

## **Interview with Father David Townsend**

Father David Townsend worked with the refugee education of the Bhutanese refugee students in Nepal. His contribution to the students deserves a historical archiving. I P Adhikari and Govinda Rizal of Bhutan Watch approached Father David for a written interview. He has given insightful information of the education system in refugee camps in the final years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and several other facts related to Bhutan and Bhutanese refugees:



**Father David, what made you join the refugee education programme in Nepal? What were your imagination before and what did you find? Were you culture shocked?**

My Jesuit Refugee Service superiors needed to find a Project Director for BREC. At the time I was one of the JRS people at work in the Vietnamese Holding camp in Malaysia. I was pretty conversant with the Vietnamese refugee situation. However, I knew nothing concerning refugees from Bhutan. I was transferred from a majority Muslim Malaysia to Hindu Nepal; from South East to South Asia; from the tropics to the Himalayas; from one small refugee camp with a shrinking population to several sprawling camps with a rising population; from being part of a team of pastoral counsellors to being the Project Director concerned with the education of some 35,000+ refugees students together with almost 1,000 refugee staff, mostly untrained volunteer teachers, and a dedicated group of largely expatriate volunteer teacher-

trainers. Nothing in my wildest imagination could have prepared me for this. I was welcomed with great kindness and hospitality by people of great patience. Wherever I have been in Asia, whether South-East or South, I have never experienced culture shock. The generous humanity of the people prevented any such alienation. I can honestly say that the only place where I have spent extended time and suffered culture shock was the USA.

**Compared to your previous experiences, what was the standard among refugee students and teachers? What they lacked and what they excelled in?**

Not having been involved in formal refugee education before my arrival in Damak I have no previous experience against which to judge. There are some memories I can share. All the teacher-trainers, including the non-Bhutanese, had been working in Bhutan. When their Bhutanese counterparts were expelled, they decided as a group to continue to work with them in the Nepali camps. I was greatly edified by the earnest dedication and commitment to enhancing the education of the uprooted Bhutanese youth in the camps. The ongoing teacher-training focussed on enhancing and supporting the very many untrained Bhutanese teaching volunteers who faced several large classes each day, all refugees themselves. Without the courage and dedication of these volunteers there would have been no BREC. Because of these heroes and heroines, I had a yearly headache. Since parents were seeing the value of education for their children two things were happening. First, parents enrolled their children as soon as they were of age. Second, students remained in school; there's very little dropout. My headache was finding ways of expanding the physical size of the schools, building extra classrooms, etc. and finding more teachers, to accommodate the growing population.

**As an Executive Director of the refugee education programme, what changes did you intend to bring in and how far were you successful?**

I received a well-honed young programme that was functioning and effective, despite the inherent difficulties that face any refugee programme. Long before I arrived it was the central success and jewel in the eyes of UNHCR. My initial hope was that I do no harm. Generally speaking, I believe that in this I was successful. Fairly quickly it became obvious to me that the programme needed to find supportive counterparts closer to Nepal. I took soundings from the experienced educators among the Jesuits in India. I invited some to give some teacher-training in the camps. From this developed, after I had left the scene, what seems to have been a very fruitful collaboration.

**Was education system designed to instil in students love towards their country of origin or prepare them to meet the demand of the local labour market?**

The education in the camp schools was to prepare the students to sit the Nepali School Leaving Exam. This education was done, as in Bhutan itself, through the medium of English. In this the camp schools, with a success rate of 86%, were more than twice as successful than the Nepali-medium schools. Since local absorption of Bhutanese refugees was never an option for them, neither was the local labour market the object of the education programme. Another diminishing hope was that of any return to Bhutan. With its English-medium teaching, the programme did in some way prepare the youth for resettlement, which was in mainly English-speaking receiving countries.

**Your time in Nepal also coincided with the first students' revolt in the camp. What was the genesis of the problem and how did you solve it?**

I have no recollection of any student revolt.

**Years later, the refugees were resettled in the developed countries. Was the education system preparing them for the march to these countries? Or should they have been taught differently to match their future?**

You need to ask the many Bhutanese who have had to go through the trauma of resettling in a third country. A few years after I had moved from Nepal, I had the opportunity to visit in Canada and the USA, several former refugees, including those with whom I worked closely. All seemed to have settled with good employment, and were in good contact with each other, despite great physical distance.

**How is/was your relationship with the Government of Bhutan? Did you intend to travel to Bhutan? What was the response?**

I never had any relationship, good or otherwise, with the Government of Bhutan. I never tried to visit Bhutan. The opportunity never arose, since I was not able to afford the expensive daily cost to foreign visitors.

**Your message to your former students, teachers and staff and to the refugee students back in the camps?**

Thank you for your welcome. Thank you for your kindnesses and especially your patience to me when I was with you. Thank you for the extraordinary example of your cohesive selfless dedication of yourselves to the future of your people. I trust

you can be relaxed and justifiably proud of what you have achieved, something in which some few of you are still labouring today. Finally, I hope you will forgive me any hurts I caused any of you, which must be so since I am human. Hold me in your prayer before God as I do you.