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Refugees from Bhutan hope for a more colorful future here

By Carly Flandro
Seattle Times staff reporter

In South Asia, Bishnu Magar had no right to dream.

She was a refugee, lucky just to find peace and a place to call home.

Today, Magar, 19, is a student at Foster High School and lives in Tukwila. She aspires to be an artist or a nurse — either way, she's just happy to be able to aspire.

Magar and her family are from Bhutan, a tiny nation tucked high in the Himalayas between China and India.

Washington state has become home to hundreds of Bhutanese like Magar in recent years. More refugees from Bhutan, Iraq and Myanmar are coming to the state these days than from any other countries, according to the U.S. State Department.

They come for many reasons — to escape violence, to seek a better life, or simply because they have nowhere else to go.

The most recent data show that in the 11 months ending in August, 472 Bhutanese refugees came here.

Magar and her family have been here for two years and still struggle to find their place in the community.

But for the first time, Magar can express herself without being ashamed — which, for her, is enough to make other difficulties bearable.

Magar loves to paint and draw. In her old country, women had well-defined roles — weaving, cooking, minding children. Magar was one of very few girls who made art, and she often was ridiculed for doing so.

Everything bamboo



GREG GILBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Bishnu Magar, 19, is a Bhutanese refugee who lives in Tukwila. She wants to be an artist or a nurse.



GREG GILBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Bishnu Magar quickly sketches the home she lived in in Nepal, where she and her family lived in a camp for about 16 years.

Magar was born in Bhutan, but her family fled the country when she was an infant. Ethnically Nepalese, the family feared cultural persecution.

For about 16 years, they lived in a camp in Nepal with other Bhutanese. The United Nations supplied enough bamboo and food to build homes and avoid hunger.

In her living room last week, Magar leaned over her notebook, sketching the shape of her family's hut, the thatched straw roof, the interwoven bamboo walls. Walls, the chairs, tables, beds — everything was bamboo. Furniture would break, and the family would have to wait for more bamboo from the U.N. to build more.

Dal Diyali, 33, another Bhutanese refugee who lives in Tukwila, remembers those bamboo huts: He lived in one for 15 years at another camp, the largest of its kind. With 18,000 inhabitants, he said, space was scarce and huts crowded together.

"There was no privacy," he said. There was also a lack of nutritious food and health care. Many died. "The trauma of living there" drove some to suicide, he said.

Children could go to school through 10th grade, but after that, there was no work. Refugees weren't permitted to leave the camp. They relied on the U.N. for food — mostly chilis, beans, rice and lentils.

But Magar and her friends wanted something they saw as a basic need — paper and watercolors. Through painting and drawing, they could imagine being in other, better places.

So, for four or five weeks, they all would save their rations of lentils. When they had enough, they'd sell them to buy a ream of computer paper, new watercolors or pencils.

Magar displays a picture she drew of herself and her friends, all in patched clothes, pooling their lentils.

"We were very poor," she explained.

The International Rescue Committee, one of six resettlement agencies in the area, helped Diyali and Magar come to the U.S. The nonprofit group pays refugees' first month's rent, encourages them to take English classes and helps adults find work and children enroll in school.

Many people who are helped by the agency live in SeaTac, Burien or Tukwila, where rents are more

South Asia

Bishnu Magala was born in Bhutan, but she and her family fled that country's violence and took refuge in Nepal. Now, they live in Tukwila.



Source: ESRI

MARK NOWLIN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

affordable. Refugees generally move into the same neighborhoods, if not the same apartment complexes, so they can help each other adjust to their new lives.

Hopeful atmosphere

One afternoon last week, Magar and her family seemed happy and busy.

Relatives walked in and out. Her mother left for an English class. Her sister cut red peppers in the kitchen. Her grandmother, a tiny woman in bright clothing, came in and sat cross-legged on the couch.

The relaxed, friendly, hopeful atmosphere is a far cry from the grim existence the family left in Asia.

Magar's family history was told to her by her grandparents and the grandparents of neighbors. Her forebears were from Nepal but emigrated to Bhutan generations ago.

Eventually, so many Nepalese people were in Bhutan that the Bhutanese feared their country was losing its identity.

In 1988, after a Bhutan government census, many ethnic Nepalis were branded illegal immigrants, according to a U.S. State Department fact sheet. Citing ethnic and political repression, many fled to Nepal.

Magar was a 1-year-old when her family joined the exodus.

In Nepal, it was peaceful, but the refugees were scorned and unwanted. They were discouraged from showing their talents, but Magar painted and sketched anyway. Even in Nepal, she hung her art all over the family home.

Magar's family applied to leave, and through a U.N. program they were invited to come to the U.S.

At first, her parents resisted: Learning the language would be too hard; the culture would be too different.

Magar and her siblings convinced their parents they could take care of one another. It would be worth it for a better life. "And in the end, we were able to come here," Magar said with a big smile.

She looked down, showing a few more pages in her sketchbook. One showed an owl sitting alone in a tree, a barbed-wire fence in the background.

That was when she first arrived in Tukwila and was lonely, missing friends and struggling with the language.

The next one showed a girl in a bright dress running and smiling, wildflowers in each hand.

"That," Magar said, "is when I started using watercolors again."

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