Interview with Hari Bangaley Adhikari

Hari Bangaley Adhikari is based in Cincinnati, OH. He was resettled from Bhutanese refugee camp as part of the third country resettlement of the Bhutanese refugees. He lived in exile in Nepal for 18 years, during which he championed political and social activism overcoming the uncertainty, deprivation and psychological troll that define life as a refugee. Adhikari continues his advocacy for justice, recognition, and historical accountability post his resettlement in the US.

Excerpts from the Adhikari's candid conversion with the Global Campaign for the Release of Political Prisoners in Bhutan (GCRPPB) team[2] for The Bhutan Journal.

TBJ: How do you remember your early life in Bhutan, and how did the political climate begin affecting you and other Nepali-speaking Bhutanese?
Adhikari: I was born in Bokray, Tshirang, and later lived in Damphu. My childhood was simple. I loved sports—football, volleyball, basketball—and studied in Damphu and Punakha before continuing my education through correspondence. I never imagined that one day I would be called a political prisoner.

Things changed in the late 1980s when Bhutan promulgated the Citizenship Act of 1985 and carried out the 1988–89 census. These measures targeted Nepali-speaking Bhutanese, questioning our belonging in a country where our families had lived for generations. Many policies worked together to attack our cultural and religious identity. We were forced to wear *Bakhu* and *Kira* even in extreme heat, including while farming. Nepali language was banned; our textbooks were piled and burned in front of us. Officials humiliated people by forcing beef into their mouths, knowing that for many Hindus the cow is sacred. These actions made us realise something was deeply wrong, and we began saying, 'we also have rights'.

[2] Deepika Subedi, Bishal Upreti, Meenakshi Niroula and Bhanu Khanal

TBJ: What motivated you to raise your voice, and how did the appeal to the king come about?
Adhikari: I never thought of myself as a politician. We were simply raising our voices for basic rights. During the census, it became clear that citizens could suddenly be labelled non-citizens. Even the king's statements did not make sense. Six of us decided to write an appeal to the king in 1988. Some of the men had wives born in Nepal who had lived in Bhutan for decades, had children and grandchildren, yet were still at risk of expulsion. I was the youngest—about 20 years old.

We went to Thimphu and met Tek Nath Rizal. He advised us to gather wider support. With help from Hari Chhetri, Ran Bahadur Basnet, and Bhim Subba, the appeal was drafted. Rizal and Bidhya Pati Bhandari signed and submitted it. Soon after, an investigation team was sent, and I was arrested in 1989. I no longer have a copy of the appeal, but it may exist somewhere.

TBJ: What were the consequences of the appeal, and how did discriminatory policies affect families, especially those with cross-border marriages?
Adhikari: Our appeal simply asked for fairness. We did not demand democracy. We warned that the policies could turn citizens into non-citizens. These policies breached cohesion in the families, marriages, and social life.

Many men had wives born in Nepal. These women had lived in Bhutan for decades, raised families, and contributed to society. But the law said that if they could not prove they were born in Bhutan, they had to separate from their husbands and return to Nepal. One woman, Sita Motay, was denied being citizen of Bhutan despite being married to a Bhutanese man, and took her own life. Others were escorted back to Nepal by their husbands, who then returned to Bhutan alone. These separations were not due to failed marriages—they were forced by government pressure. I believe the love between those couples still exists, even if they had to remarry later.

TBJ: You were arrested multiple times. Can you describe your arrests and the conditions you faced in Bhutanese prisons?
Adhikari: I was arrested six times. The first was in 1989, when I was held for three days in an administrative office in Damphu. After forming the People's Forum for Human Rights and meeting with Rizal in Kakarbhitta (Nepal), we began distributing pamphlets about human rights. Things escalated, and I was arrested

again—this time I was imprisoned for 313 days. My longest single stretch in prison was 18 months. I did not even see the September 1990 protest—they took us away before it happened.

In Thimphu jail, 42 of us were kept in a dark office room for three months and 13 days. My skin turned pale, my beard grew long, and one of my former students did not recognise me. Later, I was moved to another jail for about one and a half months, sharing a bathroom with other prisoners, including women. Eventually, we were transferred to a police guest house where conditions were slightly better. I shared a room with Ratan Gazmere. Next to us were Rai brothers, Balaram Giri, Y. N. Chaulagai, Tekbir Chhetri, and Bishwanath Chhetri. We were given food more regularly and drank coffee from thermal bottles. For a short time, it felt almost normal.

I was arrested again in 1991 and released in 1992. Even after reaching the refugee camp, I was arrested once more while marching to Thimphu as part of the Appeal Movement Coordination Council (AMCC) peach march, being the head of the peace march team. Whenever authorities heard of a planned protest, they arrested us beforehand so the demonstration would lose strength.

TBJ: How did the international community engage with Bhutan's prisons, and what impact did their involvement have?

Adhikari: In the early 1990s, international organisations began pressuring Bhutan about political prisoners. Amnesty International called for our release. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) visited in 1992. On the day they came, guards woke us early, took us into the forest, removed some handcuffs, and even sawed-off ankle chains so we would look better. They warned us - "We do not know what you will say to them, but depending on what you say, we have thought about your release." Prisoners were terrified and gave statements favouring the government.

They told the ICRC that 313 prisoners had been released and that there were no more political prisoners. In reality, more than double that number remained inside. The Red Cross only had the official statistics. Their visit helped some who were released due to international pressure, but for many others, conditions did not improve until much later.

TBJ: Can you describe the torture you endured and how you and other prisoners coped mentally?

Adhikari: It is very hard to talk about the torture. They used *Chepuwah*—placing wood under and over my thighs, then squeezing and jumping on it. The pain was so intense that I screamed like a goat during castration. They beat the soles of my feet until I felt the shock in my head. They hung me upside down until blood poured from my mouth and nose. One officer said a person cannot die until three bottles of blood have been taken.
Today I have trouble breathing. I cannot walk more than twenty steps. The beatings damaged the natural cushion in my feet. My footsteps sound different from a normal person's. More than seven people died due to *Chepuwah* torture in Chemulung prison. I carried seven dead bodies, chains still around my ankles, and loaded them into police trucks. One prisoner's body was so infected that pus flowed constantly. After carrying this dead body, my own body smelled for a week.

Amid this brutality, solidarity kept us alive. Many of us knew each other from school. At night, even after torture, we sang folk songs and used metal plates as instruments. That helped us not break mentally. Some prisoners I remember still being inside are Ganga Ram Dhakal, Bhakta Bahadur Rai, and Prem Rai.

TBJ: Were your family ever able to visit you, and how did these experiences affect you emotionally?
Adhikari: Officially, family visits were not allowed. But one guard secretly allowed my family to see me once in Thimphu. My son was born while I was in prison, and that same guard let me hold him briefly. I was told not to mention it or the guard would be punished. Holding my child made me very happy, but I was terrified they might hurt him. These memories remain with me. I would not say I am fully depressed, but the torture has left lasting physical and emotional scars.

TBJ: Why do you believe the Bhutanese government targeted Nepali-speaking citizens, and how did this shape the refugee crisis?
Adhikari: The global wave of democracy made Bhutan nervous. Nepali-speaking Bhutanese made up around half the population. The monarchy feared losing power, so they began depopulating our community and taking our land. They claimed we occupied fertile southern land and did not belong there. They also felt insecure about Dzongkha, which had relatively few speakers, while Nepali was widely spoken and easy to learn.

They made Dzongkha mandatory—if a student failed Dzongkha, they failed school. They passed rules revoking citizenship if Bhutanese citizen lived outside Bhutan for more than a year. Educated youth had no opportunities and left.

Farmers were easily threatened or forced out. Many older people blame themselves, saying, "If we had not protested, we would not have lost our home." But I believe the government would have expelled us eventually anyway.

You cannot blame Tek Nath Rizal for writing the appeal to the king. Nobody fully thought through all the consequences before protesting. People acted on emotion. There were very few people who truly understood politics. Even those who had studied it lacked experience..

TBJ: What happened after your release, and how did you become involved in human rights work in the refugee camps?
Adhikari: When I was released in 1992, I tried to stay in Bhutan. But authorities threatened me and my family. They told my father, "If he is killed, do not come crying." It became clear that leaving the country was the only way to survive. As I fled, I saw the suffering of our people along the route. When more of my friends arrived in the camps, we formed Association of Human Rights Activists (AHURA). Our team included Ratan Gazmere, Jogen Gazmere, Iswari Mishra, Hem Raj Gurung, Ambika Dulal, and Susil Pokharel. I was given the responsibility as the Torture Victim Concerns Coordinator.

With Amnesty International's support, we treated around 2,200 torture victims—only those we could reach. We also organised human rights classes and international advocacy.

We decided to remain independent and not align to any political groups. We noted people were hesitant to join the events that political parties called for. For the AMCC appeal march, we focused on classes about human rights. We wanted people to be informed and to know what they were fighting for.

Our team worked well together. We were fortunate to receive international support that helped us reach our call far and wide. People ask what AMCC achieved. At the very least, we drew global attention to our crisis. We made people look at Bhutan differently.

In 1994, we attended a UN conference in Switzerland and nearly passed a resolution, but India blocked it by sponsoring Bhutan. That experience taught me how the world works. Later, around 2006–2007, I began advocating for resettlement. Many opposed me at first, but over time people understood that returning to Bhutan was becoming impossible.

TBJ: What message do you have for young people and organisations working on Bhutanese human rights today?
Adhikari: Focus on one thing at a time. Do not get distracted by matters unrelated to your cause. Build your credibility. Do not depend on others to do your work. Expose Bhutan's wrongdoing to the world. You are young and have access to information we never had. Gather our history and spread awareness. Many young people want to help but do not know where to begin. Teach them our story. When we went to Switzerland, the independent expert did not even know Bhutan existed. How can we explain a problem in a country the world does not know? Awareness is the foundation of justice.