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Category : [January/February/March 2010](#)

Published by dharmalingam on Dec. 27, 2009

In My Opinion

Helping the Bhutanese Refugees

How one organization supplements government assistance to settle new arrivals in the US

By Sree N. Sreenath

The Bhutanese immigrants are the first poor Hindus to have arrived in the United States as refugees in large numbers, having lived for 17 years surviving on UN food assistance programs in seven camps in Nepal. When a refugee family arrives in the US with basic possessions, the government gives them food stamps, financial assistance, health screening and insurance, job search assistance, basic English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) coaching and an inexpensive apartment along a subway or bus line in a poor and often dangerous neighborhood. All of this is done through contract with a settlement agency. This contracted support lasts for eight months. After that period, the refugees are completely on their own. This is when Sewa International USA, the organization that I am president of, steps in.

Sewa is a non-profit, international, volunteer-based service organization, in partnership with Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, that works in 30 different US cities on the Bhutanese Refugee Empowerment (BRE) Project. Our volunteers are nonresident Indians, second-generation Indian-American students and concerned Americans. A number of like-minded organizations have joined hands with us in this ambitious project.

In addition to employment and transportation (unemployment is nearly 70% in some communities), refugees face uprooting of familial and societal structures, cultural and religious isolation, language barriers, children's education needs, family issues (marriage, birth, death), conflict resolution, counseling needs, cold weather, health and hygiene issues. We give financial responsibility education, and hold job etiquette seminars and resume writing workshops.

We help in finding entry-level employment in the hospitality and food industries, retail, customer relations, NGOs and factories. Women are employed through projects such as sewing, ironing, fabric painting, weaving, housekeeping and value-added food product generation (e.g., pickles). Microfinance for starting home/office cleaning or landscaping businesses, or to buy a car, is provided. We connect up a Hindu American family with a vulnerable Bhutanese family for mentoring and developing friendships.

We sponsor and conduct bhajans, yoga/meditation and festival celebrations. After 17 years of virtual incarceration in camps, the elders--functionally illiterate and numbering 40% of the workforce--have lost their skills and will to work. They have a hard time adjusting and great difficulty finding employment. We have helped start urban and rural farming programs for these ex-farmers, and we help market their produce. We also counsel students seeking higher education and provide rental assistance in cases of eviction.

One scene is etched in my mind for ever: On November 16, 2008, we met with a newly arrived group of Bhutanese Hindus in Cleveland to take them to the local mandir. Though the temperature was around freezing, most were wearing thin sweaters, no gloves and were barefoot or with only sandals. A friendly smile, a Gurkha hospitality cup of sweet, hot, boiled milk with tea from them, and a "Welcome to the US" from us, we were suddenly bosom friends. It started snowing heavily--the first snow. To our horror, young and old alike started jumping and playing in the snow in their bare feet without headgear, jackets or gloves. To our puzzled concern about frostbite they said, "We lived in the tropics; snow is new to us. Isn't it beautiful?" That afternoon we pooled our money and bought shoes for all 35 school-going children in the group. Thus began my relationship with this beautiful and friendly community.

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