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Editors

Dr. Govinda Rizal

I P Adhikari

Advisor

Dr. D N S Dhakal

Admin

Karma Dupthob

Coordinator

Ram Karki

Contact Address:

Post Box 204

Smithfield, South Australia 5114

Email: bhutanwatchresearch@gmail.com

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Editorial

This issue also carries many grievances of the past and the agony of unsolved issues. This journal like the first one also carries sentiments and contents of Bhutanese diaspora more than Bhutan.

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De-Suung: The Orange Army

Govinda Rizal

Formed on the principle of volunteerism, the Orange Army is dedicated to crowd control, rescue, and operation during emergencies, takes up the role of alert citizens. The Orange Army is now running a parallel government and is growing incredibly popular among the citizens most of whom are not happy with the democratic parliamentary system in the country and victims of calamities.

Page 3

Citation: Rizal, G. (2021). De-Suung: The Orange Army. *The Bhutan Journal*, 2(1); 3-19.

Democracy, Adult Franchise, and Public Participation

I P Adhikari

Bhutan promotes adult franchise, conducts periodic elections and has elected parliament and government. It has political parties contesting elections. But it lacks accountability mechanisms, participatory channels, independent and active civil societies, democracy education, and monitoring system that are central to a functional democracy.

Page 20

Citation: Adhikari, I. (2021). Democracy, adult franchise, and public participation. *The Bhutan Journal*, 2(1); 20-38.

Integration and Satisfaction Among Resettled Bhutanese in Australia

Manfred Ringhofer

Forcefully evicted out of their country, 20% of the Bhutan's Lhotshampa population spent decades in refugee camps in eastern Nepal. Now they are resettled in developed countries and are starting a new life. They are

happy. They have embraced their new country; and their connection with Bhutan is gradually eroding.

Page 39

Citation: Ringhofer, M. (2021). Integration and satisfaction among resettled Bhutanese in Australia. *The Bhutan Journal*, 2(1); 39-58.

Bhutanese Settlement and Community Leadership

Om Dhungel

Refugee resettlement provides opportunities for key stakeholders to work more collaboratively by adopting strength-based approaches in driving positive settlement as well as successful integration outcomes. The focus of this article is on learnings from the Bhutanese refugee settlement experiences in different settlement countries and the role community leaders can play.

Page 59

Citation: Dhungel, O. (2021). Bhutanese settlement and community leadership. *The Bhutan Journal*, 2(1); 59-72.

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

Susan Banki

The proposed Bhutanese Refugee Cultural Complex in Jhapa in eastern Nepal is worth asking about its purpose(s). Such commemorative structures are used for documenting history, preventing future problem events, reconciliation, individual healing, and tourism.

Page 73

Citation: Banki, S. (2021). Bhutanese refugee cultural complex: An outsider-insider perspective. *The Bhutan Journal*, 2(1); 73-83.

Democracy and Political Prisoners in Bhutan

Ram Karki

Everyone said Bhutan attained democracy in 2008. King agreed to it. But Bhutan is the only democracy in the world where pro-democracy activists are still serving jail sentences. International community remains a mute spectator to the sugar-coated Bhutanese democracy. Bhutan fooled them by taking advantage of their interest in geopolitics.

Page 84

Citation: Karki, R. (2021). Democracy and political prisoners in Bhutan. *The Bhutan Journal*, 2(1); 84-94.

Refugees Longing for Repatriation Anticipate Permanent Persuaders

Taralal Shrestha and Bidhya Shrestha

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. Repatriation is not just a physical return to 'home' but a complex political process.

Page 95

Citation: Shrestha, T; Shrestha, B. (2021). Refugees longing for repatriation anticipate permanent persuaders. *The Bhutan Journal*, 2(1); 95-105.

Bhutanese Refugees: Past, Present, and Future

Michael Hutt

Interview with Prof. Dr. Michael Hutt about the Bhutanese refugee issue, his engagement, future of Bhutanese refugee issue, and Bhutan's democracy and human rights movement.

Page 106

Citation: Hutt, M. (2021). Bhutanese Refugees: Past, present, and future (Govinda Rizal & I P Adhikari, Interviewer). *The Bhutan Journal*, 2(1); 106-111.

Editorial

We offer TBJ Second Issue of BW to readers. It gives us an immense pleasure and satisfaction to some extent. It is the unofficial link between the Bhutanese Diaspora and Bhutan. This issue also carries many grievances of the past and the agony of unsolved issues. This journal like the first one also carries sentiments and contents of Bhutanese diaspora more than Bhutan.

The political prisoners detained on charges of demanding democracy in the country are still in prisons even after 12 years of democracy. The king who is above the law is raising an army and is in an early phase of running a parallel government.

The year 2020 also the year of coronavirus pandemic put the global population indoor for most of the time of the year. For the first time after 1990, the issue, discussion, and news on Bhutanese refugees as well as Bhutanese Diaspora remained frozen throughout the year. There were ample opportunities to raise the issues of the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal to a new height. Situation was ripe after a long time.

António Guterres, who had visited Bhutanese refugee camp as the head of UNHCR became the UN Secretary General. Filippo Grandi, who is actively interested in solving Bhutanese refugee problem became the head of the UNHCR. In Nepal, majority government was formed for the first time after many decades. The Bhutanese refugee camps are in the Constituency of the Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, who was also an important figure in the bilateral talks with Royal Government of Bhutan and the international organisations in the past. Since the start of the refugee saga, the blame of the failure to solve the refugee issue was crowned on the instability of the Government of Nepal. After the formation of majority government in Nepal, the hopes were high that it would stand strong to negotiate on the issue. In Bhutan too, a new government was headed by a more moderate and sensible prime minister. All the situations were positive except for the relief supplies to the refugees in Nepal. Their relief support was withdrawn crippling all their energy and resources necessary for a movement. The ripe situation could not be turned into an opportunity.

The refugees in the camp have lost the direct guardianship of the UNHCR. While the education of children in refugee camps is now nobody's responsibility, thereby, pushing refugee children to mass illiteracy, there are promising stories coming out of Bhutanese community in resettled countries.

There is only one way to keep the issue alive and retain a link between the Bhutanese Diaspora, refugees and their country - that is through writing and telling stories.

This issue is neither complete nor sufficient. It leaves abundant topics and issues to be covered in future issues. The challenge remains that there are limited individuals who can write in the format of a research article, and those who do may not have access to the right contents. This journal shall remain dedicated to documentation and dissemination of valuable research findings related to Bhutan and Bhutanese people in the country and in Diaspora.

We are aware of the changing dynamics in research and academic discourse and the necessity to sustain the quality and scope of this journal. We invite potential authors, reviewers, and mentors to channelise drafting of research articles by maintaining the standards.

We anticipate continuous support from the distinguished authors and valuable readers.

Editors

De-Suung: The Orange Army

Dr Govinda Rizal¹

ABSTRACT

What was the need of the Orange Army with strength more than that of the Royal Bhutan Army or the Royal Bhutan Police? The Orange Army called *De-Suung* (Organisation) and *Desuup* (members) established in 2010 on the auspicious of the King's thirtieth birthday is now the largest force in the country with more than 18,000 permanent members from all walks of life and all corners of the country. Formed on the principle of volunteerism, the Orange Army is dedicated to crowd control, rescue and operation during emergencies, takes up the role of alert citizens. Now, it is the fastest-growing organisation in the country. Its formation and functioning are outside the expectation of the constitution. However, the King who is the guardian of the constitution and the supreme commander in chief of armed forces and militia is also the supreme commander of this extra-constitutional Orange Army. While the King needs a recommendation from the Prime Minister to command the army and police, the government has no control over the Orange Army, formed and run by the King who commands it directly. The Orange Army is now running a parallel government and is growing incredibly popular among the citizens most of whom are not happy with the democratic parliamentary system in the country and victims of calamities. There is no mechanism to check the cankerous Orange Army if it walks the way of SAVAK, Gestapo, Ku Klux Klan, or the Yakuza except the formation of another extra-constitutional institution to counter it.

Keywords: calamities, secret agency, totalitarian, volunteerism, militia, security

Introduction

Orange uniformed extra-constitutional army personnel are everywhere in Bhutan (Rinzin, 2020). Called by the name *De-Suung* (De-Suung,

¹Rizal is based in Beldangi, Jhapa Nepal; ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0002-6245-1996

2020) (heavenly protection), His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck of Bhutan keeps them around him and are the first faces seen in rescue teams during or after calamities. The paramilitary personnel reaches first at the sites of earthquake, flash flood, landslide, glacial outburst, road blockade, and inferno- that are common in the country- with helping hands and balm. The orange uniformed personnel is in the front-line in controlling crowds. Now, a decade-old Orange Army is the largest force liked by both the people and victims of calamities and has been functioning without a question or a word of criticism.

Bhutan does have a long history of organised secured forces. Until 1950, the security of Bhutan and its rulers was the responsibility of the people and loosely organised soldiers and monks. Several families would allow one of their male children to a monastery to take up the study of religion and rituals and another male child to be a ruler's soldier. In 1951, a group of soldiers was trained to suppress the growing discontentment among the people. Their first major accomplishment was the neutralisation of the movement by the Bhutan State Congress. The group of soldiers continued in several forms taking up specialised roles. Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) was propagated from the group in 1962 on the backdrop of the Sino-Indian War. After the assassination of Prime Minister Jigme Palden Dorji and the public execution of the accused Chhabda, Royal Bhutan Police (RBP) was institutionalised on September 1, 1965. It was employed to control crowds and suppress sporadic protests by the people in different parts of the country.

After the death of the third King in 1972, several forces were active in preventing the then crown prince Jigme Singye Wangchuck from becoming the king (Weinraub, B. 1974). A troop cloned from the RBA was empowered with special training to provide security to the King and the members of the royal family. They formed Royal Bodyguards (RBG). In 1989 and 1990, youths and students were provided militia training by the RBA. They were employed to crush the movement in southern Bhutan in 1990-1993 and the monks uprising in eastern Bhutan in 1997 (Chil Soldiers International, 2001).

Between 2001 and 2003, selected personnel from RBA, RBP, and RBG and militia were provided commando training. They were led to the infamous ‘operation all clear’ when the Indian fugitives who were provided political sanctuary and patronage at the beginning (Mahanta, 2013) and taking refuge in the forest in Bhutan and fighting for independence of Assam and a part of Bengal against Indian establishment were crushed (Lamsang, 2015).

After the systemic political reforms that took place between 2005 and 2008, the RBP and RBA were placed under the Ministry of Home and Culture Affairs. This clearly means that these two wings of the armed forces are placed under the government. The RBG that is responsible for the security of the King and royalties have limited numbers and strict protocols. The King cannot command any of those forces at his whims.

It was at this juncture that the then-new king chalked out plans of raising volunteers under his sole command who would respond to his calls and remain loyal to him throughout their lives. During his third year in his office as a King, he began raising volunteers. The institution is called *De-Suung* and its members are called *Desuups*. In the Dzongkha language, *De* means heavenly and *Sung* means protection or governance (Dzongkha Development Commission, 2002).

As per the constitution of Bhutan, the king shall be the Supreme Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces and the Militia; The RBG shall be responsible for the security of the king while the RBA shall serve as a professional standing army and both forces shall form the core of Bhutan’s defence against security threats. The RBP shall, as a trained uniform force under the Ministry of Home Affairs, be primarily responsible for maintaining law and order and prevention of crime, and shall also be considered an important part of the nation’s security force; and the parliament may, by law, require compulsory militia service for adult citizens to strengthen the defence of the country (Constitution of Bhutan, 2008).

There is no provision in the constitution for such a paramilitary force and there are no measures to check and balance them. The constitution keeps the king and his actions unquestionable. As per article 2, clause 15

the king shall not be answerable in a court of law for his actions and his person shall be sacrosanct (Constitution of Bhutan, 2008). Taking undue advantage of the magnanimity of the provision in the constitution, the king has started to take such giant steps. Within a decade, the extra-constitutional paramilitary institution has turned into the largest force that has volunteerism on the face and role of an intelligence agency in action.

The *Desuups* mold difficult opponents into loyal citizens through lucrative talks. The process of entry into *De-Suung* begins from a call with a prospect of volunteerism during calamities and there is no exit. Once an individual enters the so-called volunteer group, takes training and oath of allegiance, there is no provision of resignation, retirement, or exit from the service throughout one's life. It is a lifelong promise to serve the King and to be ready to attend his call.

The office of *De-Suung* located at Lungtenphug Army Training Complex in Thimphu periodically calls for new candidates. The applicant must be at least class ten passed and aged 20 years or above and are admitted on a first come first serve basis. They have to submit 'No Objection Certificates' from their office if employed, and from police for all.

The members of the *Desuup* force are extracted from different institutions, universities, constitutional bodies including Election Commission and Anti-Corruption Commission, courts, RBA, RBP, business organisations, schools, medical institutions, farmers, tour guides, unemployed youth, and in-service and retired government employees. Even members of parliaments have taken the training to appease the king and to seek his favor in future courses.

The *Desuups* are publicly soft-speaking, friendly and supportive individuals in uniform, who belong to an extra-constitutional (hence illegal) secret force run by the king himself. There are various reasons behind its formation. All reasons expressed to date are altruistic in traits, but the fear is on the very intention of the formation of such an extra-constitutional paramilitary force and its cankerous growth.

According to the Constitution of Bhutan, the King is the Supreme Commander in Chief of the armed forces. The king must wait for a recommendation from the prime minister, who in turn must have the approval of the cabinet, to command the RBA or RBP. There is a limit of 2,000 personnel in RBG. Moreover, the king is not confident that the army, police, and bodyguards will walk an inch outside their protocols. The king chose the extra-constitutional path to implement his vision, ideas, and whims. The highest vision could be the autocratic monarchy with a browbeaten government.

Methods

Primary information was obtained from people in Bhutan who have taken the service and other people who have studied the situation closely. The information was verified based on the information given on the website of the Orange Army (<https://desuung.org.bt/>) and social media sites of the *Desuups*. The names of the informants are kept confidential.

Findings

Monarchy Under Constitution

In 2005, the former King Jigme Singye Wangchuck made several populist changes to win the confidence of the people for the easy accession of his son to his throne. The bans on the use of the word ‘democracy’ and the formation of political parties in the country were lifted. A constitution was drafted and promulgated, elections were held to find people’s representatives to form government and the prime minister was made the head of the government while the king remained the head of the state and the guardian to the constitution. The former King abdicated in favor of his son- the present King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck. The reasons behind those several populist reforms were to take rest from the series of bloody endeavors taken to conserve the power in the family, hand over the power to the son at the apogee of his reign when the situations were under his control. The bloody exercises included the crushing of voices for democratic changes, murder, and mass expulsion of political opponents in 1990 and 1997, and the 2003 undiplomatic withdrawal from engagement in the repatriation of the evicted population. Besides, the 2003 bloody war against the Indian insurgents hiding in Bhutan added guilt to the king.

The new king was coronated as a ceremonial head with no power to exercise and no work to win people's praises and appreciation. The media began to grow critical and people often came to the street and media questioning the government's wrongdoings. The powerless king had to wait for the prime minister's approval to take any step. The constitution was a cage on the new king's freedom.

Establishment of Royal Media Foundation

Coinciding with his thirtieth birthday on February 21, 2010, the king established a foundation and brought all public and private media establishments in Bhutan under 'Bhutan Media Foundation.' The King granted Nu 15,000,000 to bring all the media houses under the royal foundation (Press release, 2010/3). The media houses became eligible for incentives such as subsidies, advertisements, fellowships, grants, and training. In return, they had to submit their loyalty to the king. Thereafter, all the media critical to the system were silenced for good. All the news, views, interviews, and opinions are censored through mechanisms established under the media foundation before they go public.

***De-Suung*: The King's Force**

On the same day he grabbed all the media in the country into his foundation, the king also established *De-Suung* the Orange Army that started functioning a year later. The objective is to inculcate pure values such as accountability and responsibility, commitment, ethics, integrity, respect, self-discipline, and service first in the *Desuups* and extend to all the citizens (De-suung, 2020). Any youth meeting criteria can apply to become *Desuup* using an online registration system. The candidate must present five documents – (1) copy of Citizenship Identity Document, (2) copy of academic certificate of the highest degree achieved, (3) No objection certificate from concerned agencies for the employed, (4) medical certificate of fitness, and (5) security clearance from RBP.

The selected volunteer is provided training and administered the oath and becomes a *Desuup*- a member of *De-Suung*. The *Desuup* gets an orange uniform and several recognitions and per diem of Nu 1000 during the training and operation days. However, there is no mention of

punishment if one tries to break the oath. They must remain alert to respond to any royal command; they must report any irregularities and anti-regime comments in their command areas and institutions to their *Desuup* supervisors. They celebrate His Majesty's birthday, National Day, and *De-Suung* Raising Day as well as provide muscle power to control crowds during such mega-events.

They must appear polite and humble in the public, for which they must treat their supervising officers with courtesy and respect; at all times be humble, civil, and orderly; and control their tempers and exercise the utmost patience and discretion.

Organisational Structure

The present King is the supreme commander of the Orange Army. It is independent of the government and His Majesty's Secretariat handles its everyday affairs. Directly below the office of the His Majesty's Secretariat in Tashichho Dzong is the *De-Suung*'s director. The Directorate of *De-Suung* is in Lungtenphug. There is one district coordinator in each district, four zonal coordinators, and focal persons in blocks and villages and government and private institutes who report to the directorate. All the positions are held by Drukpas. The open role of the *Desuup* is to remain alert to attend any call during emergencies. However, *Desuups* are expected to report the irregularities ongoing in their command areas or offices.

What was the need for the Supreme Commander in Chief of the RBA, RBP, and RBG to start an extra-constitutional force? Will its future action continue to be limited to alms and balm during disasters or will it take the path of Gestapo and Schafft Schutzzone of Germany, Sevak of Iran, Ku Klux Klan of the USA, Uyoku Dantai and Yakuza of Japan?

***De-suung* honour code and core values**

I as *De-suup* will keep service to my nation before my own safety and comfort.

I as *De-suup* will remain honest in thoughts and upright in actions.

I as *De-suup* will protect the national heritage even at the cost of my own life.

I as *De-suup* will never vacillate from integrity to my motherland and loyalty to my supreme commander.

I as *De-suup* will always volunteer for service to TSA-WA-SUM at any point of time.

I as *De-suup* will never let down my Supreme Commander and my fellow De-suups.

I as *De-suup* vow in the name of deity of our motherland that I will abide this honor code always and every time.

Source: <https://desuung.org.bt/>

Training

Training for *Desuups* takes place in Tencholing Military Training Centre Wangduephodrang, Damthang (Paro), Gaylegphug² (Sarbhong³), Chuwabari⁴ (Sarbhong), Tashigatshel (Chukha), Thimphu, Paro, Sibsoo⁵ (Samchi⁶), Tendu⁷ (Samchi), and other military centers. The paramilitary *Desuup* force is now the largest force in the country with more than 18,000 members. The strength of RBA including the RBG is 12,700, and RBP is 14,000.

² Gaylegphug was renamed Gelephu in late 1990s

³ Sarbhong was renamed Sarpang in late 1990s

⁴ Chuwabari was renamed Jigmeling in late 1990s

⁵ Sibsoo is renamed as Tachicholing in late 1990s

⁶ Samchi was renamed Samtse in late 1990s

⁷ Tendu was renamed Tendruk in late 1990s

Between 2011 and 2020 there were series of training in 43 batches. The training for the 43rd batch took place between November 16 and December 12, 2020. The training was held simultaneously in six training centers of MTC (Tencholing), SRPF (Chukha), Wing IX (Gaylegphug), Wing V (Sibsoo), Wing I (Tendu⁸), and RBPTI (Jigmeling) (Staff Reporter, 2020). The batch had 668 male and 832 female participants. They were mostly unemployed youth with at least Class X degrees. After the trainings, the *De-suups* were expected to volunteer for short-term field deployment in different districts.

Until the 37th batch, there were on average 12 trainees in each batch. However, the number has rapidly escalated in 2020. In six batches that were held in 2020, more than 14,000 *Desuups* graduated. The rush of increasing the extra-constitutional force shows that big events are on the card.

The volunteers get to experience real-life activities outside their regular four walls. There are competitive adventures for them to showcase their strength, skills, and strategy to survive during calamities. Common adventurous activities include mapping, rappelling, route marching, and zip-lining (Denker, 2020).

There are two types of training namely the *De-Suung* Integrated Training Programme and the *De-Suung* Accelerated Programme that are instituted to be a value-based personal development programme with the main objective to encourage all citizens to be active in the greater role of nation-building. The training programmes are designed to inculcate appreciation, harmony, and cooperation as a group and as active members of society. *De-Suung* Accelerated Programme focuses on public health and security, to prepare the *Desuups* to support health workers such as in combating COVID- 19, if necessary.

Works of *Desuup*

It has been said that the *De-Suung* was meant to respond to disasters. However, in 2013, Prime Minister Jigme Y Thinley informed the

⁸ Tendu was renamed Tendruk in late 1990s

parliament that the king in exercise of his profound wisdom initiated a special *De-Suung* Training Programme for strengthening the internal law and order (National Assembly of Bhutan, 2013). It was an acknowledgment that the government was not capable of maintaining law and order. By then, 700 personnel had received training to respond and serve during disasters in the country (National Assembly of Bhutan, 2013). When a seventeenth Century Wangdue Phodrang Dzong caught fire, the king and his *Desuups* were in the frontline fighting the inferno. Prime Minister and other officers were nowhere near the scene. They were in other places busy preaching gross national happiness anthems. The *Desuups* got the first highlight there. The Covid-19 pandemic, dengue epidemic, and cordyceps collection time availed the *Desuups* with opportunities to reach every house and individual, possibly for gathering information and maintaining inventories of places people and their properties. Selected tour operators and tour guides are trained as *Desuups* (Gyelmo, 2016) to keep track of the tourists and report to the *De-Suung*.

Twenty *Desuups* were deputed in medical team during the rescue operation of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal (Pem, 2016). In November 2018, at least 120 *Desuups* were deputed to control crowds for two weeks long prayers by Je Khenpo in Rajgir and Bodhgaya, India (Rinzin, 2020).

In January 2016, 100 *Desuups* took part in Clean Bhutan Campaign when they collected 10 tonnes of waste including about two sacks of condoms, plastic bags, pet bottles, sanitary pads, toilet papers, and underwear (Wangdi, 2016).

In June 2020, *Desuups* were involved in recording medical and biometrics of people involved in collection of cordyceps from the wild (Lhamo, Cordyceps collectors being screened for safety, 2020). In July 2020, *Desuups* helped in cleaning the area and planting trees around the Luetshokha Lake in Samtengang, Wangdue district (Lhamo, Preservation of Luetshokha tsho completes , 2020).

On September 15, 2020, two *Desuup* ladies on duty were overrun by a Hilux driven by a drunk driver. They were airlifted and taken to Delhi for treatment.

The *Desuups* are entitled to free life insurances. If a *Desuup* dies during the Covid-19 duty, his or her nominee will receive the insurance (Subba, Free life insurance for Covid-19 frontline workers, 2020).

***De-Suung* as a Secret Intelligence Agency**

In July 2020, Four hundred *Desuups* joined the security forces patrolling the southern borders to identify the people suspected as vectors of coronavirus crossing the border. People were confined in quarantine as per the Covid 19 management guidelines (Kuensel, 2020).

In August 2020, three villagers who had crossed Bhutan-India border to sell their cattle in India were arrested and put in quarantine. They were punished, made to pay for the quarantine service, Covid-19 tests, and had to pay 10 days of labor services (Lhaden, 2020) for breaching the protocol of crossing the border.

The *Desuups* to regulate the movement of people distributed movement passes to the residents in Samdrup Jongkhar. The *Desuups* categorized the residents into zones (Wangchuk K. , 2020) for easy monitoring of their movements.

In November 2020, *Desuups* were with police and custom officers in seizing tobacco consignments being smuggled across the borders and arresting at least 47 smugglers (Rai, 2020).

In November and December 2020, the *Desuups* and police intelligence rounded up business owners in Thimphu for continuing their work after 9 pm. They also went from shop-to-shop checking licenses (Yangyel, 2020).

The king conferred his *De-Suung* with ‘Heart Son of Bhutan Medal’ in recognition of its service during the Covid-19 pandemic (Kuensel, 2020a).

Funding for the Organisation

There is no information on the source of funding for *De-Suung*. One of the sources is His Majesty’s Secretariat in Tashicho Dzong. Besides, the

government also diverts the excess budgets that are not spent by government bodies by the end of each fiscal year. There is a small collection of *De-Suung* shops that sell uniforms and clothing. Officers good to *De-Suung* adjust and divert their unspent budget of their officers to *De-Suung*. In one such case, Anti-Corruption Commission charged Lieutenant Colonel Rinzin Yeshey with embezzling more than Nu 889,000, and a military court sentenced Yeshey to four years and six months in prison, but the High Court's bench III acquitted him for lack of corroborating evidence. He had adjusted the fund to conduct the fifth and 10th batch of *De-Suung* programmes (Pandey & Dema, 2019). The Bhutan Media Foundation, a partner organisation of *De-Suung*, receives support from the Swiss Embassy in New Delhi through Helvates (Bhutan Media Foundation and Journalist Association of Bhutan, 2020) and the US-based Asia Foundation (Asia Foundation, 2020). They are involved in the study of users' involvement in social media. On December 14, 2020, Tashi Dorji the Chairperson of National Council informed the parliament that at least 9000 *Desuups* were provided monthly payments provided to them during pandemic (Subba, His Majesty's closing ceremony of Parliament, 2020).

De-suung and Corruption

While the volunteers and the king are in the field attending the calls of catastrophes and training, there are officers in between who are busy embezzling the funds for gifts and alcohol.

On October 25, 2018, High Court's bench two convicted two army officers Major Tshering Tobgay and Major Sonam Tshering, and a non-commissioned officer (NCO) Tanka on the charge of embezzling *De-Suung* Training Fund (Tshering, 2018).

On November 15, 2019, the Supreme Court of Bhutan sentenced nine RBA Officers and a non-commissioned officer (NCO) for embezzlement of the *De-Suung* training funds. The accused were sentenced to prison terms ranging from one to three years. Major Ugyen Nidup, Lieutenant Colonel Rinzin Yeshey, Lieutenant Ugyen Dorji, Major Sonam Lhagyel, Lieutenant Colonel Karma Tharchen, Lieutenant Colonel Ugyen Norbu, Major Sigay Tshewang, Major Lingi Jamtsho, and NCO Sonam Dorji were dragged to the supreme court. They were charged for adjustment

of funds to provide funds to support *De-Suung* programmes (Wangchuk R. , 2019).

Major Kinga Norbu submitted to the High Court that besides serving alcohol to the *Desuups* on occasions, the administrative officers had to serve the drinks to the director every night which was the practice from the first batch of *Desuups* (Dema, 2018).

Conclusion

A tiny kingdom between two giant republics of China and India has a small population of less than a million. It has small army and police forces. However, the king has established the largest force that works parallel to the government. It is too early to predict the future of the King's Orange Army. However, the working modality, content of the oath, and inclusion of its members from different sectors and areas can only be feared in a long run. History has shown that SAVAK, Gestapo, Ku Klux Klan, Yakuza, and several such secret organisations were adored and accepted by the people at the beginning for their altruist-like populist works. However, such organisation always ended up doing more harm than good to the social and political system. It is high time for the elite groups to study the cancerous phenomenon of raising an alternative force outside the content of the constitution and the system. But the strength of the extra-constitutional Orange Army is already massive and omnipresent in the country that it is equally dangerous to discuss and question.

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Democracy, Adult Franchise, and Public Participation

I P Adhikari¹

ABSTRACT

Bhutan is now a democracy. This new democracy promotes adult franchise. It conducts periodic elections and has elected members in parliament and government. It has political parties contesting elections. Despite these basics of democracy, the country lacks accountability mechanisms, participatory channels, independent and active civil societies, education about democracy, and monitoring system that are central to a functional democracy. Citizen-government continue to remain a concerning factors in institutionalising democracy in Bhutan. Drawing from regional experiences, Bhutan poised to have a bumpy ride on democracy. The issue of human rights and social justice would be a far cry. This paper discusses parameters of democracy and public participation in Bhutan and the future of Bhutanese democracy.

Keywords: Democracy, election, participation, people, political parties, adult franchise, human rights

Introduction

For democracy to sustain and flourish, citizens must understand their community, politics and the processes. Social awareness helps to build a civilised society whereas political awareness cherishes healthy democracy. Civilised citizenry provides good nutrition for a vibrant democracy. A civilised society and healthy democracy have coherence in terms of social harmony, unity and ability to understand others' values and cultures.

East, West and South

¹ Adhikari is Adelaide based media and human rights activist. He is editor of 'The Bhutan Journal' and Bhutan News Network

Multicultural Bhutan evolved through migration. The original inhabitants such as Brokpa, Lepcha, and Doyas (or Lhops) still survive but are marginalised and losing their identity. Comprising approximately 15% (CIA Factbook) of the country's population², they primarily live in Samtse and surrounding districts (Tshering, 2020). Their younger generations now attend school and have political exposure but hardly politically active. The three major ethnic groups – Ngalops (generally called Ngalongs), Sarchops, and Lhotshampas³ – dominate the country's social, economic, and political life: pre- or post-democracy.

The politically conscious South has become the ultimate decider of the power balance in the last three elections. South is testing the national leadership of democratic Bhutan. While the South and East were punished for their call for political changes in the past, it's the South that plays a vital role now.

The South has interacted with democratic India more often than others – borne the risk of being misled or trained on why democracy and freedom are necessary. However, the South is unlikely to take national leadership in near future despite its heavy influence to determine who holds power in Thimphu. Palace still holds negative perception and unsolicited suspicion about South. It may matter of time for the South to express not necessarily loyalty but democratic rights and political will to force Thimphu to accept that the region too is capable of leading the nation. The non-Nepali population resettled after 1997 may come as a rescue to this operation. West has traditionally controlled the national politics for centuries but East momentarily came to national limelight when Thimphu decided to escort the region post-1997 demonstrations⁴.

² This is estimation based on multiple sources. The exact numbers are difficult to collect since Bhutan's national census do not enumerate population based on language or ethnic group

³ People living in the southern part of Bhutan are referred to as Lhotshampas in Bhutan's Dzongkha language.

⁴ Jigme Y. Thinley from eastern district of Pemagatshel remained central political figure since power devolution in 1998 until the 2013 elections when he lost and retired from politics.

In all elections held so far, the East has shown its displeasure to Thimphu. Thimphu flickeringly used either South or East to retain power balance. Beginning mid-80s, East-West bond was strong, leading to eviction from South while South and West bond has grown stronger post-democracy marginalising the East. The day East and South agree to claim their combined presence in Thimphu, West will feel the threat. This combination may end up determining the fate of Bhutanese monarchy and the century-old political equation. However, this political collaboration requires risk, gambling, and superior political consciousness.

Conscious Civil Society

Civil society is vital element of a democratic society. Organised civil society is the backbone of a democracy (Greenwood, 2007). Civil society in Bhutan is neither pro-active nor politically conscious. It is unorganised. The civil society organisations (CSO) in Bhutan are primarily controlled by royal family⁵.

As of 31 October 2020, 51 CSOs are registered under Civil Society Organisation Authority (CSOA). Only a few engage in democratic processes and civic education. Established by Siok Sien Pek, wife of former journalist and information secretary Kinley Dorji, Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD) is the only CSO demonstrating an active interest in democracy dialogues. Over the years, it targeted young citizens, running seminars, and youth camps to sensitise them of their role and importance of their active participation in democratic process.

Civic education can be formal and non-formal. Bhutan has not steered in both fronts as yet. Institutions like Royal University of Bhutan may invite its affiliates for civic and democracy education in addition to Royal Thimphu College, Sherubtse College, and Norbuling Rigter College which are already running some courses and democracy club. The clubs are ineffective. The university may encourage student newspapers or elections of student council which would help teenagers gain insight into

⁵ CSOs like RENEW, YDF, Bhutan Foundation, RSPCA, Bhutan Nun Foundation, RSPN, Bhutan Media Foundation, Royal Textile Academy are all operated under the direct supervision of royal family.

the basic principles of liberal democracies. Engaging students in practicing and rehearsing democracy will lead to more motivation and willingness on their part to become engaged in politics in future. The process will certainly help produce quality and conscious leadership for a vibrant democracy. Educating young people to become members of society, who actively participate in the shaping the political environment is a crucial step in the context of political socialisation (Buhl, 2003). The structure through which this process takes place determines the future political orientation of the individual and ultimately the nation's political future.

Bhutan Transparency Initiative is specialised in enhancing accountability and transparency of public funding and government coffer. This activism is important to keep an elected government accountable for mismanagement of the public funds – an important aspect of an accountable democracy.

The CSOs lack state funding to strengthen their democracy education drive. Prospects of future leadership of democratic Bhutan under current education initiative will concentrate on urban centres and power tussle among few individuals in Thimphu. Lack of adequate active CSOs in civic and democratic education will negatively impact Bhutan's political discourse in future.

Tobgay⁶ cabinet's open-air consultation with residents in Thimphu once a week initiated in 2013 was a step forward in narrowing citizen-government divide and empower citizens in their say on local or national issues. However, initiative remained limited to the capital city and accessible to limited individuals and was discontinued when DNT took over the reign in 2018.

The election commission made few attempts in the early phase of political transition to engage citizens to understand democracy. They, however, were limited to making people understand voting and election process.

⁶ Tshering Tobgay of PDP was prime minister for the period 2013-18

None of the three governments elected since the political change have demonstrated in building a vibrant democracy by actively engaging citizens. The parliamentarians travel to their constituencies during parliamentary breaks and their engagement is limited. For Bhutan to build a healthy and participatory democracy, the parliamentarians must engage in formal forums in villages and towns of their constituency. Having a permanent office in the constituency⁷ would be one step closer to having regular contact with voters and listening to their views and improve their participation.

Participatory Politics and Adult Franchise

The call for political changes in 1990 was resisted on pretext that calls were not ruler-friendly and that Bhutanese citizens were not ready for democracy (Denyer, 2007). Some other claim, democratisation in Bhutan had begun long ago (Masaki, 2013). The resistance failed to last long and ‘democratic’ government was finally allowed. The palace overwhelmingly took credit for the change (Thinley, 2018). Those who raised their voice for change failed to be loud enough to claim their credit.

Bhutanese ‘democracy’ started with mock run polls (Majumdar, 2007). Four imaginary parties Yellow, Green, Red and Blue were created for 21 April 2007 mock polls. Yellow represented traditional values, red industrial development, blue was fairness and accountability, and green for the environment. The exercise was an attempt to teach people about voting. Bhutan’s long claim of being a democratic government had silently accepted its undemocratic history and admitted the need to teach people the basics of a democracy.

An election commission with leadership having no exposure to democratic exercise and bureaucrats in district offices with no understanding of democratic process were teaching and instructing students to act as leaders of a party standing in a democratic election. The country remains a very strategic position for western democracies to use as base to exert pressure on China. Had these favourable

⁷ Having permanent office for MPs in constituency was one of the proposals made by Thinley government but was withdrawn

circumstances not been with Bhutan, country's path to democracy would have received tremendous criticism from the western world.

Ground reality of the time gives a different thought. TV was a new phenomenon in Bhutan with only a couple of hours on air. Limited people within the metropolitan area had the opportunity to own a TV set at home. The country had handful of newspapers published from Thimphu. It would have been a phenomenal success for these newspapers if ever reached a few regional business hubs such as Gelephu, Samtse, Phuentsholing, or Samdrup Jongkhar. Additionally, the readership was the big issue, even today, for these newspapers – let alone understand what the news intended to mean. The language used in these newspapers was targeted for educated elite in metro areas and hardly meant anything for rural population.

The BBS radio was only source of information available for greater mass. According to National Statistics Bureau 2005, 69% of Bhutanese lived in rural area. And radio's reach to these rural folks had been very recent. Telecommunication was accessible to only 76 of the 201 blocks (gewogs). ISP Druknet had 2,000 plus customers, country had approximately 7,000 computers and around 5,000 people were using internet. Social media had not become an option for many Bhutanese. Under these circumstances, there are enough grounds to cast doubt if the idea published by foreign media that Bhutanese generally don't want democracy was a genuine voice of the Bhutanese population (Denyer, 2008). The reluctance of the Bhutanese citizens to actively participate in elections was a lack of education and access to information rather than their displeasure over king handing over some of his authority to the elected bodies.

The ECB had to conduct NC election in phase due to lack of candidates (Reuters, 2008). Strict vetting rules on nominations was one striking reason for lack of candidacy⁸. Further, politics in Bhutan was until then perceived for few limited families who whirled power and influenced national politics for a long time. Professionals were hesitant to risk their profession in favour of politics and democracy. A total of 41 candidates

⁸ Election Act of Bhutan 2008, Article 176(d) and 177(d)

had contested in 15 districts on the first schedule of National Council elections (Bhutan News Service, 2007).

Majority of these elected representative were new public faces and strangers to politics and democracy. It was the challenge for every individual with no political background and democracy education to steer country's politics in a new direction that will determine the future stability of a new democracy.

Thimphu was conscious to make sure National Assembly elections do not divide society. However, parties were ready to win the election be it at the cost of division. Division was obvious with two parties in the field – Druk Phunsum Tshogpa (DPT) and People's Democratic Party (PDP) - fielding some populist and well-revered individuals. Many senior bureaucrats left their jobs to test their luck in politics. While DPT had political stalwarts like Jigmi Y. Thinley and Khandu Wangchuk, the PDP had candidates with royal connection like Sangay Ngedup – maternal uncle of the current king. Thinley influenced bureaucracy and presented himself as the advocate of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Through his personality as a GNH advocate, Thinley had maintained the closest relations with royal family⁹, more precisely with King Jigme Singye Wangchuk.

The NA election held on 24 March 2008 was a shock for many. The voters created the smallest opposition in a newest 'democracy'¹⁰. It was sort of a voters' dismissal of a party – PDP – that had direct royal relations. Interestingly two seats that PDP won were in Ngalop dominated western Bhutan. Major players to swing vote was the last-minute silent campaign by bureaucrats who went home three days before election day and allegedly instructed voters in favour of DPT. PDP's Sangay Ngedup resigned as party leader and two MPs played an

⁹ This close relation was manifested when his son Palden Thinley married Princess Kesang Choden Wangchuk – half-sister of the current king - <https://www.webcitation.org/67L5zetr8?url=http://www.bhutanmajestictravel.com/news/2008/her-royal-highness-ashi-ke-zang-choden-wangchuck-married-to-dasho-palden-yoeser-thinley.html>

¹⁰ DPT won 45 seats while PDP won 2 seats

active role for five years. Eighty percent of the registered voters turned up to exercise their adult franchise (Sengupta, 2008).

The electorates of Bhutan have remained polarised and divided ever since. They are heavily manipulated and swayed by minor events and issues. The second NA election gave an astounding victory (ECB, 2013) to the smallest opposition, unexpectedly. The second run was more vigorous and lengthier with more than two parties in the contest.

Post-primary, political exchange remained primary reason for unexpected outcome. The Bhutanese law provides opportunities for individuals to change parties after primaries if their party failed to win in top two. This privilege is restricted once they are elected. A lot of exchanges made post primaries in 2013 – including DNT's president abandoning her party to join PDP. The shift psychologically influenced voters loyal to DNT to support PDP. And this loyalty returned to DNT when PDP¹¹ categorically instructed its supporters to vote for DNT in the third parliamentary elections in 2018.

Today public participation in political discourse is not democratic enough. The country is horizontally divided between two parties and the splinter groups within them. Democracy, public participation, review of the government functionaries and effectiveness, holding the government accountable to what their promises are largely absent, except the use of adult franchise during election. The ECB made efforts to energise younger generation through democracy club in schools and colleges but failed to get continuity. ECB-envisioned youth parliament has become functionless.

A small section engages in barter of votes and singing hymns in favour of one party against the other. These individuals invoke fear and suspicion among the supporters of opposing parties. The need of the time is to host continued debate on whether the parties are abiding by their duties and whether they are fostering the gems of democracy. It must be a continuous process and not on the wee hours of another election.

¹¹ PDP failed to pass the primary round in third parliamentary elections in 2018

Democracy at local level

For citizens, their first access to government is the local government. For a democracy to be strong, vibrant, and accountable, these local governments must have better connections with people and their effectiveness must be continuously reviewed through civic activism. The empowered citizens have the responsibility for critical review of their government's performance rather than wait next election to provide mandate.

Democracy in Bhutan is mandated and controlled by central machinery in palace. The political discourse is designed in such a pattern that competition at the local level is absent completely. The local assemblies in villages, municipalities and districts have been made apolitical with the objectives to ensure political influence does not affect their operations. This has created relationship vacuum between the national and local leaders. Laws give no independence to local governments.

The candidates willing to run for local government offices must have clearance of no political affiliation or have resigned as party members at least a year before the contest¹². Legally, this is strong instrument to avoid political representation at the local government but practically not. Although the tendency for Bhutanese to remain not loyal (Subba, 2018) to any political party may be argued as evidence of loose political influence in the local government.

Bhutan claims the devolution of central government authority as early as 1980. However, the local government emerged as agency of little importance following the 'democratic' transition. The earlier form of local government was a rubber stamp to carry out orders of the local district chief appointed directly by the king.

Stronger local government is a litmus test for a maturing democracy and greater public participation in the democratic process. Greater the decentralisation, greater is the public participation in governance and decision making. For a decent democracy, accountability of the local government matters most – being the closest democratic institution for

¹² Local Government Act

citizens. While economic policies are designed and implemented by the central government, social accountability forms the most important part of the local governance.

Social accountability processes are central to enhancing participation, transparency and accountability in local government. Currently, social accountability and grievance redressal mechanisms are either weak or non-existent in Bhutan. Putting in place such platforms for state-citizen dialogue will be an opportunity to air and address public grievances. At present, communities rarely make complaints with LGs. It is not because they have no complaints but the lack of clear and effective complaints handling mechanisms, including channels for feedback and redressal for the communities to file their grievances. As a direct consequence, most complaints are reported to MPs and ACC, which should otherwise be dealt with by LGs. Failing to amend this system will weaken the local government and this in turn will impact on strengthening democracy in Bhutan.

Local Government Elections

Local government elections were one of the most difficult tasks that ECB had to carry out. From vetting the candidates, educating them on the process and responsibilities and preparing a legal framework was a herculean task. The educational qualification criteria set by law forced many leaders who led the villages for generations to stay away from politics. The educated Bhutanese had hardly stayed in villages and served in the previous local governments. With new system, an almost complete overhaul in the leadership and thoughts were expected to swamp at the local governments.

The staggered electoral process started on 20 January 2011 with elections in a few districts. It took months for the ECB to complete. Primary reason behind the protracted process was lack of political enthusiasm for individuals to contest for local government leadership. The stringent rules barring people currently involved in any business or affiliated to any political group were other hindrances discouraging candidates. They were weighing benefits of getting elected as local

assembly members compared to being employed or running their own business.

The office of the local government was not attractive enough for people to leave job and join the race. They risk their future (if privately or publicly employed) in case of loss. The senior leadership and politically conscious mass had already joined the party politics. It was a hard search for individuals who are ready to risk the career and serve the public with fringe benefits. The legal provision of not requiring at least two candidates in the local government electorate provided some relief for many individuals. Many villages had only one candidate standing for the position. People voted yes or no. Majority received approval.

The local government elections were held after a delay of over two years. Chief Election Commissioner Kunzang Wangdi described it as "teething problems" (Sherpa, 2011) since the country is a beginner in the democratic practice and that culture and the mentality of the people had yet to come in tune with the democratic processes. Public perception was that since they had an elected government in Thimphu, there was no need for them to elect a local government. It was the result of an age-old administrative system where local governments were run by government employees and their appointees.

The delay was also caused by ineffective parliament. The lawmakers were new to law-making and parliamentary process. It took time for them to formulate laws on local government electoral process, power and privileges. Power sharing structure was the most contentious issue. Parliamentarians and policymakers were concerned about the financial independence and autonomy of the local bodies.

A local government candidate must be functionally literate and possesses skills adequate to discharge his/her responsibilities as certified by the Election Commission of Bhutan or possessing a formal degree in the case of candidates for Thrompon (mayor)¹³.

Under this provision, the ECB conducts a functional literacy test of everyone who intends to stand as a candidate for the local government

¹³ Local Government Act 2009 (21.e)

election. The stated intention of the ECB was to filter individuals to choose the best candidates who can well serve the purpose. However, it appears to be an examination conducted by Civil Service Commission for government employment. Further, the examination has technically undermined the capacity of individuals who have failed to or barred to attend schools. Because a large section of Southern Bhutanese was barred from attending schools on security ground following 1990 unrest, their right to political participation is curtailed. While undermining those who did not attend school, the local government election law failed to capture the ground reality of the country and accept the universal fact that attending school was basic human rights and state has obligation to provide it.

Local Assemblies

Administrative decentralisation has occurred simultaneously with the formation of local government¹⁴. The Department of Local Government (DLG) under Home Ministry is responsible for local administrative functions (Brassad, 2008). Local administration uses the same structure as national government. Administrative officers are responsible for public service delivery in their jurisdiction and are accountable to the local government officials. While there is no devolved authority on administrative staff selection, district governments can redistribute their staff based on need, evaluate performance and recommend promotions (Thompson, 2020). It is unclear how the lines of accountability function in practice and whether administrative officers remain solely accountable to local government officers or whether their duty of care lies with the sectoral ministries. Horizontal accountability seems to exist at the district level, particularly with the role of the District Environment Officer who is mandated to commission multidisciplinary committees for all new projects (Thompson, 2010).

Local governments have no legislative powers but can make rules within their mandates and the laws set by the Parliament. DYT's have specific regulatory functions. GYT's can levy certain taxes like land and

¹⁴ Bhutan currently has 20 districts, 205 blocks and 1044 villages

entertainment taxes. Class A municipalities¹⁵ have greater legislative autonomy and can set property tax rates. Limited fiscal decentralisation has also been introduced alongside functional decentralisation. The central government has assigned up to 40% of its total budget to local government transfers (UNDP, 2006).

Block assemblies are the lowest level of representative assemblies. Generally, district's business headquarters are called Thromde. The major business hubs like Thimphu, Phuentsholing, Gaylegphug¹⁶ and Samdrup Jongkhar are given the status of municipality which function as self-governing urban governments that fall directly under the jurisdiction of the central government. Several Class B & C municipalities were established through parliamentary approval between 2015 and 2017. Proposal for other municipalities have been stalled since 2017 (Zangmo, 2017) when political parties failed to come into agreeing on terms to the proposal from the government. This is primarily because of the work needed to be done to redistribute constituencies as per legal requirements where a municipality must have at least 7 constituencies and no more than 10 – and a verdict passed by the Supreme Court (Dema, 2016) in response to the writ filed against government proposal.

Public Participation in Local Government

Voters still disregard the authority of the local government. It is largely because of limited authority it whirled. Also, voters prefer attention from the national government and parliament members who had assured everything during election. A NC assessment of local government reads, “One striking observation in the last few years has been that the elected members of parliament usually get inundated with issues raised by their constituents that are mostly administrative, which is well within the mandate of the local government functionaries to address them.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Dzongkha name - Thromdes

¹⁶ Gaylegphug was renamed Gelephu in late 1990s

¹⁷ Local Governance Assessment Report - Prepared by the Good Governance Committee for deliberation in the House (NC)

Local Development Planning Manual developed by Gross National Happiness Commission says the local government is required to ensure public participation in designing development activities. However, central and local governments remain in conflict over the demarcation of authority in many issues like roads & bridges¹⁸ construction, school administration, health facilities. The majority of the budgets for these development activities are controlled and administered by the central government.

The Block Assemblies and Municipalities host, generally, one annual meeting with people. Questions can be raised as to how qualitative and strategic the outcomes of such processes are and whether one meeting a year will invite constructive engagement of all stakeholders. In many cases, according to a report (National Council of Bhutan, undated), the annual meetings are merely an uncritical aggregation of respective Gewog and sector activities that are not well coordinated and therefore not providing a strategic plan or vision on how to create a coherent pathway for local development. There are myriad of community-based organisations and groups like community forestry group, citizen monitoring committees, cooperatives, self-help groups, livestock groups, etc, whose engagement can be critical to ensuring comprehensive and exhaustive inputs to planning, implementation and evaluation processes, whose engagement at present happen on ad-hoc basis and not in a coordinated approach.

Public scrutiny is not well developed. Local government are mandated to publish relevant information to the public either using public notice boards or through annual reports. There are few observational studies undertaken to evaluate whether gewogs comply with these requirements; a field visit in 2009, showed that few gewogs publish information on public notice boards or through annual reports. This could be a capacity issue, with gewogs unable to produce information like annual reports (Thompson, 2010).

¹⁸ One glaring example is the bridge over Mao River in Gelephu. Every successive government promised a bridge over the river connecting Gelephu with people across the river. The river spans for almost one kilometer in width.

Decentralisation in Bhutan has many challenges ahead, the largest of which is capacity issues at the local level and the lack of real fiscal and political autonomy. The recent lack of candidates for the local government elections demonstrates a concerning level of citizen lack of awareness and/or apathy to participation in politics and local governance. Getting citizens more involved would be key to ensuring these decentralisation policies are worked out and implemented in an efficient, transparent and corruption-free manner¹⁹.

Public Perception of Democracy and Freedom

In a statement in June 2019, Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering put a strong negation on the future of democracy in Bhutan. He said, ‘people are tired of democracy because of the very nature of the parties (Press statement from PMO).’ Tshering was referring to two major issues raised by the opposition party – increasing salary of the government employees and replacing Zhemgang with Sarpang district for government’s tourism flagship programme²⁰.

The PM blamed other parties for lack of ethics in politics and democratic chaos in the previous two terms. While he used his right to criticise other parties, he missed to realise the opposition has the same right to criticise his actions. The PM may have taken opportunity to incarcerate his opposition for not being supportive to his initiative, but the statement would provide avenues for those looking to cut the throat of democracy. It is not abnormal phenomenon in a democracy for opposition party to blame government for no reason. The PM’s words will reverberate to his actions and will have wider impact. It results in parties being culprits for failure of yet another ‘democracy’. This will help materialise the idea, which came in early days of the Bhutanese ‘democracy’, that Bhutanese citizens are not ready to accept a democracy and democratic culture.

¹⁹ European Union, Quality Support Facilities in the field of decentralization, Local Governance & Local Development. Letter of Contract N°2 2013/330793. Decentralization in Bhutan. October 2015.

²⁰ Read our take on Zhemgang Vs Sarpang issue here <http://www.bhutanwatch.org/sarpang-vs-zhemgang/>

The memories of 1990s are still alive – brutality people faced while asking for democratic rights. Despite consistent denial that there was no pressure (Palden & Wangdi. 2018) on King to relinquish his power is utterly false.

Conclusion

Ten years into the practice, the political leadership has not invested much in shaping a positive outlook for democratically elected leadership. UNDP rightly pointed out ‘Bhutanese politicians struggle to gain credibility with the electorate’ (UNDP, 2019). Two major sections are likely to negate the elected political leadership further. First – the stubborn royal supporter who look at every opportunity to increase the authority of the king. Second – those who have been tarnished for seeking democracy in 1990s. The western region primarily goes by first while South and east follow the second option. However, there are mixed bags too among these clusters. South and East may want a further reduction in royal prerogatives to empower citizens but may not have built their own leadership capability.

Bhutan lacks larger forums for wider inclusion of its citizens in political and democracy education. The only means for them to understand democracy is listening to contestants and casting ballots in periodical elections. Bhutan must widen the scope and mission of democracy education and reach out to the remotest part to ensure every citizen equally understand their role and responsibility in a healthy and prosperous democracy.

This young ‘democracy’ practically needs assertive and robust civic and political socialisation that produce future leadership who can fully understand the values, norms and culture of democracy. The regional experience of democracy is good enough to learn that without proper civic education and political socialisation, the democracy has derailed. This will create public mistrust and frustration on democracy and its core values.

The democracy in Bhutan must evolve into participatory and inclusive for it to remain relevant and active and to avoid future ethnic and

regional tensions. The early indications are not positive for a healthy democracy. It is time Bhutan understands democracy beyond ballots.

The evolution of culture requires time. Bhutanese society was ruled vertically. Consulting and engaging public and accepting their feedback in decision-making is a completely new phenomenon. King continues traveling to villages and talking to people – which should have been carried out by elected representatives. King's direct interaction with public must not influence the democratic process and people must rest their trust in their representative above their king. In a constitutional democracy, a direct engagement of king is not required for country's socio-economic development and political modernization (Wolf, 2012). We have adequately seen democracy failing where monarchy remains pro-active. His activism through De-suung, a practice of parallel government, has already undermined elected government.

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Integration and Satisfaction Among Resettled Bhutanese in Australia

Manfred Ringhofer¹

ABSTRACT

Bhutan's population design out of unfounded fears led to eviction of over 20% of the country's population, mostly Nepali speakers. It was not an ethnic cleansing. It was a Bhutan's best effort to avoid democracy and respect human rights. The efforts to return to Bhutan failed. Most of them are now resettled in developed countries. The data included in this article were driven from primary research conducted by the author in August 2018. It was found that the lives of the resettled Bhutanese people have germinated with new hopes and new vision for future. They have embraced their new country and connection with Bhutan is gradually eroding. The connection would have benefited both resettled Bhutanese and Bhutan. This paper provides basic background of the Bhutanese refugee issue but focuses primarily on integration of resettled Bhutanese in South Australia, their psychological attachments with Bhutan and Australia, and the way they are coping up with language challenges, cultural shocks and identity issues.

Keywords: Discrimination, equality, happiness, immigration, integration, refugees

Introduction

The Bhutanese refugees qualify for refugee status under the Refugee Convention because they are the 'people, whose fear of persecution is based on reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.' They were forced out of Bhutan with unfounded fears. A multicultural Bhutan feared democracy, liberty and globalisation but emphasised tradition or an ethnic fundamentalism (Waters, 1994). The ruling elites in Bhutan (Ngalops), in denying the reality of being a multi-ethnic society, started to

¹ Prof. Dr. Manfred Ringhofer is associated with Osaka Sangyo University, Japan

strengthen their status first with the change of the Nationality Law 1958 in 1985. Exclusive census was carried out in the South in 1988, *Driglam Namzha* was introduced, One Nation One People Policy promulgated and terrorism charges were laid against those who demonstrated in 1990 demanding democracy and human rights.

This author is associated with Bhutanese refugee issue since 1990 when Amnesty International London, asked the Nara Group 45 (Japan) to write cards on behalf of Ratan Gazmere, a prisoner of conscience. As the chairperson of Amnesty Nara, this author mobilised people to write hundreds of cards to the Bhutanese King, foreign minister and home minister and Bhutan's consulate in Geneva. Amnesty Nara and Amnesty Schwalbach (Germany) jointly worked for the release of Gazmere who was declared prisoner of month in September 1991. Gazmere was released on December 7 of the same year after spending more than two years in prison. Author met Gazmere in March 1993 when he had established Association of Human Rights Activists (AHURA) Bhutan and started campaigning for refugee repatriation from his base in south eastern Nepal. On return to Japan, this author established the refugee support group AHURA Japan with Jeannie Donald, a former English teacher in Bhutan and a member of Amnesty Nara, Mitsu Evang on July 7, 1993². AHURA Japan contributed financial assistance for transport and treatment of more than 100 torture victims from camps to a Centre for Victims of Torture (CVICT) treatment center in Kathmandu, scholarships for refugee student for higher studies, incentives for teachers for distant education (universities in Nepal and India) and educational goods to Caritas Nepal (Kodama, 2004).

Kudunabari Incident

Author read about the incident in *Kuensel* dated December 22, 2003. Refugees got angry when the Bhutanese members of the verification team placed conditions for their repatriation. The Bhutanese newspaper claimed the angry refugees burned the building with Bhutanese verification team inside. Days later arriving in Nepal, this author met

² July 7 was chosen as an appropriate date as it coincided with the date on which People's Forum for Human Rights was established by T N Rizal

with a French cameraman and his assistant who verified that the house was not burned. Author saw the visual footage of the cameramen where a few youths seen pelting stones at the fleeing vehicles of the Bhutanese verification team members. Then Foreign Minister Khandu Wangchuck reported the incident to the 82nd National Assembly session in July 2004. (The Story of Bhutanese Refugees, 2010).

According to incident witness Khem Khanal from Khudanabari Camp, who now lives in Melbourne, gave a different story: “UNHCR organised this meeting with JVT team, Nepal government representatives, Refugee Coordination Unit (RCU) and refugee representatives. During the meeting Bhutanese officials tagged refugees as anti-national, criminals and categorised a 7-year-old girl as terrorist. When the refugees asked questions, Bhutanese officials ignored their questions and tried to escape. Then some of the youths pelted stones to their cars. Nepal Police escorted Bhutanese officials to safety. Two days later UNHCR and RCU said, it was a mistake of the Bhutanese officials. Even though many refugees were interrogated, no one was arrested. The news from *Kuensel* that there was a fire in the camp is completely wrong. After that the verification process did not proceed further” (Personal interview, 2020).

Story of Bhutan Population

History of Bhutan's population is inconsistent. Inaccurate population data was presented when Bhutan joined Colombo Plan. When Bhutan joined the United Nations, they declared country's population to be over a million (Rustomji, 1978). The population figure continued to increase, and 1994 Bhutan told the world that its population was 1.765 million (Japan Foreign Ministry, 1996), but two years later, Bhutan announced the population to be 765,000 (Japan Foreign Ministry, 1998).

In August 1998, a student from Tokyo University asked Bhutan's National Statistics Bureau to provide data about Bhutan's population based on 1988 census. He was told that there is no data (Ringhofer, 2000). To put it correctly, even after the 1988 census, Bhutan continued to project the national population by estimates. The estimates lacked ethnic composition. This concludes the eviction of nearly 20% of the population was based on perceived fear of fabricated population increase,

not based on factual data. Democratic movement in Nepal had political influenced in Bhutan and rulers perceived threat to their status quo. The often-cited danger of cultural identity loss of the Ngalops is the other excuse to validate eviction.

Together with other factors, the enforcement of One Nation One People Policy in 1989 resulted into some protest in southern Bhutan. Nobody knows how many criminal acts were committed in southern Bhutan by the government forces, guerilla groups from India and Lhotshampas (Giri, 2014). This author made 15 visits to the Bhutanese refugee camps and interviewed them. Jeannie Donald accompanied in many of these visits. Following resettlement, this author visited these refugees again in Australia. All these interviews points to one thing – Bhutanese refugee issue is not an ethnic cleansing. Presence of non-Lhotshampas among the refugee community while many Lhotshampas still living in Bhutan supports this theory. It is an issue of democracy and human rights. The term ‘ethnic conflict’ is often loosely, to describe a wide range of intrastate conflicts that are not, in fact, ethnic in character (Brown, 1999). This is not the case in Bhutan.

Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH

The Royal Government of Bhutan was seeking a face saver. This became a necessity following demonstration in eastern Bhutan in 1997-98. Former Prime Minister Jigmi Y. Thinley had already started the mission to present Gross National Happiness (GNH) as a shield to protect Bhutan from further criticism. Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS) was established in 1998 and it launched the aggressive propaganda to seek international attention on GNH. Other than a handful of individuals in Thimphu, none in Bhutan knew about GNH, despite the claims it was introduced by King Jigme Singye in 1972. The purpose has been to establish a society preserving the culture based on Buddhist belief. GNH does not talk about coexistence of multiple culture, other ethnic groups, treatment of minorities and respect for other faiths.

In a sense, GNH is a kind of assimilation policy targeted at the nonconformist section of the population (Ura, 2006) and to divert the

focus of the international community away from undemocratic nature of the governance. Though government's survey in 2005 said 96.8% of the Bhutanese were very happy or happy and only 3.3 percent were unhappy (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2005), the index had deteriorated since then. Two more surveys were carried out in 2010 (CBS, 2012) and 2015 (CBS, 2016) which provided more realistic picture of the Bhutanese population and their happiness rating (Table 1). The 2005 survey portrayed more happier Bhutanese due to the fact that respondents feared repercussion if they failed to abide the government version of the story in absence of legal instruments guaranteeing freedom of speech.

Table 1. Categories of GNH Index, Headcounts and Sufficiency (all figures in %)

	Sufficiency	GNH 2010		GNH 2015	
		Population	Average sufficiency	Population	Average sufficiency
Deeply happy	77-100	8.3	81.5	8.4	80.90
Extensively happy	66-76	32.6	70.7	35.0	70.8
Narrowly happy	50-65	48.7	59.1	47.9	59.1
Unhappy	0-49	10.4	44.7	8.8	45.2

Source: A compass towards a just and harmonious society. 2015 GNH Survey Report, CBS, 2016 p59

In 2010, 59.1% stated they are unhappy or narrowly happy, which declined in 2015 to 56.7%. The surveys have not spelled out the reasons for decline in happiness but if governance is a reason behind, it has been reflected in the last three elections. And if legal guarantee of freedom of speech is the reason for people to speak the reality, Bhutanese people deserve such a quick democratic maturity. Now it's time the world question Bhutan's 'trustworthy history and policy' (Munro, 2016).

Not only the national surveys, but international happiness studies also show the continued decline of happiness in Bhutan. The World Happiness Reports show the successive decline of happiness index – 79 in 2015 (SDSN, 2015), to 97 in 2017 (SDSN, 2017) and then to 95 in 2019 (SDSN, 2019). *Daily Bhutan* points out that discrepancy of outcomes

from national survey and World Happiness Report is due to the criteria and methodology used (Daily Bhutan, 2019).

Happiness Among the Resettled Bhutanese

Resettlement of Bhutanese refugees in Australia began in 2008 and some 6,000 (Australian Government, 2018) had resettled in Australia. About half of them live in Adelaide (Fujibayashi, 2017). This author visited Adelaide seven times, Melbourne five times, Sydney four and Canberra three times between 2013 and 2018 as part of this research.

Demography of the Respondents

Personal interviews were conducted in August 2018. Most interviewees lived in Salisbury– the most concentrated settlement of Bhutanese Australians at the time this research was conducted. I had known some of these respondents while others were introduced through my acquaintances. A total of 100 individuals participated (Table 2). Interpreters were used for those with English difficulties. Participation was voluntary and privacy was assured. Identifiable personal details were not recorded. Of these respondents, 75% were born in southern Bhutan while 25% were born in refugee camps in Nepal. Of them seven had been government employees back in Bhutan while one was running a private business. The following few tables show the composition of the survey participants. There were 69 Hindus, 21 Buddhists, 5 Kirats, 3 Christians and 2 non-religious.

Table 2. Birth place of the respondents

Birth place	Male	Female	Total
Samchi ³	14	8	22
Dagana	14	6	20
Sarbhang ⁴	11	3	14
Chirang ⁵	14	2	15
Samdrup Jongkhar	1	1	2
NA	1	0	1
Subtotal (Bhutan)	55	20	75

³ Samchi was renamed Samtse in late 1990s

⁴ Sarbhang was renamed Sarpang in late 1990s

⁵ Chirang was renamed Tsirang in late 1990s

Beldangi 1	5	4	9
Beldangi 2	5	1	6
Beldangi 3	2	3	4
Sanischare	3	0	3
Timai	1	0	1
Khudunabari	0	1	1
Maidhar	0	1	1
Subtotal (Nepal)	17	8	25
Total	72	28	100

Table 3. Age at arrival in Australia

Age	M	F	Total
~10	2	1	3
11-15	8	4	12
16-20	13	2	15
21-25	12	2	14
26-30	7	3	10
31-35	5	1	6
36-40	7	5	12
41-45	4	4	8
46-50	4	3	7
51-55	6	1	7
56-60	3	0	3
61-65	0	1	1
66+	1	0	1
NA	0	1	1
Total	72	28	100

Outcome

Table 4. Overall degree of feeling of integration

Independence	M	F	Total
100%	31	13	44
95%	5	2	7
90%	7	4	11
85%	2	0	2
80%	10	2	12
75%	6	0	6
70%	3	2	5
65%	1	0	1
60%	2	2	4
55%	1	0	1
50%	3	1	4
40%	0	1	1

NA	1	1	2
Total	72	28	100

Table 5. Satisfaction with housing conditions

	Total	Very	More or less	Diff to say	Not satisfied	Not at all	NA
Own house	61	54	6	1	0	0	0
Rental	36	17	14	0	4	0	1
House							
Apartment	2	2	0	0	0	0	0
Total	99	73	20	1	4	0	1

Females felt more integrated to Australian community compared to males (Table 6). The high rate of satisfaction among families living in their own house can be credited to the housing policy of the Government of South Australia, which enables many refugees to acquire own houses thorough concessional credit mechanism. Those living in rent have also expressed their satisfaction on housing conditions (AHURI, 2014, p.26-28).

Table 6. Integration feeling by arrival year

Year	Integration feeling	Age (o=own house/ r=rental)
2008 (9M, 1F)	100% 4M	23(o) 27(o) 28(r) 30(o)
	90% 1M	39(o)
	75% 1M	67(o)
	70% 1M	65(o)
2009 (10M, 7F)	50% 2M 1F	59(o) 60(o), 25(o)
	100% 4M, 3F	26(o) 26(r) 30(o) 64(o)
		32(o) 48(r) 52(o)
	90% 1M 1F	54(r), 52(r)
	80% 1M 1F	28(o), 54(o)
	70% 2M 1F	40(o) 28(o), 22(r)
2010 (14M, 1F)	60% 1M 1F	40(o), 60(o)
	50% 1M	57(o)
	100% 8M	21(o) 25(o) 29(o) 31(o)
		33(o) 35(o) 46(o) 48(o)
	95% 2M	28(o) 28(o)
	80% 1M	62(o)

	75% 1M	34(o)
	65% 1M	46(o)
	60% 1M 1F	31(o), 38(o)
2011 (9M, 2F)	100% 3 M 1F	18(o) 24(r) 41(r), 47(r)
	95% 1M	31(o)
	80% 3M 1F	30(o) 31(o) 33(o), 54(o)
	75% 2M	59(o) 20(r)
2012 (8M, 5F)	100% 2M 2F	30(o) 51(o), 28(o) 35(r)
	95% 1M	32(r)
	90% 2M 2F	58(r) 84(o), 17(r) 71(o)
	80% 1M	50(r)
	75% 1M	31(r)
	70% 1F	36(o)
	55% 1 M	35(r)
2013 (11M, 9F)	100% 4M5F	21(r) 22(o) (25(o) 46(o),18(o) 20(o) 37(r) 40(o) 54(r)
	95% 1M2F	26®, 18(r) 25(o)
	90% 2M1F	42(o) (44(r),19(r)
	85% 2M	13(r) 49(r)
	80% 1M	58(o)
	75% 1M	29(r)
	40% 1F	21(o)
2014 (3M)	100% 1M	23(r)
	90% 1M	48(r)
	80% 1M	35(o)
2015 (4M, 2F)	100% 2M 2F	18(r) 21(r), 37(r) 52 (o)
	95% 1M	29(r)
	80% 1M	54(o)
2016 (3M, 1F)	100% 3M	21(r) 40(r) 58(r)
	40% 1F	NA
2017 (1M)	80% 1M	36(r)

Young respondents, mostly under 30 years, who were born in Nepal said they feel more being Australian than Bhutanese. However, these youngsters still feel the need to link their identity with their parents' nationality – Bhutanese. Few youngsters also expressed they missed their life in refugee camps and find integrating with the Australian society a challenge.

Senior members of the community feel more Bhutanese than Australian.

And this is high among those who were gainfully employed back in Bhutan. People with special needs feel they are integrated well. Integration feeling among those who come early is higher but not in some elderly people compared to those who came later (See Table 6 and 7). They cite reasons such as difficulties in finding jobs, concern of acculturation and loss of language. Of the 28 female respondents, 21 were not in gainful employment. Despite this, they felt more integrated to the Australian way of life.

Table 7. Arrival year and integration feeling (in %)

Year of arrival	80%-100%	Under 80%
2008-09	59	41
2010-11	79	21
2012-13	86	14
2014-17	100	

There were 13 respondents who arrived Adelaide under resettlement between 2014 and 2017. Six of them were over 40 years and were living in rental accommodation. The possible reason for their higher integration feeling could be family reunion or losing hope of repatriation. Elderly population who arrived early for settlement and have owned house were not so happy being in Australia.

Table 8. Connection between integration feeling and employment

Job type	Number of respondents
Carers	6
Casuals	14
Part time	4
Unemployed	12
Full time	62
No Data	2

Younger population entered workforce quicker compared to those in 50s or early 60s. Respondents in 50s and 60s faced challenges of language, culture and acceptance of their prior learning to enter the workforce.

Employed respondents felt being more Australian compared to those who were not. Full time employed felt more integrated compared to those who were casually employed. This feeling is even lower among

those employed part time. Over 52% of those permanently employed responded they feel 100% integrated. Others felt their experiences of bullying and racism in workplace as the reason for not being fully integrated. And almost 90% of those employed were aged 20s or 30s. A small number feel the difficult tests required for getting citizenship and language barrier are some of the factors affecting their integration into Australian society.

Sixty percent of the respondents said their gainful employment helped them to some degree for integration. Professionals such as nurses and social workers were more satisfied with their jobs compared to those who work in food processing, interpreting or care for family members. Males are more satisfied with their job compared to female and respondents with better English do feel more integrated compared to those having lower English language command.

Table 9. English proficiency of the respondents

Proficiency	Number of respondents
Very good	15
Quite good	46
No problem for communications	19
Not so good	8
Bad	5
Not rated	7

Table 9.1. Breakdown of the respondents with very good English proficiency

Gender	Age	Arrival	Integration feel (%)	Job type	Rate integration policy
M	40	2009	60	Part Time	Very good
M	34	2010	75	Full time	Very good
M	13	2013	85	Student	NA
M	18	2013	100	Student	Good
M	18	2013	95	Student	Good
F	22	2013	70	Student	Good
M	28	2013	100	Full time	Very good
M	30	2013	100	Full time	Good
F	32	2013	100	Full time	Very good
M	33	2013	100	Full time	Very good

F	52	2013	100	Full time	Very good
M	57	2013	50	Full time	Very good
F	60	2013	60	Part Time	Good
M	46	2015	100	Full time	Very good
M	59	2015	75	Full time	Very good

Though all proficient English speakers feel positive about integration policy but not all feel they are well integrated (Table 9.1). This could be the result of positive stories they were inculcated during orientation before resettlement which gradually erode as they actually experience the Australian society. The story and reality might be different.

Table 9.2. Breakdown of the respondents with quite good English proficiency

Gender	Age	Arrival	Job type	Integration feel (%)	Rate integration policy
M	23	2008	Casual	100	Very good
M	27	2008	Full Time	100	Difficult to say
M	39	2008	Full Time	90	Good
F	25	2008	Full Time	50	NA
M	59	2008	NA	50	Good
M	26	2009	NA	100	Good
M	28	2009	NA	80	Not so good
M	54	2009	Full Time	90	Good
M	64	2009	Casual	100	Good
M	30	2009	Full Time	100	Very good
M	28	2009	Full Time	70	Good
M	31	2010	Full Time	60	Good
M	35	2010	Full time	100	Very good
M	28	2010	Full time	95	Very good
M	31	2010	Full time	100	Good
F	38	2010	Full time	60	Difficult to say
M	62	2010	Full time	80	Good
M	48	2010	Part time	100	Good
M	28	2010	Full time	95	Very good
M	21	2010	Unemployed	100	Very good
M	29	2010	Full time	100	Very good
M	25	2010	Casual	100	Difficult to say
M	46	2010	Full time	65	Good
M	18	2011	Trainee	100	Difficult to say

M	24	2011	Trainee	100	Good
M	31	2011	Full time	NA	Good
M	33	2011	Part time	NA	Good
M	42	2012	NA	90	NA
M	36	2012	Carer	95	Good
M	32	2012	Carer	95	Good
M	50	2012	Full Time	80	Good
M	17	2012	Trainee	90	Very good
M	30	2012	Full Time	100	Very good
M	28	2012	Full Time	100	Good
F	35	2012	Casual	55	Good
M	25	2013	Casual	95	Good
M	21	2013	Full time	100	Good
F	21	2013	Unemployed	40	Good
M	25	2013	Casual	100	Difficult to say
F	19	2013	Unemployed	90	Good
M	26	2013	Casual	95	Difficult to say
M	44	2013	Carer	90	Good
F	17	2013	Trainee	100	Difficult to say
F	20	2013	NA	100	Difficult to say
M	23	2014	Trainee	100	Difficult to say
M	48	2014	Unemployed	90	Good
M	35	2014	Unemployed	80	Difficult to say
M	54	2015	Full time	NA	Very good
M	30	2016	Casual	80	Difficult to say
M	40	2016	Unemployed	100	Good

Out of 13 with poor English proficiency, 9 of them were females (Table 9.1). While in camps, females were traditionally meant for domestic works while boys attend schools. The gender gap created by education system in camps is now affecting the females in integration. Life in camps were dominated by traditional role of women and getting married at an early age, which resulted in dramatic fall of girls' percentage after eighth grade (Ringhofer, 2002).

Table 9.3. Breakdown of the respondents with not so good English proficiency

Gender	Age	Arrival	Job type	Integration feel (%)	Rate Integration policy
M	60	2008	Unemployed	50	Difficult to say
F	48	2009	Unemployed	100	Very good

F	54	2009	Carer	80	Very good
F	47	2011	Unemployed	100	Good
F	54	2011	Unemployed	80	Good
F	51	2012	Unemployed	100	Good
F	37	2013	Unemployed	100	NA
M	58	2013	Unemployed	80	NA

Table 9.4. Breakdown of the respondents with bad English proficiency

Gender	Age	Arrival	Job type	Integration feel (%)	Rate Integration policy
F	71	2012	Unemployed	90	NA
M	84	2012	Unemployed	90	Very good
F	54	2013	Unemployed	100	Good
F	40	2016	Unemployed	NA	Difficult to say
M	58	2016	Unemployed	100	NA

Support System

Table 10. Australian immigration and integration policy in relation to Health and Pension care

Degree feeling of	Integration Policy	Health System	Pension system
Very good	24	51	17
Good	54	43	41
Difficult to say	14	2	32
Not so good	1	3	7
Not good at all	0	1	2
NA	7	1	2
Others	0	0	1

A total of 78% respondents rated the Australian integration policy very good or good. The health system got an even better acknowledgment with 94 % whereas only 58% rated pension system to be very good or good.

Over 65% rated social service and support system for new arrivals to be good or very good. Only 8 respondents felt it was not good. These respondents highlighted the importance of social support provided by Australian Refugee Association (ARA), BAASA or Bhutanese Ethnic School. Those who rated social support as difficult to say or not good,

cited reasons such as difficulty in accessing government forms and filling them, lack of information in their language, not adequate support at Centrelink offices and not enough hours to learn English (Koirala, 2016).

Education and Languages

Family structure is one important aspect to learn language and pursue education. Let's look at the family composition of the respondents. These 100 respondents were from 79 households, 35 of them were under 30s, not married but still living with parents. Some in 40s were still unmarried. With only one exception all of the respondents were living in extended family. All of them use Nepali as their primary language for family communication.

Out of 79, 21 households had no school-aged children. While children from 55 families attend formal schools, only children from 12 families attend Nepali classes run by Bhutanese Ethnic School. Kids from one family attend language classes run by SA Government. The language classes within the formal education system had not become popular in the community during the research period.

Absence of regular Nepali education means younger population lack Nepali proficiency. This created communication barriers within the family. Only 2 grandfathers admitted communication problems, it seems that grandparents in their late 50s and 60s are already facing difficulties in communicating with their grandchildren. The language barrier is posing challenges for grandparents to pass their stories of struggle and life in Bhutan/Nepal to grandchildren. Telling stories is an important facet towards preservation of culture and history.

Community Cohesion

Living in closed community is a Bhutanese culture. Regular contact and communication are important. 69% of the respondents say they interact with community members 'very often' while other 5% said they contact often. 85% of Buddhist responded their community interaction as either very often or often while 71% of Hindus responded as very often or often. 100% Kirats responded very often and Christians did not respond.

Volunteering within the community groups forms the basis of regular community interaction. 55% of the respondents said they volunteer for community activities of Bhutanese Australian Association of South Australia (BAASA), Bhutanese Ethnic School, Punya Foundation, Association of Himalayan Buddhist of South Australia (AHIMBSA), Adelaide Dragon Soccer Club, Radio Pahichan, Bhutan Martyrs Memorial and Torture Survival Society (BHUMMATSS), Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) and Didi Group. Others volunteer in City Council or other local non-profit groups. 80% responded attending inter-cultural events because they feel volunteering in such events is important to preserve culture, continuing rituals, teach language to children and educate younger generations about history.

It was found that 15% felt being discriminated – 4% in event participation, 3% from Hindu Brahmins and the rest did not specify. In contrast, only 8% responded, they were discriminated while back in refugee camps. However, many hesitated to respond to questions related to caste-based discrimination. Among those who responded, most feel education or legal instruments are required to address the problem. A researcher told this author personally she did not find any forms of discrimination within the Bhutanese community in Adelaide. She has not addressed this issue in her research (Tine, 2017). The fact is caste-based discrimination has become stronger among the senior members of the community following resettlement. Bhanu Adhikari, who was denied Hindu rituals for speaking against discriminatory practices, has lodged Australia's first legal complaint of discrimination on the basis of caste, in the Equal Opportunity Commission of South Australia (Knox, undated). Younger respondents feel the issue would get resolved as time lapse and people learn more about equality and Australian values. Asked by the author, two Hindu priests (in Melbourne) said they were ready to conduct rituals for lower caste families if they receive assurance from community elders that they would not be discriminated following the event.

Connection with Bhutan

Bhutan has not formally allowed the resettled Bhutanese to visit the country. A few have travelled informally through southern border, with their relatives inside Bhutan. 91% of the respondents were interested in travelling to Bhutan as tourists while 5% said they were not interested. 2% mentioned they would love to return if political environment and human rights situation improved.

Conclusion

The integration of former Bhutanese refugees in Australia is gradually taking a shape. The longer they live here, the more they feel at home. The younger generation is adopting Australia as their home, quicker than their parents. Language barriers, employment challenges and culture differences are some of the areas that required attention to help them integrate better. The connection with Bhutan is gradually eroding and if Bhutan failed to open borders, it will fail to reap the economic and technical benefits these resettled Bhutan can bring to their previous country. The resettled Bhutanese are now not threat to Bhutan's political ambitions but assets to economic and technological advancement. They have already contributed huge to Australia.

Within the resettled Bhutanese community, intra-community and inter community bond is becoming stronger through public events. Discriminatory social hierarchy within the Hindu culture is one small factor hindering the intra-community bond which need immediate attention.

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Bhutanese Settlement and Community Leadership

Om Dhungel¹

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, three possible solutions are pursued to address refugee problems globally. These include repatriation of refugees to their country of origin; local integration or third-country resettlement. This article explores further the resettlement option, how it is currently approached by different resettlement countries, and opportunities for key stakeholders to work more collaboratively by adopting strength-based approaches. Role of service providers as well as communities and community leaders are explored in driving positive settlement as well as successful integration outcomes. The focus of this article is on learnings from the Bhutanese refugee settlement experiences in different settlement countries and the role community leaders can play in driving successful settlement outcomes.

Keywords: Bhutanese refugees, capacity building community, leadership, resettlement, strength-based approach,

Introduction

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1951 to help the estimated one million people displaced by World War II to return home. Seventy years later, there are 79.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. Among them are 26 million refugees over half of whom are under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2020). One percent of the world's population now have fled their homes because of conflict or persecution. This is a growth in atrocities and human suffering and is unacceptable.

¹ Based in Sydney, Dhungel is Director, Board of Asylum Seeker Centre

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention establishing UNHCR, a refugee is someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his or her nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country" (Refugee Convention, 1951). The refugees of concern to UNHCR are spread around the world with over 73% hosted in neighbouring countries. Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Myanmar currently make up the top five source countries while Turkey, Colombia, Pakistan, Uganda and Germany are the top five hosting countries (UNHCR, 2020). Refugees live in widely varying conditions, living in open and make-shift shelters particularly during initial arrival periods such as the Maidhar camp to established camps such as Beldangi refugee camps in case of Bhutanese refugee settlement journey. Cost of supporting these refugees to help them survive and restart their life is huge. UNHCR now operates in 135 countries supported by over 17,000 personnel and its budget has skyrocketed to US\$8.6 billion in 2019 from a tiny sum of US\$0.3m when it first started.

Australia is a leading international partner in sharing refugee protection responsibilities and assisting those most in humanitarian need. Along with the United States and Canada, it ranks consistently among the world's top three resettlement countries. On a per-capita basis, Australia is the UNHCR's largest resettlement country (UNHCR, undated).

Resettlement and Key Players

UNHCR is mandated by its statute and the UN General Assembly Resolutions to undertake resettlement as one of the three durable solutions. It helps resettle refugees to a third country in cases where refugees cannot go home because of continued conflict, wars and persecution or they live in perilous situations or have specific needs that cannot be addressed in the country where they have sought protection. Although a small fraction - less than one percent of refugees are resettled each year, resettlement plays an important role in addressing the broader refugee issue globally. Once resettled, people not only focus on restarting their lives in a new country and a new environment, but many

individuals also support other fellow refugees overseas while others start championing for the broader refugee issue, supporting the work of UNHCR and relevant governments.

Only a few countries take part in UNHCR's resettlement programme. This is despite the fact that the world order has shifted significantly with a large number of newly industrialised countries joining the ranks of rich developed nations since the establishment of UNHCR in 1950. In recent years, the United States has been the world's top resettlement country, with Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Nordic countries also providing a sizeable number of places annually.

Bhutanese Refugee Resettlement

"Bhutanese refugees have a problem. The world outside Nepal does not know they are there. The arrival figures in Jhapa speak of the relentless pace of Thimphu's eviction program. The refugee-run Human Rights Organisation of Bhutan (HUROB), which manages the [refugee] camps, counts arrivals. There were 234 refugees in 1991 July, and an average of 1500 Lhotshampas arrived every month since then until December 1991, when there was a sudden dip to 412 arrivals for January 1992 – coinciding with Amnesty International's visit to Bhutan. Immediately thereafter, the arrival rate shot up to an average of 10,000 a month, where it remains today. By 23 July 1992, there were 62,723 refugees registered in the six camps of Maidhar, Timai, Goldhap, Beldangi I and II, and Pathri. UNHCR estimated 65,000 in the camps- a Kathmandu-based magazine (Dorji, 1992) aptly summarises the problem of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal in 1992.

The problem continued to grow and so did the refugee population. Initially, repatriation to the home country was the only option pursued by the Bhutanese refugees as well as other stakeholders. When the governments of Bhutan and Nepal started bilateral negotiations in 1993, people welcomed the move hoping for an amicable resolution of the problem and return home at the earliest. However, despite 15 rounds of talks spanning over a decade, the fate of over 100,000 refugees was not nearer to any solution. Bhutanese refugee issue clearly warranted international involvement and required the consideration of other options including third-country resettlement. Individuals and different

organisations in exile started actively lobbying the UNHCR and the international community in pursuit of this option.

Frustrated by the lack of any progress in Bhutan-Nepal bilateral talks, a core group of countries supporting the refugee in camps announced in 2007 to collectively address this long-standing issue by resettling some of the refugees. The Core Group included Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and the United States. In late 2007, the government of United States - committed to accept about 60,000 refugees (Pagonis, 2006) and started resettling them in 2008. The government of Australia also followed the USA. The first two groups of Bhutanese arrived in Adelaide in South Australia and Launceston in Tasmania in May 2008 as part of Australian resettlement programme.

According to UNHCR, more than 101,600 individuals have been resettled in eight different countries since the start of the resettlement programme: 5,692 people in Australia, 6,667 in Canada, 874 in Denmark, 327 in the Netherlands, 1,002 in New Zealand, 566 in Norway, 358 in the United Kingdom and 86,166 in the United States (UNHCR, 2016). UNHCR continues to seek solutions for the remaining refugees in Nepal. According to UNHCR official, “this is one of the largest and most successful programmes of its kind and the resettlement of nearly 9 out of 10 Bhutanese refugees is an extraordinary achievement” (Shrestha, 2015).

Settlement Experiences

In 2016, this author - a former Bhutanese refugee, undertook a study as a Westpac Social Change Fellow² and travelled to Norway, the United States, Canada and New Zealand. The observations below are based on the discussions with relevant government departments and stakeholders including the resettled Bhutanese communities in these countries, people involved in refugee settlement, refugee settlement experts and organisations.

² The Fellowship programme offered by Westpac Bicentennial Foundation aims at creating “positive social change in Australia by investing in people who have the drive and innovative ideas to improve the social wellbeing of Australians.”

It is worth noting here that one of the objectives of the overseas study tour was to find the best practice in refugee settlement and integration. However, I found that it was about ‘valuing and nurturing the local’ rather than ‘a best practice’ that can be applied across the board. Instead, I came up with some guiding principles (Dhungel, 2017) and I believe these principles are relevant to governments, UNHCR, service providers and other organisations working on refugee settlement and related areas.

Key observations and learnings from the study are highlighted below:

Very Grateful and Committed to Rebuild Their Lives

The overarching message that I received from the resettled Bhutanese community was - we want to learn the local language and develop necessary skills, we want to work and make our living, and we want to give back to the community that has generously welcomed us. Having spent extended period in refugee camps, the resettled people were committed and keen to start a new life despite challenges. It meant learning the local language, acquiring new skills and getting a job or starting a business.

Common Interest and Care for the Whole

Every community and the leadership that I met were passionate about general well-being of the resettled community. There was this inner desire, which is a great foundation for engagement and involvement, and work collectively for the greater good of the community and the society. However, there was also a sense of tension, particularly amongst youth who were struggling to balance this collective approach with the more individualistic approach in their new countries of settlement.

Overwhelming Aspiration for Home Ownership

Having grown up in an environment where every family usually owned home; families are generally very driven and committed to buying a house which gave them a sense of security and belonging in their new homeland. The aspiration to own a home has been a major motivating factor for people to learn the local language, acquire skills and seek employment or start a business. For instance, over 65% of families

resettled in Sydney have bought homes within 5-6 years of their arrival under the humanitarian settlement programme (STARTTS, 2017).

Positive Impact of Previously Settled Community Members

Out of the five countries covered in this study, Australia, Canada and the United States already had some Bhutanese settled prior to the humanitarian settlement. The presence of Bhutanese community members in places where Bhutanese people have been resettled gave a positive impact on the success of settlement. Having settled earlier, they were able to provide guidance, advice and assist the new arrivals in settlement journey.

Successful Settlement

Successful settlement means different things to different people. However, learning local language, getting into employment and buying a house were considered important for a successful settlement. There was also a common trait in people who considered themselves successfully settled and happy such as close-knit families, operating as a unit, making well thought-out decisions based on individual and the family's collective aspiration and well-being. There were also close community connections and people were integrating well in the local community, which gave them a strong sense of belonging.

Inspiring Success Stories

It was observed that every resettlement that the author visited has produced several inspiring success stories. Some standout achievements have been noted and captured in different areas including community contribution, youth leadership, employment, and academic and professional excellence from across Pittsburgh and Atlanta in the US, Halifax and Lethbridge in Canada, Christ Church and Palmerston North, New Zealand, Stavanger in Norway and Sydney in Australia.

More Successful Compared to Others

Across the countries visited, relevant government departments, settlement service providers and other stakeholders generally consider Bhutanese refugee settlement as more successful compared to other resettled communities. The Bhutanese people are more organised and work cohesively as a community. This can be partly attributed to the

values that the community developed while living in exile - well-organised refugee camps in Nepal, where people volunteered for the community welfare, helped each other, and learnt to live in harmony.

Settlement Challenges and Adapting

Starting with acceptance - coming to terms with the reality of living in a foreign land, people faced with the initial challenges of settling in a completely new environment. There were issues like isolation among the elderly, need for positive engagement for youth, and learning a new language, developing skills necessary to get into the workforce and getting employment.

For new arrivals who come from a community-based support system, the availability of a wide range of 'services' and 'service providers' is at times overwhelming. The availability and the need to access services from outside the community has in many instances led to the erosion of family discipline since individuals feel that they can access the 'services' they require from 'market' rather than from relatives. They neglect on building relationships, listening to elders of the family and community.

It has been observed that the shift from collectivism to individualism and the erosion of community and social capital is negatively impacting the quality of life for many.

Change in Family Dynamics

Traditionally, parents to a large extent controlled the family matters and maintained a level of discipline in the Bhutanese community. The family was an important structure with individuals adding to the collective – it was an inside out approach. Children would be guided by parents and they would take permission from parents for any major decisions. This was no more the case in many families when children, particularly upon reaching the official 'adult' age made decisions with little or no regard to the views of their parents.

There were, in many instances, total collapse of family discipline with children coming home and going out at their will; mothers cooking regular meals and waiting for children only to be told that they have already eaten outside and resulting in disheartened mothers and food

wastage. The situation was awfully hard to bear for many parents and were struggling to cope with since many of them had sacrificed everything to provide the best they could afford for their children.

Socio-economic Status Realignment

When people settled in new places, their individual and family circumstances changed significantly. Socio-economic status in Bhutan and in the developing countries are quite entrenched and normally take a long time to change. However, it is not the same after resettlement. People who started working early or families that had more working members progressed quickly and enhanced their economic as well as social status irrespective of their status back home or in the refugee camps. It was particularly interesting and encouraging to note that people were able to overcome the entrenched caste-based socio-economic discrimination and disparities of the past. Similar to the neighbouring countries, Lhotshampas practiced caste-based social hierarchy. This meant that some of the lower caste were not only treated as untouchables, but they also remained poor due to the traditional trades they confined themselves to which had limited opportunities for growth and prosperity.

Community Organisations and Structures

Every resettled Bhutanese community had formed one or more organisation(s) aimed at supporting the community in some way or other. Community initiatives have been based on the skills and strengths available within the respective community members. Each community was resettling in its own unique way and knowledge was being developed through their local interactions. Given the success stories emerging from every settlement that the author visited, it was clear that community work and community development generally cannot be practiced from a prescriptive framework. It rather requires finding what works in a community, nurturing it and doing more of it

However, community organisations were facing challenges with operating and managing themselves when differences arose within them, resulting in emergence of additional organisations. Community organisations were generally set up in the traditional top-down,

hierarchical approach practiced back home or in the refugee camps and didn't suit the purpose and clearly needed a rethink.

Driving Positive Settlement Outcomes

Community leaders could play an important role in the successful settlement and integration. Based on the extensive interaction and discussion with key stakeholders involved in the settlement process in different countries (Dhungel, 2017), the following areas have been identified as important for community leaders to act on:

Building Trust and Adapting to Democratic Culture

Prior to resettlement, people were often exposed to or had dealt with political parties, human rights and other social organisations in refugee camps. Due to the difficult circumstances and the environment that people lived in, it sometimes leads to the erosion of trust and people become sceptical about belonging or associating with any community organisation in general. As such, community building in resettled countries needs to start with rebuilding trust and developing relationships.

People fleeing from persecution generally do not come from a democratic culture; they are more used to a top down, command and control structure. This approach will neither be conducive nor effective in a community development setting. Building a community requires a different mindset. It requires a more collaborative and consultative approach; engaging people, identifying leadership at different levels and nurturing them to drive different aspects of community development.

Based on the settlement experiences in different countries, successful settlement and community development are about creating champions in the community and nurturing collective leadership. Leadership requires a democratic mindset and leading by example and not just giving instructions. Respect for expertise and experience and dealing appropriately with people who can add value to the organisation and the community in general is vital for the long-term sustainable development of a community.

Organisational Structures

After settling in a new country and a new environment, it requires a major shift in thinking and the way people approach settlement, community organisation and associated structure that are intended to serve the community. It is important that community members are involved in identifying the need and the benefit of having an organisation to provide a common platform for the community. It should be complementary to what already exists and consider the broader environment including the existence of social support and a wide range of service providers supported by the government and other funding bodies.

Operationally, the traditional top-down, hierarchical approach doesn't suit community development. As Carsten Tams notes, social influence is most effective when it comes from all directions (Tams, 2018). A bottom-up 'building-block' approach supports a sustainable model through an ongoing process of adding on to what has been built thus far. So even when a new team is elected to lead the organisation, it continues to draw on the expertise of the past committee members and other volunteers in the community and in particular, senior members who form the pivot for the community.

Newly emerging community organisations may start the process of forming, or reviewing their organisations by asking the following questions:

- What sort of future we want as individuals and as a community?
- How can we be proactive and start by utilising the resources – strengths and assets that we have within the community?
- How can we build our internal capacity?
- How can we quickly move away from the social security support that the government provides which can in turn be diverted to more needy in the host community?
- Having embraced a new country in a new environment, how can we be engaged, integrated and be active citizens so that we can start contributing back to the wider society?

Capacity Building

Building and enhancing internal capacity is key to successful settlement and sustainable development of a community. Relying only on external help means the system will collapse once the external input ceases. Developing and implementing projects by utilising the assets within the community allow people to build and hone their skills. At the same time, it provides volunteering opportunity, people develop confidence and leadership skills, gain valuable experience and much needed referee/references that the community organisation can provide for an individual to move into employment. There is a huge potential for community driven initiatives to be strengthened and enhanced by increasing the level of people's engagement as well as working collaboratively with service providers to fill any gaps, mainly aimed at community capacity building and empowerment within the resettled Bhutanese communities and more generally in any refugee settlement situations.

Community Leadership

In a community setting, it should be recognised that everyone in the community has talents and community members are kept at the centre of community building. Once basic needs are met, it is about what people have and not just what they need. Leaders play the role in building relationships and involving others and their role shifts from 'telling' people what to do to 'asking' people what their passions and aspirations are enable them to utilise their full potential and prosper.

In addition to the general leadership characteristics of honesty and integrity, courage, ability to care about others, communication and a sense of humour, a successful community leader requires the ability to:

- Adapt to democratic culture and collective decision making
- Work with and bring on-board key influencers within the community
- Build rapport, connect with and work across generations
- Put community interest first above personal including individual and family interest in dealing with community matters, and
- Commit to continuous learning.

Intercultural Matters

Newly emerging communities have an important role to play in building relationships and engagement with the wider community. By being proactive and working closely with local service providers and other stakeholders will help avoid ‘institutionalisation’ of issues. This includes community intervention before a ‘child at risk’ is removed from a family or an ‘irritant child’ in school is referred to a youth service provider. There have been instances where children have been removed from families with the intent of ‘protecting’ the child, however, it has caused immense psychological and social impact on the families concerned and added financial burden for the government.

Integration

Community leadership is particularly important in strategically creating a balance between what it does internally within the community promoting its tradition and culture and what it can learn from the wider community through active engagement with other communities. While it is important to maintain one’s tradition and culture intact, it is more important to learn about the people and the country and adapt to the new environment. It is about making the best of both worlds – retaining the best of what you bring in and learning the best practices from other communities.

Conclusion

At a macro level, the outcome of successful refugee settlement and community development is a widely shared vision for the future of the community, a community that has an enhanced level of citizen engagement and participation. It is also about strengthened individuals and an expanded leadership base, better use of resources from within the community and the commitment to continuous learning and willingness to adapt.

Refugee settlement and integration and broader community development is an ongoing process. It needs adapting to the changing external and internal factors as well as ongoing reinvestment of time and effort in the community, driving motivation and the fostering of new and diverse transformational leaders.

From a global refugee settlement perspective, over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees from the UNHCR camps in Nepal have been resettled in seven developed countries since the programme first began in 2008. The success of the Bhutanese refugee settlement in different countries as well as the refugee camps in Nepal being noted as one of the best run camps prior to the resettlement is a clear demonstration of the value of driving a paradigm shift in refugee settlement from a *Need-Based Approach* to a *Strength-Based Approach* - whether be in refugee camps or resettled countries, the focus is not just on people's needs but on the inherent strengths and assets that people have. This is the first such refugee resettlement programme of this scale UNHCR implemented with the support of several governments, the Core Group in this case. The resettlement programme warrants a close look at different aspects that contributed to this success including the way the refugee camps were managed, education and other activities in the camps, the role of refugee leadership and other relevant factors.

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

Dr Susan Banki¹

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: Bhutanese refugees, history, memory, memorialization, persecution, reconciliation, culture

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 “Bhotagay Mandir”, the BRCC was founded, funded, and built by Dr. DNS Dhakal, the Acting President of the Bhutan National Democratic Party (BNDP). As a scholar of forced migration,

¹ Dr. Susan Banki is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Sydney. She conducts research on human rights, refugees, and transnational activism.

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.²

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 Bhutanese Nepalis, even as they lived in crowded refugee camps? Or is

² 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.

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 memorials³ that have the Hebrew equivalent inscribed on stones. Or

³ 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.⁴

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

⁴ 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.

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Democracy and Political Prisoners in Bhutan

Ram Karki¹

ABSTRACT

The uprising of 1990 in Bhutan was a wakeup call for Bhutanese monarchy to reform. The response remains the blackest period in the country's history. Women were raped, political leaders, students, human right activists and other common people were tortured, jailed. Many died, no one has the definite data. Ethnic cleansing took place resulting in the eviction of more than one-sixth of the country's population. Largest per capita refugees were produced. Movement for dignified repatriation has failed miserably but the resettlement of those Bhutanese refugees in developed countries was declared a great success.

The King announced in 2005 that the country will have a 'democratic' government. He handed over his authority to his son to govern. The King and the country received massive appreciation for initiating democracy. By nature, the democracy should primarily benefit those who demanded it. Instead, Bhutan is the only democracy in the world where pro-democracy activists are still serving jail sentences. International community remain mute spectator to the sugar-coated Bhutanese democracy. Bhutan fooled them by taking advantage of their interest on geopolitics.

This paper shall look at the story of dissidents behind the bars, their families and response from the international community – including governments, human rights groups and the United Nations. Additionally, the major highlights of this paper will be to examine the implementation of fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution of Bhutan and to see if such fundamental rights as enshrined in the constitution are real or a toothless instrument.

¹ Karki is Hague based human rights activist.

Keywords: political prisoners, democracy, human rights, politics, justice,

Introduction

Bhutan was declared a ‘democracy’ following the election in 2008. The political and bureaucratic elites reward the king for initiating the democratic change, though in fact it was the result of decades long peaceful struggle of the Bhutanese people – primarily from southern Bhutan. Historically, call for democracy in Bhutan began as early as 1950s – the days of political activism by members and supporters of Bhutan State Congress (BSC). The renewed call in 1990 received international attention to some extent. The intention of the Bhutanese government to crush it like in 1950s failed. However, hundreds of pro-democratic activists were arrested and were declared as anti-national or terrorist by the regime resulting in sentencing them for life. As per UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which first visited Bhutan in 1994, more than 300 activists were arrested. In its report later it confirmed that out of them 19 were granted amnesty by the king during national day occasions. The activists have no authentic records but it’s very liable that numbers are high. This figure given by the UN Group does not include custodial deaths and non-custodial deaths.

Many of those arrested since 1990 are still languishing in prisons serving life sentences. Today after more than a decade of being declared a ‘democracy’ with a written constitution, Bhutan failed to recognise those fighters who alerted the Bhutanese society of the need for a democratic government and guarantee of human rights.

Political prisoners and democracy cannot co-exist consistently. What defines a political prisoner? There is no universally accepted definition for political prisoners. Political prisoner is “someone who is put in prison for expressing disapproval of their own government, or for belonging to an organisation, race, or social group not approved of by that government” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020) or ‘a political prisoner is generally defined as a person who is imprisoned for his or her political activities, particularly those who oppose or criticize the government of their countries (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2003 January 23).

Bhutan's freedom fighters currently in jails are within the periphery of these definitions.

Uprising, Eviction and Camps

Bhutan is known as the land of Gross National Happiness (Julie, 2018). Until 2008, the country had no written constitution but was ruled at the whims of the King. The laws were implemented arbitrarily as per the conveniences of the ruling elites, who occupy the kangaroo courts and brutal security agencies. King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, who ascended the throne at the age of 18 years in 1974 (Weinraub, B. 1974) introduced some of the draconian arbitrary laws in the name of TSA WA SUM (AHURA, 1993) during late 1980s. With the aims of discriminating and subjugating the southern population (AFP, 2018) King Jigme introduced One Nation One People (CEMARD-Bhutan, 1994) policy that required everyone to strictly follow ancient Tibetan code of conduct Driglam Namzha (Amnesty International, 1994) which resulted in mass peaceful uprising all over southern Bhutan. Several discriminatory laws and policies like citizenship laws, green belt policy, dress code etc. (Human Rights Watch, 2007) compelled Lhotshampa people to protest in September 1990. Hundreds of peaceful protesters were arrested, and many killed (Minority at Risk Project, 2004) and more than hundred thousand were forcefully evicted (Rose, 1993), regularly cited as a strong case of systemic ethnic cleaning (Frelick, 2008) by the King Jigme Singye Wangchuk.

Bhutanese citizens of Nepali origin after being ethnically cleansed were further chased by the Indian Government, which as per the Article 2 of Indo-Bhutan Friendship Treaty cannot allow anybody to use its soil to wage a democratic movement in Bhutan (MEA India, 2007). Bhutanese citizens were expelled and dumped in Nepal by the Indian authorities. Nepal had no capacity to accommodate the refugee influx and had to request UN involvement. Bhutanese refugee camps were established in Nepal during early 1991 (Karki, 2018).

Between 1989 and 2009 Bhutanese human rights and political activists organised several peaceful rallies demanding establishing democracy and human rights in Bhutan and repatriation of evicted citizens with

honour and dignity. Unfortunately, all attempts failed to democratise Bhutan at that time. The activists also failed to provide justice to the fellow countrymen who were serving life sentences in prisons on charges of treason and terrorism.

Under tremendous pressure from both internal and external forces, Bhutan held its first general election on March 24, 2008 and a written constitution was adopted on July 18, 2008 by the first elected parliament (AP, 2008). Article 7 of the Constitution of Bhutan guarantees fundamental rights to all the citizens. Article 7.2 says all Bhutanese citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech, opinion and expression and while 7.4 says 'A Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.'

The reality on the ground is completely different and there are no groups or individuals who dare to raise questions why it is not. The situation is more miserable among the Nepali speaking population in southern Bhutan.

Bhutan had released some of the high-profile individuals who were declared prisoners of conscience by the Amnesty International (Amnesty International, 1992). Amnesty reported more than 50 political prisoners in 1995 who remained in detention without any charge or judicial trial in a court (Amnesty International, 1995). BW records show there are 42 political prisoners currently in jail who were arrested between 1990 and 2010. Oldest of them Ganga Ram Dhakal, son of Late Mukti Nath Dhakal from Bahunitar, Umling, was arrested on November 16, 1992. Rai and Dhakal currently serving life sentences in Chemgang jail. Dhakal's family are resettled in Canada. Nar Bahadur Monger from Nimtola, Dorona and Bhakta Bahadur Rai from Juprey, Bhur are serving life sentences since May 11, 1993 and September 23, 1993 at Chemgang Central Prison, respectively.

Prisoners of the Later Days

Dechen Wangmo is serving 15 years of jail term. She was arrested on 19 October 2009 from her residence in Phuentsholing by the officers of the Royal Bhutan Police in pursuant the orders of the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan. As per a UN report

Wangmo was arrested without any warrants and was prohibited from discussing political issues (HRC, 2011). Denying her to express her political view, against the backdrop of newly installed constitution, is a gross violation of the spirit of the constitution that has guaranteed right to freedom of speech, opinion and expression. UN report further reads ‘Wangmo’s arrest and detention are a direct consequence of her exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and expression in purported violation of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.’ As of December 24, 2020, she is kept in an open-air prison in Paro.

BW investigations show the latest victim of political vendetta was Bhim Bahadur Rai, son of Late Hasta Bahadur Rai of Dhanasey², Beteni³ who was arrested on May 5, 2010 and is serving a life sentence at Chemgang Central Prison. Birkha Bahadur Chhetri and Kumar Gautam both of whose families are resettled in Australia and Canada, respectively, are serving life sentences at the same prison since their arrest on February 26, 2008. They are the youngest Bhutanese serving as the political prisoner in Chemgang prison. These are a few representative names of the several political prisoners whose families have come into contact with BW.

All the political prisoners housed in Chemgang prison were being provided with an International Identification Number by International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) which identified them from rest of the prisoners.

As I write this piece on political prisoners Yongba Drukpa from Samdrup Jongkhar was released after he completed his 14 years of prison sentences on December 21, 2020. Jongba was arrested for his close association with exile political activists from eastern Bhutan on August 5, 2007. He is a Sharchop.

Campaign for Their Release

Human rights activists and family members of the political prisoners launched global campaign for the release of these political prisoners in

² Dhanasey was renamed Jakhori in late 1990s

³ Beteni was renamed Patshaling in late 1990s

2019. Their campaign extends to countries where former Bhutanese refugees have resettled.

The campaign begun with a formal request to the King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk. The request on behalf of the families and friends of the political prisoners outlined the need for their release citing reasons for immediate reunion with families. The parents appealed for mercy on their children saying they are too old to wait any longer. Children of those prisoners have grown up to adults and are unlikely to recognise their parents if separation continued further. A physical appeal sent to the King was received by palace secretariat on October 14, 2019. No response was received. The campaign sought support from human rights groups and UN agencies as well.

The appeal was read out live to Facebook streaming from the grounds of International Court of Justice in Hague on February 19, 2020.

An appeal was made to the King of The Netherlands to use his good office to influence in Thimphu for release of political prisoners. Directorate of the King Willem Alexander of The Netherlands responded on November 26 to say that it has received the appeal and forwarded to his Ministry of Foreign Affairs for consideration.

Signature Campaign

To broaden the campaign and engage larger Bhutanese Diaspora and our supporters, signature collection campaign was launched on November 24. Beyond that the signature collection initiative also drew attention of the existing situation of political prisoners in Bhutan. The objective was to collect signatures and message from community members, families of the prisoners and wider supporters of the Bhutanese human rights movements and deliver them to stakeholders.

The signatures and messages of 453 individuals from 15 countries were delivered to the King of Bhutan and numbers of other human rights organisations on December 10, coinciding with the International Human Rights Day. King's secretariat acknowledged the receipt of the document on December 14. The petition along with the signatures were also sent to human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights

Watch along with European Union, UN Human Rights Council, among others.

The petition was also sent to government in the host countries at the initiation of I P Adhikari in Adelaide (Australia), Gopal Gurung & Aiman Samal in The Netherlands, CM Nirola, Hari Subedi, Suraj Budhathoki, Rom Bista & Lila Mishra in United States, Durga Giri and Prem Giri in UK, Purna Dahal in Denmark, Prakash Gautam in Canada, Prahlad Dahal in Cairns (Australia), Devendra Gautam and Suman Chhetri in Sydney (Australia) and Sudharsan Adhikari, Deven Sapkota and Netra Prasad Sharma in New Zealand.

In Hague, a delegation of Bhutanese Community in The Netherlands (BCN) submitted the petition to Pia Dijkstra, Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs and explained the parliamentary committee members about the story behind the political prisoners. The delegation requested if parliamentary channel can be used to release Bhutanese political prisoners.

Australian Parliamentary Hearing

On May 13, 2020 Adhikari briefed Human Rights Sub-Committee of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade of the Australian Federal Parliament about the plight of Bhutanese political prisoners and urged them to press Bhutan for their early release. “We are very concerned about the status and treatment of the political prisoners. We are very confident that treatment in jails have deteriorated since the Bhutanese government stopped allowing visits of the International Red Cross representatives in 2012,” Adhikari told parliamentarians (BNN, 2020).

Engaging UNHRC

Case of Bhutanese political prisoners was presented to the h UN Human Rights Council on June 5, 2020. During the presentation, presided by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, UN commissioner was urged for her urgent action to press Bhutan for the release of all the political prisoners at the earliest possible. The High Commissioner said that she was fully aware of the situation of Lhotshampas community in Bhutan and their story of eviction in 1990,

camps in Nepal and post resettlement. She assured to raise the issue with the government of Bhutan during the forthcoming UPR session. The issue was again raised at a UNHRC's Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council on July 15, 2020 where 35 human rights activists and researchers from around the world attended.

Families of Bhutanese Political Prisoners

Families of 20 of the 42 political prisoners, have either resettled in various western countries or are currently living in the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal. The parents have grown too old or have died. Some of these parents have personally appealed for release of the political prisoners through videos

Ran Maya Gautam is an elderly mother of Kumar Gautam who is serving life sentence in Chemgang prison. In her open letter from Canada, she expressed her deep pain and anguish for not having seen her son Kumar for so long and appealed all the peace-loving people of the world to help release her son and all the political prisoners in Bhutan.

'Bhutan has now democracy and would like to appeal Bhutanese king now, through this letter, to release all those political prisoners as these prisoners were uneducated, innocents and incapable in shouldering the allegations they are alleged of. Those living to see their son, their husbands or parents, such as me, would be very thankful to your majesty, if you consider,' her letter reads.

Conclusion

Bhutan was forced to accept democracy following frequent calls. The political prisoners are living proof of that. It is yet to be counted the number of deaths and disappearance at the hands of government forces during the tumultuous years in 1990s. 'Democracy' in Bhutan was not by a grace of the King. By nature, hereditary monarch never relinquish power. Attempt in Bhutan was for a short-term popularity.

If Bhutan's constitution really guarantees political freedom and human rights and if Bhutanese authorities are ready for a practical example, there are absolutely no reasons to continue to keep these political prisoners in jail. Their incarceration would weaken Bhutanese

democracy and tease the fundamentals of political pluralism. It's against history, against political principles and ethnics of humanity that those demanding democracy are treated as criminals when country claims to be democratic.

Fighters of the democratic movement must get a recognition and appreciation when system change, not jail sentences. Bhutan should release these political prisoners and recognise for their contribution and sacrifices with highest honours. This will further strengthen Bhutan's credential in the international stage.

Bhutanese political prisoners deserve the freedom they fought for and enjoy a free society they envisioned.

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Refugees Longing for Repatriation Anticipate Permanent Persuaders

Tara Lal Shrestha* & Bidhya Shrestha†

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

* Tara Lal Shrestha is a PhD in Subaltern Studies in Native Literary Contexts and Assistant Professor of Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University

† Bidhya Shrestha is a PhD fellow and Assistant Professor of Central Department of Population Studies, Tribhuvan University.

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; Bhattacharai, 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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Bhutanese Refugees: Past, Present and Future

Professor Dr. Michael Hutt, who was until recently Professor of Nepali and Himalayan Studies, at School of Oriental and Africa Studies (SOAS), University of London, is a renowned scholar on Bhutan studies. He has visited Bhutan, the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal, and Bhutanese resettled in developed countries. He has closely studied the refugee saga from the beginning till date. He has authored books and articles in peer reviewed journals on Bhutanese issues. I P Adhikari and Dr. Govinda Rizal of Bhutan Watch Team approached Dr. Hutt for a conversation on past, present and future of the former and current Bhutanese refugees.

When Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) was evicting its people, you had visited Bhutan and later the evicted people in exile and published your findings. What's your relationship with RGOB then and now?

I have visited Bhutan only once, in 1992, spending two weeks in the country. On that occasion I was a guest of the RGoB, who were interested in the conference on Bhutan I was organising in London the following year. I met the king and the foreign and home ministers and travelled as far as Bumthang and Chirang (Tsirang).

While I was conducting the research for my book *Unbecoming Citizens*, I wrote to Lyonpo Jigmi Thinley twice to ask for permission to visit Bhutan again. On the first occasion I received a polite refusal: I was informed that negotiations between the governments of Bhutan and Nepal were at a highly sensitive stage, and that this would not be a 'conducive background' for my 'scholastic undertaking.' On the second occasion I received no reply. Of course, the fact that I was not able to conduct research inside Bhutan while writing this book made it easier for critics of my work to dismiss it as a one-sided account. I have been reliably informed that *Unbecoming Citizens* was banned in Bhutan, and I have not tried to visit Bhutan again since it was published in 2003.

The dreams and struggle of the refugees for repatriation to Bhutan failed. Where did the refugees fail in their struggle?

That is a huge question, to which there is no single answer. I think many factors were at play, but I would point to four in particular. First, in

terms of getting international opinion on their side, the refugees were up against the wider world's perception of Bhutan as a Shangrila governed by an enlightened monarch. Second, there was the refusal of India to become involved in resolving the issue. Third, there was a problem of political disunity among the refugees. Fourth, there was a lot of political instability in Nepal – as a result of this, the membership of the Nepal government's negotiation team was constantly changing, and it was persistently out-manouvered by the Bhutanese side.

The RGoB has declared a democratic system in Bhutan. How democratic is the new system?

It is more democratic than the system that preceded it, but it is still quite constrained. I wrote a piece about the 2008 changes for the *New Statesman*¹ which is still online, and I was also interviewed by NPR radio² around the same time.

My main point was that this was a limited democracy because it allowed for only two political parties and because candidates would all be members of the small, educated elite. I have not followed political developments in Bhutan very closely in recent years, but I believe that the democratic space is slowly widening there: there is greater media freedom, for example, and greater accountability.

What is the contribution of the 1990 dissident movement to establishment of democracy, If at all?

I think there is a relationship between the new policies on citizenship and culture introduced by the RGoB in the late 1980s, the opposition which arose to those policies in the south, the flight and expulsion of the refugees, and the limited democratisation of the Bhutanese polity from 2008 onward. However, I don't think this is a simple causal relationship. Obviously, the king and his advisers feared that democratic change would unleash forces that would undermine the dominance of the

¹ <https://www.newstatesman.com/asia/2008/01/bhutan-party-elections>

² <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89025347&t=1600855957469>

Drukpa elite. So my view is that the RGoB would not have democratised, even to the limited extent that it has, if the demographic balance had not been changed first. But did the RGoB have a plan from the outset, or was it simply reacting to changing circumstances? I do not know.

How has the demographic balance changed after the eviction of a section of the citizens? Has the eviction turned the demographic balance favoured the ruling groups (Ngalongs) or has it benefited some other groups?

Obviously, the departure of a large portion of the southern population has tipped the balance in favour of the other Bhutanese groups, but I do not have access to any data that would enable this to be quantified.

Was the eviction an ethnic cleansing, political violence, religious divide or failed democratic movement?

I dislike the term ‘ethnic cleansing’ and in any case it is not applicable here, because not all of Bhutan’s Nepali population were displaced. The process did involve political violence on both sides, it had some aspects of religious division (religion being a key element of ethnicity), and I’m sure that many of those affected had democratic aspirations.

There is one issue that has always intrigued me, but has never been properly investigated, because data on the composition of Bhutan’s Nepali population in terms of castes and ethnicities are not available. We do not know for sure, for instance, what proportion were Bahun, what proportion were Gurung, what proportion were Bishwakarma, etc. If we did, it would be very interesting to compare this with the population of the refugee camps in Nepal. For instance, did Bahuns form the same proportion of the camp population as they did of the pre-eviction population of Bhutan, or were they overrepresented in the camps? If they were overrepresented, why would this be, and what light would it shed on the political objectives of the eviction process?

You had met the former King Jigme Singye Wangchuk. What’s your observation of his take on Bhutan’s problems, democracy, multiculturalism and pluralism?

I published an account of my audience with King Jigme Singye in the September/October issue of Himal magazine in 1992. Here is a quick summary:

King Jigme talked about the 'southern problem' very deliberately and said that on numerous occasions he had stood alone against the mass of the National Assembly: in granting amnesties to prisoners, for example, and in ordering the army not to fire on demonstrators in the south. He was able to reel off statistics for the number of civilians he said had been killed, the number of bridges he said the 'terrorists' had destroyed, the number of police he said had been killed and injured, and so forth. He said that he knew that after he had pleaded with a particular group of southerners to stay in Bhutan after they had 'applied to emigrate' they had left the country none the less, and told me that the government procrastinated over such applications in the hope that the intending 'emigrants' would change their minds. He said the 'southern problem' was the single most crucial issue for Bhutan at that time. He described it as a question of national survival and said the country had united behind him when he had pledged to abdicate if he did not find a solution. He denied that he was autocratic in any way and emphasised that he was willing to do anything that was necessary to preserve Bhutan's sovereignty. He said that a system that depended upon one person was dangerous, and that democracy would come: 'they may be surprised by the extent of the changes we are prepared to make in years to come'. He pointed out that there had been operations to evict Nepalis from Northeast India in the past, and that if Bhutan evicted Nepalis as refugees into India, India would not accept them. He argued that the 'emigrants' were telling the Indians that they were emigrants to Nepal, that the Indians were therefore letting them across, and that once they reached Nepal, they were declaring themselves refugees.

He admitted that the Dress Code ruling had caused corruption at first, with police officers fining people on the streets and then pocketing the money. He talked at length about the need for Bhutan to maintain a distinct cultural identity and emphasised that the dress law applied only in the dzongs, courts and at official ceremonies and the like. King Jigme then insisted that I should visit southern Bhutan. As I knew Nepali, he said, I could leave my minders behind and go anywhere and speak to

anyone I liked. He assured me that what Bhutan needed was criticism and advice, not praise.

The RGoB had clearly identified me as a foreign academic whose support could be of use to them. I think they were disappointed when I decided to talk to refugees and dissidents in Nepal as well and tried to take a more balanced approach.

Where do you see the confluence of the evicted people and the RGoB in future? How should the two parties prepare for such a time?

Will there be any such confluence in future? I am not sure the RGoB will ever be particularly interested in talking to the ‘evicted people’, because it has effectively disowned them as citizens. And I don’t see anything that would oblige it to participate in such a conversation. However, who knows what the future holds? Maybe, as Ram Karki suggests in your previous issue, there might be some economic benefits for Bhutan in engaging positively with this large global diaspora. I guess one issue that arises in the meantime is the question of how people will keep a sense of their Bhutanese identity alive in their countries of resettlement and pass it on to the next generation. We held a workshop on the Bhutanese refugee experience at SOAS in 2014, and the papers were published in the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*³, which interested readers can access online.

You mentioned (in Unbecoming Citizens) that repatriation of Bhutanese refugees to the land they were forced to leave would not resolve the problem in entirety. What's the real solution? Do you believe resettlement has resolved the problem?

Resettlement has given people a chance to move on with their lives after too many years in limbo and build a future for their children. But of course, it does not resolve the problem that first led to their expulsion and flight, and I understand that the Nepali Bhutanese who remain in Bhutan still face many challenges.

³ <http://www.digitalhimalaya.com/collections/journals/ebhr/index.php?selection=43>

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