

Introduction to Nepalese Culture

with Naya Yuva

Our guest speaker, Monica Limbu, brought along two friends from Naya Yuva, Diya and Merisha, to give a fascinating joint presentation covering Nepalese culture, the history of the Gurkhas and the experience of the Nepalese in Rushmoor.

Monica began by explaining that Naya Yuva means New Youth, and that the group was founded in 2012 initially to deal with drugs and alcohol problems among young Nepalese people. Their role has since broadened to include any issues relating to integration. They aim to raise awareness, through workshops and meetings, and to change attitudes, through promotional events, networking opportunities, and youth activities. Monica was able to provide many examples of fundraising and community activities in which Naya Yuva have been involved, for example, over 100 young Nepalese participated in the Frimley Park Hospital Fun Run, and 20 took part in a weapons workshop with the Police.

She went on to tell us a little about Nepal, with its rich multi-cultural population speaking over 100 indigenous languages and practising a number of different religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, heavily influenced by its large and powerful neighbours, India and China. Covering an area of nearly 1,500,000 kilometres, with a population of around 27,500,000, Nepal is mainly agricultural, divided into three broad geographical bands: the Terai region (plains); elevated flatlands and hills; mountain region. The country is spectacular and beautiful, but life expectancy is short: 60.9 for men, 59.5 for women.

Monica told us that the Gurkhas are mainly recruited from the hilly regions of Nepal, to the east and west of the country. Their history dates back more than 200 years and their motto is 'It is better to die than to live like a coward'. 26 Victoria Crosses have been awarded to members of the Gurkha Regiment—this in spite of the fact that the VC wasn't extended to the Gurkhas until 1911. Monica said that if there was a minute's silence for every Gurkha casualty from WWII, we would have to keep quiet for two weeks! This goes some way towards explaining the great value of the Gurkhas to the British Army.

Nepalese people who have made Rushmoor their home have naturally brought their rich culture with them, and Diya explained the three main festivals they celebrate: Dashain, Tihar and Teej. Dashain is the most auspicious festival, celebrated for 15 days, with the 10th day, Tika, the main day. The Goddess Durga is worshiped with innumerable rituals and offerings. Tihar is also known as Dipawali, Diwali or the Festival of Lights, and brings families together for five days of feasting. Houses are decorated, fireworks let off, and children engage in deusi bhailo, which is similar to trick-or-treat. On each day, a different deity is worshiped. Teej is the fasting festival of Nepalese women that falls in August or September, when married women fast both to honour Lord Shiva and for a long and healthy life for their husband. Traditional songs and dances feature strongly in the Teej festival, with red the predominant colour.

Nepalese culture is governed by caste and ethnic groupings, the main ethnic groups being: Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Magar (Thapa, Pun, Rana, etc.), Sherpa. This creates a complex society very unlike typical Western society.

Merisha told us that immigration of the Nepalese into Rushmoor began in 2000, with former residents of Hong Kong, following its reversion to Chinese rule in 1997. These were the children of Gurkhas. In 2004, those who had served since 1997 were granted leave to settle in the UK, and in 2009 the same right was granted to those who had served a minimum of four years prior to 1997 (the 'Lumley' Gurkhas). As a result, Rushmoor now houses elderly 'Lumley' former Gurkhas, working age former Gurkhas, and their children and wives. All other cases are subject to the usual immigration rules and regulations, for instance, those with specialist skills to offer. The biggest impact is on services for the elderly and for cohesion of the younger community.

There are some easily recognised common practices among the Nepalese, such as the wearing of traditional Nepali gold ornaments, the greeting, "Namaste", Buddhist prayer flags on homes and in gardens, and all kinds of social gatherings.

Nepalese culture is characterised by self-reliance and mutual support, pride, great respect for the elderly, an expectation for young people to excel, different life opportunities and experiences, and an unwillingness to say "no". The latter can cause difficulties when someone is reluctant to admit that he or she hasn't understood something that has been explained.

According to Merisha, there are a number of community groups to help Nepalese immigrants, including the British Gurkha Welfare Society and the Gurkha Army Ex-servicemen Organisation, as well as tribal groups such as Tamu Dhee UK, Kirat Yahthum Chumlung and Magar Samaj UK.

A great many local universities and colleges now also have Nepalese youth groups, including both Farnborough Sixth Form College and Farnborough College of Technology.

Diya ended by explaining why so many Nepalese choose to settle in Rushmoor: previous Army connection; a preference to live in a closed, tight-knit community; the Gurkha Welfare Centre, in Aldershot; the many Gurkha organisations, such as BGWS, GAESO, Maddhat Shamuha; Nepalese staff at Rushmoor Borough Council and CAB.

The range and number of questions that followed the presentation demonstrated the audience's keen interest in the subject of Nepalese culture. And our three presenters proved themselves wonderful ambassadors for both their community and Naya Yuva.

You can find further information about the Gurkhas at:

<http://www.gwt.org.uk>

<http://www.bgws.org>

For more information about Naya Yuva:

<http://www.nayayuva.org>