

Bhutanese Cultural Overview

Who are they?

Bhutanese refugees are predominantly Nepali ethnically (also known as “Lhotsampas”). They are from Bhutan, which is a small, mountainous country in between China (Tibet) and India, just north of Bangladesh. Most of them are Hindu, but a fair number are Buddhist and Christian as well. Their culture generally incorporates both castes and clans. Often, households consist of extended families members and they have a high regard for elders.

Why have they fled?

In the 1980s, the Bhutanese authorities established policies known as *Bhutanization*, imposing their culture, language and religion on other groups. In response, many protested, and the authorities destroyed their property, arrested and even tortured them. In the 1990s, many fled from Bhutan into India and eventually refugee camps in Nepal. There are now 110,000 Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, which is significant since Bhutan’s population is only 672,000. Others have resettled to Australia, Canada, the United States, and several European countries. The United States has the biggest population of Bhutanese refugees. The Twin Cities only has 1,600 Bhutanese people, but this population is growing.

Main do’s and don’ts with Bhutanese refugees

Do

- Find out what foods they do not eat. Hindus do not eat beef and many Bhutanese are vegetarians.
- Seek to understand their non-verbal gestures. They may shake their head from side-to-side to mean “yes”.
- Respect elders.
- Remove your shoes before entering their home.
- Recognize that newly-arrived refugees will likely not know how to use our kitchen appliances.
- Keep in mind the difficult environment that they are coming from in a refugee camp.

Don’t

- Enter the kitchen without permission, as it can be considered a sacred space.

Some good Nepali words/phrases to know...

English	Nepali
Hello/Greetings/I bless the divine in you.	Namaste. <i>Or Namaskar (respectfully)</i>
My name is _____.	Mero naam _____ ho.
What is your name?	Tapaiko naam ke ho?
How are you? / Are you well?	Tapailaai kasto chha? / Tapailaai sanchai chha?
I am fine. / I am well.	Tik chha. / Malai sanchai chha.
Thank you.	Dhanybad.
See you again.	Pheri bhetaunla.
It is tasty.	Mito chha.
I understand.	Maile bhujchu.
I don't understand.	Maile bhujhina.
I don't know.	Taa(haa) chaina.
Please repeat that.	Pheri bhanuhos.
Excuse me? Or Yes.	Hajur? / Hajur.
I'm sorry.	Mhap gharnuhos.
No problem.	Ke(hi) chaina.
Okay	La
Come in.	Aaunos.
Why?	Kina?
Food	Khana
Cooked rice	Bhat
Friend	Sathi

Resources

- Refugees from Bhutan Presentation:
<http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/refugee/vfbhutan.pdf>
- Bhutanese Refugee Story (Video) - From Nepal to Seattle's Rainier Valley:
<https://vimeo.com/7260916>
- Video for Learning about Bhutanese Refugees:
<http://www.culturalorientation.net/learning/populations/bhutanese/video>
- Bhutanese Refugee Families Backgrounder:
<http://www.brycs.org/documents/upload/bhutanese-cultural-backgrounder.pdf>
- Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal, from October 2007:
<http://www.culturalorientation.net/content/download/1332/7801/version/3/file/CAL+Backgrounder+04+-+Bhutanese+Refugees+in+Nepal+FINAL.pdf>