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**TITLE**

The transformation of homeland politics in the era of resettlement: Bhutanese refugees in Nepal and the diaspora

**ABSTRACT**

This article examines how resettled Bhutanese refugees who lived in refugee camps in Nepal for two decades perceive, understand, and interact with their “home” country of Bhutan in the political sphere. It draws on initial field research (of a larger, six-year longitudinal project) of Bhutanese refugees who remain in Nepal and who have resettled in the diaspora. The first part of the paper will review the theories that might predict resettlement political engagement as categorized by the author (declining, continuing, shifting, and reformed). After a brief discussion of methods, the article will then review the context of refugeehood and resettlement for refugees from Bhutan, and will then compare homeland politics in the pre-resettlement and resettlement phases. The article concludes that homeland politics has continued in the resettlement era, although in somewhat altered form.

**Keywords**

Bhutanese refugees; Lhotshampa; resettlement; homeland politics; diaspora

### Introduction

Refugees who flee across borders are generally dissatisfied with aspects of the country from which they have fled, whether these elements are political, economic, or ethno-social. It is not surprising to imagine that refugees would then have good reasons for engaging in *homeland politics* – activism specifically devoted to reforming aspects of the home country. While not all refugees engage in homeland politics, those that do are well positioned to play that role by virtue of their continued proximity to their country of origin, their exilic status and their local cultural and linguistic knowledge. But what happens when these refugees resettle to a new country?

This article will describe the theoretical basis and preliminary findings of a project that examines the political activism of refugees from Bhutan who continue to live near their country of exile in Nepal and those who have resettled to countries of the Global North. Relying on elements from transnational understandings of politics and from the social movement literature, the article delineates the theoretical differences between neighbouring countries of refuge (NCR)<sup>1</sup> and countries of resettlement. Then, drawing on field work in Nepal and Australia, the article locates Bhutanese refugees' past and current political activism and analyses how homeland activism has been shaped and re-shaped as the site of activism is altered.

### The Nexus of Social Movements, Transnationalism and Refugee Activism

The literature on social movements – a “constituency lacking formal representation... that make(s) publicly-visible demands for changes in the distribution or exercise of power” (Tilly, 1982, p. 26) – has recently recognised the significant role of transnationalism in shaping the mechanisms and messages of the politics of contention. Anderson’s “long-distance nationalist” for example relies on transnational resources such as currency and propaganda to ignite change at home (1992, p. 13). One important contribution of the political transnational literature has been to acknowledge the role of refugees in particular (as opposed to all migrants) in creating a political space “over and beyond” national borders (Wahlbeck, 2002, p. 122). As noted, refugees who have conflictual relationships with their home governments are uniquely positioned for participation in homeland politics. Their opposition to current policies or power structures often stems from first-hand evidence of persecution, which provides both an impetus and instrument for promoting change at home (Shain, 1993, p. 114). Further, refugees with uncertain legal status have an additional incentive to engage in public activism if they believe that it will help support their asylum claims (Shah, 1999). At the same time, impermanent legal status in countries near the conflict zone (NCRs) can impact the choices that refugees make about mobilisation (Banki, 2013a; Brees, 2010).

While recognising refugees as important political actors, the transnational literature has not developed separate theoretical frameworks for refugees who remain in NCRs and those who resettle in third countries. Scholars are, of course, aware of the distinction, but virtually no

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<sup>1</sup> While the term ‘country of first asylum’ has been used widely to describe those refugees who have fled across borders and have not found a durable solution to their plight, I suggest that the term ‘neighbouring country of refuge’ (NCR) is preferable, first because the country in question is very often not the first country to which refugees flee (the refugees from Bhutan offer a case in point, as they all transited through India), and second, in many situations these countries do not offer asylum. ‘Protracted refugee situations’ and ‘warehoused refugees’ have also been used in the literature, but these terms lack precision for other reasons (Banki, 2013a) NCR is a term with greater clarity and offers a clear spatial, if not theoretical, distinction between these two types of spaces.

theoretical work has been done on differences in the degree and nature of transnational political activism between NCRs and resettlement countries. Yet the distinction is important because of their significant inherent differences. In NCRs, refugees are closer to home, and therefore possess a strong localised understanding of current events in the home country (Landau, 2003, p. 33). Because of uncertain legal status, their movement is often restricted to camps or other settlements, which keeps refugees physically close together and may impact local communication and community bonds (Jacobsen, 2001). Because NCRs generally host humanitarian aid organizations that provide shelter and food, the cost of living is lower, but so, too, is the ability to earn hard currency as formal employment is generally prohibited (Hyndman, 2000). Finally, and to the crux of the issue, host governments in NCRs often discourage or ban outright refugee political activity because they do not want to damage relations with home country governments (for example, Castles, 2004).

By contrast, in resettlement countries, refugees nearly always arrive from significant distances, which may affect their ability to obtain information about the home country in a timely fashion. Even in resettlement countries with ethnic enclaves, refugees still find themselves spread out geographically more than in NCRs. And the affluence of resettlement countries increases refugees' level of education and social capital and hence their ability to earn money and mobilise resources (Van Hear, 2006). Finally, resettlement countries place restrictions neither on movement nor on political activity, although refugee priorities may conflict with dominant political mores (Zucker & Zucker, 1989).

Given the more restrictive environment in NCRs, one might expect to find a lack of political activism on the part of refugees there, and the fact that there is a significant body of literature about refugees in NCRs in general (under the terminology 'Protracted Refugee Situations' (for example, Crisp, 2003; Loescher, Milner, Newman, & Troeller, 2008) and very little about specific political activities seems to indicate a widespread assumption that NCRs do not provide a conducive environment for political mobilisation. While "homeland politics" yields more than 1,600 references in Google Scholar, a careful canvassing of the literature reveals that less than 50 articles specifically attend to homeland activism as practiced in the NCR. Yet even within the constrained context of NCRs, refugees do mobilise politically: empirical work cataloguing the activities of Tibetans in India (Houston & Wright, 2003), Burmese in Thailand (Banki, 2013b; Brees, 2010), and Sudanese in Egypt (Hausermann Fabos, 2002) confirms this.

The theoretical-empirical divide reinforces a critical need to theorise the NCR as its own political space. At the same time, because refugee activism directed toward the home country takes place in the transnational arena – where resources, strategies, and messages are shared across borders – it is valuable to understand not only how refugee communities interact with elements in the home country, but how, as refugees move from NCRs to resettlement countries, they manage increasingly complex relationships across several different borders.

As refugees move to resettlement countries, four general possibilities present themselves. First, theories of assimilation, acculturation and incorporation suggest that resettlements' dual traits of permanence and opportunity would shift refugees' priorities to 'starting over', and thus discourage activism. The literature behind these theories is vast and well-developed, although most focuses on *migrant* processes (Al-Ali, Black, & Koser, 2001; Itzigsohn & Saucedo, 2002; Portes, Escobar, & Arana, 2008). A subset, however, examines *refugee* integration (Kuhlman, 1991; Michel, 2002), including in Australia (for example, Forrest, Paulsen, & Johnston, 2006).

Second, ethnonationalist concepts in the nationalist and diaspora literatures suggest that collective claims fuelled by non-territorial identities would sustain homeland activism even for refugees who cannot return 'home.' The well-tread homage to Anderson's work (1991, 1998) has been applied to several refugee contexts to support this argument (Sheffer, 2003; Wayland, 2004).

Third, the concept of strategic essentialism found in subaltern studies suggests that activists would retain their essential political identities as mobilisers but, as a response to new hierarchies present in the place of residence, would shift their attention to politics in the resettlement country. While there is contestation around the meaning and use of Spivak's terminology, it retains explanatory power when applied to refugees whose voices would not otherwise be heard (McPherson, 2010).

Fourth, political process theory suggests that as access to nodes of power shift in the country of resettlement and resources change, homeland activism would reform itself in response to the political opportunity structures available. In the context of refugee activism, this theory is the least well-developed of the four. The limited research available (Hammond, 1993; Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2001; Wayland, 2004) neglects to take into account the focus on frequency, scope and strategies germane to this research project.

While the theories described above have traction and heft from extensive associated literatures, the homeland politics of refugees from Bhutan is absent from any of these. The following sections offer a description of the methods used to collect data, a brief review of the refugee/resettlement context for the Bhutanese, and a comparative analysis of homeland politics in the pre-resettlement and resettlement phases.

### Methods

A comparative approach, both temporally and geographically, will necessarily be undertaken in order to determine the shape of homeland politics among members of the Bhutanese refugee population. This examination will qualitatively examine data from the pre-resettlement period (i.e., pre-2007), and thereafter, and will cover activities that occurred/are occurring in Nepal and in the diaspora. The discourse of grey literature, both online and printed, in both Nepalese and English, has been analysed to understand the frequency, scope, and character of activism in multiple sites. Interviews with homeland activists in Australia and Nepal will help to flesh out possible causal explanations for changes over space and time. Semi-structured open-ended interviews will further be repeated longitudinally over a five-year period from 2013 to 2017, allowing for a close examination of actions and views on Bhutan as a homeland in the context of resettlement.

In order to organize the data about types of activism, this article relies upon Keck and Sikkink's (1998, 1999) clearly delineated clusters of strategic techniques used by transnational advocacy networks: information politics, leverage politics, symbolic politics, and accountability politics. This set of categories is useful because, as described below, it comprehensively covers the full range of transnational activities that activists may utilize, and has the potential to draw out differences in the shape of activism across time and space.

*Information politics* refers to the act of gathering, preparing and sharing information about the issue of concern (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Nearly always a precursor for other kinds of activism, it has the potential to draw in both core and 'soft rim' activists (Guarnizo, Portes, &

Haller, 2003, p. 1238). This is because the kinds of roles needed to produce information are varied and diverse. Those with appropriate language skills, for example, can translate documentation. Others may be involved in the distribution of pamphlets or online materials. Others provide testimony relating to the relevant issue. As such testimony forms the backbone of data on which information politics relies (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), even those who participate infrequently can still be seen as important contributors to the cause.

*Leverage politics* makes use of more powerful actors who act as levers to magnify the point of pressure. Keck and Sikkink's most famously cited example of leverage politics in the transnational realm is the boomerang model, in which local groups bring their causes to international actors, who then place pressure on national governments to make changes relevant for local groups (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Sikkink, 2005).

*Symbolic politics* uses symbols, poetry, images and other creative representations to project a narrative that creates and heightens meaning (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Often linked to forming a cohesive identity, symbolic politics are important for both external purposes – to bring the distant closer – and for internal purposes – to create 'collective signifying processes' (Melucci, 1993, p. 219).

*Accountability politics* seeks to "oblige more powerful actors to act on vaguer politics or principles they formally endorsed" (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 95). A valuable way of linking what activists do with the actors whose behaviours and norms they seek to change, accountability politics necessarily requires commitments from the actors in question, which activists can use as a point of pressure.

#### Nepali-Bhutanese Refugees in context

The circumstances that generated the exile of tens of thousands of Bhutan's southern-residing, mostly Hindu-practising, ethnically Nepali population have been covered in detail elsewhere (Evans, 2010; Hutt, 2003, 2005; Quigley, 2004; D. Rizal, 2004; Whitecross, 2009). In sum, a suite of social, political and ethno-cultural pressures forced the Nepali Bhutanese – also called 'Lhotshampa' – to depart Bhutan between 1989 and 1992.<sup>2</sup> Families of both a political and non-political bent fled the country, facilitated by a government fearful of changing demographics and proximate historical annexations. While the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGB) asserts that these refugees left of their own accord, evidence from scholars (Hutt, 1996, 2003; Lee, 1998), regional commentators (Chandrasekharan 1998), and human rights bodies (Amnesty International, 1992) suggest that they were forced. This is at the crux of the citizenship issue, because, for two decades, refugees engaged in homeland politics have campaigned from Nepal to repatriate (return) to Bhutan and have their citizenship reinstated. By 2006, the UN agency that protects refugees, the UNHCR, counted 107,800 refugees from Bhutan living in seven camps in Nepal (UNHCR, 2007, p. 388).

In 2007, the demographics of the Bhutanese refugee community began to shift, when countries of the Global North decided to resettle Bhutanese refugees permanently to their own countries. The reasons for this change have been outlined elsewhere (Banki, 2008b), but

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'Lhotshampa' is contested, because, while it accurately describes the southern-residing population of Bhutan ('Lhotshampa' means 'southerners' in Bhutan's majority language, Dzongkha), it is a more difficult tag to ascribe to refugees once they have departed Bhutan, and certainly, once they have resettled to new countries. They are no longer southerners of Bhutan. At a May 2013 workshop at the School of Oriental and African Studies, resettled refugees eschewed the term. In its place, the author has chosen to use the term 'Nepali Bhutanese.'

the resulting policy has led to a rapid outflow of Bhutanese refugees from the camps and from Nepal. At the writing of this article in July 2013, only 35,919 Bhutanese refugees remain in Nepal.<sup>3</sup> Of those resettled, approximately 5,000 are in Australia, of whom about 500 live in Sydney. In addition to concerns about how resettlement has impacted the ability of remaining refugees to stay healthy, feed themselves, and be educated, there has been, from the start of the resettlement process, a palpable fear that resettlement will reduce the pressure on Bhutan to accept back refugees, and in so doing, dilute the efforts of those who want to promote political reform in Bhutan (Banki, 2008a). This has implications not only for those who still want to repatriate to Bhutan, but for those Nepali Bhutanese who *never left* Bhutan and never became refugees, who remain in “liminal legal space” and whose access to citizenship and a range of rights, including political, cultural, and land rights in Bhutan are not guaranteed (Whitecross, 2009, p. 58).

### Pre-Resettlement

In the pre-resettlement phase, political activism directed toward Bhutan focused on three related issues: first, raising awareness about the treatment of Nepali Bhutanese in Bhutan prior to exile; second, advocating for the right of refugees to repatriate (return) to Bhutan; and third, in the mid-2000s, examining the newly established democratic process under way in Bhutan. A fourth issue was focused not on reform within Bhutan, but on the international community’s espousal of resettlement and its impacts, an issue that has been commented on elsewhere (Banki, 2008a, 2008b). As the fourth issue does not concern homeland activism, it is not discussed here.

### *Information Politics*

The primary pre-resettlement homeland activity was based around collecting and securing accurate information and ensuring its distribution. Pamphlets and books detail the story of torture in Bhutan’s prisons prior to exile, (for example, BRAVVE, 2006; T. N. Rizal, 2004) and videos set the context of expulsion and the culture of fear created by some Bhutanese officials, such as *The Pathetic Exile* which narrates with mournful music the instances of beatings, public humiliation, and torture of Nepali Bhutanese in southern Bhutan.<sup>4</sup> Monthly newsletters such as the *Bhutan Review*, published between 1993 and 1996 by the Human Rights Organization of Bhutan (HUROB) covered a range of relevant topics, such as the April 1994 issue that reported on: the release from prison of a Nepali Bhutanese student activist; the xenophobia of the RGB through evidence of official circulars that warn of the “infiltration of non-nationals” into Bhutan; and the recent visit of a US State Department official to the camps and the ensuing discussion that India remained reluctant to play a role in encouraging repatriation (HUROB, 1994).<sup>5</sup> Information politics also included activities among the refugees that “develop(ed) a historical consciousness that was conditioned both by their sense of injustice and by their need to underscore their right to return” (Hutt, 2003, p. 10), such as annual dramatic re-enactments in the school camps of the alleged drowning of early activist Masur Chettri by the Bhutanese head of state, Jigme Palden Dorje.<sup>6</sup> Said one refugee with pride:

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<sup>3</sup> Data from the UNHCR office in Damak, Nepal, provided to the author in August 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Unpublished, n.d.. In author’s possession.

<sup>5</sup> The entire *Bhutan Review* archive can be found on Digital Himalaya at <http://www.digitalhimalaya.com/collections/journals/bhutanreview/> [accessed 1 October 2013].

<sup>6</sup> There is much contestation around the specifics of Masur Chettri’s life. See Dhakal and Strawn (1994) and Hutt (2003, pp. 116-120).

Masur Chettri was the first man to raise a voice against the Bhutan government. That was a long time ago, that was the time of the third king.... So in that scenario we used to play the drama in the camps. I played the most wanted character, that is, I am the Masur Chettri, because at that time I had a very good voice, and very good courage.<sup>7</sup>

The frequency of such activism was relatively high, with human rights reports, education in the camps, and articles in the local media occurring regularly. More than any other set of activities, information politics appealed to broad segments of the public, including audiences in Nepal, in India, and in the international community.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Leverage politics*

Activists made efforts to request that third parties leverage their power by placing pressure on the RGB. Family and community contacts between Nepali Bhutanese refugees and Nepali citizens facilitated frequent meetings between refugee leaders and Nepali government officials, as the former seemed to have the ear of the latter.<sup>9</sup> Other activities included: meeting with US and Australian government officials in the mid-1990s and beyond (BRAAVE, 1999, pp. 11-17), sending letters to parliamentarians in India with requests to influence Bhutan's actions<sup>10</sup>, and requests in 1999 by the newly formed Bhutanese Refugee Representative Repatriation Committee (BRRRC) to the then-UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, to resolve the Bhutanese refugee issue through the formation of an impartial international team (Chandrasekharan 1999). The nature of leverage politics (and the connections that activists had with influential powerholders) suggests that this type of activity was generally carried out by a small number of core activists, generally in response to specific events, in the pre-resettlement phase.

#### *Symbolic Politics*

Symbolic politics played an important role in revealing problematic ethnic and citizenship policies, during which raising public awareness took on its most visible forms. While the first peaceful protests within Bhutan took place in September 1990, refugees had already protested outside the country one month earlier, trying to physically travel the distance back to Bhutan and attempt to re-enter the country, symbolically indicating the importance of physical presence in Bhutan for the Nepali Bhutanese population. According to one (currently outdated and archived) website that detailed the mobilisation of Nepali Bhutanese activists:

More than 25,000 people gathered at Garganda (inside India) to launch peaceful demonstrations and protest rallies in Bhutan on 26th August, 1990. However, the Indian police did not allow the demonstrators to pass through Indian soil. They created barricades and promulgated prohibitory orders banning the Bhutanese demonstrators to move a distance of around 30 km from Garganda to Phuentsholing Bhutan, the gateway through Indian territory. While inside Bhutan a dawn to dusk curfew was imposed in Phuentsholing and the gun-trotting (sic) army personnel were deployed.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with refugee, D1, April 2013, in Sydney, Australia.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with refugee, D3, April 2013, in Sydney, Australia.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with refugee, N11, July 2013, in Kathmandu, Nepal.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with refugee, D2, April 2013, in Sydney, Australia.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.oocities.org/bhutanese/refugees/movement.html> [accessed 21 July 2011].



In the ensuing years, further symbolic protests of this kind included the 1996 Peace March (with concurrent cycle rallies, walking marches, and demonstrations in Siliguri (India), Damak and Kathmandu, respectively) (HUROB, 1996) and the 2007 Long March in which thousands of refugees tried to return to Bhutan but were stopped by Indian authorities (Dhungana, 2010). While not carried out with great frequency, symbolic protests such as this played a key role in targeting both Nepali and Indian publics.

Symbolic protests could take written form as well, as refugees used creative writing to focus attention on their homeland. Poems and narrated stories written in both Nepali and English about refugee flight and exile did not explicitly demand reforms in Bhutan, but can still be considered political acts in their own right, as they demand recognition from the RGB of an exiled population. A stanza from one poem from a working draft of an unpublished anthology produced in the camps reads:

Never in my life I dreamed to be  
A living corpse, a waif, a refugee  
Calculating the year, months and days-  
Hours, minutes and seconds,  
Mere awaiting the bang of repatriation.  
To play lullaby on the cradle of nation,  
With peace, dignity and freedom. (Kharel, 2000)

Symbolic politics has the potential, like information politics, to draw in large numbers of participants who may be otherwise peripheral to the movement. Marches drew thousands of protesters, while those writing creatively may have been able to express hopes and dreams that would find no other manifestation politically.

#### *Accountability Politics*

Of all types of homeland politics, there is the least evidence for accountability politics in the pre-resettlement phase. Limited reference has been found to activists trying to make good on former promises of the RGB, partially because few promises had been made by Bhutan regarding Nepali Bhutanese prior to 2007.

One striking example of homeland politics among the refugees did indirectly make the RGB accountable for former promises. It also utilised information politics in innovative ways, collecting and packaging information so that it could be used for leverage. In 1999 and 2000, the Association of Human Rights Activists in Bhutan (AHURA) developed a digitised database to contest the RGB's official narrative that the refugees were not citizens of Bhutan.<sup>12</sup> Armed with slow computers and scanners, the volunteers for AHURA collected, scanned, and returned to its owners any official documentation from Bhutan that camp residents were willing to share: invoices, tax receipts, old cancelled passports, land registries, and birth certificates. Each document was then linked in a software program to its owner, which was then linked to their home *dzongkhag*, or district. The data could then be sorted by family, refugee camp, district, and types of documentation.<sup>13</sup> Just over 50% of the refugee population participated in the survey, constituting 4,553 families (COHRE, 2008, 27-28).

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<sup>12</sup> See Hutt 2003 for detailed translations of specific documents, and explanations of the importance of each. Hutt for example notes the significance of land title, which is, it is argued, a proxy for citizenship in Bhutan. Hutt cites one refugee explaining the *thrām*, i.e., land ownership document. The refugee asserts "anyone who has land, holds a *thrām*. For him the land itself is proof [of his Bhutanese citizenship]" (2003, 21, fnt 18).

<sup>13</sup> The author is grateful to AHURA members for granting permission to review the digitised database in Damak in November 2007.

According to one source, the digitized database was submitted to Sadako Ogato, the then-High Commissioner for Refugees, and it was requested that these international actors take part in the impending verification exercise to determine the nationality of the refugees. Ogato reportedly claimed never receiving the database (John, 2000).

The digitized database represents a creative and innovative approach to mobilisation, one that relied on a significant number of actors (i.e., volunteers to collect the information throughout all of the camps) in order to contest the official discourse of the Bhutanese government. It seems, in hindsight, that this would have been a useful instance through which to exercise as much leverage as possible; further research will be conducted to clarify past efforts to use the database as a lever for change.

### Resettlement Phase

Since the start of the resettlement program for Bhutanese refugees starting in 2007, approximately 69,000 refugees have been resettled to countries of the Global North.<sup>14</sup> Interviews and direct observation with refugees in Sydney, Australia, and in Kathmandu and Jhapa, eastern Nepal, form the basis for this preliminary research, revealing manifestations of homeland politics in both the NCR and the resettlement country, but offering mixed evidence about its frequency and nature. On the one hand, many former activists who have resettled find themselves less involved than previously, as they are now focused on community events to build their life in their country of resettlement. One interviewee's comments seem to reflect a broader trend among resettled refugees:

I would say one thing over here, why we are not raising that political issue from overseas. From Australia, we might get a better life over here and we are secure. If we didn't feel secure, we might think "Oh, one day we should have to go our land", so I would say, like around the 500 we are here – Bhutanese in Sydney – nobody can say "Oh, one day I'm going to Bhutan". As a visitor, we can go, but to live there, nobody would say now to go because they are secure here and everything is here.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, resettled refugees are making use of their diaspora status to utilize community resources toward the goal of improving the situation in Bhutan. For example, the Bhutanese Association in South Australia established a constitution in 2009, and its third aim and objective is to "To support the promotion and protection of human rights of Bhutanese people, both living within and outside Bhutan, in accordance with the UN General Assembly Resolution 53/144 of 9 December 1998."<sup>16</sup> As well, those who remain in the NCR may have a greater ability to access resources, with significant influxes of remittances into the camps and surrounding areas of Damak and Jhapa, where homeland activists continue to reside.<sup>17</sup> A telling sign of the importance of remittances to the NCR refugee economy is that there are more banks in Damak, close to the remaining refugee camps, than there are in Biratnager, Nepal's second largest city with a population of 170,000.<sup>18</sup>

### *Information politics*

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e487856.html> [accessed 22 August 2013].

<sup>15</sup> Interview with refugee, D2, April 2013, in Sydney, Australia.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.bhutanese.org.au/about-us/constitution>, p. 4 [accessed 4 May 2013].

<sup>17</sup> Interview with refugee, D2, April 2013, in Sydney, Australia.

<sup>18</sup> Direct observation, July 2013.

The sharing and distribution of information about Bhutan appears to have reduced considerably in the resettlement phase among activists, and, where it exists, in changed form. Camp Management Committee leaders note that public events and informational meetings about Bhutan have virtually disappeared.<sup>19</sup> The one exception to this is social programming that encourages the youth and the elderly to come together on the last Sunday of every month, where the elderly share their stories about life in Bhutan with the younger generation. While these meetings do not have a political focus, they are a way for the youth to have a connection with Bhutan.<sup>20</sup>

Written informational material continues to be published, although perhaps in lesser amounts. And a canvassing of the refugee-produced printed grey literature in both English and Nepali reveals a shift in the types of publications. The thin, NGO-produced documents of previous years (Basnet & Dhakal, 2001; HRCB, 2003; Penjore, 2007) have for the most part been replaced by longer books, published in both English and Nepali, with the notable assistance of diaspora communities.

These publications, focused on Bhutan, have historical and political emphases. For example, Tek Nath Rizal, perhaps the best known Nepali Bhutanese whose years in a Bhutanese prison have made him a symbol for the abuses of the RGB and who was an Amnesty International Prisoner of Conscience, continues to write prolifically, describing both the harms done to him personally and to other Nepali Bhutanese. While two of his books published in 2009 are currently available in English (2009, 2010), a third is only in Nepali, although assistance is currently being sought from refugees in the diaspora for translation assistance (Rizal, n.d.).<sup>21</sup> Another historically directed publication, outlining the injustice done to the Nepali Bhutanese and urging that repatriation to Bhutan be considered along with resettlement, appears to be a reissue of earlier work (Rai, 2013).

The most notable example of information politics in the resettlement phase is undoubtedly *Bhutan News Service (BNS)*, an online service which has published more than 1,500 articles in English and 180 articles in Nepali since 2009. Its editorial staff is spread throughout the globe, from Adelaide, Australia, to Syracuse, US<sup>22</sup> and its 2012 Annual report thanks donors from a range of diaspora countries, including Australia, the UK, Denmark, Canada, the Netherlands, and the US (Bhutan News Service, 2012). While more *BNS* articles concern resettlement issues than news arising in Bhutan (there are 360 articles under the 'Diaspora' section compared to 130 articles under the 'Nation' section), the site does contain some articles that are clearly meant to provide information about politics and power in Bhutan today.<sup>23</sup> The most prominent example of this is information about Bhutan's National Assembly elections, discussed in the following section.

### *Leverage Politics*

Bhutan's National Assembly Election – which took place in two stages in May and July of 2013 – provided a key point of leverage for refugees to apply pressure to politicians within Bhutan, although this may have more to do with Bhutan's recent emergence as a democracy and less to do with resettlement. Not surprisingly, the foci for pressure for Nepali Bhutanese

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<sup>19</sup> Interviews with refugee camp leaders, N7, N8, N9, July 2013, in Jhapa, Nepal.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with camp leader, N7, July 2013, in Jhapa, Nepal.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Tek Nath Rizal, July 2013, in Kathmandu, Nepal.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.bhutannewsservice.com/about-us/our-team/> [accessed 30 August 2013].

<sup>23</sup> A comprehensive analysis by the author of all of *Bhutan News Service's* articles in both English and Nepali is underway, but was not complete at the time of the publishing of this article.

were issues surrounding citizenship, census and return. For example, one Sydney-based refugee has been sending emails to local contestants in southern districts of Bhutan to urge them to resolve the citizenship issue for Nepali Bhutanese. He noted that “Especially in Southern part there is one more census issues, like, people they have been categorised into different groups, and some category of people, they are not getting all the facilities that a true citizen should get in Bhutan...so these kind of issues can be solved if an MP who is from that region, if he can raise this kind of voice in the Party.”<sup>24</sup>

Another example of leverage politics comes from the former editor of *Bhutan News Service*, T.P. Misra, who used the election as a way to reach out to the outgoing Bhutanese Prime Minister, Jigme Y. Thinley, whose party was victorious in the primary. Through Facebook, T.P. Misra publicly put on the table the refugee issue, forcing a response about a topic that few Bhutanese politicians want to address. In an article for *The Global Post* entitled ‘Bhutan: An exile’s view of the parliamentary elections,’ Misra wrote on 12 July 2013, “A few days after his party’s victory in the primary, I chatted briefly with the outgoing Prime Minister Jigmi Y. Thinley via his Facebook page. Responding to my query about his party’s position on the refugee issue, he said, ‘It is a humanitarian problem that must be resolved in ways that are dignified and durable for the people in the camps’.”

While the months leading up to the election appeared to provide a point of leverage for activists in the diaspora, it is interesting to note that the day after the July elections, three separate interviewees in Nepal did not yet know Bhutan’s election results, calling into question whether physical proximity actually allows faster or immediate access to information from the homeland.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, two Bhutanese refugees based in Scranton, PA, who had the chance to meet US President Barack Obama used the opportunity to give him a 3-point petition that included an exhortation to place pressure on the RGB to consider repatriation. According to *Bhutan News Service*, the refugees delivered the following message to President Obama: “We wish to take this opportunity to request you Mr. President to exercise all available diplomatic measures to urge the government of Bhutan to allow return of all willing Bhutanese refugees in Nepal’s camps and those surviving hardships outside the camps back to Bhutan” (‘Community Leaders meet President Obama, VP Biden,’ 25 August 2013).

One avenue that was formerly used for leverage politics has closed, at least for the time being: international pressure. The prevalence of visits to the UN by Bhutanese activists to promote reform in Bhutan seems to be in decline since resettlement began. First, leaders who have resettled are unlikely to be able to travel to Geneva for UN meetings, because citizenship does not come immediately and refugees must await passports before they travel. “When I get (my passport), the first country I want to travel to is Bhutan, but I don’t think they will let me in,” noted one resettled refugee.<sup>26</sup> This may change within the span of a few short years as resettled activists have access to more resources and the ability to travel. Second, those activists who remain in Nepal are experiencing greater obstacles travelling internationally. Two interviewees in Nepal reported that they were not able to obtain travel documents to leave Nepal, something that in past years, they were able to do.<sup>27</sup> Thus efforts

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with refugee, D4, June 2013, in Sydney, Australia.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with refugees, N10, N11, N12, July 2013, in Kathmandu, Nepal.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with refugee, D5, June 2013, in Sydney, Australia.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with refugees, N10 and N12, July 2013, in Kathmandu, Nepal.

to leverage the influence of third parties are carried out within Nepal, such as sending signed letters to the US and Indian Embassies. One activist representing the Senior Citizens' Committee for Repatriation reported collecting 2,000 signatures for a letter to the US Embassy.<sup>28</sup>

### *Symbolic Politics*

Where activists used to host a range of symbolic activities centred on focusing attention on Bhutan and its expulsive actions, including the walking and bicycle marches referred to earlier, the author could find few recent symbolic activities related to the homeland. True, in numerous diaspora communities, Bhutanese refugees are maintaining cultural and religious traditions, such as celebrations of the holiday Teej in various locations such as Salt Lake City and Norway,<sup>29</sup> or the 7-day retelling of an important Hindu text in the small town of Vadsø in Norway, at a latitude of 70° N. The event was claimed by its organizer, one of 16 resettled families in the town, as the largest Hindu festival ever in the northernmost part of the world (Chautari, 2013). Rather than being focused on Bhutan or politics, however, the focus here is on how resettled communities are using symbolic action to maintain tradition. The one example of symbolic politics came in the form of a 2012 book of poetry written by a Nepali Bhutanese expressing his nostalgic feelings about Bhutan (Dahal, 2012). An article in *Bhutan News Service* explicitly notes that the book was published with the assistance of diaspora refugees living in the US ('Shivalal Dahal's poetry book 'Tursa' released, 5 December 2012).

### *Accountability Politics*

As accountability politics relies on promises made and Conventions signed by the power in question, activists' efforts to utilise this means of pressure will depend to some extent on Bhutan's promises to enact change. An editorial published in the *New York Times* on 29 June 2013 provides an excellent, if telling, example of the way in which accountability politics may be used in the future. The author, Vidhyapati Mishra, writes of his personal experience of exile from Bhutan and the difficulties he and fellow refugees experienced in the past 20 years. In "Bhutan is No Shangri-Law" he argues, "Helping us, though, is not the same as helping our cause: every refugee who is resettled eases the pressure on the Bhutanese government to take responsibility for, and eventually welcome back, the population it displaced.... The international community can no longer turn a blind eye to this calamity. **The United Nations must insist that Bhutan, a member state, honor its convention on refugees, including respecting our right to return**" (author's bold).

This is a powerful call for action, one that references Bhutan's responsibility as a member of the international community. But what is telling about the article is that the author, whom the *New York Times* claims "wrote this essay from the Beldangi II refugee camp," had, by mid-July 2013, already resettled to the United States.<sup>30</sup> This is an indication that at the current time, NCR sources of leadership and experience vis-a-vis homeland politics are being continually depleted and transferred to countries of resettlement, for better for worse.

### The End of Activism or the Beginning of New Opportunities?

Preliminary research on the homeland politics of Nepali Bhutanese indicates that the movement to promote reform in Bhutan continues, although with significant changes in actor

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with refugee, N11, July 2013, in Kathmandu, Nepal.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.bhutannewsservice.com/main-news/resettled-bhutanese-in-australia-celebrate-teej/>;  
<http://www.bhutannewsservice.com/main-news/salt-lake-bhutanese-mark-teej/>;  
<http://www.bhutannewsservice.com/main-news/teej-celebration-kicks-off-in-norway/> [accessed 1 May 2013].

<sup>30</sup> Email correspondence with Vidhyapati Misra, July 2013.

frequency and strategic techniques employed. This points to a movement that is changing in response to changing political structures, both in Bhutan and in the diaspora, and thus most closely resembles the fourth hypothesis posed in this article. Where funding used to come from humanitarian aid organizations (to fund refugee writings, for example), it now comes from the diaspora. Where powerholders in Nepal were once approached to request their assistance in promoting the idea of repatriation, diaspora refugees are now poised to promote the rights of Nepali Bhutanese from their countries of resettlement. And while the frequency of activism among some resettled refugees may have decreased in the short term, the scope of that activism, through *BNS* and other international platforms, has arguably increased its reach to a wider community. It is an assured certainty that the academic scholarship on Bhutanese refugees will increase now that resettled refugees are more easily accessible to researchers on limited budgets and with limited time to travel: the past few years has already seen a litany of articles about Bhutanese refugees' physical and mental health in the country of resettlement (Benson, Sun, Hodge, & Androff, 2012; Mitschke, Aguirre, & Sharma, 2013; Patel, 2012).

It is too early, of course, to measure the effects of homeland politics on the impacts in Bhutan. Will refugees be permitted to return? Are Nepali Bhutanese likely to resolve their citizenship issues quickly? Longitudinal research over the next several years (as this project espouses) will contribute to answering these questions.

### Conclusion

This paper has developed the theoretical framework for hypothesizing the impact of resettlement on homeland politics, and it has relied on field research and secondary data to chart such activism in the NCR pre-resettlement phase of Bhutanese refugeehood. It has suggested that in the pre-resettlement phase, homeland activists used a wide range of strategies to mobilize, and that these varied in frequency and scope.

In the short term, preliminary research of homeland politics in the early years of the resettlement phase of this refugee population suggests that, despite the fears of former activists, homeland politics continues, although in altered form, and, not surprisingly, from an increasing variety of physical locations. While the focus for a great many refugees has shifted to individual problems associated with daily living in the country of resettlement, some homeland issues remain important, and both within Nepal and in the diaspora, a focus on the homeland continues, if moderated by distance and temporal resources. In the medium term, it may be that resettlement facilitates continuing NCR homeland activism, and that the activities that persist change in frequency, scope and character. An influx of resources, and the networks that have emerged internationally as a result of resettlement, suggest that there is still considerable scope for homeland activism. Future field research in Australia and Nepal over the next 5 years will allow the testing of this suggestion.

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