

Bhutanese Refugees: Past, Present and Future

Professor Dr. Michael Hutt (ORCID ID: 0000-0002-3869-6096), who was until recently Professor of Nepali and Himalayan Studies, at School of Oriental and Africa Studies (SOAS), University of London, is a renowned scholar on Bhutan studies. He has visited Bhutan, the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal, and Bhutanese resettled in developed countries. He has closely studied the refugee saga from the beginning till date. He has authored books and articles in peer reviewed journals on Bhutanese issues. I P Adhikari and Dr. Govinda Rizal of Bhutan Watch Team approached Dr. Hutt for a conversation on past, present and future of the former and current Bhutanese refugees.

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

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

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

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

That is a huge question, to which there is no single answer. I think many factors were at play, but I would point to four in particular. First, in terms of getting international opinion on their side, the refugees were up against the wider world's perception of Bhutan as a Shangrila governed by an enlightened monarch. Second, there was the refusal of India to become involved in resolving the issue. Third, there was a problem of political disunity among the refugees. Fourth, there was a lot of political instability in Nepal – as a result of this, the membership of the Nepal government's negotiation team was constantly changing, and it was persistently out-manouvered by the Bhutanese side.

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

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

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

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

I think there is a relationship between the new policies on citizenship and culture introduced by the RGoB in the late 1980s, the opposition

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

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

which arose to those policies in the south, the flight and expulsion of the refugees, and the limited democratisation of the Bhutanese polity from 2008 onward. However, I don't think this is a simple causal relationship. Obviously, the king and his advisers feared that democratic change would unleash forces that would undermine the dominance of the Drukpa elite. So, my view is that the RGoB would not have democratised, even to the limited extent that it has, if the demographic balance had not been changed first. But did the RGoB have a plan from the outset, or was it simply reacting to changing circumstances? I do not know.

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

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

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

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

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

camps? If they were overrepresented, why would this be, and what light would it shed on the political objectives of the eviction process?

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

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

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

He admitted that the Dress Code ruling had caused corruption at first, with police officers fining people on the streets and then pocketing the money. He talked at length about the need for Bhutan to maintain a distinct cultural identity and emphasised that the dress law applied only in the dzongs, courts and at official ceremonies and the like. King Jigme then insisted that I should visit southern Bhutan. As I knew Nepali, he said, I could leave my minders behind and go anywhere and speak to anyone I liked. He assured me that what Bhutan needed was criticism and advice, not praise.

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

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

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

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

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

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