

Bhutan History/Overview



History

Bhutan is a nation made up of several ethnic groups. Most Bhutanese refugees are descendents of the group known as *Lhotsampas* or “People of the South.” The Lhotsampas came to Bhutan from neighboring Nepal in the late 1800’s per invitation from the Bhutanese government who was attempting to develop the uninhabited and wild Southern Bhutan for agricultural purposes. This area soon became the country’s primary supplier of food.

Though the Lhotsampas retained their Nepali way of life, language, and customs, and remained largely separated from dominant groups living in Northern Bhutan, they were granted full citizenship of Bhutan in the late 1950’s. In the 1980’s, however, the Lhotsampas were declared a threat to political and social

order and Nepali language was banned, Nepali teachers and officials were fired, and Nepali books were burned. New eligibility requirements and policies were made that deprived Lhotsampas of their citizenship and civil rights.

The Lhotsampas organized and tried to protest against the “*Bhutanization*”, however, this activism ended in violence and mass arrests. Incidents of rape, torture, and false imprisonment were widely acknowledged by Human Rights organizations. In the 1990’s, many Nepali Lhotsampas were forced to sign what were called “voluntary migration certificates” that expelled them from Bhutan and displaced them in Nepal. Expelled and fleeing Lhotsampas continue, more than 15 years later, to be denied citizenship in Nepal, as well. It is estimated that over 125,000 Lhotsampas are still living in refugee camps.

Language

Approximately 97% of the Bhutanese refugees are ethnic Nepalis. Almost all speak Nepali as a first or second language. About one-third have a functional knowledge of the English language.

Religion

60% of Bhutanese refugees are Hindu, 27% are Buddhist, and approximately 10% are Kirat, which is an indigenous religion comparable to animism (an ancient, pagan-like belief system). The remaining small percentage is Christian.

Views on mental health and mental illness

Mental health and mental illness are not well understood or acknowledged among Bhutanese. The trying conditions in which Bhutanese have lived, however, have likely negatively impacted the mental health of this group. Depression, anxiety, and/or post-traumatic stress are of particular concern.