aiding Victims of Violence (BRAVVE)? Does this serve to remind the outside world of the ingenuity and creativity of

---

<sup>2</sup> In discussions with many refugees, I have heard many opinions on the best label to use to describe the ethnic Nepali population from Bhutan. While Lhotshampa (southern-residing people) is preferred by some, I accept the argument that this place-based label obscures the importance of ethnicity in the struggles for identity. I have elected to use the term Bhutanese-Nepali.

Bhutanese Nepalis, even as they lived in crowded refugee camps? Or is it a piece intended to evoke nostalgia for those who lived through it: *remember the bustling vocational centre?* More broadly, what is the intent of the BRCC? To educate outsiders, to reconcile with those still inside Bhutan, or to serve as a historical archive for those who lived through it?

I don't ask these questions by way of criticism. To the contrary, I am excited about the prospect of a place where one can go to study an issue about which I care deeply. And, having had several long-ranging conversations with Dr. Dhakal when I visited, I know he is interested in these questions also. Further, the BRCC, and particularly the parts of it devoted to history, are not yet complete. In fact, Dr. Dhakal told me, he doesn't want to officially open the centre "until the leaders of Nepal and Bhutan are shaking hands at its entrance."

But as an "outsider-insider" to the Bhutanese refugee narrative, I thought it might be valuable to offer a personal perspective on how the BRCC might be envisioned. I call myself an "outsider-insider" because I have had the honour of meeting thousands of Bhutanese refugees over the past 15 years, and I have interviewed nearly 100. I have recently completed a book about Bhutanese refugee homeland activism (which is currently sitting with a publisher). But I have not had the experience of those who left Bhutan and struggled to live in the refugee camps, and I speak neither Nepali nor Dzongkha. As a scholar, I know the issues. Still, the fine details that cannot be captured by official documents – how long it takes to walk from one remote village to another, how one prisoner was actually able to communicate with cousins in the refugee camp, who went to school with whom, pre-exile – often still escape me, even today.

Below, I review what other researchers have discussed about the purpose of memorials, monuments, and museums. I draw on ideas that have come from other contexts, like War Memorials, Holocaust Museums, and commemorative events and architecture. Building on those ideas, I ask some questions about the current state of the BRCC (from 2019), questions that I hope will be helpful in shaping its continued formation.

## **The Purpose of Commemorative Structures**

Depending on who is building them and frequenting them, memorials, monuments, and memorial museums can serve different purposes and can tell very different stories. But they all fall under the category of structures that interact with personal and collective memory for a public purpose. I call all of these *commemorative structures* in the paragraphs to come, for shorthand.

### *History in the Making*

The first purpose that commemorative structures may serve, and likely their most common purpose, is to relay a telling of history that focuses on a tragic or difficult segment of the past: a conflict, a persecutory event, a war, a genocide, a natural disaster. In this way, they are different from, for example, national museums, which may offer broad overviews of a country's history and potentially gloss over the narratives of liminal or ignored populations (although good museums should seek to do both).

This purpose of commemorative structures recognizes the relationship between *history* and the more subjective and constructed element of *memory*. What commemorative structures do, through statues, memorial plaques, artifacts, chronologies, and the telling of personal and relatable stories, is to turn history into collective memory. This may lead to a solidification and ossification of memory. Put simply, it suggests that commemorative structures risk embracing an unchanging view of the past, just as unreflective national museums may do. It is often overlooked that these discourses may embrace a different, but equally unnuanced, tale about the contested history.

### *Never Again*

Second, commemorative structures' purpose may have a focal point that looks to the future, rather than resting in the past. Building on narratives that offer a reflection as to how it was possible for the difficult situation (war, genocide, persecution) to occur, commemorative structures with this purpose assert, plainly: *never again*. Commemorative structures may relay the *never again* message quite explicitly, such as Holocaust memorials<sup>3</sup> that have the Hebrew equivalent inscribed on stones. Or

---

<sup>3</sup> Visit <https://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/en/> for more detailed stories of holocaust

they may have educational components that recognise the types of behaviours and communication styles (propaganda, laws that prohibit movement of an ethnic minority population, neglect of communities in need) that lead to the tragic or difficult event commemorated. By identifying the patterns that generated such a problematic history, the hope is to prevent its repeat.

Commemorative structures with a *never again* purpose differ in the populations that capture the focus of their future warnings. This may be a limited exhortation – “We must ensure that this never happens to us again” – or the message may speak more broadly about the necessity to avoid the kinds of ignorance and othering that leads to ethnic or political violence or neglect in the whole world.

### *Reconciliation*

Third, commemorative structures look to the future with a different view. Rather than a prevention purpose, they can play a role in reconciliation. Here the purpose is to craft historical narratives in such a way that people who frequent the site are able to look objectively at the conditions that precipitated the event. This may mean reinterpreting previous understandings of conflict and violence, and those who carried it out.

The *process* of deciding the narrative of commemorative structures is as important as the outcome. Who is included, and who makes the decision about the vision of the final product? Collaboration – incorporating the multidimensional angles of parties to the conflict or site of persecution – is a key aspect of reconciliation. Coordination among various stakeholders, it has been shown, improves possibilities for genuine efforts toward transitional justice. Where previously embattled parties need to be re-integrated, creating dialogue about how to imagine the commemorative structure can help to smooth out ideological differences (Karabegović, 2019).

### *Healing*

Fourth, commemorative structures may give those who suffered through the conflict or war a chance to heal emotionally. This is different from collective reconciliation, but rather speaks to the potential of individuals

to face a difficult past and close off the painful aspects of it. This kind of closure, on the one hand, may be a way of looking toward the future. On the other hand, it may lead to a glorification of the past, a celebratory way of appropriating painful memories so that certain aspects of these memories – like humiliating acts of oppression or defeat – are removed from the (his)story. This, of course, means removing from the narrative parts that don't fit a story of triumph – over evil, over oppressors, over a painful past. Healing, then, may sit on the opposite side of the spectrum from glorification (Rowlands, 1999).

### *Tourism*

Finally, commemorative structures may serve a more instrumental purpose: they may aid in tourism development. This goal can be problematic if this is the sole purpose or if it ignores the story of persecution, but as a secondary goal, bringing tourism dollars to regions that have been decimated by conflict is not inherently bad if it can bolster an economy at the same time that it broadens awareness of the historical and sociopolitical contexts that led to the memorialised situation in the first place.

### **BRCC and its Early Multiple Roles**

Having reviewed some of the likely possible purposes that commemorative structures serve, I now turn to the BRCC. I ask, at this early stage in its formation, what role, or roles, does the BRCC hope to fill? For evidence, I draw on conversations with Dr. Dhakal and articles written about the BRCC in diaspora publications, as well as my observations about the BRCC from March 2019.

Dr. Dhakal told me explicitly that he came up with the idea of the BRCC when he visited a museum commemorating the Armenian Genocide. He explained: “Until this day, there are countries that have not recognised the genocide of the Armenians, which happened more than 100 years ago. I don't want to wait that long for people to know what happened to our people.” Clearly, and not surprisingly, the first aim of the BRCC is to tell the history of a difficult past. The marble memorial demonstrates that, and, as noted, reaches back into Bhutanese Nepali history, reinforcing the “origin story” associated with one of the earliest dissidents in the Bhutanese Nepali narrative.

And yet, there are some important omissions in this history, currently. The details that precipitated the flight of tens of thousands of ethnic Nepalis are lacking. These are moments in Bhutan's history that are known well to every Bhutanese Nepali: *Driglam Namzha*, the Green Belt Initiative, the overzealous implementation of the national census in Bhutan's southern regions. Later, there were other significant events that are given short shrift: the 1990 demonstrations, the establishment of the non-Nepali exile organisation headed by Rongthong Kuenley Dorji (DNC), and the release of Tek Nath Rizal. But while every Bhutanese Nepali knows this history now, the BRCC will hopefully outlast the current generation. This is, after all, one of its purposes. Furthermore, if the BRCC is intended for an audience outside of the refugee community – and one can assume that it is, given much of the English language signage – the BRCC will have to consider carefully which aspects of history it wants to emphasize.

Commemorative structures with historical purposes may differ in terms of the slice of history they cover. The period of persecution or violence is often the most prominent part of the presentation, but many commemorative structures also remind audiences of the daily lives of the affected population *before* the difficult event occurred. By focusing on the pre-event, audiences are reminded of what was lost in the event's aftermath: *see how we lived, and how we might have continued to live, in the absence of the persecution or violence that followed*. For example, at the Kigali Genocide Memorial, which commemorates the atrocities of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, one of the exhibitions is devoted to life in Rwandan society not only prior to the genocide, but also prior to colonisation. Quite deliberately, this exhibit demonstrates the ways that different ethnicities lived in harmony, but also endured hardships, prior to the imposition of external forces.<sup>4</sup>

Having heard so many stories about Bhutan from those who remember it – about the mandarin groves, the cardamom fields, the school picnics – I believe that what might be called the “pre-event history” would be a popular part of any BRCC exhibit. For the older generation, the power of

---

<sup>4</sup> Visit <https://kgm.rw/memorial/exhibitions/> to learn more about Kigali genocide

these stories – collective in their nature, because so many refugees share them – would also serve the purpose of allowing the older generation to gain some closure, and to heal from the pain of the past.

Currently, the BRCC offers little by way of healing purposes. This is understandable, since there is, as of yet, no real way to close off the telling of Bhutanese history; these exhibits have yet to be developed in their entirety. When they are created, it may be wise to pay close attention to the design of the displays. Research about the potential for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to help with veterans' post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) showed that the design of the memorial had an important effect on their experiences of visiting it, and of the possibility of facilitating a healthy mourning process (Watkins, 2010). Thus, as difficult parts of the Bhutanese refugee experience are put into exhibition form, it will be important to consider not only the appropriate words and tone to use (sombre, hopeful, angry, factual), but also how these stories are presented: how should photographs be paired with narratives? When, if at all, should the actual voices of Bhutanese refugees be used? What should be the location of such stories in the museum – at the entrance, tucked away in a high room, or placed side-by-side with stories of survival? These are questions that it will be useful to answer.

Dr. Dhakal also envisions the BRCC as a place that will help aid reconciliation. The creation of the future BNF points to this goal, but to my mind, this will be one aspect of the centre most difficult to accomplish. The obvious reason is that the combination of exile and resettlement has physically separated those who espouse government and dissident narratives, and they have had virtually no opportunity to interact. While some have admitted, both in private conversations and in books (Pradhan, 2012; Rizal 2018) that mistakes were made by both sides, no public dialogue has been forthcoming. This is all the more reason why Dr. Dhakal's plan to involve a range of stakeholders on the BNF committee is a wise one, including those who currently live in Bhutan (presumably, northerners), Nepalis, and Bhutanese Nepalis (Dhakal, 2020). As noted, it is coordination between these diverse parties that can potentially deliver a message of reconciliation to future audiences.



A topic of some difficulty will need to be addressed: how will the BRCC treat the parts of the exile movement that were, to put it delicately, less than savory? As a scholar, I feel comfortable asserting that violence on the part of anti-government groups was the great exception, not the norm. Yet to ignore these infrequent, but real, aspects of the movement is to lessen the possibilities for reconciliation. After all, they had a significant impact on the psyche of northerners and the ways that some Bhutanese chose to leave Bhutan. Of course, any pro-government representatives who work as part of a BRCC committee will need to engage in a similar reckoning.

Partially related to the purpose of reconciliation is the *never again* purpose, which actively applies the chronicling of difficult history in order to prevent it from happening again. This is work, as already noted, that requires not just the display of information, but its analysis and sharing in outside communities, often paired with discussions of similar contexts. While the Bhutanese refugee situation is unique in many ways, the stripping of citizenship is an increasingly common phenomenon globally. India, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States have all created legislation that makes it easier for citizens to lose their citizenship. If the BRCC wanted to draw some broader links with other similar situations, a focus on citizenship removal may be one possible path. Community engagement and global outreach will be an important component of this.

Finally, the fifth purpose I mentioned: is the BRCC intended to draw in tourists? Thus far, this goal remains completely aspirational, since the BRCC hasn't yet officially opened. It has neither been advertised widely, nor has it been granted trust status by the government of Nepal. And many of the questions posed above will likely want to be answered before the BRCC starts taking in large numbers. Further, who is the targeted tourist audience? If it is to appeal to members of the host community (which, one would imagine, it should, given two decades of these two populations living side by side), how will the museum tell the story of the local Nepali community in Jhapa and Morang districts? For the estimated 15,000 Bhutanese exiles who have been living in India for three decades, what part of their story might be possible to tell, given

their precarious existence today? Might they want to visit? Currently, the BRCC displays dozens of articles and photographs describing the work of Bhutanese activists and their meetings with outside parties. How will these external stakeholders (Nepali and Indian politicians, UN officials) be incorporated into the narrative?

In addition to questions of substance and content, pondering a goal of bringing in tourists lays the groundwork for a separate set of questions about how the material at the BRCC should be presented: how much detail should be included in displays? Should these assume no outsider knowledge, or a little? Which languages will be included in signage? Certainly, Nepali and English. But what about Dzongkha, Hindi, and potentially other indigenous languages of eastern Nepal? For illiterate or semi-literate visitors, what channels might be available to share a nuanced and complicated story?

## **Conclusion**

I understand that the resources needed to bring the BRCC to a fully functioning centre will take time to collect. Therefore, the ambitious questions posed above are not meant to be answered immediately, but only expected to begin a conversation about the enduring purpose of the BRCC. Having some clarity about its purpose(s), I hope this article has demonstrated, will influence decisions about the substance and design of the BRCC, going forward.

At present, the truth is, the in-the-making character of the BRCC reflects the unfinished business of the Bhutanese issue as a whole. Yes, 'democracy' has come to Bhutan, and there is no longer an issue of more than 100,000 refugees languishing in Nepal's refugee camps. But return to Bhutan for those who have not resettled remains a dream, and for ethnic Nepalis who never left Bhutan, full acceptance into Bhutanese society has been a slow process, and for some, an impossible obstacle. The BRCC's greatest triumph will be if it can contribute to closing a chapter on that part of this continuing story.

## References

- Dhakal, D. (2020, December 1). Bhutan-Nepal Library. *NRB*. Retrieved from <http://nrbbhutan.org/bhutan-nepal-library/>
- Karabegović, D. (2019). "Who chooses to remember? Diaspora participation in memorialization initiatives." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*: 1911-1929.
- Pradhan, O. (2012). Bhutan: The Roar of the Thunder Dragon. *K Media*; Thimphu, Bhutan
- Rizal, G. (2018). A Pardesi in Paradise. *Discourse Publications*. Kathmandu, Nepal,
- Rowlands, M. (1999). Remembering to forget. The art of forgetting. A. *Forty and S. Kuchler*. Oxford, Berg: 129-145.
- Watkins, C. (2010). "The War Memorial as Healing Environment: The Psychological Effect of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Vietnam War Combat Veterans' Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms." *Environment and Behaviour* 42(3): 351-375.