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than 100,000 Bhutanese suddenly found themselves stateless after being forced to exit their country.

Purni remembers how, under the threat of death, they had to leave everything overnight – the family farm, their home, their cows and their beloved dog, Baloo.

After a census in 1988 revealed a growing population of people of Nepali descent in the south of Bhutan, ethnic tension flared. Elite Bhutanese began to label them illegal immigrants, seeing them as a threat to their culture.

Amnesty International reported refugees it interviewed “said they had fled Bhutan to escape from torture and other human rights violations committed by the Royal Bhutanese Army and Police.”

Additionally, the organization’s investigation found that many women had been raped during the course of army operations or while in detention and that “ex-prisoners among the refugees gave testimony of beatings, ill-treatment, degrading punishment and, in some cases, torture. Many alleged that they were released on condition that they would leave Bhutan.”

Ram, Purni and their two sons, Som and Thal, were loaded onto one of many government-sponsored trucks used to remove Bhutanese people of Nepali descent. First, Purni said, they were dropped in India. Then a second truck took them to a refugee camp in Nepal, where many Bhutanese lived for decades with nowhere else to go.

She said by the time they arrived at the camp, many refugees were “losing their minds” after having lost their property, livelihoods and nationality in a single day. Many also lost young children to sickness during the relocation, further deepening their despair.

Purni said she cried for many years, but the family eventually adjusted to their new life inside the camp. Ram began working in a restaurant an hour away in Damak. Work began before the restaurant opened and finished long after it closed each night, and he was only able to see his wife and children once a month.

The couple had two more children while living in Nepal: Sumitra, their only daughter, and Bhim, their youngest.

Together they lived in a small thatched-roof hut propped up on walls made of bamboo stalks woven together like a basket and stabilized with hardened mud. All four children attended a makeshift school, where they learned some English, along with Nepali and Dzongka – a Bhutanese language – from the limited supply of books they shared with other students.

Each night, they finished their homework before the sun went down, taking the daylight with it.

Their parents had never learned to read or write, in any language, and many modern-day comforts, such as electricity and indoor plumbing, were unfamiliar to the Chhetris.

Ram and Purni were anxious about starting their life all over again, but they decided to make the trip to the U.S. to give their children a better future – one outside the walls of the refugee camp.

The Chhetris were one of the first families to leave the camps for the United States in 2008, when efforts to resettle the



Purni and Ram Chhetri join their daughter, Sumitra, at her graduation from Portland State University. Sumitra Chhetri earned a bachelor's degree in political science, becoming the first Bhutanese refugee in Portland – and the first in her family – to graduate from a four-year college.

PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

At right, Purni Chhetri inside the Beldangi 1 camp, one of seven refugee camps in Nepal, where more than 100,000 Bhutanese refugees lived for decades.



refugees began.

Since then, more than 830 Bhutanese refugees have resettled in Oregon, according to the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization, or IRCO.

Sumitra was 14 when they boarded the plane for the U.S. – life within the camp was all she and Bhim, who was a toddler, had ever known.

In preparation for the move, Ram packed the necessities: a flashlight, to check their new home for snakes at night; and a machete, for cutting food and wood for cooking over an open fire.

A caseworker from Catholic Charities met them at the airport and took them to the home of their oldest son, Som. He had moved to the U.S. six months earlier and was living with another Bhutanese refugee in Portland.

The caseworker tried several times to explain to the family how an American toilet worked, but it was a tough transition. Ram laughs now as he remembers standing on the toilet seat, trying to figure it out.

The family soon got a two-bedroom apartment on Southeast 122nd Avenue, where all six lived. Everything was new, from the strange appliances in the kitchen to the busy streets filled with fast-moving cars. Sometimes they would stand on one side of the busy avenue for half an hour, waiting for a break in traffic before they'd run across the street. Later they discovered crosswalks.

Food presented its own set of challenges. They bought a packaged mixture one day at Albertsons, thinking it was dal – a popular bean dish in eastern Asia. Looking back, they think it may have been pet food. It tasted terrible.

They had no idea that in America, cats

and dogs had their own aisle in most grocery stores.

When Ram received the bill for the cost of their plane tickets from Nepal – \$8,000 that he had to repay to the International Organization for Migration – he couldn't sleep for a week. Having debt was unfamiliar, and the amount seemed insurmountable.

Refugees also receive a stipend for their first eight months in the U.S. For the Chhetris, the \$800 barely covered rent each month, let alone anything else. But Som had found a job before his family joined him, and Ram soon found work cooking at an Indian restaurant.

They had been awkwardly trying to adapt for about eight months when Steve made his first visit to their apartment.

Steve Seig had signed up as a volunteer family mentor through a program at IRCO, and the Chhetris were his first assignment. He drew on his teaching experience to slowly introduce them to English and American culture, bringing along props as teaching aides, writing English words on a white board, and using flashcards during his lessons.

“It’s not necessarily a benefit to know the language of the student you are speaking to,” Steve said. “Because then that becomes a crutch, and you tend to go back to that language.”

If the Chhetris wanted to tell him something, they had to say it in English.

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STEVE SEIG,
IRCO MENTOR FOR THE CHHETRI FAMILY

“This family,” Steve said, “their work ethic is unbelievable.”

He said he was amazed with how quickly Sumitra and Bhim learned to speak English, and whenever he walked in the door, Ram, who had never spent a day in school, would immediately grab a notebook.

“He will sit down, and he is just staring at me and the white board,” he said. “They all want to learn. They all want to be here, and it made my job really easy.”

After five months, IRCO told him it was time to begin working with a new family, but Steve decided to continue teaching the Chhetris independently. Now, seven years later, he has retired from working for the Beaverton School District but still visits the family most Sundays.

Steve has not only been their ambassador to the developed world; he’s a lifeline, helping them with everything from getting their driver’s licenses – it took Ram five attempts – to studying for their citizenship tests. Today, all six of the Chhetris are U.S. citizens.

And sometimes he’s there to help with the little things too, like junk mail.

“Immigrants and refugees, they are prey for people out there,” he said. “They will receive something in the mail – I would look at things and say, ‘ignore this,’ or ‘let me take care of it,’ because the wolves are out there.”

He also walked them through buying two houses. The family lived together in the first house, purchased for Som, until he began a family of his own. In Bhutanese culture, they would have continued to stay under the same roof, but that was not the American way. Ram wanted a house for his wife and younger children. About a year ago, Steve helped them buy the modest single-level home in outer Southeast Portland where they live now.

Ram soon painted it a stunningly bright yellow and planted rows of matching marigolds to decorate the front yard.

Today the family is embracing their own version of the American dream. Ram and Purni live comfortably, with Ram working in sanitation for Teeny Foods, while their children are striving to prove to their parents that their struggles were not in vain.

“Like a lot of other immigrant children think, you are going somewhere for better life, so you don’t mess up,” Sumitra said.

Som works as the manager of Parks for New Portlanders at Portland Parks and Recreation and has become known as an outspoken advocate for the Bhutanese community. He has testified before Portland City Council and has shared his story and outlined the needs of refugees with various media outlets, such as the Los Angeles