

Keeping Activism Alive: Bishwanath

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



generation of people with his words and actions. He is a member of the Governor's Advisory Commission on Asian-Pacific American Affairs in Pennsylvania. Govinda Rizal of The Bhutan Journal (TBJ) approached Chhetri for a written conversation. Here is the full interview.

TBJ: What are your earliest memories of Bhutan and your first experiences as a refugee in Nepal?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bhutanese diaspora today? Is repatriation to Bhutan a ‘forget and forgive’ issue today?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TBJ: Is there anything else that you like to share through the Bhutan Journal?

BNC: The Bhutan Journal, in the face of adversity, has been consistently working to keep the issue alive and provide the most relevant information to the mass. I commend the hard work of the team members in The Journal. I ask the readers to read Bhutan Journal for reliable sources of information on Bhutan.