

Bicycle Culture in the Bhutanese Refugee Camps

Tara Lal Shrestha^{1*}

¹Lecturer, Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University

*Corresponding Author: shresthatara@gmail.com

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Abstract: *This paper through qualitative research method documents stories of bicycle history in the Bhutanese refugee camps in eastern Nepal – the stories of the seven refugee camps – that remains in retrospections of the Bhutanese diaspora (in the countries of resettlement) more alive than in the camp. As an unofficial model of bicycle culture, the pre-third country resettlement period is examined through the aesthetics of bicycle commuting for cause in the post-third country resettlement context, when bicycling in the refugee camp is in the verge of extinction. Studying the grey literature, including the visual texts, this paper also attempts to draw the attention of the Bhutanese community, who experienced the aesthetics of bicycling then is mostly indulged in car culture in the countries they have resettled. Finally, this article presents some evidences of insights into how the Bhutanese community from the resettled countries can contribute to the bicycle culture and there are some rays of hope. The finding of this research helps to affirm bicycle activism in order to establish a sustainable bicycle culture.*

Keywords: Bicycle culture, bicycle stories, Bhutanese refugee, resettlement, retrospection

1. Introduction

Some people may take bicycle just as a human invention from its utilitarian aspect - simply a means of transport. For others, it may be a means of recreational activities, sports, and adventure. Apart from fun riders, for a larger group of people, bicycle is an integral part of their daily life related to their livelihood. For them, bicycle is an aesthetic as well as utilitarian object. It is also a source of their personal autonomy, the best means of their mobility. A bicycle can connect politico-cultural, psychosocial and economic aesthetics of human life. So, a lot of artifacts use bicycle as an aesthetic object.

There is a good relation of bicycle with an aesthetic artifact, bicycle as a subject of imagination, which appeared through a sketch drawing in notebooks of Da Vinci's students, "walking machine" and it came to be a reality with the invention of bicycle. It changed the lifestyle of people (Angelovski, 2016). During the golden age of cycling at the end of the nineteenth century in cities such as New York, London, and Paris "men smoked fewer cigars, wore cheaper suits...as a result of bicycle craze" (Williams, 2004, p. 293). The omnipresence of the bicycle in the individual and collective experience allows from everyday life into the sphere of the imagination. It manifested from Picasso's art to the inspiration for music world, where many artists have taken cycling as a music always going forward, a free energy. Similarly, cycling is more aesthetically used in all sorts of texts- from aesthetics to actions (Angelovski, 2016, p. 233).

In 2007, this author visited Bhutanese refugee camps in eastern Nepal during the Dashain festival.¹ A marvelous model of bicycle culture existed then in the camps. It was wonderful to observe such a huge number of refugees around the uncountable bamboo huts rushing here and there on bicycles. Early in the morning and late in the evening, a long caravan of ordinary bicycles was seen to be going out and coming back to the refugee camps, particularly on the way from Beldangi camps to Damak. They looked like a long march of ants from a distance. In the carriages of most of the bicycles "would have a *batuka*- ordinary bowl as their tiffin box" (Shrestha, 2012, p. 68). They would ride bicycle with cause, not for fun. The mass cycling to work scenes are briefly covered in the novel *Sapanako Samadhi*

(Requital of the Dream). Reflection on the bicycling culture of the refugee camps now gives us a nostalgic feeling. This author has lots of memories of bicycle riding in the camps.

This article attempts primarily to locate the bicycle culture of Bhutanese refugee camps in the pre-resettlement era through grey literature. Secondly, the bicycle culture reflected in representative texts is analyzed from the perspective of eclectic aestheticism of bicycling in the current context. The last section produces some insights into how the vanishing history of bicycle culture in the camps could connect the stories of refugee history and how the resettled Bhutanese community can contribute to global bicycle activism.

1.1 Bicycle culture in the camps

Nepal is poor in formal bicycle infrastructures. But a rich unofficial bicycle culture within and outside the Bhutanese refugee camps in eastern Nepal was at the core of everyday life despite having no bicycle infrastructures, i.e. lanes, stands, tracks- nor were any campaigning or functions related to safety guidelines and rights of bicycle users. Roads, tracks and paths always had a large number of bicycle riders and it looked as if a big bicycle rally was going on and they would soon disperse into village yards in the morning and into camps in the evening. Everyone for all purposes would use bicycles. Riding bicycles with cause, not for fun, was one of the most beautiful parts of the bicycling history in the camps. However, it is hard to trace back how the bicycle culture evolved and who steered its expansion.

It is believed that Shur Samser Jung Bahadur Rana introduced the first bicycle in Nepal in 1910, after 100 years of its invention. When the East India Company brought 35,000 bicycles to India from the United Kingdom, few of them are believed to have arrived in Nepal (Ulak, 2022). At that juncture, some bicycle might have reached to Bhutan. King Tribhuvan and his bodyguards used to ride bicycle in Kathmandu. First-generation democratic leaders and other elites in Nepal used bicycle with pride then. Gradually bicycles became common among people.

Key commercial hubs in Southern Bhutan such as Sibsoo, Samchi, Phuentsholing, Gelephu, Samdrup Jongkhar are connected to the plains of India. These hubs host distillery, juice, food, and fruit processing factories where people used bicycles for daily commuting. Those who were forced to leave the country early may not, but those leaving later might have carried out some of their bicycles to the camps in eastern Nepal. They first took shelter in different parts of India. Bicycling in India was the key means of transportation then (Gazemere, 2022 & Subba, 2022). People from Chirang and Dagapela had no easy access for bicycling due to hard geological terrains; but they began to use bicycles in the camps. Masons' works in surrounding villages were primary income sources. The first payments they received were invested on bicycles. Bicycles helped them to buy bicycles. Bicycles earned bicycles. Jogen Gazmere received some money for an interview with BBC was invested in buying a second hand bicycle. He said, "I lived in the camp and had to go out frequently; I bought an old bicycle" (Gazemere, 2022).

Each individual has individual as well as collective bicycle memory. Gauri Shankar Niroula from Australia recalls the days when few Lhotshampas could ride bicycles in Bhutan. In 1989, front-line activists fled the country after key figures of their community were arrested and tortured. The first 91 displaced who arrived at Maidhar riverbank in Nepal in February 1991 had no bicycle with them.ⁱⁱ By late 1991, people began to leave the country in mass and bicycles appeared in the camps. The likelihood of bicycle entering the refugee camps would be by someone from Samdrup Jongkhar district when large number of citizens from this district arrived Maidhar following the raid of their camp in Assam by the Indian police. L B Rai came from Nichula in Sarbhong district - the place without of access of motors. His friend Chadra Man Subba had a new *Hero Ranzor* bicycle, which was taken over by royal Bhutan army. Rai and Subba might have paddled bicycles first time in Maidhar.

They lived in Maidhar until 1992 (Niroula, 2022). Subba took a good ride in Maidhar the old bicycle his one of the brothers brought from Bhutan but he is not sure whether he was the first to ride in the refugee camp.ⁱⁱⁱ Thak Bhahadur Thapa from Canada recalls the day when Pemba Sherpa was selected as president of Youth Organisation of Bhutan (YOB) by the meeting organized next to Krishna temple in Maidhar and since the next day he saw Sherpa rushing with bicycle.^{iv}

When organised camps were set up with support from the international community, bicycle culture was already a boom. Most of the bicycles were bought from Naxalbadi (west Bengal, India), where they were cheaper compared to prices in Birtamode or Damak in Nepal.^v Frequent visits by relatives left back in Bhutan and regular transport strike in Nepal means bicycle emerged as the most viable alternative to transport from refugees travelling from the camps to Nepal border to ferry their relatives. Many refugees sent their children to study in Sikkim, Kalimpong, Siliguri and Darjeeling, crossing Nepal border. Bicycles helped them earn better.

The bicycle culture was not limited to a section of the refugee community – men, women^{vi}, children, professionals, politicians, teachers or labourers, all used bicycles. Younger kids would go half-ride. If not fit the size, they would use bicycle through half-paddling. There was a person, Niroula recalls, who would earn per day NRs. 25 by the help of his bicycle and contribute NRs. 5 to the needy family each day. The remaining 20 rupees would be his revenue for his family members. He says, “The *batuka* containing rice on the bicycle carriage is a huge symbol of our history of struggle as refugees fearful with the locals.”^{vii} Many times, there were disputes and the locals would take their bicycles away. At one stage, the bicycle users in the camps had to register their vehicle with the camp authority and receive a number plate as a symbol to recognize that bicycle belonged to a particular refugee.

There were uncountable tiny shops within the camps (called *dule dokaan* in Nepali). People would ride bicycle to Naxalbadi through Kakadbhitta for shopping, 8-10 hours ride for a return journey from Beldangi. Feared being arrested in the border, they generally would avoid using main highway. Petty businessmen used bicycles to ferry goods from Naxalbari to the camps for sale. Many camp residents told this author that bicycles were extensively searched during the height of Maoist insurgencies in Nepal on suspicion they carried explosives.^{viii} One bicycle would carry at most 100 kgs of goods on top of the rider.

There were thousands of teachers and students from the camps who would use bicycles every day. Daily wage workers had bicycles. Those who were involved in various organizations and institutions were rushing with bicycle. The bicycles earned some money and with that money they bought a bicycle. There were a lot of door-to-door vendors inside the camps. Milk and yogurt (curd) would be carried from fringe villages to the camps for sale. In the camps milk was carried from the outside local communities on bicycles in such a huge quantity and sold every day that children would say, ‘bicycle gives us milk.’^{ix} Camps goods were sold outside. Indian markets were economically linked to the camps. The mothers and grandmothers would carry load by bicycles. Grandmothers were not able to ride but they could drag goods home on bicycle. Sick ones were carried to the health post by bicycle.

In the later days, when black & white TV sets became popular in the camps during the Football World Cup, powered by heavy motor batteries, bicycles helped ferrying these batteries for recharging – from camp to Damak and Birtamode. While public transport was not reliable, bicycles gave life to camp life and its economy. The local Bangay market had thrived well on the bicycle repairing business.

1.2 Bicycles in grey literature

The film *Desh Khojdai Janda* (In Search of a Nation) directed by Prakash Angdembe released in 2015 foregrounds the history of Bhutanese refugees. The movie captures the core

lifestyle of the Bhutanese refugees during the conflicting time of resettlement. There was resistance for and against the resettlement from the camp people. The struggle for repatriation was weakening.



Figure 1 Thousands of Bhutanese refugees would go out of the camps early in the morning and return to their huts in the evening through bicycles before they left Nepal for third country resettlement 5:14-6:30



The bicycle scenes continue while the movie narrates the history of Nepali migration to Bhutan, forcible eviction in the 1990s and sketches of the early 1990s Jigme Singye Wangchuk and Dago Tshering enforcing ethnic cleansing in Bhutan. It also captures the imagined drawing of how Nepali books and documents were burnt. Nepali culture and language were banned. The ‘One Nation One People’ policy was enforced (0:25-3:21). The beginning of the movie with the bicycling and narrating the history before is impressive. Various documents, including oral histories, show that southerners’ voices were suppressed with military might. The sketches also capture the history of how persecution followed with torture, killing, rape, and extortion in the south, where schools, hospitals, and other civic services were shut down. The photos were taken with forced smiles as government evidence

proving southerners left Bhutan of their own free will (3:22-4:36). The bicycle scene presents how the history of the Lhotshampas intricately loyalty to the Bhutanese nationhood and why they were forced to leave the country.



Figure 2 A scene along with a bicycle scene tells the history of the citizens leaving Bhutan in the movie – 4:22-4:25.

The plot of the movie begins with a narration of a bicycle rider, Karbari (assistant to village headman in Bhutanese local government), who uses a bicycle every day to work and keeps his bicycle carefully inside his narrow bamboo hut at night. While other Nepalese movies feature cars, this movie has extensively used the bicycles to portray the real bicycle culture in the camp. The protagonist of the movie, even though it is Deepawali (the biggest Hindu festival), goes to work in a construction site as a mason. The third-country resettlement issue is at the center disintegrating friends and family and community. There are various scenes in the movie that captures massive bicycle use for utility purposes. Conducting meetings by organisations, preparing materials for demonstrations, carrying people - bicycles are everywhere. The subaltern activists, who have no agency to exist and speak to establish their demand, carry on their meeting in action. They conduct a meeting and discuss important political agendas while bicycling to work. They keep on their meeting and make plans of peace march to Bhutan by riding bicycles. They discuss their issues, express their anger, and set the agendas while riding bicycle collectively.





The song “Chhati ma Lageko” by Swaroop Acharya narrates the story of eviction with words, “When I was in the womb, my mother ate clay of my motherland; I also ate that very mud; that might be the reason I love my country so much” (0:23-0:28). The song begins with a scene where a mass of people is bicycling in a rush – coming in and going out of the camps- and the lyrics go:

छातीमा लागेको माटो त आँसुले धोइ पखाल्छु (The clay dust of my chest I clean with my tears)

मुटुमा लागेको माटोलाई कसरी मैले पखाल्नु (How could I clean the clay of my heart?)

जन्मिदा लागेको माटो त मरेर भोली पखाल्छु (The clay of birth time I clean when I die tomorrow)

नजन्मी लागेको माटोलाई कसरी मैले पखाल्नु (How could I clean the clay of before birth)

शिरमा लागेको माटोलाई कुनै दिन आकाशले पखाल्ला (The clay of my head the sky cleans someday)

पाउमा लागेको माटोलाई बाटोको शितले पखाल्ला (The clay of my feet dew will clean)

मनमा लागेको माटोलाई कसरी मैले पखाल्नु (How do I clean the clay of my heart?)

The movements back and forth with bicycle riders move in and out of the camps. The protagonist represents his community- all riding bicycles as if a big rally is going on. Such a fragment, not grand narratives, beyond the elitist history of capitalist consumerist culture, is preserving the value to this precious aesthetics of bicycle culture of the camps by rewriting it. More people might wish to revisit those days in the future through artistic representations.

The short musical movie *Sang Sangai Kanchhi* by Jeevan Baral captures bicycle stories within and outside refugee camps. The cast of Dayahang Rai and Nagma Shrestha with bicycles tells a lot about the Bhutanese refugee histories. More importantly, it silently tells the vanishing history of bicycle culture around the camps (Giri, 2022).^x



Figure 2 The bicycle aside – the priest yells loud cursing the pig and the pig owner- 0:58-1:02

The movie narrates how each day begins with bicycles in and out of the refugee camps. Nagma (Kanchhi) goes out of her home with a bicycle. A *doko* (bamboo basket) is tied on it. Dayahang as a refugee teacher with bicycle meets her on the way. Her bicycle gets punctured; he helps carrying her *doko* on his bicycle. A boy on a motorbike offers her a lift, but she chooses his bicycle. They travel together on bicycles. Bicycles provide them a sense of freedom to move away, meet in secluded areas and spend quality time without interference. He plans to resettle to the US and requests her to come to Damak. Bicycles are their means of commuting in all kinds of trips. Little kids are playing with bicycles- bicycle parts, tyres, and rings. The school ground is filled with bicycles. Almost all teachers and students have bicycle. Everyday, he takes clay *tika* brought from Bhutan, where he was born and goes out with his bicycle. It was a typical life style of the pre-resettlement camps.



Figure 3 (His Amu is putting the *tika* of the mud brought from Bhutan saying ‘your Papa has sacrificed his life for this mud in Bhutan’ – 5:36-5:38)

The law did not allow the refugees to work outside the camp. The matrimony and relations between refugees and locals were hardly accepted. Casteism was/is highly practiced within and outside the refugee camps. Their relationship could not be accepted despite the fact that they both were teachers, the educated persons. The motorbike boy makes a plot to expose their relationship as an issue in the school. By taking help of her priest father, the motorbike boy is successful to provoke the issue that the refugees are prohibited to work as they minimize the local’s opportunity. In the school a poster was put with a slogan, “Bhotaange in our school taught, local’s opportunity lost.” *Bhotaange* is a derogatory term to address Bhutanese refugees among the locals. He has no option than drive back home on his bicycle.



Figure 4 (The two antagonist characters, the priest as her father and the motorbike boy as one side lover appear in the school with a plot to make him resign- 6:09-6:11).



The scene coming out of the school with his bicycle after resignation back to his hut through her house is sad and sentimental. He stops his bicycle for a while in front of her house and looks at her windows. Bicycle has a therapeutic essence to them. Then he looks busy with decorating a small model house. He heals his trauma through the beautification of a model house at the camp. The background music with sweet lyrics moves on:

तिमीलाई पाएँ जीन्दगी मेरो (If I get you in my life)

खुशीले सधैं रमाउला (I'll enjoy all my life)

ठेसलागे पाइला साहरा तिमी (In case I stumble and fall)

तिम्रै हात नै समाउला (I shall catch your hands)

मर्दको जात गर्दै न घात (The clan of men deceives no one)

तिमीलाई लाने गरिसके आँट नै (No deceive, take you away)

सँगसँगै कान्छी जीन्दगी काटौंला (Pass our life together)

सुख र दुःख आपसमा साटौंला (Share pains and joys together)

The more he contemplates beautifying the model house, the more he recalls her and the moments he spent with her through autonomous bicycle riding. The day to leaving the camp was approaching near. The International Office of Migration (IOM) bus was waiting for the refugees to ferry up to the airport, then Kathmandu and the USA or Europe. Kanchhi could do nothing to bring back those moments spent bicycling together with him. She could neither stop him, get married and live a dignified life within the caste-based Hindu society nor could she go to third country with him.

Kanchhi looks at him from a distance while he was marching towards the IOM bus. He turns away from the bus and marches towards Kanchhi with his Amu, takes out the mud from Bhutan and put it on Kanchhi's parting. They got married in the open theatre-like scenario; the motorbike boy is helpless. The short musical movie ends with the words, "Love and relationship cannot be refugee."



Figure 5 Gifting a model house while leaving the camp to his beloved Kanchhi with a promise of living together at the end – 8:06-8:12

He gifts her a model home as many Bhutanese refugees left their bicycles to their best ones. Some sold them at half price to the locals as this author bought a used bicycle from Khudunabari Refugee Camp and preserved it in Kirtipur, Kathmandu. Thousands of bicycles of the camps dispersed and disappeared. This author is using the camp bicycle in Kathmandu

in daily commuting. In the university the bicycle helps connect youth with vanishing history of the refugee camps. Unexpected people get connected within the bicycle culture of eastern Nepal refugee camps. Nirmala Limbu Sherpa, while cooking, often talks about increasing trends of bicycle culture in Kathmandu. Every off day, a long line of cyclists coming to Kirtipur takes her youthful days in Jhapa, Surunga and she unfolds her memories of bicycle culture within and outside the refugee camps, “One after another Bhutanese refugees would die then; they shifted from Maidhar riversides to better camps and then they began to use bicycles for all purposes like my father. They used bicycles to work, to go to the jungle, and to do everything.”^{xi} Like her, Bhakta Bdr Tamang, a local next to Timai camp, recalled some remarkable memories related to bicycle and Bhutanese community:

A tailor of about 45 got the date to the US. A few days were left to fly. He was found dead on the way to Naxalbadi with his bicycle near Magurmadi by a monastery. Those were the days when in front a baby seat would be the baby. The man would be in the driving seat. At the back would be his wife. Bicycling looked beautiful. The scene is still alive in our eyes. In each festivals and functions, Bhutanese people would move on by bicycles.

Tamang also recalls hundreds of kilograms of nuts being carried by bicycle up to Water Tank and Naxalbadi. Even some big bags were used to carry goats and pigs at the back and front on the bicycle. All goods were exchanged and sold on bicycles. There would be weekly bazaars in Dhulabari on Tuesdays and Sanisshare on Saturdays. Lots of goods were carried away from each corner of the villages on bicycles. Bicycles would be hardly empty. Even during snakebite, they would put the victim on the bicycle and rush to Char-Aali Army Camp; when black cobra would bite, bicycle tube would be used to tie the muscle and block the blood and rush. A bicycle ambulance would help save many people.^{xii}

Parts of the bicycles were effectively reused. For instance, refugees with disabilities in the camps would get engaged in various income-generating activities. As Deepesh Das Shrestha (2020) shows, “One of them was making traditional stools (*muda*) using bamboo sticks, colorful nylon threads and used bicycle tyres (Shrestha, 2020).



Figure 6 Hard at work, older refugees with disabilities make bamboo chairs using local materials in Beldangi settlement in Nepal, photo by Deepesh Das Shrestha

The saga of bicycle culture in the camps is diverse and multi-dimensional. Though the bicycle history of the camps is short-lived, there are many stories alive. The strings of bicycles extend to a lot of aspects of the Bhutanese community.

1.3 Bicycle in activism

It is revealed that most probably, the activism history of Maidhar began with a bicycle. Few pieces available visual and literary texts prove that bicycle was the wheel of life in the camps in the pre-third country settlement period. The bicycles were used as one of the key means of transport then.

Apart from mass memories, each document or text associated with the stories of Bhutanese refugee history captures bicycle of the camps. Govinda Rizal's *A Pardesi in Paradise* connects Bhutan, India and Nepal through his bicycle experience. While in Bhutan, he loosened the valve of a bicycle tyre with his friend Damber Khadka and had to pay a fine of Nu 20 (Rizal, 2018). When he came to Nepal, in his words, Nepal is as "a paradise of freedom" (p. 155), there were seven camps- three in Beldangi, one each in Goldhap, Pathri, Timai and Khudunabari, and each camp was divided into sectors and each sector into sub-sectors and there were about one hundred huts in each sub-sectors. People visit various places on bicycle (p. 158). Rezal recalls the use of bicycle by peace marchers of Appeal Movement Coordination Council:

In the evening, I received a message to leave the camp and move to Jaigoan to enter Phuntsholing Bhutan on the following morning. I assembled the people, asked them to choose either to walk all the night through the dense forest to reach the border in the morning or stay until morning and take the local vehicle.... The earlier group had walked ahead. We could not catch them in the dark. We returned to the village and asked Sukdev's nephew to arrange two bicycles. He rode one bicycle and guided us, and Khadananda Koirala carried me on another bicycle. We tried all the night to catch the team. We searched the forest and tea garden. We could not meet our team. In the morning we reached Kalchini Camp. Some of our people there had just woken up. They were preparing tea. We drank tea, left the bicycles there, took a local bus and went to Jaigoan. (p 311-12)

People used bicycles while collecting mutthidan (a feastful of donated rice). Evidence show, since the beginning when they stayed first in Timai (not well recognized first, who did not like to identify as refugees) and then Maidhar with Bhutanese refugee identity, bicycles appeared as an unavoidable wheel of life. Activists rushed for meeting people and fetching foods and goods to the camps on bicycles.

In 1996 a group of activists from camps organized a bicycle rally in Jaigaon – border Indian town to Phuentsholing. Initiated jointly by Democratic Youth of Bhutan, Student Union of Bhutan and Youth Organisation of Bhutan - some 200 youths had volunteered to paddle from camp to Bhutan. The objective was to seek attention on the five-year-old crisis and for repatriation of the evicted citizens. However, they were arrested by Indian security forces while on their way to Bhutan and dumped back (UCA, 1996). The refugees setting out from towns in the strip of Indian territory between Nepal and Bhutan to a planned mass rally at the India-Bhutan border were quickly arrested by Indian security forces and they were deported to Nepal. All the activists surrendered and returned to Nepal with the commitment that they would not do any such activities in India in future. In the views of some activists, this group was actually trying to superimpose the peace march to Bhutan and when the peace march was ready, they rushed earlier, surrendered and returned (Ghimire, 2022). However, few of them used alternative routes and reached near Jaigaon to continue the bicycle rally. They were arrested, and the bicycles were damped in the Kharibari police station (Giri, 2022).

There are various facts and figures regarding the bicycle rally event and participants. Bishwonath Chhetri said they had planned to enter Bhutan after Jaigaon by bicycle. A total of 151 bicycle activists were ready for this. According to Chhetri, these activists were keen bicycle users in the camps. The security forces arrested them before they could execute their plan to split into three groups for separate cycle rallies. Many bicycles were damaged and, in the words of Chhetri, they faced challenges to repair and replace the damaged bicycles. Some of them got lost.^{xiii}

There are multiple views about what happened after the bicycle rally failed after the activists surrendered in India. Bhakta Ghimire recalls about 300 people with bicycles returning to the camps from the rally. He said, "It was not a big deal for a few hundred cyclists participating in the rally from a population of well over 130,000 refugees." But Chhetri says, in fact only 151 cyclists were enlisted officially for the rally. Ghimire further recalls those days on Maidhar riverside, where a Bastola family often used to ride bicycle with other dozen people. It was tough to preserve a bicycle then. Most of the time the bicycle owner would panic when neighbors or relatives came to borrow the bicycle. Then bicycles increased high, almost each family having 2-3 bicycles. Ghimire calculates:

There were about 43 thousands huts in the camps. In the camps 113,000 were registered and were 17,000 plus non-registered also lived in the camps; around 30,000 Bhutanese were living outside the camps and almost same number Bhutanese were in India, who would visit the camps frequently. About 15,000 Bhutanese were teaching in various schools; among them, some were registered and some were not. The bicycles were the only means of mobility for all these groups of these people. It was not a big deal to have a few hundred in bicycle rally. (Ghimire, 2022)

Unfortunately, the bicycle rally could not be a model of resistance in Bhutanese refugee history. The population of the participants as well in the bicycle rally looked low, where tens of thousands of bicycles were in a single refugee camp. Ghimire recalls those days when KP Sharma Oli would appear in political marches and mass meetings. Bhutanese refugees had a good attachment with Oli and other political leaders then and sometimes thousands of people from the camps would participate in political programs by bicycle. Ghimire remembers politician Padma Sundar Lawoti had organized a program in Charpani, where 4,731 bicycles were arrested from the program, and it became a big issue then. According to the rule, refugees were not allowed to go out of the camps to participate political programs, nor could they go out and work formally. Hundreds of bicycles would be caught time and again by the local people/authorities.^{xiv}

1.4 Bicycle culture in retrospection

None of the individuals this author contacted could trace down the origin of bicycle culture in the camps. But everyone agreed that there were multiple bicycles in each refugee hut at the height of its popularity. Karki and Niroula (2022) are two activists who escorted the most vulnerable displaced 91 people and settled in the Maidhar riverside. However, they are unable to recall who introduced the bicycle in the camp first, but they remember a mass of people rushing by bicycles. Karki rather recalls the days when he had to wait long hours to repair the bicycle in the camp. "We had 5 bicycles in our hut and whoever got up earlier, would use the best bicycle," he enjoys recalling those days of camp life.^{xv} All people would keep the bicycle inside the narrow hut for security purpose become nostalgic of bicycle culture in the camps in the countries where they have been resettled. The context in resettlement world is quite different. Most of the cities have good bicycle infrastructures. The Netherland bicycle culture is worldwide recognized. However, bicycling among Bhutanese community member looks rare. Nor the documentation of history is noteworthy. Niroula searched the first bicycle man of the camp for weeks and failed to get the fact.

Nevertheless, the bicycle culture of the camp found alive vivid in the individual and mass memory. Bhutanese diaspora recalls bicycle culture from eight countries. Pratap Subba from the US recalls Kancha Rai in Sarbhang, who was very popular for bicycling in Bhutan as well as in Nepal. People would know him with the nickname Bachana Kanchha, whose bicycle passion was unique. People would even know his family as ‘bicycle family.’ One could never see him without a bicycle (Subba, 2022). Thousands of common people liked him to have taken bicycles as part of their lives in the camps. But those bicycles of the camps were left aside when they chose the third-country resettlement program. They gave their bicycles to their relatives, friends or sold them at cheap prices. They resettled in the car-crazy countries. The resettled community appears to have forgotten their bicycle culture. The place changed their personality significantly. Gazmere from Australia says that the bicycle aesthetics of the refugee camps have been transformed significantly. One family has multiple cars in the resettled country now. Tara Niroula from the United Kingdom said, “Things have been changed a lot after resettlement.” Bicycle users are rare in the resettled world. “I do have three cars in my home here in UK, you see,” Niroula said with a sense of pride.^{xvi} When I called Gauri Shankar Niroula in Australia, he was in a new Toyota Hilux with the family. His daughter was trying to drive it in the seashore. After my unexpected question on bicycle culture of the refugee camp in Nepal, he got lost in nostalgia. He was so enthusiastic that he seriously engaged in search for the first bicycle user in the camp. Bhakta Ghimire, Bishwonath Chhetri, Sanchaman Rai and Shiva Dahal from the US view that even weather is not as suitable to bicycling in the resettled countries as in Nepal.

Many individuals this author contacted agreed the continuation of the bicycle culture of the refugee camps of Nepal is unimaginable in the resettled world. But some people are pushing bicycle pedal in the countries where they resettled. Ram Karki said, “I have three city bicycles at home in the Netherland (Karki, 2022). His kids found bicycling to school in the Netherland. In Norway, Ramesh Gautam was found a keen bicyclist. In his words, bicycle culture of the camps is alive in memory to others, but it is still a reality- a means of daily commuting for him. Few bicycle enthusiasts are seen in the resettled countries. Rare people in the resettled world use bicycles to work and all purposes. Gautam says, “I’ve four bicycles and I use them regularly. My school, where I teach as in Nepal, is 9km away and I often take pedal assist electric bicycle. While returning, I take a longer way through jungle, spending about two hours.”^{xvii} This author found Gautam, who learnt his first bicycle in the Pathari camp in 1993 when he was a student of grade three, continued cycling in Norway. He said, “I do have all generation of bicycle- city to MTB, racing and electric bicycle. I ride at least 50km every day. Sometimes I take MTB and go off-road for adventure. On vacation, I drive a racing bicycle and in a single setting, I have crossed up to 110km” (Gautam, 2022). He further said, “Climatic conditions does not affect my bicycle enthusiasm.” In the severe atmosphere too he found bicycling in Norway, even during the high snowfall. Stavanger, where he’s staying, is a good cycle city with a dedicated lane and other required infrastructures for cycling. For him, bicycling is possible in each context if well prepared for all kinds of trips or purposes though the environment is not as favorable as in Nepal. He was happy that he has noticed some bicycle enthusiasts in different resettled countries including the US at least as fun rider. The Netherland is the best country of the world with a bicycle-friendly infrastructure. Other European countries are developing bicycle infrastructures and young generations are using bicycles to school and short-distance commuting.

2. Conclusions and findings

After the Second World War, as various research findings show, bicycle culture was overtaken by car culture in developed countries. Sooner, serious policy makers realized that car culture is devastating. Europe and Australia^{xviii} are now reviving the cycling trends though high-income developing countries in the Arabian Gulf region still have low cycling

activities (Shaaban, 2020). Bicycle infrastructural and social engineering projects are being launched in developing countries, too. Current policy documents show much optimism about the possibilities to increasing the bicycle's model share in transport by means of infrastructural and social engineering to enhance bicycle use and its facilitation (Oosterhuis, 2014). Increasing safety and connectivity in cycling networks is aiding to encourage more women to bicycle (Le, 2019) and a need for improving connections in infrastructure that bicycling mode share increased greatly where bicycle infrastructure was best, and the gender gap was largely reduced (Teschke, Chinn, & Brauer, 2017).

Bicycles are more equipped with standard safety elements. Paddle access electric bicycles have been promoted targeting individuals with lower physical capabilities (Sucha, 2017). The higher cost of owning, using, and parking a car, combined with car-free zones policies, has played a role in encouraging cycling. Public demands for car-free city are rising – i.e. People's Decision for Auto-Free Berlin, if the plan succeeded, it would be the largest car-free area in any city of the world (Peters, 2022). Again, we are living during a bicycle revolution. Many cities across the globe continue to construct mile after mile of on-street bicycle lanes and rural areas trails at an astonishing rate (Withers and Shea, 2016). In this context, although the precious unofficial bicycle culture of Bhutanese refugee camps of eastern Nepal is a vanishing history, the beauty of this bicycle culture is noteworthy. The aesthetics of bicycle history of the Bhutanese refugee camps alive in the fragments are waiting to be revisited and reconstructed artistically as a unique model to global bicycle culture. Bhutanese refugees enjoyed the freedom of mobility and the bicycle offered them the abundances of freedom. Even, crossing Nepal border and reaching various parts of India was like a cup of tea for them because they had bicycles. The saddest thing is that they could not return back to Bhutan, through India (the same route they came to Nepal) that was not so far regarding distance, despite having tens of thousands of bicycles in the camps.

This article depicts that the bicycle culture of the Bhutanese refugee camps in eastern Nepal is a distinct model of bicycling for utility purpose from each action to activism despite the fact that it lived a short life. Those thousands of bicycles are no more in the camps. Few hundred bicycles left in the camps have been sidelined by motor vehicles.^{xix} There were 1600 huts in the camps, and at least one bicycle in each hut in average, there were a thousand plus bicycles till the date this article finalized.^{xx} With the help of fragments of bicycle aesthetics of the camps available in grey literature and memories, various creatively artistic bicycle activisms are doable. Stone carving could be one of the most durable means of preserving the bicycle culture of the camps. At least various artistic stories are possible to tell and retell; they are presentable to the international community, which is substantial to world bicycle culture.

The bicycle community is growing globally. After all, bicycling is politics of resistance for justice to all. It is an international activism. Anyone can contribute to bicycle culture from any corner of the world. How the Bhutanese diaspora, an authentic actor of utility bicycling, contributes to bicycle culture demands a series of serious self-actualization activism. Preserving the retrospection (at least) of the utility bicycle culture of the Bhutanese refugees is precious history for bicycle activism.

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End Notes

- ⁱ This author has academic and emotional attachment with Bhutanese community and loves keeping in touch with them and their issues.
- ⁱⁱ Niroula was one of the activists to escort the 91 most vulnerable Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees from India and station in Maidhar riverbank in eastern Nepal. After three months they settled there, in his words, bicycle appeared in the camp, but he is not sure who did ride the first bicycle in the camp.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Based on the talk with Subba and Niroula on 27 January 2022.
- ^{iv} Based on the talks between Niroula and Thapa on 24 January 2022.
- ^v Chandra Chhetri in Australia bought a car in 2009 and recalled those days of buying bicycles with Niroula and friends in Naxalbadi, which would be so happy moments; buying cars in the resettled countries they say time and again.
- ^{vi} According to Sunil Ulak, the grand daughter of Judda Shamsher was the first Nepali woman to ride bicycle in Nepal and it is hard to find out the first female who used bicycle in Bhutan and in the Bhutanese refugee camps in eastern Nepal.
- ^{vii} Based on personal interview on 16 January 2022.
- ^{viii} During my various visits to the refugee camps, it was rumored that many refugees were helping the Maoist movement from various ways and bicycles were used. It is also rumored that the first countries presented resettlement in more flexible way to save the refugees from Maoist's influence.
- ^{ix} In an interview Gauri Shankar Niroula said, "My daughter would say in the camp, 'bicycles give us milk' along with other children."
- ^x According to NB Giri who keeps on visiting the camps time and again recalls those days of mass cycling and compares how very few bicycle users are left now in the camps; bicycles have been replaced by motor bikes and public vans in the camps, which is not comparable with bicycle aesthetics.
- ^{xi} Limbu, who is taking care of her three children through her part-time jobs in Kirtipur, loves to talk about bicycle culture within and outside the camps, where she spent her childhood and youth often connects her talks with camp people and their bicycle stories in Jhapa.
- ^{xii} Based on the talk between Tamang and Niroula on 24 January 2022.
- ^{xiii} Chhetri during the virtual interview narrated the difficult situation of organizing the bicycle rally with logistic support. In total 151 bicycles were listed and oriented in the camps; but there would be more cyclists with them because hundreds of people also participated the peace march at the same time. Many of them had bicycles not listed formally in the rally.
- ^{xiv} Ghimire, living in USA, shared this experience through social media on 16th January 2022.
- ^{xv} Karki is living in Netherland now as resettled refugees and using bicycle regularly, as he says, he has 3 bicycles in his home. His son and daughter go to school by bicycle.
- ^{xvi} Based on personal interview.
- ^{xvii} Based on series of talks and personal interview.
- ^{xviii} <https://bicyclingaustralia.com.au/news/the-data-is-in-cycling-participation-numbers-are-way-up/>



^{xix} In a talk on January 27, 2022, Exiled Bhutaneez said from the Beldangi camp that there is few hundred bicycles left behind and occasionally being them used but most of the time private motor vans are available in the camps. Lifestyle of the camps has been changed drastically and that bicycle culture is alive only in the memory.

^{xx} Gurga Nepal, who was using bicycle for last eight years regularly working as a teacher, speculated that at least one thousand bicycle could be counted by January 2022.