

# Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal

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COR Center Backgrounders provide key information about new refugee groups for U.S. resettlement workers.

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The Cultural Orientation Resource Center (COR Center) at the Center for Applied Linguistics works to increase the capacity of overseas and U.S. refugee service providers to orient refugees to their new American communities and to inform U.S. communities about refugee orientation and new refugee groups.

The United States has launched a program to resettle tens of thousands of Bhutanese refugees from refugee camps in Nepal. The refugees, almost all ethnic Nepalis from southern Bhutan, have been living in camps in eastern Nepal since they were expelled from their homes in Bhutan more than 16 years ago. The refugees are unable to return to Bhutan or to settle permanently in Nepal.

Of the more than 100,000 refugees in Nepali camps, the United States will consider for resettlement at least 60,000. The first small group of refugees is expected to arrive in the United States before the end of 2007, with larger numbers anticipated by March and April 2008.

This Backgrounder provides Reception and Placement (R&P) agency staff and others assisting refugee newcomers with an overview of the Bhutanese refugees to help them prepare for the refugees' arrival and resettlement needs. The Backgrounder briefly discusses the causes of the refugee problem, explains the need for third-country resettlement, and describes the characteristics of the refugee population.

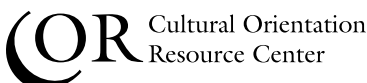
## Causes of the Refugee Problem

The great majority of Bhutanese refugees are descendants of people who in the late 1800s began immigrating to southern Bhutan—lowland, malarial-infested regions shunned by the Druk Buddhist majority—in search of farmland. There they became known as *Lhotsampas* (“People of the South”).

Contact between the Druk in the north and the Lhotsampas in the south was limited, and over the years, the Lhotsampas retained their highly distinctive Nepali language, culture, and religion. Relations between the groups were for the most part conflict free. Under Bhutan's Nationality Law of 1958, the Lhotsampas enjoyed Bhutanese citizenship and were allowed to hold government jobs.

In the 1980s, however, Bhutan's king and the ruling Druk majority became increasingly worried about the rapidly growing Lhotsampa

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population. Concerned that the demographic shift could threaten the majority position and traditional Buddhist culture of the Druk, Bhutanese authorities adopted a series of policies known as *Bhutanization*, aimed at unifying the country under the Druk culture, religion, and language. The policies imposed the Druk dress code and customs on the Lhotsampas and prohibited the use of the Nepali language in schools. Nepali teachers were dismissed, and Nepali books were reportedly burned. The government also established new eligibility requirements for Bhutanese citizenship that disenfranchised many ethnic Nepalis, depriving them of their citizenship and civil rights.

When the Lhotsampas began to organize politically to protest the policies, the authorities declared the activities subversive and unlawful. Some Lhotsampas became activists in the Bhutanese People's Party, which called for Bhutan's democratization. Smaller ethnic communities also began to advocate for a more democratic political system. In 1990, large-scale protests led to violent clashes with the police and army and to mass arrests. Ethnic Nepalis were targeted by the Bhutanese authorities, who destroyed the Nepalis' property and arrested and tortured activists. Individuals were forced to sign so-called "voluntary migration certificates" before being expelled from the country. In December 1990, the authorities announced that Lhotsampas who could not prove they had been residents of Bhutan in 1958 had to leave. Tens of thousands fled to Nepal and the Indian state of West Bengal.

## Need for Resettlement

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), many Bhutanese refugees say they want to return to their homes in Bhutan. Despite this desire—and despite numerous high-level meetings between the governments of Bhutan and Nepal to resolve the refugee crisis over the past 16 years—Bhutan has not permitted a single refugee to return home.

Local integration has not been possible for political reasons. Moreover, Nepali government policy denies the refugees two basic rights that are prerequisites for local integration: freedom of movement and the right to

work and earn a living. Only a small number of refugees have been able to acquire legal citizenship in Nepal. This occurs through marriage or descent.

With neither repatriation nor local integration a realistic possibility for the great majority of refugees, resettlement to a third country, such as the United States, has emerged as the only durable solution to the 16-year-old problem. The plan to resettle the refugees has been a divisive issue in the camps. While many welcome the chance to begin new lives in other countries, a group of politically active refugees opposes the resettlement plan, saying that repatriation to Bhutan is the only acceptable solution.

## Characteristics of the Refugee Population

### Camp Demographics

Approximately 107,000 refugees reside in seven camps in eastern Nepal: Beldangi-I, Beldangi-II, Beldangi-II Extension, Sanischare, Goldhap, Timai, and Khudunabari. A few hundred refugees are living outside the camps.

The population is nearly evenly divided between males and females. Children under 18 make up a little more than 35% of the population, with nearly 8% under the age of 5. Adults age 60 and older make up nearly 7% of the population.

### Ethnicity, Language, and Religion

Almost 97% of the refugees are ethnic Nepalis. The non-Nepalis include the Sharchop, Drukpa, Urow, and Khenpga ethnic groups. Nearly all refugees speak Nepali as a first or second language. UNHCR estimates that about 35% of the population has a functional knowledge of English.

Of the refugee population, 60% are Hindu, 27% are Buddhists, and about 10% are Kirat, an indigenous religion similar to animism. The percentage of Christians in each camp varies from 1% to 7%.

## Education

Education in camp schools is conducted in Nepali and English and follows a modified version of the Bhutanese curriculum through Grade 10. Beyond Grade 10, students attend local Nepali schools outside of the camp. Some students have attended secondary schools and universities in India.

## Social and Occupational Backgrounds

Like the Nepalis in Nepal, the Nepalis from Bhutan divide themselves into castes. Their caste system separates people into different social levels and influences the choice of marriage and other social relationships. Interestingly, the percentage of refugees with no education does not vary greatly by caste, probably because there is equal access to education in the camps. High-caste individuals are much more likely to have a postsecondary education than members of low castes, however.

In their occupational backgrounds, most refugees identify themselves as farmers or students. Other occupations include primary and secondary teachers, social workers, tailors, weavers, and housekeepers. Most refugees have not had opportunities to acquire job skills in the camps. Plans by UNHCR are underway to provide camp residents with vocational training.

## Family and Gender Roles

The average household size is approximately 8 persons and typically consists of elderly parents, married sons and their wives and children, and unmarried children. Refugees consider extended family members, such as aunts, uncles, and cousins, part of the immediate family. After marriage, women traditionally move from their parents' household to that of their husband.

Polygamy, while not common, is practiced: Of the more than 15,000 households in the camps, there are more than 500 with a polygamous marriage or relationship within the household. Often the two wives are sisters or other blood relatives, and in some cases, one of the women is disabled or otherwise in need of special help.

Gender roles are distinct and clearly defined. Girls experience heavier household workloads than boys, a distinction that continues into adulthood. Women generally do not have equal access to information and resources and do not enjoy equal decision-making authority in the family and the community. In certain social groups, divorced and widowed women have a low position within the extended family and often must raise children without the support of family members. A female victim of sexual abuse or rape and her family typically face ostracism and harassment by the community.

## Ties to the United States

The Bhutanese community in the United States is extremely small, with an estimated 150 Bhutanese living in areas surrounding Atlanta, New York City, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. As a result, almost none of the refugees have family ties in the United States.

## Diet

A typical meal for the refugees consists of rice, lentils, and curry. Some people abstain from meat. Because of the Hindu belief that cows are sacred, Hindus do not eat beef, and as a result it is generally not available in the camp. Refugee camp residents commonly eat chicken and goat.

## Exposure to Modern Amenities and the West

The camp population includes refugees with little exposure to urban amenities and very limited knowledge of life in the West. Refugees cook on solar rice cookers and with charcoal; most will not be familiar with modern cooking appliances and practices.

## Traditional Practices that May Conflict with U.S. Customs

In addition to the occasional practice of polygamy, arranged and early marriages are a feature of traditional culture. Traditional medicine practices exist alongside modern medicine. Among Hindus, animals are sacrificed during festivals and marriage ceremonies.

## Resettlement Considerations

Refugees approved for resettlement will undergo an intensive 3-day/15-hour pre-departure orientation to prepare them for their first few months in the United States. Cultural Orientation (CO) sessions will be held initially at the Damak Office of the International Organization for Migration in eastern Nepal. It is envisioned that once conditions allow, 3-day CO courses will be held in the refugee camps with a 1-day refresher class to be held at the transit center in Katmandu before departure. Based on CAL's *Welcome to the U.S.* guide and video, the CO curriculum will cover the following topics: pre-departure processing,

role of the resettlement agency, housing, employment, transportation, education, health, money management, rights and responsibilities, cultural adjustment, and travel.

For rural refugees who have lived for years in camps with little opportunity to work, employment will be a challenging experience. English language training will be an important need for many within this population, who will arrive in the United States with little or no English. Some refugees will have completed secondary school and will arrive with aspirations for higher education.

The refugees are reluctant to be separated from extended family members and may prefer to adapt to their new surroundings amid strong and supportive family relationships.

The content of this Backgrounder is based on information provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCR) and on a publication by Human Rights Watch, *Last Hope: The Need for Durable Solutions for Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal and India* (retrieved September 20, 2007, from <http://hrw.org/reports/2007/bhutan0507/index.htm>). Additional information about the refugees and refugee camp conditions was provided by the Office of Admissions, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, U.S. Department of State.

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