Hindu Refugees in the United States

Alignments

Theme: History and Movement
Disciplinary Area: Asian American Studies, Hindu American Studies, World Religion, US History
Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: Justice and Equity, Self-Determination, Solidarity and Collective Action, Empathy and Pluralism
Oregon Standards: HS.ES.1, 5, 7
Standards Alignment:
C3 Standards:

- D2.His.1.9-12: Evaluate how historical context and multiple perspectives shape interpretations of past events.
- D2.Civ.10.9-12: Analyze the role of citizens and governments in addressing global humanitarian issues.
- D2.Geo.12.9-12: Evaluate the impact of human migration on regions and cultures.
- D4.6.9-12: Use disciplinary concepts and tools to construct arguments and propose informed action in response to contemporary challenges.

Lesson Overview

This lesson introduces students to the concept of refugees, with a specific focus on the experiences of Hindu refugee communities from Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Kashmir as well as the broader historical and political context surrounding refugee resettlement in the United States. Students begin by exploring their own perceptions of the term “refugee” and identifying major refugee populations in U.S. history. Through a combination of class discussion, guided reading, and analysis, they learn about the Refugee Act of 1980, the Bhutanese government’s “One Nation, One People” policy, and the human rights abuses that led to the forced displacement of thousands of Bhutanese Hindus.

The lesson emphasizes critical thinking about how legal systems, cultural identity, and political decisions can impact vulnerable populations. Students examine how the United States has responded to refugee crises over time, and they engage in an applied group activity by designing a modern refugee policy that builds on the legacy of the 1980 Act. The

lesson supports civic engagement, historical empathy, and higher-level analysis of justice, identity, and governmental responsibility.

Key Terms

Refugee - a person who has been forced to flee their home country due to persecution, war, or violence.

Immigrant **-** a person who chooses to move to another country, usually for education, work, or family reasons.

Persecution **-** treatment or oppression because of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or social group.

Ethnic Cleansing - the forced removal of an entire ethnic or religious group from a region.

Lhotshampa - ethnic Nepali Hindus who lived in Bhutan and were targeted during the "One Nation, One People" campaign.

Kashmiri Hindus - An ethnically Nepali community which is predominantly Hindu, with a significant Buddhist minority and and a number of syncretic Hindu-Buddhists, who lived in Bhutan since the 16th century but were targeted with religious and political violence.

One Nation, One People (Driglam Namzha) - Bhutanese government policy enforcing cultural and linguistic conformity that disenfranchised the Lhotshampa.

Voluntary Migration Forms - documents which Bhutanese refugees were forced to sign under coercion, falsely suggesting they left voluntarily.

Refugee Act of 1980 - U.S. law creating a consistent refugee policy, defining refugee status, and establishing support systems.

Asylum - legal protection given to people already in a country who fear returning to their country of origin due to persecution.

Resettlement - the process of moving refugees to a safe new country where they can rebuild their lives.

Diaspora - a community of people who live outside their original homeland but maintain cultural and emotional ties to it.

Article 370 - the constitutional article that provided special semi-autonomy to the state of Jammu and Kashmir, revoked by India in 2019.

Advocacy - public support for a cause, often seeking policy changes or to raise awareness.

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Explain the difference between immigrants and refugees and describe the unique challenges refugees face.
- Analyze the causes and consequences of the Bhutanese Lhotshampa and Kashmiri Hindu refugee crises.
- Evaluate the impact of the Refugee Act of 1980 on U.S. refugee policy.
- Discuss how different perspectives influence the way historical events are interpreted and remembered.

Hindu Refugees (Bhutanese)

Begin by asking the class, "When you hear the word 'refugee,' who or what do you picture?"

Have students discuss their response with the person to their left. Then share answers as a class.

Then ask students, "Can you think of any groups of people who have come to the United States as refugees? What were some of the reasons they had to leave their original countries?"

Have students discuss their response with the person to their right. Then share answers as a class.

Use discretion during classroom discussions, as student emotions may be intensified by the subject matter. For example, certain historical or current events, such as those involving violence, discrimination, or social injustice, may evoke strong feelings of sadness, anger, or anxiety. Teachers should be aware that not all students will have the same background knowledge or lived experiences, which can influence how they process these discussions. Providing space for respectful dialogue, acknowledging emotions, and offering support resources when needed can help ensure that the classroom remains a safe and inclusive environment for all learners.

When presenting information to students, the information can be read aloud by the teacher or a student, read silently, or read in groups. If a copy is provided to students, have students underline or circle areas that resonate with them. If a copy is not provided, have students jot down parts of the reading that resonate with them on a separate sheet of paper.

Every year, millions of people move across international borders in search of new lives. Some of these individuals are immigrants, who voluntarily relocate for reasons such as education, employment, or family reunification. Others are refugees, who are forced to flee their original countries due to war, violence, persecution, or natural disasters. Unlike immigrants who often have time to prepare and make choices about where they settle, refugees often leave suddenly, with little to no resources, and face uncertain futures. This distinction is crucial for understanding the unique challenges and experiences of refugee communities, including Hindu refugees who have sought safety and stability in the United States.

The Refugee Act of 1980 was a major U.S. law that created the system we still use today to help people fleeing persecution in other countries. Before 1980, there were many separate laws that only helped certain groups, like refugees from Europe or people escaping communism. The Refugee Act was designed to create one fair system for everyone, no matter where they were from or what political situation caused their problems. The law was signed by President Jimmy Carter on March 17, 1980. It was strongly supported by both Democrats and Republicans in Congress, especially after the U.S. faced pressure to respond to the large number of refugees coming from places like Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos after the Vietnam War. The Act officially matched U.S. law with the international definition of a refugee — someone who has a "well-founded fear of persecution" because of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. It also set a refugee admissions limit of 50,000 people per year, though the President could adjust that number during emergencies. The law created programs to help refugees settle in the U.S., including funding for housing, job training, and English classes. Thanks to the Refugee Act, many groups like the Bhutanese Hindus were able to legally enter the U.S. through organized resettlement programs. But for groups like the Kashmiri Hindus, who often did not come as part of large resettlement programs, other legal options like asylum were often necessary.

Many Hindu refugees came to the United States after facing serious threats in their countries of origin. Two of the largest groups are Bhutanese Hindus and Kashmiri Hindus. Each group has its own story of hardship, migration, and settlement.

Bhutanese Hindus, mostly from the Lhotshampa community, faced severe persecution in Bhutan beginning in the late 1980s. The Lhotshampa are a group of ethnic Nepali people who had lived in southern Bhutan for generations, practicing Hindu, Buddhist, and syncretic Dharma traditions and speaking the Nepali language. For many centuries they lived peacefully in Bhutan, but tensions grew as the Bhutanese government, led by the ruling Drukpa Buddhist majority, began to claim that the growing Lhotshampa population threatened Bhutan's cultural identity. In 1989, the government introduced a harsh policy

called “One Nation, One People” (Driglam Namzha). For example, people were required to wear traditional Drukpa clothing, such as the *gho* (a robe for men) and *kira* (a long dress for women), even though these clothes were not part of Lhotshampa culture. The policy also required the use of the Dzongkha language in schools, government offices, and public life, even though the Lhotshampa primarily spoke Nepali. Hindu religious practices were discouraged or even banned in some cases, and Nepali-language schools were shut down. The government also began performing strict citizenship checks, demanding that people prove their ancestors had lived in Bhutan before 1958 — a requirement that many Lhotshampa could not meet, either because records were not kept or because the rules were applied unfairly.

Although the policy was presented as a way to promote national unity, it was actually used to justify ethnic cleansing — the forced removal of an entire ethnic group. The Lhotshampa were made to feel like outsiders in their own country. If they did not obey these cultural rules, they were labeled as disloyal or dangerous to Bhutan’s national identity, leading to the harassment, arrests, torture, and forced expulsions that followed.

As the Bhutanese government increased pressure on the Lhotshampa community to adopt Drukpa culture, many who resisted faced serious consequences. Harassment often started with government officials visiting villages, questioning families about their citizenship, and demanding paperwork that many people didn’t have, even if their families had lived in Bhutan for generations. If people could not produce documents proving their right to stay, they were labeled as "illegal immigrants." Arrests became common — some people were taken away for speaking out against the government or attending protests. Once arrested, many were tortured during interrogations to force them to admit to false crimes or to pressure them into leaving the country. Torture included beatings, starvation, humiliation, and long periods of detention without trial. Even those who were not arrested lived under constant threats of violence. Soldiers and police would intimidate families by showing up at their homes, damaging property, or threatening to harm family members if they did not comply. Women were especially vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence. Entire communities lived in fear, unsure of when government forces might show up. These extreme conditions made life unbearable for many Lhotshampa, forcing them to flee Bhutan in search of safety.

When the Bhutanese government expelled the Lhotshampa Hindus, they wanted it to look like the refugees were leaving on their own, not because the government was forcing them out. So, many Lhotshampa were forced to sign official papers called “voluntary migration forms.” These documents stated that the person agreed to leave Bhutan willingly and give up their citizenship. However, in reality, most people had no real choice. If they refused to sign, they could be arrested, tortured, or threatened. Some people were beaten or saw their

family members abused. Out of fear for their safety, many people signed these forms just to protect themselves and their families. This is why we say they were “forced to sign” — even though the paper said they were leaving voluntarily, they were actually being coerced (pressured with threats or force) into giving up their homes and citizenship. This allowed the Bhutanese government to claim that it was not forcing anyone to leave, even though it clearly was.

By the mid-1990s, over 100,000 Lhotshampa were expelled and ended up in crowded refugee camps in Nepal, where they lived for 15 to 20 years with limited resources and little hope of returning home.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and several countries, including the United States, eventually agreed to resettle many of these refugees. In 2006, the U.S. announced it would accept up to 60,000 Bhutanese refugees, later increasing the number. Thanks to the Refugee Act of 1980, the U.S. had a legal system in place to allow these refugees to enter, receive government assistance, and work toward permanent residency and citizenship. When Bhutanese Hindus arrived in the U.S., they faced new challenges: many spoke little or no English, had education of a type not valued in Western economies, and struggled to find jobs. They often settled in cities like Columbus,Ohio, Atlanta,Georgia, Pittsburgh,Pennsylvania, and Syracuse, New York, where nonprofit organizations and local volunteers helped them adjust. Over time, Bhutanese Hindu refugees built strong communities, opened businesses, and established temples, while working to keep their cultural and spiritual traditions alive in a new country. At the same time, they made efforts to integrate into American society by learning the language, pursuing education and employment, and embracing American values. Their story is not one of creating a separate enclave, but of balancing cultural preservation with active participation in their new communities.

Discussion Questions

- *Think about Bhutan’s “One Nation, One People” policy. Can you think of other examples, in history or today, where a government tried to create unity but ended up targeting certain groups?*
- *What role should countries like the United States play in accepting refugees from conflicts like the one in Bhutan?*
- *Do you think wealthier countries have a moral responsibility to help refugees? Why or why not? What factors should be considered in refugee resettlement decisions?*
- *Why might governments use legal documents like "voluntary migration forms" even when people are clearly being pressured or threatened to leave?*

- *How do language and culture become tools of power in conflicts like the Bhutanese refugee crisis?*

Activity

Materials Needed:

- Handouts
- Computer or poster/markers

Teacher Instructions:

- Distribute the handout *The Refugee Act of 1980: A Deep Dive*
- Hand out the *Then vs Now* comparison chart
- Distribute the *Bhutanese Refugee Crisis & U.S. Refugee Policy: A Timeline* handout
- Ask students, "Do you think the Refugee Act of 1980 is still effective today? Why or why not?"
- Optional questions:
    - What do you notice are the biggest differences between how the U.S. handled refugees in 1980 and how it does today?
    - How might political opinions or world events influence refugee decisions?
    - Why do you think the number of refugees allowed into the U.S. changes from year to year?
    - What do you think would be most challenging for refugees trying to come to the U.S. right now?
- Place students into small groups of 2-4.
- Tell students, "You and your group are acting as a team of U.S. lawmakers. Your job is to create a new law or policy that makes the United States' refugee system better and more fair today. Use what you've learned about the Bhutanese Lhotshampa refugees, the Refugee Act of 1980, and current refugee challenges.
- Hand out *What your Group Needs to Include* page
- Allow students 20-30 minutes to create their new law/policy
- Have students share their law/policy with the class
- Optional: vote on which law/policy the class would want to make into law.

The Refugee Act of 1980: A Deep Dive

The World Before 1980: Why the Act Was Needed

Before 1980, America's approach to refugees was kind of messy. There wasn't one single law that said how refugees should be treated. Instead, different groups got different treatment depending on where they were from and what was happening in the world. For example:

- After World War II, the U.S. welcomed many European refugees.
- During the Cold War, refugees from communist countries (like Cuba or the Soviet Union) were often accepted quickly.
- Refugees from other places (like Africa, Asia, or the Middle East) didn't always get the same attention.

It's also important to remember that the idea of offering refuge wasn't new in America. Long before modern refugee policies, many European immigrants—including Puritans, Baptists, German and Swiss Protestants, Anabaptists, and English Quakers—had come to the U.S. fleeing religious persecution. Their experiences shaped both American society and the nation's evolving identity as a place of refuge for those seeking freedom.

The U.S. handled each crisis separately, using emergency laws or presidential orders. This made the system inconsistent, and some people were treated unfairly just because of where they were from or what was politically popular at the time.

The Vietnam War made this even more obvious. After the war ended in 1975, thousands of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos needed help. The U.S. scrambled to help them, but it showed how badly a permanent system was needed.

So Congress decided: "We need a law that treats *all* refugees fairly, no matter where they're from."

What Exactly Did the Refugee Act of 1980 Do?

Here's a breakdown of the most important parts:

1 Clear Definition of "Refugee"
Before 1980, there wasn't a single legal definition. The Refugee Act used the international definition from the **United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention** (which most of the world had already adopted):

> A refugee is a person who is outside their home country and can't return because of a *well-founded fear of persecution* due to:
> - Race
> - Religion
> - Nationality

- Political opinion
- Membership in a particular social group

This made sure U.S. refugee law wasn't based on politics or personal opinions — it was based on actual danger and persecution.

2 Annual Refugee Cap (a.k.a. "Ceiling")

- The President, with Congress's agreement, would set a limit on how many refugees the U.S. would accept each year.
- If a major crisis happened (like a sudden war or disaster), the President could allow more refugees temporarily.
- Example numbers:
  - In 1980, the first year, the ceiling was set at 231,700 (very high because of the situation in Southeast Asia at that time).
  - In most years since then, it's been between 50,000 and 125,000.

3 Creation of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR)

This new office was part of the federal government's Department of Health and Human Services. Its job was to help refugees once they arrive, by providing:

- Short-term financial assistance
- Job training and help finding work
- English language classes
- Healthcare and counseling
- Help with enrolling kids in school

The idea is: "We'll help you get started, but after that, we want you to become self-sufficient and part of American society."

4 Asylum System Established

- If someone is already in the U.S. (for example, as a tourist, student, or even undocumented) and can prove they're justifiably afraid to return home for the same reasons as refugees, they can apply for asylum.
- Asylum gives similar protections as refugee status: safety, legal residence, and eventually the ability to apply for permanent residency and citizenship.

5 Congressional Oversight

- Every year, the President has to talk to Congress about how many refugees will be accepted.
- Congress reviews reports and can push back if they disagree.
- This makes sure refugee policy isn't controlled by one person and reflects American values.

What Happened After 1980?

Since the Act passed, millions of refugees have been resettled in the U.S., from almost every corner of the world. Here are some key points:

- **1980s–1990s**: High numbers of refugees came from Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos), the Soviet Union (especially Jews and dissidents), and the Balkans (after the Yugoslav Wars).
- **2000s**: Refugees came from places like Iraq, Somalia, Sudan (including the "Lost Boys of Sudan"), and Myanmar (Burma).
- **2010s–2020s**: People fleeing civil wars in Syria, Afghanistan, and most recently Ukraine, along with LGBTQ+ individuals and others from Central America, Africa, and the Middle East.

Changing Numbers Over Time
The refugee ceiling has changed depending on the president and the world's situation:

Year	President	Refugee Ceiling
1980	Carter	231,700
1993	Clinton	~120,000
2017	Obama	110,000
2018	Trump	45,000
2020	Trump	15,000 (lowest ever)
2021-2025	Biden	125,000

These numbers show how refugee policy can shift dramatically with politics, but the basic Refugee Act rules stayed the same.

Why Is the Refugee Act Still Important Today?

- It makes sure the U.S. provides refuge to people who are in real danger.
- It was drafted with the intent to keep politics out of decisions.
- It reflects American values of freedom, safety, and second chances.
- It allows the U.S. to respond to crises all over the world.

The Refugee Act of 1980 remains one of the most important humanitarian laws in U.S. history — even 45 years later.

The Refugee Act of 1980: Then vs. Now

Category	When the Refugee Act Was Passed (1980s)	How It Works Today
Law Passed	Signed into law by President Jimmy Carter on March 17, 1980.	Still in effect — remains the main U.S. refugee law.
Reason for Law	U.S. needed a consistent, fair system to help refugees from anywhere in the world (not just Cold War conflicts).	The same goals apply, but new global crises (wars, climate disasters, religious conflicts, etc.) have shaped who applies.
Definition of a Refugee	A person with a "well-founded fear of persecution" based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.	The same legal definition still applies today.
Annual Refugee Limit (Ceiling)	Set at 50,000 per year (with flexibility for emergencies).	Varies yearly: as low as 15,000 (2021); raised to 125,000 (2023–2025).
Who Decides How Many Are Accepted?	The U.S. President, in consultation with Congress.	Same system today — but the decisions are often debated in politics.
Processing Time	Faster in the 1980s, as the system was new and smaller.	Often very slow today — background checks, security screenings, and paperwork can take years.

Support for Refugees	Government-funded resettlement agencies provided housing, job training, and language help.	Similar agencies still exist, but some have faced budget cuts and political challenges. Many nonprofits and volunteers now help too.
Global Focus	Focused on Southeast Asian refugees (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia), Cold War refugees (Soviet Union), and later groups like Bhutanese Hindus.	Focus includes Syrians, Afghans, Ukrainians, Sudanese, Central Americans, Rohingya, and more — constantly shifting based on new crises.

Bhutanese Refugee Crisis & U.S. Refugee Policy: A Timeline

1958 — *Bhutan passes first citizenship law*

- Creates complicated rules for proving citizenship, affecting many Lhotshampa (ethnic Nepali Hindus).

1985 — *New citizenship act tightens rules*

- Many Lhotshampa struggle to prove their legal status.

1988-1989 — *"One Nation, One People" policy begins*

- The Bhutanese government enforces strict cultural rules (Drukpa language, dress, religion).
- Large-scale discrimination against Lhotshampa begins.

Early 1990s — *Mass expulsions and violence*

- **Bhutanese Hindus** are arrested, tortured, or forced to sign "voluntary" exile papers. Over 100,000 Hindus flee Bhutan, forced to abandon their homes.
- Refugees flee to camps in **Nepal**, where many stay for years.

1980 (background policy) — *U.S. passes the Refugee Act of 1980*

- The law creates a fair system for refugee admissions based on humanitarian need, not Cold War politics.

2006 — *U.S. agrees to resettle Bhutanese refugees*

- The United Nations begins large-scale resettlement efforts.
- The U.S. plans to accept up to **60,000 Bhutanese refugees**, later increasing the number.

2008–2016 — *Major Bhutanese resettlement in the U.S.*

- Bhutanese Hindus arrive in cities like **Columbus, Ohio; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Syracuse, New York; Atlanta, Georgia**, and more.

What Your Group Needs to Include

1 A Name for Your Law or Policy

- Be creative! Your name should reflect what your law is trying to achieve.

2 Who Qualifies as a Refugee?

- Will you keep the current definition or change it?
- Will you add new groups of people who deserve protection?

3 How Many Refugees Will Be Accepted Each Year?

- Will you set a limit (cap)?
- Will your system be unlimited?
- Will it change based on world events?

4 How Will Refugees Be Supported After Arrival?

- Think about housing, jobs, schools, mental health, cultural support, language classes, etc.
- What programs will help refugees adjust to life in the U.S.?

5 How Will the Process Be Made Fair and Efficient?

- How will you make sure the system works quickly but still safely?
- How can paperwork, interviews, or screenings be improved?

6 How Will Your Law Prevent Unfair Treatment Like What Happened to the Bhutanese Lhotshampa?

- What protections will you include to stop governments from forcing people to leave unfairly?
- How will you recognize people who were pushed out of their countries under pressure?

Create a Visual Presentation:

Design a poster, slide deck, or other visual aid to explain your new law.

- Include your law's name and key ideas.
  Be creative! You can use:
    - Slogans

- Logos
- Illustrations
- Flowcharts
- Timelines

Your presentation should help others easily understand your plan.

Hindu Asylum Seekers and Internally Displaced People

In addition to refugees, there are other categories of people who are displaced from their homes, including asylum seekers and internally displaced people (IDP). Asylum seekers are individuals who have fled their home country due to fear of persecution—often based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group—and are seeking protection in another country. They must apply for asylum and wait for legal recognition as refugees. In contrast, internally displaced people are forced to flee their homes for reasons such as violence, conflict, or natural disasters, but remain within their original country's borders. Unlike asylum seekers, IDPs do not cross international boundaries and often lack the same legal protections or international assistance. Both groups face significant challenges, but their legal status and the type of help they can receive differ depending on where they are and whether they have crossed a border.

Asylum Seekers

Bangladesh provides a critical case study in discussions of asylum, ethnic conflict, and forced migration—particularly concerning the persecution of religious minority communities. When India was partitioned in 1947 into India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the new nation of Pakistan was divided into two parts, East and West Pakistan, separated by 1,000 miles of Indian territory. East Pakistan was ethnically and culturally distinct from the West, yet political and administrative power was concentrated in the West. These divisions laid the groundwork for decades of marginalization that culminated in the 1971 genocide. As recognized by the U.S. House Resolution 1430, the atrocities carried out by the Pakistani military and their allied militias in 1971 were not only directed at Bengalis broadly but disproportionately targeted Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and Christians—constituting crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide.

Ethnic tensions increased in subsequent years and in 1971 tensions between West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) erupted after decades of political, economic, and cultural marginalization of the Bengali population by the West Pakistani ruling elite. Following the Awami League's electoral victory on a platform for East Pakistani

autonomy, negotiations failed, and on March 25, 1971, the Pakistani military launched *Operation Searchlight,* beginning a campaign of mass killings, targeted executions, rape, and the destruction of Bengali communities—particularly targeting Hindus, intellectuals, and Awami League supporters.

Over the nine-month Bangladesh War of Independence, estimates suggest around three million people were killed, more than 200,000 women raped, and millions displaced, with 10 million fleeing to India. Eyewitness accounts from journalists, U.S. diplomats, and international agencies documented the atrocities, describing systematic targeting of Hindus and widespread massacres that met the definition of genocide under international law.

Internally Displaced People (IDP)

The Kashmiri Hindus are a distinct ethno-religious community who trace their ancestry to the Kashmir Valley, located in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent. Followers of Hindu Dharmas, they have maintained unique cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions for centuries. However, the religious persecution that erupted in Kashmir in the late 20th century forced many Kashmiri Hindus to flee their ancestral homeland. They had to flee -- either to other countries as refugees, or to other states in India. Kashmiri Hindu language and culture were unique to the Kashmir Valley, but the Kashmiri Hindus were being resettled in Kashmiri encampments in far-away cities in other parts of India, with their own distinct languages and cultures.

In early 1990, Kashmiri Hindus did not just hear distant reports of danger—they directly experienced threats broadcast from mosque loudspeakers across the valley. On the night of January 19, 1990, during a blackout, mosques blared chilling slogans such as *"Raliv, Galiv ya Chaliv"* ("Convert, die, or flee") and *"We want Kashmir without Pandit men but with Pandit women."* Hindus and Sikhs were explicitly warned that they must convert to Islam, leave Kashmir, or be killed. Locals were urged to identify Hindu homes, and those who fled or converted were told to leave their women behind. These messages created an immediate climate of terror and catalyzed the rapid mass exodus of the community.

From 1989-1991, at least 350,000 Hindus fled their homes fearing for their lives. Estimates suggest that 95% of the community left the Valley. Many settled in camps in Jammu, Delhi, and other parts of India under difficult and often deplorable conditions. Importantly, their inability to return home is not simply due to displacement; many Hindus' homes were occupied or stolen, and survivors credibly fear that neighbors who once threatened them would target them again if they returned.

In India, Kashmiri Hindus often faced significant challenges adjusting to life outside their homeland. Many were housed in overcrowded camps, suffering from poor living conditions,

unemployment, and a loss of cultural rootedness. The trauma of sudden displacement and the long-term uncertainty regarding return to Kashmir have led to high rates of psychological distress within the community.

Although the Indian government provided financial assistance, educational quotas, and employment packages to help Kashmiri Hindu families rebuild their lives, many refugees have struggled with a deep sense of marginalization. Survivors continue to feel alienated, not only because of the violence they endured but also because the government has never fully acknowledged the scale of what happened—denying or downplaying many deaths known personally to victims' families and failing to deliver justice. This lack of recognition has left many Kashmiri Hindus feeling invisible in their own country, carrying unresolved grief for loved ones lost and a homeland they may never safely return to.

A portion of the displaced Kashmiri Hindus sought opportunities abroad, including in the United States. The migration of Kashmiri Hindus to the U.S. predates the 1990 exodus, but it increased significantly afterward. Many Kashmiri Hindus came as highly skilled professionals, particularly in fields like information technology, medicine, and academia, benefiting from U.S. immigration policies favoring skilled workers. However, many carried with them the trauma of forced displacement and a strong desire to preserve their unique culture in a foreign land.

Kashmiri Hindu associations have played an essential role in maintaining community identity and cultural continuity in the United States. Organizations like the Kashmiri Overseas Association (KOA) and the Kashmiri Hindu Foundation, Inc. have become key platforms for advocacy, cultural education, and community support.

Spiritual festivals such as *Herath* are celebrated widely within diaspora communities. Practices of temple and family ceremonies and storytelling continue to sustain community bonds even thousands of miles from the Kashmir Valley.

One of the most significant developments among Kashmiri Hindus in the United States has been their active role in political advocacy. In recent years, this advocacy has intersected with broader conversations about human rights, minority protections, and U.S.-India relations. The advocacy also seeks to ensure that any peace process involving Kashmir includes guarantees for the safe and dignified return of displaced Hindus to their ancestral homes, though the prospects of return remain uncertain given ongoing instability.

In 2019, the Indian government revoked Article 370 of its Constitution, originally instituted as a temporary provision which granted Jammu and Kashmir a special autonomous status after Partition given its location on the border of India and the newly created Pakistan. Article 370 allowed the region to have its own constitution, flag, and significant autonomy

over internal matters, while defense, foreign affairs, and communications remained under Indian federal control. The revocation of Article 370 dissolved this temporary special status, fully integrating Jammu and Kashmir into India's federal structure. The former state is now two federally governed territories: Jammu & Kashmir, and Ladakh.

For many in India, this move was seen as a long-overdue step towards national integration, uniform governance, and development for the region. However, critics both within India and internationally viewed the revocation as deeply controversial, citing concerns over human rights, the abrupt nature of the change without local consent, and its potential to inflame tensions between different communities in Kashmir.

For some Kashmiri Hindus, the revocation of Article 370 sparked cautious optimism that their long exile might finally end. The Indian government announced several resettlement initiatives aimed at encouraging Hindu families to return to the Valley, offering financial aid, job packages, and enhanced security measures. In parallel, human rights organizations have raised alarms about restrictions on civil liberties, internet shutdowns, and the arrest of political leaders and activists in Kashmir following the revocation.

The Kashmiri Hindus are a powerful example of how ethnic and religious minorities can be displaced due to religious and political violence, and yet find ways to rebuild and preserve their identities far from home. In the United States, Kashmiri Hindus have built vibrant communities that continue to honor their cultural heritage while contributing to American society in diverse fields.

Discussion Questions

- *The Kashmiri Hindus have worked to preserve their traditions while adapting to life in new countries. How do you or your family maintain cultural traditions from your ancestors?*
- *How do displaced communities maintain cultural identity and community cohesion in diaspora settings such as the United States?*
- *What do you think motivates people to stay connected to their homeland even when they live far away?*
- *What factors contributed to the displacement of the Bangladeshi and Kashmiri Hindus, and how does this reflect larger patterns of ethnic conflict and violence in the world?*

Activity

Materials Needed:

- Perspective cards

Teacher Instructions:

1. Explain to students that different groups involved in the Kashmir conflict may describe the same events in very different ways depending on their experiences, goals, and identities. The way a news story is written can shape public opinion and political decisions.

2. Divide students into groups of 3-4. Assign each group a perspective by giving them a perspective card. For larger classes, some groups will have repeating cards.

Kashmiri Hindu Perspective

- Kashmiri Hindus are members of diverse tribes and clans native to the Kashmir Valley, who for millennia formed the region's majority, but whose population has sharply declined in recent centuries."

- In 1989-1991, during a rise in separatist and militant activity, many Hindus were targeted, threatened, and killed.

- Over 350,000 fled their homes to escape murder and violence.

- Hindus point out that what happened to them fits the definition of ethnic cleansing — they were forced to leave their homeland because of their religious identity.

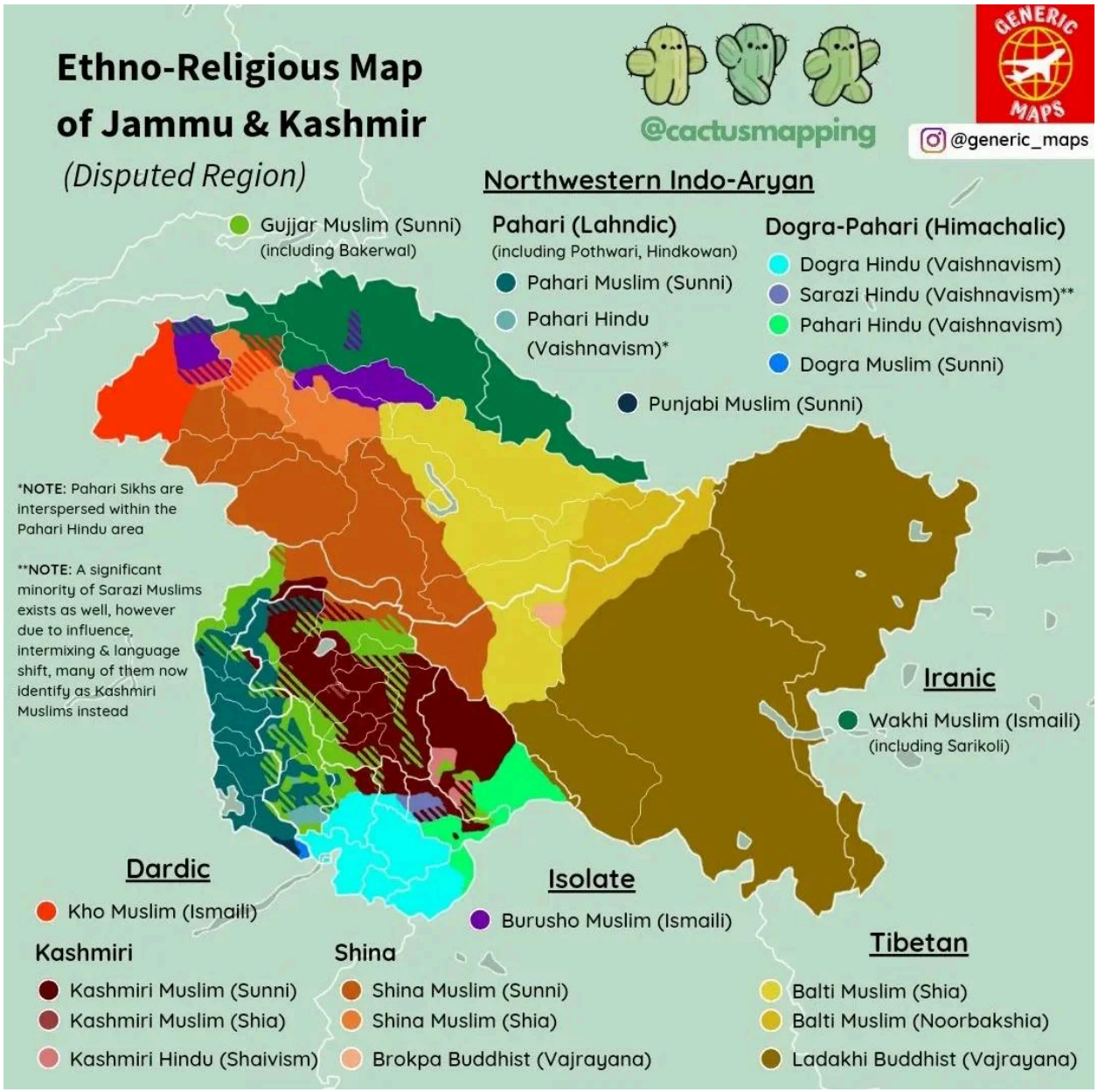
- They struggle with trauma, loss of homeland, and the fight to preserve their culture in exile.

- They support the Indian government's efforts to fully integrate Kashmir into India, hoping it might allow them to safely return one day.

Key emotions & themes: fear, injustice, loss, displacement, erasure, voicelessness, intergenerational trauma, oppression, cultural genocide, longing to return, advocacy for justice.

Kashmiri Muslim Perspective

- "Kashmiri Muslim" is often discussed as being the majority group in Kashmir. However, this is an inaccurate assessment as this is not a hegemony - the reality is much more nuanced.



From this, it is clear to see there are many groups of Muslims in Kashmir, each with a unique history and political ideology.

- The oldest Kashmiri Muslim groups appeared after Islamic invasions after the 13th century CE. Those that settled either were inimical to the local Kashmiri Buddhist,

Vaiṣṇava, Śaivas, Sikhs, and others - or sought to co-exist, and even syncretize with them.

- Subsequent groups arrived during different phases of history, giving rise to ethnically diverse Kashmiri Muslim communities.
- After the partition of India into East and West Pakistan and India in 1947, and Pakistan's subsequent attacks on Kashmir, there were a number of Muslim insurgents from Pakistan, backed by the Pakistani army that settled in Kashmir. These groups form the majority of the Islamist separatist and UN-recognized terrorist groups in the region.
- As a consequence, viewing Kashmiri Muslims as one group erases numerous Kashmiri Muslim groups who do not share the same political or even religious ideology with the others. It is important that any discussion of Kashmiri Muslims is able to account for the various positions of Kashmiri Muslims.
- Islamist Muslim groups in Kashmir oppose the heavy Indian military presence, and want either independence or to be incorporated into Pakistan.
- Some Kashmiri Hindus were caught in the waves of violence and militancy that have affected Kashmir since 1947, especially during the insurgency of the late 1980s and 1990s, and feel their voices are often overlooked in global narratives..
- Many recognize that Hindus suffered, but also feel that Kashmir's story is often told one-sidedly, focusing only on Hindu suffering while ignoring Muslim suffering.
- Islamist separatist groups like the LeT and JEM and their supporters see the Indian government's policies, especially the revocation of Article 370, as oppressive and a denial of their political rights.

Key emotions & themes: oppression, injustice, political struggle, feeling unheard, outgroup homogenization, oversimplified, lumping secular Kashmiri Muslim groups with separatist Kashmiri and Pakistani Muslim groups

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International Human Rights Observer Perspective

- These are people or organizations (like Amnesty International, UN observers, journalists) who are not part of either community but document and report on human rights violations.

- They see the conflict as complex, with both Kashmiri Hindus and the various Kashmiri Muslim groups experiencing suffering and injustice in different ways.

- They are concerned about:
    - Violently forced displacement and killings of Hindus.
    - Political violence and killings of separatist Muslims.
    - The large Indian military presence.
    - Internet shutdowns, mass detentions, and restrictions on freedom of speech.
- They advocate for peaceful solutions, protection of all minority rights, and accountability for all abuses.

Key emotions & themes: complexity, human rights, impartial observation, concern for civilians, need for peace and accountability.

3. Each group is tasked with writing a headline and a one-sentence summary that they would expect to see in a newspaper or online article about the Kashmiri Hindu exodus.

Encourage groups to think about:

- What would this group emphasize?
- What emotions or facts would they highlight?
- What words would they choose?

4. Each group presents their headline and one-sentence summary to the class. Briefly discuss:

- How do the different headlines shift the story?
- Why is it important to hear multiple perspectives?
- How does the perspective of the storyteller influence how we understand history?
- Why is it important for displaced communities like the Kashmiri Hindus to have their voices heard?

Wrap Up

Throughout this lesson, we explored the complex and emotional realities faced by refugees, focusing especially on Hindu refugee communities from Bhutan and Kashmir. We learned that while immigrants may choose to leave their countries for personal opportunities, refugees are forced to flee due to danger, persecution, and violence. We studied the Bhutanese Lhotshampa Hindus, who were expelled from Bhutan through systematic

cultural oppression and threats, as well as the Bangladeshi and Kashmiri Hindus, who were driven from their homes amid political and religious conflict. Each group faced tremendous loss and trauma, but also demonstrated resilience by rebuilding their lives and preserving their cultures in new lands.

We examined the Refugee Act of 1980, a U.S. law that created a fairer and more consistent system to admit refugees regardless of their country of origin. We analyzed how this law has evolved over time and discussed the continuing challenges refugees face today. Through group activities and discussions, we considered how governments and international communities make decisions about who qualifies as a refugee and how they are supported. We also looked at multiple perspectives, recognizing that the same event can be viewed very differently depending on people's experiences and identities.

Assessment

In small groups, take turns answering this question. Each person has 1 minute to share their thoughts without comments or interruptions from other group members. Optional: Have a talking stick or object that is passed when a timer rings after 1 minute.

Consider posting the question on the board so students can refer back to it as needed.

Question:
Why might some governments create laws or policies (like Bhutan's "One Nation, One People" policy) that they claim are for national unity, even though these laws end up harming certain groups? Do you think governments have a responsibility to balance majority cultural identity with minority rights? Why or why not?

Homework

It all happened so quickly. Just a few weeks ago, you were living in your home country — going to school, spending time with your friends, and celebrating holidays with your extended family. But tensions in your community grew worse. Protests turned into violent clashes, and some groups began targeting people from your religious and cultural background. One night, your parents told you to quickly pack a small bag — you were leaving immediately for your safety.

Your family traveled for days, taking buses and crossing borders, leaving behind your home, your neighborhood, your school, your friends, and almost everything you owned. After a long and exhausting journey, you arrived in a new country. This place is completely

unfamiliar: the people speak a language you don't understand, the weather feels different, the food smells strange, and the culture operates in ways you are still trying to figure out.

Now, you and your family are living in a small apartment provided by a refugee assistance program. Your parents are desperately looking for work while you've just started attending a new school. The other students don't know your story, and you're not sure how to fit in. Some people seem kind, but you've also noticed others staring at you, whispering, or avoiding you. You feel torn — part of you wants to blend in and make new friends, while another part is afraid of losing the culture and identity you were raised with.

You also wonder if you will ever be able to return home. News from your country still sounds unstable and dangerous. Your family talks about home often, but also tries to focus on surviving and building a new life here.

Your Task:

Write a 1-2 page journal entry imagining yourself as this refugee student. In your journal entry, describe:

- What daily life feels like now in this new country.
- Your memories of home — what you miss most.
- The emotions you are experiencing (fear, sadness, hope, anger, loneliness, confusion, etc.)
- Any challenges you face at school or in your community.
- How you and your family try to keep your traditions and culture alive.
- Your hopes, dreams, or fears for the future.