

Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal - Supplement

The following material is intended to augment the Refugee Backgrounder, *Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal* (published by the Cultural Orientation Resource Center at the Center for Applied Linguistics in October 2007), in advance of the completion of an Enhanced Refugee Backgrounder on this population. The information was provided by UNHCR Department of International Protection, Resettlement Service, Senior Resettlement Coordinator Jennifer Ashton, and area expert Mangala Sharma; it was also reviewed and supplemented by other UNHCR staff with expertise on the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal.

Background

The complex Hindu caste system of the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal (based upon and similar to the Indian caste system, but not exactly the same) is a means for ensuring social and economic cohesion and hierarchy in a population that is ethnically diverse. Traditionally, certain occupations are ascribed to each caste: Brahmins are teachers, Chettris are warriors, others are merchants or skilled craftsmen, and so on.

Each refugee's caste is designated by their surname. For example, the surname "Sharma" indicates that its bearer is a Brahmin, while the surname "Gurung" indicates a member of a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group. As such, refugees can tell immediately who belongs to which caste.

While the more modern and educated members of the population do not necessarily adhere to all elements of the caste system, the more traditional members are very strict, particularly if they are of what are known as the upper castes. Caste is considered an important means of protecting purity, and intermingling of castes in certain circumstances can mean that this purity is disturbed. (Additional information on caste relationships and surnames will be included in the forthcoming Enhanced Refugee Backgrounder.)

Resettlement Considerations

While the complexities of caste are something with which a service provider need not be familiar, there are certain important considerations for resettlement staff members and volunteers.

Housing: Grouping members of different castes in the same house or apartment (such as housing singles together) is likely to present substantial difficulties. The use, and "purity," of kitchens and prayer areas is particularly sensitive for older people of "higher" castes. Such traditions are well-respected by different castes, so co-occupants of different castes are likely to find a way to adjust. However, this means that such mixed-caste groupings would require separate kitchen spaces.

Visits: For some families, if visitors not of their caste enter their house, ritual purification by a priest will be required after the visit. Thus care should be taken to seek the permission of a family before entering the house. It is also important to request permission to enter prayer rooms and the kitchen, and food should not be touched. Unexpected visits may also be unwelcome.

Meals: Many older members of the refugee group (and most of the older orthodox Hindus of higher caste populations) will not eat food that has meats, eggs, or any cooked food. Resettlement agencies should focus more on providing fruit, bread, lentils and rice (to be cooked later by the refugees themselves) and other vegetarian items. Refugees of different castes may also not be able to share a meal.

Social Gatherings: Some refugees may not appreciate efforts to have all the Bhutanese refugees resettled in a community gather for social occasions. Sometimes members of different castes may attend the same function, but prefer to sit at different tables.

Special Populations: As the most traditional members of the refugee populations, older refugees are likely to benefit from a meeting place where they can talk, perform prayers together, and secure services from agencies. Widows may also require particular attention, as may wives divorced by polygamous husbands obligated to divorce all but one wife in order to gain admission to the U.S. These groups may require additional material, emotional, and spiritual support as they resettle.

Resources

Additional information on the caste system and culture of various ethnic groups included in the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal can be found at countrystudies.us/Nepal/31.htm