



Voices in Exile

Bhutanese youth
photograph
their lives in
refugee camps

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Bhutanese children photograph their lives in refugee camps

More than 60% of refugees who have fled their homes are unable to return to their families and communities in the immediate aftermath of the war, natural disaster, or persecution that led them to leave in the first place. They are trapped in protracted refugee situations.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees these people's lives might not be "at direct risk but their basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile".

▷ "Refugee huts are arranged in lines and are made out of bamboo and plastic. I have spent 8 years of my life living in camp and I do not know how many more years we will spend here. In Bhutan now our village has become a forest. We are becoming adults but have only distant dreams of our country."

Pasang



UNHCR estimates that there are 32 protracted refugee situations currently ongoing around the world, accounting for 5.5 million of the 9.2 million refugees known to exist globally.

One such group are the 106,000 Bhutanese refugees who have lived in UNHCR run camps in south-eastern Nepal since 1991.

The refugees are a Nepali-origin ethnic group known as the Lhotshampa, whose ancestors were invited by the Bhutanese government to migrate to the southern lowlands of Bhutan in the late 19th century to cultivate the malaria-infested jungles in exchange for Bhutanese citizenship.

In the 1985 Citizenship Act the Bhutanese government introduced a number of new laws aimed at bringing the culture and lifestyle of the Lhotshampa in line with that of the ruling Drukpa majority. Public demonstrations against this policy were held across southern Bhutan.

In 1990 human rights organisations widely reported incidents of rape, torture and false imprisonment leading to the coerced eviction of a large section of the Lhotshampa community.

With a population estimated at 600,000 Bhutan, which is often considered to be the world's last Shangri-La, has effectively expelled one sixth of its people. This makes it one of the highest generators of refugees per capita in the world.

“I am a girl carrying my own dreams, stories and suffocated views. This is my life as a refugee.”

Poonam



I AM A STAR
OF BHUTAN.

Life in the Camps

Growing up in Limbo

Among the swelling numbers of Bhutanese refugees arriving in Nepal in 1990 were trained teachers who immediately set about creating an education system in the hope that the children would continue to keep up with a good standard of schooling for their imminent return home. In part due to the determination of those individuals, the standard of the English medium education in the camps is considerably higher than in the rest of Nepal.

However, to many of the young students, the expansion of their minds feels more like a curse than a gift, for the limitations placed on them by their refugee status does not allow them to seek legal employment outside the camps and use the knowledge and skills that they have worked so hard for.

“I am a Bhutanese boy living in a refugee camp. Bhutan is a country with many racial and linguistic groups, with both Buddhist and Hindu people. I use my pictures to show that Bhutanese people are kind, loyal and speak the truth. We pray to our gods for peace and harmony and to allow us to return to Bhutan.”

Nar Bdr



The Children's Forum seeks to harness the energy and ability of these young refugees by involving them in workshops and activities that give them the opportunity to focus their talents in positive ways. Through photography, art and journalism the participants can express the way they feel about what it means to grow up and live as a refugee.

Through their images we are invited into their lives: into their huts to cook their rations, eat with their families, collect water with their neighbours and into their classrooms to learn and laugh and play with their friends. They show us the realities of living cheek by jowl with thousands of other refugees and the conditions in their camps where years in limbo have taken their toll on people's physical and mental wellbeing.

And they speak to us of being a forgotten people.

With conditions in the camps deteriorating, the Bhutanese refugee crisis rarely makes it into the international media. The recent political upheaval in Nepal, and the Bhutanese government dragging its feet in relation to seeking a durable solution to the problem, has resulted in the refugees feeling unheard and marginalised.

As well as providing vocational training the Children's Forum gives the young refugees a means of communicating with their peers, their community and local and international audiences – a platform from which they can demand to be recognised and remembered.

▷ Weaving

Deo Maya

“Refugee means people who do not have a house to live in, people who do not have land and properties. They just have their empty bodies. Even though I am a refugee still I do not understand the meaning of the word. We are like beggar men and that makes us sad.”

Mon Maya









◁ What is his future?

“This boy is 8 years old. What is his future? He holds a hammer when he should be holding a pen. He will receive 5 rupees for a tin of crushed stones but it will take him all day to fill one tin.”

Praja

▷ “He is the man of the match. He never loses hope of becoming a football star in Bhutan.”

Purna





◁ Hidden style

“This photo denotes the hidden style of Bhutanese boys. They are people that possess wonderful skills but being refugees they are unable to fulfill their potential. They are very close friends and united even though they fall into different castes.”

Nar Bdr

▷ “Some of the children in the camps roam free and make lots of noise.”

Ajay





◁ Collecting water

“There is a saying that many drops of water make an ocean. Like that we must share our good ideas together and solve our refugee problem.”

Dhanapati

▷ “Women queue at the health centre with their children. It can take hours of waiting.”

Til Maya









◁ “This is where we store pots in our kitchen. In our refugee camp the huts are small and it is too congested. It is difficult to maintain a bedroom and a kitchen. It is just like the shed of a cow.”

Yethi Raj

▷ “An ill woman lies outside her hut. Many people get sick especially in the summer season because it is so hot in the camps.”

Bishnu Maya





◁ Breaking rocks

“These old men are working to earn money to buy vegetables. They will earn very little.”

Dhanapati

▷ “We receive rations according to the number of family members. If a family has small babies then the rations will be sufficient. If the family has only adults they will have to buy extra or borrow from others. We have to eat little to make it last. In Bhutan we could eat whenever we liked but in camps we cannot do this.”

Bhima





◁ “Small children are innocent and do not know about the history of our forefathers, Bhutan and the refugees. Sometimes my small sister asks our parents when we will return to Bhutan and who made them come here to this refugee camp.”

Mon Maya

▷ “Refugee people are poor in wealth but rich in kindness, helpfulness and ability.”

Yadap





◁ Children Weaving

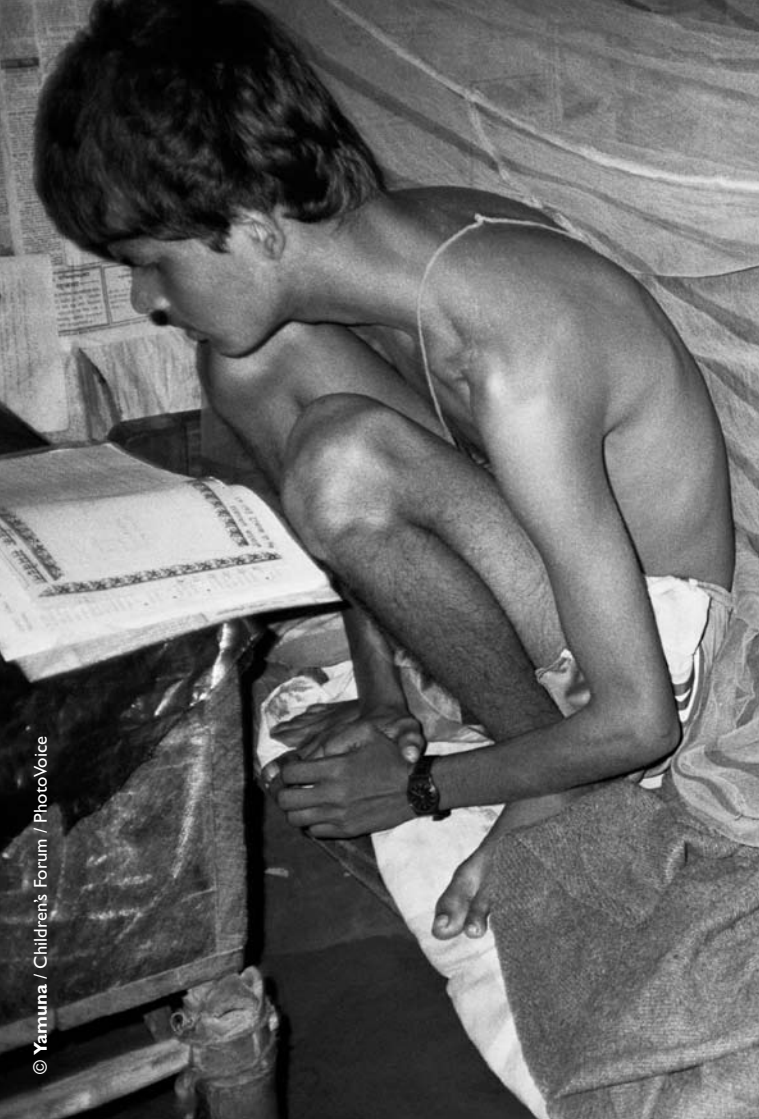
Praja

▷ Assembly at Marigold Academy

“Even though we are refugees still we get an opportunity to study. Through study every individual can be lead onto a brighter path. Education is the ornament of a human being. It is consolation to the old, ornament to the rich and wealth to the poor. Refugees do not have anything, only our education is with us.”

Bishnu Maya





◁ “He is my brother. He is studying in Class VIII. He wakes up early in the morning because his examinations are very near. He is naked, sitting on the bed, because he has just woken up, lit the lantern and started studying.”

Yamuna

▷ “Carrying rations back to the huts.”

Aite Maya





◁ “He is an old man who thinks life is like smoke that a puff of wind can disperse. He says in Bhutan he was very rich and that he came to Nepal with only the clothes that he was wearing. He complains that he will die without seeing his country again. Myself and others tell him that is not the way to think.”

Yethi Raj

▷ “When there is no space in the classrooms we carry on learning outside.”

Bikash





◁ Small girl

Mon Maya

- ▷ “This old man is a pundit, he is sitting outside his hut and reading his prayers. Each and every person has the right to follow their own religion. It is a fundamental right.”

Yethi Raj





◁ Early Morning

“Our huts are so close together that it is easy to meet with our friends and family.”

Prem

▷ “These temples are situated all around the camps. They are built by the people of the camps and they contain many beautiful paintings. They are Buddhist and Hindu temples but people of any religion can go in and worship there. They are believed to be holy places.”

Bikash, Sanchu, Khem, Bhima





◁ My grandfather

Purna

▷ Playing with a doll

“These children were born in the camps. They play happily because they do not know about Bhutan - they do not understand about our situation in the refugee camp.”

Bishnu Maya





◁▷ “In camp time flows by continuously. Some people say we may always be neglected. In my pictures I want to show how refugees pass time - people gather in families and share their happiness and sorrows. We youths play games and do exercise, we paint pictures and sing songs. We keep our minds active.”

Praja









The aims of every PhotoVoice project are greater than just turning out fine new photographic voices. The strong images published here are the by-product of a process that the organization believes is every bit as important as the end result.

Teaching photography is a means of creative therapy and a form of play. These are priceless outcomes – laughter in the company of friends and the happy focus of a shared creative endeavour. Exhibitions are the celebrations of the students' achievement, but they are also the places where these new photographers can raise awareness of the specific issues of social exclusion or human rights abuses that worry them, and in so doing influence the behaviour of policy makers, the media, or the general public. Finally, photography has very real vocational possibilities. Projects can generate income for participants and PhotoVoice supports those who are skilled and committed enough to pursue careers within their local industries.



In 1998, Tiffany Fairey, PhotoVoice's co-Founder, arrived as a social anthropology student in the Bhutanese refugee camps with the aim of setting up a photography project for the refugee children.

She established the Rose Class, a project that allowed the participants to express their hopes and fears through photography, art and writing. The project aimed to build confidence, increase skills and provide a platform for these young people to communicate to their community and international audiences their stories of growing up as refugees.

From its humble beginnings working with the group of 13 children that made up the Rose Class, the project has now involved over 3000 refugee youth. During its initial years the project survived on limited funds and was driven by the energy and enthusiasm of a small group of young people. In 2002 the Rose Class was renamed the Children's Forum after PhotoVoice started working with local partner, The Lutheran World Federation. In 2003 PhotoVoice secured Comic Relief funding enabling the project to expand.

Project activities are varied. In addition to photography workshops they have included camp events and exhibitions,



workshops with local Nepali children, video documentaries on child trafficking, camps wall bulletins, writing and journalism workshops and 9 month art courses. For the last 5 years the young people have also published a monthly newspaper:

2000 copies of which are read by the Bhutanese refugee community both inside and outside the camps. A number of the original participants now teach and co-ordinate activities for the younger ones.

“Before, I was living in this camp and thinking there was nothing I could do for my community. Now I feel that I can make a useful contribution to our community. I am grateful for that. I do not want my life to be futile. The word refugee does not mean devoid of desire, curiosity and interest. I have to express my opinion.”

Aita Singh



More recently the focus of the Children's Forum has shifted to providing the participants with vocational skills with which they can earn an income in the future.

In collaboration with local photographic labs in Nepal, the project is running a vocational photography programme and has recently opened an office and Photo Centre in the camps. The Photo Centre houses a community photo library, a darkroom and a studio that will enable the young people to run a photographic business and generate a sustainable income stream for the project.

Many of the young people have been able to use the skills gained beyond the project. One of the original participants works as a journalist while another runs an art business. Some young people have also generated income from their skills to fund their further education.

The work produced by the Children's Forum has been exhibited around the world including in Kathmandu, London, Paris and New York. The project has received significant press coverage in both print publications and tele-media including on the National Geographic, The Observer, BBC online and Radio Nepal.



Dil Maya

I'm a Bhutanese girl. I live in a refugee camp with my family. Though I was small when I came from Bhutan I remember it well because my parents always talk about our beautiful home, our land, and our animals.

I remember playing with my friends in beautiful gardens but today when I look around I see only bamboo huts everywhere.

Outsiders look at us and say that we are lazy people, that we are getting everything and have comfortable lives in the camps, but this is wrong. We did not come here through choice. In Bhutan, every day the army used to come to my village and they would beat and torture my parents and the elders and take any food they liked. We were able to bear this but they continued coming time and again.

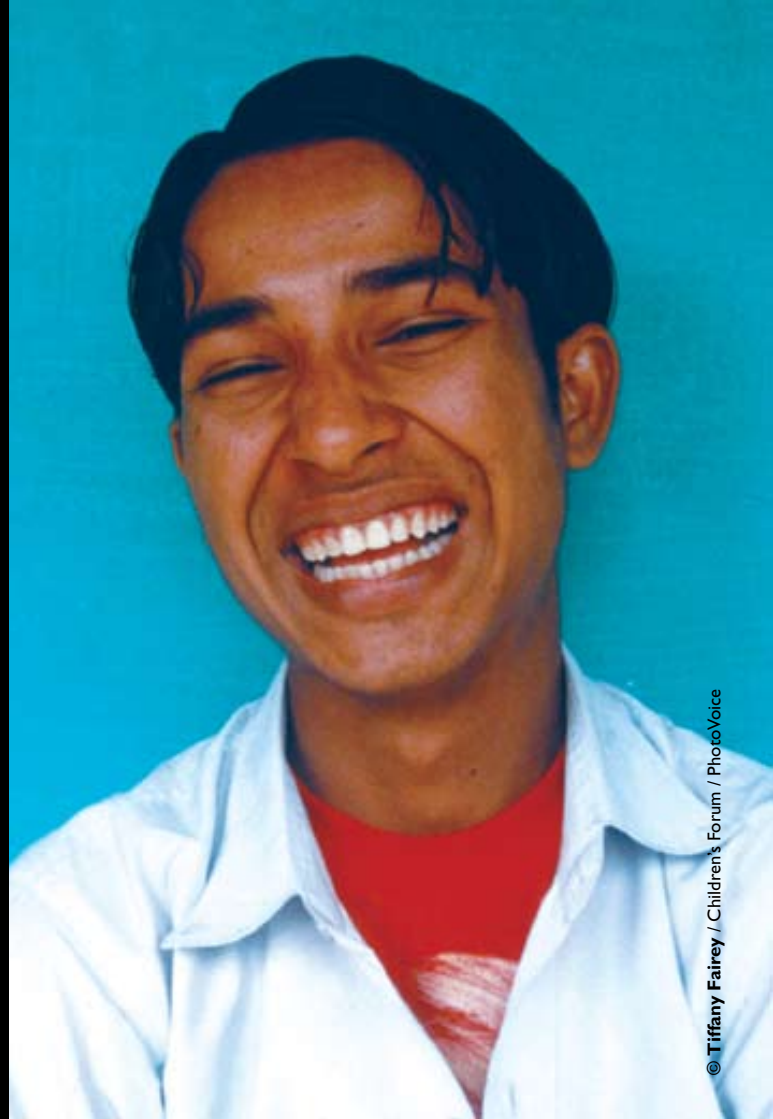
I wish all people could see that I'm not happy to be a refugee even if we are well looked after. My friends and I may be educated but it does not have any value without freedom. I won't be proud of my knowledge until I have citizenship.

Indra

I was born in my beloved Bhutan. Then I came with my parents, four brothers and sister to live here in the camps. At the time I was unaware that we were losing our house and belongings but was conscious that my parents walked with heavy legs and tears in their eyes. Before we left our country my father was jailed - he was released with the ultimatum to leave the country.

Now I am living in the refugee camps. The houses are closely packed, we eat things provided to us by UNHCR and other organisations, we do not have enough space to play but we have schools with simple educational facilities. I passed secondary level from my camp school.

I dream of a bright future working for society and my country but I'm always covered by the dark blanket of being a refugee. My mind is filled with unclear thoughts about my future and what it will be. Lots more children are being born every day in the camps. Crimes like robbery and rape are not common but are increasing. I am afraid about the increasing number of youths with energy and ambition but who have no place to exercise their minds.





Deo Maya

When I was six months old my father died. After that, when I was two and a half years old, my mother eloped with my step father and I was very unlucky as I didn't get the love of a father and mother but instead I was forced to stay alone. When my maternal grandparents heard about me they took me in their own house and kept me there. Day by day I slowly matured.

When I reached the age of 7 years I came to Nepal along with my two grandparents. We had all become Bhutanese refugees. I joined the school and I have continuously studied until today. But we were all still homeless and jobless. My grandfather is always ill and he has mental impairment. My grandmother also has only one eye. I am the one who is able but I have not had any opportunities to get a job and work until I joined the photography programme. Now I have been given the opportunity to become a lady in the photographic field. Such training was not available before and since I have been a child my ambition has been to become a photographer. This project has enabled me to fulfil my dream and so I will not forget this until my last breath.

Abishek

Fifteen years ago we were enjoying a happy life in Bhutan. Then the Bhutanese government evicted us. In 1990 the Government began to persecute us, labelling us Nepalese, because we spoke Nepali and we wore traditional Nepali dress. They burnt and destroyed our house and chased us into the night. I was 2 years old at the time. My family had to leave Bhutan and was forced to spend a life in the camps. We have now spent fifteen years living in exile.

All the young people are eager to return to the motherland. Every year the Bhutanese government has talks but does not appear interested in taking the refugees back. I am worried there will be no repatriation and we'll die in the camps. The small children do not know anything about Bhutan because they have been born in the refugee camps.

Because the camps are overcrowded many people are catching diseases. Now in the camps there are only small children. The old are dying, rich people are leaving and the youth are going outside the camps to work.





Sanchu

I still remember my brief time in Bhutan. My family had land and other property. In Bhutan I had a nice school building which was made of cement and bricks. In Bhutan I had good neighbours. In Bhutan the houses were a good distance apart.

We helped one another but then people and the Government began to misunderstand each other and they ruled that the girl students should cut their hair like the boys and said we should wear a different style of clothing from our traditional dress. This is the main reason why we became refugees. They took our citizenship documents and our property and made us landless.

Here I have nothing. I have no documents so I can't get any permanent employment or opportunities. I have no fixed place to live. I have no right to exist freely. I do not have a small piece of land where I can settle. But I got a golden opportunity to gain education in the refugee camps. We have knowledge but do not have citizenship.

Local people treat us like prisoners because we are poor.

Devi

I was only 7 years old when I left Bhutan with my parents. I did not know about the cause of our leaving Bhutan. Now that I am older I know the cause of our eviction. My greatest sorrow during that time was leaving my school where I had been studying for one year. It is a great fortune to the refugee children like me that we are able to continue with our education and that it is given freely. I am studying up to secondary level and am going to study further very soon. In the future I want to be a great doctor or a renowned journalist.

I am spending this refugee life quite happily and it is good being with friends and relatives but I am very sad not being in my homeland and not having citizenship. It is good fortune for me to be involved in The Children's Forum as a journalist for our publication. This project has brought me more confidence, given me more experience and has developed me mentally giving me another view and essential practical knowledge.

This is just a small selection of the hundreds of young people who have participated in The Children's Forum. To read more photographers' stories go to www.photovoice.org



PhotoVoice

working with positive negatives

PhotoVoice seeks to bring about positive social change for marginalised communities by providing them with photographic training with which they can express themselves, generate income and advocate for change.

PhotoVoice is an award-winning international charity and the only development organisation of its kind in Europe. Its projects empower some of the most disadvantaged groups in the world with the photographic skills that they can use to transform their lives. By setting up in-field photojournalism workshops its projects enable those who are traditionally the subjects of photography to instead become its creator. Through photography these individuals find the confidence to speak out about their challenges, concerns, hopes and fears.

PhotoVoice projects span four continents, assisting refugees, street children, orphans, HIV/AIDS sufferers and special needs groups. Internationally, the organisation provides the platform for these groups to exhibit and market their work and, in so doing, to inspire change. It also provides long-term support for individuals to pursue careers in their local photographic industries.

PhotoVoice always works in partnership with other international and local community organisations.

Support our work: become a Friend of PhotoVoice or buy any of the prints published here at www.photovoice.org

▷ “Weaving to earn extra money.”

Yethi Raj

“Photography is the only medium through which I can focus all my feelings about living a refugee life. I have come to understand the real objectives of snapping photos: they can create awareness and cooperation among the refugee community and also with communities in other countries of the world about our way of life and what it means to be a refugee.”

Nar Bdr





The Children's Forum project has been made possible by the generosity of numerous individuals and organisations in the UK, overseas and within Nepal.

Particularly the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), The Hamilton Trust, The Bhutanese Refugee Support Group, Save the Children UK, AHURA, The Connect Youth Millennium Award Scheme (British Council). Between 2004 and 2007 the project has been funded by Comic Relief.

The Children's Forum was initially called the Rose Class and for several years was self-run by the 17 original project participants. It was one of the two projects that inspired the foundation of PhotoVoice.

In 2002 PhotoVoice appointed a local project co-ordinator and forged a partnership with one of the implementing agencies working in the refugee camps, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). In 2003 PhotoVoice merged with the Bhutanese Refugee Children's Forum, originally established by Save the Children and subsequently part funded by PhotoVoice and UNHCR.

PhotoVoice and LWF continue to run photography, art and journalism programmes through the Children's Forum and the project has just built a small self-sustainable photographic centre in the refugee camps. A number of the original project participants are now earning a living or supplementing their income through their art, photography and journalism work.

For further information on the Children's Forum project please see:
www.photovoice.org



THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION — NEPAL

PhotoVoice has been working with local partner, LWF Nepal, since 2002.

Founded in 1947
the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) is a

global communion of Christian churches in the Lutheran tradition. They established LWF/Department for World Service (LWF/DWS) as a humanitarian organization with field offices in 34 different countries rendering assistance to those in need with a focus on fostering awareness, advocacy, solidarity and action at local, national and international levels on a wide range of human rights, humanitarian and development issues.

www.lwfnepal.org

PhotoVoice project directors and managers: Tiffany Fairey, Coco Campbell.
Thank you to all the staff at LWF Nepal, CN Timsina, Rachel Carnegie and the Bhutanese Refugee Support Group and to Indra Timsina, local project manager.
Copy: Charlie Devereux, Coco Campbell, Annie Dare. Art: Sarah Watson.
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“Many people forget that despite losing their citizenship and property, refugees still guard their traditions, customs and dignity. In this modern, competitive, scientific and civilised world refugees have to find a way to survive.”

Menuka

For further information on the Bhutanese Refugee issue and to see more of the work from the Children’s Forum, including an interactive tour of a refugee camp please see:

www.bhuitaneserefugees.com



◁ "Here I am a refugee.
But I don't want refuge,
I want the wings to fly."

Photo by Aite Maya
Words by Devi

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PhotoVoice is a registered charity no. 1096598
ISBN 978-0-9554437-7-0

www.bhutaneserefugees.com