

## MANISHA'S QUEST FOR DIGNITY AND PURPOSE

Manisha is a 57-year-old Bhutanese woman who resettled in the United States in early 2009. She is eager to tell her story, which she does with the help of an interpreter. Manisha describes her childhood as wonderful. She was the youngest of seven children born to a farming family in a rural village of Bhutan. Although there was little support for education in her community, especially for girls, Manisha's parents valued education, and she was one of five girls in her village school, where she was able to finish the second grade. As was tradition, she married young, at age 17, and became a homemaker for her husband, a contractor, and the four sons they later had. Manisha and her husband had a large plot of farmland and built a good life. They were able to develop some wealth and were sending their children to school. She says that they were managing well and living in peace. In 1988, the political climate began to change and the good times ended. Manisha says she doesn't really understand how the problem started, because in Bhutan women were excluded from decision making and were given little information. As she talks, she begins to reflect that she has learned some things about what happened, but she still doesn't understand it. What she does recall is that the Bhutanese government began to discriminate against the Nepali ethnic group to which she belongs. News accounts indicate that the Druk Buddhist majority wanted to unite Bhutan under the Druk culture, religion, and language. The Nepalis had a separate culture and language and were mostly Hindu, while the Druks were Buddhist. Manisha says she does not know much about this, but she does recall that suddenly Nepalis were denied citizenship, were not allowed to speak their language, and could no longer get access to jobs. Within a family, different family members could be classified in different ways based on ethnicity.

Manisha recalls a woman who committed suicide as the discrimination grew worse. She also remembers that the Nepali people began to raise their voices and question what was happening. When this occurred, the Bhutanese government began to send soldiers to intimidate the villagers and undermine the Nepali resistance. It is evident that Manisha is controlling her emotions as she tells about cases of rape of Nepali women at the hands of the Bhutanese soldiers and recalls that the soldiers expected Nepali girls and women to be made available to them for sexual activity. She reports that government forces targeted Nepali families who had property and wealth, arresting them in the middle of the night and torturing and killing some. Families were forcefully evicted from their property. She recalls families who had to flee at night, sometimes leaving food on their tables. One day when Manisha was at the market, the soldiers arrested her husband and took him to jail; she didn't know where he was for 2 days. He was in jail for 18 months. She remembers that she and her sons would hide out, carefully watch for soldiers, and sneak back home to cook. She was afraid to be at home. Finally, one day she was forced to report to the government office, and there she was told to leave and go to Nepal. She says that until then, she was just a simple housewife who was tending her gardens and cooking for her family. She told the government representative that she couldn't leave because her husband was in jail and she needed to care for her children. She tried to survive, living with other families, and she managed to live that way for a year. Finally, Manisha heard that her husband would be released from jail on the condition that he leave the country. By this time, neighbors had started to flee, and only four households were left in her village. She sent her youngest son with friends and neighbors who were fleeing. A few days later, her husband was released. He said he was too afraid to stay in their home, and they too had to flee. Manisha did not want

to leave, and as she tells her story, she still talks longingly of the property they had to leave behind. But the next morning, she and her husband and their other three sons fled the country. It was a 3- day walk to the Indian border, where the family joined the youngest son. Manisha and her family then lived on the banks of a river with other Nepalis who had fled. Her sons ranged in age from 6 to 19 at this time. Manisha recalls that many people died by the river and that there was “fever all around.” After 3 months, Manisha and her family were moved to a refugee camp in Nepal, the largest of seven Nepali refugee camps. They spent 17 years in the refugee camp before coming to the United States. The 18 months of imprisonment affected her husband such that he was not able to tolerate the close quarters of refugee camp living; he lived and worked in the adjacent Nepali community and came to visit his family. The four boys were able to attend school in the camp. The camp was managed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ( UNHCR), whose representatives started to build a forum for women. Manisha says that many of the women were, like her, from rural areas where they had been self- reliant, eating what they grew and taking care of their families. Now they were dependent on other people. The facilities at the camps were closely built and crowded. There was always a need for cash; the refugees were given food, but money was needed for other things, like clothes and personal hygiene items. Oxfam, an international aid organization, started a knitting program and the women were able to sell their knitted items, which provided much- needed cash. Manisha recalls that many of the women were emotionally disturbed and needed support. Some committed suicide. She began to provide moral support to other women and to disabled children, and she worked as the camp’s Deputy Secretary for 3 years.

Manisha’s family wanted desperately to get back to Bhutan, but they began to realize that that would not happen. They also learned that Nepal would not give citizenship to the refugees even though they had a shared culture. So, Manisha and her family decided to resettle in the United States where they had been assured by UNHCR workers that they would have a better life. The family resettled in three stages: First, Manisha and her husband came to the United States along with their youngest son and his wife. The older sons and their families resettled in two different waves of migration. They all live in close proximity. Some of Manisha’s sons and daughters- in- law are working and some are not, but most are employed only part- time. Some work in hotel housekeeping, and one daughter- in- law works in a hospital. Manisha and her husband have not been able to find work, and she suggests that the language barrier is greater for them than for their sons and their families. She says they are all struggling financially and that they worry because they need to repay the costs of transportation from Nepal to the United States. But mostly, Manisha wants to find a job because she wants to make a contribution and have self- respect. In the camp in Nepal, she had been working and was on the go. Now, she says she lives behind closed doors. She and her husband are taking English as a second language (ESL) classes, but she feels strongly that she needs to be out at work so that she has a chance to practice English. She has given some thought to the type of work she could do, such as folding laundry or working in a school cafeteria. She thinks she could do those jobs, even with her limited English proficiency. She and her husband continue to practice their Hindu faith at home, but they are not able to attend the nearest Hindu Center, which is 15– 20 miles from their apartment, as often as they would like. The social worker at the Refugee Resettlement Program is concerned about Manisha and other women like her who are isolated and unhappy. — Beverly B. Koerin and Elizabeth D. Hutchison