

My Father's Way Of Resistance

By Stuti Chetteri

In the 1980's Bhutan's government began to persecute Nepali ethnic people. Nepali ethnic people were called terrorists because they simply followed their culture and traditions. Bhutanese soldiers would harass Nepali ethnic people. A lot of women were sexually harassed. There were no real statistics of it but countless women have come forward to share their story. The soldiers went inside their homes and vandalized their things. The king wanted Nepali ethnic people to completely change their identity if they wanted to live in Bhutan. Even if they did try to change, it was hard because they were harassed every day. The Bhutanese king wanted Nepali ethnic people to act like the Bhutanese: eat what Bhutanese people eat, wear what Bhutanese people wear, and talk in their languages. As a result, the Nepali ethnic people felt the need to change and act more Bhutanese in order not to stand out. These are all acts of persecution.

My father, Raju Chhetri, was born in Gelephu, Bhutan, on September 9th, 1985. This was the year the Bhutanese government passed official laws persecuting Nepali ethnic people. For example, Nepali children weren't allowed to go to school and adults were not allowed to work even if they had Bhutanese citizenship. These are just the surface of the laws that were passed. By the end of 1990, more than 90% of Nepali ethnic people lost their homes and were homeless. Ethnic Nepalese had no choice but to leave Bhutan. In 1990, it was calculated that more than 106,000 people had left Bhutan. It was estimated that more than 40,000 ethnic Nepalese from Bhutan had come to Nepal. For so many people to come to Nepal, it shows us how much they endured. They were now looking for a new home. The United Nations established 12 new refugee camps in Nepal for the Nepalese from Bhutan because the Nepali government refused to give them citizenship. Some people stayed back at the border of Bhutan to protest; they even set up camps there, but they were arrested and some even killed. The Bhutanese government drove them out. This is ethnic cleansing. This is cultural erasure.

For a lot of Nepali ethnic people the best way to resist was to leave. My father and his family left Bhutan in 1990. He was five years old. My father was shot while escaping. He came to India and lived there for a little over a decade. Then, he moved to Nepal but he was still not in a refugee camp. He went out into cities to work to provide for his family. He met my mom while traveling in 2006, and they got married later that year. I was born on November 19, 2007. Then my brother was born, September 9th, 2009. Then, my father heard about the refugee camps. My father couldn't provide for his family, my brother, me and my mother. So, we all moved to the refugee camp. We were registered. It was the year 2010.

After six years of living in the refugee camp, our process of resettlement was approved. We were resettled to America. We have been living here for almost seven years now. I know and understand my culture very well. I speak Nepali, I can write and read it. My father taught me a lot of things about our culture. He felt the need to erase his culture when he first came to America. He wanted to fit in because he had finally been resettled; he had a home now. He wanted to erase the bad memories of his life back then, but something told him to not give up. We have a church full of Nepali ethnic people and he realized that there are people like him, who learned to love their culture. He resisted and held onto his culture because he realized the importance of it. He didn't want to forget it. "Sure, there were bad times," he said. "but it got me to where I am today and that's all that matters." He held onto it for so long and wanting to suddenly change made him realize why he held on to it for so long. He resisted those feelings. Having to go through that at such a young age is hurtful, but even the king of Bhutan couldn't erase his culture.