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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



Migrations of Bhutanese refugees

I often meet fascinating people through my work as a freelance writer and artist. Through the “Migrations” project — a series of radio stories and essays about immigrant and refugee communities — I have learned a lot about and met many people involved in the Bhutanese community in just the past six months.

According to Chhabi Koirala, president of the Oregon Bhutanese Community Organization, there are about 2,500 Bhutanese refugees living in Oregon. One reason for this is that the king of Bhutan imposed the Citizenship Act of 1985, which enforced a single national culture. It required Bhutanese who were culturally Nepalese to change their clothing and cultural traditions. The government also tightened its citizenship laws. As a result, Bhutanese people of Nepalese ethnicity — many of whom had lived there for several generations — were declared illegal immigrants. Nearly one-sixth of the population, or about 100,000 people, were expelled and ended up in refugee camps in Nepal until 2008, when the U.S. and other countries accepted them.



Moti Rizal. (Photo/Nisa' Haron)

Many Bhutanese refugees, however, like 67-year-old poet Moti Rizal, who came to Portland in 2009, are left with a longing for their former homes while adjusting to American life. Rizal has written a collection of poetry about his former life as a farmer in Bhutan and how the Bhutanese government forcibly removed him and other Bhutanese from their homes.

I met Rizal through the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO). With assistance from Suprina Koirala, his caseworker and interpreter, we talked about his life and his poetry.

When he was in Bhutan, Rizal said he and his fellow villagers helped build roads and structures in the country. He said the king wasn't thankful for that and in the 1980s, the king wanted them to change their culture, wear different clothes, and change their religion.

It was difficult, Rizal said. The army forcibly evacuated his family, taking away all they had, and sent them to Nepal. They weren't alone; many people lost their homes and property. Rizal said they didn't even have time to say goodbye to extended family; they just left their property and were sent away.

Rizal and his family left Bhutan in 1991 and ended up as refugees in Nepal. He felt poor and unwanted in Nepal and wanted to go back to

Bhutan, but Bhutanese-Nepali people were not welcome. Rizal spent 18 years in the Nepali refugee camp. While there, he tried unsuccessfully to get his land back.

According to Rizal, the king said Bhutan is a small country and he didn't want a lot of Nepalese there. He also explained that the king said he had a lot of bullets, so he didn't care if he had to kill them, so it was better if they just left.

It's ironic that with this history, Bhutan, a land-locked country on the eastern end of the Himalayas, is now touted as the “last Shangri-la” to tourists. The country espouses the motto “gross national happiness” and the king was actually on the 2014 best-dressed list in *Vanity Fair*.

Rizal thinks of America as a “dream place” because of the hardship he experienced in Bhutan and in the refugee camp in Nepal. Though he could never go back to Bhutan, Rizal still misses his farm and farming. He speaks nostalgically about the crops he once grew: beans, vegetables, grains, “and all that good stuff,” he said.

He still hears about people in his village who were expelled from Bhutan. Because he's a U.S. citizen now, he doesn't want to return. “Maybe our children will visit, but I'm here now and I'm not going back.”

I asked Rizal to read one of his poems. He actually sang this one because that is the way poetry is recited in his culture. I'll end this column with the translation of the poem:

“Our Bhutan, Our Song”

By Moti Rizal

Translation by Suprina Koirala

*Because of the hardship I'm bearing till now,
 just thinking about the past makes me go crazy
 and that has turned into this poem.
 Our tears have now become an ocean
 because all of us have cried that much.
 All of us have left the country,
 crying and screaming for help.
 Even though we were in Nepal
 and couldn't stay in Bhutan,
 our hearts were still left behind.
 Just like the waterfalls and the rivers in Bhutan,
 our tears never stopped leaving the country.
 And even though we were in camps,
 it didn't stop till then.
 We were scared going back to Nepal.
 We had to migrate from one place to another.
 We had to walk through the jungle.*

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