

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 scarce 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.

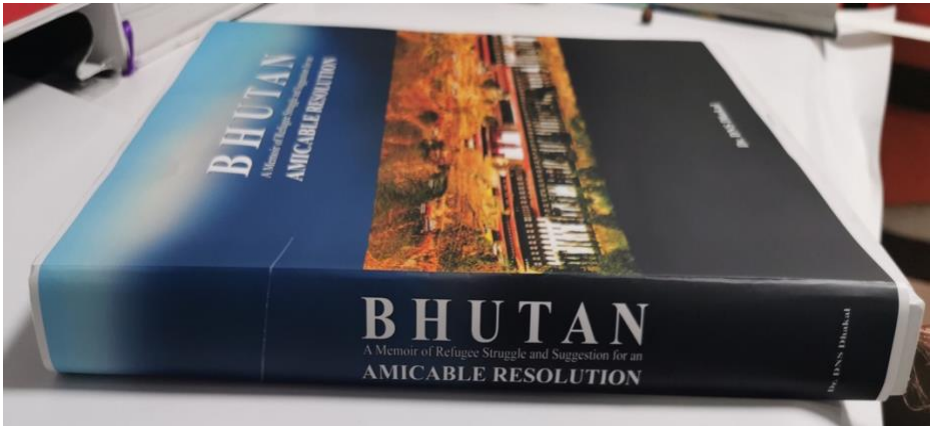
TBJ: Last year, you authored the book "Bhutan: Memoir of Refugee Struggle and Suggestions for an Amicable Resolution." Could you provide an overview of the suggestions presented in the book for our readers? Additionally, how have stakeholders responded to the purpose and contents of this publication?

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 gayleghug (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.