Displaced but not Disempowered: Bhutanese Refugees and Grassroots Activism

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ABSTRACT

In the early 1990s, about 80,000 ethnic Nepalis fled their home country of Bhutan and found refuge in Nepal. For more than a decade, activists from the refugee community used a variety of tactics to try to reverse the position of the Bhutanese government so they could return to Bhutan. Two of these tactics, a series of marches and digital documentation, are explored below. In this inter-
view, Susan Banki speaks with Bhakta Ghimire and Hari Khanal, two grassroots activists from the Bhutanese Nepali refugee population.

In the early 1990s, about 80,000 ethnic Nepalis left their home country of Bhutan, crossed through a small strip of India, and found refuge in Nepal. Most of the refugees—who grew to a population of about 110,000 by 2007—lived in seven refugee camps in eastern Nepal for more than a decade, where they were firmly focused on returning home, asserting that they had been evicted through a combination of coercion, threats, destruction of property, and imprisonment and torture of those suspected of “anti-national” activities.1 Throughout, the government of Bhutan insisted that the refugees had no right to return to Bhutan, claiming that most who left were never citizens to begin with and that those who left were aggressively inclined toward the cloistered monarchy.

Many refugee activists were keen to challenge the Bhutanese government’s narrative. From Nepal, they engaged in several creative grassroots tactics to convince the international community—and the Bhutanese themselves—that they were peaceful citizens of Bhutan. The success of these tactics is difficult to measure. Not one refugee has been permitted to return to Bhutan in twenty-eight years, which was the original aim of the movement. But the vast majority of the refugee population—more than 100,000 refugees—have found permanent homes in countries of the Global North through refugee resettlement.2 Furthermore, in the mid-2000s, the King of Bhutan initiated a democratizing process that includes a constitution and elected members of government, although the work of reform is not complete.3

In this interview, Susan Banki speaks with Bhakta Ghimire and Hari Khanal, two grassroots activists from the Bhutanese Nepali refugee population.4 Both have now resettled in the United States.

SUSAN BANKI: What was your motivation for becoming activists?

HARI KHANAL: As a citizen of Bhutan, I was missing my country so much, and all other people in the refugee camps in Nepal had the same kind of feelings. We all wanted to relocate back to our home country, Bhutan. People in the refugee camps and the Bhutanese refugee leaders felt necessary to organize ourselves, and raise our voice from local to regional, then to the international levels to put pressure on Bhutan to establish an atmosphere, so that the government of Bhutan will take us back. I personally felt the same thing and decided to be an activist and work for the greater cause of the Bhutanese population.
BHAKTA GHIMIRE: The main thing that motivated us, Hari, me, and most of the refugees in the camp, was the same thing—that we would like to be back in our own homeland, Bhutan.

BANKI: I’d like to ask about two of the big activities that refugee activist organizations did that really managed to harness the power of the people: marches and documentation.

KHANAL: There were many marches, but I will talk about our involvement with the AMCC. AMCC was an umbrella organization of the Bhutanese social and human rights organizations which was known as the Appeal Movement Coordinating Council. The AMCC organized a series of seventeen batches of peace marches in which the refugees planned to walk all the way from Nepal to Bhutan. The purpose of the marches was to tell the international community clearly that we really wanted to go back to Bhutan, and we needed support to pressure Bhutan. We also wanted to tell the Bhutanese government that we are genuine Bhutanese citizens and we needed to be back to Bhutan.

BANKI: What was the reason to march back through India to Bhutan? Protests can happen in refugee camps, which is more convenient, or places further away, where international media might pay attention.

KHANAL: We came via India to Nepal when we became refugees and we wanted to go back the same way how we came to Nepal.

BANKI: What do you think is the power of a march that is in India compared with, for example, a protest in a place like Geneva or New York?

KHANAL: You know, we could have done that too, but it would be only a few people because we were unknown at the time and when we do any kind of demonstrations with only few people, we would not be heard. Before organizing this peace march, many of the Bhutanese leaders went to different forums far away and spoke on behalf of the Bhutanese refugees, but nobody heard it because they didn’t know much about the Bhutanese refugees and how they were living in the camp, the reason behind them becoming refugees, and what they really wanted.

GHIMIRE: AMCC actions were based on the feelings of general people. AMCC tried to demonstrate the basic feelings of the refugees, and give some knowledge to the local government in Nepal and in India, and also the Bhutan government. The main focus of the march was to appeal to
the King of Bhutan. There were some rumors that the real situation in southern Bhutan was not known by the King. So we were pointing out that we wanted to make the King know about everything. We had to go to Bhutan for this, nowhere else. They actually carried a petition.

BANKI: Who carried the petition?
GHIMIRE: The group leaders.

BANKI: So was the idea that you were going to march into Bhutan, and hopefully even all the way up to the north to present the petition?
GHIMIRE: Yes, we were trying to reach Thimphu.

BANKI: So this wasn’t just a one-day march. This was waves of marchers, over several months. How did you prepare for this?
KHANAL: In order to provide logistic support to the AMCC and the peace marchers, we requested help from refugees housed in the camps in Nepal. The people donated a fist of rice every morning for several months. Every morning they took out one fist of rice, and kept in a separate container. There were volunteers who were assigned to collect the donated rice. They collected it, they packed it, and they brought it down to AMCC’s office located in Damak. Also they sent most to the specific spots where the marchers were present at that exact timing. This is how people in the camps supported the peaceful march.
GHIMIRE: In this way we funded our own activism.
KHANAL: It was just a partial funding, no matter how many people donated it was not enough since it was just a fist of rice. We were not only providing food for the marchers, but we had to do many things, such as coordinating with the press media, traveling a lot back and forth from camp to the place where marchers were staying, or going to other places where we had meetings with local and regional level leaders and do many other activities. I am sure that we also received some of the donations from the local people and local NGOs, but I was not involved in overseeing the financial management.

BANKI: Did you get the donations before you started, or was it only after people saw the power of the marches that they decided to donate?
KHANAL: People living in the camps started giving before starting the
march since AMCC was able to do a kind of advocacy by publicly highlighting the programs months before the marches began. People were aware and eager to support.

**BANKI:** What was it like when the first march started?

**GHIMIRE:** On January 14, 1996, we started from Damak. There was a lot of crying, singing, many things like that, because it was the departing point of our group. About 150 people were there in the forefront with the banner.

**KHANAL:** The banner said “Peace March to Bhutan” in Nepali and English. We made the signs from screen printing. The peace marchers wore white shirts with “Appeal March to Bhutan” written in blue letters.

**GHIMIRE:** We had a big religious ritual, everyone had a tika on their forehead, like getting departed with a big family, and there was a big mass to say good bye to the group, giving them garlands to wear, looking like a big festive occasion. That way we set off from Damak walking the whole day, and we halted in a shift camp that evening.

**BANKI:** Still in Nepal?

**GHIMIRE:** Yes, we walked two days in Nepal before reaching the border area.

**BANKI:** Men and women?

**GHIMIRE:** Mostly men.

**BANKI:** Young and old?

**GHIMIRE:** Every age category. There were people around twenty-one, twenty-two years, and up to fifty years old.

**BANKI:** Where did people sleep? The march was expected to take many days.

**KHANAL:** There were shift camps made up, all along the route in India too.

**GHIMIRE:** Then, near Kakarvitta, near the border to India, on the third day, we reached the border. We had a long deliberation discussing possibilities what of what might happen after reaching the border. What if the police were there in India? What if we were arrested? We had different aspects of training to be calm.
KHANAL: The peace march was based on principles of Satyagraha, the peaceful protests of Gandhi. Satyagraha is a sacrifice.

GHIMIRE: The Satyagraha is non-violent. It is done without any kind of violent activities. It is exactly the same as Gandhi.

We wanted to to show the government of Bhutan that this was a peaceful group of people who just want to go home.

KHANAL: The marchers were selected very carefully. We wanted to to show the government of Bhutan that this was a peaceful group of people who just want to go home.

BANKI: Were the marchers trained beforehand?

KHANAL: In the beginning, the first marchers were trained in Damak. AMCC used to orientate people every time, whenever or wherever they had time, or if the marchers were staying somewhere, before they got arrested, we always told about the non-violent movement, and everybody strictly followed the principles of nonviolence.

BANKI: Did you warn people that they might get arrested?

KHANAL: We told people that we may get arrested, but to remain peaceful. That is what the marchers were told and everybody strictly followed those instructions.

GHIMIRE: We were not scared, we were not afraid to face the security forces, but the blocking side, the Indian side, they seemed frustrated, angry, aggressive, and confrontational with us.

BANKI: You mean the Indian police, the local people, or both?

GHIMIRE: There were not only police, there were some Border Security forces, there were some armies, and there were some local people too.

BANKI: How did they know you were coming?

GHIMIRE: Because we had a big group walking together, we had banners on our body, we were chanting some slogans, so they knew very easily.

KHANAL: They knew there was a campaign going on for several months before we started the march, so everybody was aware.

GHIMIRE: We were stopped in the middle of the Mechi Bridge, where the
exact international border between India and Nepal falls. We waited there for a long time, and we asked the Indian police leader to explain why we were stopped at that area. He was trying to clarify the government’s stance that we were ordered to stop using the banner. Then after being a few hours there, we discussed what to do going forward. We had some Indian intellectuals and social workers on our side, supporting us. We discussed with them too, and then after taking everyone’s opinions, we decided to cross the border. Crossing the border meant we crossed the bridge. As soon as we crossed, everyone was arrested. They had big trucks with them; they just dragged everyone and put everyone from the marchers’ side into the trucks.

KHANAL: When they arrested people they said that the peace marches were against the IPC 144, which is the Indian Penal Code. But there was only marching, there was no riot.

GHIMIRE: And then they took them to the Siliguri and Jalpaiguri prison.

BANKI: Among that group, was there, even in the arrest, still a feeling of hope or determination?

GHIMIRE: People never lost their determination and hope because of their arrest and detention. They came out from prison even more active.

KHANAL: As soon as the first group was arrested we had the second group ready.

BANKI: How soon after the first group did the second group cross?

GHIMIRE: The first group was arrested on the Mechi Bridge on January 17 and after three or four days, 274 people were volunteering for the next group, without fear of arrest. Actually, one thing is worth explaining here; as soon as the first group was arrested on January 17, no people went back to the camps, we just went straight down to the Mechi Bridge in a big crowd, a big number. So the next group was made up of people from that group that was waiting.

KHANAL: The same thing happened with the second group. They started in the Mechi Bridge the same way and again they tried to move forward but they went a little bit further crossing the Mechi Bridge since there were too many people there. They were arrested in between the Mechi Bridge and the security check point towards India. Then the third group went which was led by Bhakta.
BANKI: Tell me about the third batch. I would like to hear about your personal experience, Bhakta.

GHIMIRE: I cannot recall the exact date of my group arrest. When the second group was arrested, we were planning to get a third group to cross the border, so AMCC nominated me as a forefront leader for the third group. I got around 400 volunteers for the third group. I listed them, every one, and we left the same way the first and second group did. We were not arrested there, actually. We were escorted by the police until the end of the bridge, and after crossing the bridge, we were arrested, all of us. There was a big mess while they were arresting us because they didn’t have the logistical management for such a big group, like they didn’t have big enough rooms, big enough buildings to put us, so they kept us in the truck for four days. They didn’t feed us, they didn’t give anything to eat or drink, and they didn’t let us to get out of the loaded trucks. The Indian administration made a big mess then. After four days they took us to the Berhampur jail, near Calcutta, about 400 kilometers away from the place we were arrested. Everyone was frustrated in our whole group, not getting anything to eat, not getting to sleep.

BANKI: Were you trying to keep people’s spirits high?

GHIMIRE: Yeah, we tried. We did many things. We used to sing, we used to narrate long stories, everything possible to entertain ourselves and increase awareness.

BANKI: What kind of songs were you singing? Revolution songs?

GHIMIRE: Not actually revolution, it was anything to entertain us, any songs. In the first group, there were some marchers who were clever enough to create songs and poems. A song was made up basing on the articles of human rights, from the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights] that was very famous among all the groups. I could not sing any song, but I praised the people who could do that. But I used to write some poems and stories and narrate them in between the groups.

BANKI: What kinds of stories?

GHIMIRE: Any kind of stories, like made up stories.

BANKI: So you were an entertainer?

GHIMIRE: Yes. (Laughs).
KHANAL: I was not a marcher, but I was working from outside. I used to stay in Siliguri and visit the people arrested if they got sick and hospitalized. We would go and meet them there, talk to them, and get information. I used to go every day to Jalpaiguri Prison early in the morning where I would to bring the newspaper for them that had our coverage as we didn’t want them to get frustrated. But the prison guards did not let us go and meet or talk to them, but we used to hand over the newspaper, so that people inside the prison could read it. And then in the evening, we used to prepare press releases ready to go for the media, about what happened that day, how many people were arrested, what was going on. It was like day-to-day op-eds.

BANKI: Was the coverage sympathetic in those newspapers?

KHANAL: Yes, there were a lot of Nepali newspapers publishing from India too. I also had to go into Kakarvitta from Siliguri almost every day and fax the press releases to Nepalese media, which were published from Nepal. I also used to help the marchers at the transit camp in India, not the refugee camp. There was a camp that we established once the marchers got released from the Indian prison. We did not go back to Nepal, we wanted to stay in India and start the march from there again, so there was a camp established in a place called Panchai. We had a big tent there where people gathered and took rest for some days and prepared to march again. When they got more people in the prison, sometimes they released the people who were arrested before, and we sent out new batches of people into the march. Little by little we were able to organize seventeen batches of marchers that way.

GHIMIRE: When my group was released, the first time, we reached the camp in Panchai. We stayed there for a few days. Then we went out again, got arrested again. The second time, they again sent us to Berhampur jail, a twelve-hour drive from Siliguri. We were there for many months the second time. On June 13, there was a lathi-charge against us. That happened in that jail because of some minor reason. There was a small misunderstanding, a conflict, between Indian prisoners and the Bhutanese group and there was a big lashing where they beat the Bhutanese prisoners, every one in the group. One guy, weak and quite old, Mr. Baburam Sengdan, was badly hurt during the lathi-charge. He was taken to the hospital inside the jail and after three or four days he died. This was a very frustrating situation for all marchers being in the jails without committing any crime. Baburam Sengdan’s incident made us get bold enough to take brave deci-
sions to get released from the jail. I want to remember his name with honor in this relation. After that we did an indefinite hunger strike, and this was effective. We were released on July 5.

KHANAL: Hunger strikes worked with the first and second batches too. But, months later, one group actually entered into Bhutan.

GHIMIRE: The first group entered into Bhutan on August 15, 1996.

BANKI: *Were you there?*

GHIMIRE: I was inside Bhutan, but I was not wearing the banner. I was doing a kind of surve. Early in the morning, I went to find which entrance was safe for everyone.

BANKI: *So you the first one to go in? Were you like the advance team?*

GHIMIRE: Yes, I went there, I went inside Bhutan at 5:30 in the morning.

BANKI: *Did you pretend to be somebody else, or you just walked?*

GHIMIRE: I did not do anything unusual, because my face looked Indian; Indians were allowed to move throughout. Even some Indians were employed inside Bhutan. So I took that advantage of that to fool the security forces guarding the entrance.

BANKI: *How did it make you feel to walk into Bhutan after so long?*

GHIMIRE: It was a kind of an energetic and motivating thing to me, I was doing something that was a miracle, I was excited.

BANKI: *You were not scared, just excited?*

GHIMIRE: I was not scared. And I had the confidence that my face looked like someone from India. I got there at 5:30 in the morning, even a little before that, because at that time most of the people were waiting to get the information about a safe entrance. I was the one to provide that information, and as soon as I gave them the message, the group crossed inside and went to the bus depot, where they have the bus services there. Actually our undecided logic to get to the bus depot was to find transportation going to Thimphu from there. There were fifty marchers gathered around a half a mile inside Bhutan from the border. People started coming as spectators watched the group, and the policemen they started to gather around the group, and they called some government officials. Within minutes the
group of marchers was surrounded by a mass of security personnel looking like they were the real VIPs. Gradually the government officials started coming near to the group and started talking with them. But at the same time, the camera holders, the reporters, were driven out of the area, some cameras were confiscated by the police, every belonging was taken. And the police started discussion, a hard discussion with the group. There was a big debate going on within the group and the government officials.

**BANKI:** *Was the debate about why they were there, or about the treatment of the refugees in southern Bhutan?*

**GHIMIRE:** The topics of their debate were why and how the group entered Bhutan, what happened during 1990s, how they were evicted, everything that went on during the mass eviction of southern Bhutan in the 1990s. After that long discussion, the group was taken somewhere, a special location that is under the government jurisdiction, and they were told that they will be taken to Thimphu to see the King.

**BANKI:** *Really? They were told they would be taken to Thimphu to see the King?*

**GHIMIRE:** Yes. And they were given something to eat, they were allowed to sleep, given a good place to sleep, and after a few hours, like one or two hours, they were called to get into the vehicles, like they were going to Thimphu. They were loaded in the trucks, in mini-buses, and it was night, it was dark. Everyone was sleepy, so they didn’t know that they were taken out of Bhutan and taken into India.

**BANKI:** *So they were lied to?*

**GHIMIRE:** Yes. The group was taken out of Bhutan and deported to India. It was a dark and rainy night of August 16, 1996. All the members of the group were loaded in the truck. There were police officers trying to convince the group to get out of the vehicles. They tried to convene their mission leaving the group in front of Indian police stations too. But the Indian government didn’t allow them to do so. The Bhutan police took the group from one place to another to get out of the truck, but the marchers were delaying that. They were saying that they want to go to Thimphu and will get out of the truck only when they reach Thimphu. So the police were frustrated and the drivers were terrified. They were trying to trick the people. On the way they got to a market area, and the police said, “You
have been hungry, not eating for a few days, you have to drink something. We are also hungry, so let us have some kind of food here,” they pretended like that, and they asked everyone to get out of the truck. Most of the marchers were really hungry and sick. So they got down to have some refreshment. However some guys stayed in the truck. Taking this chance the police trucks ran away like the defeated army escaping from a battlefield. There were four marchers still in the truck. They were kicked out while truck was running in a big Indian forest. The truck ran away and all the four remaining marchers were off the truck. We found them on other day, in the big forest. That night, there was a big rain, a storm, the poor guys; they stayed in the forest, in the rain, without food, for almost three days.

**BANKI:** With these marches, only a few made it to Bhutan, and no one made it to Thimphu. Would you consider the marches a success or a failure?

**KHANAL:** Yes, we could take this both ways. We can say it is failure because we were not able to continue. It took so long because the people contributed for such a long time, and there were fractions and disagreements because they got tired. But this was also a kind of success, since Bhutan went from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. Bhutan got criticized or pressured by the international community because of what they did to the southern Bhutanese. So, maybe just to eyewash the international community, Bhutan at least developed a written constitution, and established a multi-party democracy under the instruction of the King.

**GHIMIRE:** Effectively we failed, but in general we gained something.

**BANKI:** What did you gain?

**GHIMIRE:** We gained confidence that our family members living in southern Bhutan, they will not be tortured, they will not be evicted again because of us, because we did something, and as Hari said, the democratic system was introduced in the country. It is not sufficient, but something has started.

**BANKI:** Now I’d like to ask about the second tactic. Can you tell me about the database?
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KHANAL: The database was actually organized by AHURA Bhutan [Association of Human Rights Activists, Bhutan. In the database we had documentation that was provided by the Bhutanese government, the documents that proved we were citizens and expelled from the country. Many of the people had their documents confiscated when they left in 1991 and 1992, but somehow people managed to bring at least something that showed they are Bhutanese citizens.

BANKI: What are some examples of the kind of documentation you’re talking about?

KHANAL: Like the citizenship ID card, land tax receipt, kasho, which is a document given by the King to the people offering the land.

BANKI: The idea was to collect this documentation and do what with it?

KHANAL: To collect the demographic information of the people, such as where they lived in Bhutan, what was their address in Bhutan, and where they live now in the refugee camp including the sector number, the hut number and the members in the family with their date of birth, name, and at least three to four documents that will prove that they are Bhutanese citizens. This was compiled in one place, in a database, so the person looking at the database could look at all of the information.

BANKI: What did you do with all the documents?

KHANAL: We scanned them all. We would go to each camp, go to refugee huts and interview people, separate the most important documentation that is good to use for the database, then we wrote on a piece of paper to make sure that we gave back their documentation the way that we brought it. We brought the documents to the Damak office with us for scanning purposes. Our staff had folders for each family. When we finished the scans, I used to go back and return the documents. While collecting the database, we also filled out forms to gather demographic information.

BANKI: The camps are spread over miles and miles. How long did this take?

KHANAL: We worked for a year. We were ten to twelve people involved in this database work. This was a very important activity to convince the international community, including Nepal, India, and Bhutan and prove that we are real Bhutanese citizens. We realized that this was very important because the Bhutanese government has been telling the international
community. “These are not the Bhutanese people, they are illegal immigrants, and they voluntarily left Bhutan to go back their original place.” We thought this is going to be a very important tool since nobody could go with all of their documents every time, every place. This is one of the main reasons that we wanted to make a compact documentation so that we can produce this before the international community. Scanning was also good because then we had a record of these documents where they could not be destroyed by fire. There were many fires in the camps, with bamboo and close cooking fires.

**BANKI:** About how many people you were able to collect this information from?

**KHANAL:** A huge number of families. I think we did documentations of 50,000 people. Half of all the refugees.¹²

**BANKI:** Were you working almost every day to collect this information?

**KHANAL:** Almost every day. And the database was linked to the scans. You could click on a person and it would show their family information, their scanned documentation, and their dzongkhag,¹³ and from the dzongkhag, you could click on other families, and see their documentation. We put it on a CD. Then we used these CDs as our advocacy tools. I remember when I went to Kathmandu with chairperson of AHURA Bhutan Ratan Gazmere to meet with a diplomat while the governments of Nepal and Bhutan were negotiating about what to do with us. We actually met with the then-foreign minister who was leading the Nepalese delegation, Chakra Prashad Bastola. Ratan presented this in the computer, this database. The Foreign Minister Mr. Bastola was very, very eager to watch it and see it, what we had done. And I remember that he asked us to continue the work and make it 100 percent and give it to him. But we were not able to do it all. This was a pity that not everybody was willing to come out to take part in the database.

**BANKI:** Why not?

**KHANAL:** There were so many organizations, but AHURA had funding.¹⁴ Some section of the people wanted to do their own documentation, but they did not have the intellectual manpower, the technology they needed, and also they didn’t have enough skilled volunteers.
BANKI: *Is there anything, upon reflection, that you think you or Ratan could have done to convince more people to participate?*

KHANAL: There were information sessions in the camp before we started. AHURA distributed brochures or leaflets to inform the people, to explain why it was important. I was attending one of the information sessions because I had a newspaper in the camp and I was writing about it, and I saw it was a wonderful project and that is why I decided to volunteer to help for it. In my opinion, if this project was supported by other leaders among the refugees, we would have achieved the 100 percent—even if not 100 percent, we would have covered at least 80 percent of the total refugee population which would be way better than 50 percent.

BANKI: *Half of one lakh is still impressive.*

KHANAL: Although there were many leaders who were not supportive, we were still able to include many people in this project. However, it was our bad luck that we could not do more than that. I do not want to blame them; they just didn’t want to support this project.

BANKI: *What were the logistics of organizing so much information?*

KHANAL: When we were doing this documentation, we were very careful because these were the people’s very important documents. They were the history for the people and the proof. We always thought in our mind that we need to take care of them, when we take them out of the camp and then return them just as we took them. That was a very tough, challenging job for us. I still feel so proud that we didn’t lose anything, not even a single document. I tried everything possible from our end during that time which made us successful to some extent. Even today, I think that everybody should have come forward and participated, which would have made the documentation more effective.

BANKI: *It was a creative and innovative effort.*

KHANAL: Thank you.

BANKI: *Can you compare advocacy that is visible like marches to the more invisible advocacy like quietly meeting politicians or collecting information?*

KHANAL: Both are very important. I the second part, the digitalized database, these kinds of activities are little slow in nature, but they are very
effective, because they are the proof. It will take a longer time to achieve the goal, but it has a very big impact on bringing some changes. The physical one like the peace march, is equally important, because we don't know if people can express openly and physically. It was the real time that AMCC organized peace marches and the Bhutanese people expressed their opinion openly and physically and more visibly, where people from other areas, other parts of the world came to realize that these people really wanted to go back to Bhutan. That is why I don't see that one has less importance and the other has more. But the first kind of visible activism will have to be physically present, it's more tiring and frustrating.

BANIKI: Which do you think was more effective, the database or the march?

KHANAL: Both were effective in their own way. The peace march was a way of expressing the refugees’ views to go back to Bhutan and to tell them how much they love their country. And it was organized to tell the international community that we don’t want to go anywhere else, we want to go back to Bhutan and serve our own country Bhutan rather than living anywhere else. The database did something else. It was done to tell the international community that what the Bhutan government says is not true, and to find reality, what we are, who we are, how we came, whether we are Bhutanese or not. This was the main tool, since the Bhutanese government was not telling the truth from the beginning until now and the government will say same thing again and again in future too. However, the result was different! People came to know about us, and now we are resettled. So, a solution was found, even if not the one we wanted originally.

BANIKI: Bhakta, how about you? Do you have an opinion about which was more effective?

GHIMIRE: Actually both have different values, like an equal standard. The documentation database was effective to convince the world that we are from Bhutan, but we need a new home now, and the march was to demon-
strate the feelings and the emotions of the general Bhutanese people, and that we were peaceful.

**BANKI:** *Is there still work to be done for Bhutan? Is there still a role for activism?*

**KHANAL:** This is a very tough and important question. Thank you for raising it. The bigger portion of the refugees now has citizenship, or will have it sooner or later, in America or Australia or somewhere else. But the biggest concern is, what are the possibilities for the people remaining in refugee camps in Nepal who want to go back to Bhutan? Will the government really take them, like as their citizens or not, we really need to think about it. They may still be thinking that the Bhutanese government will say okay, they can still think that they will have a beautiful life in Bhutan. However, I do not believe that this is possible any more. The repatriated Bhutanese refugees will not be treated right even if the Bhutanese government decides to take them back. These people will be watched and monitored so closely and will not be allowed to exercise their basic rights as they are very few in numbers and will be always suppressed by the government.

**GHIMIRE:** Yes, I completely agree with that.

**KHANAL:** But beside that, I think it is very important to keep our history alive, no matter where we live. I think we can do it, if we really want to do something. We can warn the Bhutanese government time and again that the government should not target other people and expel them from the country. We need to keep on doing something through advocacy so that no one will have to leave the country in future.

**GHIMIRE:** If we join hands and work together, we can find many people—many people—in existing refugee camps, settled in the Indian area now, people outside the camps but still in Nepal. They have their knowledge, they have their ideas, and they have their frustration, not being inside Bhutan. We have to work together with them. We do not have to worry thinking we have no people, but we have to have the right strategy, we have to have the right plans, and we have to manage the financial matters. If we do that, we can still address many issues to explain and push against our history of forceful eviction.
BANKI: Do you think in the age of social media, you need the same tactics? How have things changed?

KHANAL: By using social media, there is one important thing we can do it. We can make the Bhutanese government understand that we really do not think anything bad about Bhutanese people. We really love our country and our people in Bhutan, and we want to do something positive. In the past, we always criticized for everything that happened in Bhutan. There is still time to establish a culture to appreciate and encourage people if they do something good. Many of us are connected our old classmates, with people who have been in Bhutan all this time through different social media. This is a good first step to start utilizing social media to influence the Bhutanese government and the people inside, that we always think positively about the country and the people.

I think it is very important to keep our history alive, no matter where we live.

BANKI: Are there any final lessons learned about grassroots activism that you would like to share?

GHIMIRE: Like any kind of like campaign for any kind of change, I think if we want to organize peacefully, or if we want to achieve that through peaceful means, we need to be very committed, very united, cooperative. Sharing of ideas, and active involvement is very, very important, and teamwork is necessary to run any kind of campaign for any kind of change.

BANKI: That is a good note to end on. Thank you for your time.
Regional Map Of Peace March Route

ENDNOTES


4 The authors have drawn inspiration from a somewhat similar article written in 1995, in which two refugee leaders who engaged in advocacy with high level stakeholders were interviewed about the aims of their organization. Michael Hutt and G. Sharkey, “Nepalese in Origin but Bhutanese First: A conversation with Bhim Subba and Om Dhungel (Human Rights Organization of Bhutan).” European Bulletin of Himalayan Research 9(4) (1995): 32-37.

5 To walk, as the marchers wanted to do, from Kakarvitta in Nepal to the main border gate at Phuentsholing, in Bhutan, is approximately 120 miles.


7 Bhutan’s capital city is Thimphu.

8 Damak is a town near the largest camps for Bhutanese refugees, about thirty miles west of the Indian border.

9 Hari is referring to clauses in Indian law (Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code and Sections 141-149 of the Indian Penal Code) that address public disturbances by limiting public assembly in the case of riots. Section 144 however has been used to
prevent peaceful protests, both during the Indian Independence movement and more recently.

10 While neither Hari nor Bhakta explicitly say it, the goal of the marchers here was to overwhelm the Indian government by “filling the jails,” a tactic used globally, from the U.S. Civil Rights movement to Karachi activists protesting missing Shias.

11 A police beating with batons.

12 AHURA Bhutan reported that they covered 51 percent of the camp population, which at the time, was approximately 96,000. Ratan Gazmere and Dilip Bishwo, “Bhutanese Refugees: Rights to Nationality, Return and Property,” Forced Migration Review 7 (2000): 20-22.

13 A dzongkhag is a district in Bhutan.

14 AHURA received a small grant from the now-defunct Centre on Housing, Rights and Eviction in 1999 to undertake the documentation over the course of a year. Personal interview with Ratan Gazmere, October 2014.

15 One lakh = 100,000 people.