



IOM International Organization for Migration
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CULTURAL PROFILE



Children from Beldangi camp give the 'Namaste' greeting which means both 'hello' and 'good-bye'

THE BHUTANESE REFUGEES IN NEPAL A TOOL FOR SETTLEMENT WORKERS AND SPONSORS

Prepared by IOM Damak, Nepal 2008

I. Historical Background of the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal

The Bhutanese refugees are descendants of Nepalese migrants that settled in Southern Bhutan in the late 1890's. Originally recruited by the Government of Bhutan to clear the jungles of Southern Bhutan in the late 1890's, they were called Lhotshampas, meaning 'People from the South'. Over time the Lhotshampas prospered in Bhutan and became high-ranking government officials and educators. According to the 1988 census they made up 45% of the population of Bhutan.

In 1958 the Bhutanese government passed the Citizenship Act, which granted the Lhotshampas the right to Bhutanese citizenship. Every citizen was issued a land tax receipt. From 1958 to 1985 the Bhutanese government introduced integration programs and incentives for intermarriage between the Lhotshampas and other ethnic groups of Bhutan. However, the Buddhist Druk majority became increasingly concerned over the growing population and power of the mainly Hindu Lhotshampas.

In 1988 the government introduced a census, which took place only in Southern Bhutan. It required that each citizen produce the 1958 land tax receipt. Following this census the Lhotshampas were re-classified as 'illegal immigrants' despite having produced land tax receipts from 1958.

In 1989 King Jigme Singey Wangchuk adopted a "One Bhutan, One People" policy. Nepali language was removed from school curricula and it was mandatory for the entire population to wear the national dress of the north. The southern Bhutanese resisted the policy, as there was still a strong attachment to their Nepalese cultural heritage. Demonstrations ensued and the government began to crack down on what they deemed were 'anti-nationals' from Southern Bhutan. There were widespread reports by Lhotshampas of arrests, detention, rape, and torture. They reported being forced to sign 'voluntary migration' forms. By 1991 thousands had started to flee for Nepal via India by truck. In 1992 UNHCR established the first camps in Eastern Nepal built to house the more than 105,000 refugees. An additional 20,000 refugees (estimate) fled to other parts of Nepal and India. An interesting fact about this population is that they all arrived at roughly the same time in Nepal. There were not waves of refugees arriving at different times over the years as in many other refugee situations. Fifteen rounds of talks between the governments of Nepal and Bhutan on the Bhutanese refugees' right to return have yielded no results. Not one single refugee has been repatriated. In 2007 the government of Nepal accepted the option of third country resettlement. Resettlement was hotly contested and even violent up until this past year. Since the first departures to the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand last year, negative attitudes toward resettlement have changed dramatically. Many of the vehemently anti-resettlement leaders are themselves now applying for resettlement. Some small groups are still actively opposed to resettlement in the camps.

Settlement Considerations: This is a very diverse group of refugees in terms of life experience. Some have gone to University and worked outside the camps. They can be highly educated and have lived in 'westernized' conditions. Others have never left the camps and have had no exposure to western amenities. The refugees have been dependent on aid organizations to meet their basic needs for seventeen years. It can be very challenging to shift attitudes and expectations for refugees who have spent so much of their lives in refugee camps

The Bhutanese refugees have many questions and concerns about their legal status in Canada. Their citizenship was lost in Bhutan and there is concern that this could happen to them again someday. There is hope of returning to Bhutan for many, even if it is just to visit.

II. Religion, Culture and Tradition



Married women wear a 'sindoor' which is a mark on the top of the forehead made from vermilion and other herbs. Additionally, it is common to wear a 'bindi' which is a decoration wore between the eyebrows worn by both married and single women.

Religion

The main religion of the Bhutanese refugees is Hinduism (estimated at 60%) followed by other religions including Buddhism, Kirat and Christianity respectively. As far as marriage goes, there is some cultural practice whereby young girls and young boys select their partners and later consult their parents accordingly. In many cases parents do agree and love marriages take place. Arranged marriage still exists although this is mainly practiced among the pre-literate and elderly population.



A roadside temple inside Timai camp. Some temples are shared by both Hindus and Buddhists.

Caste System

The caste system is very prevalent and very complex among the Bhutanese refugees. It is the same system followed in Nepal. There are a total of 64 castes, groups and parties represented in the camps. The Hindus, who make up the majority of the Bhutanese refugees have four castes; namely the Brahmins, Chhetris, Vaishyas and Sudras. The Brahmins are considered to be the top class followed by the Chhetris, Vaishyas and the Sudras respectively. The Kirats are a different caste, which is also divided into sub-castes, the Rais and Limbus being the main branches. Rais and Limbus belong to the Mongolian race and look physically different.

Settlement Considerations: Many question whether they will live near a Hindu temple. Festival days are very important to Hindus. They are encouraged when they hear about other communities of South Asian Hindus living in and worshipping in Canada. Working on festival days could be challenging for some to accept.

Some families who are placed in housing near one another may not socialize due to caste difference. Lower caste families tend to act passively around higher caste families. High caste Brahmins will not eat or drink water that is prepared by anyone except themselves or outside their own home.

Many refugees question how they will be able to cremate their dead in Canada. They are told that in countries where there are Hindus, adaptation has been made for religious burial traditions (along with the fact that cremation is common for non-Hindus in North America as well). What will be a concern is how the Bhutanese will be able to adequately observe the thirteen-day mourning period if they are working. During the mourning period special traditions are observed daily with visits from a religious leader; fasting is common.

Birth, Wedding and Death Rituals

Bhutanese refugees have increasingly accessed the hospital care provided in the camps versus giving birth at home. Children are named in a special naming ceremony eleven days after their birth.

Polygamy and child marriage are increasingly less prevalent but were initially common among the Bhutanese refugee population.

Hindus practice cremation; Buddhists and Kirats bury their dead.



It is common for babies and small children to wear eye make-up, bangles and earrings. It is mentioned in Canadian Orientation Abroad that Westerners would find small children wearing make-up unusual and possibly unsettling.

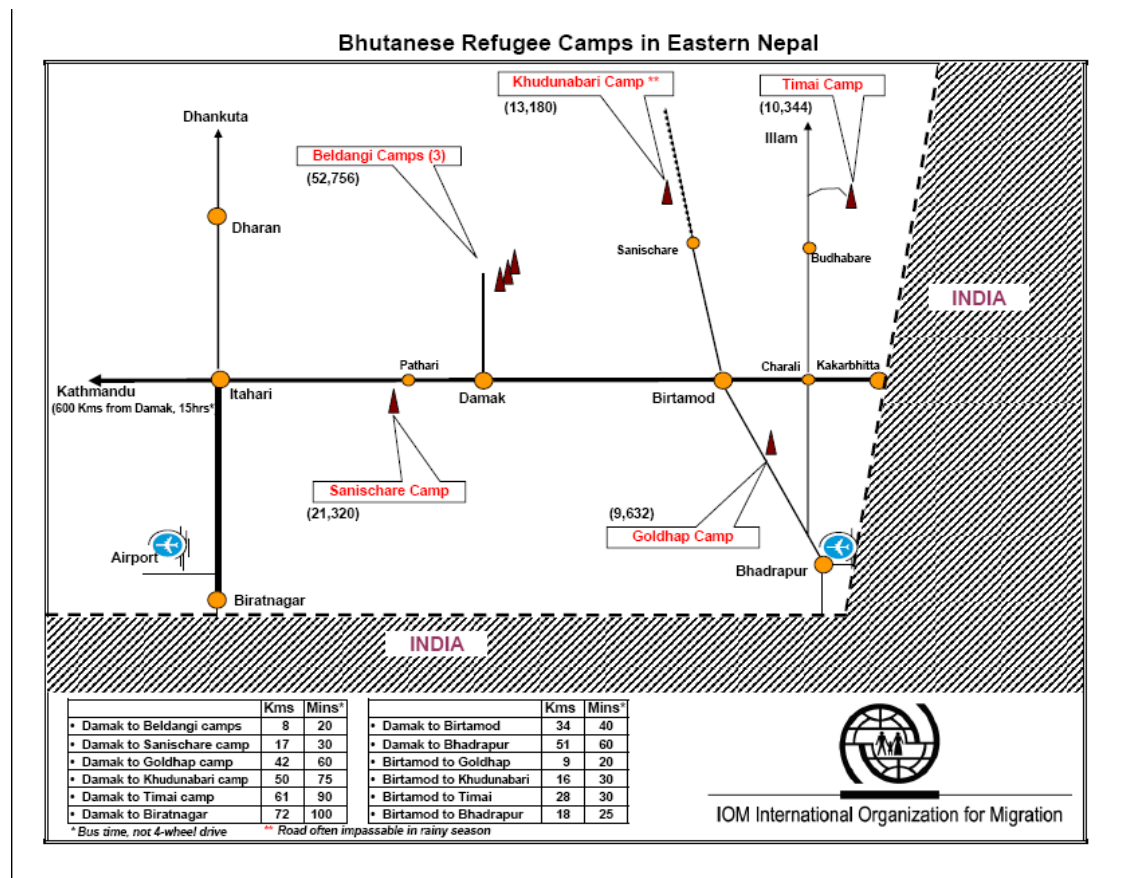
Communication: Moving one's head from side to side can mean both yes and maybe. This can cause confusion for Westerners.

Hygiene/Personal habits: Spitting in public is very common. Bhutanese refugees regularly clear their throats and spit just about anywhere outside very frequently. Belching out loud is also common.

Dress: The younger generation wear Western style clothing. Older women wear the Nepalese style sari and men wear the daura suruwal. Bhutanese, like Nepalis, always take their shoes off before entering one's home.

Settlement Considerations: Cultural differences are addressed in Canadian Orientation Abroad but will need reinforcing after arrival. It could pose a more difficult adjustment for the elderly population.

III. Refugee Camp Life



The seven refugee camps where the Bhutanese reside and their populations are:

Beldangi 1, 2, and Extension (52,756), Sanischare (21,320), Goldhap (9,632), Khudunabari (13,180) and Timai (10,344).

Population

The female to male ratio is almost evenly divided at 49.3 % female and 50.7% male. Children under 18 make up 35.5 % of the population (with 7.6% under the age of five). Adults aged 60 years and older represent 6.6% of the population. (Group Profile and Proposal Document, Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal for Group Referrals in the United States, Prepared by UNHCR Nepal, Damak, Page 2.)

An interesting aspect of this population is the fact that the age 0-2 population is the same as the age 65 and above population. This is quite unusual in refugee camp settings. Some attribute this to family planning. IOM figures cite an average family size of three persons. It should be taken into account that there are many large families as well as single cases, which can affect the data.

Family Roles

The Bhutanese refugees are a patriarchal society, however women do play an active role in the camps. For example there are female Camp Secretaries and it is common for some of the younger generation to go outside the camps to attend universities. In the past, women in the camps traditionally did not have opportunities to work outside the home. Women are responsible for cooking, cleaning and chores. Children pay respect to elders. Spanking or other use of physical discipline is common but not practiced by all Bhutanese.

Settlement Considerations: As with many refugee populations family roles can be greatly altered by many factors including stress and culture shock. A woman getting employed before her husband or earning more money could be a major stressor however this is changing for the younger generation.

Housing, Water, Food and Sanitation



Together with its Dutch NGO partner Stichting Vluchteling, UNHCR funded the construction of solar ovens so that the refugees no longer have to burn scarce wood for their cooking.

Food



Food in the camps is provided by the World Food Program (WFP).

The 'Food Basket' consists of the following daily amount: Rice 400 gram, Lentils 60 grams, Vegetable Oil 25 grams, Sugar 20 grams, Salt 7.5 grams, Wheat/Corn/Soya blend 35 grams, Seasonal Vegetable 100 grams (UNHCR)

Meat and fish can be bought in the camps (with the exception of beef since Hindus do not eat beef). Fish is caught in local rivers and treated with a preservative to keep in the camps. There are a significant percentage of vegetarians among the population.

Bhutanese refugees generally eat two meals per day-lunch and dinner. Daily diet consists of rice and lentils with 'gundruk', which is, dried vegetables. Bhutanese refugees eat with their hands.

The camp residents generally have better access to water than most refugee camps in the world, but people must still wait in line.

Settlement Considerations: Breakfast in the western sense is not a common meal but rather an early lunch taken between 10 and 11 am. Daily school meal routines will be new to families. This includes children eating breakfast before going off to school.

Using cutlery will be new for some, especially among the older generations.

It is advised to let families buy their own meat and eggs rather than stocking for them before they arrive. *For a detailed list of suggested items for refugees upon arrival in Canada see Appendix I.*

Housing



Refugee houses in Beldangi I. Houses are divided into 'sectors' in the camps. A sector head is elected to represent the residents on the Camp Management Committee.

Houses in the camps are constructed of bamboo and measure 6 by 3.5 meters. Extended families live together and the average household size in the camps is six to seven people. Partitions are made inside the huts for privacy. Flooring is dirt and swept daily with handmade brooms.

Settlement Considerations: Refugees voice concern over not being able to have entire extended families living in one apartment or house due to occupancy standards. They will want to be able to host large gatherings to celebrate festivals, weddings, births and mourning periods.

There will have been little to no exposure to western housing and appliances for many families. Special attention should be given to using toilets, sinks, showers and ovens.

Littering is common and should be given attention in post arrival orientation upon arrival along with proper disposal of waste. Recycling (in regards to waste disposal) will be a new concept.



Toilet facilities are shared by two huts.

Health Care

Access and quality of health care in the camps is considered to be quite good in relation to other refugee situations. Currently, all camps have medical facilities, health care staff and a pharmacy. The Association of Medical Doctors of Asia (AMDA), an implementing partner of UNHCR, manages health care in the camps. The doctors also provide services to the local population who live close by the camps. Women have been given information and access to family planning options.

IOM Medical staff has noted that many conditions that go unnoticed in other refugee populations are diagnosed and treated because refugees have access to care. Unlike many other refugee populations, they are forthcoming with their health issues including even mental illnesses.

According to a report entitled '*Trapped by Inequality: Bhutanese Refugee Women in Nepal*' conducted by Human Rights Watch, there are indications that the refugees suffer higher rates of depression and anxiety than the local population and the rate of suicide is four times that of the local population.

Settlement Considerations: Experience working with this population indicates they will be pro-active about getting their health needs met in comparison to other refugee groups. Refugees often cite access to quality health care as a compelling reason to apply for resettlement. As with many refugee groups there could be refugees in need of psychosocial support.



A Bhutanese refugee at the IOM Medical Clinic in Damak

Child and Youth Education



Students in an elementary classroom at Beldangi II Camp

Education is highly valued amongst the Bhutanese. The Bhutanese refugees have been an important and valuable source of teachers for the country of Nepal. There have been more than 150 teachers who have already departed for third country resettlement.

Education in the camps is free until grade 10. From 10th to 12th grade refugees must pay a portion of the tuition as Caritas, a donor supported implementing partner of UNHCR, only partially funds those grades. Many children from the camps go to boarding schools in Nepal and India for 10th-12th grade. There are many schools in the Nepalese camps starting from kindergarten and below the age of five through primary and secondary school. Students are all provided with free textbooks.

Settlement Considerations: Students leaving for third country resettlement are given School Leaving Certificates from their respective schools which can be useful to their future school in Canada. The school system in the camps is what Westerners would consider strict and hierarchical. Teaching methodology is old-fashioned and includes rote memorization and recitation exercises. Many will be unfamiliar with the Western model of expressing individual opinions and creative thinking in the classroom. Parents will also not be used to the educational model in Canada that encourages family participation and involvement in the learning process.

Many families who might have paid for their child's grade 10-12 tuition are opting not to because they believe they could be leaving for Canada, thereby causing a lag in education for some at that grade level.

Adult Education and Vocational Training



Income generation projects such as weaving are run by the Bhutanese Refugee Women's Forum

There are comprehensive vocational training programs run throughout the seven camps by Caritas and the Bhutanese Refugee Women's Forum. Some of the vocational training courses include computer and cell phone repair, carpentry, plumbing, construction, and sandal making.

There has been a sharp increase in the number of refugees taking driving lessons in preparation for third country resettlement.



An Adult English class, introduced after the prospect of third country resettlement

Settlement Considerations: Many of the vocational training programs may not train participants to exact Canadian standards; however the fact that refugees have had training and exposure in many skill-based fields should be seen as positive.

Language

Nepali is the primary and most common language spoken by the Bhutanese refugees. Nepali has its own script. All children raised in the camps have been taught English along with Dzongkha (Bhutanese national language). Among the generations not born in the camps, men speak more English than women. The estimated rate of English speakers is around 35% but this is higher among youth. Many elderly people will speak no English.

Settlement Considerations: There are highly educated former teachers and professionals who could serve as interpreters and even caseworkers for agencies working with Bhutanese refugees across Canada.

Employment

Technically refugees are restricted from working however it is common for many to travel freely outside the camps and engage in employment (primarily for men) or attend universities. Generally, women and girls do domestic work such as cooking, cleaning watching and taking care of their kids. Work outside the camps includes teaching and construction jobs throughout Nepal and India. Additionally, some are engaged in farming and teaching in the refugee camps as well as in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal, as well as in other parts of the country.

Settlement Considerations: The notion of being able to freely work without restriction is encouraging to Bhutanese refugees. They may be inquisitive about their rights as workers given that as refugees some were taken advantage of by local employers who were able to exploit them with lower pay due to their legal status.

Camp Governance Structure

The camps in Eastern Nepal are uniquely autonomous. The camps are governed by a democratic, election-based model under the leadership of a Camp Secretary who works in coordination with the Nepalese government representatives. The Camp Secretary is head of the Camp Management Committee (CMC), made up of sector heads. The Committee is responsible for food distribution, health care programming, and birth/death registration and dispute resolution. Additionally there is a Counseling Board made up of elected representatives to make judicial decisions and to resolve day-to-day disputes. Both men and women participate in camp governance. The fact that these camps are entirely refugee run is an incredibly unique system for refugee camps.

Settlement Considerations: The refugees have lived within an active, democratic system. Many will have an active voice in their settlement process and desire to be involved in the many decisions affecting their lives.

Appendix I

Suggested grocery list for families upon arrival:

Rice (white) in big quantities, lentils (all kinds, yellow, red, black), dried green peas (split peas), ginger, garlic, onions, hot peppers, turnip greens, spinach, cabbage, okra, potatoes, fresh coriander (cilantro), plain yogurt, whole milk, apples, oranges, bananas, grapes, salt, sugar, peppercorns, turmeric and Indian curry powder, dried coriander, fennel, fenugreek, oil (Soybean, corn or mustard), cookies, biscuits, cereal, loose tea.

Other items of importance for purchase will include bangles (important for women on festival days, weddings) and also herbal powders used for making 'thika' for blessings. These things can all be found at local South Asian shops.

Appendix II

Religious Holidays of Nepal followed by Bhutanese Refugees

- **Dasain (Vijaya Dasami):**- This is the biggest and most widely celebrated national Hindu festival in Nepal, usually falling in early October. There are roughly two weeks of celebrations. The main deity worshipped during Dasain is Goddess Durga.
- **Tihar (Deepavali/Diwali):**- This is another Hindu festival celebrated in Nepal and as well as India. This is the festival of lights which falls in late October or early November. The celebrations continue for five days.
- **Mani Rimdu:** - It is one of the most fascinating High Himalayan Buddhist festivals observed every year, usually in November.
- **Buddha Jayanti:** - Celebrating the birth of Lord Buddha in the first week of May.
- **Shiva Ratri:** - Shivaratri or the night of Lord Shiva, is observed in March and celebrates Lord Shiva.

References

The following sources were used in compiling the Cultural Profile:

Profile of the Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal: IOM Nairobi

Interviews with refugees conducted by IOM Nepal Canadian Orientation Abroad staff with refugees in Beldangi I, II, Extension, Sanischare, Goldhap, Khudunabari and Timai camps.

Interviews with staff of Caritas Nepal.

Bhutanese Refugees-The Story of a Forgotten People <http://www.bhutanese-refugees.com>

Group Profile and Proposal Document, Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal for Group Referrals in the United States. Prepared by UNHCR Nepal, Damak,

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