

Bhutanese in MN Fact Sheet

History of Trauma

- Bhutanese refugees are of the Lhotshampa ethnic group; this term refers to their origin as ethnic Nepalis living in southern Bhutan
 - Lhotshampas once made up one-third of Bhutan's population but now only comprise one-sixth, as many have fled the country as refugees
 - Lhotshampa were brought to southern Bhutan as agricultural laborers in the late 19th century. Subsequently, many Nepalis immigrated illegally into Bhutan and chose not to integrate into Bhutanese culture (continued to speak Nepali, practice Nepali customs, etc.). This maintenance of Nepali culture and customs was most pronounced in rural areas of Bhutan.
- There are ten distinct ethnic groups in Bhutan; Ngalung ethnic group, known also as Drukpas, form the ruling community and the majority government
- 1980's "Bhutanization:" the Bhutanese government considered the Lhotshampas' distinct and burgeoning Nepali cultural practices a threat to national unity. In hoping to fulfill a "one nation, one people" policy, Bhutanese dress and language requirements were imposed, Bhutanese citizenship was stripped from Nepali-speaking Lhotshampa, Hindus were forced to marry Buddhists, and Lhotshampa were considered illegal aliens.
- 1990's: Nepalese in Bhutan fled or were forced to refugee camps in Nepal, becoming unable to return to Bhutan but unable to resettle in Nepal
 - Since 1991, one-sixth of Bhutan's population has sought asylum in Nepal, India, and other countries



Anna Husarka, "Photo essay: refugees from Bhutan," *Open Democracy*, Nov. 18, 2009
(<http://www.opendemocracy.net/anna-husarka/photo-essay-refugees-from-bhutan>)

- Residency in seven refugee camps has been lengthy: over 105,000 people have spent 15-17 years in the Nepali; 40,000 of the refugees in camps are children
- No Bhutanese who fled has been allowed to repatriate to Bhutan

- The U.S. agreed in 2006 to resettle up to 60,000 refugees, prompting reactions from some refugees who feared the U.S. was conspiring with Bhutan's government to permanently prevent repatriation to Bhutan
- "The Bhutanese refugee situation has become one of the most protracted and neglected refugee crises in the world," Amnesty International USA
- "I can't think of another country where people know less about the situation that the refugees left. What people know about Bhutan is a utopia, Shangri-la, kind of thing. But I don't think people look at it as a country where one-sixth of the population was ethnically cleansed," Larry Yungk, a senior resettlement officer with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
- In camp refugees felt unsafe due to the unstable government and Maoist movement in Nepal.
- There were high rates of alcoholism and gambling in the camps.
- "The parent was no longer the provider, the camp was." Children may not view their parents or elders as providers, but rather as equals

Resettlement

- Of the approximately 107,000 in refugee camps in Nepal, the U.S. agreed to resettle 60,000, and Australia, Canada, Norway, Netherlands, New Zealand, and Denmark approved the resettlement of 10,000 each
 - Refugees began arriving in the U.S. in late March of 2008
 - As of early September 2009 17,612 Bhutanese had resettled in the U.S.



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- Bhutanese refugees are considered quick to learn their way around new cities and skills of new jobs, and they arrive anxious to become self-sufficient
 - Tend to have stronger English skills than refugees from other countries, since English was the language used in refugee camp schools
 - Upon arrival in MN, 35% speak English (early 2009 stats)

- Minnesota's Bhutanese refugees are 98% Lhotshampa (early 2009 stats)
- Most of Minnesota's Bhutanese refugees live in St. Paul
- Due to the US economy, Bhutanese refugees have had trouble finding jobs
- Bhutanese in MN are concerned about violence due to an incident in a Minneapolis neighborhood where a young Bhutanese man was attacked (summer 2009)
- Bhutanese may have trouble adjusting to the northern climate, since they are accustomed to the hot climate of the southern foothills of Bhutan
- Elderly refugees who speak no English say they feel isolated in their apartments
- Vulnerable groups: youth (entering the public school system), single female households, widows (become dependant on sons), physically disabled people, individuals who do not seek out health care (undiagnosed, unaware of mental illness issues), illiterate individuals
- Youth have expressed challenges in learning how to interact with new peers (interacting with new cultures, communities)
- Especially for elders, there are concerns over death and funeral rituals. Elders worry that the youth will not carry on the traditions for their funeral. In addition, other family member's behaviors affect if the elder can get into heaven.
- Transportation is a major barrier to socialization. Many of the refugees have never ridden a bike or driven a car.
- One of the closest Hindu temples that the Bhutanese attend is in Maple Grove, MN.

Cultural Comments

- Bhutanese people are community oriented.
- Family size is often up to eight persons.
- Members of extended families (aunts, uncles, cousins) are considered part of the "immediate family".
- Age 50 is considered "elderly or old" in Bhutanese culture. The elderly would take on the role of sages in Bhutan. Here in U.S., age is not as likely to carry that same significance.
- Religion: Hindu (majority) and Buddhist (dominant Bhutanese religion)
 - Many wear bindu (dot of red powder representing an offering) on their faces
 - Whether Hindu or Buddhist, most abstain from eating beef
 - In the camps, some converted to Christianity
 - Of refugees in MN, 60% are Hindu
- Most Bhutanese refugees are vegetarians; this presents issues for refugee children who receive school-provided lunches containing meat.
- Story telling is very important to the culture.
- Flowers are given as a sign of respect.
- Guests take shoes off when visiting others' homes.
- Guests should accept food items offered to you; if uncomfortable with this, accept water.
- It is culturally normal to hide the issue of physical disabilities.

- While the refugee camps banned the caste system and stressed the inclusion of all, it can still be seen in marriage and death practices.
- Celebrations: Festival of Lights (major cultural festival), lunar new year, naming ceremonies for new births

Language

- Speak a dialect of Nepali that is derived from Sanskrit
- Upon arrival in MN, 100% speak Nepali and 35% speak English

Family

- Males are traditionally the dominant members of society (this seems to be changing in refugee communities).
- Parents are not traditionally involved in their children's education and expect teachers to take care of their children.
 - The U.S. practice of having parent-teacher meetings is not something the Bhutanese typically do.
 - Efforts must be made to promote parent support.
- Children do not know how to advocate for themselves, as they have been taught not to speak to or complain to the teacher.
 - Bullying has been an issue for Bhutanese refugee children in MN

Physical Issues

- Vitamin B12 deficiency in most Bhutanese refugees.
- Adults are concerned for youth over-eating or eating unhealthily.

Mental Health Issues

- Feelings of inadequacy due to not being allowed to work in the camps: "Being stateless for so long was demoralizing me, so I had to take some step to find better avenues...I also felt that my own skills were being wasted"
- Humility experienced at camps due to having to stand in line for rations: "You felt like such a beggar. [For] people who have a lot of ego or self-respect, it's really difficult. That went on for 17 years."
- Domestic violence has been a cultural issue, especially in the refugee camps.
- Most present with physical symptoms and refrain from acknowledging emotional turmoil.
- Children have never experienced life outside of refugee camps.
- There have been 6 suicides in the United States of Bhutanese refugees.
- MN climate has been problematic for some Bhutanese refugees. It can worsen the isolation in the elderly already cited above.
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Vocabulary

- Daiva Dosh= divine displeasure
- Pitri-Dosha= influence of ancestral spirit

- Grasha Dasha= Planetary influence
- Local spirits= Nag, Gram, Devala
- Karama= Action
- Bhoot and Preta= Ghosts and spirits
- Bokshi/nerra dosha= witch craft/ evil eyes/ black magic/ possession
- Sato Janu= loss of soul

Traditional Treatments:

- 1) Puja and Patha= worship and recitation
- 2) Graha Japa/ Graha Parya= prayers and chanting
- 3) Pitrisrada/Pitrikanya= ancestral worship
- 4) Satvic Diet= Sage's diet
- 5) Avoid mahda= intoxicants
- 6) Dhami/Jhari/Bijuva= Shaman
- 7) Purohit/Guru/Lamal Pandit= chanting

Medical doctors, psychiatrists seen as last resorts for assistance

Resources in Minnesota

- Mangala Sharma is a primary Bhutanese advocate, organizer, and leader in MN.
 - Sharma organized Bhutan Day on February 28, 2008 in St. Paul with various workshops, resources, and cultural shows for new immigrants. More than 200 people attended the celebration.
 - Sharma founded the Nirvana Center in St. Paul as a Bhutanese center for refugees to come together, build relationships, community, and learn about resettlement resources. Nirvana helped the young Bhutanese adults organize a fall festival. Dashain Festival, held traditionally in Late September early October, is the largest festival in Nepal.
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- CVT initiated a partnership between the Bhutanese community and local police departments to educate refugees about the laws of the country and ways to access law enforcement officials, as well as to respond to law enforcement-related questions and initiate an amiable relationship.
 - Bhutanese response to this meeting was positive; remarks were made that this was the first conversation they had ever had with a law enforcement official during their lives, and that in Bhutan they had been expected to bow down in respect and obedience in the presence of law enforcement officials
 - Young adult group began meeting once a month with CVT staff in September, 2010.

Compiled by CVT

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Mike Greenlar/The Post-Standard

Bhutanese refugee Hari Adhikari at center dances at a Bhutanese festival held in Syracuse, New York.