

THE TRI-CITIES WELCOMING COMMUNITIES PROJECT

As one of Canada's leading centres for the settlement of recent immigrants, the Tri-Cities of Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam and Port Moody have embarked on an initiative to ease and enhance newcomers' experiences while making the region a more welcoming and inclusive community. Initiated by S.U.C.C.E.S.S. a diverse group of community leaders and stakeholders are working together as an active Advisory to develop, implement and oversee all elements of the Tri-Cities Welcoming Communities Project.

MEET OUR ADVISORY MEMBERS.

- ACT 2 Child & Family Services
- City of Coquitlam
- City of Coquitlam, RCMP
- City of Port Coquitlam
- City of Port Moody
- Coquitlam Public Library
- Douglas College
- Douglas College, The Training Group
- Fraser Valley Regional Library
- ISSofBC
- Ministry of Children & Family Development
- Port Moody Public Library
- S.U.C.C.E.S.S.
- School District No. 43 (Coquitlam)
- SHARE Society
- Tri-Cities Chamber of Commerce
- Tri-Cities Seniors Planning Table
- Vancity
- West Coast Family Centres Society

PROJECT CO-ORDINATORS

PEERs Employment & Education Resources

BHUTANESE REFUGEES BY THE NUMBERS

100,000+

Number expelled from Bhutan

80,000

Number resettled in refugee recipient countries

230

Number currently living in B.C.

800-900

Number originally expected in B.C.

6,500

Canada's allocation of Bhutanese refugees

a centre of excellence for research on immigration and diversity, identified some complaints but also found high utilization of the services provided and a generally positive outlook toward life in B.C.

Nevertheless, Khadka says, the situation with the Bhutanese is far from ideal: only a few have been able to find jobs here, and a significant proportion remain on social assistance. His PhD thesis will reflect a soft labour market in which employers have proven unwilling to take a chance on the refugees. Most Bhutanese want to work and wonder why they haven't been able to land jobs, he says. A common sentiment is, "We can mow the lawn; we can do construction." They wonder why they are offered social assistance but not the vocational programs they need to get the jobs that are available.

That said, the Bhutanese have been finding jobs — just not in B.C. Many of the several hundred refugees expected in Coquitlam never made it here, landing instead in other provinces, mostly Alberta, where jobs are more prolific and employers more willing to take a chance. And a chunk of the more than 200 Bhutanese who did arrive in Coquitlam have already left. In late July one group simply rented a charter bus, and high-balled it to Lethbridge. "Thirty-six people," Khadka says.

In Alberta the Bhutanese are finding work in various sectors including construction and food

preparation, but mostly in chicken packing plants, especially one in Lethbridge. There they are paid about \$12 an hour, says Khadka, and have proven to be unusually reliable employees in an industry characterized by high turnover. The same company that has hired so many Bhutanese in Lethbridge also has a plant here, but has yet to take on any at its local operation.

To people like Khadka and Friesen, the experience of the Bhutanese offers both lessons and cautions for future large refugee resettlement movements to BC. They're gratified that the programs they and other community partners helped set up and run have been well-received and, in many ways, effective. They also can't help but approve of the initiative shown by the Bhutanese in hunting down jobs, wherever they may happen to be. The experience should help assuage the fears of some Canadians that refugees are destined to forever be a cost to society rather than a benefit.

At the same time they regret the stresses caused by high unemployment in the Bhutanese community here. Still, Khadka hopes the situation is beginning to improve. As they become more Canadianized, some of the Bhutanese are comfortable travelling back and forth between here and Alberta. And, he says, while the adults have low literacy levels and few marketable skills, their children are settling into both life and the job market a lot more easily.



THE ROAD FROM BHUTAN

THE PLANNED ARRIVAL IN TRI-CITIES OF SEVERAL HUNDRED BHUTANESE REFUGEES FROM NEPAL SPARKED UNPRECEDENTED PREPARATIONS. FIVE YEARS LATER THERE HAVE BEEN MANY TWISTS AND TURNS.

When in 2008 Canada agreed to accept 5,000 Bhutanese refugees (a number eventually increased to 6,500), it was determined that B.C would receive several hundred, and most would be settled in Coquitlam.

In a city of about 125,000 people, that promised to have quite an impact, so it's fortunate that the decision was followed by some of the most proactive and comprehensive settlement preparations ever mounted. Today, five years later, most of Canada's Bhutanese allotment has arrived, and on balance both Coquitlam's local settlement effort and the Bhutanese adjustment to life in Canada can be called a qualified success. That said, the primary reason behind the solid outcome is a wrinkle that no-one could have anticipated.

Raj Khadka has a unique perspective on Operation Swaagatem ("welcome" in Nepali), as the name of the coordinated plan to ease the arrival of Bhutanese refugees is called. On one hand he speaks Nepali, the language of the refugees, and is employed as an Outreach Settlement Worker with the Moving Ahead Program, a provider of settle-

ment services within the Immigrant Services Society of BC (ISSofBC). On the other he is currently completing a PhD in Social Work at UBC, with the Bhutanese refugees and the labour market they've encountered as his thesis subject. "My views as a settlement worker are not always the same as my opinions as an academic," he says.



Khadka was not part of the original planning process that led to Operation Swaagatem, but he believes that it was a necessary initiative. Having lived in a state of limbo for almost two decades, the Bhutanese refugees were poorly prepared for life outside of a refugee camp. In large part descendants of Nepalese

migrants who moved to Bhutan as job seekers beginning in the final decades of the 19th century, they were never integrated into Bhutanese society nor afforded civil rights, and during the 1980s were subjected to

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INSIDE



OUR HOME, OUR STORIES

This is the second in a series of information packages prepared by the Tri-Cities Welcoming Communities Project. Written by Jim Sutherland. Photographs by Paul Joseph.

NEXT ISSUE

Immigrant Volunteerism in the Tri-Cities



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IN BRIEF



ABOUT THE BHUTANESE REFUGEES

Late in the 19th century southern Bhutan was a region not unlike B.C.: mountainous, sparsely inhabited, largely undeveloped. In taming the region contractors imported some 60,000 Nepalese, to clear the forests and plant and harvest crops. Never granted full rights of citizenship, these people and their descendants lived a tenuous existence. By the 1980s, with illegal immigration on the rise and the Nepalese poorly integrated into Bhutanese society, Bhutanese officials declared the One Nation, One People policy, which enforced northern Bhutanese codes of dress and etiquette in the name of cultural preservation. In the early 1990s, following a national census and deportations of recent Nepalese arrivals, strife grew between the two camps, leading to clashes and demonstrations, soon followed by a crackdown. By 1996 more than 100,000 people were living in refugee camps rife with malnutrition and disease. Neither India nor Nepal accepted the refugees, while Bhutanese repatriation stalled. In 2007 the U.S. offered to resettle 60,000 refugees, joined by seven other countries, with Canada and Australia as the most significant contributors. In 2008 the first refugees left for their new third-country homes.

escalating discrimination. In what some have termed a case of ethnic cleansing, more than 100,000 ethnic Hindus fled or were expelled from Bhutan, most of them landing in refugee camps in Nepal, where they resided with few prospects until 2008, when eight countries, including Canada, agreed to resettle some 80,000 of them. As Khadka points out, large numbers of the Bhutanese arrivals had known no other life except inside a refugee camp.

There were other factors working against their success as settlers. Given the option of choosing the country they would move to, many of the most educated and able-bodied opted for the U.S., which was regarded as the land of opportunity, says Khadka. Canada, by contrast, was believed to offer better services, and tended to attract those with health or other issues, at least at first. (The much deeper recession experienced in the U.S. helped change that impression, and resulted in what observers believe has been a more difficult immigrant experience there.) Making matters worse, there is no pre-existing Bhutanese community in B.C. A few hundred immigrants from Nepal speak the same language, but Khadka is one of only a handful working in the helping professions.



RAJ KHADKA PROVIDES SETTLEMENT SERVICES WITHIN THE IMMIGRANT SERVICES SOCIETY OF BC (ISSofBC)



The first group of Bhutanese arrived in Coquitlam in early 2009. Why Coquitlam? In fact, says Chris Friesen, director of settlement services for ISSofBC, the Tri-Cities, particularly Coquitlam, is one of the most common final destinations for government-assisted refugees, along with Surrey. Housing costs are lower than in places like Vancouver, and there is a strong and growing network of services. In consultation with some members of the existing Nepali community, it was determined that keeping Bhutanese arrivals in close proximity to each other would give them at least the benefit of a community—other people who spoke the same language and were dealing with the same challenges. All government assisted refugees destined for BC pass through ISSofBC's Welcome House facility located in downtown Vancouver and receive immediate first language support services through the ISSofBC resettlement assistance program team. But an additional rationale for the Coquitlam nexus was that by keeping the community relatively intact it would be easier for various service providers to offer more integrated first-language supports.



LARGE NUMBERS OF THE BHUTANESE ARRIVALS HAD KNOWN NO OTHER LIFE EXCEPT INSIDE A REFUGEE CAMP

With several hundred refugees expected and a bit of time to plan for their arrival, preparations went well beyond anything seen in the past, says Friesen. For the first time in B.C. representatives of federal, provincial and civic governments, along with school and health authorities, were brought together by ISSofBC to undertake pre-arrival planning. More than 90 people attended a preparation forum, out of which several initiatives arose. A partnership between Coquitlam School District 43 and ISSofBC resulted in a six-week summer camp to prepare Bhutanese children for school, as well as after-school programs to help students keep up and stay occupied during the school term. Nepali-speaking university students were mobilized to aid in orientation. A newcomer welcome guide booklet and letter was provided by the City and Mayor of Coquitlam, and the Share Family and Community Services-led New Beginning ECD Refugee program added staff who spoke Nepali. This was in addition to the standard array of programs offered to refugees by other local community agencies and the school board, such as SWIS workers and S.U.C.C.E.S.S.

Canada, by contrast, was believed to offer better services, and tended to attract those with health or other issues, at least at first.

There was also a recognition that the public should be aware of the Bhutanese and their situation. Information was made available on the web and elsewhere, and the media was enlisted. With their compelling story, the refugees attracted the attention of outlets ranging from radio stations and community newspapers through the Vancouver Sun and the Globe and Mail, which sent a reporter and photographer to Nepal to follow the progress of a refugee family that settled eventually in Coquitlam. Speaking as both a front-line worker and an academic, Khadka says that the programs have generally functioned as intended. On this day he's arrived at the office in Coquitlam's Cottonwood neighbourhood by way of a maternity ward, where he helped a young couple understand why their new baby wasn't being discharged along with the mother. It was a simple case of the premature baby needing to gain a few extra ounces, but hospital staff had been unable to communicate that to the worried parents. Without an interpreter the communication gap might have grown into a much bigger problem. A 2011 survey of Bhutanese arrivals conducted by Metropolis British Columbia,

REFUGEES IN CANADA AND BC



In recent years Canada has admitted between 15,000 and 30,000 refugees a year. These divide fairly equally into three categories: refugees landed in Canada (for example, asylum seekers), privately sponsored refugees, and government assisted refugees, as in the case of the Bhutanese.

In 2012 about 7% of all Canadian refugees arrived in BC, slightly less than our proportion of the national population and significantly below the 16% of total Canadian immigrants received by the province.

Top source countries for Government Assisted Refugees in BC in 2012 were Iran, 26%; Afghanistan, 26%; Somalia, 14% and Iraq, 14%. Just 4% were from Bhutan.

Since the beginning of 2012 the leading BC municipalities for refugee settlement have been Surrey, 33%; Tri-Cities (primarily Coquitlam), 20%, and Burnaby, 13%.

- The source countries of GARs settling in the Tri-Cities in 2012 were Iran (43%), Afghanistan (33%), Bhutan (21%) and Iraq (2%).
- Almost 35% of GARs settling in the Tri-Cities are children and youth under 18 years old.

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