

National advocacy to connect homeland

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We have defined our 'official' identity based on our nationality. We regard ourselves Bhutanese because we have connection with Bhutan. Our heart still beats for Bhutan. We still dream to see Bhutan, visit Bhutan. We not only have left behind our friend, families and relatives but our gems of emotions, memories, properties and sweats. We drained our blood for the prosperity of Bhutan. We set the economic foundation for the country because of which the country is now making such a tremendous progress.

We have pain emitting out of our suffering caused by eviction. We are disgruntled against the rulers of Bhutan for denying our basic human rights. Our dispute is with the rulers, not with the country – the land.

As long as we regard ourselves Bhutanese, our connection with Bhutan must not terminate. We should not only have emotional but physical and economical connection the country. We wish to see and visit our relatives and family members. As we make our economic strength, we would like to invest there.

For our dreams to come true, we should continue dreaming. We should dream with open eyes and we continue our persistent efforts to make this dream come true. Let's envision to travel to Bhutan freely in our generation.

1. Political lobbying

In Australia, we lack political connection. We, definitely, lack connection with Canberra. We have hardly talked to our politicians what we wanted to do and what they should do to help us achieve. To build political connection, it does not necessary need of becoming party members or its followers. It is more to do with our frequency of holding discussion with political leaders and presenting our proposals. It is more to engage the decision makers into our issues and address them appropriately.

Australia and Bhutan hold good bilateral relations for years. Australia is a major donor to Bhutan's development projects and Australia

provides the highest number of scholarship for Bhutanese to pursue higher education. Australia continues to become the favourite destinations for Bhutanese, either for higher studies or migration. More and more Bhutanese, either through Australian or Bhutanese government scholarship or through private means, are travelling to Australia for studies, work and family union.

We must take this positive vibe in our favour. We must persistently lobby the political and bureaucratic circle to put pressure on Bhutan to open door for us to visit and see our relatives. Union of families, parted by the eviction in 1990, must not only take place in Australia but in Bhutan too.

The association shall engage with the highest circle of political and bureaucratic decision makers to engage them finding means to open Bhutan's doors for resettled folks to travel to Bhutan and meet their relatives. This is universal human rights and Australia must uphold this rights and push Bhutan to abide by these humane principles.

Many of our friends and families back in refugee camps still aspire to return Bhutan. Our engagement with Australian government should also focus on holding dialogue with Bhutan to ensure these aspirants are given chance to see Bhutan.

Lobbying at the regional, state and federal level is necessary. The association shall leverage all options for the lobby.

2. Connection for social justice

We assume, Bhutan government will not accept or tolerate any form of investments – for profit or not for profit – we intend to make in Bhutan. We haven't tested it yet. We assume, Bhutan will not accept our application for travel as a tourist. We haven't tried yet, at least from here in Australia. Our assumptions are based on our experiences as Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. We tend not to like the being called 'Bhutanese Refugee' any more yet we continue to accept ourselves within that circle, at least when it comes to connection with Bhutan. Even if we accept our individual or direct investments are unacceptable in Bhutan, we have looked at the alternatives. We have remained within the four walls.

A lot of Australian not-for-profit organisation work, directly or indirectly, in Bhutan. There are individual Australian too, who have endeavoured their time and energy towards maturing Bhutanese Australia relations and enrich Bhutanese progress and prosperity. So far, we have hardly met with these individuals and organisations and expressed our interest to serve.

We must spare energy to engage with these individuals and organisations and make efforts to contribute for Bhutan's progress. Our engagement with Bhutan through these not-for-profit institutions, with no political motives, may possibly open doors for us to travel to Bhutan, see our friends and families and make investments. Additionally we would be able to contribute productively to the progress and prosperity of the Bhutanese society and retain our Bhutanese-Diaspora identity.

The association shall also work at the connecting people to people contacts that will engage the local community through academic works.

3. Sponsoring our relatives for studies and work in Australia

Higher education in Bhutan is rare and expensive. There are limited seats in the government and private colleges for higher education. Every year when Class X examinations are published, government sets cut off point for students to get college enrolment. Those under the enrolment have to either find cheap colleges in India or look for low-paid job. Those who have influence avail foreign scholarship while those who can afford go themselves.

However, large number of Bhutanese whose income is not good cannot afford to help their children pursue higher education. They come most from the rural community, economically marginalised and socially deprived. Failure to provide children with higher education means the family continue to run the circle of poverty and backwardness.

The association should make every effort to find alternative help and sponsor these students to travel to Australia to pursue their university education dreams. This will be the biggest contribution we can bring any changes to the life of economically and socially marginalised communities and to enlighten them about real human rights, democratic values and individual liberties.

We can work in collaboration with the employers here to provide seasonal employment opportunities to people from Bhutan. That will open doors for people to people contact. This will erase the negative taboos that people in Bhutan have about us. Lets be generous with them as we move a step to reconciliation.

4. Economic, social and moral support to those from Bhutan who advocate for family connection

Family connection is fundamental to the wellbeing of an individual. Voice of many in Bhutan, who seek to connect with their families in resettled countries, curtailed. There are reported instances where local government officials and elected local government representatives indiscriminately target individuals who maintain relations with their relatives and friends abroad. There are instances where individuals, who meet their 'refugee' relatives, economically blackmailed, threatened of jail sentences on charges of sedition and treason.

The association shall work towards providing economic, moral and social support to those from Bhutan who advocate for rebuilding and reconnecting with their family and relatives in Diaspora. These advocates would be vital in putting pressure on political parties in the Bhutanese parliament to make policy changes allowing us to revisit Bhutan and see our families and relatives.

5. Economic connection

Our journey towards economic prosperity is marching steadily. Our desire for investments that gives us profits as well as satisfaction is growing. As we develop entrepreneurship, Bhutan could one of the ideal destinations for us to make investments. We have passion, enthusiasm and emotions attached to the economic and social prosperity of the country we were born in.

With no political intentions, it's time that we start searching avenues to divert our investments to Bhutan. We should be able to convey message to the government of Bhutan that our engagement in Bhutan will not only boosts the social wellbeing through family connection but also provides economic benefits for Bhutan. In addition, this will further enhances the bilateral relations between Bhutan and Australia.

6. Special humanitarian program for those in camp, not resettled

The settlement process has come to conclusion. There are over 7,000 our countrymen still lingering in Nepal with hopes to get repatriated. They have rejected the offer of bigger dreams, brighter future and wider hopes but maintained the pure love and affection with the country they were born in. We must salute their endeavour and dedication towards respectful repatriation.

The association shall endeavour its utmost capacity to work for a respectful solution for those willing to repatriate. The association shall stand firm in its support that governments of Nepal and Bhutan must agree to provide safe passage for this small population return to their country. UNHCR must work with the countries who offered settlement of the last refugee population and India through diplomatic channels

to ensure Bhutan abide by its commitments to repatriate the remaining exiled Bhutanese.

This repatriation will facilitate deeper connection between Bhutan and its Diaspora.