

Interview with Tika Biswa Phase II Bhutanese Oral History Project

August 7th, 2014

Transcriber's Note: This 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. Although this participant is not an elderly Bhutanese refugee, because she lost all of her family, including her mother, it was important to capture her family's history as the sole survivor.

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Project: Phase II Bhutanese Oral History Project
Interview with: Tika Biswa (TB) [age: 32 years old]
Interviewed at her home in St. Paul
Interviewed by Richa Sharma (RS)
Translator: Samar Upadhyay (SU)
Also present: Andrea Klein Bergman (AKB)
Date of Interview: August 7th, 2014

RS: This is Richa Sharma and I'm here with Ms. Tika Devi Biswa to record her life history as part of Phase II of Bhutanese Oral History Project with Ramsey County Historical Society. Today is August 7th, 2014 and we are at Ms. Biswas's residence. Where and when were you born?

TB: Dagana, Bhutan. August 30, 1981.

RS: What languages did you speak in Bhutan, other than Nepalese?

TB: Only Nepali.

RS: How old were you when you left Bhutan?

TB: Eleven years old.

RS: What did you love most about being born and raised in Bhutan?

TB: I don't remember much about Bhutan because we didn't have time to enjoy it --all the family finished.

MS: What she said was all the family finished, so there was no way to remember because she lost all of her brothers and sisters.

RS: What do you miss the most about Bhutan?

TB: I don't remember any of this.

RS: Could you describe what happened to your family in Bhutan?

TB: Most of my family died in Bhutan. I remember my mom dying, apart from that I don't remember anybody else, but they all died in Bhutan, all my brothers and sisters. I had four brothers and sisters

RS: Did they die from illness or did they die from another reason?

TB: My dad says they all died because of illness.

RS: What was it like growing up as ethnically Nepali in Bhutan?

TB: We had to fear about everything. Whatever we ate, where ever we went, whatever we did we had to be afraid. It was a scary life.

RS: What is your religion of birth?

TB: I was born a Hindu and I'm still a Hindu.

RS: And that answers my next question. What traditions are important to your family to continue?

TB: The weddings and **Bartaman* they are all part of Hindu religion so I feel like we should keep it. And anything on Hindu religion is valuable. [*Note: *Bartaman* is a Hindu coming of age ceremony]

RS: Is there one in particular that you want to describe?

TB: I don't really want to talk about the personal things I enjoy because I lost my whole family, so not to ask those questions. I enjoy **Dashain*, but I don't enjoy **Tihar* much because I lost my family and once you lose your brothers and sisters it doesn't mean much.

RS: How many generations did your family live in Bhutan before the exile?

TB: All I know that my grandparents and parents living there, I don't know anything else.

RS: What district did you live in Bhutan?

TB: Ghosi in Dagana district, Bhutan.

MS: District is *jilla* -- that's Dagana and block means subdivision and that's Ghosi.

RS: What was your parent's work in Bhutan?

TB: Farming.

RS: Did you do farming in Bhutan too?

TB: I was too little, I didn't do it.

RS: What animals did your family own?

TB: Cows, goats.

RS: What did your family farm?

TB: Rice and corn.

RS: Did they sell their crops to anybody? Who and where did they sell?

TB: No we didn't sell them, we just used them at home.

RS: Did your family do business with any ethnically Bhutanese people?

TB: No.

RS: What was your education in Bhutan?

TB: None.

RS: Did your family own any property, the land that you farmed?

TB: Yes.

RS: And what was your role as a woman, or daily life like?

MS: Well, she was not a woman, she was a girl.

TB: I don't remember what I was doing.

RS: Do you remember when your family first decided to migrate to Bhutan from Nepal?

TB: My dad told me that we can't live in Bhutan anymore, there is fighting going on everywhere and there is war going on so we can't live in Bhutan anymore so we have to go to Nepal and that is how we left.

RS: The question was actually, why, if you remembers why they moved to Bhutan from Nepal?

TB: I don't know why.

RS: How old were you when you left for Nepal?

TB: Eleven years old.

RS: Do you have any specific examples of what happened when you were moving from Bhutan to Nepal?

TB: I don't remember anything, I forgot everything.

RS: Which refugee camp did you move to?

TB: Pathri.

MS: Pathri is also called Sanesari. Pathri is the name of the city, but the camp is called Sanesari.

RS: How long did you live in the refugee camp?

TB: Nineteen years.

RS: Can you tell me a little bit about your life in refugee camp?

TB: It was all sadness in the refugee camp.

RS: Who provided the housing and the food?

MS: UNHCR.

TB: UNHCR.

MS: It was given by United Nations, but through an agency called Lutheran Social Service, but people don't know them, so they call them, "Luthroon"

RS: Can you describe the housing?

TB: Bamboo huts and straw roof.

MS: It's a kind of a grass that grows in eastern Nepal and they dry it and make it a roof. It is different than the hay.

RS: Can you describe the food you ate and how many meals did you eat per day?

TB: We ate boiled rice, pumpkin, potato curry and sometimes lentils.

RS: And how many times?

TB: Two times.

RS: Did you have electricity?

Tb: No.

RS: How did you get information about relatives still in Bhutan or outside of the refugee camps?

TB: I didn't have anyone outside of the refugee camp.

RS: What were your religious and family responsibilities while in the camp?

TB: I became mother before I became a daughter because I don't even remember how I became a daughter because I didn't have a mom. I had to learn how to cook and wash the babies and clean. I became a mother all of a sudden. We followed all of the rituals, because we are Hindu.

RS: How old were you when you got married and did you get married in the refugee camp?

TB: I was fourteen years old when I got married, and I got married in the refugee camp.

RS: Can you describe your marriage ceremony?

TB: We eloped. We eloped from [one] refugee camp to [another] refugee camp. We went from my house to my mother-in-laws house and then we came back to my house again and we lived there.

RS: Was there a reason for the elopement?

TB: It was a love marriage and my dad didn't agree so I eloped.

RS: Was it okay after marriage? Was it okay to reconcile?

TB: He didn't say anything after we got married.

RS: If you had to rate the quality of your life in the refugee camp. 1 being the worst and 5 being the best, how would you rate it and why?

TB: Before we got married it was really tough, after we got married, I was happy all of sudden and I would give it a five.

RS: Can I ask what changed to have that big flip?

TB: Before we got married my dad used to get ill and then I had to take him to the hospital all by myself and I didn't have much help and I struggled a lot. After we got married, my husband filled the role of a son and so I had a lot of help.

AKB: Maybe ask how she met her husband?

TB: I met him in the camp. First he was in Kathmandu and the reason he married me is he felt sorry for me because I was alone, a single girl. And when my dad was sick, I had to ask for help from other guys and some people kind of exploited me, they would tease me and bully me. After I married him, things became very normal because a man came to the house.

RS: And how old was your husband when you married him?

TB: Twenty-two.

RS: Did you work while in the refugee camp?

TB: No, I didn't work.

RS: Then what did you do on a day-to-day basis?

TB: Kid responsibilities. Feeding the kids, taking care of the kids and dad used to get sick all of the time, and most of time went to taking care of him.

RS: Did your dad live with you after marriage?

TB: Yeah, we lived in the same house.

RS: And how many children do you have?

TB: Four kids.

RS: At that time in refugee camp, four?

TB: Three of them were born in the refugee camp and one was born here in Minnesota.

MS: He's a new Minnesotan!

RS: In the refugee camp, did your husband or any other family members work?

TB: My husband worked. He worked outside. He's mechanic by profession so there was no work in the camp. Though they lived in the camp, he worked outside in a local garage. He's a skilled mechanic.

SU: I'd be interested to know what is the access like? Could people go outside of the camp?

TB: We couldn't really go outside of the camp, technically no but he wasn't registered in the refugee camp so he went out. He got registered later on.

MS: Let me explain to you what happens in the camp. Even though camps --we don't have—it is like, technically, legally we were not allowed to come out of the camp or work out of the camp. And there is very strict vigilance there, police force, everything there. But there are some people that find their way. Nepal had a lot of demand for small skilled jobs, farming jobs, helping, mechanic, some school teachers here and there in boarding schools, so some people found their way to get out, teach in the day time and come back in the evening.

TB: When he came from Bhutan he went to some other city, instead of coming to the camp. And later on his family was in the camp so he came to visit and then we got married.

AKB: I'm just wondering because he was able to work and bring in some money did that make their lives a little bit easier or better in the camps?

TB: The income really helped especially in taking my dad to the hospital, the camp's medications, and the facilities didn't really help much. So that money went into his hospital fees and that really helped and that kept him going for a long time until last year.

RS: Did you use the income to provide education for your children too?

TB: It wasn't enough to do all of that. But the kids went to school in the camp.

RS: Was the education in the camp, was that provided financially?

TB: Somebody arranged for it, but I don't know who.

MS: It was only UNHCR, but there were different subcontractors.

RS: When did you come to the United States?

TB: Came in 2010.

RS: Why did you come to United States?

TB: We suffered in the camps, so we were hoping our lives would get better. So we came here for more happiness.

RS: Why to Minnesota, specifically?

TB: We got free case.

MS: The refugees come in two waves here: one is called family reunification, which means there is a family member is an anchor and they bring them, just like I brought Devika. Free cases are—you don't have to have relatives or friends but you need to be an agency that will take the responsibility of taking care of them for three months.

RS: How many free cases?

MS: Everybody comes free case now.

RS: When was that changed?

MS: That happened in 2010. Up to 2009, it was all family sponsored.

RS: Did you have any other family members in Minnesota before you came?

TB: Nope.

RS: Can you tell me what family came with you when you came?

TB: Just my family: my kids and my dad.

RS: And your husband?

TB: Yes.

RS: Do you have any family remaining in the refugee camps or in Bhutan?

TB: No, not anymore.

RS: And everybody is in United States?

TB: Yes, everyone is here.

RS: Can you describe the process from UNHCR to getting to Minnesota?

TB: It's a huge process that is started from taking pictures, application, ID card, DSS background check, and then medical check, and then travel and come here!

RS: And how long did the process take?

TB: It took us about a year and half.

RS: Can you share some feelings you had when coming to Minnesota?

TB: When we first came I felt really sad because I didn't meet any Nepalese. But now it's a lot better because I know a lot of Nepalese.

RS: Can you repeat again when you arrived in Minnesota, what date?

TB: April 9th, 2010.

RS: What did it feel like when you first arrived by plane to Minnesota?

TB: I didn't feel anything. I didn't feel happy, but I felt sad or hurt because a lot of the people that I knew were still back there.

RS: What are the biggest differences between Nepal and Minnesota?

TB: Everything is better here. I like it better here than Nepal.

RS: Do you have any specific examples of any big differences you have noticed?

TB: I feel the happiest about my kids being able to go to school and I don't know if we still had been in Nepal they would have gone into wrong paths. I didn't get any opportunities, but hopefully my kids will get better opportunities and going to school. My seven year old was interpreting for me.

RS: Do you remember Bhutan enough to state any big differences between Bhutan and Minnesota?

TB: The school was kind of far in Bhutan. But my biggest concern always has been the education for my kids. Especially because I didn't get to go to school and I didn't have any education I really feel good about my kids being able to go to school. Had we stayed in the Nepal or Bhutan I don't know what would have happened to their education. Here they get to go to school and at least their education is on the right track. And I feel happy about that.

RS: What grade are your kids in?

TB: The oldest one is in twelfth grade, (as in a senior in high school. Second one is in seventh grade. Next one is in sixth grade. And the baby is two years old, causing havoc.

RS: What does it mean to be a Bhutanese American to you?

TB: I feel happy about it.

RS: Are you an American citizen?

TB: No, not yet.

RS: Are you planning on becoming a citizen?

TB: No.

MS: I think she didn't understand that question.

RS: Will you be taking the citizenship class?

TB: One day, but I have not started preparing.

MS: What she understood was, "are you preparing for the test". But she has not prepared.

RS: Do you want to be an American citizen?

TB: I would like to but I don't know if I can or not.

RS: Why do you think that?

TB: I've asked around and what I have heard I'm not educated enough. So I don't know if that will hamper my chances.

RS: Are you taking English classes?

TB: No, I don't go anymore. I went a couple years ago and then my dad got sick and I didn't have any time to go. But even before that, I use to go once or twice a week.

RS: Do you want to learn English?

TB: Yes.

RS: How often is English used in your house?

TB: I try a little bit with my kids.

RS: What language is spoken at home?

TB: Just Nepali for the most part.

RS: Nepali from you to your children? What language do your children speak?

TB: They speak Nepali because they know mom can't understand.

SU: Do the kids speak in English to gossip about you?

TB: Yeah, but I understand a little bit.

RS: What is important to you to retain from your culture and traditions now that you are living in Minnesota?

TB: I would like to save my customs but all of my sons have become Christians. Only the little one born here is Hindu.

RS: When did your sons convert?

TB: My oldest son he always in *Believer. Right after we came here he converted. [*Note: the participant used "Believer" in reference to Christianity.]

RS: And your other sons?

TB: They took turns becoming *Believers, I couldn't keep track when it happened. They go to where the rest of the community goes.

SU: How did the process started becoming Christians?

TB: It was being passed from other kids. Everybody started going to Sunday School and my kids went there. All internal.

RS: Who brought Christianity to the refugee camps or was it always there?

TB: Nobody was Christian. Somebody from the camp that started it.

RS: Here in Minnesota, are you involved in any Bhutanese community events?

TB: I've been to a couple of programs. And that is when I met *Bahini. [*Note: the participant means Richa when she said, "Bahini" which means, a non-blood "sister" in Nepali].

RS: What organization, when you first came, helped you resettle here?

TB: International Institute of Minnesota.

RS: What kind of services did International Institute provide, help you with?

TB: They helped us with food, finding a place to live.

RS: Did they help you with paper work and where to file?

TB: They had given us a volunteer that is who helped us.

MS: The agency that brings them first they pay their rent, they find a house for them, and then they pair them up with volunteers. Volunteers are the ones that take them to fill the form and all of that.

RS: Do you worry about you and your family becoming too American?

TB: No I don't feel worried. I believe they are going to keep our customs. I have faith in them.

RS: Can you give me an example of how you do to keep the customs?

TB: If you keep following the customs, hopefully they will follow the customs but I don't force them to do it. If they want to do it they can.

RS: Can you describe more of a custom that you do at home and how you do it?

TB: We do *Dashain* and *Tihar* all of the celebrations; we do light our lights in our shrines every evening.

SU: That is the Hindu custom, right?

MS: You do the prayers, chant the prayers, morning and evening. She also said she doesn't force her culture to anyone to do it. "I believe, I do it. I guess that is how they learn!"

RS: That is a very good way of going about it, not forcing! Do you have any trouble communicating or understanding the younger generation, like your kids who were born here or grew up here?

TB: Yeah, the kids don't want to understand Nepali. When I speak to them, sometimes they don't understand what I'm saying but they don't tell me that they are not understanding, so they wait till dad comes home and they confirm with him.

RS: Just related to your children, do you communicate with their teachers? If not, who does?

TB: Their dad talks to them.

RS: Do you have any future education goals?

TB: I have goals.

MS: Will you wait until the kids grow up?

TB: No, I think now my husband changed his schedule and he starts at 5:00 pm and goes to work and now I feel like I can go take classes in the morning.

RS: What would you study?

TB: I just want to learn the language, I don't feel like I have a chance with anything else.

RS: Small steps. Do you work in Minnesota?

TB: No, I don't work.

RS: Your husband works? What does your husband do?

TB: He works at Delta.

MS: He cleans the airplanes through a cleaning company called ABM.

RS: How did he find the job?

TB: I don't know anything about his work.

RS: Do you drive here?

TB: No, I don't drive.

RS: Does your husband drive here?

TB: Yeah, he drives.

RS: Is this a purchased home here?

TB: No.

MS: It's a house, but a rental house.

RS: Do you know if your husband has any difficulties in his work?

TB: No, I don't think so.

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

MS: She was kind of numb, so I say that she already said that here the kids got to go to school.

RS: Other than the education for your children, what other things do you like about living in Minnesota?

TB: I like everything about Minnesota.

SU: What about the snow and the cold?

TB: I like the snow too because it snowed where I grew up. When my mom took me to Thimpu, that is where I saw really cold weather and I'm kind of used to it. As a baby I was exposed to snow.

RS: Is there anything that could have helped your adjustment in Minnesota?

TB: I wanted other Nepalese. The biggest problem is the language and there was nobody here from my community.

RS: Any negative experiences living in Minnesota now?

TB: There is nothing I dislike about being in Minnesota. The only thing I don't like is this house because this is where my dad died. I said goodbye to my dad.

RS: Do you have any hopes for the future?

TB: I have hopes for my children, but not for myself.

RS & MS: How about learning English and passing citizenship?

TB: I'm interested but I don't have hope.

RS: The teachers here do magic, so you will be able. Are you involved in any community organizations here?

TB: No.

RS: Do you have any American friends?

TB: No. My husband has a lot of American friends.

MS: I was recalling the time we came for her son's birthday and they were drinking this high big of red label.

RS: So your husband has American friends?

TB: Yes.

RS: Are they work friends or how did he meet them?

TB: They live around here and they are neighbors.

RS: Do you interact with them?

TB: I try a little bit but I don't speak the language, so it's tough.

RS: Do you celebrate any American holidays?

TB: Yeah, we celebrate everything!

RS: How do you celebrate Thanksgiving?

TB: Whatever we can fix at the time!

RS: Do you feel that you are fully integrated in Minnesota now?

TB: I feel integrated. I don't feel like I'm outside of the circle. In the beginning, it used to be scary because we didn't know anyone, we didn't know the customs and we didn't know what

we could do and what we couldn't. Especially when we were back in Nepal, they spread rumors, we couldn't really know what to do.

MS: What she said was when they were in Nepal they spread so much bad rumors about what happens in America, so they were very scared. The story is when they were encouraging people to go for resettlement, people who were against resettlement spread the rumor they would be raped, they would be beat. In America, sex is open and girls would be raped outside. That was the fear that was spread. They also told them when they go to America, your husband and wife would be divorced. They gave our example. Dr Chabi and Mangala are divorced now and they remarried somebody else and Mangala is with a black man.

RS: And they had a picture of a new family member, like a cousin's kid or something and my sister and I were holding it, and they said it's my dad's kid with somebody else.

MS: That was the rumor in the camps, so when they came they were shocked when they saw us together. They wanted to discourage people from coming and especially from people who were Maoists.

TB: I heard the same thing about some other women who had come earlier that the lady had eloped with another man, a black man had taken her.

MS: They had so much fear. You would not believe when my sister-in-law came!

TB: Before it used to be scary with all of the rumors we did not want to interact with people, but now I feel really integrated, I go outside and say "hi" to the neighbors, smile to the neighbors. It feels like a family [in the neighborhood]. For six months I didn't look at anybody's face! I was too scared to look at people's faces because the rumor was that if you stare at people they will just take me away.

RS: You said you attended cultural events by Bhutanese community?

TB: Yeah, I've gone to a couple of them.

RS: Did you cook food and take it there to share with people?

TB: First time I took some food.

MS: The Nepali doughnut.

TB: No, I took the traditional goat meat.

RS: Did people enjoy it?

TB: That was the time when everybody cooked food and everyone got diarrhea. Everybody had it. Only me and my husband didn't get sick.

MS: I didn't get sick. I think it was in that bread. I didn't take it, she didn't take it. So many people got sick.

RS: This is the end of the interview from my side, do you have anything that you want to share?

TB: Now let us have some refreshment.