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IN THIS ISSUE

Bhutanese Women in Public Spheres: Agency, Existence and Resistance

Tara Lal Shrestha

This research attempts to explore the existence of Bhutanese women in public spheres in exile. Bhutanese refugees- their (hi)stories about the resistance and existence. It blends with personal narratives, introduces instances of representative Bhutanese women who have marked traces in the resistance history. It also talks about women who exist outside the bourgeois public sphere via their case. Theoretical insights from Nancy Fraser have been used, who proposes subaltern public spheres instead of singular bourgeois public sphere. Presenting available foundations and insights, this paper posits possible ways to articulate plural public spheres for the Bhutanese women in exile.

Page 17

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Interim Governments in the Kingdom of Bhutan

Govinda Rizal

Globally, interim governments function as transitional entities managing governance during crises or regime transitions, facilitating the shift towards a stable governance structure. Their roles include supervising elections, maintaining law and order, addressing immediate socio-political challenges, fostering reconciliation, and upholding democratic values. In Bhutan, these bodies rectify political deviations, reconnect to autocratic governance norms, and transition selective authority to the succeeding government. During this transition phase, the interim governments orchestrate conditions conducive to a particular party's success in the later election, thus influencing the forthcoming government's composition.

Page 41

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Bhutan India Security Relations: Conflicting Cooperation

I P Adhikari

Bhutan-India relations are shaped by the changing geopolitical need and conflicting security arrangements in the Himalayas. The countries call it 'warm relations' which are rather defined by the changing political interest of the stronger neighbour - India. This article shall look into the geopolitical shift in the Himalayan belt, its influence in Bhutan and tuning of the Bhutanese security policies to suit the need of the hour. It shall also examine the reasons for shift in those security policies at different time periods.

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Interview with Dr DNS Dhakal

Deo Narayan Sharma (DNS) Dhakal is one of the few first-generation leaders of Bhutanese refugees who is still actively advocating for human rights, democracy, and amicable solutions for the Bhutanese people in exile and diaspora. He has authored many research articles and books delving into both professional subjects and issues about Bhutan and its people. His recent book, "Bhutan: Memoir of Refugee Struggle and Suggestions for an Amicable Resolution," is possibly the largest book on Bhutan published by the Bhutanese diaspora.

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Editorial

Bhutan has recently completed its fourth parliamentary election since starting the 'controlled' democratic exercise in 2008. Each election brings some surprises. It's been very hard to observe the pattern in clear form. This latest election was less controversial compared to the previous three.

The first election gave the smallest opposition party in the world while the second election turned this smallest opposition party into a winner to run the government. The third election surprisingly elected a new party to the government, which had a medical professional as its prime ministerial candidate with no prior political or bureaucratic experiences. The last election pushed the long-time opposition (*Druk Phunseum Tshogpa* or DPT) - the party with longest history of political participation in the parliamentary practice in the country - out of race. The party which ran the government for five years immediately before the election ended in distant fourth. But common feature observed is that whichever party receives southern votes wins the race. The eastern districts remain in opposition. The historical differences of east and west have always been a permanent feature of the popular mandate in Bhutanese democracy.

Between the publication of the fourth and the present issue, an election brought a tested party back to the government. The king has declared an ambitious mega-project in the land belonging to Bhutanese refugees, who await an appropriate welcome for repatriation, further complicating their return. In March 2023, Human Rights Watch released a report stating that only thirty-seven out of the expected sixty political prisoners in Bhutan have been tracked. One person from the list published by the HRW was released in September last year after completing a 25-year sentence. Other political prisoners still anticipate international pressure for their release. As of today, no refugee has been returned.

We have more surprises in this issue.

The mental health issue among the Bhutanese has been a subject of discussion in Diaspora. The issue is not limited, though those in United States have received major attention. The problem had existed while living as refugees in the camps in Nepal. The crisis had not led to disastrous outcomes at that period of time. The resettlement to third countries opened up the pandora's box. We have Devi Katel covering some of the fundamental causes, efforts and treatments alternatives about our community's mental health problem.

We have Tara Lal Shrestha discussing on the empowerment of Bhutanese women and their presence in the public spheres. It talks about women who exist outside the bourgeois public sphere via their case studies. Theoretical insights from Nancy Fraser -on subaltern public spheres – have been used to analyse the role of women in the Bhutanese society. Presenting available foundations and insights, this paper posits possible ways to articulate plural public spheres for the Bhutanese women in exile.

Govinda Rizal discusses the narratives and imperatives of interim government in Bhutan. Globally, interim governments function as transitional entities managing governance during crises or regime transitions, facilitating the shift towards a stable governance structure. Their roles include supervising elections, maintaining law and order, addressing immediate socio-political challenges, fostering reconciliation, and upholding democratic values. In Bhutan, these bodies rectify political deviations, reconnect to autocratic governance norms, and transition selective authority to the succeeding government. During this transition phase, the interim governments orchestrate conditions conducive to a particular party's success in the later election, thus influencing the forthcoming government's composition.

I P Adhikari analysis the historical and contemporary security connection between Bhutan and India and its implication on increasing geopolitical tension along the Himalayan belts. This article looks into the geo-political shift in the Himalayan belt, its influence in Bhutan and tuning of the Bhutanese security policies to suit the need of the hour. It also examines the reasons for shift in those security policies at different time periods.

We have reached out to DNS Dhakal for his view on current Bhutanese refugee stalemate, future of those still in camps and political opportunities that we had and will have.

Enjoy reading them and provide us with your critical feedback.

Mental Health Among the Resettled Bhutanese

Devi Katel[1]

ABSTRACT
The resettled Bhutanese, most specifically in the US, have widespread mental health issues. The problem had skyrocketed in early years of resettlement in the US and in other countries where Bhutanese refugees were settled. Centre for Disease Control and Prevention reported at least 16 suicides between 2009 and 2012 standing at 21.5 per 100,000 people. This was higher than the national average. The cases of such suicides have not been reported in the last couple of years, though. The issue is not completely absent in other countries where they have been resettled but due to the small population size, they receive less attention. There have been very few studies made on the cause of the issue to prescribe tentative solution. This article looks into the current situation of the mental health issues in the resettled communities and efforts made to address them.

Keywords: Refugees, suicide, social support, torture, trauma

Introduction

The resettlement of the Bhutanese refugees began in 2008 and since then over 90,000 of them have been resettled only in the US, in one of the largest refugee resettlement programs coordinated by

[1] Katel is Registered Nurse in Australia

the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in recent years (Gurung & Baidya, 2010; Shrestha, 2015). These refugees had fled the torture, rape, genocide and other forms of discriminations from officials of the Royal Government of Bhutan. They took asylum in Nepal for over two decades. Nepal denied them citizenship despite their cultural ties to the country (Chase & Sapkota, 2017), even though refugees themselves never formally approached Nepal for citizenship, Bhutan denied taking them back and the only solution remained was the resettlement in third countries.

When evicted out of the country, they were separated from family, displaced from their original homestead and lost citizenship rights of the country they lived for generations. Bhutan and Nepal continued to deny any rights to them. The separated family members never saw each other for decades. Many male members of the family remained in Bhutanese jail – bearing inhuman torture and mistreatments to this day.

Already unstable mental health status of these refugees compounded following their resettlement in the third countries. Cultural shock, adjusting to a new social environment, lack of employment, absence of trustworthy social services, and language barriers caused Bhutanese refugees to suffer from mental health issue (Ellis et al., 2016). Mental health is a public health concern among Bhutanese refugees, and these problems are experienced across generations (Rinker & Khadka, 2018).

The resettled refugee also did not receive proper guidance and support in their new country. They suffer from substance misuse, depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Cochran et al., 2013). There have been several cases of suicide in the resettled countries (Meyerhoff et al, 2018) including in US and Australia. One of the studies among the Bhutanese resettled in the US showed depression, anxiety and PTSD to be at significantly higher rates than the

general US population (Vonnahme et al., 2015). The way community understands mental health significantly differs with the understanding and approaches in the country they settled. Mental health used to be a dogmatic issue and public acceptance of having mental health problem is seen negatively in the community.

Despite this alarming situation, the resettled Bhutanese have been hesitant in utilising the publicly available mental health support and resources. Cultural barriers, acculturation stressors, economic barriers, language barriers, gaps in culturally responsive services, and the larger political environment of visible minority status (Adhikari et al., 2015) were some of the reasons for low adoption of these available support services.

Culturally responsive interventions, deeper understanding of the cause of mental health problems, public awareness, and direct community engagement would be some of the way to address the problem.

Challenging misconceptions

Personal stigma refers to the stigmatising attitudes and beliefs held by an individual, whereas perceived stigma refers to an individual's beliefs about the views of others (Aromaa et al, 2011; Golberstein et al, 2008). The resettled Bhutanese community has 'perceived stigma' around mental health. Although data are not available for Bhutanese refugees, the perception that a person who seeks psychological treatment is undesirable or socially unacceptable (Kitchener et al, 2006; Vogel et al, 2007). They don't want to be labelled as mentally unstable patient. The prevalent stigma shapes negative perceptions of mental illness and psychological treatment, and the fear of bringing shame to themselves as individuals and to their family are key reasons why they do not seek mental health services (MacDowell et al., 2020;

Poudel-Tandukar et al., 2019). Mental health is linked to 'brain–mind dysfunction' and seeking treatment for heart–mind distress seemed more socially accepted (Kohrt & Hruschka, 2010). This is not just within the resettled Bhutanese community. The stigma is prevalent in communities in Bhutan too. Most Bhutanese associate mental illness with madness, hence any kind of mental ill health is stigmatised (Zam, 2018).

Causes

When Bhutanese refugees started flying to third country under resettlement programme, they encountered many shocks – cultural, languistic, social, and economic stability. Further, the resettlement exacerbated the problem of family separation. The initial years of resettlement were traumatic for the refugees because they had no idea if their family separated by the resettlement would ever meet again.

Bhutanese refugee resettlement in Australia was held by policy makers and politicians in Australia as one of most successful resettlement programmes of the Australian government. The community quickly adopted to new way of life, enrolled to education and readily available to work. This has been the case in the US as well. Employment has been deemed the most important factor for successful refugee adaptation (Porter & Haslam, 2003). The resettled community in the US quickly became a new workforce while in other countries, it took years. Lack of adequate social security in the US forced them to seek employment while in other countries, social security support encouraged them for more time in education institutions than in the work field.

However, economic stability was another contributor in community's mental health crisis. Economic stress has been shown to be the most salient stressor that stems from difficulty finding employment and opportunities, largely because refugees

arrive with premigration challenges in resettlement spaces with underdeveloped networks and environments that often stigmatise refugee status (Baranik et al., 2018). Economic stressors, including cost, time off work, and childcare, compound the difficulties of navigating structural barriers to mental health treatment (van der Boor & White, 2020). Financial stressors and social stressors that cause disruption of family life among Bhutanese refugees were found to lead to increased risk of depression and suicidal ideation (Vonnahme et al., 2015).

Historical trauma

Refugees from Bhutan experienced prejudice in refugee camps in Nepal, as well as political violence and torture in their home country. It was extremely uncomfortable for the community to discuss the shared experience of marginalisation and isolation that refugees had, since it elicited unpleasant feelings and contributed to the stigmatisation of mental health. Generations after that did not witness the collective cultural trauma, but they still have to carry the burden of a severely disturbed life that caused them emotional, psychological, and physical harm.

People don't like to talk about the painful past. They feel they will become more isolated by expressing themselves as mentally ill or mentally unable to do things. They feel further isolation if their stories are told and shared. The fears stem from a history of political repression, perpetual threats, and disconnection and disempowerment in new spaces that leave refugees helpless and speechless (Shannon et al., 2015a, b). Even after achieving safety in places of resettlement, refugees are less likely to speak freely about their past and current suffering due to decades of silent survival (Shannon et al., 2015a).

Treatment

Existing misconception has been the significant challenge towards addressing the issue. There have been efforts made to address the problem, but they remain inadequate considering the magnitude of the issue.

The lack of help-seeking behaviour in the Bhutanese population may also highlight a gap between the need for mental health services and their use, as well as the availability, accessibility, and perceived efficacy of such services (Hagaman et al., 2016). Individuals would prefer to treat the problem at an individual level, than seeking professional advice and guidance. The most commonly reported reasons for not seeking treatment were a will to solve the problem on one's own and a hope that the problem would get better by itself (Aromaa et al, 2011). Bhutanese refugees feel more comfortable seeking help from friends and family than from professionals (Chase & Sapkota, 2017), and community generally views care seeking as negative and a sign of weakness (MacDowell et al., 2020). The traditional approach often relies on home remedies, and medical treatment is only sought when conditions are not resolved, presenting a potential challenge to health care provision (Maack & Willborn, 2018).

A large section of the community have lower level of education and a limited English fluency. Language barriers lead to fear and uncertainty regarding health outcomes, especially when interpreters are not available for important steps such as scheduling appointments or filling out paperwork (van der Boor & White, 2020). When interpreters are offered (e.g., for meetings with a service provider), concerns arise over the translation's accuracy and completeness, interpersonal dynamics, and the insertion of unsolicited personal attitudes or advice (van der Boor & White, 2020). At psychiatric care centres, language barriers and lack of interpreters can also lead to inappropriate treatment and reduced access to care. Lack of trust in translators/interpreters

results in many individuals not genuinely explaining their mental health status to the professionals. Lack of expertise in interpreting in the health care context leads to miscommunication between the health professionals and patients, resulting in wrong diagnosis and treatment. Community has limited well versed Nepali language interpreters in medical field to help patients and medical practitioners communicate accurately. The Nepali language has limited terminologies to describe mental health.

Culturally appropriate services are not readily available – which are effective in addressing the problem. Culture influences how people understand and make meaning of mental health, and exploring cultural dimensions of mental health behaviours necessitates qualitative modes of inquiry to actively "engage" culturally embedded points of view (Staples & Widger, 2012). While US has large population making it possible to institutionalise culturally sensitive care services, this may not be possible in other countries where Bhutanese have settled, such as Australia, Canada or New Zealand where population is coparatively small.

Mental health professionals are challenged with providing culturally responsive services because of significant gaps in their understanding of the cultural belief systems of subpopulations (Maleku & Aguirre, 2014, 2018). Further, they experienced discrimination from providers and staff members, which diminishes the likelihood they will seek additional services (Teunissen et al., 2014).

One study in the US found that the collective mental health experience of the Bhutanese refugee community remains largely unexpressed and unaddressed, which further contributes to the stigma associated with mental health (Maleku et al, 2022). Their collective survival, traumatic history of violence, discrimination, and marginalisation; along with the collective normalisation of

emotional distress in daily life, contribute to suppression of mental health expression (Sangalang & Vang, 2017). The resettled refugee community find it less helpful to share their suffering with community members sharing collective trauma (Shannon et al., 2015b). In Australian context, the support system for treating the trauma is almost absent. The community perception that health professionals merely prescribe remedies was diluted when these professionals instead focus on understanding the patient's perspective and finding possible solutions.

Community finds religious and spiritual practices better than the medical practices in treatment of the mental health. Engaging in culturally supportive rituals have helped promote mental well-being (Calabrese & Dorji, 2013); and religious and spiritual affiliation provide a sense of belonging and agency (Amit & Bar-Lev, 2015; Benson et al., 2012).

In a consultation in Australia, Service for Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors found that the interpersonal relationship and the close-knit community structure has a significant impact in keeping the community healthy, including minimising mental health issues (STARTTS, 2018).

Community-based initiatives formed around Bhutanese arts and literature, women's support groups, youth clubs, and sports have been used as mechanisms to bring the community together based on shared identity and experiences. Because refugee populations rely more on their social networks, community-based initiatives can provide collective platforms for cultural healing that promote positive mental well-being. As culture is a significant coping mechanism that helps to build resilience, the identified cultural ways of coping are crucial protective factors that can minimize risk factors for the overall psychosocial well-being of Bhutanese refugees (Pulla, 2016).

Holistic interventions that target culturally based collective healing and not just symptoms of mental health are crucial to bolstering resilience in this population (Maleku et al, 2022).

Conclusion

Generalised methods are insufficient to address mental health issues. Furthermore, addressing mental health in a society that has endured collective trauma from torture, family separation, relocation, and culture shock is more unsuitable. Westernised medications are not the only way to treat mental health issues with a stronger cultural component, that has been the attempt so far in address the mental health crisis among the resettled Bhutanese.

Services that are both socially and culturally acceptable are necessary. The community of Bhutanese emigrants needs to be made aware of the problem on a local level as well. The truth is that individualised services are necessary for older community members who did not receive formal education to alter their perceptions of what mental health is.

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Bhutanese Women in Public Spheres: Agency, Existence and Resistance

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ABSTRACT
This research attempts to explore Bhutanese women in public spheres in exile. Bhutanese refugees- their agency, resistance and existence- fascinated me since 2005, when the author was a Ph.D. fellow on subaltern studies. Visiting the refugee camps, the author figured out the roles of Bhutanese refugee women and the oppressed groups in public spheres. This qualitative paper blending with personal narratives introduces instances of representative Bhutanese women who have marked traces in the resistance history. It also talks about women who exist outside the bourgeois public sphere via their case studies and meager references available in fragments. Theoretical insights from Nancy Fraser have been used, who proposes subaltern public spheres instead of singular bourgeois public sphere. Presenting available foundations and insights, this paper posits possible ways to articulate plural public spheres for the Bhutanese women in exile.

Keywords: bourgeois public sphere, subaltern publics, women historigraphy.

Introduction

This paper explores the existence of Bhutanese women in exile with reference to Nancy Fraser's theory of subaltern public spheres. Jurgen Habermas firstly coined the idea of a "public sphere" in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* 1962, which was translated from German into English in 1989. For him, public sphere is a realm of social life where public opinion can be articulated in an

unrestricted form and important issues are discussed critically for shaping common interest (Habarmas, 1974). Unlike Habermas, who advocates of *one* public sphere, Fraser (1992) talks about subaltern publics.

Theoretically the idea of unrestricted or autonomous public sphere, as Habarmas talks, sounds fascinating. But in practice such an ideal space has never been established due to the absence of a truly equitable society. The space to practical autonomy, freedom and common interest oriented public role is far from the reality. Equal access to public opinion and participation are offered in practical sense for shaping collective agenda. Historically, marginalised groups are hegemonic within multiple layers.

Fraser (1992) suggested, such groups in practice form their particular space, the subaltern public spheres. Unlike official bourgeois public sphere, subaltern counter publics are discursive space where members of oppressed groups articulate alternative identities against exclusion. Fraser is more concerned to rethinking the public sphere. Unlike Habermas, who trances the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere mediating the state and citizens/society through critical discourse to common good, Fraser highlights exclusion and importance of forming counter publics of the oppressed groups. For her, as Antonio Gramsci argues, bourgeois public sphere is an instrument of forming and maintaining the structures of "hegemony." Since power relation persists on, as Michel Foucault (1988) argues, the ideal notion of seeking equality within bourgeois public sphere is a sweet dream. So, Fraser recommends forming counter publics that can be expanded up to wider publics for discursive contestation and antagonistic politics against common sense because hegemony, in the words of Gramsci, is established and sustained via common sense. Unlike the Habermasian notion of *one* public sphere, the notion of subaltern counter publics affirms to a nexus of multiple public spheres.

Bhutanese women in exile have played versatile roles in the history of 'unbecoming citizens' though the fragmented stories of Bhutanese women are sadly invisible in the bourgeois public sphere. The author has not been to Bhutan but engaged in reading and writing about Bhutanese refugee issues. This article is a part of author's personal narrative associated to reading about Bhutan and meeting Bhutanese people in exile. 'Bhutanese in exile' means the people from Bhutan either living in the refugee camps in Nepal or resettled in third countries. Some of them are living in India without refugee identity. Author visited refugee camps of Nepal frequently and meet poets, writers, teachers, and activists living in and outside the camps. Author met them, (and still) formally or informally, and engaged in discourses about Bhutanese issues. They were (are) all males.

Unlike pre-1990 Bhutan, in the camps, everyone could join the school irrespective to gender. Non-formal education programmes run in the camps offered adult women an opportunity to read, write and speak in public domain. Those who performed well became teachers in and outside the camps.

Bhutanese Refugee Women Forum mobilised women to engage in skill development trainings and non-formal education courses. They earned through knitting, tailoring and weaving. They played significant roles as sector and sub-sector heads, community coordinators, focal persons, secretaries and elected representatives (these are all elected office holders) in the camp management committees. Women representation quota was placed in the community organisations mandatorily. Organisations engaged in supporting women affected by violence. Males while seeking works or jobs outside, women stayed in the camps caring the family and also learning skills.

The third country resettlement has changed the scenario. Females have been working equal to males both outside their home and indoor. They have been independent, though most of them are engaged in labor force (Dahal, 2024). In Dahal's view, young women

are pursuing nursing profession. Some of them are entrepreneurs. Woman in resettled countries look more independent than before. The traditional family dynamics have been changed.

Still women whom author approached for key informant interviews (five resettled women) lamented that Bhutanese women exist nowhere in public sphere. Author approached a dozen Bhutanese people including 40 percent females and all respondents said that no Bhutanese women intellectual found visible giving public opinion in public sphere in exile. Sadly, in more liberal societies in the resettled countries, too, powerful public sphere exists far from their access. Bourgeois public sphere appears tougher for them to exist and speak. They believe that existing in public sphere in resettled countries appears not only tougher, those women who were visible in public sphere at the refugee camps in eastern Nepal also have been turned less visible in the resettled countries.

The key objective of this research was to initiate the discourse on Bhutanese women's existence in public spheres with specific questions: What are the public spheres of Bhutanese women? How do they struggle to exist and speak in public sphere? Why do they look invisible in public sphere? Keeping these questions into consideration, this qualitative paper primarily presents historical evidence of Bhutanese women in public spheres. Secondly, it documents role of Bhutanese women from exile that exists outside the mainstream. Finally, the paper presents possible ways to formulate subaltern counter public spheres for their agency, existence and resistance.

Methodology

This study based on personal interviews, case studies and desk reviews applies theoretical insight "subaltern public spheres" from feminist scholar Nancy Fraser (1992) with reference to Jurgen Habermasian notion of "bourgeois public sphere." In total 12 key informant interviews (KIIs) and four focused group discussions (FGDs) were conducted. In total nine KIIs out of 12 were conducted virtually since the informants have been resettled in the third

countries. Other three KIIs (two males and one female) were conducted with the Bhutanese refugees living in the camps in eastern Nepal. Two KIIs and two FGDs were conducted physically in Kathmandu, Nepal. Two further FGDs were conducted virtually. In total, 75 percent of the participants of both KIIs and FGDs were from resettled Bhutanese refugees, who hold citizenships of the countries. The researcher's personal narratives (experiences) about visiting refugee camps and resettled countries United States of America and United Kingdom meeting Bhutanese community have been used to glue the gaps in information left by the interviews. The author also talked with multiple concerned intellectuals to cross check the facts about the women figure, their biography and historiography.

Findings and discussion

The notion of subaltern public spheres criticises the Habarmasian public sphere from three fronts: Firstly, the historical exclusion of the subaltern communities in the single bourgeois public sphere, where structural dividend holding advantaged groups are obviously dominant and subaltern communities do not have access to enter the sphere. The public sphere of the subaltern, differs from the bourgeois public sphere. The subaltern cannot exist in bourgeois public sphere. The women subaltern, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words, "cannot speak" (Spivak, 1988) in bourgeois public sphere. The bourgeois institutions act against the welfare of the subaltern communities. Habermasian dream of "unrestricted inclusion and equality in the liberal bourgeois public sphere" (Habermas, 1992; p. 429) in practice appears problematic.

Secondly, seeking rationality of the discourse in a single public sphere found further problematic, where voices of the oppressed are not heard and inequality is not discussed deliberately in the name of common greater good. The so-called standard elite space stops the subaltern from raising their voice, their real consciousness. The bourgeois public sphere restricts equal participation of the subaltern. In the name of rationality, in the words of Fraser, the bourgeois public sphere intends to impose fictitious universalism. So, Fraser longs for

real rationality within subaltern public spheres excluding internal hegemony and violence. Questioning Habarmasian notion that the rationality of the bourgeois could help practice participatory parity, critics including Felski (1989) and Lyotard (1984) claim, autobiography and self-discovery narratives (also affective experience) have contributed to the construction of the female (subaltern) public sphere (Zhang, 2012; p. 148). Critics like Negt, Kluge and Hansen (1993) argue, without referring to discursive participation, any practices that bring the subaltern consciousness (experience) into the visible horizon of politico-cultural domain can carry the embodiment of the public sphere (ibid; p. 149). This notion backgrounds Habermas's emphasis on rational debate of elites and foregrounds everyday experience of the subalterns. In this notion, resistance from a pluralistic mass public is possible. Habermas was pessimistic about the possibility of resistance from a pluralistic alternative subaltern (mass) public (Habermas, 1992, p. 438).

Third disagreement with Habermas is the institutions of public sphere that favoured a single public sphere. The critics who favour subaltern publics believe multiple institutions- political to welfare agencies. Historical necessity gives birth to alternative institutions and brings experiences of the subaltern out at alternative public spheres. This paper, in this regard, attempts to explore the existence of the Bhutanese women in exile from the perspective of subaltern public spheres. Bhutanese women exist in multiple public spheres countering single (bourgeois) public sphere.

Bhutanese women and public sphere

After Bhutan's first motor roads were built in 1961, the Himalayan kingdom did not remain in the self-imposed isolation. Before that Bhutan was a country accessible to Indians, British, Tibetans, and Nepalese on foot, horseback, or on yaks. Apart from motor vehicles, Bhutan got connected to the world by jet planes. Bhutan joined the United Nations in December 1971 (Pradhan, 2012; p. 11). When the Bhutanese delegation led by His Royal Highness Paro Penlop Prince Namgyal Wangchuck was in USA to join the UN in 1971, the prince

was greeted in surprise by a western diplomat saying, as Pradhan writes, 'I didn't know Africans looked like you' (ibid; p. ix). Until then, many westerners believed Bhutan was in Africa.

Until 1990 Bhutan was untouched by westernisation. There were not many places on earth where people still lead lives not spoilt by globalisation, westernisation, TV, Coca Cola, and McDonald's (Crins, 2008; p. 2). Bhutan with about 650,000 people remained the only Mahayana Buddhist country in its *Tantric* form in the world undisturbed for centuries because of its geographical isolation and self-imposed politico-cultural system (ibid; p. 5). Women played significant role in such traditional society in Bhutan. With reference to her 17 years of experiences in Bhutan, Crins (2008) writes:

> *In Bhutan, at the village level, women's positions are generally equal to those of men. In some cases women have even a stronger position.... Women and men work together, and their work is equally valued. On a transcendental level women and men are equally important as mediums (shamans) and healers.... Women are not excluded either from the society or from sacral rites. Bhutan does not have a matriarchal culture, but matrilineality and matrilocality do exist. (p. 89)*

In social life, women in Bhutan enjoy more prestige and freedom than in many other Asian countries. In many cases women own land, houses and assets, and the inheritance is matrilineal. Husbands move in to live with their wife's family (uxorilocality). Women have power in trade, in nomadic herding, the management of large farms and families and as *Ngejum* (shamanic healers). Men help in domestic chores and raise children, and in many cases, it is the women who take important decisions. However, women have not been active (visibly seen) in public life (Brauen, 1998; Crins, 2004; Crins, 2008). But, most of the families of the women have a matrilineal heritance system that not only exists in the villages, but also in cities. Stores and businesses can be bequeathed to the owner's daughters. Women manage large hotels and companies. Women are industrious and like to be independent from their husbands (Crins & Wangdi, 2001). There is no "dowry system" in Bhutan and there is no stigma attached to

widows who remarry (Pommaret, 1998, qtd. in Crins, 2008; p. 135).

In the southern part of Bhutan, a patrilineal system is dominant where most of the residents are descendants of Nepalese and Indian migrants and predominantly Hindus (Crins, 2008; p. 135). However, in the words of Crins (2008), "unlike Western tradition, where gender differences are derived from the supposed fact that women are less than men in all walks of life, Bhutanese gender relations are marked by a high level of gender equality" (p. 167). For her, Western mindset in Bhutanese cosmology regarding the concept of gender turned out to be totally unsuitable (p. 167). Apart from their names and their free attitude towards sex, she also noticed the attitude of the men towards them. The men cooked, sewed, took care of babies and mostly were very respectful towards women…most of the time the man lives with the family of the wife, so when there's a divorce, the man has to go back to his family (Crins, 2018; pp. 31-32). In Bhutan, people generally prefer daughter to sons, in sharp contrast to Nepal and India, where daughters are seen as burdens (ibid, p. 50-51).

Crins observed Bhutanese holistic cosmology shifting drastically losing the values of ideal society- reciprocity in work, when barter was more important than money and people lived on the rhythm of the seasons (Crins, 2008). Bhutan's marriage act permit both polyandry and polygamy and provide flexibility to marry up to four times but discourages marriages between Bhutanese nationals and non-Bhutanese spouses (Rizal, 2022). The first three spouses can claim alimony or a share of property upon divorce but in case of a woman marrying multiple husbands, the court issues a marriage certificate to the woman with the name of one husband only (National Assembly of Bhutan, 1980).

After the western capitalist culture invaded Bhutan through a 'hot tourist destination,' hype, gender role started shifting. Male have become more active in public spheres. However, several women have

achieved fame, who exist in public spheres. Maina Khadka as the head of tertiary education, Ministry of Education, RGoB represented the government in the universal periodic review in 2009 in Geneva.

Dorji Choden established her existence making records of several firsts female of Bhutan like first female engineer, commissioner, cabinet member and the first minister. She formed and led a political party that was ousted from the 2013 primary election and she moved to another party to become a minister. Likewise, Hiranya Mayi Lama has been recognised as the first lady in Bhutan to enter the National Assembly as an elected member. Many women have been successful in private sector and entrepreneurs.

Still, civil society in Bhutan is neither pro-active nor politically conscious. It is rather unorganised. Civil society organisations in Bhutan are primarily controlled by royal family (Adhikari, 2022). Democracy in Bhutan is mandated and controlled by central machinery in palace. The political discourse is designed in such a pattern that competition at the local level is absent completely and public scrutiny is not well developed (ibid). Bhutan still lacks public sphere (its larger forums) for wider inclusion of people in political and democracy education, which is essential to sustain Bhutan's 'young democracy' (ibid). The space for the subaltern counter public spheres is still meager in Bhutan.

Bhutanese women in transition

Bhutanese women have formulated a distinct history of contestation and compromise. After Masur Chhetri, "one of the earliest known activists of Bhutan" (Hutt, 2006), was assassinated, his second wife Jaga Maya with her son Ranjit, 12, (only son from the first wife of Masur) began a long march meeting the Chief Minister S. T. Dorji's son Jigme Palden Dorji for justice in Bhutan (Paudyal, 2001).

Jaga Maya, in the words of Rizal (2024), went to Delhi from her rural village in Bhutan, Lapsibote, to tell the story of assassination of her husband to Indira Gandhi. She also travelled to Kalimpong to meet the Assassin's mother Rani Chuni Dorji, who offered her some money to pacify her resistance. She got some pieces of gold and cash to complete the funeral ritual of Mahasur. In the cost of Bhutan government, Jaga Maya organized *mahapuran* in Sankosh River to offer peace to her husband's soul. She got one house with land, confiscated, out of their six houses (Paudyal, 2001; p. 89).

Jaga Maya did not stop her mission of telling the story of her husband's assassination. She travelled to Kathmandu Nepal via Biratnagar and met Prime Minister Matrika Prasad Koirala along with other leaders and tried to express her pathetic history to the broader public (Rizal, 2024). She dared to speak the truth to the international community. But her struggle could not sustain up to the political activism level. She is hardly recalled in the bourgeois public sphere. In the words of Lamitare (2024), however, during the period of rigid dictatorship, Jaga Maya dared to outreach to the international communities, met authorities by lamenting for justice, and contributed to return Bhutanese citizens exiled after Masur's assassination. There are hardly any other women in Bhutan at par with her (ibid).

Bhutanese women have generated leading stories. Tashi Dorji had been worked in the mission to include Bhutan in United Nations since 1956, led a women team to Australia and enlisted Bhutan as the newest member of the Colombo Plan (Colombo Plan, 1962). In 1964, following her brother PM Jigme Palden Dorji's assassination, she took asylum in Nepal and expanded her enterprise with brand Rijal-Tashi and offered jobs to many refugees and victims. Like Jaga Maya she returned Bhutan (Rizal, 2024). She is currently in Bhutan at her post-centenarian age.

Bhutanese women in exile

The counter public sphere of Bhutanese women in exile is next important area of discourse. Becoming stateless is the most vulnerable stage. In the sudden dilapidation of refugee emergencies, women often face the longest odds for survival. Humanitarian assistance groups can increase changes from the initial phase. Refugee women and girls, at greater risk when crisis strikes, are perhaps more resilient over the long term. Careful, deliberate efforts to give refugee women a voice will pay off (Diaz, 1999; p. 59).

Mangala Sharma, a Bhutanese refugee, kept record as a human, women and refugee rights champion. She as an activist engaged in social service and played pioneering role in empowering refugee youths through Bhutanese Refugees Aiding the Victims of Violence (BRAVE) in Nepal. She set an example that refugee women are capable of overcoming the odds, starting anew, and providing leadership even in the most difficult circumstances.

In 1992, Mangala encountered a young woman in the refugee camp in Nepal who was crying, with suicidal thoughts because she had been raped by members of the Bhutanese army and had become pregnant. Her husband had taken their two sons and abandoned her in the refugee camp. Mangala soon found dozens of other women who had been raped or sexually abused and stigmatised by families (ibid; p. 59). More than 2,700 women who said were raped or abused in Bhutan received counseling in the refugee camps in Nepal (Gartaula, 2001). Mangala worked for them and won the Ginetta Sagan Fund Award in 1997. It was a great honor to Bhutanese women in exile when Sharma was awarded with Ginetta Sagan. Amnesty International had initiated an annual Ginetta Sagan Award for activists in her honor. In the words of Rizal (2024), she had been a guardian to the victims of violence in Bhutan and in the refugee camps providing counseling, technical trainings and scholarships to the youths. She was born in Tsirang (Chirang) and exiled from Bhutan in March 1992. She formed BRAVE, a self-help organisation and earned fame. She led a Bhutanese women team from the refugee

camps to Beijing to participate the International Women Conference, got support from United Nations and other international communities.

In the fourth World Women Conference held in Beijing, the RGoB had sent a delegation led by Princess Sonam Choden Wangchuck. Women forerunners from Bhutanese refugee community Mangala Sharma, Bala Sharma, Bidhya Chhetri, Sitara Sharma, and Chit Kumari Gautam drew attention of the delegates in the conference. Royal delegation faced awkward situation and after returning to Bhutan, the RGoB declared the refugee delegates as non-nationals. The news appeared in *Kuensel,* "The five refugee women attended NGO conference in Huairou, Beijing. The delegates mentioned that none of them was a refugee but presented the details of four women in Bhutan; the report mentioned that Mangala worked with UNDP in Thimphu, took leave in February 1992 and never returned; Bidhya Chhetri was teacher who left Bhutan in February 1991 with her husband who was a medical doctor. Sitara Sharma was assistant matron at national referral hospital in Thimphu, resigned from her post and left Bhutan on 10 January 1993, after claiming her retirement benefits; and Chit Kumari Gautam left Bhutan in December 1992 to join her father who had left the country in April 1991 (Kuensel, 1995). The report looks ambivalent. On one hand RGoB presented detail of their life in Bhutan and on the other they were called non-Bhutanese (Rizal, 2024).

Mangala resettled in the USA in 2000, served to Refugee Women Network and started Nirvana Center to support resettled families. Mostly females contributed to take care of the vulnerable groups of refugees. Mangala appeared as a pioneer in public sphere. She still found active to serve the vulnerable groups of her community.

Recent studies show increase in sexual abuse and gender violence among women and young girls in the Bhutanese community in resettled countries. Male-dominated community organisations have not come up with any programmes to address the issue. The problem

is unlikely to receive any attention. The community leaders, the patriarchal system promoters, believe the problem is with females (Nirola, 2022; p. 75). Bhutanese refugee women, who have been resettled in the Global north countries like Mangala, found dedicated serving their communities, wherever they live.

Pursuing public spaces in exile

Yeshi Pelzom Pradhan, originally from Kanglung, fled Bhutan in 1990, lived in India for 3 years and joined Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. She worked as a teacher, worked for INGOs and sought political asylum in the USA in 2000. Yeshi was active as a woman rights activist. She presented the Bhutanese refugee concerns in front of the UN General Assembly in Geneva and in multiple other international women rights platforms. These include the special UN session General Assembly in New York on gender equality and empowerment, Beijing conference in 2000 and 2005, among others. She worked as a programme manager for two resettlement agencies: Lutheran Services of Georgia and International Rescue Committee in Atlanta, Georgia.

Yeshi feels, if giving is empowering, receiving can be disempowering. For her, as much as giving can be fulfilling, receiving can be a traumatic experience for those always extending their hands to receive (Pelzom, 2020). She believes that humanitarian organisations, with the best of intentions, give whole-heartedly to such an extent that they appropriate the role of savior. As a former refugee, she could not and will not be able to disregard her past at the receiving end. Yeshi writes, “I emphasised encouragement and empowerment instead of services. Beneficiaries, especially those who have been living as refugees for many decades develop a culture of dependency. Numbed by the trauma of helplessness, clients internalise the act of receiving and depend on external help, pecuniary or emotional. They will ask for more and expect more” (Pelzom, 2020). Yeshi is clear that clients need not only to be provided with services and goods, but also need to be empowered. Yeshi is optimistic, “We have not let the atrocities of our past limit us,

but instead have used the experience to reawaken our sense of giving; we have given to. But when we give, let us not forget that the receiver at the end is a human being, not statistics. Let us give with the belief that we will heal ourselves, our friends, family and members of our community" (ibid).

Tulsi Bhattarai, who came USA from a refugee camp in eastern Nepal, has become a pilot. She was born in Bhutan, fled her country and resettled in the USA in 2008. She worked as a flower girl in Walmart. Her support worker told her that it would cost US$ 80,000 to complete the pilot course. Then, she planned to be a flight attendant and managed to attend training. She saved US$ 100,000 and joined pilot training. Her height, less than 5 feet, was also a challenge to her. However, perseverance and commitment led her to her destination.

Aviation is male-dominated industry and there are only seven percent women pilots around the world. Tulsi became the only pilot from Bhutanese in exile in May 2019 when she received a license from the Federation Aviation Administration. She is the first Bhutanese refugee woman, who chose to fly airbus. She says, "My long-term goal is to fly Airbus 320 for Delta Airlines. I know there is a long way to go. But I won't stop until I get to that. For pilots there is no stop" (Pradhan, 2023). Tulsi found trying to exist in public sphere through her professional experience becoming an established pilot.

Struggle within the community

Community is bigger than a family- an important platform for agency and existence. Through community mobilisation many Bhutanese women have been visible as socio-political activists in exile.

Devika Gazmere was born in Darjeling, India. She married political activist Jogen Gazmere in Bhutan. She witnessed the moment of writing *Bhutan: We Want Justice* (1989), the first document that drew the attention of the authority. Jogen was declared a traitor in Bhutan after he was identified to have joined democratic movement. When Jogen and his brother Ratan were arrested, Devika went to

Thimphu from her village, met Chief of Police and tried to explore about their situation but was forced to leave the country.

Devika, in 1990, fled Bhutan with a baby. She lived in multiple places in India. Leaving her daughter with her relatives, she travelled to Garganda and met her community leaders. She worked with Binsha Gurung, Kirtika Sharma, Devika Adhikari, and Subhadra Sharma. They established Bhutanese Women Organisation (BWO) on 8 December 1990. Devika as the chairperson began to expand their activities by publishing a pamphlet - *Bhutani Mahila Awaj* (Bhutanese Women's Voice).

In January 1991, Devika, Binsha, and Kritika travelled to Kathmandu and met human rights leaders – including popular writer Parijat - to lobby for the justice to political prisoners in Bhutan. They participated in resistance movement, distributed pamphlets and calendars and attended seminars. After Indian government forced them to leave India, they shifted to eastern Nepal. They reformed Bhutanese Women Organisation with Bhutanese Refugee Women Forum.

Devika with other activists kept on visiting India and Kathmandu meeting political and human rights leaders, working in Bhutanese Refugee Women Forum. Devika, along with a large number of women social activists, contributed to changing lives of the refugee women.

On 17 February 1992 her husband Jogen was released. They took shelter in refugee camps in Nepal. Devika remained active in women empowerment programs and social activism with dozens of women activists. She resettled in Australia in 2009.

Indrawati Rai served as the first secretary of Bhutanese Women Organisation. After she fled Bhutan, Indrawati struggled for survival of her children and family. She worked in farmhouses in India, and ultimately came to Nepal. She was with the most vulnerable groups who entered Nepal as refugees on 15 February 1991. She is one of the

key actors in taking care of the victims in the refugee camps, collecting supports and basic care. She involved in lobbying various agencies and engaged in women's welfare activities till 2007 and finally got resettled in the USA.

The bildungsroman of dozens of women similar to Devika and Indrawati look remarkable, but invisible in the bourgeois public sphere (Gazmere, 2024). Devika found busy in collecting the personal narratives of the women invisible in the public sphere despite the fact that they contributed a lot from the bottom.

Politico-cultural counter-publics

Injustice against women persists in the name of social norms and values. Centuries old existing politico-cultural structures keep women often invisible in public sphere as if it is normal or acceptable (Priyadarshini, 2014).

Bhutan, going by the official records and sources, is considered to be literally an island of women's entitlements in Asia, where women have held a place of honour. Nevertheless, there is a tremendous difference between the ideals, the aspirations and the reality. There are subtle discriminations in political representation and religious beliefs and marriage act of Bhutan. The issue concerning Bhutanese women's social status has always remained vague since Bhutanese women appear to be more privileged and gender related prejudice is being carried over in the 21st century Bhutan as well (ibid; p. 920).

Bhutanese community intact in the refugee camps has been turned into virtual community after third country resettlement. The politico-cultural gatherings exist differently in the resettled countries. The Habarmasian public sphere that talks democratic potential of cyberspace also look far from universal and integrated. Subaltern public spheres perform more practical and applicable actions. Unlike private or community sphere, the notion of public sphere refers to a specific social category that appears as a political actor (Splichal, 1999; p. 2).

Before 1990, Bhutanese youths would go to Banaras to study, where they acquired politico-cultural consciousness apart from religious and ethical study. Women- subtly engaged in literary practices- began to write and publish. Few female poets published poems in *Druk Losel* (1979-83), *Amar Bhutan* (1971) and *Biruwa* (1980) magazines. Most of them were students, teachers and civil servants (Dahal et al. 2022; p. 21) including some from India.

After 1990s, number of emerging women poets and writers increased within and outside the refugee camps. Literature Council of Bhutan (LCOB) and Global Bhutanese Literary Organisation (GBLO) along with few other literary platforms gave space to the women writers. The politico-cultural upheavals of Nepal offered progressive consciousness within the camps (ibid, p. 24).

The territory of Bhutanese refugee camps in eastern Nepal was once a center of literary cum politico-cultural discourses. Poets, writers, and activists within and around refugee huts gathered for literary programmes and political protests; intellectuals and activists from India and Nepal joined literary cum politico-cultural discourses. This author joined national and international discourses in the camps. One of them was *Vrihat Antarastriya Srijanatmak Anusthan* (Grand International Literary Assembly) organised on 28 January 2012 in Khudunabari refugee camp by GBLO (Shrestha, 2013), the author joined it as a special guest. Intellectuals and authors from India and Nepal assembled to discuss about the Bhutanese refugee issues.

In refugee camps, this author found Leela Nisha reciting poems with few other female poets. She was born in India, married with a Bhutanese, and living a single woman life. Author knew about her but did not meet her. In fact, this author never met Bhutanese woman as an opinion maker during his one-and-half decade of engagement in and out of the refugee camps. However, this author found Bhutanese women writers Maya Bhattarai, Mamta Tamang, Tila Rupa Acharya, Shanju Giri and Sita Rai in subaltern public spheres; they published

literary texts, mostly the collection of poems and *gazals*. Maya Bhattarai published multiple books including lyrical album. But, one could not find them visible in bourgeois public sphere.

Bhutanese youths, influenced from Indian and Nepalese political upheavals, engaged in politico-literary activities, living in West Bengal – the bastion of communism. *Akhil Bharat Nepali Samaj* was extending Marxist ideology. Nepal was in the second phase of political transformation, moving towards multiparty democratic system from the party-less Panchayat. The youths subtly started political mission inside Bhutan. Before open political sphere was formulated, the state apparatus exercised its power. After atrocities, Bhutanese were forced to leave their country and took asylum in Nepal. Inside and outside Bhutan they kept unified after 1990s in subtleties.

Youths living in the camps had freedom to run programme in public domain. But situation in Bhutan was different. Public sphere was confined. Youths included political consciousness subtly in cultural ritualistic programmes. Cultural organisations *Sayapatri* and *Srijana Sanskritik Pariwar* along with few others organised cultural programs. Members of cultural groups visited villages singing, dancing, and performing in open spaces. They celebrated *Saraswoti Pooja* kinds of apolitical programmes mixing with political consciousness. In 2003, the members of such cultural groups established Bhutan Communist Party connecting Bhutanese living in exile (India and Nepal). Many females involved in political activities via cultural programmes.

Rupa Subba, the focal person of Bhutanese Refugee Women Forum (BRWF) appeared as a versatile figure. A martial arts champion, Rupa was such a bold figure from school life that no one could dare to tease girls in front of her (Rai, 2024). People knew her as a singer, dancer, writer and public speaker. She played role as a political group organiser and leader; she led *Akhil Bhutan Mahila Sangh*. She worked in India and Bhutan as a politico-cultural activist. She worked

underground in Bhutan taking shelter in villages as a cultural performer. She was good at theatrical performance and well-trained trainer. Her colleagues recalled her role in orienting people inside and outside Bhutan.

Bhutanese community in exile were scattered in India and Nepal. A significant population of Bhutanese community lived in Kathmandu. Rupa moved to Kathmandu, refugee camps, India and Bhutan for politico-cultural presentations. She was equally active in dealing with issues related to domestic violence in the camps. She was both social campaigner and political activist. Unfortunately, in Beldangi-I, she died at the age of 28 in the lack of proper treatment. She was suffering from tuberculosis and jaundice (BNS, 2010).

History does not die. "Nobody can take her position", Leela Nisha recalls Rupa from USA (Nisha, 2023). "Those who did not meet Rupa," Nisha claims, "also knew stories about her agency, resistance and existence" (ibid). Tila Rupa Acharya supports Nisha's claim (2023).

Colleagues published *Rupa Subba ka Sirjanaharu*, a collection of Rupa's writings, posthumously. The book presents Rupa's available poems and *gazals*, excluding her opinion articles. Rupa speaks bold in the pages of the book. Her expressions sharp and clear come deep from her politico-ideological roots:

आकाशतिर फर्किएर थुक्न हुन्न हजुर
असत्यलाई साथ दिई झुक्न हुन्न हजुर
आफ्नो माटो खोसिएको बेला हो यो साथी
कायर भई हामी आज झुक्न हुन्न हजुर ।
आकाशतिर फर्किएर थुक्न हुन्न हजुर ।

We shouldn't spit facing the sky, dear
Nor should we befriend with untruth, dear
Friends, this is the time we lost our land!
We shouldn't bow as a loser, dear
We shouldn't spit facing the sky, dear...

हुने मात्र मान्छे जस्तो तिमी देख्छौं किन ?
दुःखीलाई दुःख पर्दा आँखा छोप्छौं किन ?
निधारमा पसिना, हातमा ठेला हुने गरीबको

Why you treat as human only to riches?
Why close eyes to sorrows of the poors?
The true history of the poor workers
Knowingly you try to erase, why?

जानी-जानी सत्य कथा तिमी मेट्छौ किन ? महिला, दलित, बेसहाराको पीडा जान्दा-जान्दै रुढीवादको तगारोले बाटो छेक्छौ किन ?	You know the pains of women, Dalits You stop their pace with stigma, why?

Rupa would say, "One voice may disappear; so we should speak collectively" (Limbu, 2075 BS; p. 22). Her dream of collective intervention faded away soon. Most of her colleagues and community members resettled in global north countries.

A versatile female figure Rupa remained alive only in story. Rupa had also published articles with pseudo-names. They have not been explored and incorporated in the book *Rupa Subbaka Sirjanaharu* (Thulung, 2024). Her articles fragmented and scattered remained waiting to be compiled and published (Limbu, 2024). Some video clips of Rupa apart from her collection of writings found available among her close colleagues.

Most Bhutanese in exile knew Rupa. Her daring acts survive in the collective memories (Angnambe, 2075 BS). No Bhutanese refugee community members dared to play such a versatile role in short period of time that Rupa did (Thulung, 2075 BS), as a freedom fighter. She lived with clear thought- fight for the rights rather than surrender- rejecting the proposal of third country resettlement (Limbu, 2075 BS).

Rupa's friends recalled her daring actions against domestic violence and other injustices from resettled global north countries. Some of her colleagues found living in the refugee camps in eastern Nepal. They recalled Rupa's struggle though the mission of repatriation and liberation of the oppressed remained obstructed sadly and badly.

Conclusion and recommendation

The stereotypes related to gender bias stop women to exist as equal to men in public sphere. This paper explored instances of Bhutanese women existing in exile from the perspective of Fraser's notion of the

subaltern counter publics. Bhutanese women constitute equal percentage of the total population of Bhutanese community. Under the traditional norms and national law Bhutanese women enjoy freedom equal to men. But they hold meager space in the bourgeois public sphere. Community members become a public only if they engage in open contestations on issues that have consequences in their lives; the public sphere supports critical concepts and contestations. Habermas argues public sphere should be autonomous from both the state power and the market economy, which appeared fictitious urge in the case of Bhutanese in exile as well. More than a hundred thousand Bhutanese refugees resettled in the so-called developed global north countries. The bourgeois public sphere remained far away of the access to Bhutanese women. Establishing alternative plural public spheres of Bhutanese women of their own apt to their contexts appeared as an inevitable option available for them to exist and speak. As Fraser suggests, a historic demand of subaltern counter public spheres of the oppressed, Bhutanese women need to formulate anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist eco-socialist counter public spheres. Foundation, for them, persists in the roots of the Bhutanese culture- the reciprocal relationship between men and women as equal. This root offers space to live harmonious eco-friendly life in the rhythms of seasons.

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Politics

Interim Governments in the Kingdom of Bhutan

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ABSTRACT
This article delves into the role of interim governments in the Kingdom of Bhutan which hold the regime during transitions between consecutive governments and bridge back the system to monarchical foundations. Between 1998 and 2008, Bhutan's king decreed a planned shift from an autocratic to a constitutional monarchy. After adopting the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan in 2008 and the inauguration of democratic principles, including regular elections and governance by elected political parties, the country embraced democratic rule while the king retained substantial power akin to the autocratic era. This paradox prompted an inquiry into the constitutional provisions enabling such a fusion. This study aimed to uncover the mechanisms embedded in the constitution that resolved this conundrum. Methodologies encompassed a review of legal texts, media sources, consultations with Bhutanese experts, and social media discourse analysis. Several constitutional provisions were scrutinized, with the core element identified as the provision allowing for the formation of an interim government - a temporary body overseeing elections between consecutive elected governments. Globally, interim governments function as transitional entities managing governance during crises or regime transitions, facilitating the shift towards a stable governance structure. Their roles include supervising elections, maintaining law and order, addressing immediate socio-political challenges, fostering reconciliation, and upholding democratic values. In

Bhutan, these bodies rectify political deviations, reconnect to autocratic governance norms, and transition selective authority to the succeeding government. During this transition phase, the interim governments orchestrate conditions conducive to a particular party's success in the later election, thus influencing the forthcoming government's composition.

Keywords: Autocracy, democracy, hereditary succession, opposition-lessness, periodic election, regime politics

Introduction

In 2008, the king of the Kingdom of Bhutan facilitated a planned transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2008 was promulgated, a ban on the use of word "democracy" was lifted, political parties were allowed to form, periodic elections were started, and constitutional bodies were established. The former king, the fourth from the Wangchuck Dynasty stepped down from the golden throne, removed his raven crown, and placed it on his son's head declaring him the first king of democratic Bhutan. Local to international media personnel returned to their dictionaries to find the superlative adjectives to describe the transition in Bhutan.

Throughout history and as per the psychology of power, Kings want incontestable power and privileges for them and want to pass them on to their vertical and lateral families (Abraham & Abraham, 2018). But the global media focused on the voluntary step down of the Bhutanese King as an exception [(Al Jazeera, 2006), (ABC, 2006), (Herman, 2009), (Bose, 2006), (Kyodo, 2019)].

Bhutan, with an area of 38,500 square kilometers and a population below one million, was under absolute monarchy for a century until 2007. Between 1998 and 2008, a planned transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy was started by the fourth king

of Bhutan after he realized his way of rule was getting outdated and ousted from the world. Yet, he wanted to remain on the throne and pass on the throne to his descendants, unchallenged for centuries to come. He came up with unique ideas of transition that would retain the dynasty's rule and at the same time get accepted in the world.

The same king who exerted strenuous effort to remove twenty-eight percent of his citizens for asking for democracy and was successful in sending to exile at least sixteen percent of the population years back declared democracy and abdication from his throne. The paradox was undigestible to anyone who knew of the state-led terrorism and eviction in 1990-1993 and 1997. Only time would tell if it was his political altruism or an eyewash to gain sympathy and glory. Since then, there have been four elections, changes in the government, and rule by a new king. Fifteen years after the announcement of the start of democracy, the system remained unchanged- neither the administration nor the judiciary nor the living quality of the people have improved much. The constitution of Bhutan drafted under the decree of the outgoing king and discussed and rectified by the first elected parliament in 2008 had the answer to this paradoxical puzzle in its articles. It had the provision of Interim Government.

Since the shift in the system of governance in Bhutan in 2008, four periodic elections have been held under the ascendancy of the interim governments.

The first transition was administered by a caretaker government in 2008. Its primary responsibility was to oversee the transition from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional democratic monarchy following the adoption of a new constitution (National Assembly of Bhutan, 2008). This transition, started by the fourth king of Bhutan Jigme Singye Wangchuck, marked a significant shift in Bhutanese politics and governance (UNDP and Parliament

of Bhutan, 2019). Since then, there have been three transitions, three elections, and three interim governments.

Interim governments are temporary political arrangements during transition periods of significant political change, especially when transitioning from one regime or leadership structure to another. They serve as temporary administrations, bridging the gap between the earlier regime and the formation of a new government (Forster, 2019). The interim governments are established to maintain stability and oversee the transition in various contexts, including the transition from violent revolutions to a new stable political environment (Aolain & Campbell, 2005). The interim governments carry out peace negotiations and guide the transition of conflict countries recovering from civil strife to a stable political environment. An interim government is a formally established administration with the special authority to manage governmental affairs for an exceptional period, extending until the election of a new government for a regular term and with a standard mandate (IFIT Brief, 2020). The interim governments oversee the transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic process (MacEwan, 1986). The interim governments take charge of state affairs temporarily during the aftermath of a coup d'état or overthrow of a government until a new civilian government is set up (Varol, 2012). Such interim governments are intended to be temporary, focusing on stabilising the country, organizing elections, drafting new constitutions, and paving the way for a legitimate civilian government. They often run under specific mandates, supervised by international bodies, and balance the demands for change with the need for stability during these transitional periods, but may lack legitimacy in public eyes (Papagianni, n.d.).

The cases of interim governments in Bhutan do not fall in any of the previously discussed or imagined transitions.

Scholars, critics, and opposition argue that the adoption of the constitution and the transition initiative aimed to appease international scrutiny while retaining the monarchy's power and prerogatives (Iyer, 2019). They point to specific provisions in the constitution that seemingly support democratic principles but, in reality, the constitutional provisions safeguard the monarchy's power, undermine checks and balances, and consolidate power.

One of the several provisions to meet the aim was the establishment of an interim government by the king between two consecutive elected governments. Interim government harks back to its original, in cases where the earlier government deviated from the royal plans and loyalty, through manipulation of the electoral process and situation to favour the king- preferred party.

Exiled political parties were also banned from taking part in any election (The Hindu, 2007-11-30). Those political groups believed unfavourable to the palace were disqualified from the process, casting doubt on the legitimacy of this meticulously orchestrated democratic transition (Nayak, 2021).

Bhutan has had four interim governments since the transition in 2008. This article critically examines their actions and raises questions about the true purpose of these interim governments and their impact on Bhutan's democratic practices. The findings of this article are expected to encourage further research and discussion on this critical issue in Bhutan's political landscape.

Materials and methods

The information and data included in this article were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. People knowledgeable on Bhutan issue were asked to deliberate on the administration system in Bhutan, the evolution of the political system, and the roles and responsibilities of the interim governments. The constitution of Bhutan, parliamentary proceedings, journal- and

newspaper articles were reviewed. Discussions available from social media were also referred to capture any gaps left behind by the mainstream media and government publications.

Findings

The responsibility of the interim government is to ensure a fair election to the national assembly to lead to the formation of the next government.

Successful interim governments in the world

The interim governments in various countries exemplify successful transitions in different contexts. For instance, South Africa, under Nelson Mandela's leadership from 1994 to 1999, adeptly navigated the shift from apartheid to democracy by embracing inclusive negotiations and emphasizing reconciliation through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Mandela, 1995), (Lodge, 2007). Meanwhile, the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) oversaw independence between 1999 and 2002, buoyed by international support and a clearly defined timeline for self-rule, establishing robust democratic institutions (UNTAET, 2002), (Kingsbury, 2004). Similarly, Gambia experienced a peaceful power transition from Yahya Jammeh's long-standing rule to President Adama Barrow's interim government (2017-2020), which notably garnered regional support, upheld constitutional respect, and remained committed to democratic principles (Nabaneh, 2019). These examples, include Indonesia (Wilson, 2022), Liberia (Morgan, 2006), Nepal (Pokhrel, 2023), Burkina Faso (Ndiaga, 2022), Serbia, Ghana, and Tunisia, which highlight diverse successful interim government strategies, such as civil society involvement, peace negotiations, inclusive dialogue, and a dedication to democratic values, fostering stability and effective transitions within their respective nations (Guttieri & Piombo, Interim governments: Institutional bridges to peace and democracy?, 2007).

Legal basis of interim government in Bhutan

Article 19 of the Constitution of Bhutan 2008 has details on the interim government (National Assembly of Bhutan, 2008). It has six clauses.

"Whenever the National Assembly is dissolved, the king of Bhutan shall appoint an interim government to function for a period, which shall not exceed ninety days, to enable the Election Commission to hold free and fair elections"- Article 19.1 (National Assembly of Bhutan, 2008)

"The interim government shall consist of a Chief Advisor and other Advisors appointed by the King of Bhutan within fifteen days after the dissolution of the National Assembly. The Chief Justice of Bhutan shall be appointed as the Chief Advisor"- Article 19.2 (National Assembly of Bhutan, 2008)

"Upon the appointment of the interim Government, the Prime Minister and the Ministers who were in office immediately before the National Assembly was dissolved shall resign from office"- Article 19. 3 (National Assembly of Bhutan, 2008)

"The interim Government shall carry out the routine functions of the Government but shall not be entitled to take any policy decisions or enter into any agreement with foreign governments or organizations"- Article 19.4 (National Assembly of Bhutan, 2008)

"The Government shall be formed within ninety days from the date of dissolution of the National Assembly"- Article 19.5 (National Assembly of Bhutan, 2008)

"The interim government shall cease to exist from the date on which the new Prime Minister enters office when the new National

Assembly is constituted"- Article 19.1 (National Assembly of Bhutan, 2008) .

There have been four interim governments in Bhutan. The first was in 2007-2008 but was named caretaker government. The other three were named interim government.

Caretaker government in Bhutan
Between August 2007 and April 2008, there were elections for the bicameral parliament as an introduction of democracy replacing the century-old absolute monarchy.

Between 1998 and 2008, a council of ministers was set up by the king. During this period, the king had commissioned the drafting of the constitution.

The constitution and practice show the application of unique criteria on who can form and lead a political party. Such a leader must be the one chosen by the king, recipient of a royal medal such as the "*Druk Thugsey* Medal" and must have a proven record of loyalty before the royal dynasty. The chances of getting the king's favour increase if the loyalties have been inherited. During the transition, the ruler declared a power transition without involving its opposition groups that were working from exile.

The highly praised shift from the earlier absolute monarchy to a democracy at once engendered a conflict between the affluent and influential figures who had thrived under the old regime and those advocating for an inclusive democracy, a group that was smaller, less influential, and dormant.

A considerable part of the population, exiled for advocating democratic changes, found themselves excluded from participation in the post-transition governance. Despite the

introduction of new slogans, the same old order persisted, with entrenched interests keeping control of the law.

In the words of Niccolo, the phenomenon of uncertainty in the new system, juxtaposed with familiarity with the old, poses a challenge to the legitimacy of previous regimes, along with their administrative and legal structures, instilling fear in those who stand opposed to those with the law on their side (Machiavelli, 1992)

Guttieri and Piombo have defined an interim government as one that governs a polity during the period between the fall of the ancient regime and the initiation of the next regime. They add, unless the older regime collapses, disintegrates, or is internally dismantled, and is subsequently overthrown with the permanent regime taking its place, actors from the earlier regime persist in obstructing, resisting, and thwarting the new system (Guttieri & Piombo, Issues and debates in transitional rule, 2007).

When it was time to take part in establishment of democracy, and in absence of opposition, the power mongers of the existing council of ministers, each of whom had the experience of leading the government in turn as the chairperson of the council of ministers- at par the prime minister, were divided into three groups. Two groups went ahead to contest elections to become ruling and opposition parties, the third group took charge of the caretaker government. Former PM Sangay Nyedup, a royal family member through connubial bliss, led the People's Democratic Party and another former PM Jigme Yozer Thinley led the *Druk Phuentsum Tshokpa*. The third group was led by former PM Kinzang Dorji as the Caretaker Prime Minister.

As per the constitutional provisions, an interim government performs regular administrative functions without exercising legislative and executive authority. Its existence empowers the

election commission to conduct free and fair elections and creates a fair playing field for political parties. The transition signals to the public that the nation has progressed one step further in the electoral process (Kuensel, 2018).

In case of gaps between the dissolution of the national assembly and the appointment of the interim government, as the one that occurred for the first time in 2013, cabinet ministers continued their duties but without the customary regalia and insignia, including their orange scarves and ceremonial swords (Kuensel, 2018).

First interim government

In the 2013 interim government- the first by its name, the appointed members were Sonam Tobgye, the Chief Justice of Bhutan as the Chief Advisor; Om Pradhan, the Chairperson of Druk Holdings and Investment; Pema Thinley, the Vice-chancellor of the Royal University of Bhutan; Karma Ura, the Director General of Centre for Bhutan Studies, Neten Zangmo, the Chairperson of the Anti-Corruption Commission; Chhewang Rinzin, the Managing Director of Druk Green Power Corporation limited; and Thinley Dorji, the Managing Director of Bhutan Broadcasting Service as the members.

Second interim government

The interim government of 2018 had Chief Justice Tshering Wangchuk as the Chief Advisor; Karma Ura, the President of Centre for Bhutan Studies; Penjore, the Governor of Royal Monetary Authority; Ugen Chewang, the Chairperson of Druk Holding and Investments Ltd.; Chhewang Rinzin, the Managing Director of Druk Green Power Corporation Ltd.; Karma Tshiteem, the Chairperson of Royal Civil Service Commission; Kinley Yangzom, the Chairperson of the Anti-Corruption Commission; Nidup Dorji, the Vice-chancellor of Royal University of Bhutan; and Bachu Phub Dorji, the Managing Director of Kuensel

Corporation Ltd. as the member advisors of the interim government.

Third interim government

On November 1, 2023, the king, as per the Constitution of Bhutan 2008, appointed the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Chogyal Dago Rigdzin as the Chief Advisor of the interim government. Other Advisors in the interim government were Penjore, the Governor of the Royal Monitory Authority of Bhutan; Chhewang Rinzin, the Managing Director of Druk Green Power Corporation Limited; Karma Yezer Raydi, Chairperson of the Druk holdings; Dorji Rinchen of the Royal Bhutan Army; Karma Hamu Dorjee, Chairperson of Royal Civil Service Commission; Deki Pema, Chairperson of Anti-Corruption Commission; Tashi, Royal Audit Authority; and Phuntsho Rapten, a member of National Council (Kuensel, 2023).

The interim government is not answerable to the public or the court

While the declaration of democracy was timely in preventing external interference in domestic affairs and averting the risk of state collapse or a potential civil war, the establishment of constitutional bodies remained confined to mere symbolic entities at surface level without substantial impact or purposeful reform.

The periodic interim governments in Bhutan are constitutionally deputed by the king. They do not need the public or voters' mandate to run the government, hence, are not answerable to the people but only to the king. Their actions cannot be taken to the court or the king as both are part of the interim government.

It is mentioned in the "rules of procedures for the business of the interim government, 2013" that *in case of dispute on the interpretation of the provisions of this rule, the interpretation of*

the Chief Advisor of the Interim Government shall be final and binding.

Since the chief justice of the Supreme Court and the head of the state are leaders of the interim government, it is an absolute government. While Interim governments are formed during regime changes in other countries, in Bhutan it is the regime restoration. The advisors of the Interim government put themselves as the lead of ministries in the role of their minister. During the three months, they restore any practice deviations that the ministries have done in the past five years that appeared to deviate from the established monarchical system. Whatever deviations that the earlier government made that were not as per the expectation of the regime, are corrected during the interim period. The newly elected governments must pick from where the interim government leaves them.

Incomplete transition to democracy
The advisors of the interim government are given responsibilities to lead ministries and thus the organizations under them. One of the purposes of the temporary ministers is to divert the outlays from unspent balances of the prior fiscal year's budget to royal organizations such as *Dessuup* (Rizal, 2021)*, Gyalsung,* or SAR instead of carrying forward the unspent balances.

Usually at the end of each fiscal year, the unused budget of the ministries, departments, organizations, and agencies is diverted to the royal projects. The government that is reluctant to submit to the budget diversion, or shows such reluctance is quashed in the coming election.

Some notable traits
Clear Mandate and Timeline: The interim government has a clear mandate with fixed timeline and definite aim to hold free and fair elections.

Capacity Building: Its focus continues to upgrade institutional capacity including imparting guidance and training to civil servants from an apolitical perspective of strengthening administrative structures to ensure effective governance.

Electoral Planning and Oversight: The interim government has the mandate to plan and oversee the electoral process meticulously, ensuring fairness, and transparency, and develop strategies to increase participation in elections to facilitate a smooth transfer of power.

Until today, the notable accomplishment of all the interim governments has been their successful conduct of elections and the smooth transfer of governance to elected authorities.

Fear and challenges

Precedential examples of interim governments

During the tenure of the caretaker government, a political party with the name Bhutan United People's Party (BPUP) was unregistered and declared ineligible to contest election (Wangdi, 2007) for its leader Sigay Dorji or any member of the party was not a recipient of the King's medal. A candidate from Gaylephu constituency affiliated with PDP was removed from the race accused of sharing with his friends two copies of an article "A Kingdom Besieged" authored by the president of opponent party the DPT (European Union, 2008). Then, the DPT was the King's chosen party. The author of the article presented it at the University of Oxford as propaganda material endorsing the earlier regime's removal of political opponents through eviction (Thinley, 1993). Subsequently, he assumed the role of the president of the DPT and became Bhutan's first elected prime minister, while the candidate who shared the article was declared ineligible. During the 2008 election, the DPT used bureaucrats going from cities to

rural areas to cast votes and campaign for the party. They were successful.

An advisor of the first interim government conveyed a dire message from Delhi to the Bhutanese public on a cut in the subsidy on cooking gas and kerosene provided by India for cooking gas and kerosene. This subsidy cut declared on 7 July 2013, coincided with Bhutan's election on the 23rd of the same month (Parashar & Datta, 2013). In response, Prime Minister Jigmi Y. Thinley suspended his election campaign, allowing the opposing party to be the chosen one endorsed by the king. The DPT lost the election-2013 and its members spoke against the king vis a vis the interim government, publicly (Yangzom, 2016).

During the second interim government in 2018, the use of social media was instrumental in influencing the result of the election again against the DPT (Pelden S. , 2018) which was yet to prove its loyalty to the king after the 2013 anti-king sloganeering. Consequently, the untested *Druk Nyamrup Tshokpa* won the election (ECB, 2018).

A different scenario was seen during the third interim government. By all criteria, the new party Bhutan Tendril Party- with a leader, from the east for the first time, who is a recipient of the royal medal, a relative of the queen, and a trusted person of the king was the waiting winner. The previously tested Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and its president and former Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay won the election (ECB, 2024). The former PM used the king's channel to reach the people in different corners and sectors of the country. The king has *De-Suups* in all constituencies, electoral pools, and villages. The king uses the *De-Suup* channel to influence people and implement his ideas (Rizal, 2021). The former PM Tshering Tobgay infiltrated the *De-Suup* system (Rinzin, 2020) and influenced the result of the election in his favour (Pelden T. , 2024).

Back-track from democracy

The establishment of the interim government in Bhutan is a systematic regression from democracy to harking back to the spirit of absolute monarchy. During the interim period, the rulers exercise control during the political vacuum to influence the people and make extra effort to select a party that they find loyal. It manipulates the electoral process to favour king-preferred party, potentially undermining the democratic principles introduced after the transition.

Lacks inclusiveness

The interim government lacks inclusiveness, which makes the environment conducive for manipulating the electoral process to favour a specific party aligned with the king's preferences, potentially excluding other parties or segments of the population from fair representation. All the interim governments have so far lacked religious, regional, ethnic, and minority representation. The failure to address divisions along ethnic, regional, or religious lines has led to widening the gaps between them.

Anti-democratic focus

The intentions of the interim government, in reality, are to safeguard the monarchy's power and limit checks and balances, deviating from a purely democratic focus. A lawyer from Thimphu writes in Kuensel.

"*... there has been a clear erosion of freedom of speech and expression under successive governments. By the third government, the vitality of freedom of speech has diminished, even impacting individual opinion writers and stifling diverse perspectives. It is crucial to acknowledge that freedom of speech and expression are pivotal to the rule of law; they provide proper checks and balances, ensuring accountability and fostering public confidence...*" (Tshering, 2024)

Power struggles for favour from the king: The practice that interim government is used to influence election outcomes in favour of the king's preferred party suggests potential power struggles and favouritism, raising concerns about impartiality and fairness in the electoral process. The interim government's manipulation of the electoral process implies abusing authority by using its power to influence election outcomes in favour of a particular party, undermining the democratic process.

Inadequate reconciliation: Failure to address past conflicts or reconcile opposing factions has perpetuated tensions and lack of initiatives to solve the protracted issues of the country is inheriting problems for future generations.

Lack of transparency in funding
Poor Communication: As the entire interim period passes under a lack of transparency about funding allocated or utilized by the interim government for electoral purposes. Ineffective communication with the public leads to distrust and disengagement.

Overburden on bureaucracy
The advisors of interim government lead the ministries as uninformed ministers, who work on directives from higher authorities overloaded or strained the bureaucratic structures, making the already over-stressed bureaucracy inefficient and indecisive. In 2018, the king commanded the bureaucrats to render "unstinted support to all of the government's endeavours" (Kuensel, 2018). The king commanded bureaucrats' principles and actions to exemplify a model of service to both the people and the country. "This Royal advice has been patiently repeated over the years, largely unheeded" ((Editorial, 2022).

Recommendation

For strengthening of the democratic system, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Amend constitutional provisions to ensure greater checks and balances, upholding democratic principles in interim government formations.
- Consider involving international observers in overseeing electoral processes conducted during interim government tenures to ensure fairness and transparency, and incorporate their feedback in subsequent elections.
- Establish independent oversight mechanisms to prevent interim governments from favouritism or undue influence in electoral processes.
- Implement measures to ensure fair representation across ethnic, religious, and gender lines during interim government formations to promote inclusivity. Include people's representatives in the government.
- Implement robust anti-corruption frameworks to prevent mismanagement of resources during interim government transitions.
- Improve communication strategies to enhance public understanding and engagement during interim government tenures.
- Introduce stringent measures to enhance transparency in funding allocation and utilisation during interim government tenure, ensuring public trust.
- Invest in capacity-building initiatives, especially within bureaucratic structures, to mitigate potential transition strain.
- Periodically review and reassess the roles and functions of interim governments to align with evolving democratic norms and address identified shortcomings.
- Prioritize national reconciliation initiatives within interim government frameworks to address past conflicts and promote unity.

Conclusion

The institutionalization of interim governments in Bhutan, as stipulated in Article 19 of the Constitution of Bhutan 2008, signifies a unique mechanism during electoral transitions. Constituting a temporary authority for up to ninety days between National Assembly dissolutions, these bodies oversee elections while refraining from policy decisions or international agreements. Though not accountable to the public or courts, interim governments rectify governance deviations and nurture a smooth handover to elected governments. However, concerns arise regarding their potential anti-democratic leanings, lack of inclusivity, and susceptibility to power struggles, necessitating a focus on transparency, inclusiveness, and safeguarding democratic principles in future iterations.

Interim governments now serve as avenues for the king to recognize emerging elites in society and to acknowledge individuals loyal to the dynasty by awarding them positions. During the past four exercises, the interim governments have restrained their influence among the local political parties only using a combination of incentives and penalties while staying within the designated responsibilities. The fear is that the involvement of the leaders of major commissions and constitutional organizations in the interim government during the transition opens a risk of undermining checks and balances. Such big breaks can be exploited to prolong the interim period and cross the line from legitimate governance to unconstitutional authoritarian control, all without giving the characteristics of a visible coup.

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Bhutan India Security Relations: Conflicting Cooperation

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ABSTRACT
Bhutan-India relations are shaped by the changing geopolitical need and conflicting security arrangements in the Himalayas. Unique geographical location, connecting two major rising powers with opposite political philosophies and international attention in Asia in the new century puts Bhutan is more critical position. The countries call it 'warm relations' which are rather defined by the changing political interest of the stronger neighbour - India. Bhutan has historically balanced its relation between India and Tibet, although it has been more closed to India for last six decades. This article shall look into the geopolitical shift in the Himalayan belt, its influence in Bhutan and tuning of the Bhutanese security policies to suit the need of the hour. It shall also examine the reasons for shift in those security policies at different time periods.

Keywords: Conflict, geopolitics, Himalayas, military

Historical connections

Bhutan shares most of its borders with India – they are porous and easy to access in east, south and west whereas the border in the north with China is impenetrable stopping frequent connections at people's level between the two countries.

Political equations, security dynamics and geopolitical confrontation define borders. Small states have often been the

'objects of conquest' in the big powers' scramble for dominion (Penjore, 2004). Weaker nations must create the ideology of distinctiveness – primarily through culture - with its stronger neighbour in order to preserve its sovereignty. 'State political power is often employed in an attempt to create a national culture' (Walcott, 2010) and Bhutan is one primary example of defending borders based on state created culture. I call this soft politics.

Bhutan's state-created culture shares a closer affinity with its northern neighbour – Tibet, China. If few southern districts are removed from Bhutan's cultural map, the Buddhist nation has nothing in common with Hindu dominated India. This is where Bhutan plays smart to defend its borders to protect cultural identity yet shifts its alliance based on the geopolitical need in the region.

Bhutan-India security connection go back much before the formation of the modern states. The earliest conflict is traced back to later part of the first millennia where historical legends relate that the mighty king of Monyul invaded a southern region known as the Duars, subduing the regions of modern Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar in India (Worden, 1991).

We don't have recorded evidence of conflict in the regions for a long period of time, though the region was prone to conflicts due to its fragile political structure. Rather Indian saints like Padmasambhava (whom Bhutanese refer as Guru Rinpoche) helped subdue internal conflict and consolidate the Buddhist teachings in areas included in the modern-day Bhutan. It was invaded several times by northern neighbours (Tibetans and Mongols) but emerged triumphed in most of these battles which helped strengthen its control over the weaker neighbouring kingdoms in southern foothills.

Soon after entering India as traders, Europeans begun exploring the Himalayan region through missionaries. The first such mission to visit Bhutan was in 1627 - Portuguese Jesuits Estêvão Cacella and João Cabral. Bhutan's relation with these expansionists did not go well.

Conflict with Europeans (British India) started when British pushed colonisation towards the Himalayas. Bhutan had in several occasions came in conflict with English forces in its attempt to support the kingdoms in southern foothills against the aggressions.

British-India not only pushed for trade with Bhutan and Tibet but forced Bhutan to accept their terms. British records always cited 'cross-border raids by Bhutan or sheltering of dissidents as the immediate cause (for their actions); however, modern historians note Britain's imperialist ambitions in the region to be the actual pretext. Bhutan was not only 'a vital cog in the Indo-Tibetan trade but also the commercial viability of Duars region for supporting tea plantations was well-known among Company officials' (Kaul, 2021).

The conflict was obvious as British aggressively moved to occupy the fertile plains because 'the Duars was the most important part of Bhutanese territory, both fiscally and economically (Ura, 2002). There were 18 Duars in Assam and Bengals regions measuring approximately 8,000 square kilometers.

Relation became rocky after the interests of the British and Bhutan clashed in Cooch Behar, resulting into the first Anglo-Bhutan War in 1772. This was the beginning of the British interests in Bhutan to create a gateway for British trade with Tibet (Penjore, 2004).

British sent several missions to Bhutan in their effort either to persuade the country to allow trade route to Tibet or to be a

catalyst for internal conflict making it easy for British to be kingmaker and impose its interest. Until the nineteenth century, Bhutan had been actively involved in the "diplomacy" of the Himalayan region and thus also engaged with India (Rose 1977). However, as British and Chinese power extended in the Himalayas, "Bhutan's response was to isolate the country and to place strict controls over intra-regional trade between India and Tibet" (Holsti 1982).

The British annexation of Assam in 1829 further exacerbated the political situation in the Duars, 'leading to hostility with the East India Company and later with the British Empire (Penjore, 2004). East India company was de-facto ruler in India prior to 1857. In 1857 it was replaced by British government.

The most significant of these missions was led by Ashley Eden in 1863-64, which was dispatched in the wake of a civil war (Kaul, 2021). Eden proposed a rather humiliating treaty agreement that Bhutan surrender all the Duars in south, British captives in Bhutan and Bhutanese citizens who committed any 'crimes' in Duars (Eden, 2005). Bhutan rejected the offer and Eden claimed to have been mistreated (Rennie, 1866). Bhutan's refusal to accept British mission and denial to establish any relations with them was interpreted as 'mistreatment' of the mission officials.

Under this pretext, British invaded Bhutan in November 1864. Bhutan never had neither regular armed forces nor any ammunitions like British. Those in charge of the fortress and dzongs had to face the well-equipped British army. British faced initial setback at Dewangiri when Bhutan made surprising attacks (Adhikari, 2012) but had final victory. Bhutan finally agreed to the terms of British through Sinchula Treaty in 1865. The British took over Bhutan's role in Sikkim and Cooch Behar in return for non-interference in its internal matters (Penjore, 2004). And Bhutan lost is authority in Assam and Bengal Duars.

The treaty was the first step towards opening Bhutan's southern border and political relations with India. Subsequent treaties have rooted to the fundamental principles of this document despite several amendments. Following the treaty, Bhutan's political and economic relations continued to tilt south and reduced communications with Tibet. Bhutan stood by British in its military invasion of Tibet in 1903 wherein Bhutan's first king Ugyen Wangchuk was a part. For this support in the 'Great Game[2]', British believed creating a buffer state in Bhutan would stop the Chinese and Russian forces from marching south of the Himalayas. This led to establishment of monarchy in Bhutan. Ugyen's action would have further worsened the Tibet-Bhutan relations forcing Bhutan to rely on British India and then with India for everything, thereafter. Had Bhutan not fought battle with British India and rejected Sinchula Treaty terms, likelihood of monarchy in Bhutan today would be an imagination.

As movement for independence in India gained momentum, Bhutanese rulers were worried about their future under Indian leadership. Bhutan king was unhappy with Indian freedom fighter Mahatma Gandhi. Bhutan's fear was absorption of Bhutan into new Indian federation. The other fear was the possible escalation of political instability in Bhutan if the movement in India expanded. This phenomenon was already observed in Nepal where movement against the Rana regime was waging with the support of freedom fighters in India. The Bhutanese king was outraged at Gandhi for meeting the brother of an incarnate of Shabdrung, who was exiled from Bhutan, considering him as threat to the Bhutanese monarchy.

[2] The power struggle between British and Russia to control Centra Asia in 19th century is generally referred to as the 'Great Game'.

Bhutan and the new India

India received independence in 1947. Dorjis in Darjeeling were entrusted to building rapport with new India and King was in most cases guided by the Dorjis on foreign affairs. The proposal of Jigme Palden Dorji to maintain direct relation with UK against new India was rejected by the British authority in London compelling this tiny Himalayan kingdom to adjust with the new leadership of independent India. Bhutanese king took no time in communicating with the new leadership. The Indian leadership assured the protectorate status of Bhutan to continue and that they would not seek any political changes in Bhutan.

Bhutan and new India revised their treaty in 1949 with no substantive changes of terms of the 1910 Punakha Treaty. Bhutan would continue as the protectorate of India with foreign policy and security handled by New Delhi.

Bhutan faced first internal turmoil in 1950s with some southern Bhutanese raising flags for democratic changes. This was more an influence from Nepal's success in dethroning Rana regime than the Indian independence. There was only one recorded demonstration in Sarbhang (now spelled as Sarpang), that too attended by 'about 100' individual volunteers. The leaders were operating from India. Indian leadership appeared to have not lent any support for this uprising other than turning blind eyes to leaders taking shelters in West Bengal.

In 1951, the new communist China took control of Tibet. Bhutan feared Chinese annexation might further expand beyond the Himalayas. In 1959 the PLA occupied eight Bhutanese enclaves in western Tibet and that same year, Chinese Premier Chou En-Lai expressed China's desire for a direct bilateral border talk with Bhutan (Penjore, 2004). Bhutan recalled its diplomatic mission in China, closed its northern borders and handed itself to India for survival. India too was fearing further advancement of the Chinese

forces south of the Himalayas barriers will be the biggest threat for Indian. Bhutan agreed to allow India dispatch Indian Army in some of the critical points along Bhutan-China borders to stop further aggression from Chinese military. The initial agreement was to train the Bhutanese armed forces through the project called Indian Military Training Team (IMTART). However, it established a permanent base in Bhutan. These Indian security installations are still actively checking Chinese activities along northern Bhutan borders.

Bhutan not only handed its security keys to India but also sought economic support to come out of isolation. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India was invited to the Paro palace[3] to discuss India Bhutan relations and economic co-operations.

In 1959, when Dalai Lama fled Tibet to take shelter in India, thousands of Tibetan refugees fled to Bhutan as well. While the large number who fled to India and then to third countries settled well economically to continue their anti-China movement, Tibetans in Bhutan were silenced. One of the influential figures of the Tibetan refugees was a fiancée of the third King – Yanki – from whom he had several children. During 1974 turmoil led by Yanki, Tibetan refugees were given choice either to get Bhutanese citizenship to abandon Tibetan dreams or leave country to follow Dalai Lama in India. Many expressed not to take Bhutanese citizenship but remain refugees (Denyer 2008). By 1981, Tibetans had left Bhutan, but small numbers remain who have now been naturalised. Through this Bhutan eliminated any form of any anti-China voice. Bhutan was still hopeful to reconnect with China in future.

[3] https://youtu.be/JELlYxKHmBI

Bhutan during Sino-Indian war

Bhutanese military did not participate directly during the Sino-India war even though Indian military were stationed in the country. This was partly because of the new economic relations established with India while cultural and traditional relations with Tibet was the bigger influence in its foreign and security policies. Bhutan under Indian sponsorship had just initiated planned development projects.

India sponsored to build infrastructures in Bhutan. The road infrastructures not only connected Bhutan with India economically but opened up access to Indian military for travel in case required for defence. The construction of roads became the main issue of discussion in Bhutan's subsequent Assembly sessions, and India was considered the only possible source of aid because of the entire absence of diplomatic relations with other countries (Priesner 2004: 219).

While the war was in progress, Bhutan was busy building its first road networks. Further, the war concentrated outside the Bhutan-China borders which did not require for an active involvement of Bhutan.

Indian security installations in Bhutan

Indian security dimension changed when Chinese troops took control of Tibet. The immediate threats were the Himalayan nations that act as buffer states to veil the confrontation between the Asian giants. Bhutan and Sikkim were the immediate target of the likely Chinese aggression. Bhutan requested security from the new Indian leaders. As a protectorate of the India bound by 1949 treaty, there was no other options for Bhutan but to seek Indian security blanket in its northern borders. However, the fact is unless briefly in 1911, China has never proclaimed Bhutan to be its part.

The first team of military personnel was sent in May 1961 led by BGS XXXIII Corps Brigadier J. S. Aurora. He was replaced by Colonel B. N. Upadhyay of the 9th Gorkha Rifles on 20 July 1962 to lead a team of about 15 officers. The Wangchuk Lo Dzong Military School (WLDMS) was raised on 16 October 1962 and commenced training with 22 officer cadets and 49 non-commissioned officers (Indian Army, nd).

It was formalised into the IMTART following the defence agreement in 1965. Its bases are located in Thimphu, Haa, Trashigang and Wangduephodrang (Schottli, 2015).

Initially, then, the economic aid given by India was highly influenced by security concerns, and thus enabling Bhutan to have an essential infrastructure (Trivdedi, 2008). Today a 1,000 person-strong Indian Military Training Team is permanently based in western Bhutan to train and regularly cooperate with the Royal Bhutan Army (Ramachandran, 2017).

Border Disputes with China and Indian Engagements

'For Bhutan, the border problem is its biggest security challenge and is critical to its future as a nation-state. Hence, Bhutan regards border solution as an end in itself, and wants a speedy settlement' (Kumar, 2010.)

Bhutan's effort to finalise its border demarcation with China is viewed worriedly in India. While demarcated and peaceful Bhutan-China borders would address India's many security concerns, Indian establishment wish it remained volatile and conflicting. One of the reasons for such Indian wish would be to avoid better Bhutan-China relations. On many occasions, Indian

media and politicians debated more seriously about Bhutan-China border than Bhutanese themselves.

India is dominant in all aspect in south Asia – economic, cultural, political and security. While India has its own reason to have its direct intervention in the neighbouring state, the dominance has resulted in rather confronting outcome. The geographical Indo-centricity on the ground has strongly contributed to this phenomenon, not only reinforcing India's supremacy in the region but further making it extremely difficult for the smaller states to bypass India and actively engage with each other directly. Landlocked countries like Nepal and Bhutan are highly dependent on India for trade and transit (Sauvagerd, 2018). The regional predominance has led to India facing primary hostility from among its neighbouring countries (Destradi 2010 & 2012; Prys 2012).

Bhutan is highly significant to India because of its geopolitical location (Murthy, 2000). The country functions as one of the buffer states between India and China. Bhutan's sovereignty is of great importance to India because a "Chinese-dominated Bhutan would flank India's position in the upper Assam, and strategically place the Chinese south of the Himalayas" (Belfiglio, 1972).

Soon after taking over the reins of the country, current King Jigme Khesar travelled to India to revise the bilateral treaty. Bhutan had made it clear, at least for the public consumption, that the country was not keen to establish diplomatic relations with any of the five permanent members of the UN security council (Chaudury, 2017).

The revised bilateral treaty in 2007 removed the provisions of Indian guidance on security and foreign affairs – practically ending the protectorate status of the country. This was the first time Bhutan managed to get out of the status of Indian protectorate – able to handle its own foreign affairs and security.

Bhutan no longer required to consult India to purchase ammunition or to establish diplomatic relations with other countries.

Bhutan transitioned to 'controlled democracy' in 2008 with the introduction of a parliament elected through adult franchise. The national constitution, prepared with support from Indian experts, has mandated the King for security and foreign affairs of the country.

An elected government was installed under the leadership of Jigmi Thinley of the *Druk Phuensum Tshogpa* following elections in 2008. This government expanded Bhutan's diplomatic presence in many countries. The initiative was not digested by New Delhi.

When Thinley met with China's Premier Wen Jiabao at the sidelines of the Rio+20 Summit in Brazil in 2012, the Indian political circle read this as Bhutan's wish to establish relations with China. Bhutan later said the two leaders discussed nothing related to diplomatic relations. There was no formal statement from India's foreign ministry, but Indian media reacted with alarm. Multiple news headlines such as "China, Bhutan 'ready' to establish diplomatic ties" (Krishnan, 2012), and "Bhutan switches focus to China" (Arora & Simha, 2012) drew attention. Indian media claimed that "India confronts a new strategic situation in its neighbourhood as its staunchest ally Bhutan prepares to establish full diplomatic ties with China" (Bagchi, 2012). While Bhutan continued its efforts at the top level to convince its intentions to Indian leadership, the Indian media stunts acted as catalyst to sour relations between the two countries.

It's a media culture in India to provoke for dismantling India's relations with neighbouring countries as an instrument to gain political favour or wider attention. Imaginative, provocative and

unverified news and opinions have been new normal for Indian news media for last few decades.

Some say Thinley's attempt to establish diplomatic ties with China should be seen as a statement being made — that the 2007 revision of the Treaty of Friendship with India is not enough, and that Bhutan wishes to now have an independent domestic and foreign policy (Rizal, 2015). Other argued Bhutan "committed an unforgivable sin in New Delhi's eyes" (Madsen, 2013).

A year later, unexpectedly, New Delhi withdrew the fuel subsidies for Bhutan. The Indian government officially reasoned that this decision was purely "developmental, financial, and technical" (Thinley, 2014) but was later revealed there was in fact an order to this effect (Lamsang, 2013). The action was deliberately introduced just before the second parliamentary elections in Bhutan, which led to fall of the Thinley government (Dikshit, 2013). Thinley, thus, became 'a scapegoat for both India and the king' (Rizal, 2015).

The new government under Tshering Tobgay, of the PDP, completely halted Bhutan's spree of establishing diplomatic relations with foreign countries. This was more desirable result for India. Tobgay did not initiate any formal communication with senior Chinese leaders too.

The latest development was the dispute in Doklam, a tri-junction of Bhutan-China-India in western Bhutan. It was Indian news media that first broke the news claiming Chinese building infrastructures inside Bhutanese territory. Bhutan neither denied this fact nor claimed it to be true. Bhutan maintained its silence and innocence and engaged Chinese and Indian leadership diplomatically. While Indian attention was concentrated on Doklam, Bhutan completed its mission to connect Tibet through road network in the central north.

Threats from India

India's northeast is the most volatile, possibly in Asia, in terms of politics, demography and environment. It is for this volatility that India's biggest fear is China's attack along the Siliguri corridor will completely disconnect two Indias. The regions, along with neighbouring countries are sometimes referred to as 'time bombs in the subcontinent' (Mehta, 2001). Losing control in Siliguri corridor will disconnect India's connection with its seven sister states and other countries in South East Asia.

There are insurgent movements from about 50 groups rooted in history, language and ethnicity, tribal rivalry, migration, local resource control, drugs, centre and state government negligence and foreign powers involvement (Penjore, 2004). The active separatist militant groups such as United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front for Bodoland (NDFB) and Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) are primary threats to Bhutan's security. These and many other militant groups have at some point used Bhutan as their operational bases. Any political disruptions in the region will negatively impact Bhutan - politically and economically.

Bhutan claimed it knew presence of Indian militants in its territories in 1996. Bhutan understood the potential danger, and beginning 1997 the issue dominated the National Assembly discussions (Penjore, 2004). However, there are also claims, Bhutan sought support from these militants for expulsion of Nepali speakers from the south (Verma, 2004; Kumar, 2004). Bhutanese king had met these militants in their own camps several times (Rehman, 2007; Telegraph India, 2004). When the threat was more serious, Bhutan sought assistance from Indian Union government to run 'Operation All Clear' in 2003. The operation flushed out the militants out of Bhutan.

The biggest threat for Bhutan is absorption by India or China. Its immediate neighbours Tibet was absorbed into China and Sikkim into India. The security confrontation between the Asian giants in the region will pose serious threat to Bhutan's sovereignty. Increasing US presence in the region, as it encircles China, the regions is certain to become the battle ground in future for dominance.

The rivalrous and hostile dynamics between India and China are the biggest security threat to Bhutan, and therefore Bhutanese foreign policy and diplomacy has consistently sought to placate India with assurances of its friendship and take the fallout of Indian trust deficit with a strategic silence (Kaul, 2022).

US interests in Bhutan

Bhutan's geopolitical location is strategic not only to India but to United States as well when it comes to its mission to establish its presence in those countries that share borders with China. US's diplomatic communication with Bhutan is handled by its embassy in New Delhi while 'Bhutan maintains a consulate general in the United States'[4].

US Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) for Bhutan, which was approved on 8 February 2023, presents new opportunities associated with expanding US-Bhutan relations. That said, the ICS does not prescribe any concrete bilateral engagement apart from identifying areas of cooperation (Acharya, 2023).

The US offered to resettle majority of the Bhutanese refugees – that had been the headache for Bhutan for decades – in hope Bhutan would agree to open its doors for diplomatic relations, at least a consular presence if not an embassy. The US regularly

[4] https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-bhutan/

engaged Bhutan during the resettlement process and sent several high-ranking officials. These visits have stopped following the conclusion of resettlement. Bhutan no more expresses interest in building rapport with the US. Thinley-cabinet had made attempts to connect with US by establishing diplomatic presence with US allies such as Australia and Israel but that's no more likely be the case anymore.

India is worried about the US presence in Bhutan. India and the US have conflicting geopolitical interest in the Himalayas. While US interest is to encircle China through 'chain of air bases and military ports (Reed, 2013)', India's primary interest is to avoid direct confrontation with China by ensuring stable buffer state. India has closely read the instability in Nepal where US presence has overtaken Indian interests and continued political unrest has affected India more. India will unlikely accept any US presence in Bhutan.

India's security interests in Bhutan as well as the structural differences between the two countries make the relationship extremely complex, and offer an interesting and rather unusual set of circumstances compared to other South Asian countries. Additionally, Bhutan is the only former Indian protectorate that exists as a sovereign country today, having agreed to let India control its foreign policy until 2007 (Sauvagred, 2018).

China too expressed its interest not to incorporate Bhutan into its imperial world. China too is worried about US presence in Bhutan but is comfortable about Indian engagement. The only worry for Bhutan remained is the resettled or migrated Bhutanese (especially in the US) who would be empowered or encouraged to boost their anti-Bhutan campaign.

Conclusion

Bhutan's relations with India is longstanding. This relation is 'open to economic coercion and diplomatic manipulation' yet better option for Bhutan is to maintain comfortable and trusted equidistance with both India and China. Indo-China rivalry at Bhutan's borders increases insecurity to all three countries.

While maintaining its closer cooperation with India, Bhutan has gradually shifted its path to reconnect China. For practical reasons, Bhutan feels safer in Chinese and Indian dominance compared to that of US. As long as the two neighbours remain committed to ensuring sovereignty, Bhutan is likely to forgo its interest in connecting US and its allies any further. That too will largely determine how India maintains its relationship with US during its dealings with China.

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Interview with Dr. DNS Dhakal

Dr. Deo Narayan Sharma (DNS) Dhakal is one of the few first-generation leaders of Bhutanese refugees who is still actively advocating for human rights, democracy, and amicable solutions for the Bhutanese people in exile and diaspora.

He had his formal education and training in Bhutan, India, and the USA, cut short by his forced exile from Bhutan in 1991. During his time in exile, he not only spearheaded the movement for repatriation but also championed the cause of third-country resettlement. Simultaneously, he remarkably continued his teaching, academic, and research endeavours at various universities across the USA, India, South Africa and Nepal. He is the acting president of the Bhutan National Democratic Party (BNDP), founder of the Bhutan-Nepal Friendship Foundation, and a key advocate for the Non-resident Bhutanese (NRB) platform. Dr. DNS Dhakal plays an advisory role in many social and political organisations, lending his expertise and leadership.

He has authored many research articles and books delving into both professional subjects and issues about Bhutan and its people. His recent book, "Bhutan: Memoir of Refugee Struggle and Suggestions for an Amicable Resolution," is possibly the largest book on Bhutan published by the Bhutanese diaspora.

Govinda Rizal of *The Bhutan Journal* (TBJ) requested Dr. Dhakal for a written interview in the first week of 2024. It may be noted

here that Dr. DNS Dhakal has been the advisor of The Bhutan Watch, which publishes the TBJ, since its establishment. Below is the full interview with the author, traveller, scientist, academician, activist, and leader of the Bhutanese community in exile - Dr. DNS Dhakal.

TBJ: You have been leading movements for democratic changes in Bhutan for more than three decades. What are the major tangible and intangible outcomes?
DNS Dhakal: Bhutan's cultural cleansing policy of Lhotsampa people triggered the protest movement of 1990's which unfortunately culminated into the refugee exodus to Nepal. This was an unexpected development in Bhutan to which the neighbouring countries: namely India and Nepal were not prepared for it. As activists we tried first to lobby the governments of India and Nepal for dignified repatriation of the refugees. Bhutan and Nepal conducted 16 rounds of bilateral talks over a period of ten years with no successful tangible results. The response from successive governments of India had been lukewarm and ticklish. Nepal could not succeed to make Bhutan accountable for its misconduct towards the Lhotsampas population.

This created a situation for the international community to intervene with the plan of third country resettlement. Now we have resettled Bhutanese in USA, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and in some European countries. A decade has gone by since their resettlements. Our people are doing well in culturally different environments, which they had to adjust at least 100 years jump in the standard of living and economic activities. The resettled population makes almost 17% of Bhutan's population. More young Bhutanese are joining the resettled communities for education and business opportunities in overseas countries.

Having such a huge population in developed countries is an asset for our community and the country. We can organise the spread-out Diaspora as a force to reckon with to usher socio-economic transformation in Bhutan. Our immediate challenge is finding a solution to some 6500 Bhutanese refugees who are stranded in the camps in Nepal.

TBJ: Compared to the situation in 1990, where is Bhutan now and where is the issue of the Bhutanese refugees?
DNS Dhakal: Bhutan has made progress in international relation, hydropower development and introducing the limited democratic system of governance. These developments will not be sustainable in the long run unless the leadership in Thimphu commands respect of all the Bhutanese including those resettled in overseas countries.

The key issue is how to resolve amicably the refugee problem and stair the country towards the sustainable path of socio-economic development. The amicable solution should address the identity issue of the resettled Bhutanese, repatriation of the remaining refugees from the camps in Nepal and democratic space inside the country for the organisations operating from exile.

The refugee issue is very much alive. Unless we find an amicable solution of this problem there is a danger for Bhutan slipping into a long drawn political instability the kind of which the country has not seen before.

TBJ: The means of livelihood and survival for Bhutanese refugees living in Nepal have been removed. What factors contribute to the stakeholders seemingly disregarding the plight of the refugees?
DNS Dhakal: The exiled communities, Bhutan and the international community are the key stakeholders. Nepal is not a signatory to the international convention on the rights of refugees.

We had agreed to the proposal of third country resettlement upon an understanding that all options, including repatriation to Bhutan would be available for the refugees. The international community needs to put diplomatic pressure on Bhutan to do its share of responsibility.

The current situation in the camps is because of the incapability of the successive Nepalese governments to spell out clearly Nepal's position. Also, the resettled community overstretched its scare resources to help the refugees in the camps which should have been the responsibility of the UNHCR. In my opinion this is a drag in finding an amicable solution of the Bhutanese refugee problem, which needs to be corrected. At the end of the day our demand for the dignified repatriation and political reforms in Bhutan will not change irrespective of what the UNHCR or government of Nepal may decide. Someday, everyone will get justice what they deserve, wherever they live: It is important that we organize ourselves as a potent force to user socio-economic transformation in Bhutan.

TBJ: A day soon, Nepal is expected to be free from the presence and burden of the Bhutanese refugees on its soil. What are the Bhutanese footprints left in Nepal that the future generation can look back and be proud of?
DNS Dhakal: Our footprints are what has been printed in newspapers and magazines; what we have done during our struggle for the repatriation; and the activities we undertook in the camps for our daily survival. These are our precious assets.

We have no rights to lay claim on the camp sites since they belong to government of Nepal. Nor would it be economically feasible for us to preserve these sites for the progeny. At the most we could preserve is in a museum.

This I realised it early on and started collecting documents, artifacts and relics from different sources when the international

community began resettlement program in 2008. Now we have a Bhutanese Refugee Historical and Cultural Complex built adjacent to Srimonarayan Devasthan—popularly known as Bhotagay Mandir- at Charali, Nepal. Hopefully, these two memorials combined would serve as a heritage site for the Bhutanese refugees in the long run.

The other outcome of the refugee imbroglio is the reinforcement of religious and cultural relationship between the peoples of Bhutan and Nepal. In that respect I have proposed the idea of creating Bhutan-Nepal Foundation which should serve as the vehicle for the promotion of informal relationship between the peoples of Bhutan and Nepal. Currently, I am managing the activities of the foundation with support from some of my family members. I do hope that other individuals will come forward to join the effort with new ideas and resources to make the initiative more effective.

Anyway, these are some of the initiatives which can keep the memory of our struggle intact for generations to come.

TBJ: Your party and you have been engaged in a prolonged struggle since the 1990s to advocate for the establishment of democracy in Bhutan. Nevertheless, the declaration of democracy in Bhutan in 2008 occurred without the involvement of dissenting political parties and their leaders. What are the fundamental similarities and differences between the envisioned democracy advocated by your party and the form of democracy instituted by the Bhutanese king?

DNS Dhakal: The third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck introduced party-less democratic system of governance in the late 1960s which was reversed by the fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. The 1990's Lhotsampa led protest movement for restoration of their cultural rights triggered Sarchops from the east to join the

wagon of democracy which cautioned the ruling elites in Thimphu to advise the King Jigme Singye Wangchuck to give some sort of a control democratic system of governance in Bhutan.

In this system, elections are organized in a controlled manner in which upper and lower houses are elected in the parliament. The upper house election is based on party-less candidates and it effectively controls the policy making environment in Bhutan. The lower house is contested by organised political parties, but their power is limited to implementation of policies passed by the upper house. The elected Prime Minister is effectively an appointed administrator who has no deep influence on policy formulation. This means the sovereign power is not with popularly elected leader. This might be ok for the transition period because Bhutan is still undergoing through the nation building process.

Our vision is of a democratic system of governance with sovereign power of running the country with popularly elected leaders in both the houses of the parliament. For this there is no better system than competitive multiparty democracy with the institution of monarchy as the constitutional head of the state. We are comfortable waiting for that time when the majority of Bhutanese people are ready for that kind of a change and are prepared to accept the responsibility which comes along with.

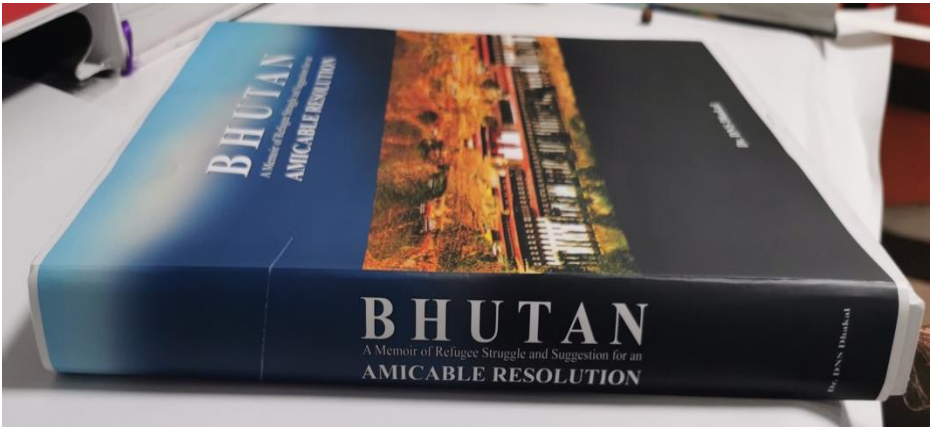
TBJ: Last year, you authored the book "Bhutan: Memoir of Refugee Struggle and Suggestions for an Amicable Resolution." Could you provide an overview of the suggestions presented in the book for our readers? Additionally, how have stakeholders responded to the purpose and contents of this publication?

DNS Dhakal: This book is focused on preserving the records pertaining to the Lhotsampa population and presenting the facts that would be easily readable by the international audience and the future generation. It tries to build upon my personal story and tells

about the background policy environment creating the refugee problem, our life in the camps, and the role of the international community to provide the durable solution for the refugee problem. It does not give details of individual's contribution in the camps or building the protest movement. As the title suggests, the book is supposed to trigger a thinking process amongst the ruling elites in Thimphu that an amicable solution is in the interest of all the stakeholders including those resettled in overseas countries.

This message however has not been well digested by the refugee community at large who believe that I am too lean on the perpetrators of human rights violation in Bhutan and giving too much coverage in my personal story. I am ok with their perception since different people have different intellectual faculty to read the complexity of the problem and the approach one needs to take to find an amicable solution.

I have spent some 30,000 USD in its publication and recovered only one-half of it thus far. And this was covered from my personal savings.



This book has an enormous database and some pictorial value of activities that we have undertaken in the camps. Having a copy of it in the family drawing rooms would be an asset for the resettled community and provide an opportunity for their progenies to dig into their roots in Bhutan.

I am satisfied with the effort that I have tried to preserve in a book what we have done in our struggle and what we have inherited from our country, Bhutan. It would have been lost if we did not have them in a bound copy.

I would encourage the resettled families to procure a copy, the kind of which will be difficult to produce in the future. I have still some 150 copies in stock. The inheritors of the resettled communities will not regret that kind of investment by their parents and I am hoping that there will be a demand from inside the country as well though it will be pricey at Nu 7000 a copy.

TBJ: There have been four elected governments in Bhutan following the establishment of constitutional monarchy and democratic reforms. What were the impediments preventing the leaders in exile from engaging, either diplomatically, personally, or politically, with the elected leaders in Thimphu?

DNS Dhakal: There is a trust deficit. I don't think the ruling elites in Bhutan believe that the refugee problem is over, and there is nothing to worry about it. And that trust building process should come from the King himself since in the past the sovereign ruler has taken the responsibility of solving the refugee problem. The leadership in exile would quickly come together to solve this problem if there is a serious effort from the King himself. I personally believe that there is a need to make an effort for national reconciliation and start working together in the nation building process, to which we have a long way to go.

TBJ: Presently, Bhutan faces significant challenges, including issues like unemployment, labour shortages, a declining birth rate, out-migration, population decline, and land grab, among others. As a dissident leader advocating for change, what constructive suggestions do you propose to effectively address these pressing challenges?

DNS Dhakal: Bhutan's growth rate in gross national product (GNP) is rather deceptive. The official record says it is plus 3000 USD which perhaps is coming from expenditures on mega hydropower projects, and not from the earning potential of general population. Bhutan needs to deepen economic activities in the rural areas where population could be productive in income generation activities. Instead, there is a shift in population base from rural to urban areas, and now urban to outmigration. This is a dangerous signal for a small country like Bhutan whose population, in my opinion, is less than 700,000.

Bhutan needs to conduct a series of diagnostic studies in macro and micro economic activities in the country and implement immediately correcting policy mechanism. Creation of mega engineering projects, for that matter, the proposed mega city in gaylegphug (now spelled Gelephu), are likely to add more economic ills than provide economic reliefs for Bhutan.

TBJ: Where do you see Bhutan and its diaspora twenty years from now?

DNS Dhakal: We need to begin a serious conversation process among the community leaderships about the future of exiled Bhutanese Diaspora. With the education and business opportunities that we enjoy in the resettled countries we should aim at becoming at par with the Indian or Chinese overseas communities in terms of educational achievement and entrepreneurial skills. With that we will draw strength to influence

socio-economic transformation of our community in Bhutan and elsewhere. The issue is of coming together; sharing ideas; and investing in our future. Our future effort should be towards that direction.

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