

# BHUTANESE REFUGEES OF NEPALI ORIGIN: NAVIGATING NATIONALITY AND CITIZENSHIP IN AN UNEQUAL WORLD

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# AGENDA

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- Introduction of Bhutanese Refugees and Research Context
- Research Methods
- Preliminary Trends and Themes
- Stories and Experiences

# INTRODUCTION

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- Bhutanese Refugees
  - Research Context
  - Emergence of the Study
  - Why Study Bhutanese Refugees

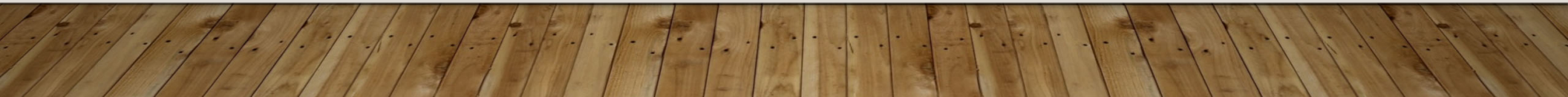
# INTRODUCTION

## *BHUTANESE REFUGEES*

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- Who are Bhutanese refugees in the United States?
  - They are of Nepali ancestry.
  - They are known as “Bhutanese refugees of Nepali origin and/or Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees.”
  - The Nepali-speaking population in the United States thus includes Nepalis from more than one nation.









## RESEARCH CONTEXT

### *WHY STUDY BHUTANESE REFUGEES?*

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- Unique political economic history
- One of the largest refugee communities in the U.S., yet invisible group
- Identity as Bhutanese refugees of Nepali origin and Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees
- Part of the emerging Nepali Diaspora
- Became refugees twice in their lifetime
- To understand their journey; how they rebuild their lives and communities



## IMMIGRATION/MIGRATION, NATIONALITY, AND CITIZENSHIP *BHUTANESE REFUGEES OF UNIQUE AND COMPLEX POLITICAL HISTORY*

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- 1890s, the government of Bhutan recruited Nepali labor migrants to clear jungles in southern Bhutan.
- This resulted in a gradual flow of Nepali labor migration into Bhutan.
- By 1988, they had become 45 percent of the Bhutanese population.
- They were referred to as Lhotshampas or “People from the South”.



## IMMIGRATION/MIGRATION, NATIONALITY, AND CITIZENSHIP *BHUTANESE REFUGEES OF UNIQUE AND COMPLEX POLITICAL HISTORY*

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- In the mid-1980s, the Bhutanese government implemented a “One County, One Nation” campaign to unify the country as per Druk culture, religion, and language.” During the process:
  - Lhotshampas/Bhutanese Nepalis encountered increasing political violence.
  - Many of them fled to Nepal and lived in refugee camps.
  - They lost their land and resources and also their Bhutanese citizenship.



## IMMIGRATION/MIGRATION, NATIONALITY, AND CITIZENSHIP *BHUTANESE REFUGEES OF UNIQUE AND COMPLEX POLITICAL HISTORY*

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- Resettlement of Bhutanese refugees to a third country began in 2008.
- It is estimated that currently there are seventy thousand Bhutanese Nepali refugees in the United States alone.
- Obtained refugee status twice in their lives: first in their own ancestral motherland of Nepal, and secondly in their country of immigration.



## SOME RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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- How has their becoming refugees twice shaped their identity, nationality/citizenship, and sense of belonging?
- How do their dual Bhutanese and Nepali identities manifest?
- Where is a home for them?
- What are the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of immigration/migration/resettlement?
- How do they navigate their socio-economic and political lives in the U.S.?
- What are their challenges and successes?

# RESEARCH SUBJECTS, SITES, AND DATA COLLECTION

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- Research Subjects
  - 30 Bhutanese Refugees of Nepali Origin
  - 20-70 Age Range
  - Various Ethnic and Religious Backgrounds
- Research Sites
  - Seattle, WA
  - Salt Lake City, UT
- Data Collections
  - Surveys
  - Open-Ended Interviews
  - Focus Groups
  - Narrative Collections

# EMERGING TRENDS/THEMES

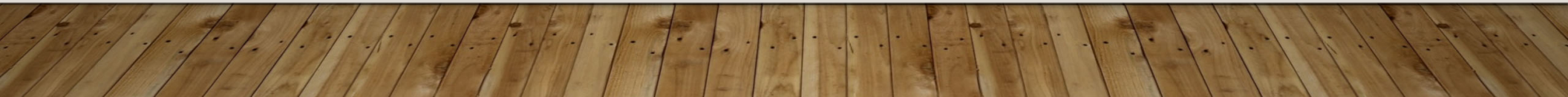
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- Multiple Identities and Belongings
- Majority live in multigenerational households.
- Social Isolation and Mental Health Problems
- Senior Members-
  - Experience trauma when recalling political violence in Bhutan
- Encounter racism and classism while navigating the social, cultural, and economic landscapes during the resettlement process.
- Intergenerational conflict, as a result of differences in adaptation experiences between children/youth and elders.
- Positive Trend:
  - Highly social and spiritual community
  - Organize social and cultural events, including community gardens









# UPLIFTING STORIES/EXPERIENCES

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- A 24-year-old pre-med female student in Seattle lives with her multigenerational family. She works during the weekends and helps her family's household economy. She also manages her family's legal documents. She aspires to become a neurosurgeon.
- Restaurant owners Kamal and Geeta came to Salt Lake City in 2010 with their three children. After many years of hard work and with the help of local agencies, they opened the Bhutan House restaurant in 2017. They are planning to open another branch in downtown SLC in July, 2023.





*“I was born in Bhutan in 1976, I was forced to flee from my birth country. I stayed in various refugee camps in Nepal for over 16 years... Currently, I work as a social worker. As a Vice-Chair of the Bhutanese Community Center, I also help and support the community in different capacities.”*