

Pilot Interview with Devika Adhikari Phase II Bhutanese Oral History Project

August 3rd, 2014

Transcriber's Note: This pilot interview was conducted in both English and Nepali. The Interviewer (RS) would ask the questions in English and the translators (MS & SU) would translate the questions into Nepali. The respondents would answer in Nepali and the translators would then translate their response in English. Although some words were left out, like "ums", etc. this transcript is verbatim.

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Interview with: Devika Adhikari (DA) [age: 31]
Interviewed at Mangala Sharma's home in Roseville
Interviewed by Richa Sharma (RS)
Translator: Samar Upadhyay (SU)
Date of Interview: August 3rd, 2014

Also present: Mangala Sharma and Andrea Klein Bergman (AKB)

RS: This is Richa Sharma and I'm here with Devika Adhikari to record her life history as part of Phase II of Bhutanese Oral History Project with Ramsey County Historical Society. Today is August 3rd, 2014 and we are at Ms. Mangala Sharma's residence. Thank you so much for being willing to do this project with us. Just to begin off, where and when were you born?

DA: I was born in Geylegphug, Bhutan, 06/09/1983.

RS: And when you were in Bhutan, how many languages did you speak?

DA: Nepali.

RS: How old were you when you left Bhutan?

DA: About four or five years old.

RS: Do you remember—you were very young—do you remember much about that time?

DA: Yeah, just a little bit.

RS: Could you share, maybe, one memory?

DA: Before we came here, we had a coming of age ceremony called *Bartamanda* and we got together with all of our relatives and I remember that very well. [*Note: *Bartamanda* is a coming of age ceremony for boys, usually it takes place between the age group of 8 years- 16 years]

RS: Thank you. I guess you were very young when you were in Bhutan, what do you understand about being a Nepali Bhutanese from Bhutan?

DA: Are you asking about while I was in Bhutan or after I came here?

RS: This is still in Bhutan. When you were in the refugee camps or in Bhutan, what did you understand about being Nepalese Bhutanese?

DA: I don't know much about the history, but it might have been because of our caste or our religion. I don't have much recollection about what happened.

RS: Okay, so then I'll just ask you a little bit about what your family did in Bhutan. What was your parent's work in Bhutan?

DA: Mostly farming. Dad did the farming and my brothers went to school and mom stayed home, but dad did most of the farming.

RS: Do you know how many generations of your family were living in Bhutan before the exile?

DA: I think it's three generations, but I'm not sure.

RS: Do you know why the first generation migrated to Bhutan from Nepal?

DA: I was too young, I don't remember.

RS: So now you're four years old when you left Bhutan...

DA: Actually, five or six.

RS: Do you remember the process of going to Bhutan to Nepal? Do you remember from stories?

DA: All of a sudden one night everybody got together--all of the relatives--and told us we are leaving for Nepal and we just headed out.

RS: Before the night when everyone came to your house, do you know that there was anything going on in the country in Bhutan and was affecting your community?

DA: My parents, my dad especially knew, he was telling us that there were revolutions going on. The schools were closing down and my aunt and uncle were telling us that there was something going on and we need to leave the country and move out. We lived close to the boarder, so we just got ready to go.

RS: Did you notice—was it just your family affected or was it your friends and your neighbors and other people ethnic Nepali background?

DA: Everybody got affected by this, all of the Nepali lived in Bhutan got affected.

RS: How did your family escape from Bhutan? What transportation?

DA: No, we didn't have any transportation. We walked to Dhatgari and that got us to Nepal.

RS: Do you remember how long it took to get from Bhutan to Nepal?

DA: I don't remember exactly how long, but it's about a week to about ten days when we left Bhutan and stayed in India for a couple of days, and then we headed to Nepal. The total time seems about ten days.

RS: And once you got to Nepal, where in Nepal did you go with your family? And what was the situation your family faced?

DA: They brought us to Timai, a camp called, "Timai". There weren't a lot of refugees there so we just got started and it was a small group there.

RS: Just so that I have my chronological order correct, what year was it when you came to Nepal?

DA: 1992 or 1993. 1992

RS: 1992. Tell me a little bit about your life in refugee camp, for example, what was your housing like and food?

DA: So United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] provided us with most of the basic stuff. We lived in bamboo huts and they had medical supplies, medical help, UNHCR. Education provided by CARITAS Nepal.

RS: Can you tell me also of how you got your education in the refugee camps? And as a young kid tell me how you grew up?

DA: We didn't have school, per-say, when we started. The older people kind of got us together under trees and told us about the importance of education, so they read books and tried to teach us about education. And later on the elders kind of appealed the importance of education and that got us up and going.

RS: And by elders, do you mean other refugees who had come in earlier?

DA: Elders meaning people that were there before us or people that came with us that were more educated. So they helped with education.

RS: And how long, as we go more towards learning about your process to the United States, how long did you live in Timai in the refugee camp?

DA: Seventeen years.

RS: Did you live at any point in your time in Nepal-- did you live anywhere other than Timai refugee camp?

DA: Yeah, I lived outside of Timai. I did my education in Birtamode is where I did my high schooling, eleventh and twelfth grade. I got my bachelors degree in Badrapore.

RS: Did you interact with a lot with Nepali people from Nepal?

DA: We had a lot of friends that were Nepali and were raised in Nepal. I had a lot of Nepali boyfriends and we speak the same language, so we didn't have a lot of issues.

RS: Do you feel, you said you didn't have any issues, do you feel that you ever faced discrimination based on the fact you were Bhutanese refugee?

DA: Yes, defiantly. The Bhutanese refugees were really hard working. So if we got better grades then we did get discriminated against we were refugees.

RS: Did you work when you were in Nepal?

DA: Yes, after finishing high school, I taught in a small boarding school and that is how I made money to go to college.

RS: Were jobs difficult to find?

DA: It was defiantly difficult to get jobs because they give priorities to people that live in the village, the Nepali citizens, even though I had better marks. I had a friend that graduated with me, even though I had better grades than her, they would give more priority to the Nepali citizens than the Bhutanese refugees. I use to show my documents and argue that I had better grades, I had more credentials to get the jobs, but they would pick her instead because they give priority to the citizens.

RS: And now going more towards your time in the United States, when did you decide to come to the United States and why?

DA: We started the process at the end of 2007; we already filled out the paperwork and then we started the process at the end of 2007, around November, December. And then by 2008, February, we were getting ready to come here. So the first calling was on February 6, 2008. And then by September we came here.

RS: When did you first hear about that you could come to the United States, about the Resettlement Program?

DA: We had already heard about the Resettlement Program and had the option to come here. But we had relatives here, lived in Seattle, Washington. We got some help, we had some questions answered from him. Hari Daju was already staying here, so we got a lot of help from them for coming here.

RS: So you came here in 2008.

DA: September 28, 2008.

RS: Did you come directly to Minnesota?

DA: Mangala Sharma sponsored us, so we came directly to Minnesota.

RS: What is the title, *Bhouju*?

DA: *Bhouju* is literally it's the sister-in-law, and older brother's wife. It's a direct relationship.

RS: And when you came to Minnesota, did you come with family or did you come alone?

DA: I came with my sister.

RS: Did you have family remaining in refugee camp or do you still have family remaining in refugee camps?

DA: When we came here there was a family still back there, my brother and my parents, there were a lot of people still back there-but they are here now. My sister is still there, but she is a Nepali citizen.

RS: And what was it like being on that plane, coming to the United States, and arriving here?

DA: It wasn't a huge deal flying over here, except it was a long trip. We got put into a group, and there was a group leader who showed us how to do certain things and there were older people in our group who didn't know how to use the bathroom. By helping them, we sort of learned how it works too. I was nominated to be one of the group leaders.

RS: You mentioned IOM. What is IOM?

DA: Immigration...

MS: International Organization of Migration.

DA: Yes. They help all of the Bhutanese people who came over to the United States to settle.

RS: Who was there to pick you up at the airport when you arrived?

DA: My brother, my sister, and we had a case manager from Seattle, Washington, Cara Casey. They came to pick us up.

RS: Did you go to your future apartment? How was that—coming home—how did it feel?

DA: They took us directly to our apartment and everything was set up. All of the Asian food and everything was set up there.

RS: How long did it take for you to fully register that you were in Minnesota?

DA: My brother and sister-in-law were here already, so it didn't feel different, it felt like home.

RS: Now that you were in Minnesota, what is important for you to retain from your culture, preserve?

DA: Preserving the culture is defiantly very important to me. Certain things like, when a family member dies we mourn for thirteen days and that kind of culture is really important. There are other cultural things that are really important to me. Especially, to pass on to our next generation, if we don't teach them our culture won't be there anymore and it's important to teach them.

RS: Before I go and ask you more about cultural integration, when did the rest of your family join you and who is in the rest of your family?

DA: My mom came in 2008, November. My brother in 2009. My oldest brother came in end of 2009, so they came in 2008 and 2009.

RS: So by the time your family had come in, what was your progress in social integration, did you have a job by then?

DA: It was difficult in the beginning to get a job because it was during the recession. But by the beginning of January 2009, I had already started working and we had already learned the transportation. We had help, the case manager showing us how to use the public transportation, so we knew how to use the buses.

RS: Did you know English before you came or did you learn it when you were here?

DA: We studied in English medium when we were in school, so I already knew how to speak English, but when I first came here the slang—the accent—was difficult to understand.

RS: Was it difficult to get a job based on language—was language a barrier?

DA: The language barrier wasn't so much of a problem, the problem was the recession. But I still got a job within four or five months.

RS: When your family finally got to Minnesota, do you feel—do you worry that your family is becoming too American? What does it mean to be too American? What I'm trying to get at is, are you worried your family will be too American, or are you afraid of losing some of your cultural identity? Your Bhutanese identity?

DA: It wasn't too difficult because the culture is important and we have preserved our traditions, and I lost my father back in 2000, and my mom was pretty ill, so we were always concentrating on how to get her here and get her treated. We weren't really worried about losing our traditional values.

RS: Let me back-track a little bit. Was it in the refugee camps that you lost your father?

DA: Yes.

RS: When your mother was sick, that was when you first arrived in Minnesota-or when your family arrived in Minnesota?

DA: She was ill before she came here and we were always thinking about how to get her here and treated.

RS: Once your mother came here, what was the process? She's better now?

DA: She's gotten lot better since she came here. Day by day it gets better. She has rheumatoid arthritis and it was really difficult in the beginning, but it's getting a lot better. And I'm really happy about that.

RS: Did you get help from any American organizations when you first came here, especially during the treatment time to help you integrate?

DA: Defiantly. Lutheran Social Services, they provided us with 'Helping Friends', and they come by about once or twice a week to help us with what to do, where to go, and spend time. Even now when more people came by we have had more 'Helping Friends' and it's been really nice and we have good relationship with American society here.

RS: So you were partnered with people through Lutheran Social Services for clarification. Do you work in Minnesota now? What do you do?

DA: I work in Minneapolis, a place called Present Help Care, I'm the assistant manager there.

RS: Is this the same job you did when you came?

DA: Yes. I've worked there since I came here and first started working in 2009.

RS: In your household, how many members are there? Do other members work?

DA: We all work. There are six people in the family and we all work.

RS: Do you have any difficulties in your work or if your family members face any challenges at work—related to being a refugee in Minnesota?

DA: We don't feel discriminated against. There is equality here. There is freedom here. We don't feel discriminated against here.

RS: In Minnesota what kind of opportunities do you see that you did not see in refugee camps?

DA: There are lots of opportunities here. We didn't know about different sorts of exercise for mom when we were in Nepal. But here they give her exercises to help her with her illnesses. There are lots of other opportunities—benefits, like social services and SSI that my mom can get. There is a lot of help here, especially to older people—to get settled in—and it's a lot better.

RS: Do you enjoy living in Minnesota? If yes, what about Minnesota makes you happy?

DA: I love that we made the choice to come to Minnesota. We had family here and we really like Minnesota.

RS: Have you had any negative experiences living in Minnesota?

DA: Like?

RS: Maybe winter?

DA: It was really difficult at the beginning because it gets really cold here and we had never seen snow back in Nepal. Now we are getting used to it!

RS: And do you think when the process of when you first got to Minnesota and now—could anything could have been better to make that adjustment easier?

DA: Back then, there were not a lot of us here, so it was defiantly difficult. But now there is a big community here of Bhutanese people so every time someone new comes, we all get together and help. So it's a lot easier for new [comers] here.

RS: So having more Bhutanese refugees could have helped earlier in the process.

DA: When we first came we had to rely on our family members, like Mangala here. We had 'Helping Friends' from Lutheran Social Service. But now, we don't need all of that help. I'm also a member of the Bhutanese community; I go and help new immigrants coming in. So there are a lot of 'Helping Hands' now and it's a lot easier.

RS: You mentioned being active in the Bhutanese refugee community. Can you talk more about what you do?

MS: She's also a board member.

DA: We formed a group of fourteen board members in our board. There are two paid employees and this group helps with getting the immigrants adjusted to the society here. Some of the things that we do are kids who have been to high school there [Nepal] and come here and get further educated, we help them find jobs. Also, we help people fill out benefit applications. People might be sick or disabled and they might need help with filling out all of the legal applications, we help with that. We help with ESL-English Second Language.

MS: We help enrolling students, Bhutanese refugees, English as a second language and they do the enrollment and they do the referral.

AKB: What is the name of the organization?

MS: BCOM. Bhutanese Community of Minnesota. It was initially called the Nirvana Center, the one that we formed.

RS: How much time did it take to be involved in the community? How much time from your day? Do you have certain events that you plan out? Or do you have certain times that you focus on helping with the organization or is it a continuous volunteering your time? How much of her time does she devote to helping out the community?

DA: We meet with people and talk about what kind of help they need. We mainly work during the weekends, but if help is needed we also help during the weekdays-business days.

RS: You're one of fourteen. Are you the only woman on the board or are there others? What is the demographic?

DA: I'm the only female on the board right now, everyone else is male.

RS: What was the process to become a board member, where you elected?

DA: Even before we formed BCOM, it was Nirvana Center, there were fourteen board members from before and there is a voting process and you are elected.

RS: Do you feel that being the only woman on the board affects how the board members-or how the community responds to you?

DA: There are no issues what so ever. There are other women candidates that applied and I won by a voting. There are other volunteers that are women as well helping out with the community.

RS: Thank you. Do you have any other information to share or anything or preserving your culture in Minnesota?

DA: We need to preserve our culture, it's really important and I thank all of you, especially Mangala and Richa for putting all of this together and all of the rest to put our story in the history books, it's really important to me. I'm so happy and thanks for all.