

Nepali Bhutanese Refugees in Buffalo



Please note that this is a rough-and-ready guide, and that these facts will not be applicable to all Nepali Bhutanese refugees that you meet.

Background

Bhutanese refugees have a complicated history. In the late 19th and early 20th century, an influx of undocumented Nepali immigrants into Bhutan occurred. These individuals were settled in the southern region of Bhutan and referred to as *Lhotshampas*, meaning “southerners”.¹

The Bhutanese government enforced the Bhutanese Citizenship Act of 1958 as an effort to more closely control the immigration.² The government wished to promote cultural and national unity throughout Bhutan. Upon Bhutan’s first census in 1988,³ the government became aware of the vast extent of native Nepali individuals living in the southern region.⁴ After the census, the government began efforts to remove these groups.⁵

Essentially, these Nepali immigrants became stateless, having their citizenship and ethnic identity taken from them. Before they were forced to leave, they were often denied rights to employment, education and healthcare. Many were tortured or raped, a tragedy compounded by the fact that victims of sexual violence often face ostracism and harassment by the community.⁶

The refugee camps that have been set up in Nepal by the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are well equipped with resources, attracting some native Nepali individuals to begin living in the camps, regardless of refugee status.⁷ But the “Nepali Bhutanese Refugees” now living in camps in Nepal are mostly native Nepali individuals who had lived in Bhutan within the recent century (about 97%). The remaining three percent is made up of various ethnic groups from Nepal and Bhutan, falsely called illegal immigrants or accused of having been drawn by the camps’ resources.⁸

Since 2003, New York State has resettled 5,741 refugees from Bhutan, with 745 in the 2013 fiscal year. Many of these have been resettled in Erie County.

Cultural Attributes

Religious Traditions and Belief Systems

Among Nepali Bhutanese, religious affiliation is as follows:⁹

- 60% Hindu
- 30% Buddhist
- The remaining 10% a mix of Christian and Kirat (an indigenous spiritual belief)

Practicing Hindus abstain from eating beef, and it is therefore rarely served in the refugee camps. Many Nepali Bhutanese individuals do not consume any meat at all.

Social and Familial Values

The Nepali people live according to a caste system. The caste system separates people into different social levels and influences the choice of marriage and other social relationships. Though level of education does not vary much with caste, those of a higher caste are more likely to have had postsecondary education.¹⁰

Family life plays a significant role in the lives of Bhutanese refugee culture. As the primary social support within the Nepali Bhutanese culture, family becomes particularly important during difficult transitions, such as relocating to America as a refugee.¹¹

In Nepali Bhutanese culture, the average household is approximately eight persons.¹² What may be considered extended family in America is thought of as part of the immediate family. A household typically consists of elderly parents with their unmarried children, as well as married sons with their wives and children.¹³

Typically, gender indicates distinct roles within the Nepali Bhutanese culture. Women and girls tend to have more responsibilities within the household, while men tend to be the primary holders of information and resources, making their role within the family and community that of a strong decision maker.¹⁴

Child-rearing customs rarely, if ever involve physical punishment. Children are taught through explanation and example.¹⁵

Language and Education

There are several languages represented among the Nepali Bhutanese refugee population. A vast majority of the refugee community speak both Nepali and the Bhutanese language, Dzongkha. Most youth who have attended schools in the refugee camps have been exposed to English.¹⁶

In the refugee camps, classes are conducted in both Nepali and English. The curriculum that the schools typically follow is a modified version of the Bhutanese schooling curriculum. Most refugee camps provide school instruction through grade ten. Beyond that, students may have the opportunity to attend local Nepali schools outside of the refugee camps. In some cases, students have attended secondary schools and universities in India.¹⁷

Employment skills and experience

Although life in the refugee camps has allowed for little to no opportunity to acquire jobs skills, Bhutanese and Nepali refugees tend to have skills in the following areas¹⁸:

- Farmers
- Students
- Primary or secondary school teachers
- Social workers
- Tailors
- Weavers
- Housekeepers

Medical Information¹⁹

The Nepali Bhutanese approach to medical/healthcare is similar to other refugee groups in that typical treatments revolve around home remedies. It is not uncommon for Nepali Bhutanese to seek outside medical care only if the home remedies do not resolve the symptoms.²⁰

Unlike Western medicine, healthcare practices tend to focus on the treatment of symptoms, rather than on addressing the underlying issue. As a result, Nepali Bhutanese refugees may have difficulty understanding chronic conditions that may not always display symptoms. Similarly, prescription

Because of the focus on home remedies, individuals seeking medical care may feel uncomfortable talking about physical concerns and issues with health providers. This is especially true of women and mothers, although individuals may feel more comfortable talking openly about the concerns of family members, such as husband and children.

medications that require continued use, even after symptoms vanish, may require additional explanation. By and large, Nepali Bhutanese refugees may not understand the benefits of preventative care approaches.²¹

Childbirth practices vary based on the life experience and setting in Bhutan. Those who lived in rural areas of their home country, or who only knew life in the rural refugee camps, are typically most accustomed to mid-wife assisted home-births. This will be true of the majority of women. However, in America, Nepali Bhutanese refugees may seek either a hospital medical birth or a mid-wife assisted home birth.²²

Post-partum practices for the mother are an important part of childrearing. After giving birth, a new mother is not expected to work or cook for eleven days –this time is spent resting and breastfeeding. The baby is not named until the end of this eleven day period. Children typically breastfeed exclusively for the first six months of life, or until the mother becomes pregnant again.²³

Upon resettlement in the US, the confusing and difficult process of applying for Medicaid or other health insurance may discourage some from seeking healthcare at all.

Resettlement Experiences and Challenges

In working with refugees, it is important to bear in mind that symptoms of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) are common, due to past experiences such as torture, imprisonment, violence and interrogation. In addition, the loss or separation of families may add to the difficulties in adjusting to the new culture.

The Nepali Bhutanese culture is typically one of community, sharing, and collaboration. Therefore, American tendencies toward privacy, consumerism, and competition can be jarring to these individuals new to the country. In addition, the overt sexuality in the media can be shocking.²⁴

Many Nepali Bhutanese are also unfamiliar with Western amenities, such as public transportation and modern technology. This is a steep learning curve and can result in difficulties finding and maintain employment. In addition, American grocery stores filled with American food products can be overwhelming and confusing, which makes grocery shopping and food preparation difficult. These seemingly small barriers affect the everyday lives of Nepali Bhutanese refugees.²⁵ Assistance and patience in these areas is very important. But, in general, it is important not to make assumptions about refugees' level of competency with Western amenities, but rather to assess them individually.

Local Resources

Bhutanese-Nepali Hindu Community of Buffalo

1071 West Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14213

bncommunityofbuffalo@gmail.com (716) 602-6113

Founded in 2013, The “Bhutanese-Nepali Hindu Community of Buffalo is a non-profit organization working for the benefit of Nepali speaking Bhutanese resettled in Buffalo, NY.”

West-Side Bazaar

25 Grant Street, Buffalo, NY

www.westsidebazaar.com (716) 464-6389

A “mini-mall” of immigrant and refugee restaurants and artisan shops. Nepali clothing and cosmetics are sold here by native Nepali individuals.

International Institute of Buffalo (IIB)

864 Delaware Ave, Buffalo, NY 14209

www.iibuff.org (716)883-1900

“The IIB seeks to strengthen Western New York by assisting refugees and immigrants to become independent, informed and contributing members of the community, and by promoting and supporting cultural competence, multiculturalism and global connectedness throughout the region.” The IIB offers translation and interpretation services.

Catholic Charities (CC)

20 Herkimer St. Buffalo, NY 14213

www.ccwny.org (716) 842-0270

“Our Resettlement clients arrive in the United States through the auspices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS). Pre- and post-arrival services such as assistance with housing, food, clothing and employment are provided.”

Journey’s End Refugee Services, Inc. (JERS)

2495 Main St #317, Buffalo, NY 14214

www.jersbuffalo.org (716) 882-4963

JERS “provides refugees with the resources and support they need to become successful, active and contributing members of the Western New York Community.”

Jewish Family Services (JFS)

70 Barker St, Buffalo, NY 14209

www.jfsbuffalo.org (716) 883-1914

Jewish Family Service assists families new to the US during the difficult transition to the American way of life. JFS provides employment services, ESL training, assistance in acquiring health care and social support services as well as public school enrollment and mental health support.

Jericho Road Community Health Center

184 Barton St., Buffalo, NY 14213

www.jrm-buffalo.org (716)-348-3000

Jericho Road offers a variety of health services to low-income and refugee families. The services range from healthcare for new mothers, to general case management, support in filling out forms, ESL education or educational support for a range of ages.

Coordinated Refugee/Asylee Legal Services (The CRLS Project)

237 Main Street, Suite 1015, Buffalo, NY 14203

(716)853-3087

A collaboration of legal service providers to support immigrants and refugees with civil and immigration legal services.

NOTES

¹ Eli, Jenelle. "Infochange India." Lhotshampas: Evicted from Bhutan. July 1, 2008. Accessed February 20, 2015. <http://infochangeindia.org/agenda/migration-a-displacement/lhotshampas-evicted-from-bhutan.html>.

² "Bhutan Profile - Timeline." BBC News. February 6, 2015. Accessed February 11, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12641778>.

³ Id.

⁴ Eli, Jenelle. "Infochange India." Lhotshampas: Evicted from Bhutan. July 1, 2008. Accessed February 20, 2015. <http://infochangeindia.org/agenda/migration-a-displacement/lhotshampas-evicted-from-bhutan.html>.

⁵ Id.

⁶ "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center Refugee Backgrounder*, October 1, 2007. Accessed February 10, 2015. culturalorientation.net

⁷ Eli, Jenelle. "Infochange India." Lhotshampas: Evicted from Bhutan. July 1, 2008. Accessed February 20, 2015. <http://infochangeindia.org/agenda/migration-a-displacement/lhotshampas-evicted-from-bhutan.html>.

⁸ "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center Refugee Backgrounder*, October 1, 2007. Accessed February 10, 2015. culturalorientation.net

⁹ "Id.

¹⁰ Maxym, Maya. "Nepali-speaking Bhutanese (Lhotsampa) Cultural Profile." EthnoMed. March 1, 2010. Accessed February 20, 2015. <https://ethnomed.org/culture/nepali-speaking-bhutanese-lhotsampa/nepali-speaking-bhutanese-lhotsampa-cultural-profile>.

¹¹ Id.

¹² Id.

¹³ Id.

¹⁴ Id.

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ "Nepal." Ethnologue. January 1, 2014. Accessed February 20, 2015. <http://www.ethnologue.com/country/NP>.

¹⁷ "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*, 2004. Accessed February 20, 2015.

¹⁸ "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*, 2004. Accessed February 20, 2015.

¹⁹ "Bhutanese Refugee Health Profile." March 20, 2014. Accessed February 10, 2015. <http://www.cdc.gov/immigrantrefugeehealth/pdf/bhutanese-health-profile.pdf>.

²⁰ Maxym, Maya. "Nepali-speaking Bhutanese (Lhotsampa) Cultural Profile." EthnoMed. March 1, 2010. Accessed February 20, 2015. <https://ethnomed.org/culture/nepali-speaking-bhutanese-lhotsampa/nepali-speaking-bhutanese-lhotsampa-cultural-profile>.

²¹ Id.

²² "Nepali-speaking Bhutanese (Lhotsampa) Cultural Profile." EthnoMed. January 1, 2015. Accessed February 11, 2015. <https://ethnomed.org/culture/nepali-speaking-bhutanese-lhotsampa/nepali-speaking-bhutanese-lhotsampa-cultural-profile>.

²³ "Id.

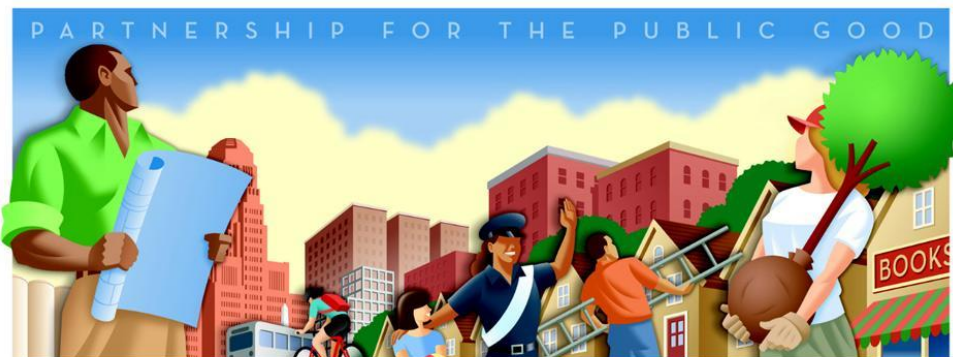
²⁴ "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center Refugee Backgrounder*, October 1, 2007. Accessed February 10, 2015. culturalorientation.net

²⁵ Id.

This fact sheet is one in a series of “snap shots” of Buffalo’s immigrant and refugee populations, made possible by a grant from the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo. They are free of charge at www.ppgbuffalo.org/publications.

The fact sheets in the series are:

- **Nepali Bhutanese Refugees in Buffalo**
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- **Eritrean Refugees in Buffalo**
- **From Puerto Rico to Buffalo**
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- **Yemeni Immigrants in Western New York**
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