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Brief Note

Deportation after resettlement: The conditional belonging of Bhutanese Americans in the United States

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the recent deportation of resettled Bhutanese refugees in the United States (U.S.) through theoretical lenses of Mbembe's *necropolitics*, Foucault's *biopolitics*, Agamben's *sovereign power*, and Arendt's *right to have rights*. It argues that U.S. immigration and deportation policies, particularly those enacted in March 2025, function as instruments of state power that criminalize, marginalize, and render refugees socially and politically disposable, producing social death, statelessness, and profound psychological trauma. Focusing on resettled Bhutanese Americans – originally expelled from Bhutan in the 1990s and later resettled in the United States, this article demonstrates how legal frameworks can mask structural violence and human rights violations. The deportation of legally resettled Bhutanese refugees rendered them stateless once more as they were forcibly rerouted to Bhutan and then escorted to India and eventually to refugee camps in Nepal. This experience of Bhutanese refugees exposes the ethical failures of contemporary immigration regimes. The authors call for immigration policies grounded in human rights, dignity, and social justice, especially for displaced and vulnerable populations whose belonging remains conditional and precarious.

Keywords

forced displacement, Bhutanese refugee, deportation

Résumé

Cet article examine de manière critique la récente expulsion de réfugiés bhoutanais réinstallés aux États-Unis à travers les cadres théoriques de la nécropolitique de Mbembe, de la biopolitique de Foucault, du pouvoir souverain d'Agamben et du droit d'avoir des droits d'Arendt. Il soutient que les politiques américaines d'immigration et d'expulsion, en particulier celles mises en œuvre en mars 2025, fonctionnent comme des instruments du pouvoir étatique qui criminalisent, marginalisent et rendent les réfugiés socialement et politiquement jetables, produisant ainsi une mort sociale, l'apatridie et de profonds traumatismes psychologiques. En se concentrant sur les Bhoutanais américains réinstallés — initialement expulsés du Bhoutan dans les années 1990 puis

réinstallés aux États-Unis — cet article démontre comment les cadres juridiques peuvent masquer des violences structurelles et des violations des droits humains. L'expulsion de réfugiés bhoutanais légalement réinstallés les a rendus à nouveau apatrides, puisqu'ils ont été forcés de retourner au Bhoutan, puis escortés vers l'Inde et finalement vers des camps de réfugiés au Népal. Cette expérience des réfugiés bhoutanais met en lumière les défaillances éthiques des régimes contemporains d'immigration. Les auteurs appellent à des politiques migratoires fondées sur les droits humains, la dignité et la justice sociale, en particulier pour les populations déplacées et vulnérables dont l'appartenance demeure conditionnelle et précaire.

Mots-clés

déplacement forcé, réfugié Bhoutanais, déportation

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Necropolitics and the United States' immigration regime

Necropolitics, as conceptualized by Achille Mbembe (2003), is the use of sovereign power to dictate who may live and who must die. Building on Foucault's (1978) concept of biopolitics, which focuses on how modern states regulate life, Mbembe (2003) takes a more radical approach, emphasizing how sovereign power is exercised through the management of death. Sovereign power, according to Mbembe (2003), is not only about fostering life (as in biopolitics) but also about exposing certain populations to social death or living death – conditions under which people are kept alive in ways that strip them of dignity, security, and citizenship rights. In the current context of the United States (U.S.), both undocumented immigrants and those with legal immigration status increasingly face surveillance, detention, and deportation under the pretext of national security (American Immigration Council, 2011; Brennan Center for Justice, 2025; DHS, 2024; USCIS, 2018, 2025). These policies disproportionately target racialized and marginalized communities, effectively excluding them from the full protection of the state (De Genova, 2002).

In this paper, we argue that the deportation policies carried out by the U.S. in March of 2025 against resettled Bhutanese Americans are not merely contemporary enforcement measures but systematic strategies that continue to shape migration patterns, social hierarchies, and human rights violations (Asian Law Caucus, 2025). These policies exemplify the biopolitical governance of populations, wherein the state delineates the boundaries of belonging through practices of deportability and removal. As such, deportation operates as a mechanism for sustaining social hierarchies and legitimizing unequal distributions of rights and protections.

Interrogating these injustices is essential for understanding their enduring impacts and for advancing advocacy toward equitable immigration policies, stronger legal protections, and the safeguarding of human rights for displaced individuals and families. The primary aim of this paper is to examine how U.S. deportation policies targeting resettled Bhutanese Americans illuminate broader dynamics of sovereignty, citizenship, and exclusion. Through an analysis of recent deportation cases, this article demonstrates how such policies exacerbate conditions of statelessness, engender processes of social marginalization, and inflict profound psychological harm upon affected individuals and families. It further contends that these practices cannot be disentangled from global structures of forced migration, nor from the historical legacies of displacement and resettlement that continue to shape the lives of vulnerable immigrant populations.

Forced migration, resettlement, and deportation of Bhutanese Americans

Bhutanese Americans, also known as Lhotshampas, are individuals of Nepali ethnic origin who historically settled in Southern Bhutan. From the early 1970s to the late 1980s, Bhutan introduced strict citizenship policies under the “One Nation, One People” doctrine, which targeted the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese by stripping them of their citizenship and rights (Hutt, 2003). These policies curtailed the Lhotshampa community’s participation in political processes, restricted their access to economic resources, and suppressed their cultural identity, thereby creating the conditions that ultimately led to their mass expulsion. By the early 1990s, more than 100,000 Lhotshampa were forcibly displaced from Bhutan (Hutt, 2003). The Bhutanese state justified these measures by framing the Lhotshampas as illegal immigrants or voluntary migrants, a narrative that obscured the reality of ethnic cleansing and misled much of the international community (Giri, 2005).

Following their expulsion, the majority of the displaced were confined to refugee camps in eastern Nepal, where they lived under dire conditions for years. Dependent on humanitarian aid and denied the right to return to Bhutan, they remained in legal and existential limbo (Evans, 2010). In response to this protracted refugee crisis, the U.S. initiated a resettlement program in 2006, committing to resettle up to 60,000 Bhutanese refugees from the camps in Nepal (Hutt, 2003). This initiative was part of a broader international effort coordinated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The program was later expanded under President Barack Obama’s administration, culminating in the successful resettlement of over 90,000 Bhutanese refugees in the US by 2015, making it one of the most successful third-country resettlement programs of its kind (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). Upon arrival, the resettled Bhutanese refugees were provided legal documentation, including work permits enabling them to begin rebuilding their lives in a new country.

Despite their formal resettlement and the legal protections afforded to them, many resettled Bhutanese Americans continue to face precarious legal and social conditions. In March 2025, ten Bhutanese Americans were deported from the U.S. after being flagged in the criminal justice system (Panthi, 2025). Additionally, as of May 2025, six more individuals were awaiting

deportation, and 31 others remain in detention facilities (Chettri, 2025; Panthi, 2025). While the U.S. authorities have justified these actions on legal grounds, such as the expiration of green cards, criminal histories, or lack of citizenship status, the broader implications of these deportations merit deeper scrutiny (Chettri, 2025; Panthi, 2025). For many Bhutanese Americans, deportation is not merely a legal consequence but a profound humanitarian crisis (Asian Refugees United, 2025; Global Press Journal, 2025; The Diplomat, 2025; Wilkie, 2025). It exposes individuals to statelessness, potential persecution, and the psychological trauma of being uprooted once again (Hutt, 2003). Beyond these consequences, deportation can undermine long-term social integration, disrupt family functioning and community networks, hinder access to education and healthcare, and perpetuate cycles of poverty and marginalization. Given their history of forced displacement, the deportation of Bhutanese refugees raises critical ethical concerns about the long-term responsibilities of host nations, particularly in cases where return may place individuals at significant risk and exacerbate vulnerabilities that extend across generations.

Deportation, statelessness, and denial of human rights

After the government deported Bhutanese Americans from the U.S., they were received in Bhutan. However, within approximately 24 hours of their arrival, the deported individuals were removed from Bhutan, and reportedly sent to several different locations (Chettri, 2025). For example, the father of one of the deportees, who resides in the U.S., mentioned that the deportees “were handed 30,000 Indian rupees each and transported to the Indian border town of Phuentsholing” (Pokharel, 2025, para. 10). A prominent refugee leader based in Nepal, Balaram Poudel, advised that some deported individuals were transported in taxis to Jaigaon, a border town between Bhutan and India, and from there passed along to Panitanki and eventually to Kakarvitta, Nepal. Four of the deportees were relocated to refugee camps in Nepal (Pokharel, 2025).

Hannah Arendt’s seminal work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), argues that refugees and stateless individuals are not only entitled to legal protection but also to fundamental human rights including justice, security, dignity, and the right to live in one’s own country (Arendt, 1951). Arendt’s “right to have rights,” framework emphasizes that individuals must belong to a political community to enjoy basic human rights (pp. 294-295). Drawing on this framework, we contend that the Bhutanese government violated the human rights of deported Bhutanese Americans. This perpetuates a cycle of marginalization, statelessness, and invisibility. In this context, Arendt’s (1951) notion of the “right to have rights” (p. 296) is crucial as it reveals how the absence of political recognition deprives individuals of the very framework through which rights can be claimed and upheld. Deportation in this context thus emerges not merely as a logistical act, but as a profound assault on human dignity and political existence.

Resettled Bhutanese refugees deported from the U.S., as well as those living under the ongoing threat of deportation, confront a profound human rights crisis that simultaneously generates significant psychosocial and mental health challenges. These harms are symptomatic

of the structural violence embedded in U.S. immigration enforcement, where deportation functions as a technology of governance that produces suffering through uncertainty, cultural dislocation, and cumulative trauma, what Rob Nixon (2011) conceptualizes as slow violence, forms of harm that unfold gradually, often invisibly, yet devastate individual well-being and community cohesion. In this sense, the Bhutanese refugee experience of deportation exemplifies Judith Butler's (2009) notion of precarity, wherein life itself becomes contingent on the state's shifting calculations of who is deemed worthy of legal protection and who remains perpetually deportable. As Agamben (1998) argues, modern sovereignty is exercised through the capacity to designate individuals as *homo sacer*, those stripped of political belonging and reduced to "bare life" (p. 12). Deportation practices targeting Bhutanese refugees function precisely in this manner, rendering them politically disposable while sustaining their vulnerability as subjects of state power. This dynamic resonates with Mbembe's (2003) conception of necropolitical governance, wherein sovereignty is enacted through the power to decide who may live and who must die (Karki et al., 2023). Deportation and deportability operate as necropolitical practices, subjecting Bhutanese refugees to zones of abandonment where survival is perpetually undermined by legal precarity, social exclusion, and psychological harm. These experiences often involve prolonged uncertainty, social stigma, cultural dislocation, and trauma, all of which contribute to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional distress (Alemi et al., 2016; Hynie, 2018; Porter & Haslam, 2005). For example, research consistently demonstrates that undocumented immigrants and individuals in deportation proceedings experience significantly higher levels of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and feelings of helplessness and isolation (Garcini et al., 2017).

Immigration policy, when rooted in exclusion and punitive control, operates as a mechanism of social control, in which immigrant populations are managed through disciplinary practices that result in their oppression and marginalization (De Genova, 2013; Menjivar & Abrego, 2012). This reflects a form of structural violence, in which legal and bureaucratic systems inflict long-term psychological and social harm under the pretense of legality and national interest (Farmer, 2004; Galtung, 1969; Menjivar & Abrego, 2012). For the Bhutanese community, this systemic oppression perpetuates intergenerational trauma and undermines any hope for safety, stability, and a dignified future.

Conclusion

This article examines how U.S. deportation policies, specifically those targeting resettled Bhutanese refugees, intersect with histories of displacement, legal precarity, and systemic human rights violations. Although admitted under an international humanitarian framework, Bhutanese refugees have been increasingly criminalized and rendered deportable, reproducing cycles of statelessness and abandonment. Such practices embody what Arendt (1951) termed the loss of the "right to have rights", wherein displaced persons are denied political membership and stripped of meaningful protection. The U.S. government's decision to deport legally resettled individuals into precarious and legally ambiguous conditions amounts to a profound dereliction

of its humanitarian obligations. In doing so, the state imposes not only physical displacement but also a form of civil and existential death, stripping individuals of legal recognition, social belonging, and the ability to live with dignity. This demonstrates how deportation policies serve as instruments of necropolitical governance, denying individuals the right to remain and the right to survive with dignity. Deportation practices that disregard historical trauma, legal status, and the basic rights of migrants expose the deep failures of contemporary immigration systems. To build a just and humane society, immigration and refugee policies must be grounded in principles of human rights, social justice, and the protection of vulnerable communities.

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