

Refugees Longing for Repatriation Anticipate Permanent Persuaders

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Abstract

Repatriation is not just a physical return to 'home' but a complex political process. With the deadlock of repatriation, resettlement came to be the only practical solution to most of the Bhutanese refugees, which weakened repatriation movement in the sense both local integration and third-country resettlement couldn't be a durable solution. Bhutanese refugees faced severe pain in exile, got international attention when they began efforts of repatriation. After the peace marches to Bhutan failed in 1996 & 2007, repatriation voices got gradually muted and activist-less eloquent. The repatriation persuaders (the eloquent and visible leaders) excluding few exceptions chose the third-country resettlement and disappeared from the activism. A paucity of unified permanent persuaders weakened the vibrancy of repatriation movement. For restoring the vitality of activism, repatriation movement of Bhutanese refugees anticipates permanent persuaders as a historic necessity to a logical conclusion.

Keywords: Hegemony, refugee, resistance, repatriation, resettlement

Introduction

Bhutan, also known as 'Druk Yul' or 'Land of the Thunder Dragon' (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2010) was a peaceful home to the tens of thousands of Bhutanese citizens before they were expelled. Their ancestors were living in Bhutan before King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk led the country under a single administrative system through his unified polity in 1950. They lived in that land before Thimphu was established

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as its capital city (Hutt, 1996). In an ethnically diverse nation, Ngalops in the west and the central Bhutan, the Sharchops in the east and Lhotshampas (Nepalese-speaking) in the south lived without fear of unbecoming citizens (Hutt, 2003). They did not speculate that Dzongkha, the language of Ngalops, would be introduced as the national language in 1961. Nor did they imagine the commonly distinguished Buddhist Drukpas and Hindu Lhotshampas (Hutt, 2005), the two dominant groups would come to confrontation. In 1958, the Bhutanese government distributed citizenship through National Law but the growing dominance of Lhotshampas in terms of population and bureaucratic positions posed a threat to the existing ruler to keep on their cultural and political order for long run. The Lhotshampas did not realise the threat Bhutanese rulers felt from assimilation of Sikkim in India in 1975. The government came up with a series of repressive citizenship laws and policies in the late 1970s and 80s to exclude Lhotshampas (Frelic, 2007). Modified Citizenship Acts of 1977 and 1985 were more troublesome to Lhotshampas. The government further introduced 'one nation, one people' policy in 1989 in favour of securing Drukpa culture that would exclude Hindu culture. During the 1988 census, it was made mandatory for Lhotshampas to produce 1958 tax receipt as a proof of Bhutanese citizenship (Hutt, 2005). The period of late 1980s forced Lhotshampas to come to street and protest against the state repression, and the response of the protests turned tens of thousands of them stateless. By 1992, they fled or were forced to leave Bhutan in big numbers, and the Indian government transferred them on trucks to Nepal (Shrestha, 2011).

Interest and Issues

At first, we became interested in Bhutanese refugee and their repatriation movement while we were MPhil and PhD fellows. It was the high and hard time of leading the movement. Since 2005 we read lots of media coverage about the persistence of Bhutanese refugees for repatriation and we would talk how we contribute to their initiatives. One of us began flying from Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal, to eastern Nepal, where seven refugee camps were located for more than a hundred thousand refugees. We saw a long march to Bhutan and its aftershocks. Since then, we saw no significant efforts aimed towards repatriation. We discussed about the need of permanent persuaders

from within the refugees so that self-representation could be made possible from individual struggle to collective movement. We observed transitions and transformations as witness, wrote about their issues. We also took several interviews. Only the identity of those interviewees who had given us consent are disclosed here. We screened newspaper and journal articles to triangulate and validate the facts. This article primarily focuses on repatriation problem of the Bhutanese refugees in the current context, when the UN and other stakeholders have announced to wind-up their humanitarian support to the remaining refugees and hope of repatriation has been superimposed by hopelessness.

The Long Wait

A small number of refugees in the camps are still longing for repatriation. Their ancestors had settled in Bhutan centuries before the establishment of the monarchy in Bhutan in 1907. They vividly recollect the days when the changing political scenarios in the late 1980s made them stateless. About 100,000 citizens had fled the country. They were transferred by truck through India to Nepal that does not share a border with Bhutan (Bhattarai, 2019). All exiled Bhutanese had a dream of repatriation. But their hope of repatriation did not sustain long. Joint ministerial meetings, up to 15 rounds, and numerous multilateral meetings failed, and repatriation lingered in limbo.

The term ‘repatriation’ refers to the activity of bringing the expatriate back to the home country (Dowling, Welch, and Schuler, 1999: 204). Repatriates are returning to a familiar place, to one’s home country, and that this should be relatively easy (Adler, 1981: 344).

Repatriation, local integration, and resettlement are taken as a ‘holy trinity’ of refugee solutions. All these solutions are associated with refugees’ access to citizenship- their full membership of a national community. But demographic impacts and domestic tensions often affect durable solutions. There are millions of refugees in the world in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo. Any refugees’ return from exile to their communities and states of origin is their first prime rights, legally and ethically. But refugee repatriation history is much covered with much darker sides. More than ethics and rights, it comes to be associated with geopolitical battles. Returning to the states of origin is

not just a physical movement back 'home', which above all demands a return to citizenship and national belonging on both in individual and at collective level (Long, 2013). So, talking about refugee repatriation is not just talking about refugee repatriation, as Long writes, investigating how refugees return home speaks to much wider political questions about the nature of citizenship and political community and the complex and often antagonistic connections between the traditions of liberalism and nationalism. The insights provided by studying repatriation have wide-ranging practical and policy implications for an international community heavily involved in post-conflict state-building on the one hand and migration management on the other (Ibid, 2013). Bhutanese refugees' repatriation movement has been facing more complex than this plight for more than three decades.

The series of high-level meetings organised to bring the Royal Government of Bhutan to the negotiating table failed, with no conclusion. The persisting deadlock forced the international community to put forward the third option- a third-country resettlement programme. It was believed that the accepting refugees prioritised third-country resettlement over other alternatives. It divided refugee community as majority of them rejected the offer, initially. They read the offer as the politics of weakening repatriation movement. Younger generation and a section of the refugee leadership gradually accepted the offer while those committed to repatriation termed it as suicidal act. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, UK and the the US agreed to absorb the Bhutanese refugees under the programme. The US alone resettled about 100,000 Bhutanese refugees out of the total 113,160-recorded refugees.

Some Echoes of Repatriation

About 6,500 refugees left behind in the UN-managed camps in eastern Nepal are living more a transitional life, whose families have been disintegrated and dispersed in different countries. A family has been split- some are in Nepal, some abroad, and some in Bhutan (Chandrasekharan, 2019; Bhattarai, 2019).

Man Bahadur Khaling came to Nepal in 2016 after spending 21 years in Bhutanese jails. All members of his family and relatives had resettled in

the US except his youngest son. This son too left for US after one and half months they met. Now, Khaling has neither received legal refugee identity nor has the option to resettle. He is associated with Manghim Kirat Temple. “I feel empty, though I try to get busy”, he said, “I sometimes think of going back to Bhutan, but that’s not easy either” (Bibas, 2019).

Purna Bahadur Limbu, 88, is living on his own following the death of his wife four years ago. He receives a disability allowance of Rs 1500 a month. He now regrets of not going to third-country under resettlement programme. He is living in the deserted camp like many other elderlies with the dream to return ‘home’. “Most of the elderly are living with the dream to return to Bhutan; but for many, that dream has faded too” (Khatiwada & Rajbanshi, 2019). The dream of repatriation is not only the dream of elderly refugees; it is the dream of the resettled refugees, too. “When you are very weak and old, you are no more able to hold on to your dream too; I’m not sure whether I still dream of returning to my home in Bhutan,” said Limbu adding that he, however, would like to go back to his home in Bhutan if the return is safe and respectful (Bibas, 2019). For these refugees, resettlement without repatriation and re-connectivity to Bhutan is not a solution. It is disgraceful for The Royal Government of Bhutan to preach to the world about gross national happiness while one-sixth of its population has been forcibly evicted from their ancestral homes, is spread over four continents, and deprived of avenues for family reunion and fundamental human rights (Bhattarai, 2019).

Purna Bahadur crossed into Nepal from Bhutan through India along with others in 1991. Bhutan’s decision to tag tens of thousands of Nepali-speaking people as ‘illegals’ created antagonistic relationship between Nepal and Bhutan. Diplomatic talks between King Jigme Singye Wangchuck of Bhutan and then Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and several other ministerial level talks failed to give a solution. As a result, people like Purna Bahadur lived in a hut in one of the seven crowded camps as refugee. Now at the age of 88, he is taking shelter alone in Beldangi 3, Sector D-2 Hut No 108. He is an asthma patient, is legally blind on his left eye and is facing physical challenges due to age. Resettlement programme has closed. His three daughters, who were left

in Bhutan when he fled away, have been married and settled in Bhutan (Khatiwada & Rajbanshi, 2019).

Among 6,500 registered refugees in the remaining two camps are 300 elderly people like Purna Bahadur. All supports provided to the refugees have stopped from January 1, 2021. People like Purna Bahadur do not know what to meet his everyday need. He is unaware of how to access health facilities after UN support is over (Khatiwada & Rajbanshi, 2019). Repatriation is a dying hope for most refugees like Purna Bahadur. Resettlement was offered with assurance that other options will remain open. That's not anymore. The refugees were given a false hope.

Though this issue is a tripartite matter of Bhutan, India and Nepal, India claims it a bilateral matter. Failing to receive cooperation from India, Nepal presented refugee issue to be an internal matter of Bhutan, leading to end of bilateral efforts. Nepal government had announced to resume bilateral talks with Bhutan in December 2018, with no progress so far. Purna Bahadur believes repatriation is the only durable solution. A UNHCR survey conducted in January 2019 shows 944 families from Beldangi and 28 families from Pathari wished for repatriation. The commitments of the Government of Nepalese to provide food and health services to the remaining refugees are for short term. For Purna Bahadur, reunion with family members in relatives in Bhutan will provide hope of getting support at the end of his life.

Hope Within Hopelessness

Refugees made several attempts for repatriation. The peaceful 'appeal movement' and 'long march to Bhutan' were significant them. Thousands of refugees crossed Nepal border to Bhutan through India, the same route they travelled when they were evicted. Indian authorities stopped them on both occasions. At least two activists were killed and 15 injured during the long march clash (Rizal, 2018; Dahal, 2014).

A sad point is that Nepal is not a signatory state to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. The refugee law of voluntary repatriation can be derived from the 1951 Refugee Convention and many UN General Assembly resolutions and executive committee conclusions that lay the basis for voluntary repatriation under refugee law. All human

rights declarations also support this law. Jurisprudentially, in the right to return to own country the scope of ‘own country’ is broader than that of ‘country of nationality,’ and the right remains unaffected even in the absence, denial, or stripping of nationality in an individual’s own country (RLI, 2020). Nepal has not formulated a national legal framework concerning refugees and asylum seekers. How long further the refugees have to wait for repatriation or a durable solution of returning ‘home’ is an unanswered question.

The future of about 6,500 refugees is uncertain. In 2011, the UN and the international community proposed to introduce a Community Based Development Programme. They tried to phase out humanitarian support and promote the path of self-sufficiency for the remaining refugees. They are seeking ways for possible local integration. The UN agency sought expression of interest from refugees seeking voluntary repatriation. It was reported that 2,000 out of 6,500 refugees had expressed their desire for voluntary repatriation (Bhattarai, 2019). Bhutan had been lobbying the international community to press Nepal for assimilation of the remaining refugees based on their ethnic connection. It would be a Himalayan blunder to accept a single Bhutanese refugee in Nepal to assimilate (Bhattarai, 2019). As Bhattarai argues, the only viable path at this juncture of Bhutanese refugee history is to ensure safe and dignified repatriation of the remaining refugees.

Key responsibility lies with the resettled Bhutanese Diaspora and their host countries to put pressure on Bhutan for safe and dignified return of the remaining refugees. The extent of lobby by the Bhutanese Diaspora will determine the outcome, not merely a diplomatic discussion by Nepal. Bhutan must accept remaining refugees and build relations with Diaspora. Repatriation will be a victory refugees and the Bhutanese democracy.

DB Subba, secretary of Bhutan’s Independent People’s Forum says, “We are not tired; we are fighting continuously, though our voices are muted, and our efforts look invisible to elites.”[‡] Few people like him argue that they are not moved away from their mission of repatriation. “I shall not accept any kind of scheme like third-country resettlement; we have to go

[‡] Based on personal interview with DB Subba conducted on Dec 27, 2020 and Jan 3, 2021.

back 'home' anyhow; no solution is as best as repatriation. Returning 'home' is our only mission then and now." He claims that those who chose resettlement also will return 'home' if repatriation option is opened in future. There are still rays of hope at the end of the tunnel.

Anticipating Permanent Persuaders

Bhutanese refugees are anticipating permanently active persuaders, not merely leaders or hopeful individuals, who will steer the movement into the right direction. "These permanently active persuaders find their intellectual resources, not in the 'perennial questions of philosophy' but precisely in their organic integration with the masses, in a reciprocal relationship of 'democratic pedagogy' in which those intellectuals with the social function of an intellectual are at least as often 'the educated' as 'the educators.' They are intellectuals who are 'organically the intellectuals of these masses..." (Cleffie, 1993: 508). Permanent persuaders are a special kind of intellectual leader defined by their ability to influence and inspire large numbers of people on the basis of experience, shared suffering, and charisma, rather than formal characteristics such as education or occupation. They are engaged in everyday activities, and they are able to evoke feeling and passion in oppressed populations based on a shared social and psychological location (Bolaria & Hier, 2006: 79).

While UN claims this resettlement to be the most successful programme, remaining refugees blame their concerns were ignored and voices remain unheard. The complexity of Bhutanese refugees' repatriation concerns show, as what Bradley writes, "repatriation is not so much about crossing a border, returning to a particular physical location or reviving lost ways of life, as it is a critical opportunity to restructure political relationships between states and citizens, with a view to ensuring a more equitable, peaceful future" (Bradley 2013: 23). 'International refugee regime presents repatriation as the most optimal, most feasible of the three durable solutions. Nevertheless, the number of studies which have followed up the process of the reintegration of returnees to their country of origin is scant" (Omata, 2011). Thinkers of repatriation, for instance Warner, argues that voluntary repatriation indicates a return to a home and community with which refugees were associated and embraced before their flight into exile (Warner 1994: 162

qtd. in Omata 2011) and as a consequence to these perceptions, institutions dealing with refugees tend to depict repatriation as a 'homecoming' to a former life and a familiar cultural environment, as a fairly straightforward way of restoring the pre-displacement life in the familiar setting (Stefansson 2004: 171 qtd. in Omata, 2011). The repatriation of Bhutanese refugees does not conform to this notion of homecoming.

The level of satisfaction differs among the returnees. One may feel blessed and others regret. For making repatriation meaningful, the role of permanent persuaders is always essential. Bhutanese refugees are not a homogenous group. Each refugee has different thoughts either on repatriation or resettlement. Some of them have chosen local integration option as well. The provision of a single durable solution is not enough (Kaiser, 2010: 51-54). Repatriation is always a complex political process, because after all, we live in a world still dominated by nation-state powers.

Conclusion

There are refugees who are still waiting for repatriation. The seniors disappeared and juniors took over the leadership, anticipating unconditional support. The role of intellectuals and activists is paramount for those who are waiting for repatriation. Reactivating role of Nepal in this endeavour and securing support of the countries where Bhutanese have resettled, is vital.

Today's Bhutan is completely different to what it was three decades ago. Communication must open through diplomatic channels. Repatriation of this small group will broaden the democratic intuition in Bhutan and restore the traditional relations between the two Himalayans allies – Bhutan and Nepal. Thimphu agreed to repatriate when resettlement completes. It must abide by its words.

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