Life in Refugee Camps

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This chapter gives us a picture of what it was like for thousands of the Lhotsampa living in the refugee camps in Nepal for nearly eighteen years, and for the children born in these camps. It will look at what opportunities the camps offered for communities to build themselves.

Personal accounts

Hari Chamlagai, now living in the United States, recalled that life in the refugee camp was indeed pathetic. The productive years of his youth were wasted in the confines of a camp under miserable conditions. When millions of others of Hari’s age, especially in Western countries, were gearing up for bright futures and careers, Hari was simply struggling to get access to nutritious food, better health care, pure drinking water, electricity, a computer—and of course freedom. Sadly, this wish list never materialized for him until much later (Chamlagai, personal communication, 2013). Hari recalls living in the Goldhap camp, from the age of three, for eighteen years (1991–2009). He responded to me from his new home in Charlotte, North Carolina, and gave me vivid descriptions of his camp life. Hari’s younger sibling lost the battle for life in the very initial stages of
their exile on the riverbank in eastern Nepal. Hari attributes the passing away of his brother to poor nutrition and the lack of access to timely health care. Hari recalls that the inadequate health care system did not only take his brother’s life, but led to hundreds of other infants, children, youth, and adults losing their lives in these camps. His own mother died at the camp hospital in 2005 due to lack of proper treatment for her asthmatic condition; she was then in her early fifties. Most Lhotsampa who lived in the camps would have seen loved ones suffer or die from preventable diseases. Simple and common health concerns within the camps included malnutrition; poor oral health; lack of gynecological, prenatal, and postnatal care; and depression or mental illness stemming from the sense of displacement and cultural alienation. Services to deal with these problems were not within the reach of the refugees (Maxym, 2010).

Hari was good at studies, sports, and other extracurricular activities and used to win many prizes at events held in the camp. He recalls that his mother used to attend these functions whenever he received an award or a certificate. More recently, in 2013 Hari received an award for community service in Charlotte and also the Gloria C. Trumpower Outstanding Employee Award for the same year. He will soon become a US citizen, but the question of what mistakes a three-year-old child could have made that led the Bhutan government to evict him from the country continues to haunt him (Chamlagai, personal communication, 2014).

Prahlad Dahal, the second author of this chapter, also has recollections of his experiences in a Nepal camp:

I still remember the first day the ration was distributed and an elderly person had taken a handful of the items received and offered them to God, pleading with him not to curse his children as his family had nothing but had to survive on charity. I remember him saying, “We have put no sweat of ours to feed the children and to offer to our saviour—the Almighty God.” The senior members of refugee families always expressed their pain and