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The Bhutanese Nepali refugees: Their history, struggle, and hopes through the ages

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Abstract

The Nepali refugees from Bhutan, primarily ethnic Lhotsampas, represent one of South Asia's most significant refugee crises. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bhutan's government implemented policies aimed at cultural homogenization, targeting Nepali-speaking communities through discriminatory citizenship laws, forced evictions, and human rights abuses. Over 100,000 Lhotsampas were expelled and resettled in refugee camps in eastern Nepal, where they lived in legal limbo for decades. Despite cultural ties, Nepal did not offer citizenship or full integration. Beginning in 2007, a large-scale third-country resettlement program relocated over 100,000 refugees to nations including the United States, Canada, and Australia. While many have rebuilt their lives abroad, issues of statelessness, identity, and trauma persist, particularly among those left behind. The crisis underscores broader concerns about ethnicity, state sovereignty, human rights, and the international community's responsibility to protect vulnerable populations. Durable solutions remain essential for justice and long-term stability.

Keywords: Nepali refugee, displacement, rehabilitation, human rights, cultural heritage

Introduction

The Bhutanese Nepali refugee crisis is a deeply significant and tragic example of state-led exclusion, displacement, and human rights struggles in South Asia. Often referred to by the Nepali term *Lhotsampa* ("southerners"), this population consists of ethnic Nepalis who lived for generations in southern Bhutan. Starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many were stripped of citizenship, harassed, and compelled or coerced to leave, resulting in tens of thousands living in refugee camps in Nepal and elsewhere. Over time, many have been resettled to third countries, but even so the crisis remains a lasting issue with moral, legal, political, and humanitarian dimensions.

This research article traces the origin of the Lhotsampa community in Bhutan, the policies that led to their displacement, their experiences in exile in Nepal, the international responses (especially resettlement), the challenges they have faced including psychological, social, legal and what their future might look like. The aim is to present a nuanced picture that integrates historical context, the human dimension, current debates, and possible paths forward.

Origins: Nepalese in Bhutan and Early Settlements

To understand the Bhutanese Nepali refugee issue, one must first understand how Nepali-speaking communities came to settle in Bhutan, their status, and how Bhutan's internal policies evolved.

Migration and Settlement

Ethnic Nepalese began migrating to what is now southern Bhutan over many decades (some accounts suggest several waves starting in the 19th and early 20th centuries). They were largely employed in agriculture, trade, and as laborers. Over time, many became permanent residents and built houses, paying taxes and integrating socially, while maintaining Nepali language, culture, and customs. Their language was Nepali; their religion was often Hindu (or syncretic), and they shared cultural ties with Nepalese across the border.

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Citizenship Laws and Bhutanese National Identity

Bhutan, a small monarchy, has historically emphasized cultural cohesion and national identity. Part of that identity has centered on its unique Bhutanese language known as Dzongkha, Buddhism (especially the Drukpa Kagyu tradition), traditional dress codes, and loyalty to the monarchy. In order to preserve its sovereignty, coherence, and what it saw as cultural integrity, Bhutan introduced nationality laws and policies aimed at formalizing citizenship and regulating who is, and who is not, officially Bhutanese.

1958 Nationality Act and Later Legislation

Under Bhutan's Nationality Law (1958), citizens needed to satisfy criteria that included residence, conduct, and proof of lineage. Later policies especially under King Jigme Singye Wangchuck heightened the emphasis on "Bhutanese Culture" through laws and regulations: dress codes, language requirements, bans or restrictions on use of Nepali language in official capacities, and special regulations for those classed as "non-nationals." Over time, the government began to assert that many ethnic Nepalese in southern Bhutan were illegal immigrants from Nepal (despite many having resided for generations), particularly targeting those who could not produce citizenship papers or who were deemed to be in breach of newer homogenizing policies.

The Policies that Led to Displacement

By the late 1980s and into the 1990s, a combination of legal, administrative, and social pressures escalated. These forced many Nepali-speaking Bhutanese to flee, or were expelled from Bhutan.

Cultural and Linguistic Repression

The government of Bhutan initiated policies to promote a single national culture. This included requiring citizens to wear national dress (the *Gho* and *Kira*) in public, instructions on dress in schools and government offices, imposing Dzongkha as the official language, and other measures which - while perhaps less stark than outright expulsion - were deeply alienating for Nepali-speaking communities, especially those for whom Nepali was mother tongue, and who had traditions and institutions tied to their community, language, and religion.

Citizenship Revocations, Documentation and Paperwork

Many Nepali-speaking residents lacked proper documentation, often because of historical neglect, lack of formal registration, or because their ancestors had migrated informally. When Bhutan began stricter enforcement of citizenship and documentation verification, many could not provide the required papers. This left them vulnerable to losing rights, being categorized as non-nationals, facing restrictions in employment, land ownership, education, travel documents, and more.

Forced "Voluntary Migration" and Expulsion

In 1990-92, Bhutan carried out what many human rights groups and refugee advocates call a forced expulsion campaign of ethnic Nepalese. People were required to sign "voluntary migration" forms, many under threat or coercion, thereby giving up their citizenship. Others were simply told to leave. Some were detained, beaten, their homes and property destroyed. Many crossed into Nepal, fleeing with

few possessions. The scale of this displacement is large: estimates suggest over 100,000 people left Bhutan for Nepal.

Lack of Durable Solutions within Bhutan

After displacement, Bhutan, while sometimes offering narrowly defined restoration of citizenship under strict conditions, has not broadly accepted responsibility for full repatriation or restoring rights for many of those who fled or were expelled. The Bhutanese government required "No Objection Certificates" (NOCs), proof of ancestry, proof of continuous residence, permitted behavior, loyalty, etc. Many were denied or unable to produce such documentation; many were reluctant because of fear of abuse. Meanwhile, Nepali-based human rights organizations and international bodies criticized Bhutan for discrimination and for failing to guarantee rights for ethnic Nepalese who remained.

Life in Refugee Camps in Nepal

Once displaced, many Lhotsampa refugees settled in camps in eastern Nepal (Jhapa and Morang districts). Their lives in those camps were difficult, and over time a combination of humanitarian aid, local interaction, and changing political and international attitudes shaped what happened next.

Camps Establishment, Numbers, Living Conditions

By the early 1990s, there were seven major camps housing ethnic Nepali refugees from Bhutan in the eastern Terai of Nepal. The approximate number of displaced was over 106,000 by mid-2000s. Basic living conditions were very challenging: limited access to proper healthcare, sanitation, clean water, schooling, and adequate nutrition. Diseases, especially infectious ones, were a serious problem.

Legal and Social Limbo

In the camps, many refugees had neither citizenship of Bhutan (they were stripped or denied it) nor any viable path to citizenship in Nepal. Nepal, though sharing language and many cultural ties, maintained that these refugees were foreign nationals, and did not offer full integration or naturalization. Thus, much of life for refugees consisted of waiting for resettlement, for repatriation, for international resolution. Socially, refugees lived in marginalization, dependence on aid, and psychological uncertainty. Many born in camps had little experience of their homeland (Bhutan) beyond what their parents told them.

Education, Work, and Economic Activities

Over time, camp life became more established; NGOs and UN agencies provided schooling, basic healthcare, and other support. Some refugees gained enough education to teach within camps or to work in informal sectors in nearby towns. However, restrictions on legal work and movement often constrained economic opportunities. Refugees sometimes did small jobs in the informal economy to supplement their income. These activities could cause friction with local populations, especially when refugees competed for scarce employment.

Health, Psychological Challenges, and Trauma

Displacement, forced upheaval, loss of home and property, often violence and coercion during expulsion, plus difficult living conditions in camps have had cumulative health impacts. Mal-nutrition, exposure to disease, insufficient

preventive care in early period were serious issues. Mental health is a slower-burning crisis: rates of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and even suicidal behaviour have been found to be relatively high among resettled Bhutanese as well. The older refugees, especially, who lived through direct trauma of expulsion, witness loss of status, identity, and prolonged uncertainty.

International Response: Resettlement and Diplomacy

Given that return to Bhutan was not possible for most and integration into Nepal was politically and practically difficult, the main durable solution became resettlement to third countries. Over decades, this has had varying degrees of success.

Resettlement Programmes Begin

In 2007, after years of stalemate, an agreement (Memorandum of Understanding) between Nepal, UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) was signed to begin resettlement of refugees to third-party countries. This created structured procedures: referral from camps, medical screening, cultural orientation, arranging travel.

Scale of Resettlement

From 2007 to about 2015, over **100,000** Bhutanese Nepali refugees were resettled. Most of them went to the United States (by far the largest share), followed by Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Denmark, Netherlands, and the UK.

Remaining in Camps, Residual Issues

Even after large-scale resettlement, there remained tens of thousands who had not been resettled for a variety of reasons: some due to age or health, some due to insufficient interest or inability to meet criteria, some because of procedural delays or lack of referrals. By 2015, only two of the original seven camps remained operational, and fewer than ~18,000 refugees remained in them.

Legal and Diplomatic Pressure

Human Rights Watch and other groups repeatedly called for durable solutions return, integration, or resettlement and urged Bhutan to accept responsibility. They also highlighted ongoing discrimination of ethnic Nepalese still in Bhutan: difficulties obtaining citizenship cards, land ownership, educational access, work permits, etc.

Challenges Faced During and After Resettlement

Resettlement offers many opportunities security, legal status, education, and freedom from the camps but it also brings its own set of challenges, adjustments, and traumas.

Identity and Belonging

Refugees often grow up with fragmented senses of identity. Many born in camps have never lived in Bhutan; many parents descended from migrants. Their identity as “Bhutanese Nepali,” “Lhotsampa,” “refugee,” etc., carries both pride and pain. Resettlement means adapting to a new society with different norms, sometimes discriminatory attitudes, and pressure to assimilate. Keeping culture, language, religious practice, community becomes a balancing act.

Mental Health and Trauma

As noted earlier, many refugees carry scars of forced displacement, of property loss, social disenfranchisement, sometimes violence. After resettlement, there are new stressors: cultural adjustment, language barriers, employment difficulties, possible discrimination. Researchers have noted relatively high rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal behaviour among Bhutanese refugees compared to general populations in their new host countries. For older refugees particularly, reflecting on what was lost and what never can be restored, the psychological burden is heavy.

Socio-Economic Integration

Even in new countries, many Bhutanese Nepali refugees face challenges: their qualifications may not be recognized; language barriers; unfamiliar legal systems; housing and job scarcity; social isolation. Younger generations may integrate more quickly (school, peers, etc.), but older ones sometimes lag behind. There may also be gaps in support services for health, mental health, social adjustment.

Legal Status, Citizenship, and Statelessness

Although resettlement grants legal status in host countries (permanent residence, citizenship eventually), the issue of statelessness lingers, especially for those still in camps or who never receive legal recognition in Bhutan. Those who remained in Bhutan or were denied citizenship continue to suffer legal exclusion. Even for some resettled, residual fears what happens if documents are lost, if authorities question origin, etc. remain.

Intergenerational Issues and Cultural Transmission

As younger generations grow up in new societies, passing on Nepali language, cultural practices, religious traditions, and memories becomes a challenge. There may be a push to assimilate. The risk is losing cultural heritage. But conversely, younger people may seek to redefine identity in hybrid ways.

Nepal's Role and its Challenges

Nepal, as the immediate host country for the Lhotsampa refugees, has had to bear much of the responsibility, with both humanitarian compassion and political costs.

Hospitality and Humanitarian Assistance

Nepal allowed the refugees to cross the border, set up camps, and camp authorities, with help from UNHCR and NGOs, provided basic services: food, shelter, health, education. For many years, Nepal was the primary site where the displaced population lived. This, itself, is significant given Nepal's own economic challenges and limited infrastructure.

Policy Constraints: No Full Integration

Despite cultural, linguistic, religious affinities, Nepal has generally withheld offering Bhutanese Nepalese permanent integration or citizenship. This has meant refugees remained in camps (or settlements), second-class in many senses: limited legal rights, marginalized socially, and vulnerable to exploitation. Nepal fears political effects of giving rights to large refugee populations, potential strain on resources, possible resettlement pressures, etc.

Environmental, Social and Economic Impacts Locally

The presence of refugee camps has implications for local communities around them: demand on land, deforestation (firewood, building materials), sanitation issues, social friction over competition for jobs, markets, and resources. There are also positive interactions: refugee teachers, labour contributions, market participation. But overall, host communities often experience both burdens and benefits.

Governance, Corruption, and Scams

Over time, problems have emerged: mismanagement of aid, delays in processing, and more recently, allegations of fraud where non-refugees try to be counted among refugees for the sake of resettlement opportunities. A scam discovered involved persons falsely claiming to be Bhutanese refugees and paying money to be placed on resettlement lists. This raises ethical, legal, and logistical issues how to verify identities, how to ensure fairness, how to prevent abuse of a system meant to help real refugees.

Ethical, Legal, and Human Rights Dimensions

The Bhutanese Nepali refugee issue raises many important ethical and legal questions.

Right to Citizenship

Citizenship is a fundamental human right recognized in international human rights law. Stripping someone of citizenship or refusing it arbitrarily is generally seen as discriminatory. The ethnic Nepalese in Bhutan were deprived of citizenship not because of actual migratory wrongdoing, but because of ethnic, linguistic, or cultural identity and inability to meet strict and often bureaucratically impossible demands. This challenges the idea of universal human rights, inclusion, and non-discrimination.

Forced Displacement and International Refugee Law

While Bhutan is not part of the 1951 Refugee Convention in the same way as some others, many of the practices (expulsion, coercion, forced “migration”) violate customary international law and various international human rights treaties to which Bhutan is party. The refugees’ right to seek asylum, right to life, to not be discriminated against, to property, etc., are implicated.

Durable Solutions: Repatriation, Local Integration, Resettlement

In refugee law, durable solutions are: (1) return to country of origin under safe and dignified conditions; (2) local integration in the host country; (3) resettlement in a third country. For the Lhotsampas:

- **Repatriation:** Largely non-existent for most, because Bhutan has not made conditions for return acceptable for many (citizenship restoration, no discrimination, ability to practice culture and language).
- **Local Integration:** Nepal has not granted citizenship or full rights. So, refugees remain largely restricted.
- **Resettlement:** Has been by far the most used route and arguably the one which provided relief to the many, but it also depends on willingness of other countries, immigration policies, and further bureaucratic challenges.

Responsibility and Moral Accountability

Who is responsible? Bhutan for the policies; Nepal for hosting; the international community for offering resettlement and pushing for rights; third-countries for accepting refugees. Moral responsibility is shared, though the primary source of harm lies with Bhutan expulsion, deprivation of rights. But questions remain about whether more could have been done earlier to prevent large-scale displacement, and whether the international community did enough to pressure Bhutan to change policies or facilitate returns or integration earlier.

Reflections on Identity, Memory, Culture

While much of the discussion is legal and political, the human dimension identity, culture, resilience is central.

Cultural Continuity

The Lhotsampas brought their language (Nepali), rituals, festivals, customs, family structures, arts, music. In the camps, despite deprivation, many traditions have been preserved. In resettlement countries, communities often cluster together; cultural associations, festivals, linguistic schools may help preserve heritage.

Memory and Trauma

Stories of expulsion what was left behind, what was lost property, ancestral homes, land, community life are essential to community memory. For many, the trauma of being uprooted, of being labeled “illegal” in one’s own home, is enduring.

Negotiating Belonging in New Lands

In host countries, especially in the West, there is the challenge of balancing assimilation and cultural preservation. Younger people especially may feel split: they have opportunities in new societies; yet they may struggle with discrimination or feeling “othered.” Also, some may feel guilt or survivor’s burden regarding those left behind, or tension between older generations’ memories and newer generations’ orientations.

Critiques, Debates and Controversies

No large human displacement is without controversies. In the Bhutanese Nepali refugee case, several debates continue.

Validity of “Voluntary Migration”

Bhutan used “voluntary migration” forms to get refugees to sign away citizenship. But many reportedly signed under pressure, coercion, threat, or in circumstances where refusal was not a practical option. Whether such waivers are legitimate under international law is debated. Human rights organizations have argued many were de facto forced to sign.

Procedural Fairness and Documentation

Many refugees lacked documentation going back generations; verifying ancestry, continuous residence, etc., is often hard especially when documentation was never issued or kept. This has led to many being excluded from Bhutan’s limited citizenship restoration programs. Also, stricter documentation regimes sometimes placed impossible burdens on ordinary people.

Resettlement vs. Repatriation

Some community members have favored return to Bhutan; others preferred resettlement. Return is meaningful symbolically, but practically risky if rights are not guaranteed. Resettlement often separates families, disperses communities, and distances people physically and emotionally from their homeland.

Nepal's Policies and International Obligations

Nepal's refusal to integrate refugees or grant citizenship is a political decision, but morally complex. On one hand, Nepal has its own resource limitations and political sensitivities. On the other, many argue that Nepal shares cultural-linguistic ties and has a moral plus responsibility toward these people who are Nepali in many senses. Also, once refugees are resettled, what remains for those who could not be moved? Also, there have been issues like the fraud and "fake refugee" scandals, which complicate trust, transparency, and fairness

Bhutan's Position and International Pressure

Bhutan has defended its policies as necessary for national unity, cultural preservation, national security. Some argue there were genuine issues about illegal migration (though scale, method, and discrimination aspects remain hotly contested). International pressure from human rights groups has often not been adequate or has been tempered by geopolitical considerations.

The Way Forward: What Needs to Be Done

Given what has happened and what remains undone it's worthwhile to lay out what needs to happen for durable justice, improvement of lives, and reconciliation.

1. **Full Recognition and Restoration of Rights:** Bhutan should take steps to restore citizenship rights, legal documentation, land rights for those who were displaced and for those ethnic Nepalis who remain with uncertain status. This would include revocation of arbitrary denials, provision of NOCs, ensuring fair access to schooling, health, work, travel, property, etc.
2. **Repatriation with Dignity:** For those who wish to return, provisions must be made to ensure return is voluntary, safe, dignified, with restoration of rights, reparations where applicable, access to land/property, freedom from discrimination. International monitoring would help ensure that repatriation is not nominal but substantive.
3. **Local Integration Where Possible:** For those who wish to stay in Nepal or even have nowhere else to go, pathways to full integration citizenship rights, legal rights to work, property, travel are essential. Nepal could consider policy reforms (though recognizing political and resource constraints) to grant rights to long-term refugees.
4. **Continued Resettlement:** Some refugees may not be able to return or integrate in such cases, more resettlement opportunities would assist. The international community must maintain willingness and support (both financial and procedural) to accept refugees, especially vulnerable individuals (elderly, disabled, families) who may have difficulty navigating the resettlement process.

5. **Addressing Mental Health, Social Welfare, Cultural Continuity:** Resettlement or displacement is only part of the solution; many refugees carry invisible wounds. Host governments, UN and NGOs should ensure mental health services, social support networks, cultural programs, education that includes cultural heritage, language preservation, etc. For those in camps or settlements still, improving health, sanitation, education, livelihoods is essential.
6. **Transparency, Fairness, Anti-Corruption Measures** The recent scandals fake refugee claims, manipulation of lists show the urgency of transparent, accountable systems in refugee registration, referral, resettlement. Refugees themselves should have access to information, grievance redressal mechanisms, participation in decision-making.
7. **International Pressure and Human Rights Accountability:** Bhutan, Nepal, and the international community must be held to standards under international law, human rights treaties. Greater diplomatic engagement, perhaps multilateral review, international monitoring, periodic reporting could help ensure that promises are followed by actions. Public awareness could also build moral pressure.

Conclusion

The story of the Bhutanese Nepali refugees (the Lhotsampa) is one of displacement but also of resilience. It is a story that challenges us to think about citizenship, identity, human rights, and what it means to be "home." While much has been done in terms of resettlement, many problems remain unaddressed: questions of identity, loss, those still in camps, those left behind in Bhutan under discrimination, mental health, cultural continuity, and the complex politics of recognition.

As we look ahead, what appears clear is that no single route return, integration, or resettlement is sufficient on its own. A mix is needed, adapted to individual preferences and circumstances. International cooperation is essential not only among governments but between civil society, the refugee community, and global human rights bodies. Reflecting on this crisis, there is a moral imperative not only to provide relief but to restore dignity to ensure that statelessness, marginalization, and exile do not leave permanent scars. The Lhotsampa deserve more than temporary shelter; they deserve a place where identity, home, rights, and justice are more than disputed words.

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