

# SNAPSHOTS OF THE NEPALI-SPEAKING COMMUNITY IN NEW YORK CITY Demographics & Challenges



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# ABOUT ADHIKAAR

Adhikaar for Human Rights and Social Justice is a New York based non-profit organization that works with Nepali-speaking communities to promote human rights and social justice for all. Adhikaar focuses works with marginalized groups, women, and youth to promote workers' rights, access to affordable healthcare, immigrant rights, and youth leadership. However, due to the lack of resources available to Nepali-speaking communities, Adhikaar also serves as an information hotline and provides referrals and assistance, including translation and interpretation, on different issues confronted by our community members.

Since it was founded in 2005, Adhikaar has worked every year with an average of 500 individuals directly, and thousands more indirectly, through a range of programmatic services including: health services, English classes, job training, workshops, advocacy support on individual immigration and domestic violence cases, community organizing, and legislative and policy advocacy on issues impacting Nepali-speaking communities. Adhikaar has been able to work beyond its limited resources because paid staff efforts are supplemented by contributions from an active board and a large volunteer network. In 2009, Adhikaar established the first community center for the New York Nepali community in Woodside, Queens. It is a wheelchair-accessible space, conveniently located near subways, bus lines, schools, and houses of worship. With the new accessible community center, Adhikaar has been able to greatly expand its programs and activities.

Adhikaar has provided opportunities to its program participants, particularly among those from historically marginalized groups within the Nepali community, to take on leadership opportunities within Adhikaar as well as in grassroots policy advocacy. For example, under the leadership of domestic worker leaders, Adhikaar successfully campaigned for the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in New York State in collaboration with organizations. Working in partnership with other Nepali, South Asian, pan-Asian, and mainstream organizations, Adhikaar has successfully created a platform to get Nepali voices heard from New York City to Albany to Washington, DC. In order to ensure that Nepali voices get stronger in the years ahead, Adhikaar led the campaign to get Nepalis counted properly in the 2010 Census. This *Jankaari* Research Project is another attempt to put Nepalis on the map in New York City and beyond.

Adhikaar's commitment to improve the lives of Nepali and other New Yorkers has been recognized through **numerous awards, including the *Union Square Award*, *New York Women's Foundation Neighborhood Leadership Award***, recognition from Chhaya CDC, Ridgewood Nepalese Society, and Friends of Nepal-NJ, as well as citations from the ***New York City Council Members***. Adhikaar's work has been featured in *the New York Times*, *the Nation*, *New York Daily News*, *Queens Chronicle*, *Free Speech Radio News*, *Kantipur*, *Kathmandu Post*, *Annapurna Post* and many other local, national, and international media.

# THE JANKAARI RESEARCH PROJECT

As a relatively new community, Nepalis are often overlooked by service providers or researchers working with and studying Asian or South Asian populations. There has been little comprehensive research done on Nepalis in any regional or national capacity within the United States. This lack of information poses a significant challenge to better understanding and meeting the needs of an emergent and highly diverse community.

Therefore, the *Jankari* Research Project was created to initiate a systematic collection of information on the demographics of the Nepali community and other issues of importance to Nepali communities, both qualitatively and quantitatively. *Jankari* means knowledge and information in Nepali, and the *Jankari* Research Project is an action research project to help Adhikaar understand how we can best serve the needs of the Nepali-speaking community in New York City, and also inform other organizations and decision-makers. We aimed to understand the reasons for the increase in migration of Nepalis to the New York City area in the past decade, the economic, political and social activities of Nepalis here, and the challenges that they face, especially with regards to work and health care.

A research team consisting of Adhikaar staff, board members, and a volunteer created the survey instrument in 2006. We created a Community Advisory Board, representing researchers and community leaders from the Nepali-speaking community to help guide the research project. After pilot testing the survey in early 2006<sup>1</sup> and getting feedback from the Community Advisory Board members, we revised the survey instrument launched the *Jankari Project* in April 2007.

Adhikaar staff, board members, interns, and volunteers, all from the Nepali-speaking community, were trained in basic survey methodology and administered the survey to all respondents. The trained surveyors filled out the forms to ensure systematic responses. We created the survey form in English and translated into Nepali, and conducted the majority of surveys in Nepali. Some of the research assistants were trained in facilitating focus group discussions, and we also conducted four focus groups representing different demographics. Susan Hangen also conducted 12 in-depth interviews, with assistance from Subas Risal and Ami Sengupta.

This report is based on 300 surveys, four focus group discussions, and twelve in-depth interviews with individuals who represent a broad spectrum of the community, including women, men, youth, students, restaurant workers, taxi drivers, and activists. The four group discussions focused on women workers about work conditions, Nepali youth on issues faced by immigrant youth, and a group of Nepalis on community health issues. The surveys, interviews and focus groups were conducted primarily in Nepali, and occasionally in English.

Most of the people we surveyed and interviewed are Nepali citizens or were born in Nepal, but we also included the broader community of Nepali speakers, including Bhutanese refugees of Nepali origin, Tibetans, and people of Nepali origin from India. Thus we define the population surveyed in this report as the Nepali speaking community. When we use the terms “Nepalis” and “the Nepali community” in this report, we are referring to this broader Nepali-speaking community.

Since there is no database of the Nepali community in New York, we were unable to use a random sampling method to identify survey participants. To identify people for our surveys and interviews, we used a snowball method. We reached out to the community and requested people to conduct surveys at community gatherings, restaurants, shops, homes, and temples where Nepalis are largely clustered in Queens and Brooklyn. We requested each participant to give names and contact information for other Nepalis. We recruited a diverse survey team who tapped into their contacts for surveys and further referrals. Thus, we were able to reach out to a wide spectrum of Nepalis in New York area. Most of our surveys were conducted in Queens or Brooklyn, though we also surveyed members of the Nepali community in other boroughs of New York City. The survey provides a useful snapshot of the community and serves as a baseline for further studies of the community.

We gathered the data over a period of about two and a half years, between April 2007 and August 2009. The situation of individuals we surveyed at the beginning of the project may have changed during the survey period. The economy in the United States deteriorated rapidly in 2008, with the greatest recession in recent history leading to high levels of unemployment. Although the recession has adversely affected Nepali immigrants, we have not separated surveys conducted before and after 2008. Moreover, other economic trends have led to changes within the Nepali community during our survey period, such as a surge of Nepali-owned businesses.

We undertook this research project to provide a framework for Adhikaar's future projects, which include direct services as well as community organizing and policy advocacy. Conversations with the community during the research process have already led to programming changes, such as the expansion of English classes and health programs, and the establishment of the Adhikaar Youth Group.

We hope that the data in this report will mobilize our community, Nepali organizations, journalists, and other organizations serving immigrant populations to advocate for more resources to support this emerging community, and against inequalities and injustices. The information obtained through this project improves our understanding of the experiences and challenges confronting Nepali-speaking immigrants, and encourages us to learn more about our community.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Nepali-speaking community has become increasingly visible in New York City, particularly in the last decade. However, there is very little data about this emerging community. Therefore, Adhikaar undertook the **Jankari Research Project** to comprehend and systematically document the demographic make-up and the needs of the diverse Nepali-speaking community. This report is the culmination of our three-year long participatory research effort, including 300 surveys, twelve in-depth interviews, and four focus group discussions with diverse groups of Nepali-speaking community in New York City. The information obtained through this project improves our understanding of the experiences and challenges confronting the Nepali-speaking immigrants, and encourages us to learn more about this emerging community.

## Rapidly Growing and Diverse Nepali-Speaking Community

Our survey confirms the general perception that the Nepali community has increased significantly in the last decade, and that the rate of growth of the community has accelerated in the past few years. An overwhelming majority of our respondents (85 percent) arrived nine or fewer years ago, and almost half of the respondents had been in the US less than 3 years.

**Eighty-five percent of the Nepalis in New York City immigrated less than a decade ago.**

The Nepali-speaking community in New York is ethnically diverse and includes many different caste and ethnic groups. There is also a wide range of immigration statuses among the Nepali-speaking immigrants in New York City. Almost 30 percent are permanent residents

(green card holders), while more than 10 percent have asylum or refugee status. There were only a few US citizens in our survey pool, reflecting the relatively recent arrival of the Nepali community. One-fifth of the respondents reported that they had overstayed their visa period. The rest reported different visa statuses, including temporary work visas (8 percent), dependent visa (2 percent), student visa (13 percent), and tourist visa (14 percent). Half of those who said they are on tourist visas had been in the United States for more than 1 year, and hence, are likely to have overstayed their visa period.

The Nepali-speaking community is largely composed of people in their prime working years between the ages of 18 and 55. The community is also more educated compared to the general population in Nepal. Fifty-seven percent of respondents have attained at least a high school degree. However, only 46 percent of women reached this level of education. Thirteen percent of all respondents have no formal education, but this number was much higher among women of whom 23 percent have no schooling.

## Facing Downward Mobility, and Low Living Standards

As with other immigrant groups, Nepalis immigrate to the United States primarily in search of better lives, and better economic opportunities. However, many members of the community experience downward mobility after arriving in New York and are not able to transfer their educational credentials and work experiences from Nepal to gain comparable work in the United States. Over half of the Nepalis in New York City were working in the business or professional sector in Nepal. While most Nepali immigrants are able to find jobs in New York area, they are

**“No matter what your background is, here you have to start from zero.”**

often low-wage jobs with long hours and few benefits. More than two-thirds of those with full-time jobs work over 40 hours per week, and more than 10 percent work over 60 hours a week. However, long hours have not resulted in high income. More than two-thirds of the respondents reported that their households earn \$30,000 or less per year. Thus, the Nepali-speaking community overwhelmingly falls into the low-income segment of New York.

### **Supporting Transnational Families**

Due to migration, the family patterns are moving away from joint families with multiple generations living together towards nuclear families. People in prime working age migrate, while their parents and their children remain in Nepal or another country. More than 80 percent were separated from their living parents, almost one-third of those who were married were separated from their spouses, and 44 percent with children were separated from them.

Over half of the respondents, across the economic spectrum, send remittances to family members, primarily in Nepal. Due to the high value of the dollar as compared to the Nepali rupee, their earnings may have a significant impact in Nepal. They are likely to be supporting extended family members as well.

### **Facing Challenges in Accessing Social Services and Healthcare**

As new immigrants, Nepalis face many problems, such as finding jobs and accessing health care. Two-thirds of the respondents faced various problems affecting them and their family members. Recent immigrants faced these problems to a much greater extent. More than 80 percent of individuals who have been in the country for less than five years faced problems. From the survey, we were also able to gather that language barriers and the lack of legal status were key obstacles in finding good jobs, receiving social service, and accessing healthcare.

Largely due to their employment in the informal sector, health care is a significant challenge for members of the Nepali speaking community in New York City. Over half of the respondents do not have health insurance. Our data suggests that Nepali New Yorkers one and a half times more likely to be uninsured compared to other non-citizen New Yorkers (35 percent) and more than four times more likely than citizens (12 percent)<sup>2</sup> to be uninsured. More than 57 percent for adults 18 years and older and uninsured, and almost 60 percent of women do not have health insurance.

### **Growing Roots in New York City**

A vibrant Nepali-speaking community is taking roots in New York City. With the rapid expansion of the community, many outlets that provide people with opportunities to connect to other Nepali speakers have emerged. More than one-third belong to Nepali social or political organizations, and almost two-thirds attend social and cultural events. The community organizations and businesses provide a support network to turn to when seeking housing, jobs, or in times of trouble. The community is becoming more involved with the local and national issues here in the United States. Adhikaar has played an important role in supporting, educating, and organizing the Nepali-speaking community in the last five years, contributing towards a stronger community and the city.

As the first comprehensive report about the Nepali-speaking community, this report helps set the baseline for future research projects. We hope that the data in this report will mobilize our community, Nepali organizations, journalists, and other organizations serving immigrant populations to advocate for more resources and against structural injustices.

# CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

As the first comprehensive report about the Nepali-speaking community, this report helps set the baseline for future research projects, helps us better understand the needs of the growing Nepali-speaking community, and help us identify possible solutions. Based on the findings of the *Jankari* Research Project, supplemented by Adhikaar's five years of experience working with the Nepali-speaking community, we propose the following recommendations.

## **Improve Language Access**

Language barrier was often cited by our respondents as causing challenges in finding jobs, as well as accessing social services and healthcare. Although the Presidential Executive Order 13166 requires federally-funded agencies to take reasonable steps to ensure that people with Limited English Proficiency have access to their programs and services, in reality, it is not always enforced.

- ✓ Budget for federally-funded programs should include funding for interpreters to ensure meaningful access to benefits and services.
- ✓ Language access regulations should take into consideration new communities that are less likely to have English language capacity.
- ✓ More investments should be made in programs and activities designed to help individuals learn English, so that fewer people will need language assistance.

## **Make Healthcare Accessible**

Over half of our respondents do not have health insurance, and almost three-fourths of the people faced challenges in accessing health care. State sponsored health insurance income eligibility levels are too low, and leave many low and moderate income individuals uninsured.

- ✓ The income eligibility level for subsidized health insurance should be raised to reflect the economic reality of living in New York City.
- ✓ Health providers should expand the use of interpretation services for patients with limited English proficiency.
- ✓ Free and low-cost clinics should be available during evenings and weekends, so that uninsured people do not have to depend on emergency units.

## **Increase Training and Job Search Assistance**

Even though more than half of the survey respondents had business and professional backgrounds in Nepal, most of them were unable to transfer their work experience, skills, and education to find comparable jobs. While immigration status is one of the barriers, it is not the only problem. Those with valid work authorization, including permanent residents and refugees/asylees, faced the same problem, and were often relegated to low-wage jobs without benefits.

- ✓ More investment should be made in job training and job search assistance to new immigrants.
- ✓ More investment should be made in programs to help immigrants trained in another country to use their skills to find comparable employment opportunities.

## **Increase Affordable Childcare Options**

Forty-three percent of respondents with children were separated from their children. The high cost of childcare is one of the main reasons for this.

- ✓ Increase options for free and low-cost childcare and after-school programs.

### **Increase Minimum Wage & Enforce Minimum Wage Laws**

The federal minimum wage of \$7.25 is not enough to survive and support a family in New York City. In addition, many immigrant workers in the informal sector are often exploited by the employers and are paid below the legal minimum wage.

- ✓ Increase the minimum wage to a living wage.
- ✓ More investment should be made in educating immigrant workers about their rights, and helping them seek redress when their rights are violated.

### **Remove the 5-year Ban on Eligibility for Public Benefits**

New permanent residents have access to few support systems and safety nets provided by the government. While in the New York State, they can qualify for health insurance for themselves and their children, they do not qualify for other public benefits like SSI, Food Stamps, and TANF “Family Assistance”.<sup>3</sup> Those who arrive to the United States on the State Department’s diversity visa lottery are often left to fend for themselves and restart their lives with little support.

- ✓ Remove the 5-year ban on public benefit eligibility for permanent residents.
- ✓ Provide support programs specifically for new immigrants, including those coming through the diversity visa program.

### **Pass Just and Humane Immigration Laws**

More than one-fifth of our respondents have been forced to live in fear as they were unable to legalize their status. They have been separated from their families, exploited by their employers and unscrupulous businesses.

- ✓ Pass comprehensive and humane immigration reform to end detentions, deportations, and criminalization of immigrants, and to allow family reunification.
- ✓ Rescind programs like Secure Communities and 287(g) that force local police to act as immigration agents.

### **Focus on Emerging Communities**

Much of the problems faced by Nepali-speaking community in New York City are typical of those faced by emerging communities. Before the community grows strong, and creates structures and social capital, there is a period of struggle. If entrepreneurial leaders do not step up, the community can languish, creating a vicious cycle of poverty and disempowerment.

- ✓ Policymakers and service providers should pay attention to emerging communities, and provide additional resources to help them build capacity and self-sufficiency.

### **Invest in More Community-based Research**

Nepali-speaking community in New York City is growing rapidly. More research needs to be undertaken to identify and document the changing dynamics of this community. Some of the possible future research topics include:

- ✓ The industry conditions in the sectors with high concentration of Nepali-speaking workers, including the nail salons, domestic work, restaurants, taxi and limousines, and gas stations.
- ✓ The reasons for downward economic mobility among recent immigrants
- ✓ The challenges faced by the burgeoning Bhutanese refugee population as it integrates into the larger US society and the Nepali-speaking community.
- ✓ The emergence of ethnic entrepreneurship in the community, as this may offer a more rewarding career option for Nepali-speaking immigrants.

# ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Raji Pokhrel helped conduct the pilot survey, which helped set the base for this research.

<sup>2</sup> As reported in The New York Immigration Coalition Report "Analysis of New York State Coverage Expansion Proposals: Potential Impact on Immigrants" by Mark Scherzer, Esq. and Jenny Rejeske (February 2009)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.thenyic.org/images/uploads/NYIC\\_GULP\\_PBChartDEC03.pdf](http://www.thenyic.org/images/uploads/NYIC_GULP_PBChartDEC03.pdf); last retrieved November 7, 2010.