

Interview with Dhan Maya Pyakurel Phase II Bhutanese Oral History Project

August 9th, 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 (AP) would translate the questions into Nepali. The respondents would answer in Nepali and the translators would then translate their response in English. The translator left out portions of what the respondent said during the interview. These comments were added during the edit phase by both the interviewer and Mangala Sharma and noted in each instance. Although some words were left out, like "ums", etc. this transcript is verbatim.

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Interview with: Dhan Maya Pyakurel (DP); age: 94 years old
Interviewed in Roseville
Interviewed by Richa Sharma (RS)
Translator: Arjun Pradhan (AP)
Date of Interview: August 8th, 2014
Also present: Mangala Sharma

RS: This is Richa Sharma and I'm here with Dhan Maya to record her life history as of the Phase II of Bhutanese Oral History Project with Ramsey County Historical Society. Today is August 8th, and we are at the residence of Mr. Arjun Pradhan. Thank you so much. Where and when were you born?

DP: I was born in Bhutan. But I don't know which place I was born. I was born in the village Raate Khola.

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

DP: I usually speak Nepali.

AP: The national language is Dzonghka.

RS: How old were you when you left Bhutan?

DP: I really don't remember when I left the country.

RS: Can you tell me about your time in Bhutan? What did you love about being born and raised there?

DP: I loved my domestic pets, the cows, buffalos and others. And all of the properties that I left. I still have love for my country. *We left all that we loved. We still love what we left behind.*
[*Note: the last sentence was added by MS after reviewing the audio and transcript because it was left out by the translator. Translations that were made by the interviewer and MS during the edit of the transcript will be in italic]

RS: Is that what you miss the most about Bhutan?

DP: Yes. Like carrying the firewood on my back, on my head, still I love that.

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

DP: Actually, I don't remember because of the conflict, I was confused about that. But, I loved and growing up in the place Raate Khola. I remember a little about that and I love my domestic pets and other things and the surrounding environment.

RS: What is your religion of birth?

DP: *Vaishnav Dharma* [*Note: The interpreter said Hindu, which is still correct, but DP said Vaishnav as an answer to the question. It is a sect of Hinduism. The interpreter's hold of English is not strong. The interviewer, being fluent in Nepali, listened to the audio and added this comment.]

RS: Has it changed?

DP: *Yes, I chanted God's name. I went to Mai to respect the priest, giving him 108 rupees. That's all.* [*Note: The specific event she talks about is the process she underwent to become Vaishnav from a regular Hindu. The italic was added by the interviewer during the edit phase. The following is what was said by the interpreter during the interview but is an inaccurate translation: AP: "I was a Hindu before and then became of Vaishnav Brahman team and they are superior on the top. So they worship regularly and go to the Mai Dhar in Nepali. It lies in the eastern of Nepali. So we went there and worshipped, prayed for the lord, the teacher. And I give 108 rupees"]

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

DP: *I hope that the traditions continue. I hope they remember the priest [Guru]. I pray day and night. I hope they do the same.* [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer during the edits of transcript and is an accurate translation of what DP said. The following is what the interpreter said during the interview, but is inaccurate translation. AP: "I advise to my generations that they have to follow the same works we do, worship to the gods and to remember always and pray to the Lord, and give money, 108 to the teacher. So they have to follow our traditions, because they are very real traditions that they get the peace."]

RS: Name one religious or cultural ceremony that is most important to you.

DP: I observe and celebrate the *Dashain, Tihar*, I feel like dancing and *Teej*. At the time of the *Teej* we dance and the *Tihar* we just play the bhaile and sing. So I sing traditional songs and I go to home and collect some money. That is the thing I remember and love. *Last year, I dance with Kanchi in Teez (pointing at Mangala) I love her.* [*Note: The italic was added by MS during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: Can you tell me how did you practice it in Bhutan?

DP: We have traditionally the beaten rice and rice and we make the sel roti [Nepali doughnut] and celebrate. And I don't eat meat, so we used vegetables instead.

RS: How did you practice it in the refugee camps?

DP: The caring organizations such as UNHCR organized and provided us with everything so just buy little things. So we do very interesting in the refugee camp.

RS: How do you practice it now in Minnesota?

DP: We have varieties of fruits, rice, and yoghurt and everything we like to do.

RS: Can you describe marriage ceremonies or how people marry in Bhutan?

DP: In Bhutan if we do the marriage ceremony to the boy, then we call the professional musician, it's called a *damai* and *darji*, also. And they are professional musician, traditionally they play the music for the marriage ceremony. Some people cut the *khasi*, the goat and they have a meal for them and play the traditional music but we do not cut *khasi*. For the girls, the same thing but little different way.

RS: How was it different for the girls?

DP: We don't cut the goat, they may cut in their boy's house for the girl ceremony. But if grooms did in their house, that's okay. They have varieties of sweets with rice. We have to prepare very big amount and we call very big number of people, we do that way. We cooked lot of food, many people came.

RS: Do you remember your marriage in Bhutan?

DP: Owf, really I don't remember that! I was five years old, how I could remember that day! *In the old days, they said as soon as you leave the house, you have lost your dharma. They said they couldn't wash our feet (a ritual in weddings). Yes, I was very young... maybe four. They were very strict back then.* I do not remember when they gave me marriage. In the sixteenth century, in the twentieth century we have a very strict rules and regulations. I was at the periodic spirit and nobody can hear about us and we have to live part of the shepherd huts area so we stayed there finish after our periodic time. We have to go there and bath and pure. I remember I was four or five, around there, when I get married. . [*Note: The italic was added by both interviewer and MS during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: Did you move to your husband's right after you got married?

DP: *I went when I was five years old. I was very small. The ones who taught me were strict. My mother-in-law specially was very strict. There was no light in the house. They would bring big stones and we would use that for light and to cook.* After one year, my mother-in-law is very strict, we don't have a light. We bring big stones and the three stones and we hit the stones and from that we get the light. We used that light for the cooking, everything. [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: Do you remember how many generations of your family lived in Bhutan before the exile?

DP: I don't know how many generations. What I know is, there were twelve of us in my family before marriage. *I was very little then and even now. Due to my parents feeding me plenty of butter and yogurt, my spirit is strong, I was able to hold. And at my husband's house, at the Brahmachari's house, I worked hard.* I lived at a priest's. My husband is a Brahmin and is very strict, I'm very little lady. I have to go very hard and wake up early and take a bath and follow the tradition of the Brahmin, what they have to be. It's very like Hitler system in their house. [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: What district did you live in Bhutan?

DP: Below Dajay in Damphu.

RS: What was your work in Bhutan?

DP: The actual definition is farmer. We had cows, buffalos, goats, and paddy fields. I used to do farming, I used to take care of animals, and farming I used to do paddy, I used to grow pulses Another type of pulses that grows in the winter season, and then we also use to grow millet [like couscous], we even use to grow mustard. What we used to do all year around we used to grow all kinds of plants.

RS: Did you own any property in Bhutan? DP: Yes, *lot of land in fact two big properties. I owned a big number of bamboos and other forest.* We used to have a big bunch of bamboo trees and fruit trees. [*Note: The italic was added by MS during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: In Bhutan, what was your education?

DP: No, I didn't go to school. We were not allowed to go to school, my mother-in-law was very strict. I had to take care of the house. I shouldn't tell what is not true.

RS: What was your role as a woman? What was your daily life like? Who made the financial decisions?

DP: I have a duty and responsibility take care of animals. I was solely in charge of animals, cooking, cleaning, and making sure whatever we produce from the animals kept overnight for making butter and buttermilk and things like that.

RS: What time did your day start?

DP: *I would sleep for a little bit and then get up early and work hard. I used to grind maize.* I get only the time ten to fifteen minute naps. I worked so hard at the time. [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer and MS during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: Who made the financial decisions in the household?

DP: Anything to do with money, it was my husband, who was also a priest and my mother-in-law. I was not allowed to do anything.

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

DP: I don't remember anything. I was told that my parents came from hillside of Nepal, I don't know at what age they came, but we were born in Bhutan.

RS: Do you remember why you left Bhutan for Nepal?

DP: *They kicked us out so we could not stay.* There is one story, I don't remember the years it happened. [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

AP: *Who were they?* [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

DP: *"Bhote."* [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

AP: *Who do you mean by Bhote?* [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

DP: *I guess the King, but it was other people who actually did the kicking out.* The government people evicted us forcefully make us leave the country. That is the way we left the country. [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: Do you remember any specific government actions against your family the community?

DP: I never saw that incident. We left early, if anything happened, it happened to others.

RS: Can you tell me how you traveled to Nepal?

DP: On a truck. We came on a pick-up truck. *We came from Sky from Nepal to here.* [*Note: The italic was added by MS during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: Whom did you travel with from Bhutan to Nepal?

DP: My youngest daughter, my son, Santosh two or more family with my grandchildren. So we came to the Domukha/Mai Dhar, eastern part of Nepal.

RS: What refugee camp did you come to?

DP: I lived one year in Mai Dhar, the eastern part of Nepal. And then I moved to Beldangi I.

RS: How long did you live in Beldangi I.

DP: Eighteen years.

RS: Can you tell me about your life in the refugee camp? Who provided housing and food?

DP: I didn't remember the organizer's name and what their responsibilities were. I know the distributors, working for us, like sub-sectors.

RS: Can you describe the housing?

DP: Bamboo thatch house. The pillars were bamboos. Roof was bamboo and supported by bamboo.

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

DP: I ate more in refugee camp. Around two pounds of rice per morning. I lived alone for eighteen years in refugee camp. So nobody cared for me, so now everybody cares for me. *Imagine homeless people living under the bridge, a kind of miserable life.* [*Note: The italic was added by MS during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: You lived alone in the refugee camp?

DP: Alone, nobody helped.

RS: How did you support yourself while living alone?

DP: I did a lot. I searched the wood for food to cook and made and decorate the house and built the place where I lived. I did a lot and nobody helped me that time. *So I passed my eighteen years a miserable life.* [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: Did you have your family in the refugee camp?

DP: Yes, I have family members. They separate my room and I had to do my necessary items myself and they could not come to take care of me. My six daughters were there and my two sons too.

RS: Can I ask why there was a partition?

DP: *I have always enjoyed living by myself. I don't like doing other people's work. Wash all those dishes, clean homes, that's too much. I enjoyed living alone.* I like the freedom so I don't do the labor and I don't want to become a laborer for family members. So since the beginning I live alone. I prefer to live alone. [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

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

DP: Living alone is best. My life was five.

RS: Did you work while at the refugee camp?

DP: *I didn't work. Nobody called me for anything. But on death anniversary, they called.* I used to help the others families clean the dirty stalls, and making plates out of leaves. I don't like to go out of the house to eat and sleep. I love the freedom. [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: Did your husband or any other family members work?

DP: He was a Hindu priest and a famous priest in Bhutan. *He was going to people's house read scriptures. He was forty years old when he died in Bhutan. He died early.* [*Note: The italic was added by MS during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: In the refugee camps, did your other family members work?

DP: I lived alone.

RS: How did you maintain religious and cultural ceremonies at the camp?

DP: *Why wouldn't we celebrate? We would call a Brahmin priest, and give them money and food.* We have in Brahman a six piece of rope on their body and it's very important. We give the money to them. We have a very systematic so we observe very nicely. *I continue to celebrate the traditions.* [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer and MS during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: Why did you come to the US?

DP: I don't know when I came here and why. I count six years here.

MS: 2008, August! This month, actually.

RS: Why did you come to Minnesota?

DP: I don't know. They brought me here.

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

DP: I really remember second daughter was here earlier. *And Kanchi, Nani, Mangala was here.*
[*Note: The italic was added by interviewer during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: Can you tell me who you came with?

DP: With me, Upender, oh no it is Hari, my grandson and daughter's family came.

RS: Where is the rest of your family now?

DP: Everywhere! Two in Manipur, India , one daughter in Bhutan, and rest in the US, one is Missouri and the rest are here in Minnesota.

RS: Can you describe the process, if you remember, from UNHCR to Minnesota?

DP: I don't remember, my grandson did everything, so I don't remember.

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

DP: I'm so excited and happy meeting my family members and neighbors and everybody is kind to me.

RS: Do you remember what it felt like when you first arrived by plane?

DP: *I didn't feel anything special. I just sat there. My grandson advised me to cover my face and sit so that I wouldn't get dizzy. So I did.* I don't feel anything, so I don't really remember the feeling I had. [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

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

DP: I don't see really difference between the refugee camp and Minnesota, I have very good faith in the Lord I always worship to my god, so god will know my intention. I'm always happy

with that. *I do not know what happens when I die.* [*Note: The italic was added by MS during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: Can you tell me any differences between Bhutan and Minnesota?

DP: *Bhutan is better if truth be told, but they did not let me stay there. I don't blame Bhutanese Government.* I really love my country, I don't blame to them but those who became the [Bhutanese] leaders, I blame them. [*Note: it was difficult to transcribe the last sentence because interpreter was speaking at same time as DP] They make us leave the country. I hope when I die, my spirit go to Bhutan. I don't blame the government, the king. Those who are growing like mushroom, the Bhutanese leaders, I blame them. They make our future in hell. I pray to the Lord when my spirit dies, I go to Bhutan. [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

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

DP: *Nobody tells me that. I feel good if they treat us well and not like in Nepal calling us Bagade. If they are polite when acknowledging I am from Bhutan, it feels good. But if they say it the way that they said in Nepal, like call us "Bagade " and "refugees" then I don't feel good. But if in US if the local say, "Bhutanese American" it sounds good.* [*Note: The italic was added by interviewer and MS during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: Just to get a little better look at Nepal. How was the relationship between you and the local Nepali people?

DP: I don't want to talk because they say, "Bagade."

RS: Bagade means?

MS: Exact word is, "people living in river banks".

RS: Is that related to Mai...?

MS: Yes, it's a derogatory term.

DP: And bagade is also the name for the boiled rice that refugees ate.

RS: Have you become an American citizen?

DP: Not yet, but this Thursday or something, I have an interview. Hari will take me.

RS: Good luck! What is important to you to retain from your culture and traditions, now that you're living in Minnesota?

DP: I like to keep all the old traditions, like *khel*, the type of dance that the old women like to play. And also I like *Tihar*, which is like *Diwali*. I like all the things we do. I like *Dasain* just like back home.

RS: How do you plan on retaining them?

DP: I feel hopeful that they will keep the tradition because I really love it, and I'm very, very hopeful.

RS: Are there any new values that you have picked up in Minnesota?

DP: I like everything about Minnesota. The best thing is whatever you want to do, you can do it here! Nobody stops you! They allow me to practice my religion; they allow me to put my *tika*. Nobody tell me not to do it. I like the way they allow freedom, nobody told us not to do anything. If I get sick I can have my own priest coming and reading just for me, I love it and everything is good here. Everything is good.

RS: What language is spoken at home?

DP: Nepali.

RS: Are you involved in any community events or social activities?

DP: I love to go, but nobody takes me and I can't walk. Even though I want to go, I can't because I can't walk. I love to go.

RS: What organization helped you resettle here?

DP: Don't ask me, I don't know.

RS: What services did they provide?

DP: They bought everything for us: they bought clothes, bought food and everything that was necessary. They even showed us how to cook.

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

DP: No, I don't think they will forget. They are very smart, I don't think they will forget my country. My daughter-in-law is very smart. Very smart.

RS: Do you have any trouble communicating or understanding the younger generation that were born or grew up here?

DP: I don't understand anything. All I know is Nepali! I touch my ears, I say, "Namaste" and I don't want to learn anything. I don't know anything.

RS: Do your grandchildren speak Nepali?

DP: Yeah, they speak because their dads and moms don't speak anything else. I don't speak other language. I went to English school for four months.

RS: Where did you go?

DP: Every Friday there was an English class. I didn't know how to do anything. After that, I stopped going. *After I stopped, my son started to go.* [*Note: The italic was added by MS during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]

RS: Do you have any future education goals?

DP: No! It doesn't come to me, so I don't want to read.

RS: Do you work in Minnesota?

DP: No! Why would I work, they give me so much benefits! Why would I work? Government gives me money. And they even give me things to watch. I have enough.

RS: What do you do every day in Minnesota?

DP: I don't sit still. I walk around. I go to the lake. I walk around the lake. And sometimes I go up to the hill. I have friends and they are Khadkas. I never sit inside. I went with my grandson to Farmer's Market. He told me to come to Farmer's Market, so I don't sit inside.

RS: Do any of your family members work in Minnesota?

DP: Only one grandson from son's side work but all of my grandchildren from my daughter work.

RS: What do they do?

DP: I don't know what they do, you have to ask them!

RS: What kind of opportunities do you see in Minnesota that you didn't see in the refugee camp?

DP: There in the camp, I use to go and collect fire wood. Here I don't need to do that and there is nothing much to do. I don't feel like there is much difference. My eyes hurt I don't see properly.

RS: What do you like about living in Minnesota?

DP: Everything in Minnesota. I love everything. Everything that you want, you can get it here. Some big people come and ask me and I told them I love Minnesota. "What happened to you? Do you want to go back?" I will not go back, I came here, I want to die here. I love it here. It's only good, good. Another woman came in the other day. "What is your name?" I said, "Dhan Maya". She asked, "What do you like here?" And I said I like everything, but I would like to see something, so they brought me a big book. Then they brought me a TV after a few days because I was tired of looking at the book.

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

DP: Yes, I feel fully integrated. During winter, I cannot walk in snow, I'm socialized with the local people. But in the winter time because there was snow. When I was in the camp, I lived with so many people. And when I left everybody cried because I never hurt anybody. And same thing here. I socialize with everybody.

RS: Thank you very much for the interview. Do you have anything else you would like to add?

DP: I'm so happy because of those who came to take the interview. My own child came to take my interview. I'm always asking how you are doing. *You can ask your mother if you do not believe.* [*Note: The italic was added by MS during the edits of transcript and was left out by interpreter]