

Interview with Gaura Devi Dhakal and Pabitra Dhakal

Phase II Bhutanese Oral History Project

August 11th, 2014

Transcriber's Note: These interviews were 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: Gaura Devi Dhakal (GD) [age 84 years old] and
Pabitra Dhakal (PD) [Age: 59 years old]

Interviewed in Roseville

Interviewed by Richa Sharma (RS)

Translator: Samar Upadhyay (SU)

Date of Interview: August 11th, 2014

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

RS: This is Richa Sharma and I'm here were Ms. Gaura Dhakal and Pabitra Dhakal to record her life history as part of the Phase II of Bhutanese Oral History Project with Ramsey County Historical Society. Today is August 11th, 2014 and we are at the residence of Ms. Mangala Sharma. Where and when were you born?

GD: Bhutan, 1930.

MS: My sister-in-law was born in 1955. My mom is born in 1930, but mom was born in Lamidara, Bhutan and sister-in-law was born in Dhaje, Bhutan.

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

PD: No, we only speak Nepali. The ones that stayed in the Southern villages, the people stayed up north in Thimpu spoke Dzongkha as well.

RS: How old where you when you left Bhutan?

PD: Mother was about sixty four and I was about thirty when we left Bhutan.

MS: It's almost twenty years ago.

RS: Twenty-two. Twenty-three years ago.

PD: We forgot about the exact answers.

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

PD: The environment was really nice, the food was really nice but we just left because of the problems going on.

GD: Everything was really nice. We farmed: we had our own farmland and grew our own food and everything was really nice. All the kids went to school and we had a nice, lively life but I don't know what happened and all of a sudden we left Bhutan and came to Nepal. We also had orchards.

RS: What do you miss the most about Bhutan?

GD: We were born there, we grew up there. So the place you grew up in you always remember a lot about that place. I had my own farm and we are proud of working on our own farm. I miss the paddy I used to grow. I had two big barns of rice and orange and cardamom orchards and I use to drink fresh water from Lamichane dharo . It's a stream there. And I use to go to a market called, Damphu. And my sister-in-law said they had their own farm and they were proud of their farm.

RS: Could you describe some of your experiences growing up in Bhutan?

PD: We enjoyed the farming and taking care of our cattle and our kids went to school. My mother took care of the kids for us and we either went to work or kids went to school. We used to go and collect firewood from the jungle nearby.

RS: Just to clarify what is your relationship?

PD: Daughter-in-law.

GD: Mother-in-law.

RS: Okay, that clears it up! What was it like as ethnically Nepali in Bhutan?

PD: We lived in the village and there was not any discrimination there. But I don't know what happened outside of the village, in the big city. All of a sudden there was a revolution and then we just left. In the village that we lived in, there wasn't any discrimination.

RS: What is your religion of birth?

GD: We were Hindu. I don't really care if other people follow other religions; we just mind our own business!

RS: What traditions are important to your family to continue to the next generation?

PD: The customs that we have been following I want all the customs to continue to the next generations.

GD: We grew cardamom, oranges. My first son he is a farmer still; my second son got to study and work in the United States; my youngest son got educated and he went and works in Thimphu.

GD & PD: The most important things are for my kids to be able to go to school and get educated. I hope they don't go out and steal and do bad things.

RS: Can you describe one tradition in detail?

GD: Special custom, tradition called *teej* and it's celebrated by Hindu women. It's a Hindu celebration. It's a festival where all of the women get together and they do rituals, prayers, and we dance and sing and it's a lot of fun! We all get together and celebrate that.

PD & GD: Another one where all the family gets together is *Dashain*. The older generation bestows blessings on the younger.

PD: I didn't get to meet my father-in-law, but my mother-in-law has been like my mother and I respect her a lot and all the family gets together, even Mangala and her family, we all get together and get blessings from my mother-in-law.

RS: You touched on how you practiced it in Bhutan. How did you practice it in refugee camp? You could talk about *teej*.

PD: We tried to celebrate just about everything the same as we did in Bhutan. We used to cook a lot of good food, like *Dhakani*, which is a rice dish and *Khir (kheer)* (sweet rice), another rice dish. A lot of rice dishes and meat. So we used to cook a lot of good food and celebrate the holidays.

[*Note: GD sings a song during the *teej* festival]

PD: *Teej* is where women fast all day for the long life of their husband. So night before *teej* is the celebration and they do a lot of singing and dancing and feasting.

RS: Has the practice changed in Minnesota?

PD: We do our family rituals at home in the morning and in the evening. But we still celebrate the holidays. We reserve a party hall and then we dress up and wear jewelry and everybody gets together and we dance and celebrate the same. Everybody bring food so we celebrate.

RS: Could you describe marriage ceremonies and how people marry in Bhutan?

PD: When I got married my husband went and asked my family if he could marry me. And they must have said, "yes"! That is how the marriage ceremonies begin. I wore nice clothes and jewelry and we rode the horse back! In my mom's generation, kind of like two guys carrying the bride on two wooden planks and you sit on top and carry.

GD: We used to make *kasar* - special type of donut they make out of rice flour. It's raw, it's not cooked. First we fry the rice and make the flour and some sugar and some butter and make a round ball. It's a typical food we eat during the marriage ceremony of the son, that's *kasar*. We wear new clothes and new ornaments. You sit around in a fire, the bride and groom sit around a fire. They wear make-up and nice clothes and jewelry. There are a bunch of prayers. The band comes and plays music. They wear the big ankle jewelry and nice saris and blouse, very colorful, and a shawl. Especially for the guy they dress him up with new clothes and the guy covers his

face, *mauul*, and when he sees the girl that is the time you open it up. For a girl's wedding is a long process. Dad and mom are fasting. And that day there is a big *puja* going on. There will be a fire in the middle and the bride and groom they have to go around the fire and they have to wash their feet, we wash their feet. There is a time when the girl's hand is given by girl's parents to the boy and that's when we give the necklace, and they say, "it's time, it's time!". Then boy takes girl. After the girl is given to the boy they also give a cow as an alms thing to the bride. They touch the tail of the cow and they give the cow too. Mawurai, type of special pots and cups and things that they give and it's for a special activity when the guy takes the girl home. There is the time when they have to clear the plate and the cups. They have to divide that between girl and man. [*Note: *Mauul* is a special type of decorated face cover groom wears on his way to bride's house on the wedding day.]

MS: I think that is significant you have to eat now on one plate and do things together.

GD: During the son's wedding, when he brings the bride home there is a ceremony. A special process when the bride comes home. There are three different bowls of rice that they put on the entrance and there will be lights there and the girl has to respect and bow and respect the light and enter the house. Welcoming the girl: this is your house. Lights represent God of Wealth, and the guy follows. During that process from the rice in the ground, from outside the daughter-in-law will push it inside. She will make a mess. And the mother-in-law will push it outside. The daughter-in-law's hair and mother-in-laws hair make a knot together to say the two families are together.

RS: How old were you when you got married?

GD: I was about eight or nine. *Chait* is the last month of the calendar and I got married after I turned nine, the third month of the ninth year. [*Note: *Chait* is Nepali slang for month called Chaitra]

PD: I was fourteen years old when I got married.

RS: One more question about weddings. Did you move to your husband's house right after getting married?

GU: I moved the day after.

GD: [*Note: PD sings brief song first]. The song says, "my daughter go far and live with what the faith brings you, karma". That is how they got rid of me and sent me to the husband.

RS: Another question, not related to marriage, how many generations did your family live in Bhutan before the exile?

GD: My grandfather went from Sikkim, India to Bhutan. But after twenty years of living in Bhutan, in Lamidada --because of being politically active—my grandfather got involved in politics and his life was at risk. He ran away to India, leaving children behind.

MS: We were involved in politics long time before this [exile]!

RS: Do you know why they came to Bhutan?

GD: My grandfather was like a chief in Sikkim, village headman. At that time, southern Bhutan was just opening and he was offered to come and cultivate and he was made the head of that territory. So he came as a head, and started living. But after twenty years, things didn't go well with him so he had to go away. That same house where my grandfather lived, was where I was born and lived. We had a big land with orange and cardamom and we had to leave [referring to her own life in exile]. My grandfather left my dad behind.

PD: As far as I remember, my grandfather moved from Sikkim as well. My grandfather, my dad, and my brothers. My dad died when we were kids. It started from my grandparents. My brothers and my dad died when I was little and my brothers did my wedding ceremony, usually it's the parent's job and my brothers did it.

RS: What was your work in Bhutan?

GD: Farming, cutting the wood. The jungle was kind of far away and we didn't have any transportation so we had to walk a long distance to get any firewood. The water stream was kind of far and we had to walk to get that. The way we carried it, it's like a container that you tie around your forehead and you carry it on your back.

AKB: Can I ask a practical question? They had to go and get firewood in the jungle, did they not have to worry about dangerous animals?

GD: There used to be monkeys. There used to be a bear and we would carry a lot of corn and bear would come at night and eat all of our corn! And the monkeys would come and eat our rice. It would use to come and peel the guava and eat it.

MS: The animal she is describing is the typical animal in Bhutan, called, Langur. Kind of monkey with black face and white body and that monkey likes guava.

RS: Can you talk about what your husband did in Bhutan?

GD: When he was young he did farming and then he moved onto a potato business. He bought potato from one place and sold it other places. And then he met with Pradhan.

MS: He was a big regional head person.

GD: He worked in the police department.

MS: She says police department, but what she means to say is he was working in the government type. Later on they got contract from the government to sell the timber to India. Like Pradhan was the government contractor and my father was the sub-contractor to supply timber from Bhutan to India.

GD: This girl [pointing at Mangala] was one year old when her father left.

RS: What do you mean left?

MS: She means died.

AKB: Can you ask her [PD] what her husband did in Bhutan?

RS: What did your husband did in Bhutan?

PD: My husband was the head of the village, representing the village. We use to do house chores and my husband was the village head, chief.

RS: What was your role as a woman?

PD: Mainly we cooked and cleaned and took care of the house. There was the people that farmed our land and we used to take food to them on the farm and we feed them. We took care of our parents and her [pointing to GD] mother-in-law lived in the house too and we took care of everybody in the house. Men didn't have to do all of that stuff.

RS: This is a question for you [AKB]. I know that when Aami's husband died the main man of the house was gone so it was headed by a bunch of widows, which was a huge thing. I want to ask about if it was difficult to lead a household

AKB: I would start with, "was your husband the head of the household?" and then, "what happened after he died?"

RS: Was your husband the head of your household?

GD: After my father-in-law died, my husband was in charge of the household [*Note: translated by RS].

RS: When did your husband die?

MS: Eighty-four minus 49. That's about twenty-nine years old, almost thirty.

RS: After your husband died, were you left as head of the house hold?

GD: My mother-in-law was there. These kids were little. Daughter-in-law used to take care of the kids – 5 of them – 2 girls and 3 boys. After mom died, my sister-in-law was still around. They used to cook food and take care of the kids and make food for the farmers.

PD: My mother-in-law took care of the house for a couple of years and then my husband started to take care of businesses, even when he was young. Before that, me and my mother-in-law took care of taking food to the farmers and the people that worked in the farm.

RS: How old were your children when your husband passed away?

GD: One, three, seven. I think the oldest daughter was fourteen, and then one son [PD's husband] was nine and the second son was six and the third son was three and Mangala was one year old.

AKB: Can you ask them how it felt to have all that responsibility?

RS: Can you tell me how it felt to be responsible for so many people?

GD: It was really difficult my mother-in-law was there and it was the two of us trying to raise all the kids. We had to worry about their education too. I got my son married when he was fourteen years old and that's a huge responsibility and we carried out that role.

RS: Was that community supportive of you and your family led by widows?

GD: They were really good about it, without their help I couldn't have raised all of the kids.

MS: She's now going back to why she left Bhutan.

GD: My son, the oldest son [PD's husband] he used to be the village chief and he got into jail for eighteen months. He was arrested and taken to Damphu, Bhutan, where the prison was. And he was released after eighteen months.

SU: How far was the prison?

GD: Fourteen miles. If we had transportation it wouldn't be so bad, but without transportation it was really far. If we eat early lunch or breakfast and then leave then we get there in the evening walking.

RS: Do you remember why you left for Nepal?

GD: They took our son to the prison and we started getting worried and then my old mother-in-law was getting really scared—everyone was getting really scared—so we just left.

PD: They took my husband—my husband went to work—and they picked him up there and took him to the prison in Damphu and from there they took him to Thimphu. Painful and indescribable. The main reason we left for Bhutan is because we were worried about the kids and we wanted to save the kids. The neighbors were leaving so we left too. We walked. [Note*: Translator, SU, says she was uncomfortable describing the situation because it was “painful and indescribable”]

RS: Did they tell you why they arrested your husband?

PD: He was a leader. The people made him the leader of the village and when the census came they didn't like something about it and they just took him, I don't know why. They didn't let him out when we were in Nepal. After we moved to Nepal and they let him go and he joined later. Three months after we came to Nepal.

RS: Can you tell me how you traveled to Nepal, with whom?

PD: We came separate time because it was difficult to leave. We had already left, those of us from Thimphu, we were in the camp. My mom, my grandma and my auntie—now she's dead—with learning disability. So three of us, plus my son who was ten years old at that time. We left at night, walked up to the place called, Mooray, but I stayed back and came later on with my younger son, about fifteen days later. I met all the family members, maybe in three months' time in the camp. We were young at the time so we took the little kids were with me and was told, “you stay here and wait for your husband, maybe they will let him go.” Mother-in-law left with the little kids and I came later.

RS: Which refugee camp did you live in Nepal?

GD: Timai refugee camp.

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

GD: Eighteen years.

PD : Timai and eighteen years.

RS: Can you tell me about life in refugee camps?

PD: It was hard life at the camp; I was full of sorrow. They used to give us rice and they had to go and stand in a long line with plate and they would give us rice. Later on they would give us a kerosene stove. In the beginning they had to go get firewood from the jungle.

MS: When she said long line—it was for water. Rice they have to go and collect once every fifteen days, but water is every time. But there was also scarcity of water, so sometimes they use to wait with containers for hours and hours.

RS: Did you have relatives outside of refugee camps?

PD: Yes, we had relatives outside the refugee camps.

RS: How did you contact them?

PD: They used to come visit us in the refugee camp and we use to go visit them and we talked about our daily lives, our happiness and sorrows.

RS: If you had to rate the quality of life in the refugee camps, with one being the worst and five being the best, how would you rate it and why?

PD: I would rate about two or three because life in refugee camp is not fun. When we're sleeping and the wind would come and then there would be rain and take our house down. The fire would come and burn down our house, it's just not fun.

RS: What type of housing did you have?

PD: They gave us bamboo to build the house. And bamboo and straw for the roof. In the beginning they use to give us plastic, but later on it was replaced with straw. The pillars were made of bamboo, the walls were made of bamboo and they would put bamboo on the roof as well, but they would cover it with straw or plastic in the beginning.

RS: Did you work, both of you, at the refugee camp?

PD: We had to go feed the family and we had little kids and I had to take care of the kids. And just going to get the water was an all-day event, so we had to go and get that. In addition to that we had to go and get firewood. Basically, that took all of my day, taking care of the kids, feeding the kids and taking care of my mother-in-law.

GD: There is no place to work there, so we didn't work. They use to give us rice and lentils, so we just ate that, so we didn't have to work for food. I had head injury so I could not work or get water or food.

RS: Did you spend time in Birtamod?

MS: Before she got sick, she stayed with us and she raised her [pointing to Richa], for fourteen years. She raised Richa until she was ten years old and after we came to America she went back to Timai to live with my sister-in-law, that time she got sick.

GD: I took care of Richa when I lived in Birtamod for about ten years. After they came to the United States and I went back to live with my family and that is when I had the head injury. I suffered and most of the time I wasn't even conscious. I don't remember much of what happened. But after I came here, I went for surgery and I had a brain hemorrhage and I got better after that.

MS: She got her memory back so well, we are surprised!

SU: Yeah, she's really sharp.

MS: She was not like that before.

RS: Why did you come to the US?

GD: There was no food shortage, they said we will get a lot of food in the United States, get nice clothes to wear. They give us food, they give us clothes, that is why I came!

PD: Same answer. There is no point in living in refugee camp. There is a lot of sorrow and that is why we just took our chances to go to brand new country and see what will happen.

RS: When did you come to the US?

PD: 2008.

RS: And why did you come to Minnesota?

PD: In the beginning, we just wanted to get out of there, we didn't really care where we were going. We came to Minnesota especially because we had family here. Like Mangala, my sister-in-law was here and my son, Barun.

RS: Can you tell me who came with you?

PD: When we came to Minnesota it was my mother-in-law, my husband. The youngest son came a month earlier, a month before we came.

RS: Where is the rest of your family?

PD: The oldest daughter Kalpana is in Wisconsin, Madison—she is studying medicine. Two sons are in Minnesota, they live together, Barun and Bikash. And now Aami's children. The oldest daughter is in Philadelphia, oldest son they live together here. Second son lives in Nepal, but he travels back and forth. Third son, fourth child lives in Georgia with his family, and fifth child, Mangala lives here. Everybody, all of my children are out of the camps and all of the grandchildren are out of the camps.

SU: They are dispersed.

RS: Yeah, Aami has children all over! Can you describe the process from UNHCR to getting to Minnesota?

PD: The UNHCR they had meetings at the camps and the people that needed help could go there and get help, some did their own paperwork. We got the paperwork done there and that is how we came.

RS: Can you tell me your feelings about coming to Minnesota?

PD: In the beginning it was kind of awkward, it's a brand new place. But we got used to it because we had family here. I don't know about other people, but we feel comfortable here with family.

PD: It was really awkward, I had a nice life and they chased us out. But once I came here, I didn't have much consciousness, but my youngest daughter, Mangala, took me to the hospital and they fixed me up. My daughter-in-law took care of me and fed me and I got better.

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

PD: It's really different here, everything is so clean. The environment outside and the food is really clean and good.

GD: When I came to America I was really happy because it's a land where big people live. And if you don't do anything wrong, this place is good for us.

RS: And what are some big differences between Bhutan and Minnesota?

PD: The place where you were born is better, but we couldn't live there. I have to say this is nice too. It's nice, it's a big country and there is no discrimination and we have freedom.

RS: What does it mean to be a Bhutanese American to you? They are both newly minted Americans!

MS: She calls herself, "Obama gave me citizenship". She doesn't know how to say Obama, she only knows "Obama".

GD: I feel good, it feels proud to be a citizen of a country.

RS: I guess you kind of answered it already, how does it feel to have citizenship again, to be a citizen again?

PD: I feel proud, I don't want to be a citizen of any other place now. I feel good, settled.

RS: What is important to you to retain from your traditions and culture now?

PD: I'm going to teach my family to preserve my culture, but if they want to do—they do it—if they don't want to, I can't really force them.

RS: How do you plan on teaching your family?

PD: I just hope that they learn from what we do.

RS: Learn from example, okay.

GD: The older generation, the elders, keep the tradition going. That will keep—the kids will watch and learn from that.

RS: Are there any new values from Minnesota that you have learned?

PD: Thanksgiving, Christmas, Labor Day. We celebrate all of the American holidays. President's Day!

RS: Do you go to English classes?

PD: I use to go to class, but not anymore.

GD: I do not even know "a" for alphabet, why would I go to school?

RS: Why did you stop going to English classes?

PD: Because I didn't have time. I didn't have time because my mother-in-law was ill and taking care of her and all of the other chores, I didn't have time to go to school.

RS: Do you have any trouble communicating or understanding the younger generation, like your grandchildren that were born here or born here?

PD: Yeah, it's difficult because they speak in English.

RS: All your grandchildren speak in English?

PD: Yes.

RS: Aami, do you have trouble interacting with the younger generation?

PD: The little kids, my mother-in-law talks to the little kids and they seem to understand. The older kids, like Richa, she talks to us they understand. But the little ones seem to understand.

RS: Have you purchased a house here?

PD: No.

RS: Do you work in Minnesota?

PD: I take care of my mother-in-law and my kids work. My youngest son works, my older one is going to school. My daughter-in-laws work. My younger son works at the bank. My older one used to work for the bank and quit the job to be in school now.

RS: Was it difficult finding jobs for them?

PD: I don't know if they had difficultly or not. But when we came here, my older son was already working and the younger one got a job pretty soon after we came here.

RS: What kinds of opportunity do you see in Minnesota that you did not see in refugee camps?

PD: In the refugee camp there is no opportunity, but here there is a lot of opportunity. We got to see a lot of places.

GD: I'm happy that I get to eat good food and wear nice clothes, I'm just happy about that.

RS: Is there anything you don't like about living in Minnesota?

PD: Everything is nice. Minnesota is a place of happiness.

RS: I don't want to take too much of your time. Is there anything you would like to share about your life to the people listening?

GD: Stay clean. Eat good food. Not be dirty and take shower every day!

PD: I hope all of the kids, all of my family and get what they want out of life. Don't go on the wrong path.

RS: Thank you so much!

[Pabitra sings and Gaura joins in].