

Retaining Identity

Paper Prepared by: Indra Adhikari

With inputs by Tejman Rayaka, Pralhad Dahal and other participants of the Australian Bhutanese Conference

Identity does not necessarily mean ethnicity. It defines a person's heritage, culture, values and language. It can include an individual or a big mass of individuals. A person's identity is defined by the common identity of the community in which he/she was born. Here we are talking about a common identity.

Resettlement has given us opportunity to shine – cherish the past and build the future. But also has posed challenges to remain 'ourselves'. We have already observed the abrupt changes in the way we celebrate our festivals and the language we speak. Do we really care about 'ourselves'? We must accept the necessary changes coming into our social and cultural values but it must not become so dominant that it erases our identity of who we are.

In the latest census, many of us have been counted as Nepalese not Bhutanese. Of course, we will have linguistic connection with Nepal, but we must not disconnect from Bhutan.

Ensuring that we remain who we are is important.

1. Language & music schools

Nepali language is the common identity for us. It is the lingua franca that connects our own mini cultural community. On top of Nepali language, we have multiple dialects gradually eroding from us. While we joyfully promote the principles laid down by human rights instruments that an individual has the right to get education in his/her language at home, we are systematically failing to inculcate new generation even to speak our language. This is a serious issue every parent must think twice.

A few states have already initiated such schools. They have benefited the community members enormously. The Nepali language classes have opened doors, ironically, for communication between the grandchildren and grandparents.

The association shall work with the member-organisations to establish at least one Nepali language ethnic schools in every state. The association shall work towards educating our younger generation about our language, culture, and social values. Nepali language schools are important medium to impart language classes to the children. They lay an important role in ensuring that younger generation do not loose their connection with Nepali

language. Additionally, the association shall endeavour to teach other dialects of our community to our youngsters – by encouraging the grandparents and parents to introduce such dialects to children at home.

Such schools may also be introduced with our musical instruments and dances. Volunteers shall be sought to contribute their time to teach young children to play our musical instruments and dance. The association, in coordination with the member organisations, shall make efforts to provide support with the musical instruments and other facilities to run the schools.

2. Media

Media plays very crucial role in promoting us. In Australia the mainstream media poorly covers multiculturalism. Hardly anyone here knows who Bhutanese are, forget about our culture. We have not adequately made our presence strong – as we wish to have.

We don't have a strong community media fraternity. Bhutanese community in Australia has only one regular radio program. Easy access to social media and smart phones gives people for regular connection with community members and get updated what's happening. However, with the increasing trend, as presented by quality researches, the fake news and information circulating through social media can become misleading agent for community members. The radio is the only media that shares current information in a holistic way and reaches everyone in one format. Radio Pahichan has been helping disseminate community information, discuss community problems, seeks solutions and link community members with the service providers.

The association shall work to expand this Radio project nationally and promote the sense of belonging in the community towards this radio. The association shall encourage the member-organisations to contribute toward promoting and expanding the radio reach to all community members.

The radio is very effective media to engage the elderly generation and provide answers to many of their unanswered questions. The radio shall also play the other role of sharing stories of our senior community members with young people – the story of inspirations, difficulties, challenges and hopes.

3. Cultural festivals

The best feature of our community is festivals. Traditionally, we celebrate festivals every month. It could be the family initiative or community initiatives. The busy working schedules have altered the way we celebrate our festivals and enjoy our culture.

These festivals manifest our identity. We must continue celebrating. We must find alternative to seek off time from our working life to celebrate these festivals and keep them alive. Keeping them vibrant and lively not only

enriches our life but also prospers the multiculturalism in Australia. Our children, grand children and their generations to come will certainly enjoy the vastness and virtues. Our cultural festivals teach us the philosophy of commonness, unity in diversity, respect, harmony, friendship and fraternity.

The association shall work in tandem to celebrate these cultural festivals and ensure their continuity. The association shall seek appropriate means to transfer the cultural knowledge to the younger generation that are of their interest such as cultural fashion show.

4. Documentation and story collection

One thing we lacked throughout our democratic struggle is documentation. We hardly documented our eviction, our struggle in camps and our success stories in resettled countries. We have hardly told our history to our young generation – other than what was taught in camps' school curriculum.

History lessons, of our Bhutanese ancestry, is told more effectively with new technologies that are closer with the generation. Our traditional ways of oral lessons are ineffective.

Documenting history has already begun in South Australia. The association, in coordination with the member-organisation, shall help expand this noble initiative to other states in order to collect stories of struggle, contributions to national building and sad stories of eviction – told through our older generation.

The documentation shall be in any form – text, audio, audio-visual. This documentation will form the foundation for our generation to learn about our history, culture and identity.