

Reflection on the Resettlement of Bhutanese Refugees in the UK: The voices of refugees

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We refugees are reluctant migrants: uprooted, stateless people, who have fled our country Bhutan, and no longer have the protection of any state government. Our people fled Bhutan due to our ethnicity: as a minority in Bhutan, we were in danger of being arrested, persecuted and tortured. Some have survived rape, torture and abuse by the Bhutanese army and police. Thereafter we were forced to live in refugee camps in East Nepal. Many of our children have barely known a normal childhood, and many have suffered inconceivable trauma.

After almost twenty years of dwelling in refugee camps, we were offered to resettle to third countries, such as the UK. The *Gateway Protection Programme* (GPP) is a life-line for vulnerable people like us. In 2010, the first Bhutanese refugees arrived in Manchester with the GPP. A year later, more Bhutanese refugees were resettled in Sheffield and Bradford.

Discovering a new home

When my family and I arrived in the UK in September 2010, and we got off the plane, the first thing we noticed was that it was very cold. We were also suffering from jetlag. We were transported to the transit centre, from where we were driven to our new home in Manchester. The case worker along with the interpreter showed us our new house, and explained how to use the kitchen equipment, and showed us the typical English house, with lounge (living room), bedrooms and bathrooms. Everything was ready for use when we arrived. Washing machines, can openers, electric ovens, stoves and central heating were new to most of us: in the beginning, we found it somewhat difficult to handle the kitchen equipment, particularly the electric stove. It took us a few weeks to learn our way around these things. Another persisting issue is for us to understand the particular English accent that people use here in the North West of England. For our children and the youth it is easy to learn to speak and communicate in English, but for the parents and grandparents it is far more difficult.

Our youth aims to gain qualifications and experiences that help them

to become capable adults. We hope that our youth will strive to make a major contribution to British society in the new future. However, our youth is struggling to increase their confidence, self-esteem and communication skills, which would enable them to cope with mainstream education.

Issues with resettlement

Not all people are content and satisfied with living in the UK. We Bhutanese people are family-oriented, and seek work in order to support our families: we are well-mannered and good neighbours. Refugee Action UK (RAUK) has encouraged the new arrivals to build on their group identity, and helped to set up a group organisation. Some of our group have successfully established their own community group. RAUK has helped us to overcome the many challenges and obstacles we faced during and after resettlement.

The vast majority of Bhutanese refugees in the UK are unemployed. Most of the qualifications and work experience we acquired in both Bhutan and Nepal are not accepted in the UK, and it is therefore difficult for us to find suitable jobs. Most of us are completely reliant on job seekers allowance and welfare payments. It is stressful to seek employment in the current economic crisis, and the compulsory job applications we have to complete create anxiety and frustration, because if we fail to apply our benefit payments are cut. Some elderly members of our community, who are not yet in retirement, find their situation particularly frustrating, as the entry to the job market is closed to them, due to the language barrier. As they also have to comply with the job application rules, there is a real possibility that they will lose all state subventions in the long run. As these payments are not sufficient to cover our living costs in the first place, the cuts would mean that some of us may slip into poverty.

Community development

Facing these issues alone is impossible. We are happy to have a strong community group, whose members support each other in times of hardship. The community organisation (in our case, *Takin Association UK* (TAUK)) is a place of refuge, where we can come together, enjoy each others' company, and provide help for people in need. We host several events every year, in order to celebrate religious festivals and socialise.

Our youth take part in these celebrations, as they make friends with other community members and young people from different backgrounds. We host several projects, such as a refugee football team and a film project.

Note on research with Bhutanese refugees

We have identified one significant issue with most research and literature about Bhutanese refugees, which we would like to highlight. It is close to our heart, to be acknowledged in the most appropriate terms. We came across several instances in which we have been referred to as being 'Lhotshampas'. We would like to make very clear that our ethnicity is not Lhotshampa – this Dzongkha term has been created by the Bhutanese government to refer to all people living in the Southern belt of Bhutan. In fact, the word consist of '*lho*', meaning 'South' and '*tshampa*' meaning 'people living harmoniously' – therefore the word 'Lhotshampa' actually means 'people living in the South', which includes all citizens (Bhutanese – both Drukpa and Nepali, Tibetan, Indians) resident in the South of Bhutan. Therefore, the term 'Lhotshampa' does not apply to us as an ethnicity, and we would appreciate it if researchers and writers would refrain from using this term when referring to us. We consider ourselves 'Nepali' or 'Nepali-speaking Bhutanese'.

On the other hand, it is of uttermost importance to conduct research about refugee resettlement, in order to identify problems (but also positive outcomes). We are proud and happy to have been invited to take part in the SOAS-led project, and hope that this is only the beginning of a long-term research project.