

Laxmi Sapkota

[Speaker 1]

I was born in 2002, August, at home. It was like an at-home birth. I spent about five years, so my childhood.

I don't remember entirely, but I do remember some snippets, some good memories, and some traumatic memories as well. Growing up, I don't remember too much of like three years, but once my brothers were born, relatives have told me that I used to be very excited and would usually take care of them. So, in Nepal, we have cradles, but made out of, I think, bamboo, and you use like a string to like pull it and push it, kind of put the kids to sleep.

So, that was my job, and relatives used to tell me that I used to sing my brothers to sleep. So, I used to remember this, but now I can't confirm, but I used to like sing a lot, and I was like that creative kind of kid growing up. I had like our houses were, so like our walls were attached to our neighbours, and our neighbours were our cousins, basically.

So, I spent my childhood with like my cousin next door, and our childhood consisted of us just going out to play. We didn't have iPads or anything. We played with like rocks, because our parents, like our mothers, Dad used to go to work, and like usually I'd be home with grandma or like a mum, and they would go out and cut grass, and then while they were out, I used to go out with my cousins and play with like rocks.

We would have like these small games, and also rubber bands as well. Doesn't sound interesting, but there's actually some pretty fun games that are nostalgic to everyone's childhood Nepalese people. So, we used to play those games, and just run around, be kids, just enjoy our life in that little world that we had.

I used to stay with my grandma, so I used to like sleep in the same bed as her. Our family, we used to make yogurt as well, so my job was to take tubs of yogurt to like my cousin's house, and deliver it there. So, I used to do that and come back.

Those are all the good memories. Our school was interesting. I started from like the pre-primary class, and by the time I think I was about to head into year two, before coming here.

So, that was like my schooling in Nepal, from like primary, pre-primary to year two. The school was, I think, a walk away from like where we lived, whereas my dad's school was in like a separate area. My schooling experience was in this large area.

It was like a large bamboo hut, basically, with no adequate equipment or anything. I used to go there with my cousin, and the only thing that I can remember from school is that if we didn't do our homework, they would slap us with like bamboo sticks, and that's what I can remember from my schooling experience. Whereas, when I went to my dad's school, because I was like the principal's daughter, everyone used to like adore me, and pick me up, and hold me, give me treats, and all that.

So, I completely got a like, I got a completely different treatment going to my dad's school, compared to like being a normal student. School was a bit traumatic as well. I didn't really learn much.

It was very forceful, and strict, and violent as well. And then lifestyle in the refugee camp was also not adequate. I don't remember in terms of food.

I think I was well fed. My parents did a good job of my dad working, feeding us, and we used to get biscuits as treats. Yeah, we were okay with food.

With water, we instead of having taps, we didn't have taps. We had big wells. Was it a water well or something?

But then you pump up the water, and also like we had like a open shower outside with no shelter, and an open bathroom as well. It was just all outside, like a hole in the ground. Yeah, our rooms were, our house was just basically a big room.

More kitchen area, parents, and then I used to stay with my grandma. The house that we lived in was made out of mud and bamboo. It was a woven bamboo house.

It was basically like a hut, like a one room. It was a hut, like a large room that basically had everything in the middle. We had a small kitchen.

It had a firewood system. We didn't have like a proper bed. It was just like, I think a flat mud bed.

It was like a mud floor, and they kind of raised it up with a bamboo bed. Yeah, I spent my nights with my grandma all the time, because we didn't have any space. And as I had two other siblings younger than me, they were the priority for my parents.

So growing up, I had a first brother, and after he was born, my relatives tell me that I used to take care of him. In Nepal, we have cradles made out of bamboo again. And on the cradles, they had a string, and you kind of pull the string forward and backwards to sway the child to sleep.

And that was my job. My relatives used to tell me that I used to sing to them and sing them to sleep. So I did that.

I used to sing a lot of songs, because apparently I was like that creative child. I still am. So yeah, back then, we didn't have any access to electronics.

So I don't even think we had electricity in the refugee camp. My mom, because my dad used to go to work, and my grandma and my mom, they used to go out and cut grass to feed the goats that we had. So that was like my free time to be a kid, go out and play.

We had a pretty simple childhood. We used to play with rocks and rubber bands. And I know it sounds boring, but there's actually Nepalese games using rock and also rubber bands.

They used to tie rubber bands up to make this little wall of rubber bands. It bounces around, and you used to play games with your hands and feet. And we used to play little games with my cousins like that, because our walls in our houses were attached.

So our neighbors were basically right next to us, and my neighbors were my cousins. So we used to go out and play together. Out in the jungle, we didn't even have fields.

It was straight out in the jungle. So our parents would be cutting grass, and then we would just run around and play games. Usually every night, you would hear some noises, and you would know about disasters like fires and stuff.

One night, we all heard loud bangs as well. Can't remember if I was asleep. But then what I remember is the next morning, I woke up and our lantern in front of our house was completely broken.

It looked like someone had slashed the lamp. And my parents informed me that we were broken into, and our neighbors got basically looted like their money. And luckily, no one in our house got harmed.

So my youngest uncle was threatened with a knife. Ever since then, it was kind of scary, because every night you would kind of be nervous and anxious about what could happen next. I also actually remember many people, I would say homeless people, would come up at our doorstep asking for shelter.

It would be like huge scenes and scenarios in our community and in our village. I also, as a child, found that a bit daunting and traumatizing as well. I saw like poverty basically in front of my eyes, and no one deserves to live in that poverty.

So I remember my youngest uncle, when he decided to come to Australia, I got told that he would be leaving on a big plane. And I was so curious about this plane, and I cried as well. I was like, he's leaving us and everything.

I didn't know where he was going. And then a few months later, we got, like my cousins actually came up to me and told me, oh, you're going to Australia, it's going to be so good for you and exciting for you. That's the first time I remember getting my jacket.

My parents bought me a new jacket just to come to Australia. I wore that jacket on my journey here. I was very excited because it was influenced by the people around me.

Everyone was telling me, oh, you're going to Australia, it's so exciting for you. I had no clue what it was. I didn't even know that we were moving until we went on a bus and got to Kathmandu.

And that's when I realized like, oh, like we're not home anymore. Yeah. So that was like my experience.

We got on the plane and on the plane ride, I fell sick. My first experience of Australia was at the Sydney airport. So I opened my eyes and I saw all these stores.

I saw like a burger store. I saw all these other shopping centers at this airport and all these different looking people as well. And I was like, what is going on?

I had no clue what was going on. And then we got to Albury airport and then my uncle picked us up and brought us to our new place. Yeah.

And everything was new. Buildings were new. The roads were new.

Even trees looked new to me. People were new. Language was new.

Everything was new and different and bright as well. When I did arrive here, I was provided with all these facilities that I didn't even know existed. Like I stepped into a new world that I didn't even know that existed, first of all.

So I got provided with like a bed. I saw a TV for the first time. Then I got to actually watch TV.

We had a new kitchen, fridge. I didn't know you stored food in a fridge. So that and then with school because of my experience of school in a refugee camp, I was absolutely terrified by the word teacher and like teachers coming into this new country.

I stepped into my first class and I was of course terrified by like the teacher and everyone around me spoke a different language that I just couldn't understand. Yeah. I felt very sick and anxious on my first day.

I still remember that day and then that got better though. Like as I went to school more and classes more, I realized that everyone is so nice and everyone was supportive. I met such a supportive teacher who supported because I was an ESL student.

So I met a ESL teacher who was so supportive and she basically guided me through Australia's culture, language and everything. I was presented with such support, adequate resources when I came to Australia. When we came to Australia, we were like the first few.

I think there were two more Nepalese girls that also came along with us or just before. Us three, we were like the only Nepalese and coloured people at our primary school. I didn't really recognize that difference because people were so supportive.

I didn't feel that difference when first arriving here. Later on, yeah, society has changed and there's been challenges. But then when I first arrived here, I was so lucky to be in such a supportive school and environment and it was provided to me.

So we kind of stuck together because we were trying to navigate the language and then because we could communicate to each other. We just stuck together, navigated through school. Once we got into like year two or three, then we started, because we could speak more fluently, we could communicate better and understand each other better.

Then we started having multicultural friends in our group and circle. By the time I was in year six, I had made heaps of friends. Of course, I didn't understand English when I came here, but I feel like after a few weeks or months, I started picking it up.

I actually started schooling. I was supposed to start from year one, but I started in kindergarten because that's what the ESL teachers suggested. It helped me improve my English by a lot because I was starting from scratch.

I definitely think so because it's harder for my parents to learn a complete different language at their age compared to me while I started school at a young age. I was at the age of picking up a new language. I had that capability, I guess.

Once I started speaking more fluently, I used to come home and then those English words would come out. Then my parents still encouraged us to talk Nepalese at home. My role in supporting my parents would be because my parents did go to TAFE, they were also picking up English, but then they would struggle with this pronunciation of certain words.

They would understand words, but then they wouldn't know how to pronounce it in a way for everyone to understand properly. I would teach them, hey, I learned in school that you

pronounce this word that you pronounce like that this way, so what you're pronouncing is wrong and then this is how you pronounce it. I would demonstrate to them.

They've gotten to a level where as long as we can understand each other and everybody else can understand and get to the point, then it's fine. I'm so grateful to be in a family that loves our culture because when adapting or coming to a new country and being exposed to different ways of living, customs, traditions and cultures, our family stayed true to ours and I'm proud of that. It's important for me to embrace my culture and that's what I've learned from my grandma and my parents as well.

In Australia, since we arrived and once our community was formed, we've celebrated all our festivals and even hired halls and grounds to celebrate our culture. I love all the creative stuff, so I tried to be heavily involved in community festivals. Growing up, I performed, so I love dancing, so I used to perform with my friends and that was my first step in embracing my culture was through dance.

Yeah, so I used to dance and as I've gotten older, I've started teaching kids how to dance, so I basically coordinate dances for community festivals. I teach in our spare time. I teach before festivals.

I teach children choreographies and routines in our Nepalese language, so that includes like Nepalese songs and traditional dances and we perform wearing our traditional costumes as well. I was lucky enough to receive a scholarship to a private school, so I studied at a private school for my high schooling years. I was just honoured to receive that level of education and of course with my culture and navigating the two different cultures that I was involved in and that is also a part of my identity to be strong like with my roots and stuff and I guess everybody else had to understand that.

I was lucky enough to be in a supportive environment still in high school, but however, I feel like since transitioning into university, I've had even more freedom to express my culture and religion because in a private school, you kind of are a bit restricted under the rules of like that school. For me, university was important for my parents, so I did university for my parents and the subjects that I chose. In South Asian communities, you are often like young adults, they're often told to study traditional courses and pathways, but I didn't believe in that because of my creative side, I wanted to do business because I had the understanding and I do have the understanding that business is the future and it was important for me to take that step and do something different in my family so that I can provide my family and hopefully so that my future generation don't experience the poverty that my past did, so that's why uni was important for me. It's that reflection of like how my life transformed.

In the refugee camp, we were lacking so much resources and the world is full of resources, so it's actually ignited a passion in me to spread that word on how lives can be transformed as I experienced that as a young child. It's ignited a passion in me to advocate for those and children and spread the word that every child deserves an adequate standard of living, an adequate education, lifestyle. That's one of my biggest passions in life, I believe, is to spread that word and do as much as I can to support children.

Hopefully, in the refugee camp, if I get a chance to go back, do something at least for children, encourage to provide them with resources because just as my life changed coming to Australia, I know theirs like will definitely will as well and with my passions, I'm so grateful because coming here, I've been given all these opportunities and I've been given a

choice as well. I get to choose what I want to do with my life, yeah, and I will use that choice and take my life forward and fulfill my goals and passions. Of course, to me, home is where my family is, first of all, yeah, with a belonging because all the challenges that my parents faced, I faced as a small child, so it didn't affect me as much.

So, wherever they were, I always felt like I belonged there. I'm shifting to Australia, I understand the struggles that my parents went through and since they now believe that they have an identity and I believe that I also identify here as well and I am also proud to call myself Australian. I still consider myself Nepalese because I was born in a refugee camp and I'm also proud of my Nepalese culture and background but I identify both as Nepalese and Australian.