Special Feature: America, Here We Come
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Special Feature

America, Here We Come

Chased from Bhutan, 106,000 Hindus find homes abroad

By Rajiv Malik, New Delhi, and Lavina Melwani, New York

Sample spread from this article

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As of September, 2009, 17,000 of an expected 60,000 Bhutanese Hindus have arrived in the United States as refugees. Another 40,000

are destined for resettlement in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Europe. Hinduism Today sent correspondent Rajiv Malik and photographer Thomas Kelly to one of the camps in Nepal, correspondent Lavina Melwani to the Bronx, New York, and enlisted community volunteers in Ohio and Texas. All contributed to the following report on a mass Hindu migration and the challenges and opportunities faced by this relatively poor and unevenly educated community.

Life in the Camps

By Rajiv Malik, New Delhi

Nineteen years ago, one hundred thousand Hindus--one-sixth of the population of Bhutan--left that country in a massive exodus to escape vicious persecution. Bhutan's Drukpa majority, followers of Tibetan Buddhism, declared the Hindus, who migrated to Bhutan a hundred years ago, to be illegal immigrants. They were stripped of rights, then attacked and finally forced to leave the country. Refused sanctuary in neighboring India, the refugees reached Nepal and have been living ever since in "temporary" camps, ignored by the Indian press and knowing little but unfulfilled hope, anger and resignation.

These Bhutanese Hindus are the latest large group to have been accepted for asylum in the United States. Beginning in 2008, thousands began to leave the camps for cities all over America. While a few other countries have agreed to take some refugees, a full 60 percent will go to the US.

Moving such a population, even at a rate of 1,500 per month, considering relocation to all countries, takes time. The first and bravest are already established in far-flung places like New York and Utah; while

relatives remain in the camps, receiving letters with tales of the New World and anxiously--sometimes hesitantly--awaiting their turn. During the wait, they take classes on the various aspects of modern Western life, which is much different from anything most have ever known.

The area provisionally granted to the refugees by Nepal is in Damak, 650 km from the capital, near the narrow part of India that separates Nepal from Bhutan. The climate there in September was hot and unpleasantly humid, a far cry from the cooler Bhutanese weather.

The camps are overseen by the International Organization for Migration, an intergovernmental agency founded after World War II to manage and care for the millions displaced by that conflict. Today, IOM, backed by 127 member countries, is the unofficial guardian of those who, like the Bhutanese Hindus, live in limbo, with where no country is home. Now that some countries have agreed to accept Bhutanese refugees, the IOM and the United Nations Refugee Agency decide together who will go to each country, with family unity a major consideration.

Beldangi II

There are seven main encampments near Damak. The largest, holding 22,000 Bhutanese, is Beldangi II--a warren of bamboo huts, tall trees and ubiquitous mud. It is accessible (at least, when the rivers are not in flood) only via a circuitous unpaved road. The IOM arranged for Hinduism Today to visit and interview residents here.

Impressions on entering the camp are mixed. The lush green trees provide a pleasant atmosphere, in contrast to the litter and garbage on the paths between the huts. A few structures of round, curved shiny metal, resembling satellite antennas, are actually solar heaters, used to

boil water and sterilize utensils. Hundreds of curious, excited children flock out to follow foreign visitors, especially intrigued by Hinduism Today's American photographer, Thomas Kelly, who speaks fluent Nepalese.

The home of Mr. Mano Rath Chamalgai, 67, is a cramped hut with no electricity. As night fell, a curious mob crowded the door and windows. The patriarch was the first to speak, nostalgically relating a tale that is representative of most in the camps: "In Bhutan I had a very good life. I was a farmer, with my own land and a nice house to live in. We had electricity there. But the Bhutanese government and army were cruel to us, and that was the reason we had to leave Bhutan. The eighteen years we have spent here have been very difficult."

His wife, Man Maya Chamalagai, 65, fears the future. "I am in a big dilemma. I have been living here for a long time. Now the future is uncertain. I do not know what is going to happen to us once we are in USA. I am not sure what kind of life we will lead there." Their two daughters, Lekha Devi and Parvati, know nothing but life as refugees. "I do not have the citizenship of any country right now," says Lekha Devi. "In the USA, I hope my dreams will come true."

Mr. Chamalgai continues, "My ancestors and forefathers migrated to Bhutan from Nepal. Our customs and traditions are similar to those that prevail in Nepal. So, we belong in Nepal." Nepal, however, refuses to grant them residency (see page 31).

Exiled from Bhutan

Bhutan's ethnic purge began in 1990. Making wide use of intimidation, bureaucratic dead-ends and suspended rights, the government organized a massive migration of all families that could not meet the

draconian requirements for citizenship--expelling fully one-sixth of the country's population. Forced to sign "voluntary migration forms," Bhutanese Hindus were taken to Nepal. Because the Nepalese government denied them citizenship status--most had no acquaintances or family they could trace back to Nepal--they became refugees, not legally bound to or welcomed by any nation.

Prem Paykurel, too, had been a successful farmer in Bhutan. His memories of the expulsion are fresh in his mind: "When we left Bhutan, the agitation for restoration of democratic rights was going on. Even though I was not involved, I was arrested and beaten. Finally, we were given an ultimatum by the Bhutanese authorities to leave the country. But we never thought that we would have to live in Nepal for 18 years."

Paykurel is the head of a family whose migration to America was followed by Hinduism Today (see sidebar, page 27). At the time of this interview, two of Prem's children had already flown to America. He and his family feel the time for their better future has finally come. "I have waited for so long living in these camps, thinking a day would come when we would go back to our native Bhutan," he laments. "Life has been really miserable here, and especially the children went through a lot. I am taking this decision of going to USA only because it will ensure a good life for them. But I know my wife and I will have to endure many hardships."

A Time of Transition

For most refugees, is seems, a buoyant hope for a bright future keeps the painful past at bay, but some have lost much. Yogacharya Narayan Adhikari held a high position in Bhutan: "For many years I was an elected member of parliament, the national assembly of Bhutan. I represented our people and tried to serve the interests of all in the best possible way. Then there was cultural and religious annihilation done by

the Bhutan government. First, they made a certain dress compulsory: everyone was supposed to wear only that. Then, all that was deemed not part of the official culture was forbidden."

Adhikari's current focus is on teaching yoga and meditation in America once he relocates to Pennsylvania, where some of his relatives are already settled. His main message is: "Youth must always remember their duties towards dharma. We Bhutanese refugees have to be known as good people, of right conduct and behavior. Our youth must live correctly for us to get a good image all over the world."

Hinduism is intrinsically woven into the identity of the people here. It was one of the main factors that distinguished them from the dominant Drukpa Bhutanese. They are free to practice Hinduism in the camps, and conversion efforts are forbidden by the camp administrators. There are several small temples in Beldangi II. Sitaram Adhikari, priest of the Lakshmi Temple, shares, "Without the temple, none of us could feel blissful and peaceful." He worries that he will have trouble finding puja supplies in the US: "Kusha, till, au and tulsi are four things we must have for our puja, but we cannot take the seeds with us." He and a few other priests perform samskaras, blessings, marriages and cremation ceremonies. There are also a number of pundits in the camps, such as Adhikari and Pundit Kashi Nath Ghimere, who completed his education in Bhutan and studied Sanskrit in India. A pundit's functions overlap with the priests', but they focus more on providing sacraments than on ritual worship. Pundit Ghimere is busy working not only among the refugees but the local Nepalese population as well. Another pundit, Bhola Nath Sapkota, carries the degree of Acharaya in Sanskrit Grammar from Varanasi. He explains, "There are no differences in the Hindu dharma when it comes to Bhutanese Hindus; it is only a few traditional practices that might be unique."

Orientation Classes

Most of the refugees have known only the simple life of farming, working the mountainous land and living in houses made of mud mixed with yak dung. Ms. Jennifer Pro, Overseas Processing Supervisor of the IOM, knows well the challenge of integrating them into gigantic cities like New York, Cleveland or Los Angeles, each with populations many times that of Bhutan's.

In addition to a standard education for the children--some of whom surpass their American peers--the IOM provides cultural orientation classes for refugees whose move has been scheduled. The curriculum is designed to help them understand their host country and survive in it. The instructors, though called "volunteers," are paid $500 a month. To qualify, they must have actually lived in the host country.

According to instructor Shashwat, the refugees are taught about all aspects of life in their future home, particularly those that will seem most alien to them. For example, they learn that toilets are inside the house, and that water runs in pipes day and night. To help overcome the language barrier, short crucial sentences and key English word are taught. Refugees with just a few dozen words in their vocabulary display pride in their accomplishment, little aware of how much must yet be learned.

Classes on health and hygiene teach how the standards of personal cleanliness are much different in an American city than in the camp. Other sessions focus on flying in an airplane, what to expect at security, how the toilets work and even how to operate the control for the in-flight entertainment.

Students are encouraged to ask questions. The most basic answers may be the ones they will need the most as they brave their awkward

new world. The instructors use mock settings to help them visualize, interact with and understand what they will encounter. They see and touch objects, and pass around pictures of everything from dressing styles to airport signs.

The aid programs for them in the US will be short term, so everyone is encouraged to think now about getting a job. Pictures depicting nurses, construction workers, drivers, clerks and people in other professions are passed around, eliciting animated questions from students. Yogacharya Adhikari volunteers, "We are told how to hunt for jobs so that we can become self-dependent, which is the most important thing."

Camp Management

David Derthick, Resettlement Program Manager for the International Organization for Migration, sighs with relief when talking about the massive effort to send the refugees to America. Notwithstanding all the work involved, it is easier, and more humane, than maintaining a refugee camp. Overall, he says, the camps have worked remarkably well over the 19 years, considering all the tensions and potential problems. "These refugees are treated better than any refugees with whom I have worked in my whole life. The camps are well run, and the infrastructure is good. The government of Nepal has been quite benevolent toward them. In other situations I have seen, refugee camps are closed, and refugees are confined like prisoners. This is not the case here. Refugees freely move in and out of the camps. They travel to India and to Kathmandu. Technically, they should not work, but many do, and that releases some of the tensions that would arise from having tens of thousands of people idle. Some even have good jobs that pay well."

"Unfortunately, there is a rule, issued by Nepal, that structures should not be permanent. But refugees here are themselves the de facto government of the camp; they run for offices and get elected in hotly

contested elections. I have found the leaders to be extraordinarily good administrators who care about their people."

The IOM, the United Nations and a Christian relief organization called Caritas provide the infrastructure and the resources for the camps. The IOM is the main organizer; the UN provides various services, including primary education and part of the funding; Caritas contributes food and provides education at the ninth and tenth grade levels.

Father Varkey Perekkatt is with Caritas Nepal, which is part of the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, a group that, historically, has engaged in intense and widespread conversion efforts. According to Perekkatt, Caritas has a different goal. "In the curriculum in our schools there is nothing special about religion. We are not running a Hindu school or a Christian school. I am a Catholic priest, but we are here in a humanitarian, secular assistance. Under that condition, religion does not count." Refugees similarly reported that there is little or no proselytizing at the camps. Perekkatt continues, "Ninety-five percent of those who came here were Hindus, and the rest were Buddhists. Now there are the occasional Christians, less than five percent after 18 years." He did not explain how five percent had become converted, given the camp rules prohibiting proselytization--though there are churches in the area.

Caritas' main challenge nowadays is to find, among the refugees, good school teachers who speak English, the medium of instruction. Perekkatt laments, "Last year, 600 of our 1,100 teachers left for resettlement. Soon 291 more will be leaving." This is a consequence of the policy of sending the more educated people first to the US and other countries, knowing that they will get established more easily. But Perekkatt is still confident that the children are being properly taught. He says with pride, "Some of our students who are now in American schools have written that they are performing better than other people

in their class." He says many resettled Bhutanese write to him from America, telling about their life, their jobs and their challenges. "These are good people; some are making 25 dollars an hour there." (The average yearly income in Nepal is $471.)

Camp Conditions

The camp organizers are suffering from what Human Rights Watch calls "donor fatigue,"which set in before the current recession. In December 2006, the World Food Program warned that it had not yet received any international donations to fund its food aid to the refugees for the next two years, and would be forced to cut their rations. Caritas stopped distributing clothing in 2002. Likewise, the UN, compelled by budgetary constraints to scale back assistance programs, stopped providing vegetables and spices to supplement basic rations. Refugees who have no outside income can now prepare only the most basic meals, with little variety and poor nutritional value. Sometimes there just isn't enough, and tensions mount.

The cutbacks have been many, and the impact is dramatic. The materials needed to fix the roofs of their simple huts, for example, are no longer available, and leaks abound. During the rainy season, entire families crowd together in the small parts of their huts that are still dry, or take shelter in another family's hut. Leaky roofs in school classrooms mean that the jute mats on which the students sit become soggy; there are no chairs, so the children must attend classes standing up.

Probably the biggest impact of budget cuts was the switch from kerosene to coal briquettes for cooking. While briquettes are cheaper, they also have serious disadvantages compared to kerosene, including health hazards.

The Emigration Process

The IOM estimates that 25,000 refugees have left for other countries so far. "Everything is going on smoothly. Every month about 1,500 people are leaving," says David Derthick. "I expect this to be the case for next several years. Certain refugees families here are frustrated because we have a big backlog. But I think 1,500 people is a lot, all things considered."

He describes some of the logistical challenges that can overshadow the extensive paperwork and refugee training. For three months of the year, the fog in the Damak region is so thick that few planes can fly to Kathmandu, whence refugees fly to India and then America. During other times of the year, rivers flood, making it impossible to reach the camps.

Security is an constant concern. In May of 2008, two IOM buses were attacked and set on fire. No one was hurt, but Derthick says the message was clear: "There is a small group of refugees which does not want the refugees to resettle. In another incident, a grenade was thrown into this compound." Those against the resettlement feel that Bhutan should take them back, and that accepting the resettlement is a display of weakness. Others would rather be accepted as citizens of Nepal, or to receive asylum in India.

Perenkkatt explains that Nepal has tried to negotiate with Bhutan on behalf of the refugees: "Fifteen rounds of talks took place between Bhutan and Nepal. Bhutan came up with conditions very few were able to agree to, including planning a closed camp where refugees would live for two years studying Bhutan's main culture. After that, they would take exams on it and renounce their own former culture. But even that offer was restricted to only a few, and eventually withdrawn. When all this was announced, people went wild and violent. After that, many young refugees went to Maoists and wanted to fight Bhutan's government for their rights. Many chose this path of confrontation

between 2004 and 2006." Much of the anger calmed down when, in 2006, an American delegation visited the camps and offered asylum soon thereafter. But tensions and fear are still commonplace.

Vishnumaya Oli, a 27-year-old English teacher and a refugee, says, "The problem now is that almost all the educated people have already left the camp and settled abroad. Those who are here now are mostly uneducated, and many are negative in their outlook. Some create disturbance in the camp. Just a few days back, one of the camp's leaders was stabbed to death. We do not know if the murderer is a refugee or a local Nepalese with a vendetta. But things are getting worse." Vishnumaya's relatives have already left. "My parents have settled in the US, and they are extremely happy there. They call me up every day and ask me to join them."

Hinduism Today asked Derthik if consideration is given to helping the Bhutanese Hindus retain their cultural and personal identities during the relocation process. Clearly puzzled, he replied, "I will be honest: I never thought of this before. I was reading your magazine today and realized that their rich culture is a new dimension to me. Honestly, I do not know. Here we are just giving them nuts-and-bolts information on how to survive in America and other countries." He adds, however, that in selecting the country of resettlement the UN "values the importance of family unity and would not send some members of a family to Australia and others to the United States."

Arriving in America

By Lavina Melwani, New York lassiwithlavina.com

One can only imagine what a hullabaloo there would be if America were to push out thousands of its naturalized citizens, stripping them of

all rights, based simply on the language they spoke or the faith they practiced! Yet Bhutan has managed to do this with impunity, destroying the lives of thousands of its own citizens who thereafter languished in refugee camps, their lives disrupted and put on hold. Youth who were born in the camps have wasted the best years of their lives-up to 20 years-living in limbo, with no dreams and no future. Two decades have been spent as stateless people, belonging nowhere, allowed to have no allegiance, no sense of purpose.

Difficult as their situation has been, there is a silver lining: the offer of the United States to resettle up to 60,000 of the 106,000 refugees. About 8,000 have already arrived in the US and been given government assistance to settle down. But this help is for just eight months, after which they have to fend for themselves. Many of the refugees speak no English and have no marketable skills. What will life be like for them as they try to get their bearings in a world light years removed from their simple rural existence, first in Bhutan, and then in Nepal? Certainly their lives will be very different. And each family's situation will vary depending on the towns and cities they land in, from Ohio to Georgia to California, New York and New Jersey. Those here now are finding the people, the economy, the climate and even the language vastly different between Anchorage, Alaska; Oakland, California; Houston, Texas; Atlanta, Georgia; and right here in New York City, where just about everyone's ancestor came as a refugee from one country or another over the last two centuries.

The Bronx's Little Bhutan

A Little Bhutan is taking shape in the rough, hard-nosed Bronx borough of New York. The Bronx is a traditional landing place for immigrants--at any given time in the last hundred years, one-third of its residents have been foreign born.

T.P. Mishra, now 25, was just six years old when his father was beaten

up, kept under police surveillance and then stripped of his citizenship. The whole family was expelled from Bhutan, and since then Mishra knew no other home but the congested huts of the refugee camp until he arrived in the US on July 2, 2009.

Mishra lives in a rundown, bleak and yet somehow handsome old apartment building, a place with an unkempt, struggling patch of grass in front. In this hard neighborhood, even the grass has to fight to survive. In Mishra's apartment, there is scant furniture and the barest of necessities. There are no fancy decor items, just a black sofa, a chair and, on one side, a couch where he sleeps. The bedroom is shared by his two sisters, Tika and Dillu. The parents are still in the camp, waiting their turn.

A miniature flag has pride of place on his side table, a part of his life wherever he goes, wherever he lives. It is his identity. It is the flag of Bhutan, the country that disowned him. For Mishra, as for all the refugees, it tells a tale of unrequited love. Mishra is more fortunate than most: he has an education that is enabling him to do some worthwhile things. With his faithful laptop by his side, he is a journalist in exile; and he provided Hinduism Today a window into the world of the Bhutanese refugees. The voice of his community, he has his own website (www.tpmishra.com) and two blogs.

Mishra's sister Tika is a lovely girl, but she looks wan and pale, low in joy and smiles. She is learning English through the International Rescue Committee, the resettlement agency. The days seem to hang heavy on her, as she has no job. Her younger sister Dillu is working in a factory, packing food. As they improve their English, their access to the outside world will increase.

Mishra's building houses the largest settlement of Bhutanese refugees in the New York area: 50 people in 9 families living in the same walk-up building. They move easily among each other's units, eating together, chatting about world and personal matters, almost like an extended family of many cousins, uncles and aunts. Those who have left their parents behind in the camp look to the elders here as surrogate parents. As in a family, everyone is closely connected. Says Mishra: "Sometimes I feel I'm not in America--I still feel I'm within the camp or with my community. If I lack anything, I can come down to my neighbor's and open the fridge and take what I need. And if they lack anything they can come to me."

Hinduism Today also visited the family of Jaya Narayan, 78, and his wife Nar Maya, 68. The whole family--sons, daughters, grandchildren and grandparents--are dressed in traditional garb, the men with a Nepali topi or cap, the women with Nepalese scarves and jewelry, their faces leathery and weather-beaten. Happy to meet another Hindu, they take their visitor to their small makeshift shrine for their evening arati. Nar Maya lights a divya and her husband blows loudly on the small conch as the family gather close. Hindu values are intact here. No matter how little the refugees have, they share it, even with strangers. The steaming, sweet milky chai, served in steel tumblers, is delicious.

Their home shrine is in a closet, with coats hung incongruously on top. On the wall are calendars with the images of Sri Krishna and Lakshmi, and in the shrine photos of their family members who have passed on. An oil lamp divya burns on the table, a makeshift attempt to retain religion in their daily life.

Narayan's large, shining computer contrasts with the Spartan furnishings. The refugees have learned that a computer is essential for connecting with their community, be they in Australia or Wisconsin, USA. Through video, they can watch each other and laugh and talk

together. Young and old gathered around the computer, having a video chat with their daughters in Australia.

The Bronx Bhutanese were getting ready for Dashain. The country of Nepal shuts down for two weeks each year in September/October to celebrate. Abi Sivakoti says, "We pray for ten days, and on the tenth day we get blessings and tikka from our parents. We have a very good meal, and that's how we celebrate. There are so many pandits in the refugee camps but there isn't one here. We do hope to get one here because we don't want to miss out on our culture."

Mangala Sharma, Activist

Mangala Sharma, now living in Minnesota, came to the US in 2000 after receiving political asylum. Since then, she has been working to advocate on behalf of the refugees. She explains, "I was born and raised in Bhutan. In fact, I am the fourth generation of women born in Bhutan in my family. I used to work for the United Nations; then I lived in a refugee camp in Nepal."

Sharma says the 300 Bhutanese already in Minnesota have formed Nirvana Center, a collaborative effort with local Hindu families. The Center provides familiar food items, winter clothes and other necessities to arriving refugees. Sharma shares, "So far, Minneapolis has been very good place for resettlement. We have many more benefits than other states."

She says what while most of the people come from a farming background, the community also includes some professionals who are both studying and working, thus preparing for the future. All are Hindu. She mentions, "Nirvana Center is the outcome of people's needs and hunger to preserve our culture and religion. We have satsang every

fortnight, and we completed the Art of Living workshop, which people loved."

Impressions and Challenges

Santi Ram Poudel spent 16 long years in Maidhar Refugee Camp. Before that he lived in the village of Lalihapper, a backward and remote place where there were no motor roads, schools or markets. During the 1990s, he recalls, Bhutan used its military and civil servants to wipe out the Nepali-speaking Southern Bhutanese through torture, rape, murder and burning of homes. Poudel was one of the lucky ones. He obtained an education under these difficult circumstances--though his Master of Science in Urban Planning from Tribhavan University, Katmandu, means little in America. Presently he is a coordinator in a nonprofit assisting immigrants.

Insightful and articulate, Poudel shares his observations and impressions. First off, he confides, "I thought all the Americans are multi-millionaires. I thought on every corner of the street people will hire for a job and it won't be hard to get employment. Things didn't happen that way, and it is really tough and challenging to find jobs. Initially we thought we won't find people who would help us but we found people who not only helped us but cared for us. They touched our lives. My three uncles and their families are resettled at South Dakota."

He found life in the camps left them totally unprepared for the US. While they were happy to escape the growing discontent, he says, "the cost of resettlement is too high. Most had not expected life to be so different. Some are really disturbed, our seniors especially. Be it buying groceries, banking, making appointments or job interviews, people are having multi-dimensional catastrophes."

Poudel wants to pursue graduate studies, but must balance that desire with his need to make money and his essential role in the community: "For some, I need to write their checks, read the letters and interpret for them, solve family issues, encourage and provide moral support."

He expressed a common dilemma, present even for refugees in the camps: "If I make a phone call or visit my relatives in Bhutan, the government will suspect them and may expel them. This is how the life is!" Still, he affirms, "I respect my country and I feel proud to be a Bhutanese citizen. It may take time to resolve the crisis, but it will be resolved. The fourth king of Bhutan realized his mistakes and he did not hesitate to abdicate his throne. The fifth king is far-sighted and a visionary leader."

American Hindus Step Up

The Bhutanese refugees present a new scenario for the American-Hindu community: how to help a largely uneducated group of Hindus settle down. Nearly all previous immigrants from the Indian region have been educated professionals for whom carving a niche in America was little challenge. But this group is different, and a number of Hindu temples and organizations have stepped in to help.

Sree N. Sree0nath (see his In My Opinion, page 9) is president of Sewa International, one of the key Hindu-American organizations working with the Bhutanese across America (www.sewausa.org /bhutanese-refugee-empowerment-project). He explains the challenges: only about 20% of the group have any college education and hence a working knowledge of English. These have gotten and held jobs, and bought their first cell phone, computer and used car. At the other end of the spectrum are some 40% who are functionally illiterate. They speak only Nepali--not even Hindi, which would help them get jobs in Indian businesses. Another 20% are under-employed. The work is mostly minimum wage--restaurants, motels, convenience stores, gas stations

and the like. These are legal workers, and that is an advantage. They've appealed for jobs from the business community, and, as one community leader said, "have had some great successes--and some spectacular exploitation."

The employment situation, Sreenath explains, varies greatly. California and the South, except for Texas, have been hard-hit by the recession. Depending on location, unemployment can run 30 to 80%. "Employment is the biggest challenge; after that is cultural adjustment, especially for the older ones. Cold winter weather, which keeps them indoors, is a great hardship for those with no transportation."

Asked how the Bhutanese have been received by the Hindu community, Sreenath replies, "In all the places that Sewa International has been working, the Hindu community has more than embraced them. In a few places Sewa International does not have volunteers, and the community is left to fend for themselves. But even then, the refugees are pleasantly surprised by the warmth that mainstream America has shown them."

Looking Forward

The stars in this drama, Sreenath recounts with pride, are the children. "There are many straight-A students. Those who were in high school in the Nepal camps are a year ahead in math and science compared to the local American students. Of course, they are struggling with English and social studies, due to language."

Sreenath feels the Bhutanese accept America as home. "Having lived in jail-like, squalid camp conditions for 17 years, they find US to be a paradise--especially once they find a job and settle down. The ones who are in their 30s would like to go back, but only as tourists. The children

couldn't care less."

Religious Persecution Persists

The refugees' Hindu faith sees them through their tribulations. Yet it is this Hindu faith and culture which--almost outlawed by Bhutan--has, to a large extent, been responsible for their loss of homeland. And now, even in America, that same Hindu faith is under siege, as some refugees report coercion to embrace Christianity. On the line are jobs, material comforts and an easier life.

The resettlement agencies handling the refugees for the first eight months are expressly forbidden to proselytize among them. But such efforts have been an issue. Sreenath says, "All refugees tell us that the missionaries who visited them in the camps said that there are no Hindu temples in the US. Everyone is a Christian, and they will also have to become one, and it is better they do so right away because they will get better benefits. This kind of talk continues to be a problem in the southern states here. But wherever Sewa International is working, the missionary activities are low, if non-existent."

How to Help

You can contact Sewa International through their web site, or track down the Bhutanese in your area using public-domain government documents available at www.scribd.com/ht_resources. They include lists of all cities the refugees are settled in and a list of all local sponsoring agencies contracted to the government. There are only a few in any given area, so it should be possible to find the one working with the Bhutanese and arrange to contact a community representative. Such support is golden.

How America Deals with Refugees

The Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration of the US State Department is responsible for the initial phases of refugee resettlement. In fiscal year 2009, which ended on September 30, 2009, the US accepted 74,652 refugees from countries all over the world. 18, 833 refugees were admitted from Iraq, 18,202 from Burma (Myanmar) and 13,452 from Bhutan. These three countries accounted for nearly 70% of all US refugees for the year. The bureau attempts to spread out the refugees' arrivals through the year at about 1,000/week so as to not overwhelm the ten "Resettlement Agencies" that work under contract with the State Department.

There are five Christian agencies, including the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, one Jewish agency, three secular ones and the State of Iowa. These, in turn, work with approximately 350 "affiliates," often local branches of the resettlement agencies, which are located in all 50 states. The responsibility of these groups lasts for just eight months, during which they supply the refugees with basic necessities and core services while assisting them to achieve economic self-sufficiency "as soon as possible after their arrival," according to the agreement between the agencies and the government. Refugees are entitled to work as soon as they arrive in the US; after one year they may apply for permanent residence ("Green Card"). The Green Card would not be denied except under unusual circumstances. After five years as a permanent resident, they may apply for citizenship.

Gina Wills, public affairs specialist of the Bureau, told Hinduism Today that there is a meeting each Wednesday at which the placement of incoming refugees is determined by the resettlement agencies themselves. The agencies match the specific needs of each family, or individual with the particular resources available in the community of the agencies' affiliates. Where refugees end up is mostly a function of available capacity in an affiliates' community. From time to time, when local conditions dictate, some affiliates are unable to take on any more refugees. One example would be a city where entry-level jobs are not available. Family reunification is a primary goal.

The system is not perfect, Wills said, but "America has been resettling refugees for a long time." "People do better," she explains, "if they dive right in. We know it is hard, but if refugees who are able to work start working as soon as possible, they will assimilate and feel truly a part of the country sooner." She noted that the current economic downturn has highlighted weaknesses in the refugee resettlement program, and that the White House has created an interagency task force to explore how to improve the program.

Wills was pleased to hear of the Hindu organizations helping after the initial eighth month period, which they readily admit is too short and are trying to lengthen. We asked about attempts to convert, common to relief efforts, such as those following the 2004 tsunami. Wills pointed to the agreement between the agencies and the Bureau, which requires faith-based agencies and affiliates to keep their religious activities separate from their refugee work, and that they "may not require refugees to profess a certain faith or participate in religious activities in order to receive services." She expressed interest in learning of any activities to the contrary, either in the Nepal camps or in the US.

The Statue of Liberty says upon its base, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me." It is a promise first made in 1886, and one kept to this day by the USA, aided by hundreds of charitable organizations across the country.

Jump Starting a New Life

By Lavina Melwani, New York

There are some new neighbors in Cleveland, and they are not the Smiths or the Joneses but the Pyakurels--the same family Rajiv Malik met and interviewed in Nepal just a few weeks ago. Meet Prem Prasa and his wife Chhala Maya, both 47. Their two sons are Indra, 25, and Tika Ram, 14, and the daughters are Nirmala, 23 and Sabitra, 17. They were confined in the camp for 17 years and have just stepped into the brightness and vastness of America. They left Nepal in late September, 2009. Hinduism Today's team met them both at the camp and as they departed Kathmandu. They are joining two of their brothers and their families already in Cleveland, Ohio, as part of the US government's family reunification scheme. Through August, 2009, 152 Bhutanese had been settled here.

Their nephew Hari Bhakta, who is already settled in this Midwest city, introduces us to them and tells us about their lives. He says his uncle, Prem Prasa, was a farmer in Bhutan and served as a gatekeeper in a school at the camp in Nepal. His uncle was most intrigued by the language and climate differences in America. He would return to farming, if it is available. Says Hari: "My uncle came here for the better education of his children, for the progress of his family and to live as a citizen."

Asked about the emotions of his aunt on coming to America and whether she spoke any English, he says, "She feels pleasant and happy on reaching America because she hopes to live a better life. She does not speak English but is able to write her family names in English." It is typical of refugees from any country to the US that the elders seldom learn the language, while the middle age learn just enough to hold a job. It is only the young who actually become fluent. Hari says that his young cousins will continue their education while working part time. "They feel that they are going to live as Americans and do better in the future."

Human Rights Watch's Dreary Report

In 2007, the international group Human Rights Watch issued an in-depth analysis of the Bhutanese refugee situation. These are selected verbatim excerpts from that report. We begin with the report's footnote #6, Threat to a Nation's Survival. It answers--to some extent--a puzzling question: Why has Bhutan, the nation famous for trying to improve its "Gross National Happiness," expelled one-sixth of its population?

"Threat to a Nation's Survival"

[In a 1993 report by Bhutan's Ministry of Home Affairs entitled "The Southern Problem: Threat to a Nation's Survival] referring to the millions of ethnic Nepalis in India, the government of Bhutan raised the specter of a "relentless tide of the Nepali diaspora" imposing "a state of democratic siege on Bhutan." The government asserted that "the southern Bhutan problem is neither a movement for democracy nor an issue concerning human rights. It is simply an attempt by an ethnic community to turn themselves into a majority through illegal immigration in order to take over political power."

Developments in the region no doubt contributed to these fears. In 1975, the neighboring kingdom of Sikkim ceased to be an independent state and merged with India, following a referendum in which the Nepali migrants, who had come to outnumber the Buddhist Sikkimese, were instrumental. In the mid-1980s the Gorkha National Liberation Front led an ultimately unsuccessful but violent campaign in North Bengal in India, on Bhutan's western border, for an independent Nepali state.

Bhutan's Ethnic Landscape

The Bhutanese refugee crisis has its roots in the history of migration to Bhutan, the resulting ethnically diverse make-up of the country's population, and the harsh policies of Bhutan's absolute monarchy towards its ethnic Nepali minority. The politically and culturally dominant Ngalongs, who live mainly in the central and western regions

of Bhutan, are of Tibetan descent; their ancestors arrived in Bhutan in the 8th and 9th centuries. The Ngalongs speak Dzongkha and follow the Drukpa Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, which is Bhutan's state religion. Bhutan's king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, is a Ngalong. The Sharchhops, who live in eastern Bhutan, are of Indo-Burmese origin, speak Tshangla (which is closely related to Dzongkha) and follow the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. Together the Ngalongs and Sharchhops are known as Drukpas. The third major group, who differ greatly from the Drukpas in terms of culture, language, and religion, are ethnic Nepalis in southern Bhutan, called Lhotshampas; they speak Nepali and are predominantly Hindu. Ethnic Nepalis first began migrating to Bhutan in the nineteenth century. Many became eligible for Bhutanese citizenship under the 1958 Nationality Law. Moreover, from the mid-1950s ethnic Nepalis began to be admitted into the bureaucracy, the army and the police, and were made members of the cabinet and the judiciary.

Denial of Citizenship

By the late 1970s the Drukpa establishment had come to see the ethnic Nepalis' growing numbers and influence as a threat to Bhutan's cultural identity and the Drukpas' own privileged position. Increasingly, Bhutan's ruling elite asserted that the majority of the ethnic Nepalis in Bhutan were not in fact citizens but illegal immigrants who threatened Bhutan's "survival as a distinct political and cultural entity." The government invoked these perceived threats as justification for a series of discriminatory measures aimed at the political, economic and cultural exclusion of Bhutan's ethnic Nepalis. Two new Citizenship Acts were passed in quick succession, in 1977 and 1985, each tightening the requirements for Bhutanese citizenship.

The 1985 Citizenship Act was followed by a new census in 1988. This census amounted to a selective, arbitrary and retroactive implementation of the 1985 Act. The authorities excluded ethnic Nepalis from becoming naturalized citizens, as provided for under the 1985 Act; instead, the authorities restricted Bhutanese citizenship to

ethnic Nepalis who had records, such as tax receipts, to prove residence in Bhutan in 1958--30 years before the census. Bhutanese officials classified people who could not prove residence in 1958 as non-nationals, "returned migrants," or other illegal immigrant categories, even if they possessed a citizenship card. A series of "Bhutanization" measures in line with Bhutan's "one nation, one people" policy exacerbated a state of fear and resentment by trying to impose a distinct national identity. On January 16, 1989, the king issued a decree requiring all citizens to observe the traditional Drukpa code of values, dress and etiquette called driglam namzha. Then in February 1989 the government removed the Nepali language from the curriculum in all schools in southern Bhutan.

Backlash and Expulsion

Ethnic Nepalis perceived these policies as a direct attack on their cultural identity. This led to growing unrest in southern Bhutan, culminating in mass demonstrations in September and October 1990. The government response was swift. The authorities classified all participants in the demonstrations as ngolops ("anti-nationals"), arresting thousands of people. The government then closed all schools in southern Bhutan and suspended health services.

By the end of 1990 the Bhutanese authorities coerced the first ethnic Nepalis to leave Bhutan. They released some ethnic Nepalis from prison on condition that they would leave the country, while giving others categorized as non-nationals under the 1988 census the "choice" to leave the country or face imprisonment. The security forces harassed many ethnic Nepalis, in some cases destroying their homes. The authorities forced the majority into exile by intimidating them into signing so-called "voluntary migration forms."

A young man's testimony was typical of the accounts refugees gave to Human Rights Watch: "The army took all the people from their houses.

My father left the house and went to India. The army sent us the form issued by the government [voluntary migration form]. They said that we had to go out. They said if you go now you will get some money. Some people got a little money. On the way [as we left Bhutan] there were many police. We were forced to sign the document. They snapped our photos. The man told me to smile, to show my teeth. He wanted to show that I was leaving my country willingly, happily, that I was not forced to leave. Only one member of my family signed. My mother gave her thumbprint."

Some of the ethnic Nepalis who fled or were expelled from Bhutan settled in India, but most refugees ended up in Nepal.

Nepal-Bhutan Negotiations Fail

Refugees have the right under international law to return to their own country. However, in a flawed process that was widely discredited by international observers and refugee experts, Bhutan and Nepal instituted a "joint verification process" to determine which refugees would be able to return.

The process of "verifying" the status of refugees and placing them in one of four categories broke down after a joint Nepal-Bhutan verification team assessed only one camp, and not a single refugee has been allowed to return to Bhutan as a result of this process.

Nepalis Remaining in Bhutan

Bhutan continues to discriminate against the remaining ethnic Nepali population in Bhutan. Ethnic Nepalis have great difficulties obtaining

so-called No Objection Certificates (NOCs), which are a pre-requisite for government employment, access to higher education, obtaining trade and business licenses, travel documents, and buying and selling land. Being denied a NOC deprives a person of almost all means of earning a living. Moreover, Bhutan's remaining ethnic Nepali citizens face ongoing threats to their citizenship status. A nationwide census completed in 2005 classifies 13 percent of current Bhutanese permanent residents as "non-nationals." While most ethnic Nepalis in Bhutan do not believe that they are currently at imminent risk of being expelled from Bhutan, they fear that without citizenship cards and without NOCs, life in Bhutan will eventually become so difficult as to leave many of them with little choice but to leave the country.

Further Expulsions?

Refugees voiced to Human Rights Watch persistent fears that Bhutan might use the resettlement offer as a pretext to force its remaining ethnic Nepali citizens to leave the country. One refugee said, "Government officials in villages are saying to Lhotshampas, 'Your relatives are going to America, why are you still here?'"PIpi

Why Won't Nepal Accept the Refugees Permanently?

Why the ethnic Nepalese were ejected from Bhutan in the first place is a puzzling question, but equally puzzling is why Nepal, their ancestral home, refuses to grant them citizenship. A Nepalese academic gave us this candid assessment:

"In 1992, when Nepal was still ruled by King Bhirendra, the king invited the refugees [to Nepal] to embarrass India in the international arena. Nepal does not have a border with Bhutan. The refugees had to travel through India, making India's refusal to protect the vagrant minority very visible. These refugees were given the best possible care by the

King. The Nepalese government enjoyed international prestige and benefitted from the financial aid pouring in to help the refugees. The Maoist government retained this approach.

"I am part of the large population of Madhesis, people of Indian origin who live in the Terai or plains regions of Nepal. We speak Avadhi, Maithali and Bhojpuri. The Pahadis, people of the hills and mountains, speak Nepalese, which is unintelligible to us. The Pahadis dominate the government, army and police. We have faced discrimination for ages, but as we are 50% of the population, our votes are important. The refugees are also Pahadis.

"We are against the assimilation and settlement of the Bhutanese refugees in the Terai as they will take our land and our jobs. It is because of our opposition that the government will not consider accepting the refugees permanently.

"We Madhesis are opposed to these refugees and are sympathetic to Bhutan government. We do not expect India to give them shelter. These refugees should either go back to Bhutan or move to the Western countries."