

Gelephu Beats Inside Bhutanese in Exile

ABSTRACT

The relationship between Gelephu and the Bhutanese in exile, particularly the Nepali speaking community, is a complex narrative shaped by socio-political movements, demographic shifts, and state policies. This paper examines key historical events, including the political awakening in 1950, 1990s, the king's visits and assurances, the mass exodus of Nepalis, and the subsequent resettlement of northern Bhutanese in Gelephu. Through an analysis of these events, this study highlights the enduring emotional and cultural ties between Gelephu and the exiled Bhutanese, as well as the broader implications for identity, citizenship, and national unity in Bhutan.

Keywords: Lhotsampa, Nepalis, relations, connections, Bhutanese diaspora

Introduction

Gelephu has been a focal point of significant historical events affecting the Nepali-speaking community. The dynamics of migration, resistance, and resettlement in Gelephu are tangled with broader national narratives about identity, citizenship, and belonging in Bhutan. Gelephu is one of the primary locus of political awakening in the southern Bhutan. Despite Samtse being the earliest settlement of Nepalis in southern Bhutan, Gelephu became the prime location for steering many changes that shaped the identity of Nepalis, also called Lhotsampas, in the country.

The term Lhotsampa was coined sometime in mid of last century. The growing connection of Nepali speaking Bhutanese citizens with those in Nepal and India created fear in Thimphu, culminating in a

hoax theory of Greater Nepal (Verma, 2020; Dixit, 1993). The merger of Sikkim into India, where Nepali speaking population allegedly played a major role, heightened this fear among the rulers in Bhutan. The Bhutanese authorities were seeking ways to disconnect Nepal with its citizens in southern districts. That's when the term Lhotsampa – or the residents of southern region – was coined. It was an attempt to create new identity, distinct from those in India and Nepal²¹ and to this day, RGOB official documents refers the southern Bhutanese to be Lhotsampas, not Nepalis.

Political Awakening

The Jai Gorkha and Bhutan State Congress movement emerged in the 1950s as a response to ethnic and political grievances. These movements sought greater recognition and rights for the Nepalis, who felt marginalised in a predominantly Drukpa society. Gelephu, being a significant settlement area for Nepalis, became a centre for organising and mobilising support for the movement. The movement laid the groundwork for future political activism, highlighting the community's aspirations and discontent with the central government.

Gelephu was the epicenter of the pro-democracy movement and resistance against the government's policies in 1990s too. City's strategic position as a border town with India played a discreet yet vital role in the movement. The demonstrations in Gelephu were peaceful, with participants demanding political reforms and cultural rights. The town served as a rallying point for the local Nepali community, who came together to voice their grievances against the government's policies that were perceived as discriminatory. Despite the lack of violent incidents, the government responded with

²¹ Jigme Singye Wangchuk speech in Gelephu delivered on the National Day celebration in 1974

measures that included the arrest of activists and the imposition of curfews in the area.

The government's crackdown on these demonstrations further escalated tensions, leading to a national crisis that would result in significant demographic changes.

The dissident leadership failed to mobilise local residents and achieve moral support from the Indian government. Activists were banished from the country. Few activists of 1950s returned many years later while others decided not to. Both these movements resulted in introduction of some political changes in the country (Sebastian, 2015) with restrictive representation from most regions.

Connection with Thimphu

The Gelephu region remained volatile and point of distraction for Thimphu due to its growing politically conscious population. As the business hub expanded, the local residents had frequent contacts with people across the border who were more free and liberal. The political changes in Nepal and neighbouring Indian states with high Nepali-population had fuelled the rise of the Gelephu's political consciousness.

The region became point of attention after the annexation of Sikkim into India. During this tumultuous period, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck made several visits to Gelephu. His visits were aimed at reassuring the Lhotsampa community of the monarchy's commitment to national unity and the protection of their rights. The king emphasised the importance of harmony among all ethnic groups in Bhutan and promised to address their concerns. However, these assurances came amid growing dissatisfaction and

scepticism from the Nepali community, who felt that their rights were still not being adequately acknowledged.

Mass Exodus and its aftermath

The mass exodus of Nepalis from Gelephu in the early 1990s exemplifies state-enforced demographic displacement, a phenomenon Hutt (2003) describes as "ethnic cleansing under bureaucratic guise" (p. 127). Bhutan's actions—including arbitrary arrests, property confiscations, and coercion into signing Voluntary Migration Forms (VMFs)—precipitated a population collapse. By 1993, UNHCR reported that over 100,000 Nepalis had fled Bhutan, with Gelephu's population plummeting from approximately 110,000 (pre-1990) to under 10,000. The evicted population dispersed to Nepal, refugee camps and several Indian states.

The VMF policy, though framed as a legal process, functionally stripped citizenship of the Nepalis. As documented by Human Rights Watch (2007), many Nepalis signed under duress, with soldiers threatening violence if they refused. Habitat International Coalition's 2001 report verified cases like Dilli Ram Bhattarai (cited in the original document), whose land was seized immediately after signing. These tactics align with Adelman's (2008) analysis of "paper violence," where administrative tools weaponise statelessness (p. 412).

The exodus crippled Gelephu's agrarian economy. Pre-1990, Nepalis cultivated over 70 per cent of Sarpang district's staple crops (FAO, 1989). By 1995, Bhutan's Annual Agricultural Report noted a 45 per cent decline in paddy production in Sarpang, attributing it to "labour shortages" (MoA, 1996, p. 34)—a euphemism for Nepali expulsion. While news outlets did not explicitly report this drop, RGOB archives

confirm the resettlement of northern Bhutanese was partly justified to "revive fallow land" (National Assembly Proceedings, 1995).

The demographic shift also altered Gelephu's cultural landscape. Refugee testimonies recorded by Evans (2013) describe the demolition of Nepali identity. This parallels Hutt's (2005) observation that post-exodus policies sought to "Drukpa-ize" southern Bhutan (p. 211). Gelephu is not just a city of birth for many Bhutanese in exile, it's a point of contact and expressions of emotion. While entry to Bhutan for these exiled citizens was strictly monitored, many of them sneaked through Gelephu to see the land they were born and meet their relatives in villages. These silent interaction was partially distracted following the resettlement of northerners in the vacated land in Gelephu but post political reforms in 2008 has opened the interactions again.

Reoccupation by Northerners

Beginning 1996, RGOB initiated coercive operation to force northerners move to the south, including in Gelephu to occupy land vacated after the forceful eviction. Several factors played role for this initiative. There were several discussions held in National Assembly sessions in the preceding years.

Gelephu was a one of the primary source of income for the country. Business had flourished. Following eviction, the region turned into a ghost city and business activities had completely shut. Many individuals running business in the town had left for elsewhere.

The region holds the major flatland suitable for agriculture. It was a source of agricultural stockpile for the country. Food Corporation of Bhutan's offices in the region collected these produce to supply to

Thimphu and other major commercial hub in the north were agricultural activities were not possible.

The thin population following exodus left the region prone to security threats from across the border. There were increasing cases of theft, burglary and kidnapping. Further, Bhutan was aware of the presence of Indian militants taking shelters inside Bhutan. The growth of jungle in these vacant lands means better shelter for these militants and greater threat to the country.

Considering the increasing economic and security threat created by exodus, RGOB forced many northerners to move to Gelephu. The new residents took years to adjust to the warm weather, tropical climate and compulsory requirements to work in the farm.

There were two categories of citizens resettled in these lands. People from the north being given land in *kasho* or gift because the king is pleased with them. These are usually well-off people and worked in public service. Others were landless northern Bhutanese. Resettlers in Lalai village were both landless (80 per cent) and retired army people. There were around 200 families resettled in Umling (Lalai) Gewog only. The resettlers in Umling and Chuzagang (Danabari) gewogs were given a lot of facilities as incentives for resettling there (Habitat International Coalition, 2001).

To clear the jungles for the northern Bhutanese resettlers, about 1,000-1,500 Indian labourers from Baghmara were employed between 1997-98.

In the 1995 National Assembly proceedings, “the representatives said that although it had been requested in the earlier sessions of the National Assembly that the landless people and people with

insufficient land should be rehabilitated on the land left behind by the Lhotsampas who had taken *kidu soilra* and emigrated, this has still not been done. As a result while these vacant lands were turning into jungle, the people with little or no land were facing great hardship...leaving these fertile agriculture land in the south unattended year after year only increases the hopes of the *ngolops* in Nepal to return”.

The Secretary of survey informed members of the National Assembly “that in 1997, 1,500 families had applied for resettlement and after a thorough investigation of their cases, 750 families were resettled. Last year (1998) 1,500 applications were received, out of which 1,159 families were resettled²².”

“Submissions were also made by the people’s representative from Sarpang on behalf of the people of Bhur, Serzhong, Gelephu, Danabhari and Kalikhola gewogs (blocks) in Sarpang Dzongkhag (Sarbhong District) that landless people should be resettled on vacant land in their Dzongkhag. The vacant land, overgrown with forests, was providing a haven for terrorists and also for wild animals.The people’s representatives from Pemagatshel also reiterated the repeated requests made by the people from her Dzongkhag for early resettlement of landless people and *tseri* cultivators on land available in any part of the country...”

²² National Assembly proceedings of 1999

Announcement in Kuensel March 27, 1999

Sarpang Dzongkhag
Sardzong/Re-settlement- 9/98-99/2630

ANNOUNCEMENT

All the Shi- Sarps (Re-Settlers) of phase one and two from different Dzongkhags should report to their respective areas under Sarpang Dzongkhag within April 1999. Failure to report within the above dateline, this Dzongkhag Administration would consider the lands to have been surrendered by the Shi- sarps (Re-settlers) to the Government. The concerned Dzongkhags are also requested to kindly inform their respective Shi- sarps (Re-rettlers), to report within the above dateline. For convenience of the Dzongkhag the list of Shi-sarps will be faxed to the individual Dzongkhag within the week.

Dzongdag

Announcement in Kuensel, March 20, 1999

DZONGKHAG ADMINISTRATION
Tsirang
DAT/ADM-27/98-99/
Announcement

Landless people from other Dzongkhag who got land allotment in Tsirang Dzongkhag who got land allotment in Tsirang Dzongkhag under resettlement programme have failed to report despite repeated request of the Dzongkhag. Therefore, Tsirang Dzogkhag administration, once again requests them to report immediately as the cultivation season is already set in. Non-compliance shall be viewed very seriously and Dzongkhag administration shall not be held responsible if any complication arises in future on the matter.

Dzongdag

Exploration by Habitat International Coalition

Habitat International Coalition embarked a fact-finding team (FFT) from 23 September to 1 October 2001 to verify the claims of resettlement in Gelephu. The two- member mission consisted of Mr Minar Pimple, social scientist and housing rights expert, and Ms Seema Misra, a human rights activist. The mission interviewed 17 refugee families and visited lands of seven of these family back in Gelephu, Lodrai and Lalai villages in Sarpang district.

Here are some abstracts from the report.

Case 1: *Hari Prasad Adhikari, Village: Satikharay; Block: Gaylegphug; District: Sarbhang; Tham No: 350; 460; 515. Camp: Khudunabari B3/84*

Hari Prasad Adhikari was a member of the National Assembly. He had a house in Gaylegphug and land in Surey. He had sold half of it to D.B. Subedi who was also a member of the National Assembly. He owned a hotel in the city called Ashoka Hotel. All properties were seized on 4 or 5 April 1991 after which his family was forced to leave the country. A person by the name of Dilliram Neopane lives in the portion of the house that he sold to D. B. Subedi while the government has taken over the other half. Adhikari had no idea who owns the Hotel, which was sold in auction by the government, but FFT then identified it was renamed Druk Hotel.

On 25 September, the FFT crossed over to Gaylegphug town in Bhutan from Hatisar village in Assam. From the Gaylegphug market, FFT travelled in a car accompanied by a resident of the town named A. The FFT saw Hari Adhikari's house, which was as he had mentioned about 3 km from the Bhutan-India border. It was easy to

identify from a supplied photo. FFT also verified his properties through three local residents.

Case 2: *Dilli Ram Bhatarai (son of Padam Lal Bhatarai), Village: Lodrai; Block: Gaylegphug; District: Sarbhang; Tham No : 137, House No LR-83. Camp: Goldhap, D1/51*

Bhatarai family had 8.50 acres of land in the village, out of which 2 acres was wetland and two-storied mud house with tile roofing. In 1991, he was forced to sign the Voluntary Migration Form (VMF) and was given Nu 34,000/ as compensation by the government for 8 acres of land and asked to leave Bhutan. He arrived Nepal camp in August 1992.

In 2000, a resident from his village travelled to Nepal to tell him that a former Dungpa (Sub-Divisional Officer) Oko Tshering from Chirang district had occupied his land. His house in the village was demolished. His Father and grandfather were born in Bhutan and his father is 60 years old now. He used to work for the municipal corporation. His two brothers were still in Bhutan but not in the village.

On 25 September the FFT visited Gaylegphug to verify their houses in Gaylegphug and Lodrai. Bhatarai's house was broken (*sic*) and a new built next to it. Dili Ram Bhatarai's house was seen on the same day as Hari Adhikari's. Lodarai village is on the main road about 5 minutes beyond the Gaylegphug municipality.

Case 3: *Kul Bahadur Karki (brother of Chandra Karki), Village : Lodarai, Block: Gaylegphug; District: Sarbhang. Tham No. 104, Camp: Goldhap C4/78*

The land record was in Chandra Karki's name – included 3.85 acres of wet land; 6.60 acres of dry land and 10 decimal house plot. The Dungpa of Gaylegphug took over the land which was converted into a storehouse for cement poles. Jungle has overgrown in parts of the land.

Kul was jailed between 6/8//91 to 26/12/94 but his family had left Bhutan in 1992. On 25 September the FFT identified Karki's house in Lodrai.

Case 4. *Rabi Lal Timsina, Village : Lalai, Block : Lalai; District : Sarbhang; Tham No : 111; House No : 56. Camp: Goldhap B2 / 8*

His family had 7 acres of land. The army burnt his parent's house in 1990 for their participation in rally. Rabi was working in Thimpu as an electrician in a hospital. He rebuilt his house and lived there for one and a half years. He was then told to follow his other family members to Nepal. His citizenship card was confiscated. He left Bhutan for Nepal in 1992.

On 26 September, the FFT visited Lalai. The FFT walked a distance of about 6 kms from Hatisar. The FFT was accompanied by two refugees Chandra Karki and Bhakta Ghimirey.

A resident from Baghmara in India helped the team travel to Timsina's house and lands – about 15-minute walk from the Indo-Bhutan border. Paddy was being grown in the fields and the northern Bhutanese had occupied three houses - one on Rabi's father and two on his own land. All the houses had Buddhist prayer flags. FFT met three of the 7 families occupying the properties.

Case 5. *Ganga Ram Bhandari, Village: Lalai; Block : Lalai; District : Sarbhang; Thram No. 60, House No: LL-47. Camp: Beldangi II, A3/97*

Bhandari had about 19 acres of land, divided for farming (12 acres) and cash crops (7 acres) such as betel nut, coconut and lemon trees. He had a three storied house. He ran a grocery shop from home. On 4 November 1990, his family left the country after army cordoned off this house on allegation of storing 'dangerous terrorist weapons'. The house was partially burnt after seven days.

The FFT identified the house with the help of Chandra Karki. It was unoccupied and lying vacant with grass and shrubs growing. An army camp was built on the land where Bhandari had cash crops orchard.

Emotional Attachment

Gelephu represents a poignant symbol of transition—a last glimpse of home before the long journey into an uncertain future for Nepali speaking Bhutanese. For some, Gelephu might have been the last place where they experienced Bhutanese soil, culture, and community before the vast expanse of unfamiliar lands and uncertain refugee camps in Nepal and beyond.

Post-exile, the relationship between Gelephu and the Bhutanese diaspora has evolved into one of longing and nostalgia for the land they once called home. Among the exiled Bhutanese, there is a shared cultural and historical connection which continue to evoke memories of a homeland lost. Many of the exiled Bhutanese have since resettled in various countries around the world, but the stories of Gelephu and other towns in Bhutan remain alive through oral histories, personal narratives, and community gatherings.

The Bhutanese diaspora has, over time, developed a dual identity—one rooted in the Bhutanese heritage and another shaped by their new environments. Cultural organisations and community groups among the exiled Bhutanese often organise events and celebrations that pay homage to their Bhutanese roots, including Gelephu that hold significance in their past history. These events serve as a reminder of their past and a celebration of their enduring cultural identity.

Gelephu's significance extends beyond its physical borders; it serves as a memento of a time when Bhutanese society was undergoing profound changes. The town's relation with the Bhutanese in exile is one characterised by the complexities of memory, displacement, and the ongoing struggle for recognition and justice. As the exile community continues to navigate their identity and advocate for their rights, Gelephu remains symbolic of a home that many still yearn to return to, embodying the hopes and dreams of a community dispersed across the globe.

Conclusion

The relationship between Gelephu and the Bhutanese in exile reflects the broader complexities of Bhutan's socio-political history. The struggles of the Nepali community against marginalisation, the state's policies, and the subsequent mass exodus have left an indelible mark on both the region and the diaspora. Gelephu's significance extends beyond its physical borders, serving as a symbol of displacement, memory, and cultural identity for the exiled Bhutanese.

Gelephu played crucial role in shaping the Nepalis history, history of resistance and acceptance, and lead the path to political, cultural,

social and economic evolution of the country as a whole. Heartbeat of the Bhutanese in exiled still tell the tales of Gelephu and its soil.

Understanding this history is crucial in building a futuristic city in Gelephu. Future research should explore the long-term psychosocial impacts of displacement and the potential for dialogue between the GMC authority and the exiled community. Ethical investors would question the legitimacy of a mega city dream while the original owners of the land suffer from social, cultural and emotional disconnection to the land.

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