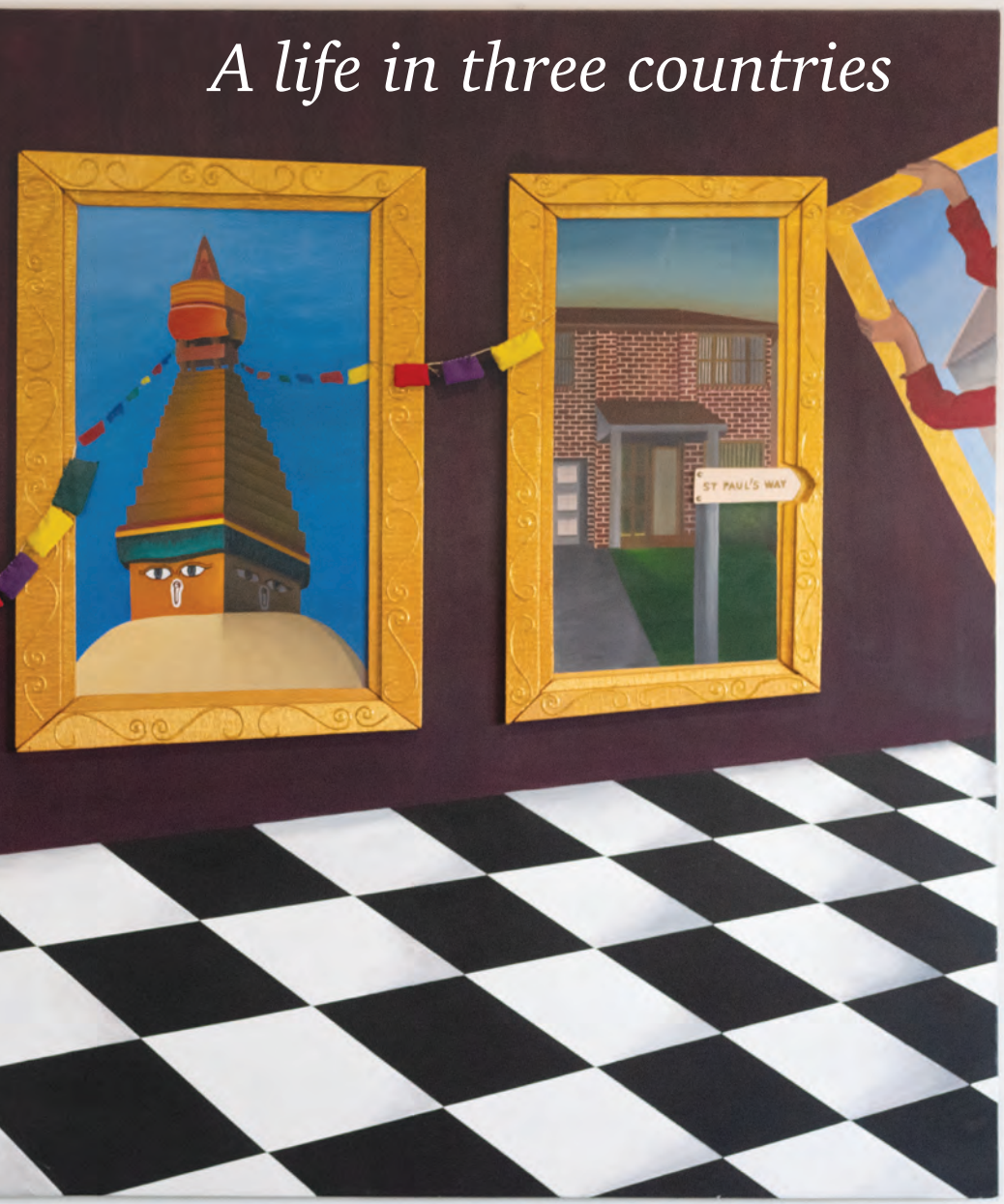
Bhutan Migration History

A life in three countries



Virginia Macleod

Bhutan Migration History
A life in three countries

Virginia Macleod

This project is supported by the Create NSW Cultural Grants Program, a devolved funding program administered by the Royal Australian Historical Society on behalf of the NSW Government and by SydWest Multicultural Services.

Cover: Painting by Smriti Dhungel Tuladhar

Title courtesy of Puspa Acharya who spoke of
'my life in three countries'

Printed by Creative Freedom Group Pty Ltd for SydWest Multicultural Services

Published by SydWest Multicultural Services, Blacktown Sydney

ISBN 978-0-9954391-1-5 – print
978-0-9954391-2-2 – digital

TITLE Bhutan Migration History *A life in three countries*

AUTHOR Virginia Macleod

DATE 2023

EDITION First

Contents

Foreword

The Bhutan Migration History project commenced when Shirleene Robinson, the Senior Curator Oral History and Indigenous Programs at the National Library of Australia approached Virginia Macleod to interview Om Dhungel, a Bhutanese community leader in Blacktown and a previous Chair of SydWest Multicultural Services. A few months later, Om suggested that Virginia look into the history of the Bhutanese migration and Shirleene agreed to include six similar interviews in the National Library collection.

For this project to become a reality and to bring this short history book into fruition, backing from members of the community and SydWest's support was vital. The community members welcomed Virginia into their homes, assisted their parents with interpreting their stories and later granted their own experiences to be recorded.

Raju Rijal became a spontaneous research assistant, without realising; while Nanda Lal Bhandari, the current President of the Association of Bhutanese in Australia (ABA) Sydney, has been exceptionally supportive of the project. All interviewees relived their experience and contributed to the project to ensure that their history in Western Sydney remains alive.

Selina Lee, SydWest's Marketing and Communications Manager, spent hours supporting Virginia and the team in the design and the production of this historical piece of work. In 2020, SydWest Multicultural Services secured a Create NSW Cultural Grant from the Royal Australian Historical Society to assist the project. Although we faced delays due to the pandemic, I am now delighted that this lesser-known chapter of Bhutan's history has now been documented.

Having collaborated with the Bhutanese community for nearly 15 years, I have developed a deep appreciation for their kindness and the strong bonds they share, ensuring the success of their settlement in Blacktown. I feel humbled to be able to contribute to this significant piece of Western Sydney's history.

I hope that the Bhutan Migration History project will enrich the lives of younger generations within the community. Understanding the background of migrant communities is of utmost importance; it highlights the valuable contributions these communities bring to the Australian way of life. Furthermore, by learning from their wealth of diversity and experiences, we can all strive to become better individuals and break down stereotypes.

Elfa Moraitakis
Chief Executive Officer
SydWest Multicultural Services
July 2023

Introducing the interviewees

Om Dhungel

Born in Bhutan, educated in Bangladesh and USA, worked for Bhutan's government in the telecommunications department. Fled to Nepal and lived in Kathmandu spending several years advocating for refugees' support. Came to Australia to study for an MBA in 1998. A gentle persuasive leader.

Tulasha Khatiwada

Left Bhutan in her late teens. As the eldest child she had supported her family from an early age. She continued to help and educate others both in Timai and later Goldhap camps. She has acted on her belief that women can and should achieve beyond domestic duties. A woman who inspires others.

Puspa Acharya

Grew up in Bhutan and worked for the government. In his 30s fled to Nepal, while living in Godlhap camp he created his own business. In Australia he serves migrants from many communities including his own. He has a quiet dependable strength.

Nanda Bhandari

Left Bhutan aged 10. He flourished under Beldangi's camp education and became a teacher himself. He pursued his interest in vocabulary and languages acting as interpreter both in Nepal and Australia. A thoughtful contributing citizen.

Yadav Timsina

Left Bhutan as an infant. His education in Sanischare camp provided a foundation for him to teach. Trained in Australia as a nurse, he is committed to working in health services and giving back to the whole community; and providing for his parents and young family. A patient and calm young father.

Champha Adhikari Rai

Born In Bhutan and left aged seven. She enjoyed Pathri camp's community life. She is dedicated to her work with older people in a residential home and enthusiastically recruits other staff. A warm open-minded carer.

Raju Rijal

Born and grew up in Khudunabari refugee camp in Nepal. He came to Australia as a teenager, adapting gradually to a new language and new life. He now calls Australia his adoptive home and embraces its multicultural values. He combines natural curiosity with persistent pursuit of knowledge.

While this history is based in their individual stories, they have spoken to represent their 'Lhtosampa' Bhutanese community now spread across the world.

PEOPLE

Lhotsampa – people of Nepali ancestry living in southern Bhutan

Sarchop – people living in eastern Bhutan, the original inhabitants of Bhutan

Ngalongs – people of western Bhutan, generally of Tibetan descent

Drukpas – Bhutan is called Druk Yul - land of thunder dragon. Drukpa may be used to refer to all those living in Druk, or only to Buddhist people

LANGUAGES

Dzongkha – National language of Bhutan, spoken in western Bhutan and by the Royal family

Sarchopkha – language spoken in eastern Bhutan

Nepali – language spoken by people of Nepali ancestry, mostly in southern Bhutan

PLACES in Bhutan

Lamidara – a village in Chirang district in southern Bhutan

Phuentsholing – second largest city, bordering the Indian town of Jaigaon in West Bengal

Thimphu – capital city of Bhutan

Gairigawn	Geylegphug
Kokre	Nichula
Sarbhang	Salami

PLACES in Nepal

Damak – town closest to Beldangi refugee camps, Jhapa district

Kathmandu – capital city of Nepal

Pokhara – popular tourist destination, the capital of Gandaki Province

Birtamod – town near the India border and closest to Goldhap refugee camp

Jhapa – district located in the eastern part of the country

Morang – district located west of Jhapa

PLACES in India

Siliguri – city in West Bengal, near Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong

CAMPS in Nepal

Jhapa District

Maidhar the first temporary refugee camp

Beldangi 1, Beldangi 2, Beldangi extension - the largest - close to 36 000 people

Goldhap smallest of the seven camps housed around 4600 people

Timai – housed over 10 000 people

Khudunabari – housed over 10 600 people

Morang District Pathri, also called Sanischare; housed 13 000 people

Bhutan migration history. *A life in three countries*

Introduction

I first met Om Dhungel at his home in Blacktown, Sydney, on a scorching day in 2019. Om wanted to start his interview with the recognition that today, 10 December was International Human Rights Day. As we talked, for several hours, the centrality of human rights in his life story emerged. The second interview, held significantly on Bhutan's National Day, 17 December, further explained his experience as one of more than 100,000 Nepali-speaking Bhutanese who left their country between 1990 and 1994. Nepal allowed them to stay in camps where they lived a generation, hoping to return to their homes and land. From 2008 most were resettled in USA, and others in Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the United Kingdom and Australia. At least 5 000 Bhutanese refuges came to Australia, but as the Australian Bureau of Statistics data does not include those born in the camps in Nepal, actual numbers may be closer to 7 000.

After these interviews when I mentioned Bhutan, friends and colleagues responded, almost reflexly, 'The land of national happiness'. No-one seemed to have heard about the Nepali-speakers' exodus. I was curious to know more about how they had survived such a prolonged experience living in a refugee camp.

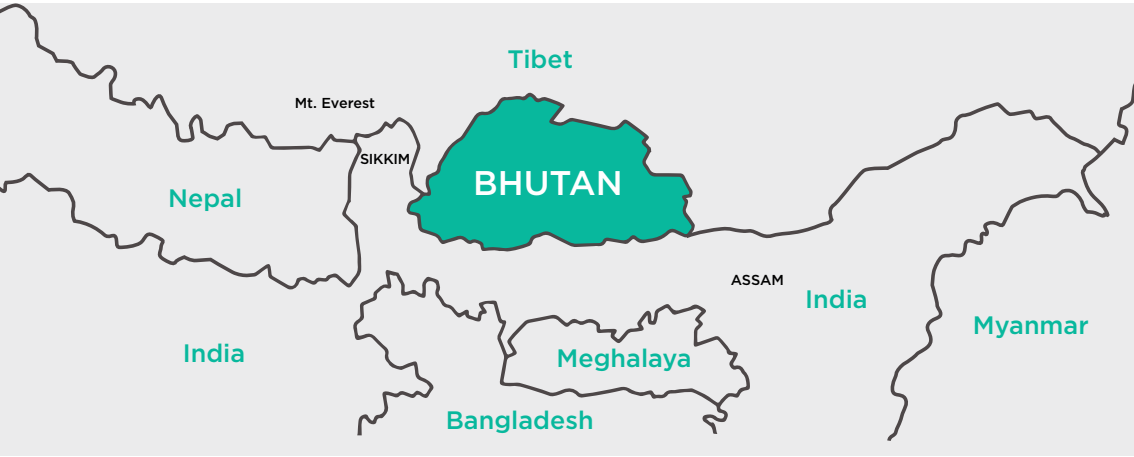
A few months later Om suggested writing a book and it seemed important that this story became more widely known.

To write a history requires more than one oral history interview, and more background. Thanks to Om's introduction I was invited to an Association of Bhutanese in Australia (ABA) meeting at Werrington Lakes, an informal get together, with games and food, where the project was explained. Here, and a few months later at a family wedding where I was also welcomed, I met several people who outlined their story, told me about life in Nepal and their experience coming to Australia. Some of them were willing to be interviewed. Younger members were keen that I should hear their parents' stories too, and offered to interpret what they said.

I started background research and followed up until I had found six potential interviewees, I visited them all to explain about the interview process and in some cases listened to their parent's story, rapidly writing notes as it was being interpreted. We were poised to start in July, but towards the end of June 2021, a Covid pandemic lockdown was announced which eventually lasted for four months. I continued reading and researching until November when, at last, it was possible to conduct face to face interviews.

Without these six people, aged between 25 and 66: Puspa Acharya, Nanda Bhandari, Tulsaha Khatiwada, Champha Adhikari Rai, Raju Rijal and Yadav Timisina, the book would never have been written. They, together with Om Dhungel, have shared their experience of events in Bhutan, Nepal and Australia and how they were affected by them. I have added some context of what was happening on other fronts.

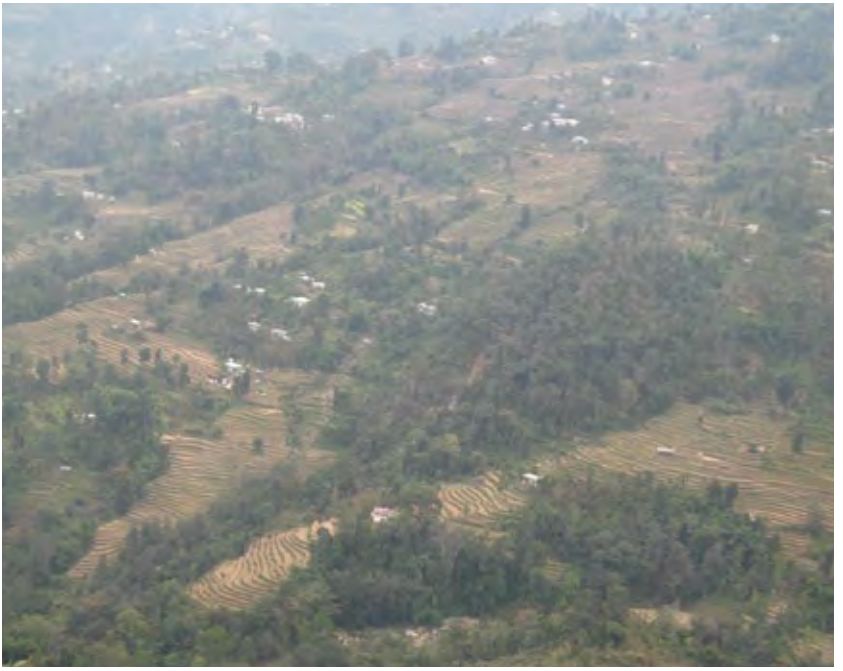
Life in Bhutan



Bhutan lies between north east India and Tibetan China covering an area of 38 394 square kilometres. The northern border is defined by the Himalayan ranges and boasts the highest unclimbed mountain in the world, Gangkhar Puensum (7570 metres). The altitude drops to 300 metres above sea level at the southern border with subtropical temperatures of 15-30 centigrade. Bhutan's rivers flow from the mountains, southwards into the vast Brahmaputra River. The three main groups who make up today's 770 000 residents of Bhutan are: the Ngalongs in western Bhutan and the Sarchops in the east (the largest group), both following Drupka Tibetan Buddhist practices, and the Nepali-speaking Hindus, known as 'Lhotsampa', meaning literally, 'of the south'.

During the 19th century the north-eastern region of the South Asia was comprised of small fiefdoms and principalities. Britain's gradual expansion of control over much of the South Asian subcontinent was often indirect, accepting existing rulers and affording them some protection, in return for control over their

foreign relations. People could move freely between regions, as did enterprising Nepalis moving across the Duars, a 30-kilometre-wide corridor across today's Bhutan, Sikkim, Assam, and west Bengal, at the foot of the Himalayas. They settled in this fertile floodplain, cleared forest, raised cattle and cultivated citrus, cardamom and subsistence crops.



Hills and homes in Bhutan – Puspa Acharya

Since Ugyen Wangchuck was elected Druk Gyalpo (Dragon King) and hereditary ruler on 17 December 1907, he and his descendants have governed Bhutan. Three years later, the British, who sought to consolidate their control of many parts of the South Asian subcontinent in this way, came to an agreement with Bhutan that it could retain independence if it accepted British guidance on external matters. Bhutan was to some extent a buffer state between the British empire in India and China.

When India eventually threw off the mantle of British rule and became independent in 1947, it also recognised Bhutan as an independent kingdom, now ruled by the second king, Jigme Wangchuck, who had succeeded his father in 1926. Bhutan strengthened its relations with India, cemented in the 1949 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. As Britain had done, India gave considerable financial support to Bhutan. It supported domestic infrastructure such as the road between the capital Thimphu and border town with Sikkim, Phuentsholing, and other roads connecting Bhutan and the Indian plains.

Jigme Dorji Wangchuck became the third king in 1952 ruling for twenty years. He established a national assembly in 1953 with representatives from each of the twenty regions. Citizenship was established for all residents, including Nepali-speakers, in 1958. Bhutan adopted one official language, Dzonghka, and universal education was established during the 1960s, previously there had only been religious-based schooling. The country was involved in the Colombo Plan 1962, founded in 1950 by several British commonwealth countries, including India, to provide aid to Asian countries and host tertiary education students. Some young Bhutanese began to take up scholarships overseas. Bhutan became a member of the United Nations (UN) in 1971 and that same year was one of the first countries to recognise newly-independent Bangladesh – a close neighbour.

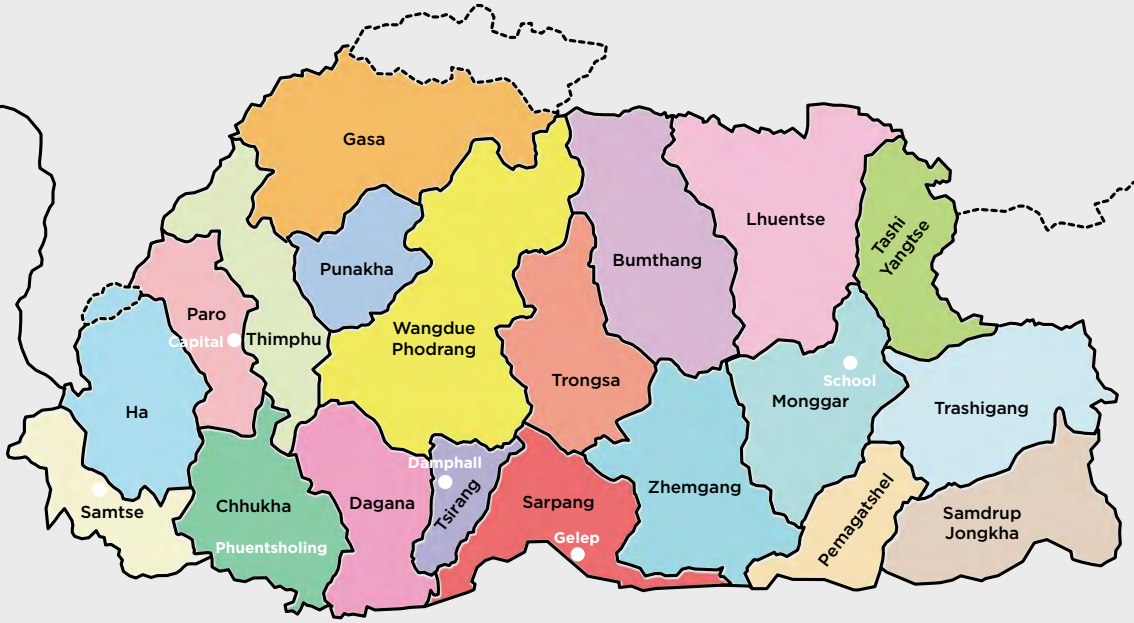
The fourth king, Jigme Sigye Wangchuck took over from his father in 1972. He built on his father's legacy expanding the government school system. During the 1980s student numbers increased considerably. However education was not compulsory and only about 25 per cent of eligible children attended. The co-educational system consisted of primary schools, junior

high schools and boarding high schools - tuition and books were free. Boarding high schools also included stationery, athletic equipment, and meals. The teaching medium was English, and Dzongkha or Nepali were taught as separate languages.

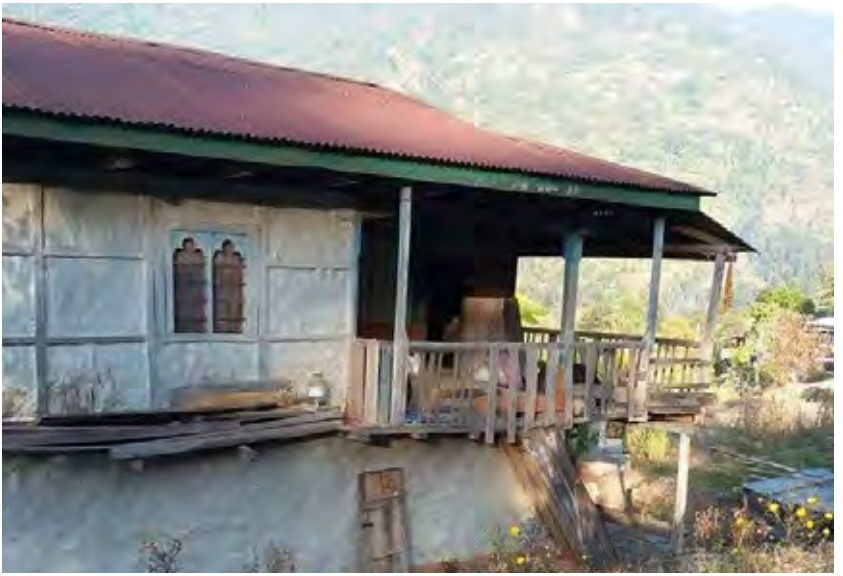
The 'One Nation One People' policy was instituted during the 1980s against a background of regional unrest. One perceived threat was the example of Sikkim. Wedged between eastern Nepal and western Bhutan the country had maintained its monarchy when it became a protectorate of India in 1950. However, following a national referendum, a significant majority voted to abolish the monarchy, and in 1975 the country, where three-quarters of the population were Nepali-speakers, became another Indian state.

Following this, during the 1980s, tensions flared up in Assam, which lies to the south of Bhutan, with objections against 'illegal' immigrants, mainly Muslims from Bangladesh.

In Bhutan under the 'One Nation One People' policy Nepali was banned and everyone had to speak and learn Dzongkha and wear national Drupka dress, women had to cut their hair short. By 1988 all those who held land had to prove they owned it in 1958 or else leave Bhutan. Enforcement was brutal, men imprisoned, women raped, land was seized and houses destroyed. Despite representation to the king by local leaders, and peaceful protest, the Nepali-speaking Lhotsampa lived in fear and began to flee.


Gasa
Punakha
Paro
Capital
Thimphu
Ha
Wangdue
Phodrang
Bumthang
Lhuentse
Tashi
Yangtse
Trongsa
School
Monggar
Trashigang
Samtse
Chhukha
Phuentsholing
Dagana
Damphall
Tsirang
Sarpang
Gelep
Zhemgang
Pemagatshel
Samdrup
Jongkha

Living and growing up in Bhutan

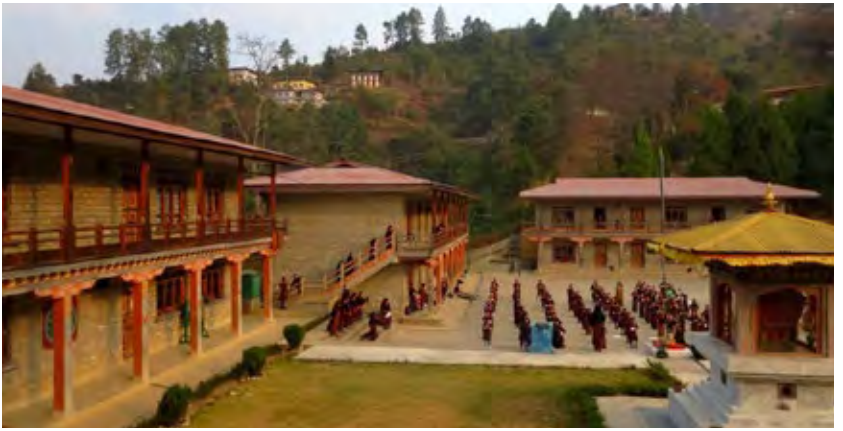


Puspa's home in Salami, Chirang district – Puspa Acharya

Puspa Acharya's father, Devi Charan Acharya had two wives, and Puspa's mother, Pingala moved with her seven children to live in a separate house close by. Puspa remembers a stone-walled house with bamboo rafters and thatched roof, the thatched cattle shelter and an open enclosure for goats. The two households both at Salami in Chirang district mostly farmed separately. Before 1965 there was no road and they used to carry oranges to market on horseback, along with other farmers, a two-day journey to Sarbhang on the border with India; bringing home: salt, matches, firelighters and kerosene for lamps.

Puspa, as the eldest, did much of the farm work. However, he benefitted from the Bhutan government introduction of universal schooling in 1961. He went to Salami village primary school from 1962 to 1968, then he walked 5 km to his next school in Damphu.

At his boarding high school in Mongar, eastern Bhutan, all was provided by the government. He lived in a hostel, but the food was poor and he had no communication with his family. He knew his mother was struggling, alone with six children, so he left before completing his education, to help her.



Mongar High school – Puspa Acharya

He travelled to the capital, Thimphu, and secured a job with the Food Corporation of Bhutan (FCB) and spent six months training in Phuentsholing, before his first posting to Sibsoo. Then he moved around different parts of the country according to where he was needed, until he settled at Phuentsholing. He met with farmers helping them to sell their crops and purchase goods that they needed, Trucks, loaded with cardamom, oranges and other citrus, apples and potatoes, drove to India and the produce was sold at Siliguri and other parts of western Bengal; the FCB imported, wheat, rice, sugar and salt.

Every year he took annual leave during June and July to plant crops in his village and regularly sent money so his mother could hire help. He enjoyed seeing his relatives and celebrating festivals at his family farm. He also purchased some land in Lamidara, and a cardamom garden.

Over fifteen years he rose to be regional marketing manager and moved to Gelephug, supervising several subdistrict food depots, as well as supplying schools and hospitals. He was sent to other countries: Bangladesh for food management training and Cyprus to study citrus processing; but was refused his place to spend a year in Australia, the opportunity being given instead to a Drupka employee.

Nepali-speakers and other Bhutanese were working together without any tension until 1985 when the government conducted a census, categorising residents as non-nationals if they were married to Indians or Nepalis. The government also required proof from all citizens that they had paid land tax in 1958. This was often difficult as paper records had been lost in floods, or house fires, or had disintegrated. Nepali-speaking government representatives appealed to the king and consequently many were jailed, tortured and some died. In this threatening atmosphere many young men began to leave the country.

In November 1990, a friend warned Puspa he would be arrested. He left his family in Thimphu with his brother-in-law, Om Dhungel. He met a relative, they stayed together and escaped through Jaigoan into Dadghari India, trying to reach Gelephug, but a friend warned him he might be arrested if he re-entered Bhutan.

He spent a few months at Birpara, south of Bhutan in western Bengal, together with a hundred other men, women and children, relying on help from Nepali tea-pickers working there. The exiles planned protests and helped others. Puspa spent two months near the Assam Bhutan border. Then he went to Nepal and stayed there helping the growing number of people fleeing Bhutan and lobbying local officials in Jhapa district to provide a camp for them.

Om Dhungel, one of fourteen children, was fortunate. Although his parents were busy running a small holding and a village store, they encouraged their children to go to school if they wanted to. He attended the traditional Hindu school and then transferred to a government school which provided free education in English. Some of his siblings missed out because they helped more at home. Om helped his parents in the shop, which opened once a week on Tuesdays, counting coins and notes. His parents carried a credit and debit ledger in their heads and could estimate the weight of goods without any scales.

In 1973 he left home to attend a central school in Sarpang – a full days' walk. He boarded there and was looked after by his 'brother' (cousin} Om Dhungyel. He enjoyed his three years there, appreciating friendships and the kindness of his teachers. Aged 15 he was accepted into a new high school at Paro (site of the only international airport in the country) he was one of only 12 Nepali-speaking pupils out of 600–700, and learnt the national language Dzonghka, which he could read, but not speak. He must have been a hungry teenager as he remembers together with his classmates, taking fruit, vegetables and potatoes from local fields and hiding them in the rafters of their room. All schools were coeducational, but there were fewer girls at higher levels. Finally, he went to eastern Bhutan to Sherubtse College in Kanglung, the only school in the country which then offered years 11 and 12. Pupils were treated like adults by the principal, a Jesuit Father. It was a broad education with plenty of sport, gardening and a good library, as well as traditional subjects.

There was no tertiary education in Bhutan and Om held to what his headmaster at Lamidara had suggested to him as a ten-year-old, that he should become an engineer. He won a scholarship to

Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). In 1981, together with other scholars, he left Bhutan, for the first time, presented his passport, and flew from Kolkata to Dacca, where they were met by embassy staff.

He didn't feel like foreigner and was often taken as Bangladeshi. He quickly learned Bengali, as it is similar to Nepali, and was fluent in English, the medium for university classes. He became an informal member of the Bhutan embassy, escorting Bhutanese officials when they visited and was the inaugural president of the Bhutanese students' association. He travelled the country and joined Muslim and Christian festivals, broadening his understanding of other cultures and beliefs. At his home in Lamidara there were both Hindu and Buddhist temples and religious practices were blended.

After five years he returned to Bhutan with an interest in telecommunications. The phone network in Bhutan was primitive with only half the 900 lines working in the capital city. Seeing an opportunity to improve matters, Om joined the Department of Telecommunications and secured a scholarship at the US Telecom Training Institute in 1987. The scholarship was well-funded and provided good experience covering the transition from analogue to digital systems. He returned to Bhutan and, with others worked on a project to introduce satellite communications in the country. Expert help was sought from Japan, but it was always intended that Bhutanese would run it. While enhancing his knowledge and skills in telecommunications digital technology in Japan, Om also absorbed Japanese discipline, honesty and work ethic. When the new system was launched in March 1990 Bhutan had one of the most modern telecommunication systems, and Om was proud to speak on behalf of the project team.

However, during the time that Om had been away developing his professional skills, the culture in Bhutan had changed. As well as the census discriminating against those married to non-Bhutanese citizens, overnight national dress became compulsory for everyone and women had to cut their hair. Nepali books were burned and schools closed, in order to enforce one national language.

The government claimed a five-kilometre-wide green belt along the southern border and ordered people living there, including Om's father-in-law, to demolish their homes and leave; some houses were burned. Naturally the Lhotsampa protested.

Om's parents had recently built a new house. The government had closed their shop, and his father as a community elder was targeted, seized, tortured and told to leave the country. Women were often seized too, so his mother left with her sisters. Many senior Nepali-speaking government servants, who in the past had worked closely with king, left the country and soon there was only himself and one other Nepali-speaker at his level. He lived under house arrest; his movements were monitored with regular police checks and he knew that his phone and others were tapped. It was fearful time.

He was warned he would soon be arrested. His choice - to stay, be taken to jail and quite possibly be killed; or save his family and parents. He got permission to inspect a telecom station and visit his family property in the border town Phuentsholing, over a weekend which bought him four days of time before he would have to be back in Thimphu. Once there he took his car across the border to be serviced in India. Never to return. He waited anxiously for three days until his wife and daughter arrived. Immediately they all drove to the safety of Nepal, where on 24 April 1992 they started a new life.

Tulasha Khatiwada's father, Ganga Ram Timsina, had two wives, who lived in separate households. Born in 1972 to Hari Maya Timsina, she was the eldest of twelve children. At a young age Tulasha helped her father on the farm tending animals and growing subsistence crops as well as oranges and cardamom. Every day she would take the cattle – 20 cows and ten buffalo – far away into the jungle. She gathered grass for the calves and carried it home when her father collected her in the evening. When she was eight or nine, she started school, walking two hours and across a river. If the water was too high, her father would come to ferry her on his shoulders, and be there to carry her back each afternoon.

Later a new school was built nearer to their home in Gelephug region. Every morning she would milk the cows, cook a meal, feed all her siblings, and dress all (except the youngest two) in national costume, which is difficult to put on, and then take them to school. Once she attended Gelephug high school she woke at 4.30 in order to accomplish all this and get to school by 8.30. She never missed school and liked all subjects; Dzongkha was new as she had never heard anyone speaking it. But at the end of year 7 her school closed. The school was turned into a prison.

Tulasha's whole family was summoned to Gelephug district office. Their identity documents were destroyed by the Drukpa chief district officer, and each member of the family was assigned a random number supposedly categorising them as Bhutanese or not, even though they were all born in the same place, as were their grandparents.

Two or three days later about ten soldiers came to their property telling them to leave saying 'Go away and get another life, or you die'. She had been told to say her father was away. Tulasha realises with hindsight, that she and her mother were lucky not to be raped, as were about a third of the women.

She reflects now:

> *The autocratic regime of Bhutan evicted thousands of Lhotsampa people living in southern parts of Bhutan with a merciless force. just for requesting human rights. The evicted family comprised an elderly person, a person with disability, an infant, children and a pregnant woman. There was no media to report, so the government used its power to evict these genuine citizens from their country. The international community closed their eyes, despite this violation of human rights and praised the government of Bhutan for achieving 'gross national happiness'.*

Tulasha feared for her father and said: 'Let's go somewhere else'. They had with them just the clothes they wore, they had buried some useful items and cooking pots before they left home thinking, 'We will come back in one or two months'.

Her parents turned their cattle loose in the forest, and left their cat and dog. The oldest child, she walked with her parents and ten siblings four or five hours through the moonlit night towards India. They hid from an army patrol, then crossed the border, walking another two hours. They reached a river, where, exhausted with carrying smaller children and not sleeping all night, they rested and made tea. Once they were in Indian territory they had degree of safety, but nowhere to stay, until an Indian farmer let them use his cattle shed. The Indian army told them they were refugees and needed to go to Nepal. After riding three different buses they were dropped, near a tea farm in eastern Nepal, but there was no sign of the camp. Without food or water, they slept under a tree. The next day, after another hour's walk, she and a cousin brother found Timai camp and led all the other families to their new home.

Yadav Timsina's father Kul lived in Gairigawn, a very remote village, in Chirang district. He was a village leader. When he married, he and his wife, Radha, had a small plot of land and gradually began to cultivate and expand it. They got a good return from selling cow's milk and produce; they shared work with other villagers. They built a three-storey house, carrying timber, cement and stones from the nearest town, a six-hour walk. As well they carried their produce to market every Tuesday, returning with staple foods- sugar, salt, spices, tea and oil.

In the late 1980s the Drupka Bhutanese started to enforce wearing national costume. It was similar to Tibetan garments and made of thick cloth, not suited to working in a warmer climate. The Drupka tried to give his father 'money in envelopes' – bribes - to enforce this. Pressure increased and rumours spread about what was happening elsewhere. Villagers began to resist and gathered outside a monastery and burned 'bakkhu' - Drupa male clothing. Local authorities reported this to the king. Villagers said they wanted to keep their customs and religion, and wanted democracy. Then the army came, there were some Nepali-speakers, 'Lhotsampa' amongst the troops. They began taking away men to prison and seizing women to cook for them, and some were raped. Kul jumped from balcony of their three-storey house and hid in the forest. He fled to Assam, sending a message to the village so that Radha knew he was alive.

Radha was left alone with her parents-in-law and five children, the youngest, Yadav only 18 months old. The army came looking for her husband and ransacked the house while she cooked a meal for them. A few weeks later she heard that many men had left the town already and decided to go too. It was devastating at this time in their lives, in their forties, when they had worked so hard and were prospering. She let loose the cattle, goats and buffalo.

Taking a small stove, pots, rice and some kerosene (which leaked into the rice making it inedible), and wearing several extra layers of clothing, they walked to the town to find a ride on a truck. Radha's in-laws who had said they would rather die than leave, cried the whole way, constantly looking back. Seeing their family dog following them, but unable to get onto the truck, they all wept as they left for the Indian border. Papers had to be filled in saying they departed voluntarily and had been compensated. Radha had none, so a man claimed her as his daughter, and she crossed the border at Sarbang as part of his family. Group photos, with forced smiles and holding these documents, were taken. Most had lost citizenship anyway. With the parting taunt, 'Go back where you came from', ringing in their ears, they crossed into India.

They camped near a river bank at Mudey. There were no toilets, the ground was filthy, the water was unclean. The children got sick, as did everyone else, and some children died. After five days, their father appeared. On the ninth day trucks and buses took everyone away to Nepal. They arrived at Sanischare (later called Pathri) that night, others were dropped at Mai, or Timai, or Beldangi. It was raining heavily and the camp was muddy and slippery. Next day agencies appeared and allocated them a space. They were given rations, and bamboo to build a shelter for themselves and their children, including the youngest, Yadav.

Champha Adhikari Rai's parents Ran Rai and Suk Rai, both born in 1943, were self-sufficient farmers growing mandarins, rice and basic foods, as well as keeping cattle, goats, sheep, pigs and chickens. They, and a group of ten families, lived in a small village, called Kokre in Chirang district Bhutan. Their house was on the track to town from remote farms. Drukpa and Nepali would stay overnight sometime as many as 20 or 30 people.

Suk remembers a crowded house and people cooking, while she went to tend cattle. She had eight children, including Champha her fourth, born in 1984. Two died in infancy.

Their two-storey house had stone walls, mud floor and thatched roof. Champha's brothers went to school walking six hours each day, but she was too young to walk so far. When she was about six years old a flood swept through the valley and destroyed their house and contents, so everything was swept away. Without a house, they had to live with relatives, and had no income. As a result, Champha laboured with her family on bridge and road works carrying heavy loads of bricks on her head. She also carried mandarins to market, a two-hour walk each way.

Champha's brother, who is ten years older, remembers the events that propelled them to leave Bhutan. They knew there was discrimination against Nepali-speaking Bhutanese representatives in politics, and schools were closed. There were several peaceful protest marches, more in towns, many people were arrested and died, or were never heard of again. One night the whole village gathered in one house, armed with rocks and stones, ready to throw them at the army which was rumoured to be coming.

Soon the entire village, about 100 people including children, left. They walked for two hours and then boarded trucks, with a few household goods and basic food. Her parents were crying, but seven-year-old Champha was excited. At Sarbhang on the Bhutan Indian border, they had to sign documents agreeing to leave and were given a minimal compensation.

As Champha reflects:

> *We were exiled due to misunderstanding with the Drupa. We had to leave because this is not our country. At grassroots level we had good relations with Drupa … They said, 'Why are you going? We never told you to leave the country'.*

They spent four or five nights waiting for a different truck to travel 'one day and one night' across India to Nepal. They went straight to Pathri (formerly Sanischare), Morang district. The parents set up a shelter with branches, plastic and bamboo. After about two weeks land was allocated to them according to family numbers and Champha's parents were given split bamboo for weaving walls, matting and plastic to build a two-roomed hut. It was a quarter of the size of their house in Bhutan – but a new home for them and their six children. Note arrived 1991.

Nanda Bhandari can remember that in 1990 his school at Nichula block, Sharbang district in southwestern Bhutan was closed as it had been burned down. When the army came to their village searching for wanted people, they would hide in the forest. His father was told to stop cultivating because he could not provide a Certificate of Origin to the government census team. He had been unable to produce his tax documents which had been destroyed in a house fire, although his mother had the right papers and she could have stayed.

37 days later in November 1992 his father died. Nanda, his mother, two older brothers and a sister fled Bhutan. They packed rice and a few clothes and within an hour had walked across the border to Farras Basti in India. While they lived under a peepal tree for over a week waiting for a truck, they would labour at a nearby Indian

farm to get food. After a six-hour journey, nauseated by truck fumes, they reached the border to Nepal at Kakarvitta, where the numbers of Bhutanese arrivals were being recorded. At this time security was lax and stealing common in Beldangi camps, but within a couple of months they had built their hut, number 24, Sector E1, and settled in.

Raju Rijal's grandparents were targeted by the ruling class in Bhutan. Their son Om Rijal and his wife, Sita Rijal who had married into the family aged 16, had to leave. Sita's family stayed in Bhutan as they could prove that they had been resident in 1958. She and her husband reached Khudunabari in 1992, expecting a few months' stay. Soon after she arrived Sita lost her first child. Raju Rijal was born in 1996 and his sister two years later.

For all the members of these families, and over 100 000 others, the rhythm of daily life was utterly disrupted by fear. The purge of the Lhotsampa in Bhutan meant their only recourse was to abandon everything and escape. Nepal offered asylum.

Homes destroyed in southern Bhutan – *Bhutan Review* Dec 1993

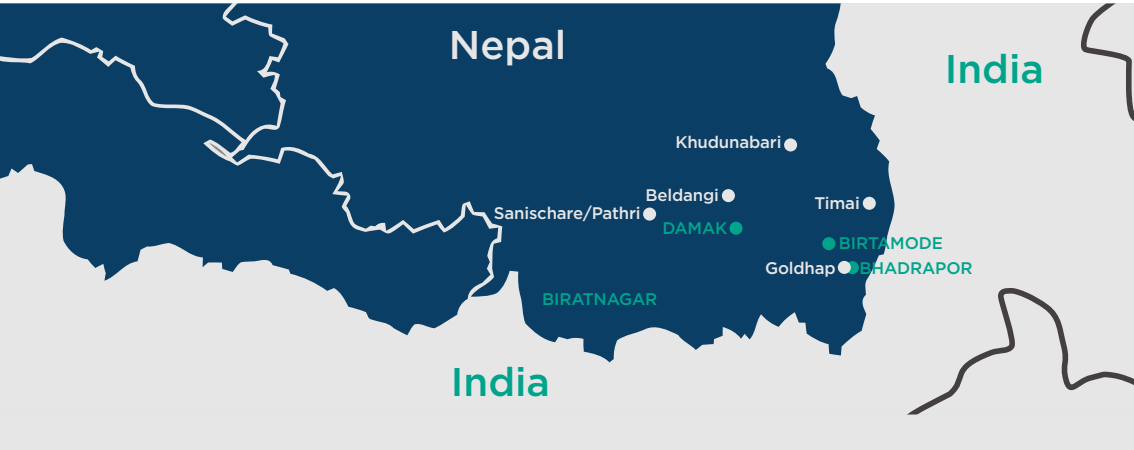
Life in Nepal

There was no reception committee awaiting those who first fled from Bhutan in 1990. Most arrived with only the clothes they wore, perhaps with a water container, or cooking pot.

An unrelenting flow from Bhutan through India into Nepal, like a human river, began as a stream and widened to a delta; every person needed to find food and water, make a shelter and gather other basic necessities: clothes, bedding, cooking utensils.

The first camp grew near the Mai River, where people took refuge in disused cow sheds beside the temples, once these were full refugees built their own shelters. However, there was much sickness there and as Puspa says: 'We lost many friends in the beginning, many children, ten to fifteen daily, died'.

Day by day more people came and soon Timai camp, opened early in 1990, was overflowing too. The UNHCR and other agencies were gradually learning from experience, and organised more sites. After three or four months, UNHCR and Nepali government had established a total of seven camps in eastern Nepal: Timai, Goldhap, Beldangi 1, 2 and Extension, Khudunabari- all in Jhapa district and Sanischare, later called Pathri, in Morang district. The makeshift Mai camp was demolished.



Puspa, with his brother, chose to go to Goldhap as he knew more people nearby. It was situated on vacant land between farms and forest, a lowland area, much hotter than his part of Bhutan. They built their shelter in Sector B 62; eighteen months later his wife, Chandra and two children joined them.

Although Puspa had been involved in government in Bhutan he did not take up any official position in the camp. He considers the Bhutanese teachers, both volunteers and trained, gave an advantage to all those who could attend schools. Likewise, the health centres were supported by Bhutanese doctors and nurses among the camps' communities. Other agencies helped developing women's skills.

Only basic needs were supplied and there was little opportunity for paid work as the Bhutanese had no citizen's rights. Some casual labour was available on local farms, but it was very poorly paid.

Puspa had ridden a motor cycle for his work in Bhutan and noticed there were many more in Nepal, but few spare parts were available around Goldhap. He gained experience through contacts in Raksole in India and came back with some spare parts, also at Birtamod in eastern Nepal too. Later he spent time in a store in Kathmandu and accumulated more parts. He opened a shop with a Nepali citizen as partner in order to get a licence. He sold spare parts to local mechanics at a discount. His partner went independent after two years, so Puspa started his own shop. This enabled all of his children to attend English-medium private schools, two boarding in Nepal and the third in India.

Camps roof tops and trees – Puspa Acharya

18-year-old Tulasha, with her parents and 11 siblings, was among one of the earliest groups to arrive at Timai camp in January 1990. There were only seven or eight tents at that time and the 15sq m one they were offered was too small to fit their family. Supplied with bamboo poles and plastic sheeting they created their own shelter, although the wind blew off the roof in the night.

Once their names were entered on the camp register, they could collect some basic food: rice, oil and yams. They had no tea or coffee.

Tulasha was delighted to enrol at school again in year 8, although with up to 60 children, classes were very crowded. After a year she left school to help her father support his family. Neither her father or his two wives could find any work. After a while they got some casual labouring carting manure and harvesting paddy but they were paid at about half the local rate. She saw others eating better than they did. They had no space to grow any food for themselves.

This situation drove Tulasha to find work. She became an adult literacy and numeracy teacher (Nepali, English and maths), under a program Oxfam ran across all seven camps. She taught five days a week in separate classrooms for men and women encouraging them to learn. Her modest incentive salary helped supply the family with tea, vegetables, matches and clothes.

Her life changed dramatically when she was married in 1993 and moved away with her husband from Timai, a mountainous area, to Goldhap camp in the lowlands. He lived alone, so there were just the two of them; such a contrast to her life spent caring for 11 siblings. Hari was a teacher working in a primary school run by Caritas; Tulasha had left her job behind. However, she found the Oxfam office at Goldhap, explained her qualifications, was interviewed next day and started work within a week. Two months later she was assistant co-ordinator and attended fortnightly management meetings in the local town Damak.

The teaching was challenging. Some men did not like their wives attending classes and wanted them to stay home and cook; some women did not want their husbands to leave home and study; in frustration they would tear the text books. Those who had been tortured had to lie down because of their injuries; many had suffered trauma. She was also dealing with threats of domestic violence or coercion. She added in yoga to help them too.

School days

Children in camp – *Bhutan Review* Oct 1993

Four of the people I interviewed lived for part, or all, of their childhood and adolescence in a camp.

For children, from about the age of six, school provided a structure in their lives. Every morning groups of related or neighbouring boys and girls, would walk through the camp together, older in charge of younger, to reach their classes at 8am, Initially, there were no classrooms; students gathered under a tree and sat on the ground, some like Nanda on woven rugs. Children walked home for lunch and finished school at 3pm.

Pre-primary lessons introduced the alphabet and numbers – in Nepali and English. Champha started kindy aged 8, wearing her mother's clothes, as she owned nothing suitable. Some schools provided a uniform for each child, but as funding for the camps dwindled there were not always enough. Her class, held under a tree, was a five-minute walk from her home in Sector G4.

Soon Champha was attending primary school taught by resident teachers using the Bhutanese curriculum. Three years later a school had been built with woven bamboo walls – reminding her of Bhutanese village homes.

At Pathri, which in 1993 had a total of 6 300 students there was a primary school for each of the twelve sectors in the camp A-L, but only one high school for years 6-10. Students who continued with years 11-12 went to English medium schools outside the camp. There they studied: maths, science, social studies, environmental education and Dzongkha. Champha also remembers dancing, singing, drama and sport – soccer. Apart from text books students had just a few books in English.

Champha reflects:

> *So many things had happened in my life, the one thing I really wanted was school. We learned whatever we didn't learn at home, where we learned too. Learning was the best thing. Homework and everything. I never had a best friend, all good friends, many friends, more important than study.*

Although education was both compulsory and co-ed at all levels, girls often dropped out. Some, like Champha, could not achieve their potential as they had to care for younger children, or help their mothers with domestic duties: washing, carrying water, cooking etc – all labour intensive. Tulasha had to stop her formal education after year 8 in order to help her father support their large family. Like schools anywhere children who had literate parents, or support from teachers, tended to do better.

Nanda had missed three years education in Bhutan. Now in 1993 when he began school again, he was fluent in Nepali, reasonably good in Dzongka, but barely spoke English. His teacher Purna Giri gave him Indian English-language magazines saying, 'Read and re-read, write and re-write'. He would then correct Nanda's work and let him keep the magazine. Soon Nanda excelled in English. In year 6 Nanda's class were given mini Oxford Dictionaries. He and his friend Indra set themselves a challenge to improve their vocabulary. One starting at A and the other at Z, they both selected 10 words each day, wrote them in sentences and shared what they had learned. They loved this linguistic game and by year 8 they had worked their way through the entire dictionary.

The day began for Yadav with assembly, exercises and Buddhist and Hindu prayers, led by the headmaster. Each day a pupil would be asked to make an impromptu speech usually on the theme, 'Bhutan is my country'.

The Catholic agency Caritas was responsible for the organisation of schools. Founded in Nepal in 1990 as the 'social arm of the Catholic Church', one aim was and is to 'secure humanitarian assistance to refugees'. They trained teachers, supplied pencils, exercise books and text books, which children used and returned at the end of the year. The relevance of education was brought home to Yadav when a visiting Father from Caritas, who had seen many refugee camps, said how lucky they were compared to other refugees around the world. Yadav feels that they were very fortunate, especially the education they had, emphasising, 'I wouldn't be here today without that'.

Teachers were Bhutanese, English was the prime language. Champha remembers they were fined if they didn't speak English, but she felt English and science were 'really good'. Raju remembers primary school classes were Nepali folktales and poetry, with some English. Yadav recalls English, mathematics and science taught in English language, and Nepali which he particularly liked, as his grandfather, and later his father, had taught him Nepali chants.

Those who failed the year-end exams had to repeat. Consequently, students' ages varied in classes. Others gradually fell behind because they had other responsibilities.

Children devised group games using chalk for hopscotch, Piya/Dhyakki; balls made of rubber bands Chungi; drop the handkerchief, Rumal lukai; knucklebones, Gatti; grandmother's footsteps, and Pitti. At secondary school pupils, ran, skipped and played soccer. On sports day they had traditional races.

Despite being enclosed within a fence, Raju describes the pleasures of roaming with friends, exploring grasslands at the camp's edges, and running around in monsoon downpours. They'd pick flowers from gardens, climb trees, play with a stray dog and puppies, or cats, chickens, goats and insects. Closer to home they played in the pathways, as there were no vehicles.

Becoming teachers

Several young people were able to find work as teachers; a tradeable skill, because their Bhutanese education and knowledge of English language was of a higher standard than the Nepali system.

After he had finished year 10, in his 'gap year', Yadav was asked to teach Nepali in a camp primary school. Then, following good results in his school certificate, he taught English too.

Aged 18, Champha became a primary school teacher and went with two others to teach English outside the camp in a Nepali private school at Pokhara. Her pupils' parents were very friendly, so she also tutored children in the evenings. She sent money home with trusted relatives, if they came to visit. In 2003 Champha also co-ordinated children's forums for girls.

After he left high school, Nanda and a friend were offered places as teachers in an English medium Nepali private school. They were given tickets to fly to the school in the hills. He enjoyed teaching and his methods, especially in mathematics, were popular. After two years working there, student numbers had increased to 400. When Nanda had come home during a vacation, the headmaster at his former middle school in Beldangi Extension camp asked him to teach there. Later he was appointed Vice Principal at another more senior school at Beldangi. However, his salary was much smaller compared with the private school which covered his food and rent too. Later he and his wife both worked in private schools. However, this was not a secure livelihood, as they were not Nepali citizens, The newspapers accused them of taking work from local people and published Bhutanese teachers' names, which threatened their security.

Education reflection

Although the teachers in the Khudunabari refugee camp schools, were not professionally trained nor [did] they have any privilege or luxury to attain any workshops and resources pertaining to teaching, but remarkably, they raised their hand to volunteer and put their time into educating younger generations like myself; they realized the important of education. … Teachers themselves had no formal guidance, they only did what they knew, which was rote learning. Nonetheless, those teachers' dedication and pro bono [efforts], shaped my very fundamental English literacy and arithmetic skills and more importantly, it accustomed me to school from the very young age of five, hence going to the school in Australia did not became such a foreign idea to me. For that reason, I am so thankful for those teachers of my primary school in the Khudunabari refugee camp. Raju Rijal

Sicknesses such as fever or diarrhoea or tonsilitis were common and treated often by cultural remedies. Each camp had a health centre staffed by Bhutanese nurses and doctors. some had been given further training. Serious cases would be referred to the hospital in the nearest town. The first camp in Nepal at Mai River was stricken with illnesses and a quarter of the children and the elderly died. The camp was eventually closed because it was so unhealthy.

As an 18-month-old, Yadav was very ill when he first arrived at Sanischare/Pathri and his sickness lingered for several years, made worse by malnutrition. Champha who had arrived earlier

contracted cholera, as did her sister, who died. Champha was in hospital for two weeks and then very weak for three months She also remembers being isolated as a potential carrier.

Once as a young teenager Nanda became jaundiced. A cultural cure failed to help him. Fortunately, some Japanese doctors were at Beldangi doing research. His school headmaster and history teacher mentioned Nanda's illness to them and they advised a diet to boost his red blood cells and he gradually recovered.

Tulasha gave birth to her first child, a boy, at the camp health centre in 1994. She had a very long labour and was carried home on a stretcher, where she spent a month recovering. Once she went back to work, she took her baby with her. She did the same after her daughter was born three years later. However, she had to take time off to be able to care for both children properly, especially as her son became malnourished.

UNHCR rations distribution – Puspa Acharya

As children grew, they became involved in collecting rations for the family. Each family unit was allotted a time once every two weeks. They received basic foods: cooking oil, lentils, salt and rice supplemented with cabbage, pumpkin or green bananas. A large family might have 50kg of rice; heavy sacks to carry home, or sometimes they would borrow a neighbour's bicycle. Secondary school boys helped at the distribution centre, unloading goods, carrying, and cleaning.

Malnutrition was probably endemic. Rations were basic so residents tried to earn a small income to supplement their diet. Once Kul Timisina, Yadav's father, learned to ride a bicycle, he rode to surrounding villages to purchase milk, yoghurt, spices, fruit and brooms and sold them in the camp. His eldest son worked on a local farm, planting, harvesting, and other labouring work. Champha with her cousins ran a micro business. They would buy 10 rupees worth of chips, set up a shelter on the road, and sell them for 40 rupees which they spent on food.

Oxfam set up community gardens to provide vegetables to supplement the rations. They established wool spinning and textile weaving classes, so women could make clothes and earn a small income.

After five years working for Oxfam, Tulasha switched to a UNHCR nutrition program for growing food in pots. Passing a written test and an interview in Nepali and English she was trained for ten days at a citrus farm, leaving her children with her husband. Once she began work, taking her children with her, she would demonstrate to others how to grow vegetables. She supplied the pots and they got soil from the nearby forest.

Children collect water at Goldhap camp – *Bhutan Review* Jan 1994

Woman at washing pit – *Bhutan Review* Feb 1995

Clean water is vital for good health. Most camps had water towers which fed chlorinated water to central taps, from where it had to be collected. It was only available three times a day for household needs – cooking and washing. Camps that had a river nearby could do washing there.

Cooking fires could be dangerous. At Pathri, Champha remembers they used banana leaves to smother any fires from stoves. As a result of cooking inside, the huts were very smoky and many people suffered with asthma, ear nose and throat problems and chronic coughs. Every tent had a cloud of smoke rising from it and pa all of smoke hung over the camp. Air pollution was bad.

More threatening was an outbreak of fire in the shelters – sometimes started deliberately in the thatched roofs – the woven bamboo walls would burn rapidly. Tulasha clearly remembers a fire at Goldhap when her husband and son were both away at Khudunabari camp. She quickly left her seven-year-old daughter with the soldiers at the army camp across the road; rushed back to their shelter, grabbed all important items and threw her day's water supply over the thatched roof. Many of her neighbours were elderly or disabled and so hard to evacuate. Luckily the wind changed and there were no deaths or injuries.

Storms could wreck homes, the wind tearing plastic roofs from the shelters. Yadav's mother, Radha, when she hears and feels the wind now, living in Australia, is very thankful that here her home has a firmly fixed roof. Tulasha recalls two severe storms over 18 years; once her thatched roof collapsed and her husband just escaped carrying their young son.

Her husband had to leave for three weeks the next morning and Tulasha had just had an operation. She had to stay with relatives, while Hari's fellow teachers rebuilt the house before he returned. She remembers it as one of the hardest times of her life, being incapacitated, managing a baby and small child Another threat for the relatively flimsy homes were the herds of wild elephants who would occasionally charge and knock down shelters.

Although some Nepalis welcomed the Bhutanese, other local villagers were reluctant to reciprocate by selling tea or vegetables in exchange for the refugees' surplus rations: lentils and rice. Camp children did not play with local Nepali children.

Added to this was the competition between the camps and local villages for scarce firewood. In order to cook they had to gather their own firewood, but had no firelighters. Agencies sometimes supplied substitutes - kerosene and coal - to ease matters.

Highlights of life were perhaps celebration of annual festivals, Dashain and Tihar and gods' birthdays. Raju liked to go with his mother to the camp temples, curious to watch and listen to the chanting. Nanda remembers visiting local temples until Hindu, Buddhist and Christian places to gather were built in Beldangi Extension camp. He feels festivals were more important in the camp than today. Perhaps because, as Tulasha says, after discrimination in Bhutan, it was a relief to go to Timai and Goldhap temples and those outside the camp, freely.

Although the displaced Bhutanese lived in a fenced enclosure, they were free to visit other camps. Raju remembers the four to five hour trip from Khudunabari to Beldangi to visit relatives. His only other outing was to see a movie in the nearest town once year.

Yadav visited relatives and liked seeing new places, riding the bus to other camps, especially Timai which was near a river and tea plantations. Champha visited all the camps to see relatives, except Goldhap, and says the houses all looked the same. She felt Pathri the largest camp was well-disciplined, there were few fights and the elders were respected.

Beyond the camps

> *Bhutanese refugees have a problem. The world outside Nepal does not know they are there. The arrival figures in Jhapa speak of the relentless pace of Thimphu's eviction program.*

The Human Rights Organisation of Bhutan, HUROB, run by the exiles, counted arrivals in Nepal. They started in July 1991 when 234 people arrived. For the next six months an average of 1500 people came. Soon this escalated to 10 000 a month, and 62 723 refugees had fled into Nepali by July 1992. By January 1993 there were 76 774 refugees living in the camps, at the end of September 1996 numbers had swelled to 91 343 refugees, including 33 112 students.

HUROB not only counted numbers but also verified where in Bhutan each person came from, asking the name of the village headman or neighbours and other questions, to establish that they were genuine refugees.

Inside Nepal various agencies were striving to support this influx of people needing sustenance, and shelter. The World Food Program committed for food to be delivered through the agency of the Lutheran World Service, Caritas Nepal ran schools, Save the Children Fund (UK), Red Cross and others helped with health, Oxfam Australia provided support for informal education and books. UNHCR had overall control of operations.

A conference on Bhutan, held in London at the School of Oriental and African Studies, was attended by representatives of the Bhutanese government, academics and journalists.

The BBC reported in 1993 that:

> *The Bhutanese Home Secretary Jigme Thinley expressed the concern of the government that since the Nepalese immigrants had established their roots in Darjeeling, Sikkim and Duars, if the Royal Government did not take necessary measures, then Bhutan's Drukpa culture would be lost.*

There was no formal representation for the refugees, nevertheless, those at the conference agreed:

> *First, concrete steps must be taken to repatriate Bhutanese refugees, and thereafter, within Bhutan itself there must be national reconciliation through which Bhutanese of Nepalese-origin enjoy their basic rights, while not endangering the Drupka culture and identity … even today no steps have been taken from any quarter to resolve he Bhutanese problem.*

However, while the Bhutanese refugees in the seven camps continued a basic existence, hoping to return to their homes, other exiles were organising political protest and negotiations.

Om Dhungel based himself, his wife, Saroja and their two-year-old daughter, Smriti in Kathmandu to advocate for and support the refugees. His parents, some relatives and friends were in the camps and they visited regularly - a twelve-hour bus journey – to offer support and money. The Nepali government was tolerant and unofficially allowed them both to work. Om was able to survive by renting his car to a tour agency. All dealings with the government were cordial and they were accorded the same respect as was due to their former position in Bhutan, the government recognised HUROB, this enabled schools in the camps to enrol children in Nepal's examination system.

Om raised awareness of the refugees' plight in an appeal on Nepal TV. Realising he spoke a hybrid mix of Dzongkha and Nepali he subscribed to a local newspaper to learn Nepali properly. Together with Bhim Subba, another former member of the Bhutan government, he edited a newspaper in English and Nepali, *Bhutan Review* from Jan 1993 to October 1996. He also compiled an annual Human Rights report to counter official Bhutanese government reports, such as the national newspaper, *Kuensel*.

A major effort was made to escort diplomats and foreign government officials to the camps to experience the numbers of refugees and their situation; as well as, behind the scenes, targeting governments who appeared sympathetic. Other international visitors, were present studying the situation in the camps and assisting, such as a team of Japanese doctors who diagnosed and cured teenage Nanda's jaundice.

When an AUSTCARE workshop was offered in creative writing Nanda was chosen as interpreter, first when it was delivered in English, and later for the Nepali-language version. This opened his mind to writing. He also developed interpretation skills which he enabled him to assist in several situations and meet people from overseas. Later he earned a small fee translating books for Nepali forestry.

Playwright, David Williamson was among a group of Australian authors and screen writers UNHCR invited to visit the camps; 'hoping we would try, in our own small way, to alert the world to a large-scale and continuing crime against humanity that the world had not even yet noticed'.

He writes:

> *The refugee camps proved to be uplifting rather than depressing. The spirit of the refugees was stirringly defiant. As we walked with them down the feet-hardened mud walkways of their new refugee villages, they told us harrowing stories of the beatings, rape, indignities and torture they had undergone, without a trace of maudlin self-pity. They just wanted us to hear the facts. To hear the truth. They wanted us to experience the pride they felt that they could endure such sudden savagery and not be broken. They wanted us to bear witness to their deep feelings that justice must eventually prevail. They wanted us to see that they were not a beaten people but were organising themselves for the day when they would return triumphantly to their homelands.*

Om and Saroja's home became a rallying and information hub. To keep issues alive, Om and others staged street demonstrations in Kathmandu from time to time, they were arrested, but treated kindly by the Nepali police.

Following initiation of talks between the governments of Bhutan and Nepal in 1993, one important issue was to establish who in the camps were genuine refugees. The Bhutanese government claimed most had left voluntarily or were not Bhutanese. By October four categories of Bhutanese had been agreed: Bonafide Bhutanese if: have been evicted forcefully; Bhutanese who emigrated; non-Bhutanese people; Bhutanese who have committed a criminal offence eg: speaking or writing against Bhutan government.

Om Dhungel in Vienna June 1993 – *Bhutan Review* Dec 1993

In June 1993 Sadako Ogata, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, spoke in Vienna, about 'the right to remain' and not be forced into exile. She said:

> *If I … emphasize the right not to become a refugee, it is because I know that the international protection that UNHC'R, in cooperation with countries of asylum, can offer to refugees is not an adequate substitute for the protection that they should haye receiyed from their own governments in their own countries. The generosity of asylum countries cannot fully replace the loss of a homeland, or relieve the pain of exile.*

Some countries such as Canada had begun to withdraw aid from Bhutan as a sanction for its treatment of the Nepali-speaking southerners. India had good relations with Bhutan and Nepal, but did not use its influence to broker a deal for refugees to be accepted back into Bhutan.

Meanwhile on the ground a series of peaceful marches were organised by activists in the camps, attempting to walk from Nepal across India to the border of Bhutan. They visited each residence in the camps asking for support - a fistful of rice to feed the marchers. Participants' ages ranged between 20 and 50 years; Puspa took part but he only got as far as Mechi bridge. It was mostly men, though Nanda's sister took part in the second march. Yadav clearly remembers that a young boy from his high school class was shot by Indian police when he tried to cross the border.

The first march left from Damak on 14 January1996, reaching the Indian border on the third day. Participant, Hari Khanal describes the scene:

> *There was a lot of crying, singing, many things like that, because it was the departing point of our group. About 150 people were there in the forefront with the banner [which] said "Peace March to Bhutan" in Nepali and English. … We wanted to show the government of Bhutan that this was a peaceful group of people who just want to go home.*

They were stopped in the middle of the Mechi Bridge, the border line with India, and 150 or so were arrested, soon a second wave, about another 250 people came and got across the bridge. A camp was established in India at Panchai, where marchers could recover and regroup to march again towards Bhutan. There were seventeen waves, some were arrested and jailed at Berhampur India, until they were released after a hunger strike in early July. On 15 August 1996, after a scout who passed as an Indian, found a safe route they managed to cross into Bhutan and went to the bus station to travel to Thimphu. They were apprehended and under cover of darkness bussed back to India.

No-one managed to return and stay in Bhutan. However, as Hari Khanal says, the march proclaimed to the international community,

> *that we don't want to go anywhere else, we want to go back to Bhutan and serve our own country Bhutan, rather than living anywhere else.*

Less dramatic than the marches, but equally important was a major project under the auspices of Association of Human Rights Activists, Bhutan, to create a database of each Bhutanese refugee or family's important documents, which proved their heritage. This also preserved documents from any future loss in fire or storms. A dozen volunteers collected and scanned documents such as: citizenship ID card, land tax receipt, kasho, - a document given by the King to the people offering them some land, their address in Bhutan and at the camp - and carefully returning them to their owners. Nearly half the camps' population was listed in this way and this disproved the Bhutan government's stance that they were not Bhutanese people, and that they freely chose to leave Bhutan and return to their country of origin.

Protestor, Bhakta Ghimire reflects on both strategies saying:

> *The documentation database was effective to convince the world that we are from Bhutan, but we need a new home now, and the march was to demonstrate the feelings and the emotions of the general Bhutanese people, and that we were peaceful.*

The fourth king abdicated in 2006 so that his son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, could implement more democratic rule in 2008.

These changes may have been influenced by the message of the marches, as Hari Khanal says:

> *Bhutan at least developed a written constitution, and established a multi-party democracy under the instruction of the King.*

According to Nanda, many people in the camps were not involved politically. It was mainly the literate and articulate who read papers like *Bhutan Review* and followed events, as he grew older, he became interested, but the rest of his family were not.

He recalls that in 2003/4 it seemed there would be an opportunity for genuine Bhutanese refugees to return to Bhutan. However, Nanda felt he had forgotten Dzongkha language. He was a literate person and wondered, 'What future would I have there? And would our land be given back to us?'.

By 2005 there were still over 100 000 people living in camps and there had been no agreement about returning any to their homeland, Younger people had no prospects, despite an excellent education in the camps, apart from becoming teachers in Nepali schools, they still had no citizen's rights and were confined to a life in temporary camps. Many had been born in Nepal and never seen Bhutan. Nonetheless some planned to go to Bhutan and use their skills as doctors, teachers, accountants, or social workers. Older people still hoped to return to their homeland. Others had married local Nepalis and had no wish to return to Bhutan.

In 2006 UNHCR counted 107 800 refugees in the Nepali camps.

Following the 16th round of Nepal/Bhutan talks in 2006, the idea of third country resettlement was proposed and supported by other countries, the USA, and a few others, including Australia.

This idea split the camp communities into: those who would only settle for a return to Bhutan, those who wanted to stay in Nepal, and those who wanted to take the chance of going to another country.

At first the last option seemed a leap into the unknown. But those who went first, and others who had already moved to Australia, like Om Dhungel, could report on life there and the opportunities it offered, especially for those who would learn English and train for a new job.

Communications had changed by now. Mobile phones were available and relatives who resettled elsewhere would call and elaborate on conditions and opportunities. Third country resettlement gradually became a reality, rather than a dream.

Third Country Resettlement

Tulasha remembers that at Goldhap camp in 2007 they all gathered for a meeting where representatives from different countries spoke about the possibility of resettlement. Although there was an atmosphere of disbelief, she thought 'If they offer, we can go'. She felt constrained by the camp and was keen to leave. She talked via pay phone with her cousin in America. Her parents didn't want to go anywhere, saying 'Wait and see'. She applied, secretly filling out forms at night and posting them in the letterbox inside the army camp nearby, as she was afraid of those in the camp who opposed any option but return to Bhutan. A month later she was called by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) office. She went, saying she had a work meeting, which she regularly did. Next the whole family went for an interview. Asked which country they wanted, she chose Australia, although she knew nothing about it. After waiting eight months for medical check-ups, they flew to Kathmandu. On 11 February 2009, she arrived in Australia with her husband, son aged twelve and daughter aged nine.

> *It had been so hard to leave, hearing her own parents and her husband's parents, and all her friends crying, 'Don't go!'.*

Champha was living outside Pathri camp and teaching in Pokhara. She had seen the advantages her pupils' parents had living and working overseas, and she wanted to go straight away. Champha chose Australia as some relatives were already living there. They were given preference because her husband's nephew had health problems. After a series of medical tests, Champha, her three-year-old son, her husband and his parents all arrived in Sydney on 3 March 2010. Later that year her brother and sister came to Sydney and her parents soon after.

As Yadav grew older, he realised there were better places to live than Pathri camp. His brothers too were seeking fresh opportunities. Their maternal uncle, Om Dhungyel, a vet, was living in Australia. Yadav heard of sealed roads, education and people following the rules. At first his father only wanted to return to Bhutan. The process for the whole family took two years, then suddenly travel tickets arrived with only a week's notice. They brought only clothes; they had no valuables and left furniture and household items for his sister and neighbours. Yadav gave his phone to a relative and the family relied on his brother's phone, Reassuringly, they met with an uncle who spoke good English and was on their 13 May 2010 flight to Sydney.

Nepali Maoists rallied some people in the camps to fight with them promising that in return they would help them get back to Bhutan. Police were stationed in Goldhap camp to stop any Maoist-backed violence. Later they endeavoured to keep the peace between those who wanted to leave for third country resettlement and those who tried to stop them, who felt that reducing numbers would diminish their power to press for repatriation.

Puspa remembers how much the news of resettlement divided people. Although he still hoped to return to Bhutan, Puspa applied as early as 2001 to migrate to Canada and Australia where his wife's brother was already living. The former refused him, and he never had an answer from Australia. In 2008 after two years process, he and his family arrived in Sydney on one of his son's birthday, 26 May 2010, and celebrated his new birth in Australia with a cake!

Raju's paternal grandparents and other elders used to talk about their lives in Bhutan and say,

> *Raju, soon, we'll return. We'll go back. There is a really nice river we can go there and swim. We could plant our own fruits. We used to have cattle, cows, goats. We could have plentiful butter and buttermilk. Our ancestor land is Nepal. Land [in Bhutan] was really good to us. Hard work was worthwhile Land was our mother.*

His family also had a long wait from 2008, involving photo documentation, health checks and interviews with an interpreter. His mother had an older sister living in Australia and his father sympathised with her wanting to be with relatives. Everybody was leaving: his grandparents and most of his relatives had chosen America – a quicker process. Once his close friend and his cousin left, Raju was excited, impatiently asking his mother,

> *when are we going? We shouldn't wait. If we don't get called for Australia, we should go to America. By then we all wanted to go- it was not so much about the place, it was about the people, your friend, your neighbour, your cousins. That makes so much difference.*

In July 2010 they left with 'only a few clothes, in a big bag'.

Nanda applied for Australian resettlement in 2008. His sister-in-law's family had also planned to seek resettlement in Australia as some of their relatives were already living there. He had also read about Australia and was attracted by a large island continent with a small population as providing more opportunities.

His brothers had already applied, but he was delayed because he missed IOM interview appointments when they visited the camp, as he was working elsewhere. Eventually he gave up work to be sure that he could be present. Nanda, his mother, wife and child reached Sydney on 10 March 2011.

By July 2013 only one third of the Bhutanese refugees, about 35 800, remained in the Nepal camps.

Life in Australia

Third country settlement is very rare; today it is estimated that only one per cent of refugees world-wide manage to move beyond the country where they first found refuge and be accepted into another country.

Although the telling of these life stories may imply the narrators were destined to live in Australia in fact the odds were all against it. The resettlement of 100 000 Lhotsampa Bhutanese is quite remarkable and a testament both to those advocates who toiled to raise awareness and the refugees themselves who presented as an organized community coupled with the generosity of other countries, particularly USA, which welcomed 80 000, Canada, Denmark, UK, New Zealand, Norway, the Netherlands and Australia.

As the years in exile in Nepal dragged on, Om Dhungel felt he must try to get a livelihood in order to support his wife and daughter, as well as his parents who were living in Beldangi camp. Committed to ensuring the return of his fellow refugees to Bhutan and seeing little progress, he wanted to explore other avenues. It was not an easy decision to leave them all to study for an MBA in Australia. When he arrived on a student visa, he stayed with his brother and family on the fringe of Sydney. He studied at UTS, with a long commute every day to Sydney Central; worked in a supermarket to support himself, and his family in Nepal. He was constantly concerned about them. Communication with Nepal was very limited, phone calls were expensive yet he wanted to hear their voices. He eventually collapsed with exhaustion and worry. Fortunately, his professor helped him apply for a scholarship and she arranged for six months deferral of his course.

Om and his wife, Saroja had each made two attempts to get visas for her and their daughter, finally they arrived two days before his graduation in May 2001. Om had already made a major decision to give up any hope of returning to Bhutan and applied for asylum in Australia which was granted in July 2000. Their reunited family lived in Dulwich Hill sharing a flat with two other Bhutanese, Tulsi Sharma and Dr Naresh Parajuli. At this time there were only three other Bhutanese families in Sydney.

Saroja had to retrain, meanwhile working at a fast-food chain. Om continued with his supermarket job. Now that he had an MBA he applied again and again for suitable positions, only to be rejected. His employment officer filmed him in a mock interview and discovered that he didn't make eye contact with her at all. In Bhutan it was sign of respect always to lower your eyes in front of an elder, but here in Australia once he looked up, offers of jobs came. Eventually he took a position with Telstra – despite his former background as a communications engineer, he became an analyst researching and reporting developments in similar companies.

He became involved with several organisations supporting migrants and those seeking asylum. His focus shifted from helping to empowering; settlement and long-term integration. He continued advocacy work.

In 2007, the four Sydney Bhutanese families, anticipating the imminent arrival of many friends, relatives and fellow Bhutanese from the camps in Nepal, formed the Association of Bhutanese in Australia. (ABA). Its purpose was to welcome the newcomers and ease their settlement in Australia. It also gave them an official representative body to work with government and non- government agencies, schools and other educational organisations.

Raju, was 13 years old when he reached Australia, leaving his childhood behind. His family stayed three weeks with an uncle and aunt in Wollongong, but then moved to Lalor Park, western Sydney as there were more Bhutanese which eased their settlement. He delighted in the luxury of running water, long hot showers, constant electricity made cooking easy at any time, but was confused by the 'gibberish' language on the TV, and intimidated by the size of the house; the family were used to sleeping in one room. After a week he and his sister attended intensive English school, guided through the trains, buses and shops by a Nepalese social worker. A year later he started high school Although his reading level was lower than his age, he did well in sciences, history and geography. He learned everything from classes, or on TV, by repetition – a skill well-taught in the camp schools.

Leaving school he was endlessly rejected for any jobs, eventually being taken on when he walked into a local fish and chip shop near to his school. Dishwashing, cleaning and taking orders he gained his first experience of work. He studied bio medical science at UTS but felt like 'a little fish in a big sea' until his third year when he made friends who each had another cultural background. In his summer breaks he wanted to experience different things. He passed his first interview and worked in a warehouse processing orders. He enjoyed the long commute: he says, 'I could read, I could listen to music, see the sights crossing the Harbour Bridge, every day' Congenial colleagues bolstered his confidence and regular pay gave him a longed-for independence.

Advised by a professor, he arranged work experience in a medical laboratory, learning, watching and assisting; after graduation he moved to an entry-level position at another hospital. His ambition is to study medicine, the admission test is very tough, but he is determined. Otherwise, he will pursue research in pathology and contribute to public health.

Raju was not worried by the isolation of the Covid pandemic, though he worked long extra hours; he loves to listen to podcasts, read and research.

He became curious about Bhutan's history and his family's history. When he was living in Khudunabari camp he had heard his parents and paternal grandparents talking about what happened in Bhutan. For many years his mother had no contact with her parents and family in Bhutan, but later letters and money were delivered via Nepalis living in India. Today her family have education and livelihood, and as they accept national restrictions, the discrimination they experience is not too extreme. Although they were able to visit Australia for three months in 2018, it seems to Raju uncertain whether his mother will ever be allowed to return to her birthplace. He says with feeling, 'It is our motherland'.

On reflection he remembers he could sense his parents concern coming to Australia in their 40s, but in the camp, already they had faced a life of uncertainty. They developed resilience and had survived and this gives them and him confidence they can do well in Australia. His mother was determined to drive a car and her example encouraged Raju and his sister.

Being confident to communicate in English has taken Raju many years. Initially he feared ridicule now he has reached a level of sophistication and nuance, which allows him to have meaningful friendships.

He feels:

> *I can really speak for myself. I can really have a voice. I can feel a sense of liberty … and work towards reaching my potential.*

Yadav arrived in 2011, aged 21 and ready for a new life. He was met by Om Dhungyel and a resettlement officer. For six months he attended English classes and during the next two years, he gained TAFE certificates in vocational studies and tertiary education skills. He was determined to work in health care and enrolled in a three-year nursing course, at the University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury campus, followed by a graduate program at a local hospital. By 2016 he had a permanent position in an orthopaedic ward, but he was redeployed during the Covid 19 pandemic. He is proud to give back to Australia, as it had given him a new life.

He realised the challenge his family had faced learning a new language. For his parents who were in their 60s when they arrived, it was, and is, a struggle; especially not being able to talk with neighbours, a contrast to the close communal monolingual camp. It was easier for him.

Yadav outlines the process by which his brothers, without any qualifications had difficulty finding work. But, through community connections and asking others, 'How did you get that job?', they got help: to write a resume, and after many attempts secure part-time work, maybe get cleaning jobs and gain experience, and gradually build up to full time work.

His parents always remain positive, reflecting on what they have now, remembering what they have survived before. His mother delights in their garden, bursting with fruit and vegetables, Yadav remarks: 'Whatever she plants, grows'.

Yadav says, 'My grandparents lived with my parents until they passed away'. As is customary, he lives with his parents, and expects to learn from their wisdom and experience; especially now he and his wife are raising their first child. He says, 'Parents are supposed to live with [their] children until their last breath'.

His parents talk about life in Bhutan almost every day, when someone from the village visits, and they dream about it. They are in contact with relatives in Bhutan, talking by phone regularly. His mother asks after their former village and she tells Yadav, 'You must go and see it one day. You take your children and say this is where your parents and grandparents lived'. He says,

> *One day I will go to see what the place where I was born looks like.* Yadav

When Champha and her husband arrived, their young son went to childcare while they both studied English language. Her husband studied accounting and she took courses in hotel housekeeping and customer service. After her daughter was born, she passed her driving test. Next, she studied aged care and was offered a job where she had done a placement.

Soon she became a personal care assistant at a Catholic nursing home close to her house. The nursing home has paid for further training and for the last seven years she has acted as 'carer, cook and cleaner'. She says:

> *Every day, if we have a vacancy, I ask people in the street, 'Do you have a qualification? You can get it. Come and work'. I have recruited almost ten.*

Some are her relatives or friends and she enjoys their positive harmonious multicultural team. During the 2021 Covid pandemic lockdown they lost staff, so she worked seven days a week, often for 14 hours. She loves her job and the 50 residents and says;

> *I will be working in aged care - all my life. I enjoy working with old people. I know what is my responsibility, the knowledge I have.*

Her parents are happier here after a tough life in both Bhutan and Nepal. Her siblings are scattered across Australia, while some relatives still live in Bhutan. Some arrived in Pathri in 1995 and are not officially registered as refugees. They are still there today, but not allowed into Australia. Champha sends money because they have no other support.

Champha remembers communal life in the camps:

> *My friends, my relatives we used to live close to each other, my nephews, nieces, my cousins we had a circle together, every day, doing homework together, helping each other, sleeping all on one mattress, during the nighttime we would take papayas and make salad. They are all in different countries now.*

She would like to visit Bhutan, but also to contribute as social worker there, or even in Nepal, which she considers their protector. 'They let us stay there for 20 years. They helped us.'

> *When I came to Australia, I saw the world. I learned lots of things. When I started working, I met with different people, different cultures, different religions, different points of view. We got a chance to work. We have all changed. Every day is interesting.* Champha

Nanda, despite speaking English and having already taught in English medium in Nepal, struggled to find work. In his English classes he concentrated on trying to speak with Australian accent and tone. He took a casual delivery job to get local experience and a reference. He was employed in an Indian furniture shop, paid cash-in-hand. It helped that he understood Hindi. When the owners moved to Queensland, they left him with an excellent reference which convinced Aldi to employ him casually, but they soon took him on permanently, managing orders.

Last year he started working as an Uber driver, using his spare time to make some extra money. He likes the variety of his customers' cultures and experiences: every time he drives, he learns from their interesting and inspiring stories.

When he arrived here his aim was to buy a house and get a degree, He enrolled in an anthropology degree, but he wanted to empower his wife to get a job first. After completing Certificate III in Child Care Education from local TAFE, she got job at a day care centre in Western Sydney. Later she ran her own day care business at home for some time and returned to her previous employer when she stopped home day care. Now Nanda has time he is studying a masters of Public Health. Due to Covid restrictions all his classes have been online, but that allows him more time for work, although he misses visiting the university campus and library.

As an adolescent and young man, Nanda had informally acted as community interpreter on several occasions. In 2012 there were few Nepali-speakers in Australia, so he volunteered to help the Bhutanese community, interpreting at SydWest Multicultural Services seminars. In 2019 he was one of four Nepali-speakers

awarded an interpretation scholarship offered by state government Multicultural NSW. It covered ethics, code of conduct, privacy, current regulations and skill sets of what to do in each interpreting situation.

He is a casual panelist for Multicultural NSW. As an interpreter, Nanda is expected to inform his employer if his client is a relative or a close friend because there might be a potential conflict of interest. Typically, he works at a police station or in the courts, occasionally at hospitals. Sometimes clients expect him to converse with them, or change the outcome of their case. So, before the interview, following his code of ethics and conduct procedures Nanda explains that he will only tell them exactly what is said to him and in turn only translate exactly what they say. He says striving to be exact requires, 'very concentrated listening'. It is sometimes challenging to find a suitable word to convey meaning. in another culture.

> *Interpretation makes me feel fulfilled, but equally sometimes there is a lot of pressure. If clients have a long story without breaks it's hard to remember everything they say, and I don't want to offend them by limiting their chance to express themselves.* Nanda

Nanda is fascinated by legal process, and researches relevant vocabulary and background, consequently he has learned much about Australian culture. He is pleased he can offer help and demonstrate his ability.

Although he is bi-lingual, he reads more books in English, but his reflection on emotions and understanding, comes to him in Nepali. He writes poetry and stories in Nepali, but feels his English writing is better.

His mother, Maya, likes to reminisce about Bhutan. Nanda says 'if she feels lonely, I talk about relatives or Bhutan'. She remembers less about Nepal, whereas she recalls life in Bhutan clearly. Nanda would go to Nepal or India and invite relatives to meet him there, but reckons it is unlikely he could enter Bhutan to

> *visit the place where I was born … the environment [is] very clean, a very fresh life, a natural life.* Nanda

Tulasha knew no-one, when she arrived aged 37 in 2009 and the Sydney Bhutanese community was very small. She was happy to meet Om Dhungel and Dr Om Dhungyel who would visit and sometimes stay with them overnight. Her children attended intensive English classes and she studied English assiduously for the next four years. During this time, she says: 'I didn't want to stay at home. I wanted to stop taking Centrelink money'. She found a cleaning job, and even when she became unwell, she couldn't rest. She took a one-year course in childcare, working part-time, studying part-time.

She passed her driver's test which made it easier getting to work at St Marys multicultural centre. There, for four years, Tulasha helped with childcare for Japanese, Indian and Bhutanese families. She organised activities for Bhutanese and other parents such as: sewing groups and also went with them on a three-day camp. Some of the women had never left home before. They were taught about different childrearing practices and managing domestic violence, as well as doing new challenging activities: canoeing and riding a flying fox. She was their interpreter.

Tulasha also took on the role of interpreter for health screening services, as she understood Hindi. She trained at Westmead Hospital and passed a written exam. In 2014 at Liverpool hospital

she became a bi-lingual community educator for the Bhutanese. She had to learn all about health checks and body parts and demonstrate the processes for breast care and pap smears. Afterwards she educated 25 Bhutanese women, in six sessions explaining, in Nepali, what hospitals provide for health care. She still encourages them to get regular checks and drives them to medical appointments.

Tulasha has a heart-felt message:

> *All women in the world, not just our community, they need to go outside, visit other places, if they don't know another language, learn another language, learn writing, learn reading, using the internet. If they are really interested, they can become whatever they want to be in this world. I like to encourage them. Our job is not to be cooking, go out and talk to the neighbors, they will talk to you. Everyone can raise children, but we can do more.*

She describes how she would always use her husband as an interpreter, until one day, after a few months, he took her to Blacktown supermarket and said:

> *'You go alone, today, by yourself'. The cashier lady said 'You are not with your husband today You talk very nicely. Anywhere you go, don't take your husband, you learn talk. You go to hospital by yourself, see the doctor, you can do it'.*

When she moved to Albury and worked as a hospital cleaner, she was unhappy because she couldn't improve her English. Now, working again in childcare, she learns from the children and the staff. She has to write, she has to read to the children and answer their questions. She researches online to find out about

Christmas, nursery rhymes and songs. All this she finds stops her thinking about the past in Bhutan.

The house in Albury is less expensive and neighbours are friendly. She avoids mentioning her refugee background, unless people ask. Some people are racist and ignore any greeting, or say, 'Go back to your country'.

Tulasha reflects:

> *Inside, I feel I have nowhere to go. Bhutan is my birth country. I can never forget, but I don't think I can go back.*
>
> *In the camps we didn't have anything. Resettlement has been so helpful – education, knowledge and opportunities … women and men can get jobs…. All the community feels they want to contribute and give back. I thank the Australian government [and] those who brought us here.* Tulasha

Welcome by family and friends at Sydney Airport

Puspa moved to Blacktown close to his sister. After six months of English classes, he found warehouse work, but as he was in his mid-fifties it was physically too hard. Instead, he studied for a diploma in community services at TAFE and volunteered at SydWest Multicultural Services – later getting a part-time job.

With his background in government service in Bhutan, he was pleased to work as a generalist caseworker, helping refugees and migrants during their first five years in Australia. Puspa reflects, 'When I came here someone helped me with all these things'. His understanding and empathy allow migrants to open up when he says, 'I am here to help you'.

Puspa reckons many of the Bhutanese community have purchased their own homes and most have achieved citizenship – important securities, after 20 years as refugees.

In 2018 he visited friends, relatives and camp neighbours who had settled in other countries and saw positive results. He was glad because many families were divided at the time and he had encouraged them nonetheless to leave the camps.

He reflects:

> *As long as I can I should work; retiring - keeping idle - is not good for your health, when your mind is working, your body also gets fit. I don't think it's my retiring time.* Puspa

Puspa runs an elders' group; (initially 20 now about 16), several of whom are in their 90s and have had no formal education. In 2010 when the program started a SydWest Multicultural Services bus collected elders and took them to their premises in Blacktown every Friday morning. When the bus broke down and could not be replaced, children dropped off their parents.

Following the March 2020 Covid pandemic restrictions, the elders began meeting online via Facebook Messenger. They have been taught, by their children or grandchildren, how to manage the technology. This has opened a new way of keeping up with families and friends scattered across the world. Once restrictions eased, still scared of Covid, they wanted to continue talking online. Puspa organises them to meet every Friday afternoon and facilitates discussion for an hour or two on Messenger, and when he has free time, he visits other homes to help with this too. He inquires how people are feeling, what they are missing and what they would like to do. He informs them what programs are on offer and updates them with the latest health information about the pandemic and vaccinations.

Puspa feels certain this program, by reducing isolation, prevents dementia and depression, and relieves the long day alone at home.

Once a fortnight on Tuesday, a seniors' group and their carers meet at Riverstone Neighbourhood Community Centre to tend their garden plots. They started with one, they now have three. The centre collects them in a bus and with all the tools and equipment provided, these seniors, who once were farmers, readily grow, potatoes, pumpkin, corn, cabbage, lettuce, herbs. Sometimes they cook up a vegetable curry or pumpkin soup. There is time to talk about Bhutan, and also reflect on their lives in the camps where they met so many people from different parts of Bhutan.

Other outings are planned, everyone makes suggestions including: painting, dancing, discussions, health checks, sight and hearing tests and therapy sessions are all organised at SydWest centres and an excursion every two months. In this way they create a busy program for the year.

Puspa holding his Community Service Diploma – Puspa Acharya

Afterwords

Between 2007 and 2016 113 500 Bhutanese refugees were resettled to eight third countries due to lack of voluntary repatriation prospects.

By 2019 there were still 6500 Bhutanese left, still waiting in Nepal, hoping to return to Bhutan.

When Owen Baerstein visited Beldangi 2 in 2019 it was the only surviving camp. He was shown round by two brothers: one a pastor and the other the camp secretary. He describes the scene:

> *This camp, now nearly three decades old, is only a shadow of what it once was. Where once stood United Nations housing, painted a brilliant white and adorned with sky blue insignia, is now a small, concentrated knot of roadside shacks, selling everything from bags of chips to tiny packets of Lakshmi chewing tobacco. The only remaining trace of state intervention is the Nepali Armed Police barracks, hemmed in by barbed wire and a warped and bent iron gate. Without an understanding of the atrocities that the Lhotshampa faced, Beldangi II looks like any other small Nepali farming village. The houses are made of woven bamboo and concrete supports, both manufactured on the camp premises … and other left-overs from the dismantled camps.*

Those who came as children and are now parents, try to find some work, while their children attend camp school. They are surrounded by an open grassy plain. From time to time, elephants still invade Beldangi 2 camp, and the residents fear that their flimsy homes will be crushed. In this and many other ways, occupants' security remains so tenuous.

As Baerstein reflects:

These camps were never mean to be permanent.

Very few people are resettled nowadays; Australia is the only country still accepting Lhotsampa refugees. Camps and institutions exist throughout the world to house the expanding numbers of refugees. These are not a humane solution and in many cases the experience has been far worse than the Lhotsampa endured. A new approach is needed which opens borders and considers a more welcoming culture.

No-one wants to be a refugee. To be forced from your home and denied return to your country, or know that if you do return you will be imprisoned or killed. In 2021 this was a reality for 26.5 million people. Today adding the 7 million Ukrainians displaced when Russia invaded in 2022, the total approaches 34 million.

Women appeal for repatriation – *Bhutan Review* Feb 1995

The Nepali-speaking Bhutanese, whose intrepid ancestors had left Nepal a century earlier to settle and farm in Bhutan, in the 1990s were suddenly evicted from their homes and compelled to leave. Fortunately, Nepal generously allowed them to stay.

Initially conditions were life threatening, and many people, mostly the elderly and children, died. The makeshift camps were unsanitary and overcrowded; nutrition was poor.

Although everyone hoped soon to return to their homes in Bhutan, this new community in exile began to organise themselves. Drawing on their combined skills and used to being self-sufficient in many ways, each family built their own shelter. They set up schools and health centres, staffed by members of their own community. They established camp responsibilities and communication structures. They were supported by international agencies or their local branches: UNHCR, Red Cross, World Food Program, Caritas, World Lutheran Foundation, Oxfam, Save the Children which provided basic infrastructure, food, clothes, cooking utensils and bedding.

Some advantages emerged. Although the camps were crammed into a small space, proximity meant it was easier for children to attend the comprehensive co-educational school system. Adult, men and women had access to literacy, numeracy and social education, and all ages could have some level of health care. Teachers could teach, nurses and doctors could help the sick. People arrived randomly, although some met up with relatives, they also mixed with people from different parts of Bhutan which broadened their horizons. A shared common language meant it was easier to communicate and organise systems in the camp, as well as freely celebrate their culture together.

Supplementary food was essential, but there was little spare land to cultivate, a natural activity for most of those in the camps. When men were unable to farm, they felt they were failing in their duty to provide for their family. They tried to earn some income but it was hard and, in some cases took them away from their families and life in the camp. Women were busy with daily chores: cooking, collecting water, washing, cleaning, caring for babies and preschoolers. Both women and men sometimes worked as labourers on local farms, so they could purchase a few necessities. Those who worked in the camps, teaching and in other roles, received only a very small incentive payment. Lack of material objects seems to have been unimportant and when leaving to resettle, they took nothing except clothes.

The initial hope that after some months they would all be able to return to Bhutan began to fade. The wait stretched for years, Nonetheless, for nearly all those who were adults when they left, this remained a constant goal. Only a few had married or settled in Nepal and did not want to return. When the possibility of going to a third country came this caused tension, and even violence, between those who felt this was an abandonment of the 'right to return' and those who wanted the opportunity to live a different life elsewhere.

All the people I spoke with have built a life for themselves and their families here, in Australia. More than that they contribute to and are involved with the broader Australian community. Their experience shows the importance of language to express yourself and build relationship. This ability to straddle two cultures also brings both power and responsibility.

The ABA model of involving the community to help themselves at a grass roots level, has been very successful; and in the longer term has been more effective than delivering services that government agencies decide are needed.

The stories interwoven in this history, of those who left Nepal and came to live in Australia, present a positive picture. This is not to say that each of them, and indeed their extended family, has not suffered. Retelling or reliving their experiences can be painful, and memories still lurk not far below the surface.

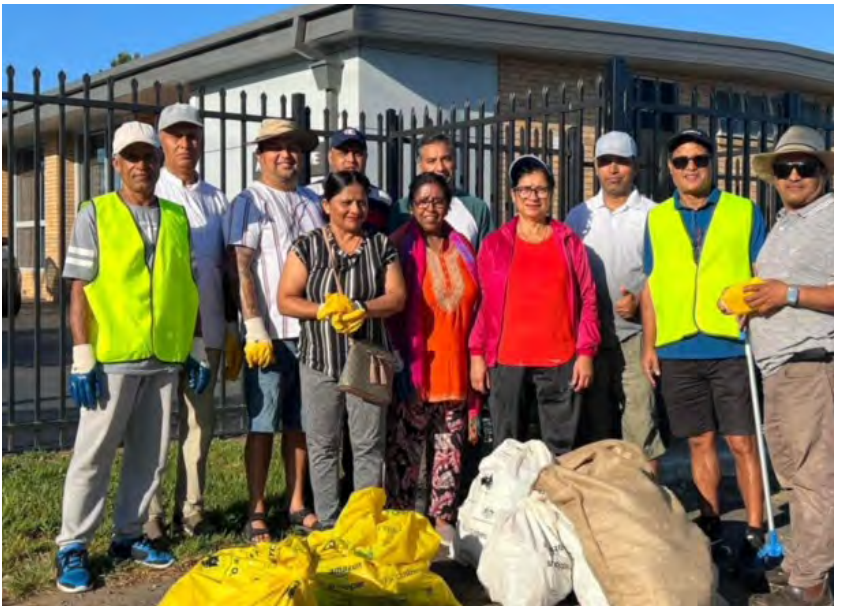
> *It is good that we came from life in the camps. We learned how to live in crisis. We were seasoned, matured. Bhutanese think not only for ourselves, but for others. This country gave us the chance.* Puspa

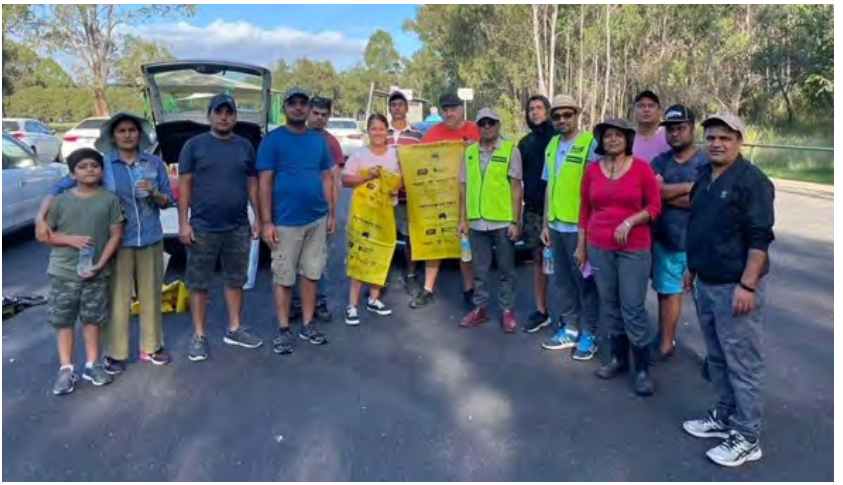
Bhutanese Community gatherings – Association of Bhuanese in Australia

The Association of Bhutanese in Australia [ABA] grew from the few families living in Sydney who provided mutual support and celebrated their culture. Initially members would meet arrivals at the airport, explain the bewildering number of home appliances, took them shopping to find foods they appreciated and introduced them to free local facilities - like libraries, Although caseworkers were assigned to arrivals, Bhutanese people who had made the same transition could provide explanation and cultural interpretation. They supplemented the government English language classes with conversation with a Bhutanese resident, often matching villagers or people with shared background.

Nearly twelve years later the ABA still supports its people, now with advice on how to get work, or buy a house. Every month – though stopped during the Covid epidemic - they gather in a park or a hall to celebrate national or religious festival. Half the ABA events celebrate Bhutanese festivals; the other half introduce and include other cultures in Australia; for example, Sri Lankan, African, Indigenous communities perform together with the Bhutanese. As well as members explore the Australian countryside and culture with trips to the national capital and the temples.

Children's language classes are importasnt so that grandchildren can communicate with grandparents. But also gathering all generations together helps to bridge the age gap and fosters understanding of their elders' views, as well as the challenges younger people face living across two cultures.





Bhutanese Community gatherings – Association of Bhuanese in Australia

Yadav and Champha have both served the ten-person executive committee. She is aware it is important to prevent elders being isolated. She organizes sports and they took a soccer team to Tasmania, she also takes elders to medical and other appointments. Nanda has helped informally, as well as serving in various positions on the executive committee since 2012, including cultural coordinator, general secretary and advisor, and in 2022 was elected ABA President, Helping his community and Australian society in general, whenever possible, has become a part of his daily routine and he considers it is embedded in his genes.

As the younger generations shoulder the responsibility to foster community culture, Om says, 'It becomes important to remember those who supported the 90 families here now'.

All those I spoke with have a strong sense of attachment to Bhutan, despite some, like Yadav, being barely able to remember it. They have grown up with the stories of their parents, grandparents, relatives and camp neighbors. They each help their family follow events in Bhutan today, exchanging news gleaned from phone calls to relatives still living there, and through social media.

The ABA is committed to raise Australian government awareness of continuing human rights' abuse in Bhutan; and the plight of those still in Nepal, stateless. For Om it is also, 'a duty as one of the 25 million refugees in the world today'.

There is also a plan, which so far has been delayed by the Covid pandemic, to visit Canberra to formally thank the government of Australia for welcoming them all.

The Lhotsampa have not abandoned the hope to be able to return to their homeland.

When he was still living in Beldangi 2, Vidhyapati Mishra wrote about his own exile from Bhutan and the difficulties he and fellow refugees experienced over twenty years. He moved to USA and in 2013 published an article, 'Bhutan is No Shangri-La' in the *New York Times*.

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.*

Bhutanese remain vigilant, even though so many have now settled across the diaspora. As academic studying the plight of Asian refugees, Susan Banki writes: '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'.

Now settled in the diaspora, Hari Khanal reflects with hope:

> *We really love our country and our people in Bhutan, and we want to do something positive. In the past, we always criticized for everything that happened in Bhutan. … Many of us are connected to our old classmates, with people who have been in Bhutan all this time, through different social media. This is a good first step to start utilizing social media to influence the Bhutanese government and the people inside, that we always think positively about the country and the people.*

Raju, a 25-year-old reflects:

Elders have lived through many things. Even though our experience may not be the same they still have experience and wisdom and knowledge of different things. They grew up in a different era but they are able to give advice from that perspective. Younger generations should build more connection with them, ask them about their history, their past life, how they were able to manage. Even though our time is very different, we can still apply their wisdom. They are our people we came from them, our parents, grandparents. Now both generations are established, after more than ten years we can rebuild this connection.

Young people like to conform and may not speak too much of their own language or practice too much of their culture, as you grow older you can combine the two cultures. We are part of the Bhutanese and Nepalese diaspora by our inheritance, it is entrenched into our DNA, and it will be part of our identity throughout our existence. By the same right, Australia is our adoptive home, having spent most of our formative years in Australia, our Nepalese Bhutanese identity and values such as loyalty, solidarity, generosity, interdependence and collectiveness has been significantly compounded by Australian values such as fairness, mateship, egalitarianism, personal liberty, freedom of choice, secularism and multiculturalism. We do not have to choose our inherited Nepalese-Bhutanese identity over our acquired Australian identity, instead we can pick the best out of each identity, combine them and unabashedly embody the amalgamation. Raju

Endnotes

1 Ngalong, Sarchop, Kheng and Nepali-speakers - make up 98 per cent of the population. Ngalongs, Sarchops and Khengs are all adherents to the drukpa kargyud school of Mahayana Buddhism, although each has a distinct identity as well. Ngalongs are people of western Bhutan and of Tibetan origin; they form the ruling and social elite. Nepali-speakers are a mostly Hindu ethnic group, predominantly based in the south of Bhutan and called lhotshampa, literally southern border people, by the drukpa.. REF Minority Rights Group International, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Bhutan, 2007, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/4954ce62c.html [accessed 29 September 2021]

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit Dooars or Duars, meaning 'door'.

3 In 1981 there were 36,705 students and 58,796 students by 1988.

4 https://www.caritas.org/where-caritas-work/asia/nepal/

5 https://www.nepalitrends.com/10-nepalese-childhood-games-that-needs-a-comeback/

6 Raju Rijal, personal communication, 22/11/2021.

7 Kathmandu-based magazine Dorji1,1992. Reproduced in Bhutan Journal 2.1, 2020, p.61.

8 *Bhutan Review*, (published in English until May1995, published in Nepali too), 31 Jan 1993 & 30 September 1996.

9 The BBC Nepali/Service, 29 March 1993, *Bhutan Review*

10 The *Bhutan Review* which was published by the Human Rights Organization of Bhutan in Kathmandu for almost 4 years from January 1993 to October 1996. Mr Bhim Subba, former Director General of the Department of Power, Royal Government of Bhutan was the editor and main driving force behind this publication. Mr Om Dhungel, former head of Planning and Development Division in the Department of Telecommunications, Royal Government of Bhutan, worked closely with Mr Subba as the co-editor and kept it going despite various challenges.

11 David Williamson, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 November1993. Reproduced in *Bhutan Review*, January 1994.

12 *Bhutan Review* Oct 1993, p1.

13 *Bhutan Review* July 1993.

14 Susan Banki, Bhakta Ghimire, and Hari Khanal, 'Displaced but not Disempowered: Bhutanese Refugees and Grassroots Activism' Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, 2019, https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/21074/Banki%20Ghimire%20Khanal%20Fletch%20Forum%202019.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

15 ibid,

16 ibid,

17 ibid,

18 Jennifer Pagonis, 'Bhutanese refugees in Nepal frustrated by lack of progress', UNHCR, 14 July 2005. https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2005/7/42d6642f4/bhutanese-refugees-nepal-frustrated-lack-progress.html

19 Banki, Susan, 'The Transformation of Homeland Politics in the Era of Resettlement: Bhutanese refugees in Nepal and the diaspora.' European Bulletin of Himalayan Research, 43, p. 120-143 (2013). UNHCR, Damak office, Aug 2013.

20 Nicole Curby, The Wait, podcast, 2018.

21 https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Nepal%20fact%20sheet%20November%202020_0.pdf

22 Banki, Susan, 'The Transformation of Homeland Politics in the Era of Resettlement: Bhutanese refugees in Nepal and the diaspora.' European Bulletin of Himalayan Research, 43, p. 120-143 (2013). UNHCR, Damak office, Aug 2013.

23 Baerstein, Owen, 'Limbo in Beldangi: The Forgotten Lhotshampa of Bhutan', Global Comment, 6 March 2019. http://globalcomment.com/limbo-in-beldangi-the-forgotten-lhotshampa-of-bhutan/

24 https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/ 26.6million in2021, Largest numbers from from Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar.

25 Shangri-La is a mythical idyllic valley. Those who dwell there, experience exceptional happiness and longevity. This concept is drawn from Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

26 Vidhyapati Mishra, 'Bhutan is No Shangri-La', *New York Times*, 29 June 2013.

27 Banki, Susan, 'The Transformation of Homeland Politics in the Era of Resettlement: Bhutanese refugees in Nepal and the diaspora.' European Bulletin of Himalayan Research, 43, 2013, p. 120-143

28 Susan Banki, Bhakta Ghimire, and Hari Khanal, 'Displaced but not Disempowered: Bhutanese Refugees and Grassroots Activism', Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, Vol 43, 2019.

Interviews for National Library of Australia Oral History Collection

Om Dhungel, interview by Virginia Macleod, Blacktown, 10 & 17 December 2019.

Puspa Acharya, interview and photograph by Virginia Macleod, Blacktown, 11 November 2021.

Yadav Timsina, interview and photograph by Virginia Macleod, Penrith, 17 November 2021.

Raju Rijal, interview and photograph by Virginia Macleod, Blacktown, 21 November 2021.

Champha Adhikari Rai, interview and photograph by Virginia Macleod, Blacktown, 23 November 2021.

Nanada Bhandari, interview and photograph by Virginia Macleod, Blacktown, 24 November 2021.

Tulasha Khatiwada, interview and photograph by Virginia Macleod, Albury, 12 December 2021.

Bibliography

Amnesty International. 1992. 'Bhutan: Human rights violations against the Nepali-speaking population in the south'. New York: Amnesty International, 1992

Owen Baerstein,' Limbo in Beldangi: The Forgotten Lhotshampa of Bhutan', Global Comment, 6 March 2019

http://globalcomment.com/limbo-in-beldangi-the-forgotten-lhotshampa-of-bhutan/

Susan Banki,'The Transformation of Homeland Politics in the Era of Resettlement: Bhutanese refugees in Nepal and the diaspora', European Bulletin of Himalayan Research 43, 2013, pp.120-143,

Susan Banki, 'Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. Anticipating the impact of resettlement', June 2008 https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/20992/44434%20Griffith%20Nepal%20New.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=2

Susan Banki, Bhakta Ghimire and Hari Khanal, Displaced but not Disempowered: Bhutanese Refugees and Grassroots Activism. Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, 2019. https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/21074/Banki%20Ghimire%20Khanal%20Fletch%20Forum%202019.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

Banki S., Phillips N, 'Leaving in Droves from the Orange Groves: The Nepali-Bhutanese Refugee Experience and the Diminishing of Dignity'. in: Sieh E., McGregor J. (eds) *Human Dignity*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2007. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56005-6_20

Bhutan Journal, Issue 1, 2020, The Bhutan Journal: Issue I – Bhutan Watch Jan 2020

Bhutan Journal, Issue 2, 2021 - The Bhutan Journal – Issue II – Bhutan Watch

The *Bhutan Review*, Human Rights Organisation of Bhutan (HUROB), Jan 1993- Oct 1996. http://www.digitalhimalaya.com/collections/journals/bhutanreview/

Button, James, *Blacktown An Australian Frontier. How multicultural Life on the urban edge provides a new look at our country*, Narrative/07, The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, October 2021, p78-85.

Om Dhungel, http://www.bhutanwatch.org/bhutanese-settlement-and-community-leadership/

Om Dhungel, http://www.bhutanwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Om_Dhungel_Driving_paradigm_shift.pdf

Dunn, Elizabeth Cullen, The Failure of Refugee Camps, *Boston Review*, 28 September 2015 https://bostonreview.net/editors-picks-world/elizabeth-dunn-failure-refugee-camps

Ferraro, Matthew 'Stateless in Shangri- La: Minority Rights Citizenship and Belonging in Bhutan', Stanford Journal of International Law, pp 405- 430, 2012.

Group for International Solidarity Nepal (GRINSO), South Asian People Conference on Bhutan, 29-31 July 1997, New Delhi, GRINSO, 1998.

Nini Gurung, 'Refugees from Bhutan get first ID cards in Nepal's camps', UNHCR,10 December 2007. https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/news/latest/2007/12/475d761c2/refugees-bhutan-first-id-cards-nepals-camps.html

Hutt, M, *Unbecoming Citizens: Culture, nationhood, and the flight of refugees from Bhutan*. Delhi, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Jennifer Pagonis, 'Bhutanese refugees in Nepal frustrated by lack of progress', UNHCR, 14 July 2005. https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2005/7/42d6642f4/bhutanese-refugees-nepal-frustrated-lack-progress.html

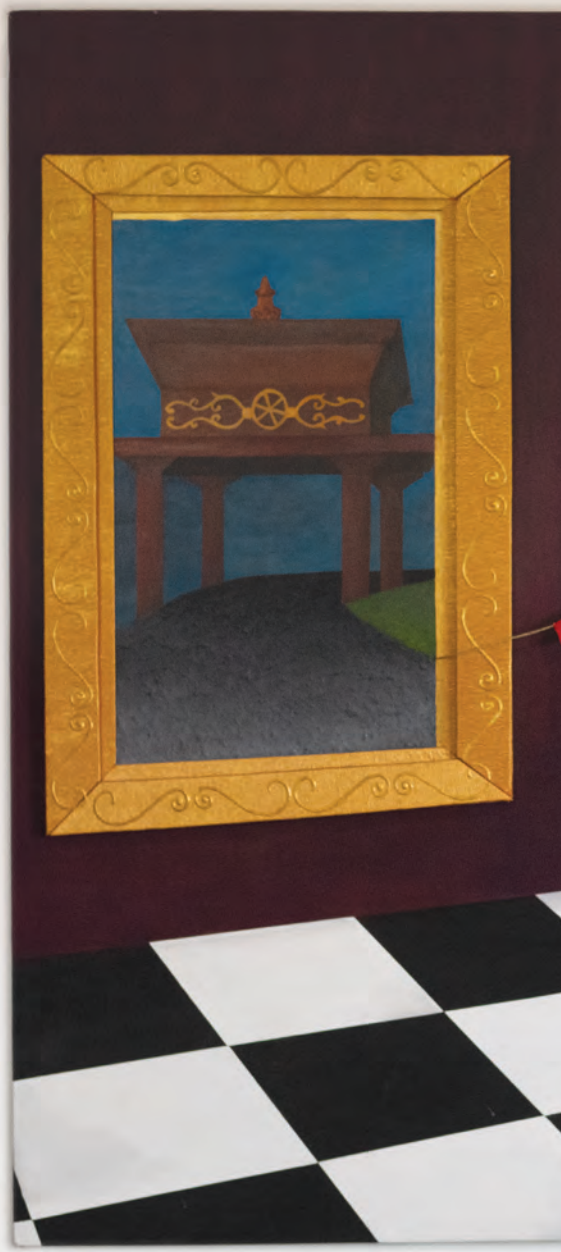
Deepesh Das Shrestha, 'Resettlement of Bhutanese refugees surpasses 100,000 mark', UNHCR, 19 November 2015. .https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/news/latest/2015/11/564dded46/resettlement-bhutanese-refugees-surpasses-100000-mark.html

STARTTS, NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Trauma Survivors, Bhutanese Community Consultation Report, STARTTS, 2018

UNHCR. 2007. UNHCR Global Report 2006, Nepal, Geneva: UNHCR

Bhutan Migration History
A life in three countries

Virginia Macleod



ISBN 978-0-9954391-1-5