

Life as a Refugee in Nepal

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Born and raised in a refugee camp in Nepal, life was incomparably disparate from what I would proclaim normal today. The refugee camp itself was situated between two rivers about two miles apart, bordered by jungles on both sides. The nearest cities were about a few hours away, walking distance, so no one could truly get a job outside the refugee camp. We basically had to survive through what the Nepali government offered, which was very little, and also through the few crops we grew around our houses. The houses were constructed from straw, mud, and in some cases wood, and most houses were connected like a duplex. There was no access to electricity whatsoever or any running water in the house. So, to attain water, you would have to get a large bucket and wait in a huge line of people of at least 20 people at the nearest tube well. There were also very scarce roads, but there was no real purpose for them, since rarely any family owned a car or even a motorcycle. There was no grass on the ground as people had walked all over them plus the scorching heat wouldn't allow the grass to grow either, so the whole neighborhood smelt like dirt.

Growing up in the refugee camp, I was always more privileged than other kids my age. For instance, while other kids were helping out with chores or cooking food, I would be in the house beating up a steel plate with a spoon, pretending that it was a drum. I was little boy blue while others were workhorses. Both of my parents were lucky enough to have an actual job in the camp unlike most of the people, so I didn't have to do too much around the house. I also had two older sisters who would do most of the cooking and chores around the house. I had no real knowledge of the world around me or how considerably hard the people around me were working just to provide for their family. I basically lived under a rock. Even though everyone was essentially trying to survive, the community itself was very caring and looked after each other as if it were a big family and people would share whatever they could with one another.

One windy afternoon in the summer of 2009, my friends and I were just returning home from playing soccer when we realized that the color of the sky had turned into an unusual shade of red and there was a small trace of smoke in the horizon. We figured it was nothing, so we just proceeded to go to our houses. I hadn't even finished drinking my glass of water when we heard intense chatter and footsteps outside. Then, one of my uncles that lived across our house yells, "THE FIRE IS GETTING CLOSER." My heart instantly stopped as my whole family rushed outside in disbelief. As I stepped out the door, I could immediately detect the eyes widening and the mouths dropping of the people already outside. My whole-body trembled just by the sight of the people around me. I could already sense the tension and the catastrophe which was about to take place. As I took another step, I caught a strong whiff of smoke which made me sneeze. I could hear the hissing of the fire even through the terror and the yelling. As I took one more step and faced towards the back of the house, I could see the Godzilla of fires only a few hundred

feet away, feasting on the houses and expanding larger by the second. With the aid of the wind, it carried the fire from one straw rooftop to another, burning quicker than thin sheets of paper. Some people started snatching whatever was in their house and rushed to the other side of the river, about half a mile south of our house. Others followed and soon it crumbled into a turmoil. The whole ground started to rumble as if it were an earthquake and not a fire, as the blur of people scrambled to safety. Amongst the chaos, my mom suggested that we, "Wait a few minutes and see if the fire dies down." Whilst others were racing back and forth and moving their supplies, our family just stood still and observed the fire. The wind fueled the flames and the fire spread rapidly. Soon enough, the fire was right next to our house, so nearby that the fire was reflecting from our eyes, and at that moment we finally decided that we needed to rush out of there. I grabbed my sister's hand as tight as I could, as we sprinted to safety while my mom and dad attempted to grab what they could from the house. While our neighbors were able to gather their supplies and carry it to the other side of the river a few times, my mom and dad had to just catch hold of what they could and leave.

At last, we reached the shaky bridge full of people and were able to cross the river and head to the safety of the jungle on the other side. We found a small clearing next to a group of people and lied down on the ground. Finally able to catch a breather, I glanced around to inspect and witnessed every single one of us trembling, with our hands on our head and tears in our eyes, watching the flames devour our houses. That night, the whole community had lost everything. No one had a place to live anymore and we all had to just camp the night in the jungle using anything that we possibly had left. Some people were even able to get their beds into the jungle, but all we had left was a few clothes, that we used as our mattress, and supplies since we were late in rushing out and were only able to make one trip from our house to the jungle. The fire hadn't left a single house or even a plant untouched. A total of around 300 houses were consumed by the fire, but thankfully there were surprisingly no casualties that day.

The next few weeks everyone had to kick off from scratch and rebuild our community. That's when I knew that I would have to step up and support my family in any way possible. I had to learn to cook food such as rice and vegetables and help out with chores in the house. With the whole community supporting each other and some help from the Nepali government with supplies, everyone was able to restore everything within the next month or two. Reflecting back on this experience that I went through transformed the way I saw the world in a way that I was finally able to see the struggle that people around me had to go through. Hitting rock bottom empowered me to acknowledge brand new perspectives and reveal a distinct character to bounce back even higher. In addition to that, I also saw the importance of the strong community like the one we had. Having left the refugee camp and now living in the United States, the memory and all the valuable lessons I learned from the fire lives with me forever.