

Women's voices from the camps of Nepal

In 1989, the Bhutanese government adopted a 'one nation one people' policy to impose the dominant Ngalongpa culture, religion and language throughout the country. The Nepali language of the southern Bhutanese Lhotshampas was banned and Nepali books burned. Peaceful demonstrations in September 1990 sparked retaliatory arrests, detention and torture. Over 100,000 Bhutanese fled to Nepal. Ganga Neupane and Pingala Chhetri, both now in their 30s, have been in exile in Nepal, in camps, for 15 years.

Ganga:

In school in Bhutan, I used to tell my teachers that I would be a lawyer. While I was teaching in the camp school, one of the children asked me what was my ambition. I had no answer for him. The aims of my life have been scattered. Life is so uncertain that we have to live each day as it comes. The governments

of Bhutan and Nepal have not reached an agreed solution. They appear to ignore the problem, dismissing the efforts of those who are struggling to resolve the situation. I feel that if the Bhutanese people had been politically aware – as we are now, a bit – we would never have left Bhutan and the problem would have been solved within Bhutan itself. Living as a refugee for so long is very miserable. We can see no way out.

Pingala:

When we arrived at our refugee camp, I saw plastic roofs blown by the wind. It was so dry and sandy. There was nobody to look after us. There was no food or proper health-care, and many died, especially children. Later, agencies like LWF, CARITAS Nepal, Oxfam GB and UNHCR arrived, providing food, medicine and education. Whenever officials arrived, the flame of our hope to return home grew bigger.

People listened to the radio to hear the news. Even today I can see old people still listening to their old radios with hope in their hearts. I often wonder why we remain unheard and ignored by the world. Innocent people keep dying every day due to lack of fundamental rights, while those promoting human rights keep themselves busy organising human rights programmes and seminars. When we hear of human rights it sounds so good but they are only on paper.

Ganga and Pingala have formed 'Voice for Change', a platform for women in the camps to speak out and to identify practical solutions to their problems. Email: voiceforch@wlink.com.np

We also want to live and progress in life. We are raising our voices for a change in our lives.

