



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Recent LDS Growth among Nepali-Bhutanese in the United States

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Overview

For the past several decades, the LDS Church has regularly extended outreach among Southeast Asian refugee groups fleeing ethnic violence in their homelands. Initially occurring among the Hmong, Laotian, Cambodians, and Vietnamese, missionary activity has more recently targeted additional ethnic groups who have arrived more recently to the United States such as Swahili-speaking East Africans, Karen-speaking Burmese immigrants, and ethnic Nepali immigrants from Bhutan. Many of these most recent efforts have occurred in the Salt Lake City area in Utah.

This case study summarizes the history of refugee resettlement in the United States and chronicles the Church's progress in reaching Nepali-Bhutanese refugees in the United States, particularly in Salt Lake City, and discusses successes, opportunities, challenges, and prospects for future growth.

Trends in Refugee Resettlement in the United States

The United States government has accepted over two million refugees since the 1970s. Primary world region of origin has varied by decade, with most refugees originating from Southeast Asia in the 1970s and early 1980s, Africa in the 1980s, the former Yugoslavia and former Soviet Union in the 1990s, and Africa in the 2000s.^[1] At present, the United States accepts approximately 80,000 refugees a year; three times as many as all other countries accepting foreign refugees combined.^[2] During the three-year period consisting of the 2009, 2010, and 2011 fiscal years, the United States accepted the most refugees from Burma (51,867), Iraq (46,242), and Bhutan (40,814). In 2011, the top ten states refugees resettled to were Texas, California, New York, Pennsylvania, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Arizona, Washington, and North Carolina. In recent years, approximately one-third of resettled refugees are under 18 years old.^[3]

Trends in Refugee Resettlement in Utah

Utah received between as a few as 251 to as many as 1,264 refugees a year between 2000 and 2009. Between 2000 and 2009, Utah accepted the most refugees from Somalia (1,432), the former Yugoslavia (1,002), Burma (997), Sudan (744), Iraq (572), Iran (530), Bhutan (466), the former Soviet Union (432), Cuba (363), and Burundi (253).^[4]

In 2004, refugees from Burma began resettling in Utah. The number of Burmese refugees accepted was four in 2004, 17 in 2005, 32 in 2006, 202 in 2007, 378 in 2008, and 360 in 2009. In 2008, Utah began resettling refugees from Bhutan. The number of Bhutanese refugees accepted was 180 in 2008 and 286 in 2009.^[5] Prior to the resettlement of large numbers of Nepali-Bhutanese in the United States, there were approximately 34,000 Nepali speakers nationwide.^[6]

Nepali-Bhutanese Background

Beginning in the nineteenth century, many Nepalese from Nepal and India settled in lowland areas of Bhutan in search of additional farmland. By the 1980s, Nepalese, also called Lhotsampas, had become a large minority group constituting more than one-third of the population of Bhutan. The Bhutanese government made efforts to reduce the influence of the Nepalese population on the country by branding them illegal immigrants. Lhotshampa leaders propagated protests and attacks on the government and its institutions, resulting in an exacerbation of the conflict. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, tens of thousands of Nepalese fled suppression and ethnic violence in Bhutan and relocated to refugee camps in India and Nepal. Today the

estimated number of Nepali-Bhutanese displaced in refugee camps ranges from 85,000^[7] to 112,000.^[8] Religion has been one of the major issues driving the conflict in Bhutan. Nepalese have refused to give up their Hindu religion and customs to convert to Buddhism; the predominant religion of Bhutan that is promoted by the government.^[9] In recent years, governments in Nepal and Bhutan have made some efforts to repatriate some refugees but most have been resettled to third countries such as the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.^[10]

Nepali-Bhutanese LDS History

In 2009, the Salt Lake Valley View Stake President John Pingree observed that 20 to 30 Nepali-Bhutanese refugee immigrants were attending church services in various wards in his stake. A Nepali convert living in the South Jordan Founders Park Stake named Girish Ghimire contacted the Salt Lake City Mission President about his concern for meeting the basic needs of the increasing numbers of refugee immigrants in the Salt Lake area. In coordination with government employees who work with refugees and other church members, Ghimire organized meetings for Nepali-Bhutanese refugees that taught them basic life skills and English. By mid-2010, these meetings had 150 in attendance and over 50 volunteers. Ghimire provided invaluable service as he was the only interpreter for these meetings to relay information presented by medical, legal, and educational professionals. In addition to providing transportation to these meetings, church members have also provided child care and donated necessary items they cannot purchase with food stamps.^[11]

In late 2010, full-time missionaries were assigned to work among Nepali-Bhutanese in the Salt Lake area and began informally studying Nepali while serving in their areas. A missionary companionship was assigned to one ward where Nepali translations of church services were available and also worked with Nepali-Bhutanese in other areas of the mission. A sister missionary from Nepal serving in the Salt Lake Temple Square Mission facilitated some of the missionary activity among investigators and new converts. Missionaries reported that convert baptisms occurred regularly and large numbers wanted to meet with missionaries, but that there was no Nepali-speaking LDS congregation and that Nepali-speaking Latter-day Saints were not available in many areas where Nepali-Bhutanese resided. In January 2011, around 10 Nepali-Bhutanese were baptized and the following month another 19 were baptized.

In early 2012, the Church created its first Nepali-speaking branch in the United States in Salt Lake City. LDS membership in the new branch consisted entirely of Nepali speakers and the new branch was organized in the Salt Lake South Stake. Members have recently reported that many of the new converts in the branch are youth. Member reports also indicate that many Nepali-Bhutanese have joined the Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota and a few have joined the Church in Twin Falls, Idaho.

Successes

The Church has quickly acted to provide humanitarian assistance, assign missionaries to proselyte, and form a language-specific branch in Salt Lake City. There have been few comparable instances in the United States where mission and local leaders have swiftly and effectively coordinated to mobilize resources needed to extend outreach to a specific ethnic group. Church leaders have been resourceful in identifying members with past mission or life experience working with, proselytizing among, or living in countries that support populations similar to Nepal and Bhutan. The Church established a basic outreach infrastructure consisting of translators, volunteers, and ecclesiastical leaders within only a year or two after appreciable numbers of Nepali-Bhutanese began resettling in the Salt Lake City area.

The formation of a Nepali-speaking branch fosters a sense of community for new converts. The branch conducts worship services and lessons in Nepali, facilitating gospel understanding and member participation. The recently organized branch improves the attractiveness of the Church to nonmembers as services are held in Nepali and they can socialize with fellow Nepali-Bhutanese immigrants.

The Church has experienced good receptivity notwithstanding Nepali-Bhutanese are traditionally Hindu and were driven out of their homelands in part because of their refusal to denounce Hinduism and convert to Buddhism. Missionaries have reported convert baptisms on a monthly basis beginning as early as January 2011. Missionary reports indicate that many investigators seriously think about joining the Church due to the potential ramifications it poses to their cultural community, likely improving convert retention as less-committed investigators are too hesitant to join a Christian church. By late 2012, the LDS Church will appear to have as many Nepali-Bhutanese members in the Salt Lake City area as in the entire country of Nepal notwithstanding an unofficial LDS presence in Nepal for two decades and the operation of an independent branch in Kathmandu for over a decade.

Opportunities

Uprooted from their native lands and cultural heritage, many Nepali-Bhutanese refugees appear more receptive to LDS missionary activity than their counterparts who continue to live in South Asia. The major social change of immigrating to the United States presents a window of opportunity for the Church to capitalize on higher receptivity as refugees adjust to American culture, redefine their identity, and are presented the option to learn about the Church. Receptivity to the Church and religion in general is often time sensitive. Within a matter of even a few years the Church could lose the opportunity to perform missionary work when conditions were most optimal as over time receptivity wanes as communities are solidified and new societal attitudes are more developed.

Nepali-Bhutanese often seriously consider the consequences of joining the Church. Missionaries report that many, if not most, investigators attend church for extended periods of a month or two before considering baptism whereas missionaries generally set a baptismal date with investigators within the first couple missionary lessons. This increased prebaptismal preparation allows converts to more firmly develop habitual church attendance and study church teachings, thus often gaining a stronger personal testimony of the Church than many investigators. As a result, the Church may expect higher convert retention rates among Nepali-Bhutanese than other refugee groups from Southeast Asia that have historically exhibited low convert retention rates over the long term.

There are abundant opportunities for the Church to initiate mission outreach programs specifically for Nepali-Bhutanese in other states. Nepali-Bhutanese refugees in Utah account for less than three percent of all refugees from Bhutan resettled in the United States. Missionaries have regularly taught these refugee immigrants in many states, but with the exception of the Utah Salt Lake Mission and possibly the Minnesota Minneapolis Mission no other missions have appeared to organize specific missionary programs focusing on Nepali-Bhutanese refugees.

Recently baptized Nepali-Bhutanese converts provide the Church with potential resources to aid missionary activity and translation projects as they become acculturated to living in the United States, strengthen their understanding and testimony of LDS teachings, learn English, and remain active. These resources can be channeled into the Nepali-Bhutanese population in Utah and applied to other cities where there are sizable numbers of Nepali-Bhutanese but few or no Latter-day Saint converts or no organized missionary program to reach them. The most practical method that the Church could expand to other states would be initially through video recordings of converts bearing their testimony, teaching gospel principles, explaining how they joined the Church, and discussing how they overcame a challenge in their conversion that is common to Nepali-Bhutanese investigating the Church. Full-time missionaries working in areas with sizable numbers of Nepali-Bhutanese could display these videos to supplement their teaching and help converts identify with how they can retain their culture and ethnicity and join the Church. In the medium and long term, the Church can send Nepali members from Nepal or Nepali-Bhutanese members from the Salt Lake City area on missionaries to areas with sizable numbers of Nepali-Bhutanese. The Church has appeared to send two dozen or more members from the Kathmandu Branch in Nepal on missions in India, the United States, and other countries. However, it will likely be another couple years until recently baptized Nepali-Bhutanese youth in the Salt Lake area will serve missions in sufficient numbers to even partially staff a nationwide program.

The Church can utilize prospective church leaders and missionaries from the community to commence official LDS missionary activity in Nepal one day if permitted by the government and a self-sustaining Nepali LDS community is established and spreads to additional American cities. At present, any prospects for official LDS missionary activity in Nepal are poor due to government bans on proselytism. Any missionary activity would have to occur through member referral.

There are very few Christians among Nepali-Bhutanese refugee immigrants. A lack of Christian outreach to this group in their homelands has reduced the negative portrayal of the LDS Church as heretical, unorthodox, and strange by many mainstream denominations. Consequently the Church is likely to expect few if any counterproselytism efforts by other missionary-oriented faiths in the coming years as these denominations lack influence on this population.

Challenges

At present the Church appears to rely entirely on non-Nepali-Bhutanese members to staff leadership for the sole Nepali-speaking branch in Salt Lake City. Reliance on white American members to meet these needs poses many challenges for developing a self-sufficient LDS community. No Nepali-Bhutanese church leadership can be a barrier for some to investigate or join the Church as nonnative leadership conveys a sense that the Church is un-Nepalese and incompatible with local culture. The Church has undertaken similar outreach campaigns among Southeast Asian ethnicities within the past few decades that rely on nonnative American members to fill leadership. These efforts have produced mixed results, especially when no native leadership is developed within a reasonable amount of time after the first outreach begins. Failure to develop native leadership within the first few years of initiating ethnic or language-specific missionary activity can produce disastrous results, such as very low member activity rates and long-term negative attitudes in these communities about the Church and its purpose. The Church has particularly experienced these setbacks and frustrations among Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese communities in the United States but has been more successful instilling a sense of LDS community and assimilating local culture with LDS culture among the Hmong. Nepali-Bhutanese youth serving full-time missions will be crucial towards building up the Church in this community.

The size of Nepali-Bhutanese communities in many cities in the United States is relatively small. In Salt Lake City, there appears to be fewer than 1,000 Nepali-Bhutanese refugee immigrants at present. With such a tiny target population, the Church faces challenges in establishing a permanent presence that becomes self-perpetuating and continues to increase in active members for long periods of time. If the flow of refugees slows or stops entirely into the Salt Lake area, it is possible that the Church will have reached most, if not the entire, population within a matter of a couple years. This could potentially lead to an oversaturation of LDS missionary resources among the community. Oversaturation leads to many dysfunctional dynamics that deter growth, such as dependence on full-time missionaries to carry out members' responsibilities like blessing the sacrament, performing home and visiting teaching, and accountability in member-missionary work and local church leadership. The stability of the LDS Nepali-Bhutanese community in Salt Lake could be jeopardized even if multiple Latter-day Saint families relocate to other cities in the United States, especially if they hold leadership positions in the branch.

Many Nepali-Bhutanese investigators desire to join the Church and become Christian after associating with church members

and missionaries but fear that leaving Hinduism and becoming a Christian would result in going to the bottom of the caste system. Nepali Latter-day Saints and full-time missionaries have tried working with investigators in the past to explain that there is no caste system in the United States and that any change in caste order would solely occur in the Nepali community if any change occurs at all. However these efforts produced mixed results as some resist these efforts and lose interest in the Church.

The Church has few translations of church materials into Nepali and no translations of LDS scriptures. Investigators and new converts have to rely on English or other second-language materials and scriptures to study the gospel. It is unclear whether the Church has officially begun a translation project for additional church materials or LDS scriptures into Nepali. Currently available materials translated into Nepali are limited to the 13 Articles of Faith, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Gospel Fundamentals, The Family: A proclamation to the World, and The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles.

Refugee immigrants face many difficult challenges assimilating into American society learning English, obtaining employment, and securing and paying for housing. The Church and government and aid organizations have mobilized to help ease this arduous process and provide education from professionals in various fields. However, there are few translators and many struggle to become economically self-sufficient for months and years after arriving in the United States.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church has experienced success baptizing Nepali-Bhutanese converts in other cities in the United States. In Oakland, California senior missionaries reported in 2010 that several Bhutanese joined the Church and further enhanced the already diverse demographics of LDS wards in the area. In Saint Paul, Minnesota members report that Nepali-Bhutanese youth have joined the LDS Church and at times bless the sacrament. Within the past few years missionary efforts among Karen have been more widespread than among Nepali-Bhutanese. Mission leaders have assigned full-time missionaries to work specifically among the Karen in Salt Lake City, Utah and Saint Paul, Minnesota. Full-time missionaries in many locations report success finding, teaching, and baptizing Karen whereas instances of several Nepali-Bhutanese joining the Church in a single location have appeared limited to Salt Lake City, Utah; Saint Paul, Minnesota; and Twin Falls, Idaho.

Other Christian groups have reported proselytizing activity among Nepali-Bhutanese refugees. Baptists have quickly planted churches in areas with sizable numbers of Nepali-Bhutanese and operate Nepali-speaking churches in Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Illinois, Massachusetts, Maryland, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington.^[12] In May 2012, Seventh Day Adventists reported no Nepali-speaking churches in the United States. At the time it was unclear whether Jehovah's Witnesses have established Nepali-speaking congregations in the United States.

Future Prospects

The organization of the first Nepali-speaking branch of the Church outside of Nepal in Salt Lake City, the mobilization of available resources suited to meet the needs of Nepali speakers in a couple locations, good receptivity to the Church among Nepali-Bhutanese in the Salt Lake City area, regular and appropriate humanitarian and service provided by American members to help meet basic needs in Salt Lake City, and some missionary activity occurring among Nepali-Bhutanese outside of Utah present a favorable outlook for future LDS growth among Nepali-Bhutanese refugees in the United States. Many opportunities to reach this community outside of Utah remain unrealized and will likely continue to be poorly attended to due to a lack of strategic vision and limited missionary resources. There are several challenges for the Church to achieve strong and consistent growth in the coming years such as a lack of translations of LDS materials and scriptures in Nepali, few if any church leaders among the Nepali-Bhutanese community, and ongoing economic and social challenges common to refugee immigrants in the United States including learning English, acculturating to American culture, finding employment, and meeting basic needs without assistance from government or charitable organizations.

^[1] "Statistics and Reports," Refugee Services Office, retrieved 21 May 2012. <http://refugee.utah.gov/about/statisticsreports.html>

^[2] "About the Refugee Services Office," Refugee Services Office, retrieved 21 May 2012. <http://refugee.utah.gov/about/index.html>

^[3] Martin, Daniel C.; Yankay, James E. "Refugees and Asylees: 2011," Office of Immigration Statistics, May 2012. http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_rfa_fr_2011.pdf

^[4] "Statistics and Reports," Refugee Services Office, retrieved 21 May 2012. <http://refugee.utah.gov/about/statisticsreports.html>

^[5] "Statistics and Reports," Refugee Services Office, retrieved 21 May 2012. <http://refugee.utah.gov/about/statisticsreports.html>

^[6] "New Census Bureau Report Analyzes Nation's Linguistic Diversity," U.S. Census Bureau, 27 April 2010.

http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/american_community_survey_acs/cb10-cn58.html

[7] "Background Note: Bhutan," US Department of State, 2 February 2010. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35839.htm>

[8] " Bhutan," Countries and Their Cultures," retrieved 21 May 2012. <http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Bhutan.html>

[9] Loftus, Hikari. "Service to Bhutanese immigrants unifies Utah stakes," Deseret News, 7 June 2010. <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700038201/Service-to-Bhutanese-immigrants-unifies-Utah-stakes.html>

[10] "Background Note: Bhutan," US Department of State, 2 February 2010. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35839.htm>

[11] Loftus, Hikari. "Service to Bhutanese immigrants unifies Utah stakes," Deseret News, 7 June 2010. <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700038201/Service-to-Bhutanese-immigrants-unifies-Utah-stakes.html>

[12] "Nepali Church USA," www.nepalichurchusa.info, retrieved 22 May 2012. <http://www.nepalichurchusa.info/>