Cultural Considerations
Nepal Excursion

The Roots of Change
Cultural Considerations Table of Contents

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Nepal Cultural Considerations

Nepal is a breathtakingly enchanting country full of natural beauty, incredible wildlife and rich cultural diversity. Located on the southern slopes of the Himalayan Mountain Ranges, Nepal hosts eight of the world’s 10 highest mountains, including Mount Everest, the highest point on earth. Nepal’s fascinating history shows that the country largely remained closed off and isolated to the rest of the world until 1951, when a Palace revolt restored the crown’s authority in the country and Nepal was later granted admission into the United Nations. However, in 2008 after a decade long period of uncertainty and turbulent negotiation between the Monarchy and the Maoist Regime, the Monarchy was dissolved and Nepal was declared a democratic republic.

Nepal’s geographical location also plays a role in the country’s development and focus. With China to the north and India to the south, Nepal continues to seek to keep a balance between these 2 nations in its foreign policy and thus remain independent. Nepal is a nation hosting multiple ethnic groups of linguistic differences but has Nepali as the official language of the country. GIVE hopes to deliver the most authentic, eye-opening and meaningful Nepal experience possible, providing you with the knowledge to respect this one-of-a-kind culture and the opportunities to make a sustainable change in these people’s lives.

Please review the following dot points for an introduction to Nepalese culture and look forward to learning and deeply experiencing much more when you arrive into Nepal!

GREETINGS and COMMUNICATION STYLE:

- All greetings and meetings generally begin by joining the palms together at chest level and saying, “Namaste”, which literally means, “The divine light in me sees and values the divine light in you”. Handshakes are common after the initial Namaste, for those familiar with western customs. It’s best for men to avoid initiating a handshake with Nepalese women as this may be considered rude, especially in villages. Always wait for the woman to initiate, if at all. Generally handshakes are gentler not strong, so don’t feel the person isn’t interested, it’s just their way.
- Outreach and use both hands together whether you are giving or receiving something as a gesture of respect.
- Thankfulness can often be expressed by facial expressions rather than by verbal affirmation. One should not assume that a person is ungrateful because they may not say thankyou.
- The use of bad language is not common even amongst friends. As a visitor we should avoid using bad language.
- Direct eye contact is usually welcomed when speaking with members of the same gender. For interactions between genders, indirect eye contact is generally appreciated.
• Conversations may begin with direct personal questions being asked. Asking the price of your possessions although might seem rude in western countries, is accepted between strangers in Nepal. If you feel embarrassed by this question they say that you don’t know as it was a gift.

PERSONAL SPACE and TOUCHING:

• There is normally a decent amount of personal space given during conversations. At least an arm’s length is appropriate, especially in situations between men and women.
• Men and women often don’t display any form of physical affection in public. Physical touch during conversations is rare. However, once you have formed a trusted friendship and that person is familiar in Western Cultures, hugging hello and goodbye is common.
• Male friends often walk holding hands or with their arms around each other which is purely a sign of friendship. The same is usually true of women with other women.

GENDER MATTERS:

• The role of the majority of women in Nepal is a traditional one. In most areas, especially rural ones, women are seen for the most part as caregivers and mothers. In urban areas there are women in the workforce, but salaries are lower and opportunities are limited.
• Travelers should avoid wearing anything too tight or revealing, especially in the rural parts of the country. Dress modestly, particularly for temples and holy places, covering your shoulders and your knees.
• In Nepalese traditional culture, when a woman’s husband dies, she is not allowed to remarry anyone. However, in contemporary society, this tradition is changing, and even the government has put a monetary incentive for men to marry women who have been widowed.
• Also, in the past it was common for men to have more than one wife. However, today there is a rule enforced by the government to reduce multiple marriages, and there is now penalties for any man who is seen to have more than one wife.

FOOD and DRINK:

• Most Nepalese people eat their meal by hand, especially Nepalese food such as Dal Bhat. Use your right hand if you need to use your fingers to eat, as the left hand is considered unclean.
• Food that has been touched by another person’s mouth is considered unclean. So if you want your Nepali friend to try something or you can’t finish your plate of food, don’t
offer it, as food once eaten by someone else is considered impure. However, it is found that many Nepalese women eat leftovers from their husband’s plate for this sharing of food is a loving gesture.

• If you are given too much rice or food on your plate, before you touch it or start to eat, you can ask for a separate plate to move this extra food onto. This is not rude and is more appropriate as that food is not impure and can be eaten by others and not wasted.
• Lips are considered polluting so be careful of sharing water-bottles. If you are sharing a drink, try to avoid touching the bottle with your lips, or use a separate glass.
• Don’t be surprised if someone belches after a meal – this is generally regarded as a tribute to the meal! It is also common to slurp tea and other hot drinks in restaurants. However, licking your fingers after food is considered to be bad manners.

**GENERAL**

• The left hand is still associated with wiping after using the toilet. Therefore, avoid passing food with it, eating with it, giving or receiving anything with it or wiping your mouth with it.
• Avoid pointing your feet or the soles of your shoes at people when you are sitting down.
• Take your shoes off when visiting a home, temple or monastery and cover up your legs and upper arms.
• Avoid smoking inside sacred structures or buildings and do not touch offerings or holy objects.
• Always go clockwise when walking around religious monuments, keeping the monuments to your right hand side. This is particularly important when passing around Buddhist Stupas of Mani Stone Walls.
• There are heavy penalties for the possession, use or trafficking of illegal drugs. Convicted offenders can expect long jail sentences and heavy fines.
• Blowing your nose in front of people is considered rude. If you must blow, do it quietly and/or alone.
• It is acceptable and not considered rude for Nepalese people to spit on the ground. The most common spitting is from the chewing of Betel Leaf and chewable tobacco.
• Ask permission before taking photographs of objects, and also before taking photos of Nepali people. Taking photographs inside most of the temples is considered illegal and disrespectful.
• Roads are narrow and crowded so horns help drivers to signal pedestrians that they are there. Be ready to hear horn noise and accept it!
• Being on time is valued differently and “Nepali Time” may mean that people run late or that events start later. It is still a good idea to turn up at the agreed times, but do expect delays throughout your time, particularly with transport.
Nepali Language – Key Phrases

Hello – Namaste

Goodbye – Byee / Tata

How are you? – Timila I kasto cha

I’m fine, thanks – Ma thika chu

Thank you – Dhan’yavad

What is your name? – Tapako naa ke ho?

My name is – Mero nam...

Where are you from? – Timi kahako hou?

I’m from – Ma America bata ho

It’s nice to meet you – Tapaimlai bhetera khusi lagyo

Very Delicious! – Mitho Chha

Yes – Ho        No – Ho’ina

Excuse me / Sorry – Mapha garnuhos

How much is this? – Yesko mulya Kati ho?

You’re welcome – Tapai lai svagata cha

I understand - Ma bujhchu

I don’t understand – Maile bujhina

I only speak a little Nepali – Ma ali ali Nepali bolchhu

Good Morning: Subha Bihani.

Good Evening : Subha Ratri.

I am enough: Pugyo
Ethnic Groups of Nepal

A true mosaic of ethnicity and diversity, Nepal has over 100 different ethnic groups that speak approximately 92 different languages. Rich in culture and tradition, each group holds various characteristics, traditional dress and beliefs. We will encounter people from a number of these groups while on our GIVE program.

The following information shows an overview of a few of the main ethnic groups in Nepal:

**Sherpa** – Sherpa is one of the major ethnic groups in the most mountainous region of Tibet as well as certain areas of China, Bhutan, India and the Himalayas of Nepal. The Term Sherpa Derives from their own Language. “Sher” means East and “Pa” means People, which refers to their geographical origin in Himalayas. This group is the most famous of the Himalayan people because of their incredible mountaineering skills. Their economy is related directly to the mountain environment and they work in field agriculture, trade, animal farming and mountaineering. There are many Sherpa’s who have set world records in the mountaineering world including Tenzing Norgay Sherpa who along with Sir Edmund Hilary was the first to summit Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world in 1953. Sherpa’s mainly follow the Buddhist faith.

**Tamang** - about 5.5% of the population. Tamang are the Largest Tibeto-Burman ethnic group in Nepal. They are also the significant majority in the western part of Nepal. They have their own culture and language which is the 5th most spoken Language in Nepal. Tamang was derived from the word Tamang where “Ta” means Horse and “Mang” means Soldiers. This ethnic group live mainly in the high hills of the Kathmandu Valley and work as farmers, porters and traders for trekking groups. Tamang’s are very skilled at making woolen garments from sheep’s wool and usually follow the Buddhist faith.

**Newars** - about 5.6% of the population. Newar are the Historical inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley and its surroundings. They are the creators of many Historic structures and responsible for building up past civilizations. They have their own culture and Language which is famous inside Kathmandu, Bhaktapur & Lalitpur Valley. People from this ethnic group are mainly traders and therefore can be found scattered across the country, with a large concentration in the Kathmandu Valley. Despite being a relativity small percentage of people, the Newari’s have contributed significantly to the history, art, architecture and business activities in Nepal. Both Hinduism and Buddhism are the main religions practiced.
Magar - about 7.2% of the population. Magars have their own ethnic language and culture and their Kingdom was the one of the strongest of west Nepal. The founder of the modern country of Nepal (Prithi Narayan Shhar) is often called the King of Magrat. Agriculture and the Military are Magar’s primary occupations. Magar’s constitute the largest number of Gurkha soldiers inside and outside of Nepal. From the 13 Victoria Crosses that were awarded during the two world wars, 5 were awarded to Magars. Gurkha soldiers are known around the world for their bravery and strength. Main industries in this ethnic group include farming, weaving, hunting and fishing.

The Former Caste System of Nepal

The Nepali caste structure is a complex system that combines many elements from birth right, ethnicity, occupation, influence, education, finance and power. It generally borrows the classical Hindu model of four broad social classes and the ‘untouchables’, and has been the traditional system of social stratification for many years in Nepal.

However, the social influence and practical effects of the different castes is much less in contemporary Nepali society as in 1962 a law was passed in Nepal making it illegal to discriminate against other castes. This movement allowed all castes to be equally treated by the law and have education open and free for everyone. Furthermore, the constitution of Nepal prohibits any form of discrimination on the basis of caste, race, sex and religion and is punishable by law.

The following are the names of the former Nepali Hindu Castes:

Brahmin’s – People in this caste worked as priests and teachers and were considered the protectors of sacred knowledge. Most of former politician are Brahmins.

Kshatriya's – People in this caste were often government officials or worked for the army or the police. Their role was to protect society by fighting in the war times and governing in the peaceful times.

Vaishya’s – People in this caste worked traditionally in agriculture and farming and their primary role was to provide food for the people.

Sudras – People in this caste group were generally traders, business people and would work in the laboring industry to serve others.
**Untouchables** – People in this caste usually worked as blacksmiths, tailors and shoemakers and were considered of low social status and would get lower wages than other castes.

The government declared Nepal an ‘untouchability’ free nation in 2006 but in practice, caste-based discrimination and untouchability can still be seen to be seen in some areas of the country. The good news is that luckily the young generation ignores the old system of castes and the untouchables. They have no problem with “lower” castes and they don’t follow any of the racial discriminations. These days, it is possible that many people do not know what caste their family was before, and there is more acceptance and equality amongst all people. However often a person’s caste can also be identified by their family name. The government of Nepal has declared to remove the caste system and have made a law against the notion of ‘Untouchability’.