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REFUGEES: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Pennsylvania, Erie Attract Bhutanese Refugees (Part Two)

By Laura Reeck
June 2022

Editor's note: Following is the second of a four-part series on refugees and how they made a new home in Erie, Pennsylvania.



Maitham Basha-Agha took this photo at the Urban Erie Community Development Corporation.



*Youssif Almusawi fled Iraq.
(Photo by Maitham Basha-Agha)*

Data from the Pennsylvania [Department of Human Services](#) indicates that Pennsylvania participated in the resettlement of more Bhutanese than any other national group in the 10 years between 2009 and 2019. Pennsylvania is the

foremost state in the United States to resettle Bhutanese refugees. As such, family groups have been reunited and a community based on filial ties and family relationships has formed.

It becomes increasingly clear that the Bhutanese who arrived in refugee camps in Nepal in the early 1990s experienced often years-long stays and what that entailed in terms of prospects for education, work, healthcare, etc. All Bhutanese people interviewed had lived in the camps for between 20 and 30 years before arriving in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Whereas in Part I of this series, Mukhti Subedi focuses on improvements in the camps and how people made a life for themselves there, here the outlook is not as sanguine. An important difference is the timescale: the refugees interviewed in this section had recently arrived from 20 years or more of living in the camps and had been in Erie for a matter of weeks or months, so their reflections on the camps describe them as they knew them when they left, while Mukti Subedi was looking back on life in the camps decades after having left, reflecting his experience from that time.

Both groups interviewed detail the reasons why they fled Bhutan in the 1990s, again as young children, and also why their Lhotshampa ethnic group was being persecuted – the “push” factor for fleeing and seeking refuge in a camp and then resettlement.

One salient difference between the Bhutanese Buddhist majority and the ethnic-Nepali Bhutanese refugees, who are predominantly Hindu, is religious belief and practice. Another is language. Virtually all languages spoken in Bhutan belong to the Tibetan-Burmese linguistic family, with the exception of Nepali, which is from the Indo-Aryan group. Treatment by the Bhutanese government and majority toward the Nepali ethnic minority living in Bhutan ranged from compelling them to change their cultural practices to jailing.

As they unfold, these interviews, in which the theme of hardship recurs, focus on the difficulties of having a marginal and tenuous status and living in a refugee camp. In one interview, a female member from a family group that had arrived in Erie two weeks prior to the interview was the lone person to speak. She describes the climate of fear and persecution that was created by the Bhutanese government, and which forced her family to flee when she was a child:

Interviewer: Did you have fear leaving your country?

U1: In our country fear? In Bhutan? I don't know about Bhutan because when we was in Bhutan we are small kids. We came to Nepal as a refugee, when we were small kids. We heard that, in Bhutan life are, the southern part of Bhutan is Nepalese. We are, our original, our ancestors are from Nepal. They went to

Bhutan and then they became Bhutanese. Then, our father and grandfather they were born in Bhutan. So we live in the southern part of Bhutan. People in Bhutan call us Lashampas and our father, mother, they told us that the Lashampas, the Nepalese life in Bhutan is very difficult. They stay there by fear, scared, afraid of the government. The life is very difficult there. They compelled our parents to do something. Usually they take them to jail. We heard that life is very difficult there.

Interviewer: How so? How was it difficult?

U1: The government of Bhutan, they compelled the Nepalese people, although we are Bhutanese, we are Nepalese people. They compelled us to wear Bhutan's dress. Ladies wear kitas and men wear baku. They compelled our father and mother to wear their dress, to employ. Well, our parents, mother and father, they wear their dress when they were going to office. They compelled them to wear their dress while sitting at home, plowing in the fields. And ladies in our Nepalese culture, ladies love to, they love to have their long hair but they compelled them to cut the hair ...

Emotion overcomes the interviewee as she recounts challenges to daily life both internal and external to the camp. Her account shines a different light on relations with Nepalis outside the camp as compared to Mukti Subedi's in Part I; from this perspective, relations seem to have hardened some over time.

[\[Audio clip 1\]](#)

In the other interview, a father, who had just arrived in Erie with his son two weeks earlier, explains through interpreter Nandu Subedi the difficulties he faced in the camps and also states that if political conditions were right in Bhutan, he would have preferred to return to Bhutan than to have resettled in a third country. He expresses a range of complex situations and emotions regarding life in refugee camps, thoughts of returning home, and hope for the future.

[\[Audio clip 2\]](#)

One significant theme is the interviewee's simultaneous wish to return to Bhutan, where he had a comfortable life before fleeing persecution, and to create a new life with more opportunity in the United States. But what stands out is his love of his home country and the life he had there, despite the fact that he had not lived there for more than 20 years.

No passage in the interview more clearly demonstrates how being a refugee defies individual choice and also how political circumstances determine the fate of individuals, which debunks one [commonly-held myth about refugees](#) – that they willingly leave their homes in search of a better life. Asylum-seekers have not chosen their circumstances, nor do refugees choose where they will be resettled.

As a reminder, asylum-seekers and refugees have both crossed a national border and are no longer within their country of origin and citizenship. But to distinguish between them, before legally becoming a refugee, a person must apply for asylum; if and when asylum is granted, the person becomes a refugee.

[\[Audio clip 3\]](#)

Arrival in Erie was for both groups their first experience of snow, American grocery stores and shopping (as opposed to the street markets they were familiar with), and food and drink they were unaccustomed to. The female refugee says with a laugh: “Food is challenging for us. We don’t have a habit to eat food like burgers or pizza ... And I don’t like to eat it so I just drinking water.”

That same family group came to Erie to reunite with other family members, including her brother and sister, highlighting how family reunification has contributed to forming a Bhutanese community in Erie over time. She also mentions that her parents had come with another of her brothers in 2012 to seek medical treatment. For both groups of interviewees, initiating resettlement was a choice and a forward-looking decision. As the female refugee says, “For better future, we came here. There didn’t have any future, we didn’t have any jobs, our status very low there. So for our better future, we came.”

The following sound clip of the male refugee clearly emphasizes that despite his own reservations about resettling in a third country, he has invested hope in his child, whose mother remains in the refugee camp.

[\[Audio clip 4\]](#)

Juxtaposing the three interviews of ethnic-Nepali Bhutanese refugees, all completed in February 2018, shows why there can never be a single, lone, or unified “refugee story,” even when people come from the same national and ethnic groups. Indeed, this is part of the purpose of oral history interviews: on the one hand, to record and preserve stories that might never be told otherwise, and on the other to treat each interviewee as a unique individual with a unique story, voice, and perspective.

Listening to voices, as you are able to do here through sound clips from the interviews, provides for a deeper understanding of how the life stories were told; these stories are not flat. On the contrary, there are times when emotion dominates to such an extent that the telling of the story has to be paused or restarted. Another important element to the three interviews with Bhutanese refugees is the presence of an interpreter in two of the three interviews; having an interpreter changes the dimensions of an interview. On the one hand, it slows the interview down, extending it; on the other, it deepens the interview and forces a

closer engagement for all participants through listening – an important part of empathy and understanding.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Reeck is Professor of French and International Studies at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. She co-founded the Global Citizen Scholars Program with Professor of Community and Justice Studies Dave Roncolato. Through that program, and in partnership with Catholic Charities, they completed a series of oral history interviews with recently arrived refugees in Erie, Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on immigrant communities and cultural production in contemporary France. Dr. Reeck's publications include *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond* (2011) and she co-edited *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France* (2018).

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