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# IN THIS ISSUE

## Editorial

This issue of the Bhutan Journal has focused partly on language—the most specifically the changing needs and status of the language of the Bhutanese diaspora. When the Royal Government of Bhutan wanted to reduce its potential political opposition, one of the major criteria in its target list was Nepali language and its users. The evicted people- who were mostly of Nepalese descent- reached Nepal where they reinvigorated their skills in Nepali language and literature that had almost extinguished in Bhutan. During their migration for resettlement, for many literate people, Nepali language or literature was the only possession they carried with them.

## Identity, Culture, and National Interest: A Pragmatic Application of Constructivist Theory to the Lhotshampa Expulsion

*James Pleace*

The Bhutanese state has constructed their identity, domestically and internationally, against the Lhotshampa people, a broadly Hindu Bhutanese-Nepali people, who feature as the '*Other*' in the process of identity construction. This group of marginalised people has been expelled from Bhutan through ethnic cleansing. The monarchy and ruling elite see the Lhotshampa as a threat to their power and have imposed policies designed to homogenise Bhutan. We explore this Bhutanese construction of identity.

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Interpretation of poetry is generally based on qualitative analysis of semantics, figurative language and expression, and knowledge about the author and literary elements. Recent advancements in computer-based text processing allow us to analyse a large amount of text quantitatively. This paper presents two useful aspects of literary analysis. Firstly, it interprets the social, cultural, and contemporary aspects of Bhutanese people's lives after resettlement represented through poetry. Secondly, it presents NLP as a methodological technique in analysing literary texts written in the Nepali language.

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# Secular Aesthetics in Bhutanese-Nepali Poems

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This research attempts to explore secular aesthetics reflected in *Punarwaspachhika Bhutani Nepali Kavita*, an anthology of Nepali poems representing post-resettlement Bhutanese-Nepali literature published by Nepal Academy in 2022. Finding secular aesthetics in Bhutanese-Nepali literature is very rare. This qualitative research primarily explores secular aesthetics in the post-resettlement Bhutanese Nepali representative poems. The anthology has been assessed from the notion of hegemony and counter-hegemony and analysed their historicity.

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## Bhutan's Employment Conundrum: Challenges and Opportunities

*I P Adhikari*

The increasing unemployment, absence of government action in job creation, small market and lack of entrepreneurial opportunities are causing trouble to the Bhutanese population, especially youths, in recent years. The young and educated population is looking for greener pastures overseas and economy is surprisingly becoming remittance reliant. There are multiple factors within the country that needs government attention in order to improve the employment rate for university graduates. The country has such a small private sector that it hardly can create any new workplaces. The biggest employer is the public sector – that too is shrinking in recent years – in response to costs cutting measures. This study will focus on the historical structure of Bhutanese job market, current trends and future prospects and what it means for the Bhutanese economy in general.

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## Keeping Activism Alive: Bishwanath

Bishwanath Chhetri (BNC) has been a leader of Bhutanese people since the conception of the Student Union of Bhutan (SUB) in 1988. He continued his activism in exile and the United States of America after the refugees were resettled in global north countries. He is actively involved in activities for preserving Bhutanese identity and history. He has inspired a generation of people with his words and actions.

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# Editorial

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Once resettled - they were scattered and the language they had carried with them was of little value to them. Only use of the language was to those people who translated or interpreted for them for a fee.

There are sporadic attempts to teach Nepali language to younger generations in the resettled countries without a unanimous rationale or much success. About a score of people from among the tens of thousands of youths and seniors who carried linguistic skills with them were able to publish books either in Nepali or English language.

Learning Nepali language in the resettled country is valued as a ticket to membership of a Bhutanese-Nepali community and provides a sense of belonging.

The seniors carry a longing, middle-aged strive for its conservation and the younger generation is yet to discover its value. Nepali is a *lingua franca* of the Bhutanese diaspora but there are more than fifty groups and ethnicities within the Bhutanese diaspora who have different first languages. They never had an opportunity to formally learn their first language-neither in Bhutan nor in the refugee camps. Learning their first languages in the resettled countries is a herculean task. At this juncture, when people are in a dilemma of conserving or laying down the language they carried till date, the Nepali language enthusiasts have taken time to revisit the history of the Nepali language in Bhutan, refugee camps and in the resettled countries and contributed articles to this issue.

Language, a marker of civilisation gives identity to its speakers. The question arises 'what will happen if the Bhutanese-Nepali diaspora shakes-off the Nepali language?' The questions will hunt not just the current generation but will have immense impact on how our future generation will identify themselves.

The common notion is that their stories must not end with the present generation. There are no written histories of the people about the terms and conditions of their migration. We have a rich history to write and cherish. The stories must pass on to the many generations. This requires collective and augmented determination. Any attempt to revisit the past is best done with the contemporary language. That is where our first languages have a value.

This volume primarily divulges in captivating the status of language and the linguists – current status of their attempts in sustaining our languages and histories.

We recognise the difficulties faced by the linguists, their efforts towards keeping their languages alive. We appreciate and motivate all individuals and organised efforts for this noble cause.

We encourage for sustained determinations. The onus of keeping it flourishing lie not just on the linguists but every one of us who share the glorious past. Every contribution will be valuable in the history.

Besides language, there are stories of youth unemployment and its challenges for Bhutan, and Lhotsampa expulsion analysed through constructivists theory are also included in this edition of the journal.

Enjoy reading them.

# Identity, Culture, and National Interest: A Pragmatic Application of Constructivist Theory to the Lhotshampa Expulsion

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## ABSTRACT

The Bhutanese state has constructed their identity, domestically and internationally, against the Lhotshampa people, a broadly Hindu Bhutanese-Nepali people, who feature as the '*Other*' in the process of identity construction. This group of marginalised people has been expelled from Bhutan through ethnic cleansing. The monarchy and ruling elite see the Lhotshampa as a threat to their power and have imposed policies designed to homogenise Bhutan. We explore this Bhutanese construction of identity. Through the case studies of Bhutanese-Nepalese and Bhutanese-Lhotshampa relations, we review the literature on both 'critical' and 'conventional' constructivism with focus on identity in the domestic and international spheres. The primary question of investigation is to what extent theorists can reconcile critical and conventional constructivism through the case study of Bhutanese national identity and the type of insights that gives us into the nation of Bhutan and its identity. We attempt to reconcile two complementary but ontologically differing theories through a pragmatic approach. Constructivist theorists in the realm of identity are deployed to explain how the Bhutanese government has acted. We find that through Bhutan, a pragmatic approach can be taken to partially reconcile the constructivisms to understand identity domestically and internationally. The findings suggest identity is central to Bhutan exercising its sovereignty, to the detriment of the Lhotshampa. The government claims

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homogeneity at home, providing a domestic base of control to pursue international interests; interests which reinforce that identity of homogeneity.

**Keywords**: Bhutan, constructivism, identity, international relations, Lhotshampa.

## Introduction

The ethnic cleansing of the Lhotshampa people in the 1980s and the 1990s started primarily with the Bhutan Citizenship Act of 1985 and the census undertaken in 1988 by the state which both helped to deprive many Lhotshampa people of citizenship. The King recognising that Bhutan only had "its culture and identity" pursued policies such as that of "One Nation, One People" (One Nation), which included ending the teaching of the Nepali language in schools and enforced adherence to Bhutanese social customs (Hutt, 2011 & Theys, 2016). These policies resulted in over 100,000 refugees, with some remaining in Nepal, being taken in by third countries (Rizal, 2004). On the surface, Bhutan actively weakened state, however, the country created and reinforced an identity in the name of national interest.

Through examining identity, constructivism can give key insights into aspects governing state actions including the events prior (Cho, 2012). Identity, after all, "in telling you who you are, strongly [implies] a particular set of interests or preferences" (Hopf, 1998). Identities, however, are not fixed (Campbell, 1992); they are "shaped by the social milieu in which they live" (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001). Constructivists concern themselves with understanding the developmental process of this 'social milieu'. Constructivism is broadly dividable into two: "critical" and "conventional" (Hopf, 1998). Critical writers reject the idea that state identity and insecurity could somehow be "pre-given" and instead posit that they are mutually constitutive as "state identity

enables crises" and "crises enable state identity" (Cho, 2009 & Weldes, 1999). They take state identity as something to be investigated to help explain insecurity. Conventional constructivists, to examine "top–down/deductive mechanisms and causal relationships between actors, norms, interests, and identity", label the state as "ontologically prior to the state system" (Checkel, 2008). These differences in focus lead them to look at identity domestically and internationally respectively. The constructivisms focus on two different locations for state identity and action, as well as this they both have advantages in their respective application. In treating the two as "different analytical frameworks", we will attempt to utilise this pragmatic approach to explore expressions of Bhutanese identity domestically and internationally (Cho, 2012).

The primary goal here is to outline a possible pragmatic approach through the case study of Bhutanese national identity and the type of insights that gives us into the nation of Bhutan and its identity. We first explore relevant constructivist theory and the form a pragmatic approach would take, before moving onto critical and conventional applications.

## The Pragmatic Approach

Both constructivisms lean towards either the internal or external configurations of state identity which, when utilised together, can provide a pragmatic approach. In doing so we can gain insights into how identity politics surrounding a state affect security or diplomacy in international relations (Cho, 2012). Critical constructivism can explain how identity themselves can often produce insecurity, whereas conventional constructivism shows the role identity plays in connecting "environmental structures and interests" (Cho, 2009 & Katzenstein, 1996). A pragmatic approach involves selecting aspects of both critical and conventional constructivist theory based on their merits. This approach seeks not to synthesise the two branches on an ontological level but to use each to investigate internal or external identities of a state.

Critical theorists hold that the state has "no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Campbell, 1992). The state, as well as identity, is in constant production and reproduction that can never be completed (Ibid). If stopped, this would expose the lack of foundations, and ultimately the stasis death of the state (Ibid). Identity, additionally to critical constructivists, "can only be established in relation to what it is not", there cannot be an *Us* without an *Other* (Weldes, 1999). This difference and the presence of the *Other* to an *Us* thus acts as mutually constitutive in forming identity. Insecurity is also a by-product of this process whereby *Otherness* transforms difference into a threat to the self (Ibid).

Campbell places state identity as the "outcome of exclusionary practices in which resistant elements to a secure identity on the 'inside' are linked through a discourse of 'danger' with threats identified and located on the outside '' (Campbell, 1992). In these exclusionary practices, we can see two primary ways through which this is achieved, 'foreign policy' and Foreign Policy. 'Foreign policy', in the first sense, is any practices which differentiate or exclude, and as a result turn subjects into the *Other* or foreign. This differentiation and exclusion informs the activities of Foreign Policy. Our focus, however, is the internal construction of state identity, but in Campbell's work Foreign Policy is the most privileged of the "discourses of danger" which tell citizens what they are meant to fear and at the same time creates the dangers in which state identity is situated (Ibid).

In further explaining the importance of "discourses of danger", Campbell states that danger or threat requires enforcing boundaries on a group (Ibid). Danger in this sense is of paramount importance when it comes to the boundary making processes of the two types of foreign policy. "A notion of what 'we' are is intrinsic to an understanding of what 'we' fear"; this distinction does not only create a community with an internal/external divide,

it aids in creating "a moral space of superior/inferior" (Ibid). Through ordering the world via discourses of danger and foreign policies, ambiguity can be constrained or "disciplined ... in terms of the spatial form of inside/outside" (Ibid). The outside is seen as contradictory, juxtaposed, and conflicting to the inside, the outside challenges the "purity" of the ordered (Ibid).

Weldes, through similar analytical tools to Campbell, argues that "the construction of crises ... occurs in tandem with the construction and reconstruction of state identity" (Weldes, 1999). These processes are mutually constitutive, "state identity enables crises" and "crises enable state identity" (Ibid). State identity provides the target of said crisis as "after all, crises must be crises for some subject" (ibid). A "crisis thus depends on the discursively constituted identity of the state" (ibid). Crises in enabling state identity provides the facilitation for the internal consolidation of state power. This is done via three important processes: "the building of state machineries", "[enhancing] the control exercised by a state over its population", and "[refining] and [elaborating] the relations of power within the state itself" (ibid). These processes secure state identity and rearticulate what is the *Other* and the *Us* (ibid).

Conventional scholars focus more on the external affects of state identity, like Barnett who explores "the relationship between identity and alliance formation" (Barnett, 1996). Identity, here, can provide attenuated links between states and Barnett "asserts that state identity offers theoretical leverage over the issue of the construction of threat and the choice of alliance partners" (Ibid). He states, regarding alliance formation, that "identity, in short, makes some partners more attractive than others" (Ibid). Secondly, which is where we can utilise his work, that identity "also suggests that the maintenance of that alliance", or here cordial relations, "can be dependent on the parties' mutual identification" (Ibid). Adversely, "a change in identity can undermine [an] alliance's foundation" (Ibid).

Wendt, on the other hand, focuses on the international state structure and how identity can act as a conduit for said structure and national interest (Wendt, 1999). National interests or "the reproduction requirements" of states are impacted by "the international system" (Ibid). Wendt delineates four types of identity; however, we are only concerned with his first type, the foundationalist, more internal 'corporate' identity (Ibid). The corporate identity like the nation state itself in this thinking is "ontologically prior to the state system" (Ibid). "People and land" constitute this form of identity and this allows us to focus on how actors can reproduce other aspects of its identity abroad (Cho, 2012 & Wendt, 1999). For Wendt identities "imply but are not reducible to interests" as "an actor cannot know what it wants until it knows who it is" (Ibid). The utility provided here is that we can have a focus on how identity has been constructed through state relations and to examine that impact on national interest.

Although national interest is influenced by the international system, the concept is still "constrained by the nature of corporate stateness" (Ibid). In treating national interest as a locus for state identities to play out, we can explore the effects of said identity. Wendt posits four national interests, however, only two are pertinent to Bhutan: physical survival and autonomy (Ibid). These two most clearly show developments within the international system impacting Bhutan's national interests. Physical survival refers to the "survival of the complex" and although maintaining survival is important, "it is not enough for a state-society complex to merely survive, it must also retain its "liberty"" (Ibid). Closely linked to this, the idea of autonomy refers to the ability to be unconstrained in "responding to internal demands or ... contingencies in the environment" (Ibid). Through national interests and the varied expression of them then, we can see how the international system has impacted state identity in the form of the national interests.

Wendt states his focus is on "the structure and effects of states … systems" rather than domestic identity (Ibid). In taking state's corporate identity for granted we can look more to the international systems and its effects on "pre-social interests" (Ibid). National interest can show well how the international environment shapes a state's identity, as shown through changes to their national interest. Although with Wendtian thinking, said interest is "constrained" by the corporate nature of states (Ibid). The corporate nature of a state is a question that goes unanswered in Wendt's writings with Wendt himself acknowledging that his thinking struggles with explaining this internal aspect of identity. Wendt, however, admits that his weakness in examining a state's corporate identity can be solved by moving the responsibility for analysis to Campbell (Wendt, 1999). Weldes and Campbell are crucial for understanding the relational nature of a state's corporate identity to that of difference and the *Other* (Cho, 2009). A hole which is left unanswered by Wendt that Weldes expands on well in the case of crises, where the *Us*, difference and the *Other*, are all produced in "a mutually constitutive process" (Weldes, 1999). Whilst the two constructivisms do conflict on their meta-theoretical foundations, they can still provide insights into one another (Cho, 2012).

For example, critical constructivism can delve into aspects of conventional theory that are left unanswered. This process, however, can be burdensome when dealing with country-to-country relations, if the identities of those states are continuously being produced and reproduced to no end. This can be partially solved when linked to conventional theory. Rather than continuously going "all the way down" for state identities in inter-state relations (Wendt, 1999), critical theory can provide a temporal 'snapshot' of state identities which can form the basis for conventional theories taken for granted corporate identity.

Both constructivisms provide insights into state identity at different levels and stand together better than they do alone. By adopting this pragmatic approach, whereby the conventional is

used for more externally facing matters and critical for those more internal subjects, we can deemphasise the ontological and theoretical infighting that distracts from application. Constructivism should not be treated as a single strand of theorising but "a heterogamous research approach: that is, it readily combines with different fields and disciplines" (Hopf, 1998).

## Application

Here, Phuntsho, a leading historian, will be used to discuss the Bhutanese interpretation of events surrounding the ethnic cleansing. Phuntsho, however, can be said to be biased against Nepali identity as evidenced by the labelling of Nepali migration into neighbouring Sikkim as a "cultural invasion" (Phuntsho, 2013). Rizal, a leader of the Lhotshampa human rights movement, will be utilised to gain an appreciation of the Lhotshampa perception of events from the time-period. Hutt, a leading Western scholar in Himalayan politics, provides an expertly balanced account of the events drawing on first-hand evidence.

## Critical

State identity can be considered the "outcome of exclusionary practices" (Campbell, 1992), and in Bhutan, the state has practiced direct exclusionary practices through the removal of citizenship from many Lhotshampa people and expulsion. Here, we will explore this direct occurrence of Campbell's foreign policy in the Bhutanese context. Labelling the unrest as a crisis, additionally enables us to apply Weldes' understandings of crises' mutually constitutive nature (Weldes, 1999).

The census of 1988 served as the rationale to expel many of the Lhotshampa and saw its origins in previous censuses conducted by the Bhutanese state (Rizal, 2004). Bhutan historically has seen Nepali immigration dating back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries and in 1928 was perceived as a "major problem" (Phuntsho, 2013). Censuses conducted by Bhutan were to "ensure

that the population was composed of bona fide tax-paying residents" and the census of 1979 enabled Bhutan to expel Nepali and Indian immigrant workers (Hutt, 2011). The 1979 census laid the groundwork for Bhutan to practice Campbell's foreign policy in everything but name. The official Royal Government of Bhutan (RGB) reasoning behind the census of 1988 was to distinguish "between illegal immigrants and Bhutanese citizens" (Dorji, 1994), and to prove citizenship locals had to provide "30-year-old land-tax receipts" (Rizal, 2004). This was undertaken only in the southern parts of Bhutan, where the Lhotshampa were the majority, and providing these documents was often hard as land-tax receipts were only required after 1964 (Rizal, 2004).

By looking at the 1988 census and the following expulsions as "exclusionary practices", we can see these efforts as securing a state identity under Campbell's writing (Campbell, 1992). We must therefore, in the vein of Campbell, ask what is under threat by illegal immigrants and in this case, it is a constructed image of Bhutanese state identity. As proclaimed by the government of Bhutan in 2016, Bhutan is the "Last Buddhist Kingdom" (RGB, 2016). Bhutan's identity was and is not fixed but performatively created. This performance was against the Lhotshampa, as they represented difference. To be Lhotshampa, was to wear different clothes, speak a different language, and follow a different faith. A Bhutanese state therefore did not teach Nepali, it taught the national language of Dzongkha, citizens of the state do not wear Nepali *daurā śuruwal*, they wear the *gho* or the *kira*. Moreover, to be a Nepali or Lhotshampa state meant annexation into India, as we will show later.

A difference and *Otherness*, to Campbell, creates "a moral space of superior/inferior" (Campbell, 1992) and the Bhutanese case is no different. The discourse from the time of the expulsion framed the Lhotshampa as *Ngolops* (anti-nationals), exacerbating the idea of the Lhotshampa people and their culture as contradictory to their own (Amnesty International, 1992). Not only were Lhotshampa

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framed as being an antithesis to the Bhutanese state, but they were also seen as less than ordinary citizens. They were considered a "mercenary menace" that were not to be recognised as equals as it would "threaten the very core of its ethnic and national identity" (Sinha, 1994). The unrest was due to "madness" rather than the ethnic cleansing (Thinley, 1994). In establishing this moral space, the state can "[cope] with new occurrences of ambiguity or contingency" (Cho, 2009). The environmental situation for the constructed Bhutanese state and political elite was, according to Prime Minister Thinley, a "state of siege" with an aggressive China in the north, the annexation of Sikkim and the Lhotshampa in the south calling for widespread reform (Thinley, 1994). This identity enabled a "construction of a certain crisis" allowing state power to be consolidated by the political elite (Cho, 2009). The Lhotshampa situation can be understood as a conflict between the political elite and Lhotshampa peoples in which the elite won (Sinha, 1994). Reforms backed by the Bhutan People's Party calling for greater equality were seen as an attempted "take over" where their political change would have led to Nepali rule through election (Thinley, 1994). The King's and elite's authority "was unquestioned and no political dissent aimed at changing the status quo succeeded to do so" (Phuntsho, 2013). The Lhotshampa were seen as rebels who the government accused of "terrorist activities of arson, robbery, extortion of money, kidnapping, and murder", repression to the government, now appear justified (Phuntsho, 2013). Through these events the Bhutanese state was strengthened. The discourse was not of the Bhutanese Lhotshampa protesting an unjust government but dissidents and anti-nationals committing rebellion against a state who had accepted an "alien population" only now to be the victim (Hutt, 2011, Phuntsho, 2013 & Thinley, 1994).

In 1991 Jigme Singye Wangchuck proclaimed, "If I, as the King, cannot protect the sovereignty and integrity of our country and ensure a secure future for our people, then it is my duty to accept full responsibility and abdicate" (Wangchuck, 1991 in Thinley,

1994). Wangchuck was referencing the period of internal instability with Lhotshampa resistance and protest. Before the process of homogenisation started by the government, The Lhotshampa people in Bhutan did not represent an objective threat or crisis. The period leading up to, and during, the crisis similarly was a "social [construction] that [was] forged by state officials in the course of producing and reproducing state identity" (Weldes, 1999). The Bhutanese state in pursuing policies of homogenisation under the name of national security and survival, saw the ever-increasing violent demonstrations as "an armed rebellion seeking to overthrow the ruling regime ... loyal to the Nepalese power abroad" (Phuntsho, 2006). In contrast, the Lhotshampa protestors saw the crisis as one of "an innocent people who had been pushed beyond endurance by overtly discriminatory practices" (Hutt, 2011).

Similarly, a "notion of what 'we' are is intrinsic to an understanding of what 'we' fear" and as well the inverse can be true, whereby fear or crisis enables identity (Campbell, 1992 & Weldes, 1999). Crises are "important means ... for the production and reproduction of state identity" and without this constant reinforcement the state would cease to exist (Weldes, 1999 & Campbell, 1992). In the case of Bhutan, it is not enough simply to be the "last bastion of *Mahayana* Buddhism in the Himalayas", a bastion needs to be "besieged" (Dorji, 1994 & Thinley, 1994). In this circumstance, violent protests against the "last Buddhist Kingdom" and the annexation of Sikkim enabled the Bhutanese state to claim a threat to their nation, reproducing state identity of a "last bastion" (RGB, 2016). In this crisis, the benefits to the state are visible. Firstly, in the empowerment of the central state, the 1988 Census, unlike its predecessor, was undertaken not by district officials. The government conducted the census directly (Hutt, 2013). Secondly, the state was able to identify those involved in the protest and remove their citizenship. The Bhutan Citizenship Act of 1985 states: "Any citizen of Bhutan who has acquired citizenship by naturalization may be deprived of

citizenship at any time if that person has shown by act or speech to be disloyal in any manner whatsoever to the King, Country and People of Bhutan." (RGB, 1985). Those who did not flee willingly were made to leave as they were either related to a suspect demonstrator or a relative had already left (Hutt, 1996). If this did not work prisoners were submitted to "ill-treatment and torture, including rape" (Amnesty International, 1992). By removing those who did not conform with the government's strict homogenisation policies, the remaining Lhotshampa were "integrated into the northern culture" (Phuntsho, 2013). Lastly, in refining and elaborating the power relations within the state, as mentioned prior the expulsion of the Lhotshampa and enforcement of the traditional Bhutanese culture over others strengthened the ruling elite.

## Conventional

Both Bhutan and Nepal share many characteristics that would suggest the two states would be on good terms. They are both members of regional organisations and in addition, both lie in between China and India vying for control (Government of Nepal (GN), 2017). Yet relations among the two Himalayan states have been described as "lukewarm" (Parajuli, 2019). The expulsion has tainted relations and despite numerous rounds of Joint Ministerial Meetings, negotiations over the issue have been repeatedly stalled (Minorities at Risk Project, 2004). In explaining these awkward relations, we will examine how Bhutanese national interest, as well as Nepalese and Bhutanese differing identities, have strained relations with Nepal.

Barnett's work on alliance formation can be used to explain why Bhutanese-Nepalese relations remain lukewarm. We can attribute three strands to Bhutanese and Nepalese identity that is shared: geographical location of the Himalayas, culture, and system of governments. Firstly, their location presents the same regional problems as parts of their borders to the north are claimed by China (BBC, 2020 & Kumar, 2010). Secondly, in culture, Bhutan

and Nepal vary considerably. Bhutan whilst being an ethnically and linguistically diverse country, like Nepal, consider themselves a Buddhist homogenous state with one state language (RGB, 2008). In reality Bhutan contains multiple ethnicities, religions, and languages (Theys, 2016). Unlike Bhutan, Nepal sees themselves as a "multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural" (GN, 2015). However, 81.3% of the population follows the Hindu religion (GN, 2012). Lastly, in systems of governance, Bhutan is a recent democratic constitutional monarchy. The country transitioned from a system of absolute monarchy in 2008 through royal initiative (Phuntsho, 2013, & Turner et al, 2011). The Nepalese transition to democracy, however, was one of civil war resulting in the country voting to abolish the monarchy in 2006 (Jha, 2014). These large differences and minor similarities form the context within which relations have not improved.

Bhutan, as described by King Jigme Singye, is a "'small country between giant and powerful neighbours' [has] no resources, only its culture and identity" (Hutt, 2011). The said culture and identity are of even greater importance when taking into consideration the effects of the "international system" on the "pre-social interests" of Bhutan (Wendt, 1999). The former King was referencing government action in enforcing a national dress code as part of the "One Nation" policy (Theys, 2016). Included in this was the forced adherence of the "*Driglam Namzha*", this consisted of the observation of traditional "Bhutanese architectural style, dress, manners, [and] official etiquette" (Hutt, 1994). This *Bhutanisation* process not only enforced Bhutanese culture and identity onto its population but also ran counter to and threatened Lhotshampa identity (Maung, 2016). The teaching of the Nepali language was removed from schools in 1989 and the census of 1988 striped many Lhotshampa peoples off their Bhutanese nationality (Phuntsho, 2013 & Hutt, 2011).

The 'One Nation' policy was continuously justified by the government as protecting Bhutanese sovereignty and identity (Whitecross, 2017). A state acting to protect one's sovereignty and identity is a given under Wendtian thinking, but the nature or method is not (Wendt, 1999). Bhutan undertaking homogenisation and ethnic cleansing against Lhotshampa in the name of its national interest is also not a given. The national interest of states is influenced by their corporate identity and as aforementioned, the international system (Ibid). Through physical survival and preservation of autonomy we can explain how developments in the international system have impacted on Bhutan's national interest. States can vary in how consciously they pursue this protection but in Bhutan this was direct as the 4th King Jigme Singye believed that "Bhutan's unique cultural identity, in the absence of military might or economic power, was its defining strength for its sovereignty" (Phuntsho, 2013).

In tracing the external factors that impacted the expressions of Bhutanese identity we can look to three events in both Nepal and India: most importantly the Indian incorporation of the state of Sikkim in 1975, a movement to create a Nepali speaking region inside India for the Gorkha people, and paranoia over a so called "Greater Nepal" being formed (Rizal, 2004). The incorporation of Sikkim coloured the Bhutanese interest of physical survival due to fears that the same could happen to Bhutan as it was protests led by Nepalis that caused India to intervene a problem in Sikkim which Bhutan also saw under its 2nd and 3rd Kings (Boland-Crewe and Lea, 2005 & Phuntsho, 2013). Although the annexation of Sikkim was caused by calls for democracy (Boland-Crewe and Lea, 2005), it was interpreted as "cultural invasion" due to "Nepali immigration" (Phuntsho, 2013). The familial relations between the ruling dynasty of Sikkim and the Bhutanese monarchy helped to increase fears (Rizal, 2004). Both Sikkim and Bhutan have also been guided by India in the matters of foreign policy and if annexation occurred, the country would no longer be the "last Buddhist Kingdom", a direct threat to the "survival of the

complex" (National Legislative Bodies/National Authorities, 1949, RGB, 2016 & Wendt, 1999). Although calls for a Gorkhaland, comprised of parts of provinces inside India, have been concrete and violent, they do not on their own consist of a threat to Bhutan's identity or independence as it was planned to be within India (Besky, 2017, Khawas, 2009, & Hutt, 1996). "Greater Nepal" on the other hand, represents a less developed concept which leans towards paranoia. The idea involved an expanded Nepalese state over the Himalayas covering all areas of Nepali speakers (Rizal, 2004 & Phuntsho, 2013).

These issues became salient in Bhutanese politics and identity/national interest formation during the backlash to the process of *Bhutanisation*. The violence took form in a similar style to that of the Gorkhaland National Liberation Front, with beheadings and police killings (Amnesty International, 1992, p.10 & Hutt, 1996). *Bhutanisation* became seemingly self-justifying and empowered the hard liners inside the RGB as fear of violence from Lhotshampa protests grew (Hutt, 2011). Furthermore, the government began to use the term anti-national to refer to those who took part in violence (Amnesty International, 1992). This cemented the belief that to protect Bhutan's national identity it had to pursue its national interest of homogenising the nation through privileging its culture. Nepalese identity had become counter to Bhutanese identity.

## Conclusion

A full synthesis of conventional and critical constructivism is difficult, if not counterintuitive to achieve. However, a pragmatic approach using each for a specific face of identity, can help to avoid ontological debates that detract from application. Theory provided by Campbell has enabled us to explore the direct exclusionary practices in which the Bhutanese state has undertaken to form the "last bastion of Mahayana Buddhism in the Himalayas" (Dorji, 1994). In addition, we have explored how Lhotshampa-ness became inferior in the discourse of Bhutan as tensions escalate.

We have shown, using Weldes, how through the apparent crisis, the Bhutanese identity of a last bastion was self-fulfilling. The Bhutanese state identity in part constructed the crisis, the Lhotshampa did not in themselves represent a physical threat to the "last Mahayana Buddhist Kingdom". They threatened to blur the lines of distinction made possible through the "outcome of exclusionary practices" (Campbell, 1992).

This helps, in part, to uncover the corporate identity that is taken for granted in Wendt's writings as people and land. The open question of corporate identity can be solved by the work of Campbell, with Wendt even stating this (Wendt, 1999). Once this snapshot of corporate identity has been taken, we can focus on the effects of the "international system" on the "pre-social interests" as we have here with Bhutan (Ibid). Wendt's focus is more on the external "structure and effects of states … systems" rather than a "all the way down" approach to state's identity (Ibid). Identity is a conduit for the international structure and national interest, whereby events are interpreted due to a state's identity. As we have shown, physical survival and security can illuminate how Bhutanese identity and national interest has been shaped by developments in Sikkim and Nepal. We have similarly spoken of Bhutanese anxieties surrounding developments in Indian and Nepalese politics which have produced insecurity. The effects of Indian and Nepalese politics can also be seen through national interest.

The extent to which one can reconcile the two constructivisms through the case study of Bhutan is in the form of a pragmatic approach. Through toning down the ontological differences, we have applied differing "analytical frameworks for capturing the construction of a state's identity at home and abroad" (Cho, 2012). We have also highlighted how the Lhotshampa people were used unwillingly to form the "last Buddhist Kingdom" (RGB, 2016) and how this led to developments in Nepalese politics being perceived as threats. Furthering this, we have tried to show the strengths

constructivism can bring in operating as two different analytical tools, to provide a deeper understanding of state identity, domestically and internationally.

Bhutan has developed a strong culturally homogenous identity for itself despite, very much, being the opposite. Whilst this identity may have safeguarded the country in some regard, the Bhutanese state has done so to the detriment of over 100,000 people. The Lhotshampa people have been forcibly driven from their homeland and are currently in diaspora. This is not an endorsement of the actions of the Bhutanese state rather an explanation of how identity has been perceived and functioned in the case study. Many of the refugees have been relocated to other countries and Bhutan is unlikely to repatriate any of them. The country gains a perceived strength in being a bastion of Buddhism and the last Shangri-la.

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# Post-resettlement Bhutanese Poetry: A Thematic Content Analysis through Natural Language Processing

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**ABSTRACT**

Interpretation of poetry is generally based on qualitative analysis of semantics, figurative language and expression, and knowledge about the author and literary elements. Recent advancements in computer-based text processing allow us to analyse a large amount of text quantitatively. In this study, we analyse 135 poems published in the anthology 'Post-resettlement Bhutanese Poetry' quantitatively using natural language processing (NLP) techniques. We analyse and interpret the words and word patterns in the anthology, classify each poem based on codes for word-use and combine assigned codes into broader themes. NLP in the Nepali language is not developed enough to classify every poem into meaningful categories; however, it can help extract meaningful insights on word-use and themes even in a complicated literary text that would not have been possible using a qualitative approach. NLP was instrumental in breaking down a large amount of text into words and subsequently categorizing the words into codes, sub-themes, and themes for further analysis. This paper presents two useful aspects of literary analysis. Firstly, it interprets the social, cultural, and contemporary aspects of Bhutanese people's lives after resettlement represented through

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poetry. Secondly, it presents NLP as a methodological technique in analysing literary texts written in the Nepali language.

**Keywords:** Bhutanese refugees, literature, Nepali in Bhutan, Nepali language resettlement

## Introduction

Until the late twentieth century, Bhutan confined itself to self-enforced isolation partly due to geographical obstacles and partly due to the government's strategy to keep away the Drukpa culture from western influences (Ramakant & Mishra, 1996; Walcott, 2011). Bhutanese traditions, culture, and languages were shaped in communities of far-flung villages where people often had limited contact and social interactions. Therefore, the developmental pace of different languages in Bhutan was much slower than that in neighboring India and Nepal. Though Bhutan is a tiny Himalayan kingdom with a total area of 38,117 sq. km (The World Bank, 2020) and a population of less than 800,000 (The World Bank, 2021), there are nineteen registered spoken languages, among which all except Nepali, are Tibeto-Burman languages (Van Driem, 1994). Dzongkha (160,000 speakers; spoken in the west), Nepali (156,000 speakers; spoken in the south), and Tshangla (138,000 speakers; spoken in the east) are three main languages as per the estimated number of speakers (Van Driem, 1994).

Bhutan has a rich oral tradition that celebrates the country's folklore, myths, and chronicles of the monarchy but severely lacks contemporary literature in different languages (Aris, 1987; Gyeltshen, 2017; Penjore, 2009; Raina, 2013). Among nineteen spoken languages, Van Driem (1994) notes that "Dzongkha is the only language with native literary tradition in Bhutan" (p. 87). He

further claims that "both Lepcha and Nepali are also literary languages, but neither has ever played any role as a literary language in Bhutan" (p. 88). But we find significant literary activities in the Nepali language, primarily in poetry, from the early 1970s that contradict Van Driem's claims. When discussing the literary endeavors of Nepali speakers, Dahal et al. (2022) divide the literature as being written in their homeland – Bhutan, when they took refuge in Nepal and after resettlement in other parts of the world.

The Bhutanese writers published books and other literary creations before the 1990s political upheaval in Bhutan. Narayan Prasad Luitel's *Shivalaya Mahatmya* (1972) and *Gyan Darpan* (1985), Gauri Shankar Adhikari's *Shankar Mahakavya* (1987), Dr. Hari Prasad Adhikari's *Sansarik Chintan* (1987) and *Samajik Chintan* (1988), Ghana Shyam Regmi's *Kalpatryi Khandakavya* (1988) and many poems published in *Druk Losel* (a literary magazine published between 1979 and 1983) reflect spiritual awareness, moral principles, and cultural and philosophical cognizance (Dahal et al., 2022).

The Bhutanese government's decision to ban the Nepali language from the school curriculum (Bahadur, 2020; Hutt, 1996; Ramakant & Mishra, 1996; Reinfeld, 2003) since the promulgation of the 'One Nation One People Policy' (Evans, 2010; Kharat, 2001; Pulla, 2016; Rizal, 2004) in 1988 further deteriorated the growth of Nepali literature. About one hundred thousand Bhutanese citizens got evicted when they demonstrated against this policy in the early 1990s (Bahadur, 2020; Evans, 2010; Hutt, 1996; Rizal, 2004). Surviving the psychological distress of exodus and adversities in the refugee camps in Nepal, many Bhutanese writers started documenting their antagonisms, emotions, pains, and miseries in the form of literature. The exiles experienced heightened trauma of statelessness and identity crisis. The Bhutanese literature written during this time reflects

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inadequacies, inconsistencies, and uncertainties that characterized life in the refugee camps. Bhutanese writers were also influenced by the political movement in Nepal that mainly raised voices for gender and class equality and regional and ethnic inclusion (Dahal et al., 2022).

After languishing in refugee camps for nearly two decades, most Bhutanese refugees got resettled in eight developed countries. The resettlement took the Bhutanese people to new places and introduced them to the industrialized, global north countries. The post-resettlement period has seen Bhutanese writers' augmented literary activism, both in the form of published books and digital presence through Bhutaneseliterature.com, the largest online directory of Bhutanese literature in existence since 2009.

In June 2022, Nepal Academy⁴ published *Punarbaas Pachhikaa Bhutani Nepali Kavita* (Post-resettlement Bhutanese Nepali Poetry), an anthology of poems written by Bhutanese poets after resettlement. The anthology, edited by Shiva Lal Dahal, Ramesh Gautam, and Bhakta Ghimire, features 135 poems, by 135 Bhutanese poets living in different parts of the world. The editors argue that the anthology is the most extensive poetry anthology published in Bhutanese literature owing to the geographic, gender, and content representation (Dahal et al., 2022).

The interpretation of poetry is based on qualitative analysis of semantics, figurative language, and diversity in expression. But recent advancements in the field of computer-based text processing allow us to perform quantitative analysis of a large amount of text that can supplement and enrich the qualitative

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⁴ A Nepal government entity established to promote the Nepali language, literature, culture, philosophy, and social sciences

interpretations. However, this sort of analysis is not common in Nepali literature. This article explores what Bhutanese writers write after resettlement through software-generated quantitative keywords and subsequent codes. More specifically, we will answer the following research questions:

- *Through quantitative analysis, what themes can we identify and interpret in post-resettlement Bhutanese poetry?*
- *Does the analysis aided by computer-coded themes quantify and capture the essence of poetry?*

We argue that the poetry anthology *Punarbaas Pachhikaa Bhutani Nepali Kavita* mirrors the resettled Bhutanese society's historical, social, psychological, and philosophical state. Therefore, this paper provides a direct insight into social behavior and identifies common themes relevant to the Bhutanese society after the resettlement. This is the first research article to demonstrate the NLP technique in analysing literary texts written in the Nepali language.

## Materials and Method
One hundred thirty-five poems published in the anthology *Post-resettlement Bhutanese Nepali Poetry* form the material for analysis in this study. We chose this anthology for thematic analyses as it allowed cross-examination of poems written by different writers. As these writers belong to the one community and share a common story, it would be more meaningful to examine the content and their poetic proposition. The anthology contains both verse and free verse poems of varying lengths. The shortest poem has 40 words (Figure 1), while the longest has 795 words. We excluded the preface section of the anthology as it is the analysis and interpretation done by the editors.
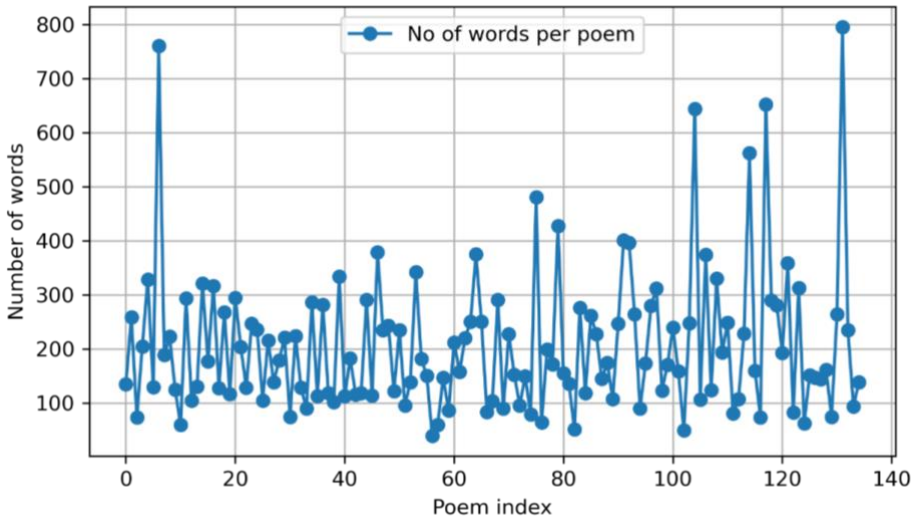
Figure 1: Number of words per poem. The x-axis shows the poem index (as featured alphabetically in Dahal et al. (2022)), and the y-axis shows the word count

To answer the research questions, we explored the themes reflected in the anthology through the mixed-method thematic content analysis approach (Neuendorf, 2018), structuring them following a process model of inductive category formation (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

We used natural language processing (NLP) techniques to analyse the words used in the anthology quantitatively. NLP is widely adopted and used by technological giants like Google and Facebook to analyse text (Chowdhary, 2020). However, the demonstrated use of these techniques in Nepali language text processing is limited (Shahi & Sitaula, 2021). NLP is a broad term used to describe the process of using technology to understand, analyse and describe the content of documents statistically (Manning & Schutze, 1999). The technical discussion and review

of NLP are out of the scope of this paper; nonetheless, for reproducibility, we discuss the steps taken to analyse the anthology.

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│  Content – The anthology "Post-resettlement  │
│            Bhutanese Poetry"                 │
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                        ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Establishment of a selection criterion – 135│
│                   poems                      │
│               Theme definition               │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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│   Working through the material – Python-     │
│            generated keywords                │
│              Code formulation                │
│   new Sub-theme formulation from the codes   │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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│  Revision of the sub-themes after 10 – 50% of│
│               the material                   │
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│       Final working through the material     │
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│            Building of main themes           │
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│       Thematic analysis and interpretation   │
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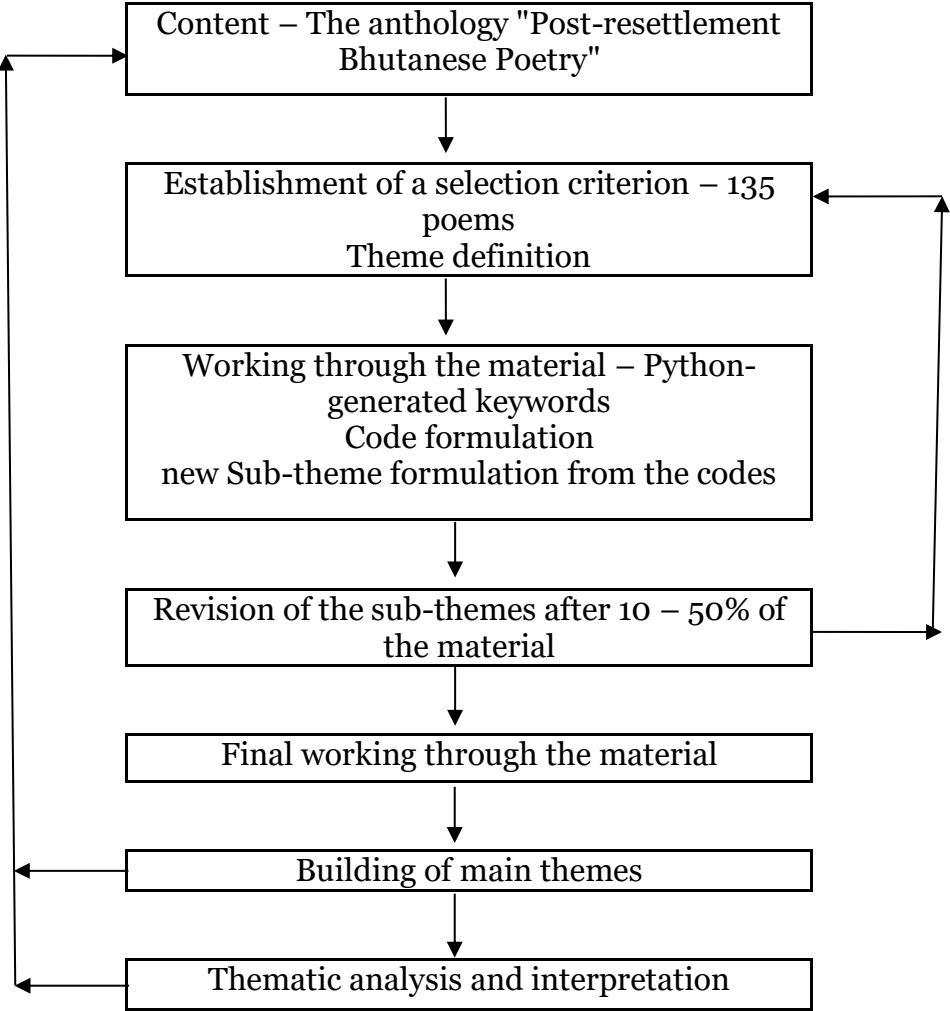
Figure 2: A process model of inductive category formation (Adopted with modifications from Mayring (2015))

We used Python as a coding platform to read the electronic version of the anthology and converted the poems to a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet comprised the poem titles, pre-assigned poem themes and sub-themes, poets' names, nationality and gender, and the extracted words associated with each poem. We processed the content of each poem to tabulate line and word counts and generate overall statistics on word use.

For the thematic analysis, we followed the process model of inductive category formation (Figure 2) and removed all stop words consisting of usual conjunctions, prepositions, adverbs, quantifiers, and punctuations. We also ignored words that are used only once in the entire anthology. After eliminating these words, each poem was reduced to a bunch of keywords ranging between five and 97 words. The elimination resulted in 976 keywords in total for 135 poems.

We classified these 976 keywords into 169 codes. We manually grouped the codes into 18 sub-themes, aligning them with the sub-themes set by Dahal et al. (2022). We mapped the keywords of every poem to a sub-theme and counted the repetition of these sub-themes for each poem. We determined a sub-theme for the poem based on the most repeated sub-theme within the poem. Finally, we merged these sub-themes to produce five broad themes (also aligning with those assigned by Dahal et al. (2022)) for further analysis (Figure 3).

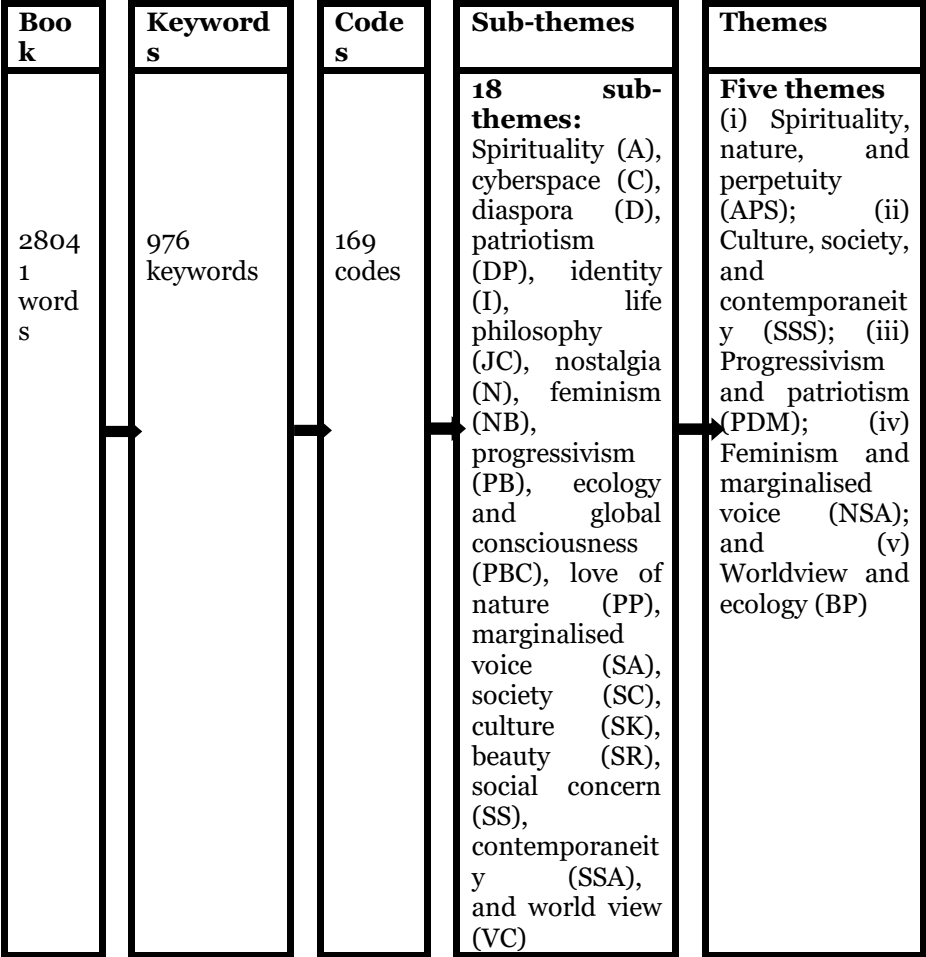| Book | Keywords | Codes | Sub-themes | Themes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 28041 words | 976 keywords | 169 codes | **18 sub-themes:** Spirituality (A), cyberspace (C), diaspora (D), patriotism (DP), identity (I), life philosophy (JC), nostalgia (N), feminism (NB), progressivism (PB), ecology and global consciousness (PBC), love of nature (PP), marginalised voice (SA), society (SC), culture (SK), beauty (SR), social concern (SS), contemporaneity (SSA), and world view (VC) | **Five themes** (i) Spirituality, nature, and perpetuity (APS); (ii) Culture, society, and contemporaneity (SSS); (iii) Progressivism and patriotism (PDM); (iv) Feminism and marginalised voice (NSA); and (v) Worldview and ecology (BP) |

Figure 3: Schematic representation of theme formation

In qualitative analysis, Dahal et al. (2022) assigned one poem to either one or up to four different sub-themes. Then, they re-categorised the poems with similar themes into a broader thematic spectrum. Quantitively we only assigned one sub-theme for each

poem. In comparison analysis, we considered a quantitative classification to match the qualitative classification if either of the sub-themes matched. Technologically interested readers can find detailed methods and code in our manual.

## Results and Discussion
### *Word-level Analysis*

Breaking down the poems into words allowed us to visualise the most used words in the anthology, as shown in Figure 4. The most frequently used words were 'र'/and (465), 'म'/I (448), 'छ'/is (346), 'पनि'/also (286), 'मेरो'/my (244), 'हो'/is/yes (215), 'अनि'/and (167), 'मलाई'/me (167), 'तर'/but (147), 'यो'/this (145), 'त्यो'/that (133), 'तिमी'/you (120), 'छु'/am (115), and 'तिम्रो'/your (112). These words might not explain much about the thematic set-up of the poems, but they reflect how common word choices are made by different poets. For example, relational pronouns, topping the list of most repeated words, are expected because poems are generally written in the first or second person. Personification leads to further addition to pronouns. The repeated presence of 'I' and 'you' shows the narrator, actor-addressee relation, and the subject of love. The pronominal usage of 'I' and 'you' (personal subject pronouns), 'my' and 'your' (possessive determiner), and 'me' (object pronoun) may also signify the holistic self in place and time (Cotter, 2011). The pronominal usage by the Bhutanese poets depicts the writing style and presentation of free-verse poetry akin to contemporary Nepali poetry.

Figure 4: Word Cloud of the poems included in Dahal et al. (2022). The size of the word shows the frequency of the words used across all the poems. The most repeated words are centered.

Keeping verbs, conjunctions, prepositions, adverbs, and quantifiers aside, what do the most repeated words exhibit? Primarily they show concepts of human relation, time, quantity, love (mind), self (ownership), and wh-questions. Figure 5 shows that some of the most repeated words after the elimination of the stop words are 'बेला'/moment (25), 'माया'/love (24), 'सपना'/dream (21), 'संसार'/ world (19), 'हात'/hand (18), 'पानी'/water (17), 'खुसी'/happiness (16), and 'साथ'/company (15). The repeated words indicate the themes and poets' emphasis on the subject of their interest. Most of them express love, which is either personal (humanistic), love for the homeland, or that for nature. These words indicate human life and emotion, sufferings and trauma, expectations, and aspirations (dreams).

The words like land, hills, soil, country, mother, and home indicate the land from where the people were forced to flee and their longing to return there from exile. Words, language, and poems show affection for art and literature. Resettled Bhutanese are in

the crisis of losing their ethnic language and culture after being exposed to the western world (Im & Neff, 2021). The question of cultural disintegration and losing traditional values, language, and religious practices have become a grave concern for people living in resettlement. So, this has often found a place in Bhutanese writing (Timalsina, 2020).



Figure 5: Word Cloud after elimination of stop words. The font size of the word shows the frequency of the word used across all the poems. The most repeated words are centered

The words referring to animals, plants, authority, identity and ecology reflect the concepts, objects, and interests of the poets. We observed that the poets do not pick words from far away hills or out of fantasy but from ordinary walks of life, self (human body), close relationship, nature, occupation (career), personal feelings and emotions, love, time, space, and experiences of life.

The repeated words show interconnections across poems at the micro-thematic level (Figure 6 and Figure 7). So, the value of a poem does not solely rest in the pleasure it gives or the grandeur of aesthetic beauty it presents but also in the connections they establish with different aspects of life.

## *Code-level Analysis*

By categorising the keywords into codes, we established interpretable concepts to analyse the content. 'Time', 'relation', 'body', 'space', 'object', 'people', 'feeling', 'life and death', 'home', 'beauty' and 'love' were some of the most frequent codes (Figure 6). For instance, words like moment, day, night, twilight, month, year(s), last year, now, and future- speak about time-concept. Time intersects in almost all facets of life, be it growth, learning, career, travel, advancement of age, or occasions of joy or troublesome moments.

The second most frequent code was 'relation'. We found many kinship words like father, mother, brother, sister, uncle, son, daughter, baby, and friends. These words indicate the collectivistic nature of Bhutanese society and emotional attachment to family life. Bhutanese families who faced forcible exile have undergone traumatic experiences of family segregation, broken relationships, and loss of loved ones in unusual circumstances.

Interestingly, we encountered several repetitions of words referring to body parts like eyes, face, hand, feet, mouth, stomach, heart, head, mind, fingers, lips, skin, chest, tongue, and ears. These words, which do not include synonyms, may mean vision, taste, sensibility, love, beauty, pain, hunger, or work- depending upon the context. The poets could have used the words either literally or figuratively.
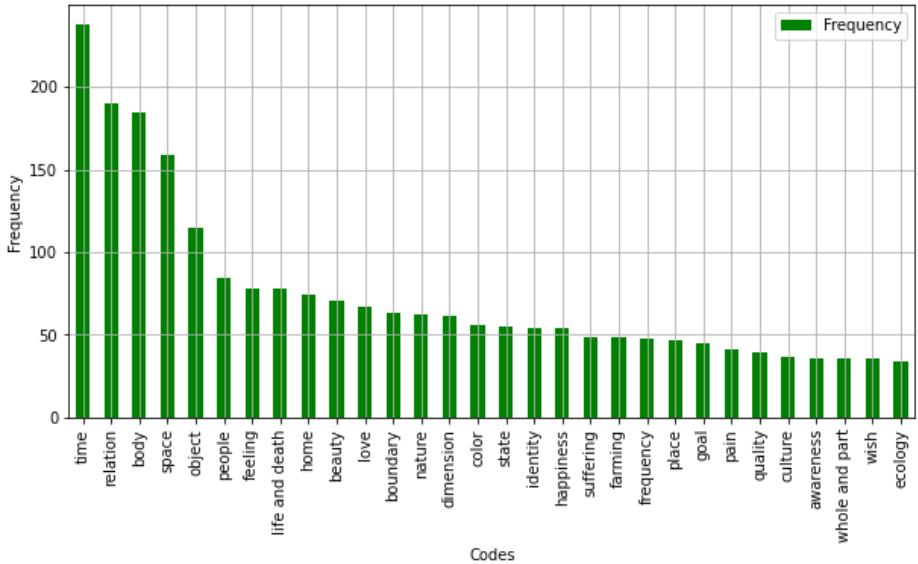
Figure 6: Histogram of 30 most repeated codes

Similarly, we found several words adhering to the concept of quantity (number), dimension, natural object, power and authority, pain and suffering, farming, travel, discrimination, identity, and ecology. Words like field, plough, mud, soil, paddy, terrace and sickle tell us about rural farming practice - a means of livelihood adopted by Bhutanese before being exiled.

## *Comparison Between Quantitative Classification and Original Qualitative Classification*

Among 135 poems, 68 poems were quantitatively classified into the broad theme of culture, society, and contemporaneity (SSS), 12 poems into worldview and ecology (BP), 42 into spirituality, nature, and perpetuity (APS) and five into progressivism and patriotism (PDM). The big five boxes in Figure 7 show each of the poems included in these broad themes.

The smaller boxes inside the broader themes show further classification of the poems into the mentioned 19 sub-themes in the method section. The box size for each poem indicates the number of keywords within the poem.

The color blue in Figure 7 means the broad themes matched the initially assigned qualitative themes. Only 60 poems in the quantitative analysis matched the original themes. Most of the matched poems were included in the SSS-theme. Only 24 poems matched the original sub-themes (not shown in the figure).
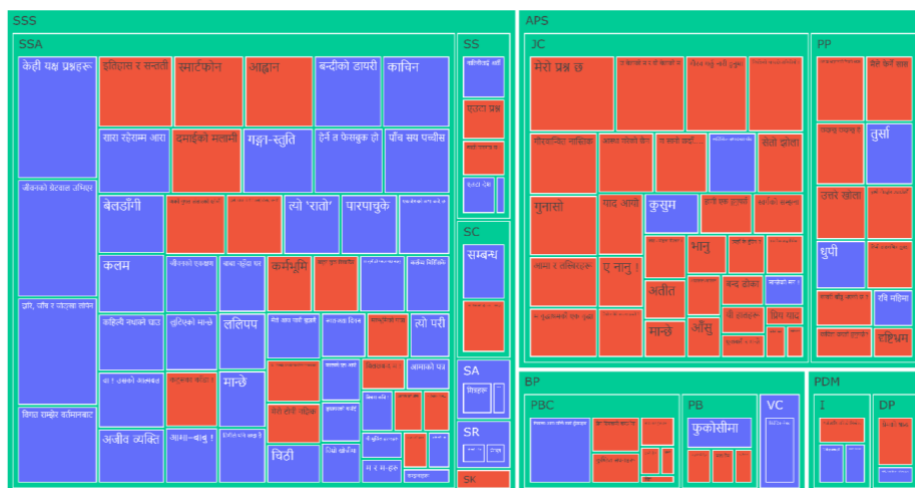


Figure 7: Quantitative classification of poems in the anthology: The first classification level (big box) is the broad theme, followed by a sub-theme (small box) for each poem. The title of the poem is shown inside the colored boxes. The box size for each poem indicates the number of keywords within the poem. The poems in blue boxes, assigned into broad quantitative themes, matched the initially assigned qualitative themes

The 45% match – between the quantitative and the original qualitative classification – is not particularly high. A poem can be qualitatively classified into multiple sub-themes and themes, whereas quantitively, we limited a poem to only one sub-theme

and one broad theme. This classification results from systematic choice rather than the shortcoming of the algorithm. We could also have quantitatively classified each poem into multiple sub-themes and themes to increase the match percentage, but we did not go in that direction because the choice of the categorization logic would make results vague and difficult to interpret.

When analyzing a poem, one may investigate its structure, tone, rhythm, diction, symbol, or imagery. A poem is condensed writing with a concise and interpretive meaning. A poem, as a whole, may mean one thing to one reader and entirely different to another. This variation in meaning arises because words are not static in meaning. Poetry involves figurative language (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014; Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2021), making the words deviate from their literal meaning. There is a common view that the beauty of poetry or its aesthetic and transcendental value comes from figuration.

In the subjective analysis, the editors focused on the poems' voices, namely their matter and content, rather than figuration. Analyzing words alone doesn't make much sense in the poetry's artistic realm or the poet's greatness. The point of breaking down poems into words is to find out if they can indicate what themes they align to. For example, the choice of words (diction) for love and war poems (heroic poems) is highly likely to differ. In the same context, words are likely to vary across different thematic spectrums- migration, diaspora, spiritualism, nature, environmentalism, feminism, or the subject of a broader world event.

The quantitative analysis showed poets' expressions about their lives, socio-cultural connections and migration, some disconnections between their past and present, and a sense of loss of identity. Deprivation of necessities, poor living standards and

dire health conditions, uncertain and gloomy future, and shattered dreams characterized life in exile. Through the thematic content analysis, we found reflections and recollections of the life spent back home, in exile, and subsequent journey to resettlement. Resettlement offered many opportunities, including a chance to acquire citizenship. Nevertheless, the question of identity (who we are) has always been debated and vividly expressed in the poems.

## Conclusion

Through quantitative analysis, we found 45 % conformity to themes assigned by subjective analysis. Both word and sub-thematic level analysis showed a close connection between Bhutanese writers and their life struggles, migration, and socio-cultural norms and values. We employed NLP to examine the word composition of poems, writers' word choices and vocabulary richness, and the prediction of the text's theme. Although NLP could enrich the analyses of literary text by providing supplementary information, it could not be a substitute for subjective analyses because computers and programs can accept the command to perform tasks but do not own the language. Letting computers think, create, process, and communicate with humans is one of the essential aspects of NLP, but NLP in the Nepali language is not developed enough to serve the purpose.

In contrast to the traditional practice of analyzing literary pieces through subjective analysis and intuitive reasoning, this study showed the use of NLP to analyse words to examine if they can contribute to the poems' themes. Cross-examination of words across the poems provided a unique possibility to analyse the most used words and their frequencies. This study only examined the predictability of themes based on NLP. Whether or not NLP can be used to predict the figurative meaning in the text is a matter of further research.

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# Secular Aesthetics in Bhutanese-Nepali Poems

Tara Lal Shrestha

**ABSTRACT**

This research attempts to explore secular aesthetics reflected in *Punarwaspachhika Bhutani Nepali Kavita* (Post-Resettlement Bhutanese Nepali Poems), an anthology of Nepali poems representing post-resettlement Bhutanese-Nepali literature published by Nepal Academy in 2022. Religion is still a dominant aspect of everyday politico-cultural life. It has been more than three decades since the people of Bhutan were evicted and made refugees. The majority of those are now resettled in the Global North countries. Their call for human rights, equality and democracy echoed from exile since 1990. But finding secular aesthetics in Bhutanese-Nepali literature is very rare. This qualitative research primarily explores secular aesthetics in the post-resettlement Bhutanese Nepali representative poems. The anthology *Punarwaspachhika Bhutani Nepali Kavita* has been assessed from the notion of hegemony and counter-hegemony. And this research analyses the historicity of the selected post-resettlement Bhutanese Nepali poems with the aim how this text exists (or fails to act) in the counter-hegemonic actions.

**Keywords:** Counter-hegemony, historicity, secularism, subaltern

## Introduction

Historicity is one of the most important acts of interpretation and analysis when we read a literary text. The motif of a literary piece is not universal because power structure is so pervasive that it not only resides at the top of society, but also circulates up to the bottom layers in the everyday lives of the subalterns. Everyone is confined within power hegemony explicitly or implicitly. Authors are also generally engaged subtly if not explicitly in the maintenance of the existing dominant power structure. A literary

piece is therefore seldom free from politico-cultural forces (Shrestha, 2022). Literature related to refugee issues is itself more concerned to the politico-cultural forces, where counter-hegemonic consciousness is visible between the lines of the expressions of the subalterns. If academic activism moves on with honesty and subaltern liberation friendly motives, broader spaces of co-existence can be formed for the muted subaltern to exist and speak, where they can act more autonomously. The secular aesthetics can offer more autonomous spaces to the subalterns. To widen such a secular space, counter-hegemonic actions with the literary academic activism are essential.

The (hi)stories of Bhutanese refugees- their settlements, displacement and resettlements- are examples of politico-cultural hegemony and resistance in the various forms of counter-hegemony. Antonio Gramsci (1999) claims that cultural hegemony is more dominant in the ruling system to subordinate the subalterns. With cultural hegemony, in the words of Gramsci, the dominant classes create worldview through which the ruling class establish and expand their power. The cultural hegemony helps the ruling classes to justify their hegemonic politico-economic and social status quo as benevolent to all citizens (Larsen, 2019; DuBois, 2005). But ultimately hegemonic dominance explicitly or implicitly produces counter-hegemony as a critique to hegemonic power. Sometimes, an individual's academic endeavor, the struggle for freedom as a counter-hegemonic consciousness, in fact ultimately reaches to the longing for a broader secular space, where one community is not oppressed and evicted because of their distinct identity. The secular aesthetics is therefore implicitly expressed in the artistic expressions seeking a permanent persuader far from the influence of the power bloc, though rare in history (Shrestha & Shrestha, 2021).

The term "secularism", which is practiced since ancient times in public life, covers wide range of meanings (Stephen & Lois, 2016;

Shook, 2017). Secularism is, according to different dictionaries, the principles of separation of the state from religious institutions. It is based on the viewpoints of seeking principle to carry on activities non-religious considerations. It believes on the notion of the separation of religion from civil affairs and the state with an aim of detaching the influence of religion in any public sphere (Galen, 2016). It refers neutrality on the religious topics, or the removal of religious intervention from the public institutions. In this sense, the subalterns can speak and act more autonomously in secular spaces, where counter hegemonic actions could be made possible from academic and literary-artistic activities. Coulter-hegemonic space with secular aesthetics is very essential for the intellectuals to exist and speak more autonomously (Shrestha, 2011). The Bhutanese diaspora is gaining space in the resettled countries, where formulating counter-hegemonic intellectual groups for counter-hegemonic actions is possible, which should not be taken as radical or extreme thought (Barden, 2010; Carroll, 2007; Hyug, 1991).

This research is an attempt to explore secular aesthetics in the representative Bhutanese Nepali poems published from the resettled lands. It, firstly, discusses how the politico-cultural forces influence the authors and role they play as the maintainer of status quo rather than counter-hegemonic actors. *Punarwaspachhika Bhutani Nepali Kavita* published by Nepal Academy in 2022 has been used for the textual and contextual evidence. The anthology edited by Shivalal Dahal, Ramesh Gautam and Bhakta Ghimire has incorporated 135 poems (retrieved from the digital archive of bhutaneseliterature.com) with 72-paged introduction, which can be a space to talk about the hegemonic hangover and counter-hegemonic consciousness. Secondly, this paper also talks about the contexts of the texts, the anthology, with reference to the Bhutanese refugee literature. Thirdly, it presents references of secular aesthetics expressed explicitly from the selected post-resettlement Bhutanese Nepali poems with an aim of seeking counter-hegemonic actions within

the text and context. Finally, with reference to the historicity the Bhutanese Nepali diaspora encountered in exile, this paper attempts to recommend some aspects of seeking secular aesthetics in Bhutanese Nepali literature.

## Materials and Methods

This research based on the qualitative methods analyses the anthology from Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony and the subaltern. When hegemony is concerned, the resistance consciousness as counter-hegemonic micro-political issues exists in the expression of the oppressed groups. The counter-hegemonic consciousness can exist as an alternative hegemony in the forms of a preparation for political transformation (Patt, 2004) by challenging the elitist dominant bourgeois' worldview (Cohn, 2005: p. 131).

Subaltern studies take historicity as one of the most important aspects when the issue of hegemony and freedom is concerned. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) believes that the subaltern consciousness is hard to represent. Bhutanese refugees have been resettled in the third countries, where secular aesthetics has been secured by the constitutions. Human rights and justice are the key control mechanism in politico-cultural discourses in the democratic countries. The aspect of secular aesthetics in the creations of Bhutanese Nepali authors, however, is untouched to the date. This research does not concern about various aspects of the identity and representation of the subalterns. It is hypothesized that the religious orthodoxies when attached in the state mechanism exploit the possible space of the oppressed to exist and speak. As Gramsci believes, hegemony is so much pervasive in the form of culture that it is almost impossible to find the real consciousness of the subaltern. The subalterns cannot claim for the secular state and they have no agency to act to restructure the politico-cultural system. So, Spivak claims, the subaltern cannot speak. The point is there is very meager space

for the subaltern to speak in the dictatorial state. To speak the truth, the subalterns cannot dare to act to alter the state's hegemonic power structure and restructuring a nation is beyond the grip of the subalterns. The intellectuals, too, as Gramsci clams, play role of maintainers of the status quo. This research hypothesised that *Punarwaspachhika Bhutanese Nepali Kavita*, its editors and contributors, as Gramsci believes, look playing role of traditional intellectuals. Very few instances show their counter-hegemonic actions. The bulky anthology incorporates meager secular aesthetics. However, the secular aesthetics exists from the cracks of the expressions. The methods and materials have been included from the longitudinal approach.

Though there are a lot of references available in the history of the Bhutanese refugees' struggle for freedom that show how they tried to act autonomously in academics and activism. But this research in particular delimits the areas of discussion and analysis on the post-resettlement Bhutanese Nepali poems. The role of literature or intellectuals in maintaining the status quo can be another issue for further research. This research is more concerned to explore voices of secular consciousness in the post-resettlement Bhutanese Nepali poems with reference to the anthology discussed above. The texts have been analyzed with reference to contexts.

**Bhutanese Nepali Literature: A Brief Review**
Written history of Bhutanese Nepali is fragmented. In 1950s, the language of the palace in Thimpu, Paro, Ha and Kalimpong was Nepali. The members of Dorji family spoke Nepali along with Hindi, English, Sikkimese Lepcha and Tibetan languages. The King spoke Hindi, English and Tibetan mixed with local dialects. In the *Dzongs* (palaces) *kha* (language) of conversation was the Nepali language (Rizal, 2022). English was not the language of common people. After 1961, *Choeke* and local dialects were amalgamated and named Dzongkha (the language of the palace) amid stiff resistance from the monk bodies and local scholars.

After 35 years of rigorous development Dzongkha was made the official language and enforced across the country (Rizal, 2022).

Nepali is the first language of many Bhutanese people since long time. But the publication of Nepali literatures began much later in Bhutan than expected. It is believed that official publications in Nepali language in Bhutan began much earlier and were extensive than personal publications, but they are unavailable. An unpublished biography of Garjaman Gurung was written in traditional Nepali and issued in 1887 by Paro Penlop from Rinpung Court (Hutt, 2000). That is the oldest record of Nepali literature though there are ample stories of copperplate inscriptions and treaties, which were either destroyed or kept hidden by the holders (Rizal, 2022). A monthly publication *Druk Losel* began to give some spaces to literary pieces. In 1970s Bhutanese students in India formed Bhutan Students' Organisation and published *Amar Bhutan* (Immortal Bhutan). Educational institutions began to invest in annual publications in 1980s. Nepali Literary Society was established in Sherubtse College with the publication of literary annual magazine *Biruwa* (Seedling) incorporating all forms of literatures- poems, stories, essays and one-act plays (Dahal, 2018). Before 1990s, a dozen writers were able to publish their literary pieces in annual publications.

A surge in publication in Nepali language began from exile. In 1993, Nepali language teachers in exile launched a literary organisation *Nepali Bhasa Parisad* (Nepali Language Council) Bhutan affiliated to *Nepali Bhasa Parisad-Silliguri*. The council supported to Nepali classes in the refugee schools (Ghimire, 2018). The council published its annual mouthpiece *Bhutani Kopila* (Bhutanese Bud) incorporating some literary pieces till 2007. In 2004, it was rebranded with *Nepali Sahitya Parisad* (Nepali Literature Council) Bhutan.

The refugee camps' life flourished literary activities and publications. Many Nepalese and foreign writers also made Bhutan issue a subject of their writings. Religious books had flourished more than the other. They appear as compilations rather than original creations (Rizal, 2022). After the third country resettlement from the refugee camps, the literature met with an unexpected ending because the Nepali remained a priced learning with those who had already learned the language and the new generation has no solid reason to be bothered with the learning of Nepali language (Rizal, 2022). The Nepali literature enthusiasts, however, reorganised Literature Council of Bhutan. A blog, "bhutaneseliterature.com" started in 2009, had already been popular among the germinating writers. A collection of 3,220 articles by 338 writers are archived in the blog (Dahal, Gautam & Ghimire, 2022). The number of collections reached about 4000 by the end of 2022 (Dahal & Ghimire, Personal Interview- 2023). The poems of the anthology *Punarwaspachhika Bhutani Nepali Kavita* (2022) have been retrieved from the blog.

**Results and Discussion**

This anthology incorporates 135 poems. It is an example of a literary text attached to the historicity. A literary text cannot be autonomous, nor can an author exist beyond the politico-cultural forces. An individual wants to be free from politico-cultural hegemony and this secular longing sometimes expands up to the level of collective consciousness when counter-hegemonic actions look valid and honest to the civil society dedicated to the justice to the oppressed. The anthology incorporates poems composed after the period of the resettlement. In the editorial the editors, Dahal, Gautam and Ghimire (2022) write, "Though all the poems have been written and published in post-resettlement period but they revisit the history, geography, culture...of our Bhutan and Nepal..." (p. ix-x). They further write, "The Nepali language speaking Bhutanese communities have their distinct historical, social and politico-cultural background" (p. 17). They give much

emphasis on the history of Bhutan under the hegemony of monarchial system and compares how they enjoyed freedom in exile. Implicitly, they claim that secular aesthetics was more visible in the writings of Bhutanese Nepali authors when they were in the refugee camps in Nepal than after their resettlement.

सन् १९९० पछिका कविताले त्यसअघिको राजसंस्थाप्रतिको निष्ठा र देशभित्रको जस्तो नियन्त्रण, राज्यको निगरानी र राजनीतिक प्रतिबन्ध थिएन…प्रजातान्त्रिक परिपाटी भएका मुलुकमा आएका भुटानीहरुले एक हिसाबको निर्वन्धता र खुलापनको अनुभूति गरे । त्यही राजनीतिक जागरण, खुलापन र बाहिरी दुनियाँसँगको सम्पर्कले भुटानी युवाहरुलाई लेखनतर्फ आकर्षित गऱ्यो….नेपाल र भारतका लेखक चिन्तकसँग साक्षतकार गर्ने अवसर पाए (२३) । नेपालमा चलेका आन्दोलनमा उठेका लैंगिक, क्षत्रीय, जातीय, वर्गीय समानता, पहिचान र समावेशिता जस्ता सवालहरुले भुटानीहरुलाई पनि छोयो । (२४)

*After 1990 poems, eulogising of kings, monarchy and confined situation in the absence of royal censorships ended…. In exile Bhutanese enjoyed freedom and openness. That political awakening and openness gave them opportunities to exchange experiences with Nepalese and Indian intellectuals. The caste, class, gender and identity and inclusion-based movements touched them. (23-24)*

The editors in the anthology talk nothing about secular aesthetics in the longest-ever introduction this researcher has read till date. The effort of the editors to add extensive discussion as an editorial or introduction in the anthology is noteworthy. But at the same time, their effort of keeping them beyond politico-cultural forces of the time when they are living the exile looks artificial. No literary piece is universal. Nor any author is beyond the politico-cultural forces. In this circumstance, either an

intellectual speak the voice of resistance and involve in counter-hegemonic action or play role of a maintainer of status quo. Subaltern historians and activists believe that collective intellectual intervention with counter-hegemonic consciousness is more effective to secure the space for the subaltern to peak and act. The role of new intellectual, unlike traditional intellectual, is to form collective counter-hegemonic groups to deconstruct hegemonic structure and reconstruct secular spaces for the subaltern. The poems compiled and presented in the second section of the anthology look as if they coincidently capture secular aesthetics.

The introduction, the first section of the anthology, claims that progressive thoughts found in the writings of Bhutanese Nepali authors after 1990s faded with or after the resettlement. The aspects of diaspora, religious beliefs based on Hinduism in particular, women's rights issues, cyber space, technological lifestyle are more dominant to them to document in the long introduction section than the secular aesthetics aspects, which is the root of their predicament. The root cause of their displacement, replacement and resettlement and isolation in exile lies in secularism. In exile, within the Bhutanese Nepali communities, the religious cum cultural clashes look going on. Secular aesthetics can contribute to reduce cultural hegemony within the oppressed community. The editors while preparing the long introduction or editorial are insensitive on this aspect. However, the editors, at least, have tried to represent diversities of Bhutanese Nepali communities while selecting the poems and from the cracks of their expressions, secular aesthetics echoes implicitly. The editorial states,

इतिहासको कुनै कालखण्डमा हाम्रा पुर्खाहरु नेपालबाट भुटान गएका थिए...फरक भूगोल र राष्ट्रियता भए पनि आफ्नो संस्कृति, पहिचान र जातीय गौरवसँग कहिल्यै सम्झौता गर्न चाहेनन् उनीहरुले...देशबाट बहिर्गमन भई शरणार्थीका रुपमा नेपालमा बस्ता उनीहरुको स्वभाषा, साहित्य र संस्कृतिको

मोह झन् गहिरिएर गयो । पछिल्लो एक दशकमा पुनःस्थापनाका क्रममा विभिन्न मुलुकमा पुगेका उनीहरुले आफ्नो सांस्कृतिक र भाषिक जगेर्नाको अभियानलाई निरन्तरता दिइरहेका छन् । प्रस्तुत कविता संकलन त्यसैको एउटा दसी हो ।

*Once in history our ancestors reached Bhutan. There was alien culture, place and people; but, our ancestors did not compromise to our identity and culture. In exile our passion to language, literature and culture was increased further. In the third resettled countries in the last decade, we are continuously struggling to protect our identity. This anthology is an example. (ix)*

The context of the anthology does not exist beyond the historicity. From this notion, if one looks at the long introduction and most of the poems, their motives look dedicated to maintaining the status quo of the power center. They do not dare to explore the root of the problem of being stateless. The counter-hegemonic actions are less focused on the editorial as well as text within. The history show, Bhutanese Nepali diaspora is much connected to Nepal. The texts produced by them cannot be detached from the politico-cultural context of Nepal. If they are more concerned with Nepali history, society and politics, how could they ignore the issue of secularism, which is at the core of the discourse since decades, how could they ignore this important domain in the discussion in their extensively lengthy editorial published as an introduction.

In recent two decades 'secularism' is a buzzword among the intellectuals and public in Nepal and Nepali diaspora and this issue remained a hot debate in South Asian contexts, too. The term secularism, furthermore, became a widely popular to address Nepal after 2006 as it used as a robust slogan to popularise the vehement process of inclusion (Shrestha, et. al. 2020: p. 47). However, it is not acknowledged, among the

dominant groups, as it is understood in the global periphery rather mostly taken as a western canonical concept to imperialise Nepal ideologically. Moreover, some critics take it as a conspiracy of Christian interference that leads to the conversion of religion. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'secularism' is the doctrine that morality should be based solely on regard to the well-being of mankind in the present life to the exclusion of all considerations drawn on belief in a god or a future state (qtd. in Singh, p. 598). However, in the South Asia including Nepali context, it is comprehended in alienated conception. It is interrogated as a western concept and has been interpreted in a monolithic dimension to the broader extent (ibid, 298). Most of the Bhutanese Nepali diaspora have been speaking from the Global North countries. However, what are the key obstacles that have confined them to counter-hegemonic actions. Most of the Bhutanese Nepali diaspora look helpless within the rigidities and orthodoxies fixed by religious beliefs. Why are they not been able to celebrate their indigenous identity from the new cultural and secular aesthetics. One of the poetic personas in the anthology is looking the root in the alien world and looks helpless:

म त यसरी बाँचेको छु
हरबखत यहाँ
आफ्नै छाला, भाषा, धर्म, पहिरन, राष्ट्रियता र
समग्रमा आफ्नै पहिचानबाट डराउनुपर्छ...
यसरी नै बाँचेको छु
(अजित रुपाबुङ, कसरी बाँच्नुभएको छ ? पृ ७६)


*I've lived like this here*
*I've to be fearful with my own identity*
*My skin, language, religion, costume, nationality &*
*identity in totality*
*I've lived like this here.*
*(Ajit Rupabung, "How are you living?" p. 76)*

The poetic persona is living a fearful life in the so-called liberal societies- in the Global North countries, where constitution secures no discrimination on the basis of religion and culture. The secularism is at the core in their constitutions. But the poetic persona is fearful with his indigenous identity- culture, skin color and religion. The persona is easily identified distinct from others, from the dominant groups there. Due to the lack of secular aesthetics, the poetic persona is unable to live with sense of security in the secular countries. Or, there is no secular practice in everyday life; there is actually gap between the theory (constitution) and practice (everyday life). Why the poetic persona is not confident enough to claim their rights? The persona can easily claim rights related to secular aesthetics in the Global North countries.

Broadly the term secularism has the humanistic and welfare state root rather than an alienated concept. It aims to establish politico-cultural harmony, equality and integrity. Subaltern groups of people are more concerned to provide justice to all in secular individuals or states. Reducing possible direct religious intrusion, secularism aims to neutralise one religion's supremacy over other. Since long cultural hegemony, the hegemony through consent is more pertinent than the direct hegemony through coercive force (Gramsci, 1999). Politico-cultural autonomy is more secured to the public, especially to the subaltern groups of people in the secular states. A poetic persona is speaking this consciousness:

म सानो थिएँ, सानो जस्तै सोच्दथेँ...
तर, जब म ठूलो भएँ...
तब मैले सानो जस्तो सोच्न छाडेँ ।
तिम्रो धर्मले मेरो साथीलाई अछूत बनाउँछ
कसैको जीवनलाई अजात भन्छ ।
मलाई कुनै स्वर्ग जानु छैन, जसको कुनै प्रमाणै छैन;

मलाई पुनर्जन्म वा नर्कको पनि डर देखाउनु पर्दैन
(एच.पी. चम्लागाई, "गौरवान्वित नास्तिक", पृष्ठ १११)


*I was child, used to think like a child*
*But now I'm matured...*
*Then I left to think as before*
*Your religion makes friend untouchable*
*Someone's life impure*
*I don't have to go any heaven unproven*
*I don't have any fear of heaven or hell no need to fear*
*(H.P. Chamlagain, "Dignified Atheist", p. 111)*


This poetic persona has moved far away in his youth, than his childhood, from the cultural hegemony. He is not fearful with heaven and hell now. He discards the religion that fragments people in terms of caste, culture, region and ethnicity. When religion is attached with the power, with the state mechanism, then subaltern groups of people suffer in such a way that the dominant group exercise elitist structure to sustain their dominance over the oppressed as if it is their god gifted rights. The elitist structures offer the dominant classes structural dividends. Secularism segregates religion from the state mechanism, reduces the possibilities of structural dividends to dominant groups, but it does not negate religious rights of the people (UKE, 2018). It rather offers atmosphere to religious autonomy to all groups of people but it negates dominance of one religion as the state religion so that dominant groups could not suppress the subaltern groups of communities via cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1999). In secular state, the dominant group is more confined to misuse state power to exercise cultural hegemony, where freedom of religion is individual and public sphere is more democratic keeping liberal values into consideration, i.e. freedom, human rights and self-determination (Jayal, 2017: p. 2). The Bhutanese Nepali diasporas, the intellectuals who are active in the journey to Bhutan for justice in

particular, are familiar about the Nepalese (hi)stories of the religious hegemony and secular aesthetic movements. Where, the debate about secularism is not a new phenomenon.

Nepal was declared a Hindu Kingdom under the constitution promulgated by the Panchayat (1960-1990) in 1962 Sen, 2015: p. 68). King Mahendra commissioned Ivory Jennings, a Professor of Cambridge University, to draft the constitution of Nepal, who envisioned Nepal as a Hindu Kingdom. Based on independent Indian constitution, Ram Ugra Sing had drafted the constitution of Nepal before him, which was more secular. While defining Nepal in 1989 there was a huge debate on whether to address Nepal as Hindu Rajjya (Hindu Kingdom) or Hindu Rajtantratmak (Hindu King Ruled) state in the constitution being reformed by Bishwa Nath Upadhyaya and finally Nepal was declared as Hindu Rajtantratmak (Mabuhang, 2021).

Puspa Lal Shrestha, the pioneer of the Communist Party of Nepal, is taken as the first political figure to demand secular state after he translated The Communist Manifesto into Nepali in 1947 (Mabuhang, 2021). He had realised the need of secularism in the country like Nepal, where more than hundred ethnic communities and some other religious minority groups of people live. It was a way of justice to all, in his view, for the coexistence and mutual respect. Instead of continuing the Hindu Kingdom in Nepal, he demanded secular structure with republic federal system via constituent assembly. Political liberalisation since 1990s declared Nepal as multi-cultural state but the dominance of certain group remained constant in public spheres. Nepal was declared a secular state in 2006 but dominance of the dominant group has been preserved from the present constitution as well with the subtle play of words, "*sanatan dekhi chali aayeko*" (the tradition continued from ancient time is remained secured). There is still a powerful politico-cultural group of people who want restoration of the Hindu King and Nepal as a Hindu Kingdom. The subaltern groups of communities and certain

intellectuals want to deconstruct the persisting Hindu hegemony and favor secularism. Another group, which is larger section, who look in between as neutral but those who are educated ones appear as opportunist. For seven decades, secularism remained a hot topic in Nepali politico-cultural and literary discourses. This consciousness has been extended up to the broader Nepali-speaking communities. The Bhutanese Nepali intellectuals sometimes are eloquent. For instance, one expression from the anthology is relevant here:

मेरो हजुरबाले एउटा देशमा राजाको चाकडी गरे
मेरा बाले अर्को देशमा शरणार्थीको उपमा पाए
म तेस्रो देशमा आप्रवासी भएर बाँचिरहेको छु...
साँच्चै, देशको सीमाना कहाँसम्म हुन्छ?...
लाग्छ, मेरो देश एउटाभन्दा धेरै हुनुपर्ने हो...
(दुर्गा रिमाल, साँच्चै, देशको सीमाना कहाँसम्म हुन्छ?
पृ. १३२, १३३)

*What's a state- territory, soil, wall?*
*My grandpa served a King of a state*
*Father lived a refugee life in another state*
*I'm living in resettled country*
*In fact, how far is the border the country?*
*I think my country is more than one*
*(Durga Rimal, "In fact how far is the border of the country?" pp. 132-33)*

A state is not just land, not only territory. Places, people, and cultures are equally important to be a nation. For peace and harmony, a nation should respect all varieties of places, people and cultures. Collective identity is possible with equal treatment to diversities. To minimise the politico-cultural hegemony of the elite upon the oppressed, religion should not be attached to state mechanism. Religion and state should be separated from each other. Therefore, most of the states in the world have constitutions that try to separate state with religion. The

constitution of Bhutan also has documented certain freedom to secular aesthetics.

The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2008 is relevant to quote when we talk about secularism in Bhutanese Nepali history and literature. It states, "Bhutan is a Sovereign Kingdom and the Sovereign power belongs to the people of Bhutan...Dzongkha is the National Language of Bhutan" (Article 1: p. 1). His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo is the Head of State and the symbol of unity of the Kingdom and of the people of Bhutan (Article 2; p. 2). Buddhism is the spiritual heritage of Bhutan, which promotes the principles and values of peace, non-violence, compassion and tolerance. The Druk Gyalpo is the protector of all religions in Bhutan. Is shall be the responsibility of religious institution and personalities to promote the spiritual heritage of the country while also ensuring that religion remains separate from politics in Bhutan. Religious institutions and personalities shall remain above politics (Article 3: p. 9). Power and authority shall be decentralised and devolved to elected local governments to facilitate the direct participation of the people in the development and management of their own social, economic and environment well-being (Article 22: p. 42). In this way, though Bhutan is taken as a non-secular country, but its constitution has incorporated some aspects of secular freedom. Religion has taken above politics. The sixth five-year plan of Bhutan was more concerned with the preservation of culture and language and in 1986 Bhutanese people of Nepali origin were coerced to wear *daura suruwal* (Nepal's national dress as their ethnic dress) and Nepali language use was more liberal (Rizal, 2022). From this point of views, looking at the past history and present constitutional clauses, there are spaces to carry on the discourses on secular aesthetics in Bhutanese Nepali literary counter-hegemonic activism. How Bhutanese Nepali actors in Bhutanese diaspora exist and act in the exile can be a good area of academic discourses.

Now most of the Bhutanese refugees have been the citizens of the Global North countries, where they were resettled. The potential youths have been expanding spaces of their academic, economic and social achievement. The more they get better exposure, the more they are able to speak for the justice and freedom. It can be hypothesised that gradually they will speak more eloquently against any forms of hegemony and oppression when one is in more liberated space. They will dare to speak for secular aesthetics as well, as one of the poems of the anthology speaks for restructuring the state mechanism, which is rigidly oppressive to the subaltern communities:

> ऊ बेला परीक्षामा पाँच मार्कका लागि
> कोरेको मेरो देशको नक्सा...
> मेटायो, फेरी कोऱ्यो
> कहिले गलेफू, कहिले पारो...
> ...अन्ततः बन्थ्यो एउटा सिङ्गो देश,
> मेरो देश ।
> आज पश्चाताप यहाँनिर लाग्छ कि !
> ऊ बेला म 'म' नै नअटाउने
> एउटा देशको कति साँगुरो चित्र कोरिरहेको रहेछु...!!
> (पुजन राई, चित्र, पृ. २५५, २५६)

> *Then for five marks in exam*
> *Drew the map of my country*
> *Erased redrawing again*
> *Sometimes Galefu, next time Paro*
> *Then would appear a country in totality*
> *My country*
> *Now I regret here at this point*
> *Why did I draw the country where I could not adjust?*
> *How narrow map did I draw of my country then.*
> *(Pujan Rai, "Drawing", p. 255-56)*

This poetic persona is very subtly indicating the confined space in the state where the poet was born. It looks as if this persona is

very naïve but from within the innocence state readers will get deep politico-cultural meaning of restricting the country, where the common citizens can exist and act more autonomously. For reaching that state of autonomy, politico-cultural structures have to be restructured by keeping the secular aesthetics at the core. But, it does not mean that individual or community have no religious autonomy. They do have the religious and cultural freedom, but state and religion are separate. There are different perceptions about secularism. But, this researcher takes it in neutral sense. Secularism is not against any religion, culture and identity. Identity is essential part of human's everyday life. This researcher believes that religion should be separate from the state power politics. Religion should be for the welfare of the people, not to exploit the oppressed groups, their identity and their culture. State's favor to one religion or culture can offer space to the dominant group to oppress the marginalized groups and their culture. State's favor to one religion or culture can produce hegemonic structure, where dominant group gets structural dividend as their innate rights. The oppressive evil of purity and impurity is one of the products of it.

In its history of digital archive, since 2010, the blog bhutansesliterature.com has archived about 4000 literary pieces of more than 300 authors (Dahal, 2023). Jameson (1981) believes that literary critics should always pay attention to the historicity in which a work was produced and says, "Always historicise." Foucault (1980) argues, knowledge and truth is connected to power. When power oppresses the subaltern groups, an individual is helpless. In that context, people are compelled to express the predicament as the poetic persona is compelled to express longing to the root of origin:

सबै थोक छ
र म फिका छु...
म माटो सम्झँदै

बाटो काटिरहेको छु,
यसो ठेस लागे पनि हुने
'आइया आमा' भन्ने थिएँ,
कसैले मेरो भाषा नबुझे पनि
अव्यक्त मनको कुरा प्रस्फुटन हुने थियो...
म एक्लो छु...खोजीहरेछु...
विस्थापित भुटानी समाजको पुनःनिर्माण !
(थुतेन दोर्जी ड्रुक्पा, देशविहीन हुनुको दुखाइ, पृ.१२२, १२३)

*I do have everything*
*And I am hollow*
*I'm recalling my land*
*Moving on forwards*
*I wish I would stumble*
*I would say, 'oh my mom'*
*My inner words would echo*
*I'm lonely...longing...*
*The restructuring of our society*
*(Thuten Dorji Drukpa, "Pains being Stateless", p. 122-23)*

This poetic persona in the resettled land is longing for their communal identity, which is in crisis. The exclusionary state's structure is not enough to this persona to exist and speak. In a very fragmented form, the persona is longing to restricting the nation, where his identity is secured. His isolated identity is longing community again. For that he is seeking ways to restructuring the society of the exile Bhutanese. In the subconscious, there lives the longing of secular space, where each language, religion and culture could exist equally. Such subaltern consciousness is hard to accumulated and transform them into counter-hegemonic collective movement.

Ranjit Guha and other subaltern studies group members believe that counter-hegemonic or authentic subaltern consciousness is available in fragmented forms of artistic and literary expressions, which are distorted by the oppressive elitist power hegemony.

Rewriting history of the subaltern from fragmented documents or living memories is a tough work as Guha and subaltern studies group members believe. For that collective intellectual movements with counter-hegemonic consciousness is essential. Bhutanse Nepali diasporas are trying to work collectively. Before the publication of *Punarwaspachhika Bhutani Nepali Kavita*, some anthologies are available, i.e. *Samjhanaka Khandit Akritiharu* (Images of Fragmented Reminiscences), *Dabaiyeka Awazharu* (Oppressed Voices), *Kangaroo ko Deshbata* (From the Country of Kangaroo) *Samakalin Bhutani Nepali Katha* (Contemporary Bhutanese Nepali Stories) along with few dissertations, texts related to life writings (biographies, autobiographies, memoirs), short and long fictions and essays. After the publication of *Punarwaspachhika Bhutani Nepali Kavita*, a collective group has also published Journey to Bhutan for Justice (November 2022). According to the editors Giri & Sharma (2022), this book has been brought into public as an attempt to let the world know the truth about the Bhutanese refugee problems via an *ad hoc* social organisation *Tshinyen Meto*. In total 47 intellectuals/activists (well-wishers) from various countries and Bhutanese diaspora have contributed in the anthology Journey to Bhutan for Justice. As editors claim, this book will also be considered as a credible document for assessing the Bhutanese refugee issue to pave the way for justice (Giri & Sharma, 2022: p. xxv). This is another platform for counter-hegemonic actions, though this anthology also shows meager concern on secular aesthetics while seeking journey to Bhutan for justice. Intellectuals also have limitations. Speaking truth to power and speak for the secular aesthetics is rare in this anthology, too. But, this research is primarily concerned to secular aesthetics in Bhutanese Nepali poems.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Human behavior is cultural construct. Religion and culture influence human's everyday life. As Spivak (1988) argues, seeking autonomous voices of the subaltern is a difficult job to the

intellectual because in the words of Gramsci (1999) the subalterns are often hegemonic to the dominant group and the intellectuals (both the traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals) are explicitly and implicitly play role as maintainers of elitist status quo. The autonomous counter-hegemonic actions are possible when intellectuals get more secular spaces to speak and act. The more secured secular spaces the intellectuals get with the counter-hegemonic consciousness, the more autonomously subaltern liberation friendly actions are possible in micro-political level. How did the editors and actors of the anthology *Punarwaspachhika Bhutani Nepali Kavita* play role is one of the recent spaces for discussion in Bhutanese Nepali literature. Though the actors, who were active to produce this anthology, look confined within the hegemony of the dominant politico-cultural forces, however, some of the texts inside the anthology are eloquent, to some extent, to establish and expand counter hegemonic consciousness with secular aesthetics. The actors could have given furthermore spaces to secular aesthetics in their long editorial cum introduction; the incorporation of such texts in the second section could possible. They are most probably aware that the counter-hegemonic consciousness is not a radical and extremist thought; it is practical and essential to expand secular aesthetics via literary activities so that spaces for justice to all with equity and freedom could be expanded.

Bhutanese diaspora is familiar with secular aesthetics while in exile. They are familiar with Indian and Nepalese politics of secularism and literary practices that concern with secular aesthetics. Nepal is never colonised, but it is never free from rigid politico-cultural hegemony. Coulter-hegemonic space with secular aesthetics has offered spaces to the Bhutanese diaspora, where formulating counter-hegemonic intellectual groups for counter-hegemonic actions is possible. In democratic countries, where they have been living now, counter-hegemonic academic actions are not taken as radical or extreme thought. Such groups are rather taken as creative intellectuals to the subaltern

communities. As the intellectuals of the subaltern studies collectives are running counter-hegemonic academic movements collectively, globally, the Bhutanese diaspora is waiting some sorts of collective counter-hegemonic academic movements with secular aesthetics. *Punarwaspachhika Bhutani Nepali Kavita* fails to affirm this current secular aesthetics from the core of the counter-hegemonic space; however, some expressions as quoted above exist into fragmented forms.

The anthology is a platform for seeking the subaltern consciousness, from where we can initiate some sorts of discourses on secular aesthetics in Bhutanese Nepali literary practices as an act of continuing counter-hegemonic actions. These sorts of actions prevent literary actors or intellectuals from becoming servile traditional intellectuals. Counter-hegemonic actions engage intellectuals to subaltern-friendly new intellectuals ready to intervene in novel area with collective consciousness. The collective journeys, with counter-hegemonic consciousness, support to the secular aesthetics. Bhutanese Nepali diaspora is longing serious intellectual discourses on secular aesthetics.

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# Bhutan's Employment Conundrum: Challenges and Opportunities

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## ABSTRACT

Increasing unemployment, absence of government action in job creation, small market and lack of entrepreneurial opportunities are troubling the Bhutanese population, especially youths, in recent years. The young and educated population is looking for greener pastures overseas and the economy is surprisingly becoming remittance reliant. There are multiple factors within the country that need government attention in order to improve the employment rate for university graduates. The country has a small private sector that hardly can create any new workplaces. The biggest employer is the public sector – that too is shrinking in recent years – in response to costs cutting measures. This study focuses on the historical structure of the Bhutanese job market, current trends and future prospects and what it means for the Bhutanese economy in general.


**Keywords**: Economy, employment, job market, youths

## Introduction

Bhutan has attained steady economic growth over the last several years and is relatively better than its neighbours. It recorded GDP growth averaging 5.4 % between 2010- 2018 (NSB, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic hit it hardest, like other countries, yet the impact was worst on Bhutan considering its import-based economy. This means, opportunities for new graduates to get employed shrunk further. The pandemic has challenged Bhutan's aim of limiting the youth employment rate to 6-6.5% during the Twelfth five-year plan period 2018-23. In 2021, the youth

unemployment rate stood at 20.9%, though the overall unemployment rate was only 4.8% (NSB 2022).

Bhutan's population increased to 763,249 (NSB 2022) in 2022 from 634,982 (NSB 2005) in 2005. As per Population and Housing Census 2005, the youth population accounted for 23% in 2005 while as per the 2017 census report, this population declined to 19.8%. The urban youth population increased by 16.8% in 2017 compared to 2005 while the rural youth population declined by 13% during the period. While youth travel to cities in search of job opportunities and a better lifestyle, the metropolis is unable to create opportunities to match the demand.

The high rate of unemployment among the youth has become one of the most discussed development issues today among policymakers. Despite the continual increase in the number of youths entering the labour market over the years, there has been a limited number of employment opportunities created from both the public and private sectors. Owing to the excess supply, the country is likely to face further deterioration in youth employment in the short and medium term.

The Labour Force Survey 2020 projected the youth unemployment rate to be 22.6 % in that year, almost double the rate of 11.9% in 2019. This decreased to 20.9% in 2021. Every year, approximately 20,000 youths enter the job market. Except for 2019, Bhutan marked an increasing trend in the unemployment rate over recent years (Kuensel, 2020).

Bhutanese job market and economy can be blamed for inherent structural complexities that failed to absorb young graduates to maximize its growth. The causes of unemployment among Bhutanese youth are varied including but not exclusively, mismatch of supply and demand of skills, youths' preference for office jobs over physical labour, small job market and lack of family support while unemployed.

If the issue is not addressed adequately and timely, it is likely to cause social and economic issues for the country. Studies have shown that unemployment and poor socio-economic condition have a strong correlation to youths committing crimes and coming to conflict with law (Gyeltshen *et.al*, 2015). Failure to find employment results into demoralisation, depreciation in their human capital and deterioration in their employment prospects which leads to social exclusion (Clark & Summers 1982). There are also cases of youth people who cannot find employments and engage in criminal activities, drug addiction and prostitutions which take them away from normal labour markets (Msigwa & Kipesha 2013).

## Causes

According to UNICEF (2020), there are 621 million young people aged 15-24 years old who are not in education, employment or training. About 75 million young people are trained but have no job. Almost 90% of all young people live in developing countries like Bhutan. And over a billion young people enter the labour market, most of them to face a future of irregular and informal employment.

The reason for youth unemployment around the world varied. The youth unemployment problem has also been linked with educational background and qualification young people acquired compared to the skills demanded in the labour market. There has been skills mismatch between the youth and the labour market which increases the problem of youth unemployment (Dimian, 2011). Other factors include market demand, education, wages and labour market policies among others that have direct impact on determining youth employment.

Changes in the age structure of the population, or demographic transformation, also determine the youth unemployment rate and 'affect the situation of youth labour markets' (Salvador & Killinger,

2008). For instance, a country with aging population is likely to create employment opportunities for youths, as the workforce required to be replaced.

Over the years, a significant number of educated youths have remained unemployed as compared to uneducated youth, particularly in the context of developing countries (Dickens & Lang, 1995). They attributed this phenomenon to a mismatch between the supply of education and demand for labour.

Byron Mook (1982), in his study of Sri Lankan labour market, noted that the real unemployment among educated youths is not as high as official figures often indicated. Only a few young people thought about self- employment possibilities, but its pursuance is obstructed by lack of finance.

In a study from Pakistan, by Qayyum (2007) likelihood of a youth with primary education being unemployed increases by 2.3%; for college graduate, the probability increases by 18.3%; and for highly educated youth, the probability of becoming unemployed is as high as 20.1%.

As per Isengard (2003), unemployment rates do not fall steadily as the level of education increases, but rather depends on whether someone has a vocational qualification, in Germany, because specific occupational skill carries more weight than formal education. A successfully completed apprenticeship seems to be an important selection criterion in the labour market. Bhutan does not have apprenticeship culture, adequately developed.

**Problems in Bhutan**
There are many determinants of youth unemployment in Bhutan such as 'skills mismatch, lack of economic diversification, and deep-rooted societal beliefs and values in Bhutanese society' (Pem, 2022).

The youth unemployment rates in Bhutan remained consistently high for last several years despite some government efforts to address them. The economic growth that Bhutan saw over the last several decades did not translate into creating opportunities for the new generation. Economic growth had no impact on the reduction of unemployment rates in Bhutan (Tenzin, 2019). The reason being the single industry – hydropower – that has been pushing the GDP growth in Bhutan while this industry primarily employs Indian and other foreign expatriates.

Contribution for strong economic growth is from non-labour-intensive sector. Agriculture sector still is the largest industry creating few new employment opportunities. The industry grew by an average of 2.9% annually during the last decade. The service sector, that employs on average 38% of young people recorded growth at 8.4% annually and industry sector employing 18.5% youths grew by 4.8%, as per Labour Force Survey 2019. Construction industry observed significant growth – mostly the hydropower projects - but remain far behind generating employment opportunities. This industry generally requires physical labour, which is not a preference for Bhutanese graduates. The social dogma in the Bhutanese society plays a vital role here – that educated individuals must have an office-based job, not a one that requires physical labour. Manufacturing sector employing 9% of the country's young work force recorded an annual average growth of 7.1% (NSB 2019).

The skills mismatch between market demand and labour supply is attributed to traditional teaching methods still practiced in the country. Tenzin (2015) and Tantipongkul & Wangmo (2017) found the effect of higher educational attainment significantly associated with youth unemployment in Bhutan. They said that completion of a lower secondary education raises the likelihood of being unemployed by 1 percentage point; middle secondary by 1.7; higher secondary by 2.7; and, degree and masters by 5.5 percentage points.

Rabten (2014) noted education and training system has not adequately prepared the youth for work. They lacked the required skills, experience, attitude and are not aware of labour market information. The more educated youths are, they are less likely to be employed in Bhutan.

This is opposite to what has been seen in other developing countries. Isengard, (2003) found the level of education contributes significantly towards the individual's prospect of finding an employment. As the level of education rises, the probability of unemployment decreases.

The higher unemployment problems with educated youths in Bhutan is certainly linked to mismatch between the education and skills in relation to the changing job market requirements. While Bhutan has improved general literacy rate and net school enrolment rate, country's education policy, specifically, the tertiary education requires serious re-thinking (NSB, 2020).

Education in Bhutan is focused on imparting core academic knowledge that does not consider the changing job pattern and market demands. The new university graduates who enter the job market every year receive a shock response that they lacked adequate skills required for the job they are aspiring for, despite attaining university qualification.

The young graduates have skills deficiencies such as work ethics, unrealistic career/job expectations, interpersonal skills, reliability, creativity and commitment. Bhutanese education system encourages lots of memorisation to go to the higher grades and hardly tests for logical and analytical thinking, creativity and imagination (Rabten, 2014).

Bhutan also records disparity in employment opportunities between urban and rural areas. Though experiences from other

countries show urban areas have higher employment opportunities, this has not been the fact with Bhutan. Youth unemployment in Bhutan is higher in cities compared to rural areas. The rural-urban migration is a big phenomenon in Bhutan, but cities have failed to create opportunities for migrating youths. In 2018, youth unemployment was highest in Paro (38.5%) followed by Thimphu (29.8%) and Sarpang (19.9%) while Pema Gatshel reported zero unemployment rate in the year.

Female job seekers are less likely to be hired compared to their male counterparts. No research has been conducted to understand logic behind the trend but generally attributed to gender-biased perception and male dominated decision makers. Also, the labour force participation rate differs significantly between male and female, particularly among urban females. The likely reason would be females exiting job market following marriage to look after kids and manage household business.

## Policy Instruments

There are inadequate policy instruments and regulations fostering employment opportunities for job seekers, including youths. Only a few vague provisions in laws do not make it the government responsibility of creating job opportunities. Country's constitution underscores creating enabling conditions for the individuals and in generating sufficient jobs for livelihood.

The Labour and Employment Act of Bhutan 2007 provides some legal protection governing employment and working conditions of the nation's workforce. Ironically, the Act says it's the vision of the King, not of an elected government. The act ensures that laws, rules and regulations related to employment are equally applied to protect the nation's workers - both employers and employees, including job seekers.

The National Employment Policy 2013 stipulates to achieve full, protective, meaningful, gainful, and decent employment for the

people of Bhutan. 'The Royal Government shall place employment generation at the core of national and local socio-economic development planning to address the employment needs of its citizens particularly, the youth and vulnerable sections of the society. Each local government shall be responsible for the creation of local employment opportunities.' It encourages, leading businesses and employers to 'provide entrepreneurship information and counselling services, conduct business competitions and facilitate networking opportunities for youth entrepreneurs.'

The likelihood of remaining unemployed among youths decreases by 21% with every additional year of their age (NSB, 2020). This means youths have to wait longer after completing their studies, to get gainful employment. This will have a negative impact on the national economy if young populations waste their resourceful ages without work.

The government had increased paid maternity leave for new mothers from three to six months (Subba, 2016). The policy measure failed to attract more women into workforce, rather encouraged employer to prefer male applicant to avoid business disruption during maternity leave. Additionally, the six months maternity leave privilege has not been implemented by the private sector.

The government job continues to remain the most preferred employment choice over other enterprises for the majority of the youth in Bhutan (BBS, 2015). But it does not have capacity to include everyone completing university. In 2019, approximately 20% of those completing university landed in government job. This has changed significantly in recent year with Royal Civil Service Commission laying off large number of employees (Lamsang, 2023) under new campaign 'small, compact and efficient civil service' (Rinzin, 2021). The share of civil service compensation now accounts for more than a third of domestic

revenue, raising concerns of fiscal sustainability. The challenge now is to be able to adjust to the new reality of "doing more for less" and focus on the outcomes society needs and wants (Dorji, 2021).

**Efforts**
There had been several efforts from the government to address the increasing youth employment. Skills shortage is one of the issues that the government is required to address. In the 2022-23 budget, the government allocated Nu 1.6B for skills development trainings to the youth in 108 areas (Choden, 2022).

The biggest initiative taken by the government so far is *Gyalsung*. The project operates from five centres across the country - Jamtsholing (Samtse), Tareythang (Sarpang), Pemathang (Samdrup Jongkhar), Khotokha (Wangdueprodrang) and Bondeyma (Mongar). The project expects to train at least 13,000 youths every year in multiple fields. The project is envisioned as a one-year integrated training program mandatory for all youths attaining the age of 18 and if in school – upon completion of grade twelve. The one-year training includes three months of basic military training followed by nine months of specialised training in various fields ranging from home construction technologies, computing and entrepreneurship to focused development of skills in agriculture[1]. Together with this, the Royal Palace also runs DeSuung programme that organises para-military training and entrepreneurial skills. The trainings are be followed by field experiences associated with business and entrepreneurial entities – with hopes that they will eventually lead to engagement of youths in meaningful economic activities such as self-employment and entrepreneurship. DeSuung also runs Business Incubation and Start-ups Centre[2] to facilitate the youths to use their skills in meaningful way.

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[1] http://www.gyalsunginfra.bt/?page_id=175
[2] https://desuung.org.bt/about-dsp/

Additionally, the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources runs Youth Employment and Livelihood Programme to help youth access employment opportunities. Critical skills training program are also provided to improve skills and creativity. To progress entrepreneurships and start-ups, Cottage and Small Industry and start-up flagship programmes worth Nu 1.2B have been introduced (Lhamo, 2020).

Other major effort from the government is opening up foreign employment opportunities. The Overseas Employment Scheme was started in 2013. Over 8,000 individuals, mostly youths, have migrated to other countries in search of jobs (Pem, 2022). Most of these Bhutanese migrated to Middle East. When several Bhutanese sent to Japan under the similar scheme (Learn and Earn) faced trouble (Quinn, 2020), government efforts were seriously questioned. However, the trend to travel overseas looking for employment opportunities is gaining momentum. Those travelling to advanced economies under dependent visa and seeking employment opportunities are also increasing. The growing remittances (Zangpo, 2021) that Bhutan is receiving in the last several years have motivated youths to seek green pastures overseas.

Guaranteed Employment Programme, Direct Employment Scheme, Youth Employment Scheme, Graduate Skills Programme, Youth Employment and Rural Entrepreneurship – all attentions have focused on creating employment opportunities for youths. The efforts have not yielded any meaningful outcome so far. All these schemes facilitate improving skills for the youths to match the market demands. However, only small efforts are directed on actually creating vacancies in the job market.

## Conclusions
Increasing youth unemployment has received sufficient attention from the government. Several initiatives have been taken to

address the issue. The initiatives are yet to provide concrete outcome that the issue has been properly addressed.

The macroeconomic indicators show that Bhutan has achieved good economic growth in the last decade improving various socio-economic dimensions such as education, health, poverty and disposable income. However, the microeconomic indicators show serious challenges for the economy if youth unemployment are not addressed on time. The policies and initiatives have not translated the vision into reality.

The country requires serious consideration to overhaul its curriculum and education system. Class-based teaching learning practices should be replaced with more practical such as apprenticeship that helps gain both knowledge and skills required by the market. The curriculum must be prepared in the workplaces, not inside the four walls. Work experiences increase employment prospects or motivate self-entrepreneurship.

Desperately searching for a more promising future, (job seekers) migrate to other countries where they will struggle to find work and a better life. Their plight also has major implications for national companies and global businesses seeking to expand or invest in frontier markets that hold economic promise. Chronic youth unemployment puts a brake on national economies, and the lack of literate and skilled young workforce limits businesses' ability to generate higher growth, better profits and more jobs (Albright, 2017).

Together, the job seekers must change their mindset that civil service is not the only employer. While government must facilitate expending private sector, job seekers must look for opportunities in private sector who are more important in terms of contribution to the national economy. It is crucial to promote private sector development and make the employment in the private sector attractive for job seekers, ensuring job security mechanisms and

other fringe benefits. There is need to introduce government incentives for those starting their own business – such as interest free funding, tax concessions etc. This will diversify the economy, which Bhutan seriously need today to end reliance on hydropower for economic growth.

Job seekers must end their prejudices on job selection – between blue-collar and white-collar jobs. Societal stigma, real or perceived, is prevalent in Bhutan - blue-collar vocational employment is not held with equal to 'white-collar' options. This prejudice must end – all jobs have similar respect, and all jobs contribute equally towards a stronger economy.

Bhutan has potential for expansion of tourism industry. In 2022, the government increased visa fees for foreign travellers (Wangdi & Gyeltshen, 2022), which will discourage tourists in longer run. Expansion of tourism industry will open opportunities in hospitality and other businesses linked to it.

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# Keeping Activism Alive: Bishwanath



Bishwanath Chhetri (BNC) has been a leader of the Bhutanese people since the conception of the Student Union of Bhutan (SUB) in 1988. He continued his activism in exile and in the United States of America after the refugees were resettled in global north countries. He is actively involved in activities for preserving Bhutanese identity and history. He has inspired a generation of people with his words and actions. He is a member of the Governor's Advisory Commission on Asian-Pacific American Affairs in Pennsylvania. Govinda Rizal of The Bhutan Journal (TBJ) approached Chhetri for a written conversation. Here is the full interview.

**TBJ: What are your earliest memories of Bhutan and your first experiences as a refugee in Nepal?**
**BNC:** I grew up in a small village called Kharbandi Basty under Ghumauney Block, Samchi District. My parents were subsistence farmers and owned five acres of land. We cultivated our land and raised cattle. Fetching drinking water from spring took about fifty minutes, fetching firewood that took a day, and taking care of cows constituted some of our daily chores besides attending school. It was a tight-knit community, and we were content with what we had. As a child, I remember having to contribute weeks of free labour to government projects. When I was in grade IV or V, I went to work on an irrigation channel construction site for a week and when I was in grade VII, I spent two weeks in a labour camp on a road construction site.

I went to village school up to grade VIII and then was sent to Paro Central School for grades IX & X where I first came across students from non-Nepali speaking communities. After graduation from

Paro, I went to Sherubtse College, the only college in Bhutan to pursue higher studies.

Around 1988, the Bhutan government introduced a series of laws and policies. These laws and policies directly attacked our citizenship, and cultural and religious rights. Having no means to voice our grievances, we secretly organised ourselves into a student group called the Students Union of Bhutan. The main purpose of the group was to raise awareness of the people, particularly students in other institutes of learning and our hope was to petition the government. I along with other colleagues visited Nepal to meet former Royal Advisory Council member TN Rizal who was at that time in exile in Nepal & together formed Peoples Forum for Human Rights in Bhutan on 7 July 1989. When the government came to know about my activities, I was arrested on November 5, 1989, taken to Thimphu and after months of interrogation, on 5 February 1990 without any formal charge or trial, I was put in solitary confinement in Rabuna military prison until December 1991.

After my release from prison, I spent a few months in the capital city. I managed to obtain a 15-day permit to go to the south to visit my village. I met a few village folks at the border town and learned that most villagers including my parents had left the country. Seeing no point in going to the village, I decided to go to Nepal to look for them.

When I reached Nepal in February 1992, I came across many leaders who were active in helping the people coming from Bhutan. At that time, people were camping on the banks of Kankai Mai and Timai. I along with other prominent members of the community visited different camps, organised meetings, and interacted with people. I registered myself in Maidhar. Friends built a makeshift hut for me on the bank of the river.

Finding food and shelter for the people who were coming from Bhutan in large numbers became a priority for us. Being a SUB member, youth and student leader, education for refugee children became a personal challenge and mission for me and my colleagues. We mobilised former students, village elders, former teachers and parents to start the education program in the camp. First, it started with classes in the open and as agencies like Caritas Nepal and UNHCR got involved, the education program began to take shape. By mid-1992 other camps were set up in Goldhap, Khudunabari, Sanischare, Beldangi I, II & III. We set up schools in all these camps and had about 13,000 students. We created the Bhutanese Refugee Education Coordination Committee (BRECC) to better coordinate the education program. We ran and managed the schools until the project was formally handed over to Caritas Nepal on 29 August 1992. Even after the handover, two Central Committee members of the SUB, Tek Bir Chhetri and Tara Bir Subedi were closely involved with Caritas/BRECC as Coordinators while the rest of us in the SUB focused on advocacy work.

**TBJ: You were a pioneer of the Student Union of Bhutan. The formation of that organisation provided a pretext for the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) to implement its depopulation strategies. Was the formation of the SUB an organic idea or an instigated activity?**

**BNC:** SUB came into being on 23 March 1988 to resist the excesses of the Bhutan Government. We witnessed attacks on our religion and culture and our citizenship was revoked. The Government introduced one law after another to make sure we lived under total subjugation and as second-class citizens. We were left with no choice but to raise our voices against such repressive policies. The existing laws and environment did not allow us to put our grievances democratically. It meant arrest, torture, imprisonment, and even death. Hence the need to organise ourselves clandestinely. On 23 March 1988, twenty-five

of us in the college met secretly on the bank of the Rongtong river in Kanglung Bhutan. We visited and organised similar meetings at the Teacher Training Institute in Samchi (Samtse) and Deothang Polytechnic College (currently known as Jigme Namgyal Engineering College) in Deothang (Dewathang) and interacted with government officials from south. As the government's mistreatment of Nepali-speaking people intensified, many people started looking for ways to register their dissatisfaction against the government's repressive and discriminatory policies. The formation of the SUB was purely organic and necessitated by the prevailing situation. A natural instinctive reaction to shake off the yokes of injustice.

**TBJ: Was the Nepali language a trigger, a fuse, or a catalyst of the conflict in Bhutan?**

**BNC:** Please be clear that it is not a conflict. It would be misleading and mischaracterisation to project it as a conflict when it is a mere natural reaction to the government's one-sided attack that threatened our very existence and identity as Nepali Speaking Bhutanese.

Restriction on the Nepali language was one of many reasons. The Citizenship Law and how the census was conducted only in the south in 1988 was aimed at dividing the family into different categories and taking away their citizenship, Imposition of *Driglam Namza*, which demanded every Bhutanese regardless of his/her religious, cultural and racial background wear *Gho* & *Kira* at all times, speak the prescribed language, follow one religion, and a series of other discriminatory and repressive measures that directly attacked our distinct identity and severely curtailed our human rights forced us to voice our dissatisfaction.

**TBJ: You were arrested, put behind the bar and released with a promise of a good life. What made you choose the road less travelled?**

**BNC:** I chose the road less travelled even before my arrest. The good life would have come at a huge price for us the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese. And many of us had to choose between a so-called good life and a dignified and honourable life. We chose the latter knowing full well it meant arrest, jail and possibly death. I think it is the duty of every conscious and educated being to stand up against injustice whenever & wherever it happens. We owe this to our country and our people.

After the release, I was offered a job, but when I refused to take up the job I started getting calls from the then foreign minister Dawa Tshering pressuring me to start working. They wanted to send me to another remote part of the country which I resisted, and I eventually took up a job with Bhutan Olympic Committee in Thimphu. I was followed everywhere I went. Plain-clothed Royal Body Guard personnels started knocking on the doors in the middle of the night. People avoided meeting me and were too scared to talk to me. Things got worse when we met the Amnesty International (AI) fact-finding team during its visit in January 1992. It was a closed-door meeting where we discussed treatments in the prisons and the prevailing situation in the country. When the AI team in its meeting with government officials raised the instances of ongoing human rights violations in the country, we were suspected of reporting the issue. Soon after, I was summoned by the foreign minister and quizzed on why and what we discussed with the AI team. The government was not happy about our meeting.

When we were in prison, we were not aware of the development outside, hardships and sufferings that ordinary villagers have been through. I feel a tremendous sense of responsibility and gratitude towards my colleagues and international organisations who fought for our release. Not to join them in the fight after my release would be a betrayal of my conscience. Even to this day, I owe my life and

freedom to those who gave up the prime of their life fighting for justice.

**TBJ: How did education in exile take its shape? Who are the actors of those early days you still remember?**

**BNC:** I gather you are talking about the education in the camps. True SUB being an organized body, its volunteers were at the forefront of this initiative, actively mobilising resources. We worked closely with the Human Rights Organisation of Bhutan (HUROB), parents, teachers, former students, and village elders to make this project take root. I certainly am going to miss many names. A few names of SUB workers that come to my mind are Ram Das, Ram Karki, Arjun Ghatane, Tek Bir Chhetri, Tara Subedi, Kamal Dhittal, Narayan Timsina, Gauri Shanker Niroula, Mukti Raj Gurung-apologies to countless volunteers whose names I certainly missed.

**TBJ: When the refugees from Bhutan began to pour into Nepal, what were the types of discussion that used to take place in your circles of friends?**

**BNC:** The exodus started after September-October 1990 mass peaceful demonstrations in the districts in the south and the Bhutan government let lose its security forces. 1990 and onwards saw Bhutan's propaganda machinery deployed at full throttle. Mass arrest, torture, rampant destruction of properties, harassment and eventually forcible eviction. The year 1992 & early 1993 was the peak, people arrived in truckloads every day.

Taking care of these people, and finding shelter and food became a priority for us. Maidhar became overcrowded, with over 24,000. An epidemic broke out and people, mostly children and the elderly, were dying in large numbers. No one knew, even the international agencies and the Nepal government, as to how to deal with the crisis and sudden flow of such a large number of

people. We had to forcefully occupy land belonging to the forest department in Dhukkurpani, which later became Beldangi I, II & III camps and Sanischare to set up new camps. While doing this, we were also trying to make the world aware of the excesses of the Bhutan Government and our struggle for human rights and democracy. Nobody thought we would be living as refugees for such a long time.

**TBJ: When the Bhutanese refugees were in a dilemma of repatriation and third-country resettlement, what were your gut suggestions?**

**BNC:** From the day one Bhutan was never serious about taking back the refugees. It was naive to believe that Nepal-Bhutan talks will lay a path for our repatriation. The process itself was flawed from the very onset. How can you expect the talk to succeed when the most important stakeholder of the crisis, the refugees and opposition groups, are excluded from the process? Bhutan managed to fool Nepal and the international community. Nepal failed us and more importantly, we in the opposition were a divided house and we staged a weak campaign. No denying there.

My gut feeling was driven by the reality on the ground and against the backdrop of the development mentioned above. No one deserves to live as a refugee in a camp. We don't have to live in the camp and endure unnecessary hardships to demand our right to return. And we in the leadership have no moral right to hold people, hostage, in the name of our fight for human rights and democracy. This, at least mostly in my circle across organisations, was clear. That is why I made that personal decision to come to the US and help many more to take the same route and together campaign with authorities here for third-country resettlement.

**TBJ: Where is the Bhutanese diaspora in terms of education, language, literature, science, sports and politics? What are the worst and the best of the**

## Bhutanese diaspora today? Is repatriation to Bhutan a 'forget and forgive" issue today?

**BNC:** It is heartening to see our folks, mostly young ones, doing tremendously well in different fields. Be it education, or business. They are the pride of our community, a symbol of resilience and hard work. Talking about the US, we are concentrated mostly in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Living in a community close to one another has enabled us to generate wealth, have a support system, and helped preserve our culture. There are downsides to it too. But the positives outweigh the negatives, therefore, I am not going to talk about the downsides here.

What concerns me most is, many among us have failed to seize the opportunity that has come our way. Dark shadows of the past still haunt us and many have not been able to break the shackles of the past. This is an unfortunate consequence of having to live as refugees in the camps for over two decades. This is one reason why I strongly believe that camp life must end for people to build a normal family and new life.

Forget & Forgive. It is easier said than done for those who have endured persecution first-hand. Forgive, as humans, we all must strive, but by asking to forget you are just being insensitive to the experience that person has undergone. It is an insult to those who died fighting for us, an insult to those who lost their family members or have their family members still in jail. Those advocating such ideas do not realise, in their quest to appear magnanimous or for an upmanship, how grave an injustice they are doing to the people, to the cause and to their struggle. This exactly is what perpetrators of human rights violation, not only in Bhutan but anywhere in the world wants. To speak in this language is nothing but to be the ambassador of the perpetrators.

No culture that I know of in the world asks its present generation to forget its past. Remembering our dead even if it is a natural

death, remembering our forefathers, and eulogising their sacrifice and works are the values deeply embedded in our culture. That is why we observe death anniversaries and make offerings and prayers for the departed soul. Should we stop doing that as well?

On the contrary, we should encourage people to revisit their past, talk about it proudly, openly and widely and loudly at every opportunity. This, I hope, will lay the path for their healing and perhaps force our perpetrators to rethink before committing heinous acts again. In the case of Bhutan in particular, those laws and policies that led to the revocation of our citizenship, denial of our religious and cultural rights, rampant destruction, occupation and seizure of our properties, arrest, imprisonment and eventual expulsion from the country still exist. There is no guarantee that Bhutan is not going to invoke the same measures and we see a repeat of history. If the perpetrator is not willing to forget it, let alone willing to forgive, then I do not understand what locus anyone has to ask the victims to forget it. If anyone is advocating such an idea, please STOP it.

**TBJ: What were the acts of historical importance (or heroism) in exile worth a mention in history?**

**BNC:** The heroism and sacrifice that do not find mention and are often lost in the noise of louder claims and counterclaims, is the sacrifice of our Bhutanese youths and students. They sacrificed the prime of their lives, their education and their career and raised the banner of resistance against injustice. People seldom talk about Man Bahadur Chhetri who died in custody on 3 November 1989 in Samchi (Samtse), we do not hear about the acts of resistance against the policies in the Deothang Polytechnic College, National Institute of Education (now known as Samtse College of Education), Sherubtse College since 1988 and many who were arrested and jailed even before the formation of a political party and 1990 demonstration.

Even in exile, youth has always been a part of every historic event. They were the youth and students who were at the forefront of the 1990 peaceful demonstrations, they opened refugee camps in Nepal, and started and worked in the education program. Be it the cycle rally, peace march to Bhutan, raising the banners of revolt in Phuntsholing, or advocating for third-country resettlement, our young and brave heroes never flinched even for a moment. I find it puzzling as to why the generation before us, particularly those in political parties find it hard to digest and accept this.

**TBJ: What is Bhutan's future, multiculturalism or a one-race nation? There are people of Nepalese descent in Bhutan. Do you suggest they learn the Nepali language and retain Nepali culture? What are your other suggestions?**

**BNC:** Multiculturalism is not a weakness but a strength of any country. The Sooner policymakers in Thimphu realise this, the better it is for the country. Bhutan's one-race nation approach is nothing but an attempt to run away from its reality and a desperate attempt by rulers to cling to power. Bhutan has always been a country inhabited by different ethnic groups. Everyone should be allowed to preserve their language, culture and religion and not impose one culture over another. The Nepali language is no exception. Having said that, everyone should be encouraged to use one language to conduct the country's official business.

**TBJ: Do you see or anticipate a tryst between the evicted people and the RGoB soon? If yes, why not now? Where do you find two parties lagging at present?**

**BNC:** No. It is a bitter reality that we all must acknowledge that Bhutan has successfully stamped out the movement for human rights and democracy of the 1990s and there is no possibility of reviving it. This does not mean Bhutan and those officials who

have blood on their hands should not be held accountable. This also does not mean that there will not be a demand for greater freedom and democracy by the people of Bhutan in the future.

When we opted for third-country resettlement and became citizens of the host countries, we essentially renounced our right to repatriation as Bhutanese citizens. Now, we owe our loyalty to our adopted homeland. For those still in the camps aspiring to return to Bhutan, I do not see anything happening or any group actively advocating for repatriation. I do not see any convergence between the aspirations of exiled Bhutanese and the intention of rulers in Thimphu. We must understand that governments have long memories. And anyone hoping to advocate the cause of the exiled community should know this. Those currently in positions of power in Bhutan are the same people who were once a part of the government's propaganda machinery.

Like any repressive regime in the world, Bhutan's consistently looking for the weak links among us to exploit the situation, causing disharmony and misunderstanding. Knowingly or unknowingly, we tend to fall into such traps sometimes. After 30 years of consistent beatings we should by now have learnt lessons and know how to protect our interests.

A culture is needed to debate and discuss issues facing us today. A kind of General Assembly of sorts where such ideas and issues of importance to the diaspora can be openly discussed.

**TBJ: What is your take on the philosophy of Gross National Happiness? Do you see Nepali Language and Hindu religion scaffolding or weakening the concept?**

**BNC:** Over one-fifth of the country's population was forced to flee the country in a matter of a few years. Bhutan's current economy is in shambles, unemployment is at its peak and Bhutanese are leaving the country in droves. This proves that the GNH is a

fundamentally flawed philosophy that has failed to meet the aspirations and needs of its citizens. I would look at the timing when the government aggressively tried to market this idea of GNH. The intention is questionable.

**TBJ: Where can new readers find information on Bhutan and Bhutanese issues?**

**BNC:** Either through state-owned media outlets or carefully cultivated and sponsored foreign media persons and writers, Bhutan has always tried to control the information and dictate the narratives of history. The voices of dissent and opposing views are effectively muzzled. That is why there is a glut of information in the public domain that is mostly misleading, inaccurate or incomplete. Under such a situation, readers should be careful when choosing sources. People should familiarise themselves with various laws of Bhutan like Citizenship Laws, Marriage Act, Citizenship Act, National Assembly Resolutions, different policies, and circulars that come out from time to time. Listen to stories of ordinary elders in the community and their contribution in nation building, read country reports brought out by international organisations like Amnesty International, European Human Rights Council, Lutheran World Service, Jesuit Refugees, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, Save the Children UK, Caritas Nepal. I also recommend to everyone to read The Bhutan Review, Bhutan Focus, and Bhutan News Service. People should not miss "Unbecoming Citizens" by Michael Hutt, and "Cultural Cleansing" by David B Thronson. There are also books written by people who have lived through the experiences. Oh, don't miss the "Dragon bites its tail" an article by Kanak Mani Dixit published in the July/August 1992 issue of the Himal magazine.

Realising the dearth of information on Bhutan, a few of us are involved in a project through an organisation called The Bhutan Research and Information Network (The BRAIN) to compile news, articles, and stories and make them available in the public domain.

If anyone wants to be part of the project, please contact the people involved in the project.

**TBJ: Is there anything else that you like to share through the Bhutan Journal?**
**BNC:** The Bhutan Journal, in the face of adversity, has been consistently working to keep the issue alive and provide the most relevant information to the mass. I commend the hard work of the team members in The Journal. I ask the readers to read Bhutan Journal for reliable sources of information on Bhutan.

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