

Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal

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Between 1989 and 1993 more than 95,000 Lhotshampas (Bhutanese Nepali-speaking Hindus of Nepali origin who live(d) in the southern plains of Bhutan), nearly a sixth of the kingdom's total population of approximately 600,000 have been forced to leave or forcibly evicted from the country by the Bhutanese Government, this has made Bhutan one of the highest per capita refugee generators in the world due to the implementation of the "Driglam Namzha" (Cultural Code of the Ruling Elite) with a "One Nation, One People" policy which imposed the language, dress code, and customs of the northern Bhutanese on the entire population. The crackdown on the southern Bhutanese continued as the government began closing schools and hospitals in an attempt to force out those of Nepali origin.

Often the countries most overburdened with refugees are already among the poorest in the world. Nepal continues to be ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world in terms of human development yet hosts more than 100,000 Bhutanese and 20,000 Tibetan refugees. Nepal's inadequate social and physical infrastructural services are overstrained by such an influx of refugees.

There are seven camps with a population of 101,000 refugees, about half of whom are located in Beldangi camp. The camps are situated on the plains of east Nepal, spanning two districts (Jhapa and Morang) which are the most heavily populated in Nepal.

To get to the refugee camps, one has to drive on winding dirt roads through fields or forested land for at least half an hour. The forest clears out all of sudden and distinct rows of huts appear in the clearing. It seems as if you have come upon a civilization long hidden from the rest of the world.

In the seven camps there are 45 schools, 40,000 pupils and 956 teachers. The student/teacher ratio is an average 40:1 but in reality the classes are much bigger than this as the number of teachers includes headmasters and teacher trainers which are given very few periods, if any at all.

A school environment provides more than just basic needs to read and write, but also provides an outlet for children to experience a sense of normality, safety and routine after many years upheaval.

Most of the classrooms are temporary structures (often made of a mixture of brick, bamboo and grass) due to the limited life-span of the camps. Many of the lower classes do not have desks and the children are sitting on jute mats which have been manufactured in the camps during the income generating activities initiated by Oxfam. However, all classrooms are provided with a table and chair for the teacher. The blackboards are portable with an easel. Each school has a large open space where assemblies can take place. On structural appearances the schools are identical to many seen in the rural areas of Pokhara and Kathmandu Valley.

No land is available to refugees for cultivation yet the vast majority of the refugees come from rural backgrounds. Artificial life in the camps for more than ten years is therefore not preparing the younger generation for a farming life back home in Bhutan. Most of them have not been involved in farming for the past decade and there is a fear that they are losing their knowledge and experience in the area where they will have to make their future livelihoods. Although vocational training programmes and income-generating projects have been initiated, they are not a substitute for the agricultural work to which most of the refugees will return. In contrast, access to medical care, food rations, education and training has resulted in improved conditions for many of the refugees.