

Interview with Deo Gurung Phase II Bhutanese Oral History Project

August 12th, 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: Deo Gurung (DG) [48 years old]

Interviewed in Little Canada

Interviewed by Richa Sharma (RS)

Translator: Samar Upadhyay (SU)

Date of Interview: August 12th, 2014

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

RS: This is Richa Sharma and I'm here with Ms. Deo Gurung today to record her life history as part of the Phase II of Bhutanese Oral History Project with Ramsey County Historical Society. Today is 12th August, 2014 and we are at Ms. Gurung's house. Where and when were you born?

DG: 10-19-1965. Dagana, Bhutan.

SU: I know that place now!

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

DG: Just Nepali.

RS: How old were you when you left Bhutan?

DG: About twenty-four, twenty-five. Twenty-four.

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

DG: Bhutan has nice environment, that is what I remember. Weather.

RS: What do you miss most about Bhutan?

DG: I don't remember much about Bhutan, it's been a long time. My little sister is still living in Bhutan. I feel like it's a lot nicer than it used to be.

RS: Describe some of your experiences growing up in Bhutan?

DG: Growing up I remember the farm animals, the village and playing with the other kids. It used to be a lot of fun, that is what I remember.

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

DG: We use to speak Nepali there. Even though the Dzongkha used to speak Nepali in our village.

MS: One thing, that is the only village where Dzongkha's and Nepalese lived together. The only village in southern Bhutan with both ethnic groups. But not in my village. That is why she said she had friends from them and they spoke Nepali too. They didn't speak Dzongkha, but Nepali.

RS: So you spoke in Nepali with them and they spoke Dzongkha and Nepali?

DG: They use to speak Nepali with Nepalese and among themselves they used to speak Dzongkha; they spoke both languages.

RS: What is your religion of birth?

DG: I use to be Hindu.

MS: They were Gurung, basically, in Nepal all Gurungs were Buddhists. First they were Hindus and then they realized they are Buddhist. So some of them are Hindus, some are Buddhist. I think we were Buddhist, but I'm not sure. We use to follow both religions, Hindu and Buddhist both.

RS: Has that religion changed?

DG: I changed when I was in Nepal.

RS: Why did you convert?

DG: I converted to Christianity. I got really sick and really ill. Then I converted to Christianity.

RS: Would you like to explain that more or move to the next question?

DG: I used to follow the Hindu rituals, puja and everything. Then I use to be ill a lot and I was ill for about ten years after moving from Bhutan to Nepal. I went to the doctors all the time and they took out one of my kidneys and they were going to take out the other one, it was going bad too. I thought I was going to die and none of the medications were helping and my sister told me I should go to church. So I followed her to church and I started going there. After some time I started getting better and the doctors asked me, "What medication are you taking that you are feeling better?" And I said, "No, I'm not taking any medication, I'm just going to the church." And the doctor was just amazed, he was from Biratnagar and he said, "You have just found a new life!". I have kept Christianity ever since.

MS: Thank God for sharing this story!

RS: That's an incredible story, thank you for sharing it! What traditions are important to your family to continue to the next generation?

DG: I have left Hinduism and Buddhism, so I have converted into Christianity so I just hope my kids remain Christian.

AKB: Since we are talking about culture, maybe some recipes and certain foods are really important to pass down to their children.

RS: Do you have any food or certain way of preparing things that you would like to pass on, family recipes, that you would like to pass on to future generation?

DG: We make sel-roti which is Nepali traditional bread, that and momos and eating rice as regular lunch and dinner. The meaning of eating a dinner is eating rice for us. But they don't really follow that here, they don't eat rice all of the time. But that's the type of things I would like to carry on.

RS: Question for you [looking at AKB]. There is the part of religious cultural ceremony and how it is practiced in Bhutan.

AKB: No need.

RS: Ask about marriage ceremony or did we get enough?

AKB: I think that question has been answered. Maybe just about the community here?

RS: Which were the ones you said not to ask?

AKB: The question about housing and food in the camps because we have reached saturation point.

RS: Thank you. Can you tell me about marriage ceremonies in the Christian community, in Nepal when you were there, or here?

DG: In Christianity you cannot elope. You basically get engaged and you get married. That is the pure form of marriage.

MS: *Pabitra bihe* is "pure wedding". Which means before the marriage they shouldn't get involved. [*Note: *Pabitra bihe* is Nepali for "pure wedding"]

DG: It's the same in Bhutan and here.

RS: Is it similar to other types of weddings in the community, where the parents go and ask for the other person's hand?

DG: Yes, it's similar. The groom's parents ask for the bride and they give permission and get married.

RS: Is there a Bhutanese refugee priest here to conduct the wedding?

MS: Pastor!

SU: I translated that!

MS: I attended her son's Christian wedding in the church here.

DG: There are pastors at the church that conduct the wedding and during my son's wedding.

MS: During her son's wedding, Kishor's pastor was there. But his wedding was done by Pastor John. And he's the one who gave blessings and order of the ceremony.

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

DG: Three generations. Counting my children. I remember my grandmother being there, not my grandfather, my dad.

RS: Do you know why they went to Bhutan?

DG: Back then the Bhutan government bought Nepali workers from the Nepal government and that is how they moved.

RS: What district did you live in Bhutan?

DG: Dagana, Bhutan. Imire village.

MS: Imire is where I was born and raised and Dagana is the district that I live in Bhutan.

AKB: Like Hennepin County or Ramsey County.

RS: Okay, I got it. What was your parent's work in Bhutan?

DG: They did farming.

RS: How old were you when you got married?

DG: I was fifteen years old when I got married.

RS: What was your work in Bhutan?

DG: Farming as well.

RS: What animals did you own? What did you farm?

DG: Cows, goats, bull, sheep and water buffalos.

SU: Not bison!

RS: That's a lot of animals! What did you farm?

DG: Rice, corn, buck wheat, and millet and beans. And maybe mustard and everything.

MS: They come from a very remote village. There is no transportation and electricity. More remote from where I came from.

RS: Did you trade or do business with ethnic Bhutanese people?

DG: Yes.

RS: What was your relationship like before the revolution?

DG: I had good relationship with people but it was only the security forces that was giving us problems.

RS: What was your education in Bhutan?

DG: I went to class three or fourth grade.

RS: What were some subjects, just so I know, that you learned in Bhutan?

DG: Nepali, Dzongkha, and English.

MS: That time they were teaching Nepali and one of the reasons the revolution started because they stopped teaching Nepali.

DG: They use to teach Nepali in school before the revolution started. After that, the stopped teaching Nepali and the revolution started.

RS: Along with stopping Nepali, do you remember what all changed after the revolution?

DG: The people use to come and ask for money.

MS: The people who use to ask for donation were involved in the revolution. They were hiding and outside of the village. The revolutionaries were young students and left early.

RS: So is this the Lhotshampas side?

MS: Lhotshampas side. Those are the guys who were just across the border and they would go inside and ask donations from them. So the people in Imire where she grew up, they were

torched by both sides. The guys from outside and would come and ask for donations, and if they don't give they would kind of harm them. And then the government officers also, "why did you give the donations, you people are traitors!" They were tortured by both sides.

DG: So the people, the revolutionists used to come and threaten us, they use to say, "if you don't give us money we will pack your head in bags and we will throw your body in the river". And then the government use to say, "if you give any money we will imprison you".

[*Note: we are interrupted briefly for sweet coffee].

MS: She gave a slogan which reads, "if you don't give the money" from the revolutionaries, "your head is going to be in the bag in river".

DG: My father-in-law and my brother-in-law took them away to prison.

RS: Is that why you decided to migrate to Nepal from Bhutan?

DG: Yes.

RS: And when did you leave for Nepal?

DG: We went to Nepal in 1992.

AKB: I just have a quick question, I'm wondering because this is a remote village, did they hear about other villages leaving or how did they as a group of people in this village decide to go? Did they hear other people were leaving? I'm just wondering what village was the first to go and how did that word spread around?

RS: Should I ask?

AKB: You should ask, yes.

RS: Did you hear, since you lived in a remote village did you hear from other villages about the demonstrations or any kind of—sorry, I'll repeat the question. So since you were living in a remote village, did you hear about other villages leaving because of the revolution? And if you did how did you hear about them?

DG: Yes, we used to get some word about it. But my father-in-law and my brother-in-law, the government gave them a form to fill out. It basically said you have to leave the country by a certain date and that is why we were forced to leave.

SU: Had they heard it over the radio or word of mouth?

DG: It was just going on everywhere, so we kind of knew. The military people and they would come. They were kind of nice—they weren't too bad—come and ask to butcher our animals so

they could eat. And when they said we had to do, “kill this chicken, kill this animal” we had to do it.

RS: I’m kind of going back a little bit. Did you own any property in Bhutan?

DG: Yes, our own land.

RS: And you had to leave it behind?

DG: Yeah, we had to leave everything behind.

RS: Can you give specific examples of what happened to your family at this time?

DG: After they took my father-in-law and brother-in-law they took them to Damphu in prison. But as far as us women, they kind of left us alone for the most part. They would take us and bring us into our office to question us. But they would question us and let us go. But they got us to come in at night. But usually we would hear things about them treating the women bad, but they didn’t do anything like that to us.

RS: So there is a suggestion of women being called in for something. Thank you for sharing that. Do you remember, can you tell me about how you traveled to Nepal? Who did you travel with?

DG: We walked about four or five days. Maybe it was two to three days we walked. The whole family, my in-laws: my father-in-law, mother-in-law, my brothers-in-law. My sister in-laws weren’t there, but everybody else. About twenty-four or twenty-five of us walked over the mountains. There is another border town called, Kalikhola because we are from Imire. And from there we took a truck.

RS: Can you explain what kind of geography?

MS: I will do this later on.

RS: Did you have children at this time?

DG: Yes, I had three sons.

RS: How old were they?

DG: The oldest one was four years old. The middle son was two, and the youngest one was less than a year old.

RS: I’m trying to imagine how it was to travel with so many little children and so many people. Can you express your feelings then?

DG: It was really difficult taking the three little kids with us. It wasn't just the kids, we had to carry our own load. We had to carry our food, our sleeping things, and blankets. We had to camp on the way and we had to have something to sleep on. Carry three babies between the two of us and food to eat along the way. Things to wear, so it was really hard. Like that we reached Maidhar camp. My husband was carrying a load and two kids on top of the load. I was carrying a load and with one kid on the load.

RS: When you arrived at Maidhar which refugee camps did you stay at?

DG: Baldangi II.

MS: First they came to Maidhar, a bigger camp. It was very congested and close. They were on a bank of a river and there for six months. And then refugees were moved to a little bit better place, so they moved them to the camp called, "Baldangi II". Remember there were three camps: Baldangi I, Baldangi II, Baldangi III. So, Baldangi II was just open and she came in March. When people talk about the timing they came, it's the time of the camps was set up. First was Midar, then was Timai, and then the third group in Goldhap, and then Baldangi, and then Sanischare.

SU: There are still a lot of people in the camps, right?

MS: About twenty thousand. There is only two camps now. Timai is finished. Goldhap is finished. Everybody who wanted to resettle there is resettled. Those who didn't want to resettle moved to Baldangi because they make Baldangi more semi-permanent thing now. No more thatch, they are putting tin roofs. So, anybody who opted to resettle, they would take them anyway, even in the next few years. Those left behind will have a little bit bigger space and UNHCR is working with the Nepali government to give them some status.

RS: Thank you, encyclopedia!

DG: Maidhar is the camp where it was really bad. Congested and dirty and sanitation was really bad. And our hut was in between all of the camps and it was really hot. And I got very sick and all of my children got sick. I was so sick that I became unconscious and the doctor Bhompa Rai is a famous doctor. He helped a lot of Bhutanese [he is a Bhutanese and technically he is a surgeon to work with Bhutanese] and Dr. Bhompa Rai took me away from Maidhar for treatment and that is when I lost my two boys. I didn't know they died after I recovered. They didn't tell me for some time that my children died—my two sons died. It was really bad. The sand was really hot on top. You are like over dinner.

MS: I've seen that camp, and it was really bad.

RS: Thank you again for sharing your story. After getting treatment from Dr. Rai did you move to Baldangi II?

DG: We lived in Maidhar for about six months more. And then after I was able to walk a little bit they moved us to Baldangi II.

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

DG: I guess I would describe as one. Talking on the more pain side, the life in the refugee camp I was never happy because I lost my babies. I think if I were with my kids—my whole family was there—I think that would have been better, but I didn't have my boys and we had all this problem what to wear, clothes and things like that. I always got sick I never got better.

MS: She didn't mention the number.

DG: I feel like my illness was due to my sadness. Despair. Being in the refugee camp was like being in a desert.

MS: It was a desert! What she meant because it wasn't on a river bank, all the camps were like sand was there. Kids use to play on the sand and little pebbles like that and it's always described as a desert. Sometimes on a windy day, I remember, if it's too windy the sand would come and be on the plate of people's food.

DG: I was so ill, it use to rain and it would take the roof away, and everybody use to run away, I was so ill I would just keep on sleeping.

RS: Did you or any of your family members work at the refugee camp?

DG: No.

RS: What was your role in the camp? Actually, before this, I forgot to ask you what was your role in Bhutan as a woman?

DG: All the duties at home were carried on by women.

RS: What did your husband do in Bhutan?

DG: He was a farmer.

RS: In the camps, did you participate in any camp management committee?

DG: My husband wasn't, but I was part of the knitting club, the Refugee Committee Forum.

RS: And what did you do as part of the RWF?

DG: We use to knit sweaters and blankets and we use to teach other people how to knit sweaters and blankets. We used to train others, and helped them with forms. And I used to teach in adult education, I did learning as well as teaching.

MS: In the camp there were language group, basically for Nepali language.

[*Note: phone rings in interview and the interview briefly stops].

RS: Sorry for the phone call. When did you leave refugee camp for the US?

DG: 2010.

RS: Why did you come to the US?

DG: We were in a lot of sorrow, it was not a good time in the refugee camps. We kept hoping and hoping that they would eventually take us back to Bhutan so we could go back home. But that didn't turn out, so God opened a way for us to come to the US. Just to be part of a country we came to the US. And we erased the identity of refugee. And it's a miracle because God himself opened the door for us.

RS: And why did you come to Minnesota, specifically?

DG: Free case. We didn't really have a choice. They said, because I was sick, we will send you wherever is good for health care.

MS: She came to know she was going to Minnesota only on the day they got the date.

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

DG: Yes, we had niece. But she is not here anymore, she went back to Georgia.

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

DG: My son and my husband and three others.

RS: Do you have family in refugee camp or in Bhutan still?

DG: My sister is in Bhutan. My cousin is in Bhutan. In the refugee camp, my husband's family is still back there. My husband's brother's kids.

RS: Where is the rest of your family? Or do you have other family in United States?

DG: Mother-in-law, brother-in-law. They are in Minnesota. My brother-in-law and sister-in-law are in Georgia.

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

DG: They helped us with the form and we went to fill out the form. They had an interview process. They asked us questions like, “why do you want to go to the US?” And I said, “we can’t go back to our own country, we can’t just stay here so I want to go to United States.” They invited me to take the picture and fill out the case. Because I was sick my process was expedited. It didn’t take longer than forty-five days.

MS: The whole process took forty-five days.

RS: She didn’t have to go through orientation?

MS: She didn’t have to go through orientation and all of that medical.

RS: Can you tell me your feelings about coming to Minnesota? On the plane or just coming?

DG: I didn’t feel anything! Leaving the camp and going to Kathmandu, my blood pressure went up.

[*Note: video of interview turned off, so the interview was interrupted to fix it].

RS: What are the biggest differences you noticed between Minnesota and refugee camps?

DG: We were in Nepal in refugee camp. We lived in a small hut and the door was really small to go in and out. They use to give us coal to cook. And then we had to go get firewood and it felt like, to go get the firewood everybody was competing and it felt we had to go thieve and rob just to get our way to the firewood. But here, I feel like if you can do something about your life you can, there is the opportunity to do so. And even there are organizations that help you if you can’t do something.

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

DG: In the United States there are people from all over the world. It’s made up of a lot of different cultures. There are refugees from all over the world and they come here and they are able to become citizens. As Bhutanese refugees I also hope to come here and become citizen of this country and that is why we came.

RS: Have you become an American citizen?

DG: Not yet.

RS: Do you have plans on becoming?

DG: Yes!

RS: Are you taking English classes here?

DG: No.

RS: Are there any new cultures or traditions that you have picked up in Minnesota?

DG: We celebrate all of the American holidays. Christmas, Thanksgiving, Labor Day, everything.

SU: How do you understand English?

DG: I studied in Bhutan, some English and that is how I can understand English.

RS: Did you celebrate Christmas and other Christian events when you were in the refugee camps?

DG: Yeah, we celebrated Christmas.

RS: Just to understand the dynamics between the community members. Did you feel like you were treated differently because you are Christian in the refugee camp?

SU: This kind of defies what she wrote in her paper.

DG: My neighbors didn't treat me bad because I was Christian. I had neighbors who were Hindus, the Brahmin caste and the *Chhetri* caste. And they normally don't eat like food that is touched by other castes or other religion. But they use to call me in their own kitchen and tell me to take the food from the pot and eat it. They really sympathized with me because of what happened to me in the past. As somebody would say, "okay, you need to follow the Hindu gods as well". These people would defend her and say, "why would you do that? You were close to dying and you started going to the church and you felt better. If you come back to Hinduism it's like you have gone to heaven and you're going back to hell. So why would you do that?" When I was really sick, I worshiped, I really felt I worshiped the Christian God, since I did it from the heart, it doesn't make sense. I was close to dying, I just can't leave that Belief.

RS: That is a special story and journey. In Minnesota, are you involved in any community events or activities?

DG: Yes, I go to all the different events. I even go to *Dashain* parties. I grew up as a Hindu, so I know the Hindu traditions and I know Buddhist traditions and I go to all the events whenever I can. I use to go to a lot of these events, but know I don't know when one happens. I haven't gone in a while.

RS: When you first arrived, what organizations helped you resettle?

DG: International Institute of Minnesota helped us in the beginning and they helped us through everything. They use to take us to church and we are still part of the same church.

AKB: I'm just wondering if the church is close by or not?

RS: And where is the church, is it close by to your home?

DG: St. Paul.

MS: It's in St. Paul and it's called Bethel Christian Fellowship. I just want to add that they have a good Christian community. And they always organize big events like Christmas and Easter and they also invite outside group like us. And I've been there, two, three times to their events. And there was three weddings we attending, Christian weddings. Bhutanese-American-Nepalese-Christian wedding. Christmas parties, Easter parties. And they also have a huge youth program.

RS: Wow, I want to participate in some, sounds like a lot of fun!

SU: While you are still a youth?

RS: Related. Did you make American friends through the Church? Do you have American friends?

DG: Mainly through the Church. I have a lot of American friends and it's mainly through the Church. I've been going there for a while.

RS: Can you describe some of the ways you interact with your friends? Activities.

DG: We do events together, like Christmas and all of the holidays and they also have a Sunday Fellowship together. We also meet on Saturdays and we also have a woman's group.

RS: That's a lot of things! Do you have any worries about you and your family becoming too American?

DG: I don't fear much. My son doesn't remember too much about Bhutan because he was really little when we left Bhutan. But even here, there are different customs here, I don't mind them much. But, to keep our old custom going we have to keep talking to our kids. The more we talk to them the easier it is for them to preserve and follow it.

RS: That's a good plan, I think. Do you or your family members work in Minnesota?

DG: My son works. My husband works too.

RS: What do your husband and son do?

DG: He works at the Dragon Store.

MS: It's an Asian grocery store. And her son is a case manager and a community leader too.

RS: Was it difficult finding the jobs for either of the two?

DG: It wasn't too tough. It was pretty easy. My son use to work in Minneapolis. And now he works for the Hmong American Partnership.

MS: But, he works for the Bhutanese refugees, his case load.

DG: Karen and Hmong too.

RS: How old was your son when you came? Did he go to school here?

DG: Twenty-three. He worked and went to school at the same time.

MS: He still goes to school.

RS: Where does he go to school?

DG: St. Paul campus.

RS: What is he studying?

DG: I don't know.

MS: He's taking pre rec courses. He wants to be a computer engineer one day, but he's taking pre-rec courses.

RS: Do you drive here or your family members?

DG: I don't drive, but my son and my daughter-in-law drive. My husband doesn't.

RS: Have you purchased a house here?

DG: Yes.

RS: It's a beautiful house! When you first got to Minnesota, how did you get housing and where did you live?

DG: At 280 and Como. It's a small Bhutanese community.

RS: Were you set up in an apartment by an organization?

DG: Yes. We lived in the old apartment that is where the International Institute kept us in a one-bedroom apartment in the beginning. My brother-in-law's kids came here and then the apartment was getting crowded, so we got a two-bedroom apartment in the same building. They didn't let five people. We were waiting for their parents to come here, but after a year they still weren't here and the manager said we couldn't live there anymore. So we moved to Larpenter and we lived there for a while. Then we moved to a different place and then we got a house.

RS: And we are almost done, sorry. What kind of opportunities do you see in Minnesota that you did not have before?

DG: In Bhutan, we used to walk for three or four hours before we could see cars, it was a remote place. But Nepal we lived with a crowd of people and there were a lot of people in the refugee camps. But here we don't see a lot of people walking around, we see more cars than people, so a big transition. It's very clean here.

SU: I love how she paints these pictures. Her analogies are so clear and concise.

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

DG: I like everything about Minnesota. There is not much that I don't like here. When I was in the refugee camp it was really stressful, it was a tough life there. But here it is not bad at all. The only thing I am worried about is not being able to see my dad who is still in the refugee camp. I'm worried that I might not be able to see him. My dad is not in refugee camp, he lives outside of the camp.

RS: Does your dad have any plans of resettling?

DG: No.

AKB: I'm just wondering because we are in the suburbs, and what it's like for her to live not in the city center and her neighbors.

RS: You have a beautiful house here in a very nice and quiet neighborhood. Can you talk about your experience living in a neighborhood like this?

DG: It's really nice here and the neighbors come and talk. All of the neighbors are really nice. We really like this place.

RS: Thank you. That is all the questions I have. Is there anything you want to share with us or with anyone listening?

DG: I want to talk to all of the everyone, all the women who have suffered as much as I have. When I was in the camp and I use to cry a lot and as a mom I suffered a lot and worried a lot.

Eventually I found Christ and that has helped me along the way. For all the other people that have suffered like me, if they want I highly recommend following the same path.

RS: Thank you so much for sharing so much about your life. I definitely appreciate it. We all do. Thank you.