



Bengali Cultural Orientation

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Table of Contents

PROFILE	5
INTRODUCTION.....	5
GEOGRAPHY	5
HISTORY	14
ECONOMY ,	17
ETHNIC GROUPS AND LANGUAGES.....	19
RELIGION	21
OVERVIEW	21
ISLAM	21
HINDUISM	22
THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE GOVERNMENT	24
INFLUENCE OF RELIGION IN DAILY LIFE	25
RELIGIOUS EVENTS AND HOLIDAYS.....	25
BUILDINGS OF WORSHIP	28
BEHAVIOR IN PLACES OF WORSHIP	29
TRADITIONS	32
TRADITIONAL ECONOMY AND JOBS	32
TEXTILES	33
GREETINGS	34
COMMUNICATION, HOSPITALITY, AND GIFT-GIVING.....	37
DRESS CODES'	39
CUISINE.....	40
NON-RELIGIOUS CELEBRATIONS AND HOLIDAYS	41

SOCIAL EVENTS.....	42
MUSLIM FUNERALS	44
DO’S AND DON’TS.....	45
URBAN LIFE	46
URBAN JOBS AND WORKFORCE	46
DAILY URBAN LIFE AND LIVING CONDITIONS.....	48
EDUCATION	49
HEALTH ISSUES	50
TRANSPORTATION AND TRAFFIC	52
RESTAURANTS AND MARKETPLACE.....	53
RURAL LIFE	59
RURAL ECONOMY	59
RURAL HEALTH ISSUES	60
EDUCATION	62
TRANSPORTATION.....	63
TRIBAL DISTRIBUTION	64
VILLAGE LIFE AND GENDER ROLES.....	65
WHO’S IN CHARGE.....	66
BORDER CROSSINGS AND CHECKPOINTS	67
LANDMINES	70
FAMILY LIFE	72
FAMILY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES	72
STATUS OF WOMEN, ELDERLY, AND CHILDREN.....	73

MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, AND BIRTH	76
NAMING CONVENTIONS	80

Profile

Introduction

Bangladesh, meaning “Bengal country,” is home to the Bengali people who have their ancestral roots in eastern India.¹ They remain linked to Indian Bengalis through their language, Bangla (or Bengali), which is related to Sanskrit.² Although Bengalis in both countries are also connected by deep cultural traditions, this report will focus on those in Bangladesh. Here, they form 98% of the population and are nationally referred to as Bangladeshis.³ Most support themselves through agricultural work, yet they must contend with annual cycles of drought or flooding which disrupt their lives and livelihoods. In addition, Bangladesh is severely overcrowded, with 150 million people living in an area slightly smaller than the state of Iowa.⁴ These problems exist alongside weak governance and political tensions over suspended elections and ongoing extremist militancy.⁵ In spite of all the problems, the people of Bangladesh continue to support a democratic political system as the best way to build their future.



© Michael Foley
Fisherman among rice paddies

Geography

Area

Bangladesh is located in southern Asia, on the northeastern Indian subcontinent. Bordered on its north, east, and west by India, it also shares a small part of its border with Myanmar (Burma) to the southeast. Bangladesh's border with India is 4,053 km (2,518 mi) in length, and with Burma, 193 km (120 mi). The Bay of Bengal, an extension of the Indian Ocean, lies just south of Bangladesh.



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Bay of Bengal

¹ Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. “Background Note: Bangladesh.” May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

² Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. “Bangladesh Linguistic Composition.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-33432/Bangladesh>

³ Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. “Background Note: Bangladesh.” May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

⁴ The population figure is a July 2007 estimate. CIA World Factbook. “Bangladesh.” 24 January 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>

⁵ Human Rights Watch. World Report 2007. “Bangladesh.” 2007. <http://hrw.org/englishwr2k7/docs/2007/01/11/bangla14864.htm>

The Tropic of Cancer cuts through Bangladesh, close to its center. Most of the country is subtropical lowland, largely formed by the convergence of three major rivers.

Bangladesh's total land area is 133,910 sq km (51,700 sq mi).⁶

Geographical Divisions

Bangladesh is generally a flat country. It consists of low-lying river delta plains, a marshy coastline, and hills in the far southeast and northeast.

Plains

Around 80% of the entire country lies within the Bangladesh Plain,⁷ the broad delta of the Ganges, Jamuna (Brahmaputra), and Meghna rivers.⁸ Because the rivers are large and the Ganges and Jamuna have their headwaters in the Himalayas, the lowlands flood annually. Most of the country is less than 90 m (300 ft) above sea level, with elevations in the central and southern part of the plain less than 10 m (33 ft) above sea level.⁹ The soil of the plains is rich, replenished regularly by floodwaters and rain, and supports intensive agriculture.



Marshy Coast (Delta at Bay of Bengal)

The Ganges and Jamuna rivers merge in the Bay of Bengal, joining other rivers destined for the same outlet and forming a dense span of connected waterways.¹⁰ This wide delta traverses Bangladesh's southern border, creating deep marshes and a fissured coastline in which the sea reaches far inland. Tidal floodplains are a prominent part of the landscape from the southern Ganges outlets all the way across to parts of the Chittagong coast.¹¹

Due to the effects of global warming, cartographers have had to redraw parts of the Bangladeshi coastline for the *Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World*. Effects seen in

⁶ CIA World Factbook. "Bangladesh." 24 January 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>

⁷ The Bangladesh Plain is situated within the broader Plain of Bengal, sometimes referred to as the Lower Gangetic Plain.

⁸ South Asian Media Net. "Bangladesh: Geography." 2008. http://www.southasianmedia.net/profile/Bangladesh/bangladesh_geography.cfm

⁹ South Asian Media Net. "Bangladesh: Geography." 2008. http://www.southasianmedia.net/profile/Bangladesh/bangladesh_geography.cfm

¹⁰ MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. "Ganges." c.2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761555855/Ganges.html

¹¹ The World Conservation Union (IUCN). "Marine Protected Areas Needs in the South Asian Seas. Volume 1: Bangladesh." Pernetta, John C. 1993. <http://books.google.com/books?id=FtIYpYI2e8MC&pg=PA4&lpg=PA4&dq=bangladesh+coastline&source=web&ots=PWKJohBbcG&sig=y6yXcMOIIIOKYIHuiTaBI-D2mLI>

Bangladesh include sea levels that are rising and monsoons that are becoming heavier. The net result is that more of the country's coastline is being lost to the sea.¹²

Hills

Fairly low hills are found mainly in southeastern Bangladesh, although some stretches of hilly land are located in the northeast. Together, they occupy around 10% of the nation's land area.¹³

The main hill system in Bangladesh is the Chittagong Hill Tract, formed from the western slope of mountains in Myanmar and eastern India. These hills rise into steep and narrow ridges that are 600–900 m (1,970–2,950 ft) in elevation. Between the hills, fertile valleys run in a generally north–south line.¹⁴

The northeastern highlands run narrowly along the border with India. These small, scattered hills generally do not exceed elevations of 30 m (100 ft). Their soils tend to be rocky, dry, and less fertile than that of the rich floodplains.¹⁵ In the extreme northeast, the Sylhet Hills reach heights of up to 335 m (1,100 ft).¹⁶

Climate^{17,18}

Bangladesh has a monsoon climate that is typical of the Indian Ocean region. As the seasons change, the wind changes direction, blowing from the southwest between April and October, and from the northeast during the remainder of the year. Between late May and mid-October, 80% of the yearly rains fall, inundating the land and causing extensive flooding. The yearly rainfall in northeastern Bangladesh averages over 5,080 mm (200 in), and in the east central border region, around 1,400 mm (55 in).

Warm temperatures prevail throughout the year, with little monthly variation. The warmest month is May, and the coolest is January. Dhaka in central Bangladesh averages temperatures of around 29°C (84°F) in May and 19°C (66°F) in January.

¹² Telegraph.co.uk. Eccleston, Paul. "Times Atlas Shows Effect of Global Warming." 3 September, 2007. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/main.jhtml?xml=/earth/2007/09/03/eaatlas103.xml>

¹³ Geocities.com. "Physical Features." No date. <http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/Bay/2163/pf.htm>

¹⁴ South Asian Media Net. "Bangladesh: Geography." 2008. http://www.southasianmedia.net/profile/Bangladesh/bangladesh_geography.cfm

¹⁵ South Asian Media Net. "Bangladesh: Geography." 2008. http://www.southasianmedia.net/profile/Bangladesh/bangladesh_geography.cfm

¹⁶ Geocities.com. "Physical Features." No date. <http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/Bay/2163/pf.htm>

¹⁷ MSN Encarta Online. "Monsoon." c.2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761566557/Monsoon.html

¹⁸ MSN Encarta Online. "Bangladesh." c.2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761553817_2/Bangladesh.html

Cyclones

Violent cyclones that originate over the Bay of Bengal periodically strike in April–May and from September to November. They cause large waves to surge along the shoreline, which extends inland some distance. Such storms often cause widespread loss of life and damage to homes and structures. A cyclone out of the Bay of Bengal in 1970, one of the 20th century's worst natural disasters, caused some 500,000 deaths in Bangladesh. More recently, a cyclone in November 2007 was considered the deadliest storm to hit the country in over a decade, killing approximately 1,100 people in southwestern Bangladesh.¹⁹ These enormous cyclones, fuelled initially by warm air that rises in the Bay of Bengal, are also known as typhoons or hurricanes. They produce high winds, heavy rains, and storm surges that flood the coastal areas.



Topography

Keokradang

Keokradang is a hill-mountain in the southeastern area of the Chittagong Hills. At 1,230 m (4,035 ft), it is reportedly the highest elevation in Bangladesh.²⁰ Some sources dispute this, claiming that the actual height of Keokradang is less than often reported. Another peak in Bangladesh often cited as the highest is Mowdok Mual (its local name), on the Bangladeshi-Myanmar border. Its elevation is about 1,003 m (3,291 ft).^{21, 22}

Sundarbans

The Sundarbans are a group of deltaic islands that lie partly in Bangladesh and partly in India, where they are designated as a World Heritage Site. Combined, they hold the largest mangrove forest in the world and are part of the world's largest delta system. In Bangladesh, they are called the Sundarbans East, West, and South, each a wildlife sanctuary where hunting is prohibited. Formed by sediment from the rivers that empty into the Bay of



¹⁹ Associated Press. Alam, Julhas. "Bangladesh Military Hunts for Survivors." 17 November 2007. http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D8SVDOU80&show_article=1&image=large

²⁰ South Asian Media Net. "Bangladesh: Geography." 2008. http://www.southasianmedia.net/profile/Bangladesh/bangladesh_geography.cfm

²¹ MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. "Bangladesh." c.2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761553817/Bangladesh.html#s1

²² Discovery Bangladesh. "Chittagong." No date. <http://www.discoverybd.com/chittagong.htm>

Bengal from Bangladesh, the Sundarbans cover 5,771 sq km (2,228 sq mi) in Bangladesh.²³

The Sundarbans support a large number of plant, animal, and insect species. They also provide a livelihood for thousands of people who work as fishermen or gather the natural resources that include wood, grass and leaves (for making mats and roofs), and honey.

Chittagong Region

The Chittagong region in southeastern Bangladesh begins south of the Feni River. The land here, in contrast to other parts of the country, is marked by valleys, forests, and hills. Its coastal plain is part saline clay and part sand. Varying in width from 1.6–16 km (1–10 mi), the Chittagong coastal area lies between the Feni River and Cox’s Bazar, a town in the south.



© a aziz apu
Boga Lake, Chittagong hills

Chittagong Hills

The Chittagong Hills, part of the Chittagong region, are in the southeastern section of Bangladesh that borders both India and Myanmar (Burma). This hilly area is formed out of the western edge of the mountain ranges in those two countries, and it accounts for less than 10% of Bangladesh’s territory.²⁴ The hills are composed of soft clay and shale rocks. They run in a north–south direction and most are lower than 609 m (2000 ft) in elevation, although some areas are higher.²⁵

Barind Tract

The Barind Tract is a triangular piece of alluvial land that covers around 7,770 sq km (3,000 sq mi) in northwestern Bangladesh. It lies between the floodplains of two rivers: the Ganges and the Jamuna (Brahmaputra). This region is elevated and composed of hard, reddish clay soil. East of the Barind Tract lie the vast Jamuna River floodplains and the Jamuna River, which often overflows its banks.²⁶

Bhar Basin (Lower Atrai Basin)

The Bhar Basin is a depression that begins at the eastern border of the Barind Tract and extends approximately 161 km (100 mi) to the southeast. It spreads between the floodplains of the Jamuna and Ganges rivers to a point near their convergence in eastern-

²³ The-South-Asian.com. “The Sundarbans Fact File.” November 2002. <http://www.the-south-asian.com/Nov2002/Sundarbans.htm>

²⁴ MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. “Bangladesh.” c.2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761553817/Bangladesh.html#s1

²⁵ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. “Bangladesh.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9109737/Bangladesh#33422.toc>

²⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. “Bangladesh.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9109737/Bangladesh#33422.toc>

central Bangladesh. During the summer monsoons, the land in this area is drenched, sometimes up to 3.6 m (12 ft) deep. The western Bhar Basin drains in the marshy Chalan wetlands, also called Chalan Lake or Chalan Beel.²⁷

Rivers^{28, 29, 30}

Although Bangladesh has about 700 rivers, three are four major river systems (the first four below) that flow through the Bangladesh Plain, forming hundreds of branches. Together, they drain approximately 1.5 million sq km (580,000 sq mi). The waters from these sources empty into the Bay of Bengal creating silt buildup and shifting islands (*chars*) and other unstable formations.



Jamuna (Brahmaputra)

The Brahmaputra (“Son of Brahma”) originates in Tibet, where it is named Yarlung Zangbo Jiang River. In India, its name becomes Brahmaputra. It crosses through the state of Arunachal Pradesh and flows into Bangladesh. Here, its name changes to the Jamuna River where it meets the Tista River, not far from the border with India. The Jamuna River ends at its confluence with the Ganges, where both rivers combine to form the Padma segment of the river.

It is not possible for permanent settlements to exist along the banks of the Jamuna River. Its channels continually shift, and silt formations become islands (*chars*) that change shape and disappear. This instability prevents any kind of construction that could be anything but temporary.

Ganges

Coming from its origin in the north-central Indian Himalayas, the Ganges enters Bangladesh at its western border with India. It runs 258 km (160 mi) through Bangladesh and joins the Jamuna River around 72 km (45 mi) west of the capital, Dhaka. Where the two rivers join and continue south as one, the name changes to Padma River.

²⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. “Bangladesh.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9109737/Bangladesh#33422.toc>

²⁸ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Studies. Bangladesh*. “Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment. Geography. ““River Systems.”” September 1988. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+bd0035\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+bd0035))

²⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. “Padma River.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9057950/Padma-River#138474.hook>

³⁰ The Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh. “Rivers of Bangladesh.” 1995. http://reliefweb.int/mapc/asi_sth/cnt/bgd/bdrivers.html

Padma

The Padma River, as the Ganges and Jamuna-Brahmaputra are known south of their confluence, travels south for a distance of 126 km (78 mi). At Chandpur, it joins the Meghna River. The Padma-Ganges forms a central deltaic system in Bangladesh, in which a network of rivers and streams totaling 2,100 km in length flow into the Padma in a general east-west direction.

Meghna

The Meghna River has its origin in the Surma River, in eastern Bangladesh. After the Surma enters an old Brahmaputra channel, it then changes to the Meghna River, which continues to flow southward until it meets the Padma River near Chandpur. This confluence with the Padma (merged Ganges and Jamuna rivers) creates a large river channel that keeps the name Meghna, and flows 145 km (90 mi) to the Bay of Bengal. The many channels and distributaries of the combined Padma-Meghna along with the smaller rivers that empty into the Bay of Bengal are called the “Mouths of the Ganges.”



Karnaphuli River

The Karnaphuli River runs through the Chittagong Region and is not connected to the other rivers named. It flows east from the town of Chittagong across the Chittagong Hills, its water used to supply the Karnaphuli Reservoir and Dam, which generates hydroelectric power. Across the hills, the river continues in a southwest course toward the sea.

Wetlands and Flooding

Approximately half of Bangladesh’s territory consists of wetlands and waterlogged ground. This is the world’s highest ratio of wetlands to land.³¹ For five months of the rainy season between June and October, 30% of the country’s floodplain is flooded over 1 m (3.3 ft). In a heavy monsoon, this flooded area can increase from 30% to 60%.³² Flash floods are also common during the rainy season.



³¹ LEISA Magazine. Vol. 24. Haq, A.H.M. Rezaul, Tapan Kumar Ghosal, and Pritam Ghosh. “Cultivating Wetlands in Bangladesh.” December 2004. http://www.leisa.info/index.php?url=show-blob-html.tpl&p%5Bo_id%5D=70481&p%5Ba_id%5D=211&p%5Ba_seq%5D=1

³² InformaWorld. Islam, Tawhidul, and Peter Atkins. “Indigenous Floating Cultivation: A Sustainable Agricultural Practice in the Wetlands of Bangladesh.” February 2007. <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/section?content=a771212570&fulltext=713240928>

Flooding disrupts agriculture and periodically leads to great loss of life and property in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the coastal areas are subject to rising water from global warming and to devastating tropical cyclones generated in the Bay of Bengal that increase flooding. Although the wetlands themselves can contribute to flooding, they have great value and commercial importance in Bangladesh. They are critical to the country's ecology, supporting a wide variety of plant and animal life. Around 300 plant species and 400 vertebrate species rely on wetlands for their entire life cycle.³³ Wetlands also support ecotourism and human settlements and are a source of revenue through the practice of specialized agriculture.

Biodiversity

Few large forests remain in Bangladesh. In hilly regions, broadleaf evergreen trees are common, and in dry areas of the plains, deciduous trees such as banyan and acacia are found. Bamboo trees grow in many places, and fruit trees such as mango, date, and jackfruit grow around villages.

Many kinds of flora and fauna live in both the freshwater and saltwater wetlands of Bangladesh. In freshwater areas, a variety of trees are found, including madar, jaldmur, barun, hijal, and chitki. Herbs, grasses, and aquatic vegetation such as water hyacinths, water lilies, and lotus also grow profusely. In the saltwater areas near the Bay of Bengal or areas further inland where fresh and saltwater mix, mangroves occupy large areas of land. Degradation of wetlands has caused the extinction of some animal species and many plants such as herbs, aquatic plants, and some varieties of domesticated rice.³⁴

Animal life is rich throughout the country, with large numbers of birds, reptiles, marine and freshwater fish, and amphibians. Bangladesh has 109 indigenous mammal species.³⁵ They include rhesus monkeys, lemurs, gibbons, wild boar, and mongoose. Leopards and elephants live in the Chittagong Hills Tract. In the Sundarbans area, the endangered Bengal tiger still survives in its last remaining habitat.³⁶



© Mohammad Mustafizur Rahman
Bengal Tiger prints

³³ InformaWorld. Islam, Tawhidul, and Peter Atkins. "Indigenous Floating Cultivation: A Sustainable Agricultural Practice in the Wetlands of Bangladesh." February 2007.

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/section?content=a771212570&fulltext=713240928>

³⁴ National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh. World Environment Day 2006. "Bangladesh & Desertification: Wetlands." 2006.

http://www.sdnpsd.org/sdi/international_days/wed/2006/bangladesh/naturalres/wetland.htm

³⁵ MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. "Bangladesh." c.2007.

http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761553817_2/Bangladesh.html

³⁶ U.S. Department of State. Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

Major Cities

The growth of cities in Bangladesh has proceeded rapidly since 1951, when the country was almost entirely rural. The rapid increase of people moving from the country to the city has led to the rise of megacities such as Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh.

Dhaka³⁷

Dhaka, with a population of 10 million people, is the nation's capital.³⁸ It is also Bangladesh's administrative, industrial, and commercial center. Situated in a jute-growing region on a channel of the Dhaleswari River, Dhaka utilizes the nearby river port of Narayanganj for shipping. Its manufactures and trade include jute products, cotton saris, textiles, rope and string, baskets, rice, tea, and sugar. Once renowned for the manufacture of fine muslins, British competition ended this trade in the late 19th century. The city is still known, however, for its cottage industries that produce handicrafts and confectionaries.



Dhaka's history is beset with many political twists and turns. In the 17th century, it was the Mughal capital of Bengal.³⁹ Competing empire builders and industrialists from England, Holland, and France established factories in Dhaka in the 17th and 18th centuries and in 1765, the city came under British rule. Almost two centuries later, in 1947, Dhaka became the capital of East Pakistan. In 1971, East Pakistan became Bangladesh and Dhaka remained the capital of the newly independent country.

Chittagong⁴⁰

Chittagong lies in the rectangular eastern segment of Bangladesh, alongside the Karnaphuli River just off the Bay of Bengal. It is the country's second largest city and its main seaport. Its industries consist of oil refineries, textile mills, and shipbuilding. Other manufactured products from Chittagong include iron and steel, chemicals, and leather. The city's hydroelectric power is generated from the Karnaphuli Dam in the Chittagong Hills.

In the early centuries of the current era, Arab, Portuguese, Mughal, and Persian sailors used this port. In its early centuries, it was part of both Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms. As with Dhaka, Chittagong came under Mughal rule, followed by British rule in 1760.

³⁷ High Beam Encyclopedia. Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th Ed. "Dhaka." 2007.
<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1E1-Dhaka.html>

³⁸ Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

³⁹ The Mughal Empire was a Muslim empire that ruled India between 1526 and 1857. It was founded by the Turkish chieftain Babur.

⁴⁰ High Beam Encyclopedia. Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th Ed. "Chittagong." 2007.
<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1E1-Chittago.html>

Today, the city's past is reflected in its Buddhist ruins, Hindu temples, and Mughal architecture and art.

Khulna

Located in southwestern Bangladesh in the Ganges River Delta, Khulna has a population of 1.8 million.⁴¹ It is a center for commerce and industry, manufacturing jute, textiles, and wood products from its sawmills. The city also has a thriving shipbuilding industry.⁴² Being situated in the fertile delta, Khulna is an agricultural center where tobacco, rice, coconuts, jute, and sugarcane are grown. The city is surrounded by swampy, forested land that holds peat deposits.

Rajshahi

Rajshahi, an administrative and industrial center, lies on the Ganges River in western Bangladesh. Its manufactured goods include processed food, silk, and wood products. The University of Rajshahi and other educational institutions are located here, along with the Varendra Research Museum which holds an archaeological collection. The city also houses a number of temples, mosques, and shrines. With a population of 1 million, Rajshahi is one of Bangladesh's rapidly growing cities.⁴³



© Hasan Iqbal Wamy
Ruins, Sonargaon

Narayanganj

Serving as the river port to Dhaka (the nation's capital), Narayanganj lies at the confluence of the Dhaleswari and Lakhya rivers in central-eastern Bangladesh. The city has boat connections with other inland port cities and with Chittagong. The country's busiest trade center, Narayanganj has a large jute market and is a pick-up point for leather hides.⁴⁴ Industry includes shipbuilding, tanning, cotton and jute milling, sugar and rice milling, and manufacture of chemicals, glass, and paper products.

History

Before 1947, history for Bangladesh was Indian history. In order to put the Bengali culture of Bangladesh in perspective, it is necessary to examine fairly recent events. Looking back to 1947, the Indian state of Bengal was divided into east and west, and both

⁴¹ Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

⁴² MSN Online Encyclopedia. "Khulna, Bangladesh." c.2007.

http://encarta.msn.com/media_461542514_761553817_-1_1/Khulna_Bangladesh.html

⁴³ U.S. Department of State. Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

⁴⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. "Narayanganj." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9054842/Narayanganj#248636.hook>

East Bengal and Muslim majority areas of northwestern India formed the new nation of Pakistan. (West Bengal stayed part of India.) In 1955, East Bengal was renamed East Pakistan. However, the nearly 1,600 km (994 mi) that separated West and East Pakistan left the Bengalis in the east feeling powerless and cut off from their western partners. This led East Pakistan to secede from West Pakistan in 1971 to form Bangladesh.⁴⁵

Early History

The Bengalis' ancestral roots are mixed between Indians from the south and the east and Aryans from the northwest who migrated into India. In the 8th century C.E., the population became more mixed as the Muslims began arriving, attracting Arabs, Turks, and Persians to the Indian subcontinent. They entered the Bangladesh region by the beginning of the 13th century.⁴⁶



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Pala Dynasty Buddha

The Mughal Empire absorbed Bengal in the 16th century, around the same time when the first Europeans were arriving. Portuguese missionaries and traders were closely followed by traders from France and Holland and by representatives of the British East India Company. Bengal became a competitive commercial center, and in 1859, the British East India Company's control of commerce transferred to the British Crown.⁴⁷

Nationalism and the Birth of Bangladesh^{48 49}

Indian nationalism grew out of British control of India in the 19th century, and it was accompanied by increasing antagonism between Muslims and Hindus. The All-India National Congress, primarily Hindu, was founded in 1859 to promote Indian self-rule. Seeking to protect their own political and economic interests, Muslims founded their own political organization, the All-India Muslim League, in 1906. Although both groups cooperated to some degree while attempting to foster Indian independence, division ultimately ruled the day. Responding to a defeat in India's first elections under the 1935 constitution, the Muslim League in 1940 called for a separate Muslim state in the Muslim-majority regions of India.



Courtesy of Wikipedia
All-India Muslim League, 1940

⁴⁵ CIA World Factbook. "Bangladesh." 24 January 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>

⁴⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. "Bangladesh Ethnic Composition and Distribution." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-33431/Bangladesh#409344.hook>

⁴⁷ Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

⁴⁸ PTIC. "History of Pakistan." October 2005. http://www.unigroup.com/PTIC/body_history.html

⁴⁹ Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

In 1947, the partition of British India created the new nation of Pakistan and divided the Bengal region along religious lines. The Muslim eastern half became East Pakistan, split from West Pakistan by over 1,000 miles of Indian territory. This geographic division disrupted commerce and industry, created transportation problems, and separated factories from raw materials. Language and cultural differences also created social instability. When the Pakistani government mandated that Urdu was to be the national language, Bengalis rebelled, feeling that their cultural identity was being threatened. Their attempts to push for Bangla as their official language morphed into a drive for political autonomy. Bengali political leaders formed the Awami League in 1949, spearheading a fight for the independence of East Pakistan. A long period of conflict followed and culminated in civil war. In 1971, India intervened on the side of Bengali nationalists who proclaimed the People's Republic of Bangladesh, independent from Pakistan. The new country's 1972 constitution established Bangladesh as a parliamentary democracy.

*The New Nation*⁵⁰

At its formation, Bangladesh faced several looming tasks. The government had to rebuild a nation ravaged by war, rehabilitating war refugees and settling them into communities. It had to establish law and order and jump-start the economy, invigorating industry and agriculture as a fundamental long-range project.

Most ruling power was invested in the position of prime minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman ("Mujib"), and the new civilian government failed to stabilize the country. (The office of the president, first occupied by Justice Abu Sayeed Choudhury, held mainly ceremonial power.) Prime Minister Mujib began by nationalizing some of the major industries, but this did not lead to economic progress. Tragically, flooding in 1974 destroyed most of the grain crop and led to famine throughout the country. Lawlessness and political turmoil followed. The military stepped in to restore order and continued to do so over the years as they felt necessary. Martial law was declared for the first time under President Sayem, who dissolved Parliament as requested by Army General Ziaur Rahman ("Zia").



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 1950

General Zia became president in 1977 and played an authoritative role in the government until his assassination by dissident army members in 1981. During his presidency, General Zia banned political parties in an attempt to reform and stabilize political processes, invigorate the economy, and restore law and order. He eventually lifted martial law and brought back elections that were reasonably democratic. After his assassination, however, elections were suspended and military rule returned.

⁵⁰ Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

Recent History

Although democracy in Bangladesh has been re-established, governance remains weak and is marred by a lack of structure to support meaningful opposition. Elections have been repeatedly marked by violence and disruption, including boycotting and strikes by opposition groups of the main political parties. Infighting has been ongoing among the major political parties include the longstanding Awami League, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and the Jatiya Party. The country has been further destabilized by rebellious tribal elements in the Chittagong Hill Tracts who want autonomous rule.

Political tension increased when an Islamist group called Jamiatul Mujahideen, Bangladesh (JMB) demanded that the government institute Shari'a law in place of the secular legal system. To publicize their demand, they bombed government buildings in most of the country's districts on 17 August 2005. They followed this with attacks on judicial employees, killing a total of 28 lawyers, judges, and police officers. The government responded by arresting hundreds of people and harshly sentencing those found responsible.

As of late 2007, the political turmoil has continued in Bangladesh. In January 2007, the Awami League announced its plans to boycott upcoming parliamentary elections. They also planned to organize transportation blockades and general strikes throughout the country. A few days later, President Iajuddin Ahmed declared a state of emergency, postponed elections, and suspended many constitutional rights held by citizens. The government claims that elections will be held in late 2008.

Economy^{51, 52}

Bangladesh is one of the world's poorest countries. It is severely overpopulated, which contributes to the nation's poverty. Other contributors are the inefficiency of its many state-owned enterprises that were nationalized after independence and its chaotic regulatory environment. By increasing imports and domestic production, the country has made progress in meeting nutritional needs, although an estimated 10–15% of the population is at nutritional risk. The rich agricultural land and abundant supply of water are resources that hold promise for future gains. Still, lack of development, infrastructure, and an industrial base has held back growth in general.

Agriculture

The Bangladeshi economy is primarily agricultural. Two-thirds of the country's people earn their living in this sector, although it only contributes 19% to the gross domestic product (GDP). The main



© colonos / flickr.com
Tea harvest

⁵¹ CIA World Factbook. "Bangladesh." 24 January 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>

⁵² Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

crops are rice, jute, wheat, maize, and vegetables. Because of the rich soil and plentiful supply of water, three crops of rice per year can be harvested in some areas. In the northeast, tea is a principal crop. Agricultural production cycles have been hampered by limited networks of rural credit and transportation, but some progress has taken place in this area.

Because agriculture in Bangladesh depends on irregular monsoons, crops are frequently at risk because of both drought and flooding. However, better flood control and an expanded irrigation network have somewhat mitigated disruptive weather conditions and led to higher yields of grain. These improvements have improved the nation's ability to feed its population, although it still relies on foreign aid. Expanded irrigation has also enabled many farmers to diversify their source of income by switching from growing wheat to growing maize, used primarily to feed poultry.

Manufacturing and Industry

The garment industry is Bangladesh's major source of growth and trade. It grew rapidly through the 1990s and has created many new jobs, mostly for women. The government has worked with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers Export Association, UNICEF, and the International Labor Organization to eliminate child labor in this industry. Reportedly child labor in garment manufacturing was eliminated by the end of 2001.

Other industries include production of jute products, paper, pharmaceuticals, and fertilizers, and the processing of tea. An industry has developed around breaking up ships for scrap metal, producing steel sufficient to meet the country's needs. The jute industry and most other industries are state-owned, following the pattern that was established at independence. Although a few industries have been privatized, most remain inefficiently managed and highly regulated by the government. Consequently, the industrial base remains weak.

Trade, Exports, and Imports

Trade with other countries is weakened by barriers such as high tariffs. Restrictions placed on investment in market sectors and a chaotic regulatory environment are further impediments to free trade. Laws are often politicized, and widespread corruption affects the government and the economy, discouraging foreign trade and investment.⁵³ Its most active global trading is in the garment industry.

Jute⁵⁴ and jute products are one of Bangladesh's main exports from its agricultural sector. Other exports include readymade garments, making up over three-fourths of the country's total exports.



⁵³ The Heritage Foundation. Index of Economic Freedom, 2008. "Bangladesh." c.2008. <http://www.heritage.org/index/country.cfm?id=Bangladesh>

⁵⁴ Jute is a natural vegetable fiber that is spun into coarse, strong thread for textile and other uses.

Bangladesh also exports frozen seafood, leather products, ceramics, and pharmaceuticals. The U.S. is a major export partner, receiving nearly 25% of Bangladesh's exported goods. Germany and the United Kingdom are next, at 12.8 % and 9.8%, respectively.⁵⁵

Bangladesh imports food to meet the needs of its vast population. It also imports oil and machinery, necessary to developing its industrial sector. In 2006, its main import partners were China (17.7%), India (12.5%), Kuwait (7.9%), Singapore, and Hong Kong.⁵⁶

Ethnic Groups and Languages

Most of the country's minority ethnic groups live in the Chittagong Hills Tracts, a narrow strip of land in southeastern Bangladesh near the borders with India and Myanmar. The people who live here are indigenous non-Muslim tribes, separate from the Bengalis who occupy 98% of the country. Two of the main tribes are the Chakma and the Marma. The Chakma live in the Karnaphuli River valleys of Chittagong. The Marma, Buddhists, also live in the Chittagong Hills region. Both tribes speak Arakanese, their primary language.^{57, 58}



© Dan Weber
Marma buddhist novice

Other tribal peoples who live in the Chittagong Hills Tracts are also Buddhist, some related to the people of Myanmar. All combined, they comprise 12 language groups. Many tribal members have rebelled against an influx of Muslim Bengalis trying to settle in the region. Periodic violence that stems from the ongoing ethnic tension has marked the region since the mid-1970s.⁵⁹

Another minority ethnic group in Bangladesh includes a number of non-Bengali Muslims (Biharis) who speak Urdu. They originally migrated to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) from India after the subcontinent was partitioned in 1947.⁶⁰ Many remain stateless, forced to live in camps across the country and still referred to as Pakistanis by the Bangladeshis.⁶¹ Many others, however, have acquired citizenship in Bangladesh.

Bangla (also called Bengali) is the national language of Bangladesh. A total of 39 languages are spoken in the country, however, mainly among small tribes who populate

⁵⁵ Export figures shown are for 2006. CIA World Factbook. "Bangladesh." 24 January 2008.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>

⁵⁶ CIA World Factbook. "Bangladesh." 24 January 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>

⁵⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. "Bangladesh Ethnic Composition and Distribution." 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-33431/Bangladesh#409344.hook>

⁵⁸ Joshua Project. Marma of Bangladesh. 11 January 2008.

<http://www.joshuaproject.net/peopctry.php?rog3=BG&rop3=113113>

⁵⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. "Bangladesh Ethnic Composition and Distribution." 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-33431/Bangladesh#409344.hook>

⁶⁰ Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

⁶¹ Refugees International. "Stateless Biharis in Bangladesh: A Humanitarian Nightmare." 13 December 2004. <http://www.refintl.org/content/article/detail/4666>

the Chittagong Hills Tracts. Approximately 530,000 people speak languages classified as Tibeto-Burman found in this southeastern area. Specific languages include Arakanese and Burmese, both belonging to this language division.⁶²

⁶² Ethnologue. "Languages of Bangladesh." c.2008.
http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=BD

Religion

Overview

Bengalis are a diverse people in terms of nationality, political beliefs, and religion. Their religious differences can be seen by contrasting Bengalis in West Bengal, India, with Bengalis in Bangladesh. In West Bengal, the majority is Hindu. In Bangladesh, however, which is almost entirely Bengali, 88% of the population is Muslim, and only 10% Hindu.⁶³

Islam

Islam is the world's second largest religion, with over one billion followers worldwide. Those who profess Islam are members of the *Umma*, or community of Muslim believers throughout the world. Their faith is grounded in surrender to God (Allah), although there is great diversity in Islamic practices in various parts of the world.⁶⁴ In Bangladesh, Islam is the professed religion of the overwhelming majority of people. Most are Sunnis, and a small number of Shi'a Muslims live in the cities.

Islam was founded by the Arab prophet, Muhammad, based on Allah's revelation to him that began in 610 C.E.⁶⁵ The revelation described a way of life prescribed by Allah that people should follow during their time on earth.⁶⁶ Within a century, Islam had spread through North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and parts of Asia. Sufi saints and Muslim merchants originally spread the Islamic religion in South Asia, where it existed alongside local traditions and cultures. Today, around one third of the world's Muslim population is found in South Asia.⁶⁷



⁶³ Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

⁶⁴ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "Islam in South Asia." July 2004. <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=1582&prog=zgp&proj=zsa>

⁶⁵ The University of Georgia. Dr. A. Godlas. "Islam and Islamic Studies Resources." c1997–2008. <http://www.uga.edu/islam/#islam>

⁶⁶ University of Southern California. "USC-MSA Compendium of Muslim Texts." 1996. <http://www.princeton.edu/~humcomp/alkhaz.html>

⁶⁷ The Library of Congress. CRS Report for Congress. Vaughn, Bruce. "Islam in South and Southeast Asia." 8 February 2005. <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/43999.pdf>

After the Prophet's death in 632 C.E., Islamic believers came to disagree about how Muslim successors should be chosen. Muhammad did not establish this procedure, but instead left it up to the religious community. His close followers chose Muhammad's friend, Abu Bakr, to be the first *caliph*, or presider over the period of "God on earth" (the first caliphate).⁶⁸ The question of rightful succession came up in 656 after the third caliph was assassinated and succeeded by the 4th *caliph*, Ali, who was the Prophet's cousin. Disagreement over whether religious leaders should be of the Prophet's lineage or independent of it followed and led to war. Shi'a Muslims believed that successors to Muhammad should be his descendants. Sunnis, who now comprise more than 90% of the *Umma*, alternately believed such leaders should be chosen through an election or selection process. Their religious practice typically has minimal hierarchical leadership, in contrast to that of Shi'a Islam with its centralized hierarchy.



© philippe tarbounch
Imam reading Koran

Both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims believe that the Holy Quran contains the words revealed by Allah (God) to the Prophet Muhammad.⁶⁹ They believe in living one's life in accordance with the laws of Allah as set forth in the Quran. To accomplish this, believers must follow the Five Pillars of Faith. These include affirming one's faith, observing daily prayer, giving alms to charities, fasting during Ramadan, and going on pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca during one's lifetime.

Hinduism

Hinduism, the second largest religion in Bangladesh, does not have a centralized authority or doctrine written in one fundamental source. It lacks formal institutions such as those present in many of the world's religions, including Islam and Christianity. A famous Hindu religious saying states, "Truth is one; sages call it by different names."⁷⁰

Not a prescribed organized religion, Hinduism is instead a system of beliefs based on the authority contained in India's oldest sacred texts, the Vedas. The author of the *Rigveda*, earliest of the Vedic texts, is not known. It was written sometime around 1500 B.C.E. Besides the Vedas, Hindu priests, or *Brahmans*, are also sources of authority for Hindus.



© Ziaif2089 / wikipedia.org
Hindu temple, Bandarban

Hindus acknowledge more than one deity and see all deities as representations of one "ultimate reality," which has various names.⁷¹ Beliefs include the existence of an undying soul which reincarnates after death, and the presence of *Karma*, a cyclic law that guides

⁶⁸ *Islamic Societies in Practice*. Fluehr-Lobban, Carolyn. "Chapter 2: The Five Pillars of Islam [p. 22]." 2004. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.

⁶⁹ The Quran is distinct from the *hadith*, which are the sayings of Muhammad.

⁷⁰ Religion Facts. "Hindu Beliefs." 15 November 2006. <http://www.religionfacts.com/hinduism/beliefs.htm>

⁷¹ Religion Facts. "Hindu Beliefs." 15 November 2006. <http://www.religionfacts.com/hinduism/beliefs.htm>

one's destiny through successive lifetimes. Underlying most rituals of the religion is an awareness of the division between purity and pollution.⁷² Water and fire are often used as purifying agents in Hindu religious ceremonies. Hindus also believe it is necessary to avoid impure acts, such as killing animals, in order to avoid spiritual pollution. Most Hindu religious devotion and ritual ceremonies take place in the home.

In recent years, nationalistic Hindu groups have arisen in India, and some have ties in Bangladesh. Similar to Islamist or other fundamentalist groups,⁷³ nationalist Hindu groups promote an authoritarian religious state. The religious symbolism of Hindu nationalism can be seen in the naming of India's ballistic missile "Agni," a Vedic god of fire. This name was assigned by the nationalist Hindu BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party-led) government of India in 1998.⁷⁴ An affiliated organization, the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad), requested that a temple be built near the nuclear test site and dedicated to Shakti, Hindu goddess of power.⁷⁵

Hindus in the area that is now Bangladesh constituted approximately 50% of the population in 1872.⁷⁶ Rising nationalism in India in the late 19th century was accompanied by increasing divisions between Muslims and Hindus in the region.⁷⁷ At the time of Partition (1947), the percentage of Hindus dropped to 22%. Over ten million Hindus from the Bangladesh area (then East Pakistan) fled to India in the half century that followed Partition. Many were forced to escape during the violent revolt in 1971 that gave birth to Bangladesh as a nation.⁷⁸ Today, only 10% of Bangladesh's population is Hindu.⁷⁹ Documented persecution of this minority community has continued up to the present.⁸⁰

⁷² Geographic.org. Photius. India. The Ceremonies of Hinduism. 10 November 2004.

http://www.photius.com/countries/india/society/india_society_the_ceremonies_of_hi~88.html

⁷³ The term "Islamist" refers to Islam that has an added layer of militant political action. The term "Islamism" derives from the term "Islamic Fundamentalism," which refers to Islamic ideas that have been very narrowly or literally interpreted and then politicized. Alternately, it is similar to using religion in the political arena. Source: *Islamic Societies in Practice*. Fluehr-Lobban, Carolyn. "Chapter 2: The Five Pillars of Islam [p. 22]." 2004. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.

⁷⁴ Bhatt, Chetan. *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths*. 2001. Oxford: Berg.

⁷⁵ Bhatt, Chetan. *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths*. 2001. Oxford: Berg.

⁷⁶ Hinduism Today. "A Bleak Future for Bangladesh Hindu's [sic]." February 2000.

<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/2000/2/2000-2-07.shtml>

⁷⁷ Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

⁷⁸ Hinduism Today. "A Bleak Future for Bangladesh Hindu's [sic]." February 2000.

<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/2000/2/2000-2-07.shtml>

⁷⁹ Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

⁸⁰ Hindu American Foundation. "Congressman Pallone Condemns Persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh Following Meetings with Hindu American Foundation." 20 May 2004.

http://www.hinduamericanfoundation.org/media_press_release_pallone-bangladesh.htm

The Role of Religion in the Government

The Bangladeshi government was set up in 1972 along democratic, secular, parliamentary lines. Although democratization was interrupted by a series of military coups, martial law, and suspension of the constitution, religion has never dominated the nation's politics.^{81, 82}

Post-1971 elements in the government, such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, tried to expand the government's role in people's lives, providing funding for religious institutions and organizing pilgrimages to Mecca. A formal change occurred in June 1988, when Parliament passed a constitutional amendment that made Islam the state religion of Bangladesh. Shortly thereafter, the fundamentalist Islamic party Jamaat-I-Islami (JI) became an active part of Parliament, although it did not retain much influence.⁸³ The 1988 amendment created some tension but did not have much influence on national life or the way Bangladeshis practiced religion.



© Soman / wikipedia.org
Islamic student rally

Courts in Bangladesh follow an Anglo-Indian criminal and civil legal system that has been modified, and they do not adhere to Shari'a law. Demanding that the government replace the secular legal system with religious Shari'a courts, an Islamist group violently attacked the courts and judicial personnel in 2005. The government fought back against the Jamaat ul Mujahideen as Bangladesh (JMB), arresting and sentencing those found guilty. Since then, the government has come under emergency rule and elections have been suspended.

In 2006, the Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities (HRCBM) filed litigation against the government of Bangladesh to demand protection for religious minorities. The HRCBM states in its lawsuit that it wants the constitution upheld as it was written at the time of independence. Specifically, Articles 27, 31, 40, 41, 42, and 43 of the constitution guarantee fundamental rights for religious minorities. These rights include equal protection of the law, freedom of religion and profession, and the protected right to acquire property. Such rights, the HRCBM claims, are being violated by the government.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. "Bangladesh Government." 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-33444/Bangladesh>

⁸² About.com. "Bangladesh: Islam in Bangladesh." c2008.

http://atheism.about.com/library/FAQs/islam/countries/bl_BangladeshIslam.htm

⁸³ Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

⁸⁴ HRCBM. Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities. "Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court of Bangladesh." 2006. http://www.hrcbm.org/news/writ_HRCBM_Bangladesh_2006.html

Influence of Religion in Daily Life⁸⁵

A religious group known as *ulama* provides the community with orthodox Islamic leadership. They are not ordained priests, although people rely on them as such in that the *ulama* unofficially administer and interpret religious law. They act to preserve and promote the Islamic way of life, often entering into political activities. Many among them have received training in religious law and theology. The *mullahs*, a part of the *ulama* who provide prayer services and other religious functions, have not received such training. Despite this, people rely on *mullahs* to conduct funeral and marriage ceremonies and give advice on religious practice. *Mullahs* also earn income from selling talismans and charms which are popular protections against evil or dangerous influences.



Shrine, Pir Khan Jahan

Sufi priests were prominent in converting people to Islam in South Asia, and Sufism has a wide following among the people of Bangladesh today. Because Sufis emphasize an unstructured and personal relationship with God, tension exists between them and Muslim scholars who emphasize formal doctrine. Still, many Bangladeshis follow their Sufi guides, called *pirs* in Bangladesh, and pursue a spiritual life that is more open to interpretation in comparison with formal Islam. Sufism or elements of it is especially popular among rural villagers. Many villages have sites where Sufi saints and holy people are buried. The villagers go to these sites to pray for good weather for their crops or for relief from ills that they or their family members have suffered.

Religious Events and Holidays

Listed below are religious public holidays in Bangladesh and their dates for 2008:⁸⁶

- New Year's Day on 1 January;
- Islamic New Year on 20 January;
- Buddha *Purnima* on 2 May;
- *Durga Puja (Dashami)* on 2 October;
- *Shab e-Qadr* (Evening of Destiny) on 20 October.

⁸⁵ About.com. "Bangladesh: Islam in Bangladesh." c2008.
http://atheism.about.com/library/FAQs/islam/countries/bl_BangladeshIslam.htm

⁸⁶ South Travels. "Bangladesh: Bangladesh Holidays." 2008.
<http://www.southtravels.com/asia/bangladesh/holidays.html>

Ramadan

A very special event in Bangladesh and other Islamic countries, the lunar month of Ramadan honors the time when Allah revealed the Quran to Muhammad. During Ramadan, which is concluded by *Eid-al-Fitr*, Muslim adults are obligated to purify themselves spiritually by fasting, abstaining from food and drink from dawn to sunset. Only the infirm, soldiers on duty, and the young are exempted. When families hear the call to prayer at sunset, they gather for the evening meal. Before dawn the following day they eat a small meal before resuming their daily fast.



© Henrik Brameus
Ramadan lights, Dhaka

This long, tiring period of fasting alters the usual rhythm of life in Bangladesh. It causes interruptions in normal patterns of business and social life in general. Working hours are reduced during Ramadan to allow more time for prayer. There may be restrictions on smoking, and some restaurants close during the day.

Non-Muslims are not expected to observe Ramadan. However, they earn respect by being sensitive to those who are fasting. Non-Muslims should try to avoid eating or smoking in public during the fast.

Eid-al-Fitr

Also a national holiday, *Eid-al-Fitr* is a religious festival that celebrates the end of Ramadan fasting on the 10th month of the Islamic calendar. In 2008, it is held in October.

Exchange 1: When do you pray?

Soldier:	When do you pray?	aapnaRa koken pRatunaa koRen?
Local:	We pray at noon.	amRaa dupuR baaRotey praaRtunaa kuRee

⁸⁷ South Travels. "Bangladesh: Bangladesh Holidays." 2008.
<http://www.southtravels.com/asia/bangladesh/holidays.html>

⁸⁸ Virtual Bangladesh. "Religions Festivals and Holidays." 17 August 2006.
http://www.virtualbangladesh.com/bd_festivals.html

Eid-al-Fitr usually lasts three days, but can last up to ten, depending on the region. Sometimes called the “Small *Eid*,” it is one of Bangladesh’s major festivals. In this celebration, Bangladeshi Muslims visit each other’s homes, exchange gifts, give charity to the poor, and visit the gravesites of their deceased relatives. Children dress in brightly colored clothing and families gather for a special meal. Businesses close and employees often receive bonuses in honor of the holiday.⁸⁹



© Sarah Looney
Applying Henna for Eid

Eid-al-Adha

Eid-al-Adha, a national holiday in Bangladesh, is another of the country’s major Islamic festivals. It is celebrated around two months after *Eid-al-Fitr*, at the end of December in 2008 for Bangladesh. Like *Eid-al-Fitr*, it typically lasts three days but can last longer, depending on the region. This festival commemorates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son in obedience to Allah. Families sacrifice sheep, goats, camels, or cows. They divide the meat among themselves and share it with the needy, including servants, beggars, and those in orphanages.⁹⁰

Muharram

The religious observance of *Muharram* takes place during the first month of the Islamic calendar also called *Muharram*.⁹¹ During this month, Bangladeshi Shi’a Muslims mourn the death of Imam Husain, Muhammad’s grandson. Most people wear black, avoid entertainment, and attend special religious services. In this month, they also avoid arranging marriages. *Ashura* takes place on the tenth day of mourning when people march through the streets expressing their grief.

Sufi Celebrations

The anniversary of the death of a Sufi *pir* (guide or saint) is an observed occasion each year in Bangladesh. It is considered as a favorable time to ask for the *pir*’s help or intercession in one’s life. Large numbers of orthodox Muslims as well as Sufi practitioners attend *pir* anniversaries, celebrated as festivals. These celebrations strongly resemble a form that characterizes many Hindu rituals.

Hindu and Buddhist Celebrations

Non-Muslim Bangladeshi religious festivals include *Shabi Barat* (“Festival for the Bestowal of Fate”), which



© Rajiv Ashrafi
Durga Puja, Dhaka

⁸⁹ Religion Facts. “Eid Al-Fitr.” 10 January 2005. <http://www.religionfacts.com/islam/holidays/fitr.htm>.

⁹⁰ Religion Facts. “Eid Al-Adha: Festival of the Sacrifice.” 02 February 2005. <http://www.religionfacts.com/islam/holidays/adha.htm>

⁹¹ U.S. Naval Observatory. 31 January 2008. “A Brief Introduction to the Islamic Calendar.” <http://aa.usno.navy.mil/faq/docs/islamic.php>

is of Hindu origins. Hindu influence is also seen in rituals intended to exorcise evil *jinni* (spirits) from people who are considered possessed. And in villages, little distinction may be observed between Muslim and Hindu shrines. One example of this overlap is found in rural areas of Bangladesh where shrines known as *satyapir* dot the landscape. Such shrines commemorate a Hindu-Muslim deity called *Olabibi* who has the power to intervene and possibly cure people from cholera.⁹²

The Hindu festival of *Durga Puja* (*Dashami*) on 2 October celebrates the vanquishing of demons or evil spirits. On this day, people wash their cars and decorate them with mango leaves and flowers. They share sweets with each other and may watch a traditional performance of the life of *Rama*.

Buddhist festivals are also held in Bangladesh. The exact time of their observance depends on local astronomical observations. For this reason, their dates cannot be accurately predicted.⁹³ One Buddhist holiday, Buddha *Purnima*, is scheduled as a national holiday on 2 May 2008. It celebrates the birth of Buddha, along with his enlightenment. The actual celebration takes place on the first full moon of *Baishakh*, a certain month in the Bengali calendar.⁹⁴

Buildings of Worship^{95, 96}

Many of Bangladesh's most famous mosques and temples are archeological treasures. In 1971, the government began excavating sites and has made important discoveries that shed light on the early religious history of the area. Not only have significant findings been made about the Islamic and Hindu religions, but the government has also discovered a rich Buddhist history. Under the patronage of kings who ruled Buddhist dynasties, several large monasteries were built throughout the country. Of these, Paharpur is the largest monastery yet discovered south of the Himalayan Mountains. Antiquities from the site such as paintings, coins, images of goddesses, and pottery are housed in a museum nearby.

Islamic Mosques

The Shait-Gumbad Mosque is located in a mangrove forest in the Sundarbans region of southwestern Bangladesh. It was built in the mid 15th century as part of a Muslim colony by General Jahan, who brought Islam to



© Russell John
Shait Gumbad

⁹² About.com. "Bangladesh: Islam in Bangladesh." c2008.

http://atheism.about.com/library/FAQs/islam/countries/bl_BangladeshIslam.htm

⁹³ South Travels. "Bangladesh: Bangladesh Holidays." 2008.

<http://www.southtravels.com/asia/bangladesh/holidays.html>

⁹⁴ Virtual Bangladesh. "Religions Festivals and Holidays." 17 August 2006.

http://www.virtualbangladesh.com/bd_days_rel.html

⁹⁵ Skyscraper City. Historic and Colorful Mosques, Churches & Temples in Bangladesh. c2000.

<http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=474986>

⁹⁶ Discovery Bangladesh. "Archaeological Sites." No date. <http://www.discoverybd.com/archaeology.htm>

the southern area. He constructed an entire city including public buildings, roads, and mosques, the most elaborate being the Shait-Gumbad Masjid.

Built in the 16th century C.E. when Afghans ruled in Bengal, the Kushumba Mosque is a protected site under the Department of Archaeology of Bangladesh. It is named after a village that lies on the west bank of the Atrai River in Naogaon district. Surrounded by imposing walls, this mosque is decorated with elaborate stone carvings on its arches and pillars.

Hindu Temples

Traditionally, orthodox Hindu temples have been built on or near high places to emphasize the ascendancy of spiritual life over worldly concerns. They may be dedicated to different gods or goddesses and decorated with idols, such as the statue of Nataraja, representing Lord Shiva in a dance pose. This particular posture has deep meaning, signifying “the rhythm of life and death that orders the universe and is said to beat in the heart in a worshipper's body.”⁹⁷ Such representations should be approached with deep respect and a meditative attitude.



© P.K. Niyogi
Mahasthangarh

Several Hindu temples are located in Bangladesh. Mahasthangarh, a Hindu temple over 2,000 years old, is Bangladesh's oldest archeological site. Hindus still hold this temple sacred. Every April and once every 12 years in December, they congregate in a bathing ceremony at the temple, located on the bank of the Karatoa River.

The medieval Kantanagar Temple in Dinajpur was built in 1752 by Maharaja Pran Nath. Its ornate, three-storied towers collapsed when an earthquake struck in the 19th century. The remaining structure is still considered one of the best examples of its type of architecture. It was built by Bengali artisans who used terracotta and brick, carving elaborate designs and mythological scenes on the temple's many arches, pillars, and plaques.

Behavior in Places of Worship

Before entering a mosque, visitors should first ask permission.

⁹⁷ Art access. “Shiva as Lord of the Dance (Shiva Nataraja) India, Tamil Nadu, Tanjore.” August 2004. http://www.artic.edu/artaccess/AA_India/pages/India_3.shtml

Exchange 2: May I enter the temple?

Soldier:	May I enter the temple?	amee hee mondiRee dookta baRee?
Local:	Yes.	haa

When visiting a mosque in Bangladesh, it is important to dress conservatively, avoiding sheer or tight clothing, and removing one's shoes before entering.

Exchange 3: Must I take off my shoes?

Soldier:	Must I take off my shoes inside the temple?	mongiRey dookta gili kee amaa jooto kulta haabey?
Local:	Yes.	ha

Women should wear garments with sleeves, not tank tops or sleeveless blouses. Their clothing should be loose fitting, whether a long dress or skirt. Skirts should not be shorter than knee length. If a woman is wearing slacks, she should wear a sweater or blouse that is long enough to reach mid-thigh. Men should wear loose fitting pants and a shirt. All clothing should be clean, and neither men nor women should wear shorts.

Before entering the mosque, women are also advised to cover their head using some type of scarf, and remove makeup, perfume, or nail polish. Men are not required to cover their heads.

Exchange 4: Do I need to cover my head?

Soldier:	Do I need to cover my head?	amakey kee maataa daaktey haabey?
Local:	No.	naa

Once inside the mosque, visitors should observe silence as talking, even softly, can interrupt prayers. Also, visitors should avoid walking in front of those praying as this

may invalidate their prayers. Women and men generally pray in separate sections, and visitors should be sensitive to this tradition.

Visitors entering a Hindu temple should observe the same protocols as those that apply to a mosque. They should refrain from touching paintings or statues and be careful not to interrupt those who are praying or meditating.

Visitors who enter either a mosque or a temple should avoid taking photographs inside the building.



© Kamrul Hasan
Call to prayer

Traditions

Traditional Economy and Jobs

Agriculture

The British development of Calcutta as their administrative and business center in the 17th century had consequences for East Bengal (later East Pakistan, then Bangladesh). Being the main producer of rice and jute for traders and manufacturers in Calcutta, the region became economically tied to agriculture. After British India divided in 1947, East Pakistan experienced sudden, extreme population growth from Muslim refugees entering the area. To accommodate the growth, the country needed to modernize agriculture beyond the traditional methods and develop an industrial base, neither happened to any important degree.⁹⁸ The economy has remained primarily agricultural, and today, two-thirds of the country's people earn their living through farming and agriculture. The sector has barely modernized and is affected annually by disruptive weather cycles.



Subsistence farming on small farms is a way of life in Bangladesh. Farmers begin their agricultural work when the weather begins to get warm in late February each year. A large number of farmers still use wooden plows drawn by oxen, repeatedly plowing their fields over a period of a few weeks. They use weeds and dirt from the fields to construct plot boundaries that will cause the fields to hold water after the rain begins. Traditional irrigation methods they often still practice include the use of a hollowed-out log resting on a pivot and a swing basket, along with a pitcher. All of these implements depend on human labor and are not mechanized. Farmers in some areas use electric pumps to provide irrigation water from wells.⁹⁹

Handicrafts

For several generations, cottage industries in the Bangladesh region provided income for much of the population. Artisans produced textiles, jewelry, leather goods, and household items made of clay, pottery, cane, and bamboo. Jute also became a raw material used to make handicrafts after the Middle Ages. Embroidering quilts by hand (*nakshi kantha*) is

⁹⁸ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Bangladesh*. "Chapter 3: The Economy. Economic Context. " 'Historical Perspective.' " 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

⁹⁹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Bangladesh*. "Chapter 3: The Economy. Agriculture. " 'Structure of Agricultural Production.' " 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

also an old tradition that has rural origins in Bangladesh. People originally used the quilts to keep warm during the cold months, and the quilts later became art forms.¹⁰⁰

Textiles¹⁰¹

The textile business which is so prominent today in Bangladesh has a long history. Cotton fiber was a major trade item and an established industry in East Bengal and other areas of India by the 13th century. Its actual production in India dates back centuries to 3000 BCE or earlier.

In ancient Bengal, the weaving of fine muslin cloth was a renowned skill. Using bamboo looms, the weavers of Dhaka passed their craft down from one generation to the next. Moghul rulers gave patronage to cloth weavers of great ability, and governors gave fine muslin cloth to emperors as tribute payments. British officials of the East India Company kept detailed, documented records of this weaving industry and the quality of its product, which was introduced to England around 1666. The unique ritual of the weaving process in one region of Bengal comes to light in the description that follows:



© E / flickr.com
Hand weaver

“The breezes that waft from the [Meghna] river over the village on its banks (especially the morning air before the sun rises high) give the weaver his ‘gift of the loom’. The weaver ... kept his elementary links with nature. He held on ritualistically to the rising at dawn to start weaving, the fixing of taana and baana (arranging yarns in order) when breezes are light at different hours of the day, the mode of weaving during the monsoon rains, the applying of starch in the dry afternoon air and maintained seasonal time, the season to stop weaving, fold up the looms and attend the village ‘melas’ (trade fair). Even to this day the weavers preserve habits and activities that conform to the rainy season, stormy weather, and the dry winters, keeping their looms in tune with the earth on which it stands. In fact, it is amazing that the shape and design of the bamboo loom placed over a clay floor pit is unchanged over the past centuries.”¹⁰²

Some of the best weavers in Bengal worked out of Dhaka, where a longer staple of cotton was used than in other areas. The Dhaka weavers created designs representing indigenous Hindu patterns and Persian motifs as well as Islamic geometric abstractions. They produced cloth to satisfy both the local working population and the richer classes. Their

¹⁰⁰ Bangladesh Open. Bangladesh Debating Council, BDC. “Art.” 2007.
<http://www.bangladeshopen.net/culture.htm>

¹⁰¹ CottonBangladesh. Ahmad, Perveen. “Traditional Textiles of Bangladesh.” 2007.
<http://www.cottonbangladesh.com/January2007/TraditionalTextileOfBD.htm>

¹⁰² CottonBangladesh. Ahmad, Perveen. “Traditional Textiles of Bangladesh.” 2007.
<http://www.cottonbangladesh.com/January2007/TraditionalTextileOfBD.htm>

industry declined in the 18th century as a result of mechanization of cloth production in England and the export of raw cotton to England. Many weavers became unemployed and were forced into agricultural work or other jobs, and the fine muslins of old became increasingly rare.

Greetings

The Bangladeshi people are known for their friendliness and willingness to help strangers or newcomers to the culture. Greeting them in a friendly, sincere manner is a way to open the door to further conversation.

Exchange 5: Good morning.

Soldier:	Good morning.	shoopRa bvaat
Local:	Good morning.	shoopRa bvaat

When encountering or meeting a local person, a polite greeting shows respect for the culture and the individual. This approach is likely to result in a favorable reception and a willingness to be helpful.

Exchange 6: Good afternoon.

Soldier:	Good afternoon.	shoobo beekaal
Local:	Good afternoon.	shoobo beekel

When locals introduce their family members, they follow a hierarchical order engrained in the culture. It is important for a visitor to acknowledge this and start off by greeting the elders, who are respected for their age, and then greet those of lesser rank. The senior male is always the one who makes decisions for the group, reflecting everyone's best interests.



© Steve Evans
Friendly welcome

Exchange 7: Are you doing well?

Soldier:	Hi, Mr. Das.	naamushkaaR daash baabu
Local:	Hello!	naamushkaaR!
Soldier:	Are you doing well?	apnaaR kabaR paalu to?
Local:	Yes.	ha

After exchanging initial greetings, the conversation can begin. Visitors should be aware that in Islamic culture, the family takes precedence over individuals. Each person is an extension of the family to which he or she belongs. At the start of a conversation and as part of the greeting, it is not only a form of politeness but also a ritual necessity to inquire about the health of the family.

Exchange 8: How is your family?

Soldier:	How is your family?	apnaaR poReevaaR kamoon?
Local:	They are doing fine, thank you.	taRao bhal waachey, dan-navaad

In general, conversational exchanges should not be overly direct or inquisitive, but simply friendly and polite.

Exchange 9: How are you?

Soldier:	How are you?	aapnee kaamon aachen?
Local:	Fine, very well.	baalo, koob baalo

When meeting Bangladeshi men, visitors should shake hands, using their right hand. Although westerners usually shake hands with a firm grip, the Bangladeshi tradition is to use a rather soft grip when shaking hands.¹⁰³

Exchange 10: Good evening!

Soldier:	Good evening!	shoobo shandaa!
Local:	Good evening!	shoobo shandaa!

Greeting women should only be done in the presence of the men, usually family members, who accompany them. Further, a male visitor should not offer to shake hands with a Bangladeshi woman, as it is overly direct or even offensive and likely to make the woman feel uncomfortable. Instead, the visitor should simply nod and issue a spoken greeting, or follow the female's lead. It is only appropriate to shake hands with a woman if she offers first. Then, the handshake should be very light, touching only the fingertips.



© Sam Sherratt
Bangladesh Woman

Exchange 11: Good night!

Soldier:	Good night!	shoobRo aatRee!
Local:	Good night!	shoobRo aatRee!

Muslim men who are relatives or close friends commonly hold hands or hug each other. This should not be interpreted in light of American culture, which could be judgmental in a negative way. In Bangladeshi Muslim tradition, such close gestures between men imply kinship or friendship and nothing more. Bangladeshi women also are emotionally expressive with each other, holding hands or kissing on the cheek. Again, such gestures are an indication of friendship or kinship. They are also reserved for close friends and relatives, never to be used as forms of greeting by visitors.

¹⁰³ India Pakistan Trade Unit. IPTU. "Bangladesh." c.2006.
http://www.iptu.co.uk/content/bangladesh_business_cult.asp#1

Communication, Hospitality, and Gift-Giving¹⁰⁴

Bangladesh is a culture in which the style of communication is indirect, as opposed to the direct style valued in American and some European cultures. Bangladeshis tend to speak in long sentences that are only understood indirectly and in the context of body language. It follows that when an American asks a question of a local person, the responses may seem vague. This does not imply rudeness. It only means that the speaker does not want to offend the questioner by giving a response that might be disappointing. Likewise, it is considered rude for a visitor to directly turn down an invitation to visit a Bangladeshi's home. If one has to pass, it's better to use indirect language such as "I will see if I can be available then," or "I'll try to be there."



When entering a Bangladeshi home, visitors should find out local customs in advance concerning etiquette and make an effort to follow those customs. It also helps to simply observe the customs and behavior of the host and of others at the event in question. For instance, guests customarily remove their shoes before entering a home, and they wash their hands before eating. Also, when dining, the host will serve the guests first, but the guests should not begin eating until after the eldest person begins.

Formal manners apply in Bangladesh. Visitors should graciously acknowledge the hospitality of their host, showing that they appreciate the invitation.

Exchange 12: I appreciate your hospitality.

Soldier:	I really appreciate your hospitality.	aamee apnaaR aatee yotaay oneyk pRoshangsha kuR
Local:	It is nothing.	aa-o keechoo naa

It is not necessary to bring a gift if invited into a Bangladeshi home. If, however, a visitor particularly wishes to offer a gift, it can be something like chocolates or pastries of good quality. Guests should be aware that since Muslims do not drink alcohol, alcoholic beverages should never be offered as gifts. Similarly, a guest should avoid taking pork products into Muslim homes because of the religious restriction against eating pork. A gift of money is also inappropriate.

¹⁰⁴ Kwintessential Cross Cultural Solutions. "Bangladesh: Language, Culture, Customs, and Etiquette." No date. <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/bangladesh.html>

Exchange 13: This gift is for you.

Soldier:	This gift is for you.	ey oop-haata aapna jena anechee
Local:	I cannot accept this.	aa aamee eta neetey paRbonaa

Finally, if a guest wishes to offer flowers as a gift or expression of appreciation, they should never include frangipanis¹⁰⁵ or any white flowers. Both are used at funerals and are signs of mourning.

Gift givers will want to be aware that a host who receives a gift will almost always reciprocate by giving one in return. Also, he will not open the gift in front of the giver, as this reflects bad form.



© Mark Summan
Flower Stalls, Ranjpur

To make the best impression, a person invited to a Bangladeshi's home should wear clean, conservative clothing. Appearance and dress are seen as indicators of good manners. Clothing that is sheer, revealing, sleeveless, tight, or short reflects bad manners and lack of respect.

Exchange 14: How should I dress?

Soldier:	How should I dress?	aamee kee jamakapuR puRvoo?
Local:	Wear loose fitting clothes which cover your body.	ha deeleydaala jaamakapuR puRun

When a host offers coffee or tea, it's a good idea to politely accept this offer even if one does not normally drink the kind of tea or coffee being offered. Rejecting the host's hospitality indicates poor manners and could even be seen as a personal rejection of the host.

Showing interest in the food that the host is serving and expressing appreciation for its quality is a mark of good intentions.

¹⁰⁵ Frangipanis are white plumeia flowers also known as lei flowers.

Exchange 15: What is the name of this dish?

Soldier:	What is the name of this dish?	ey raan-naaR naam kee?
Local:	This is Chingri Macher Malaieytaa chingRee maacheR maaley kaaRee Curry.	

Also, it is a hard and fast rule that one should use only the right hand to hold utensils or pass food at the dinner table. This is also true when presenting a gift, use only the right hand. It is considered rude to use the left hand in social interactions or when eating and drinking.

As the meal comes to an end, it's a good rule of thumb to remember to compliment the host or the person who cooked the food.

Exchange 16: The food tastes good.

Soldier:	The food tastes so good.	kabaRtaa shutee baalo
Local:	Thank you.	danavaad

Dress Codes ^{106, 107, 108}

In Bangladesh, local people wear conservative clothing adapted to climate and purpose. Women wear traditional, loose-fitting Indian-style *saris* made of cloth that weavers in the villages produce on hand looms. Depending on the occasion, the cloth may be fine muslin or it may be a coarser, more utilitarian grade of cotton. More expensive qualities of fabric are often decorated with fine, hand-stitched designs and embroidery. Women also wear clothing made of silk fabric for formal occasions. Inexpensive artificial silk is popular among women who cannot afford silk fabric. The *salwar-kameez*, a loose, long tunic worn over loose slacks with elastic at the ankles, is popular among



© Michael Foley
Colorful sari

¹⁰⁶ Bangladesh.com. "Discover the Culture of Bangladesh." c.1995–2007.

<http://www.bangladesh.com/culture/>

¹⁰⁷ Window2Bangladesh. "Directory: Clothing." c.2004. http://www.bangladeshinc.com/w2bd/liv_cloth.asp

¹⁰⁸ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. "Bangladesh Daily Life." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-33448/Bangladesh>

schoolgirls, housewives, and professional women. It is often worn for outdoor activities.

Many women in urban areas wear adapted western-style clothing. This includes dresses of modest length and blouses with different kinds of sleeves. In all cases, women's clothing is never sheer, provocative, tight, or revealing in any way.

Bangladeshi men wear slacks and casual shirts, long or short sleeved. They began to adopt this western style of dress after the end of the Second World War. In rural and poor urban areas, they wear a cloth called a *lungi* wrapped around the lower half of the body, similar to a sarong. To accompany this, they wear short vests. Middle-class men wear a different style, often adopting a knee-length collarless shirt called a *panjabi* over lightweight, loose cotton slacks.

For business purposes, men usually wear slacks and an open-collar shirt or, more conservatively, a suit and tie. If the occasion is formal, they may wear a suit and tie or dress more traditionally in slacks and a loose tunic with a waistcoat or long cloak worn over it. A turban complements the traditional outfit.

If a visitor is uncertain as to what to wear, asking a local person for advice is a good policy.

Exchange 17: Is this acceptable to wear?

Soldier:	Is this acceptable to wear?	eta kee paRbaR pojukto?
Local:	Yes.	Ha

Cuisine^{109, 110}

Eating Traditions

Women are in charge of preparing, cooking, and serving food. This has been true since ancient times in Bengali culture. Young women are trained early in their lives to assume authority in the kitchen. Other gender rules also apply, such as the custom for men and women to retire to separate areas when they dine. Women are responsible for cleaning up after meals and restoring order to the kitchen.

¹⁰⁹ Tripod.com. "Eating and Serving Bengali Foods." No date.
http://jng_chef.tripod.com/Bengali_Culture.htm#Eat_Serve

¹¹⁰ Kwintessential Cross Cultural Solutions. "Bangladesh: Language, Culture, Customs, and Etiquette." No date. <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/bangladesh.html>

Among Hindus, cooking has historically had spiritual or religious connections. The Brahmins, or religious leaders, divided foods into categories that were best suited to sustain different kinds of occupations. For instance, those who followed ascetic lifestyles would eat differently than warriors and kings. The Brahmins themselves were vegetarian and ate mostly light, bland foods.



Types of Food

The Bangladeshi diet includes a range of vegetables, grains, and meat. White rice, vegetables, and fish are staple foods, although many devout Hindus do not eat fish or animal products, especially beef. Meat is widely eaten, especially chicken and goat. Muslims avoid consumption of pork for religious reasons. Protein sources also include beans, peas, and lentils (a category known as “pulses”). Sweets, including a large variety of milk-based products, are popular among all classes of Bangladeshis.

At festive occasions such as weddings, hosts serve rice pilau, or rice mixed with pieces of meat and vegetables. They also include highly-spiced curry sauces and meats to celebrate the occasion in style. Seafoods and vegetables are often cooked by frying them in oil, adding intense spices such as green and red chilis, mustard oil, saffron, and curry. Yogurt and lemon juice also flavor many specially prepared dishes.

Non-Religious Celebrations and Holidays ^{111, 112}

- Non-religious holidays include the following dates in 2008:
- International Mother Language Day on 21 February;
- Independence Day on 26 March;
- Bangla New Year on 14 April;
- Labour Day on 1 May;
- National Revolution Day on 7 November; and
- Victory Day (*Bijoy Dibosh*) on 16 December.

Some of these holidays are accompanied by large festivals. Other festive events in Bangladesh are not national holidays, simply occasions to celebrate.

¹¹¹ South Travels. “Bangladesh: Bangladesh Holidays.” 2008.
<http://www.southtravels.com/asia/bangladesh/holidays.html>

¹¹² Virtual Bangladesh. “Religions Festivals and Holidays.” 17 August 2006.
http://www.virtualbangladesh.com/bd_festivals.html

Bangla (Bengali) New Year

Held on 14 April 2008, Bengali New Year (also called *Pawhela Boishakh*) begins at sunrise. Throughout Bangladesh, rallies, colorful processions, and traditional singing mark this celebration of the New Year. Businesses close their books and begin a new ledger. At regional fairs, artists sell traditional crafts they have made, and food vendors sell an array of specialties.



Pawhela Falgoon

This first day of spring is celebrated with special programs throughout the country. On this day, people gather for picnics, spring fairs, and cultural performances, such as recitations of poetry. Wearing colorful clothing, people of all backgrounds socialize and exchange gifts.

Martyrs Day

Also known as International Mother Language Day as designated by UNESCO, this day is a national holiday, held on 21 February in 2008. It honors the lives of those who died in the effort to make Bangla (Bengali) a national language when Bangladesh was still part of Pakistan. The government of West Pakistan had attempted to make Urdu the national language for all, and Bengalis resisted. Four were shot and killed by police at a language rally. The nationalism that grew out of this event and the struggle over language spread widely and eventually resulted in independence for Bangladesh.

Independence Day

Independence Day on March 26 is also a national holiday. It was declared at the end of a war with Pakistan that lasted nine months and resulted in Bangladesh's nationhood. It is followed with Victory Day (*Bijoy Dibosh*) on 16 December, Pakistan's formal surrender date to the allied forces of India and Bangladesh.

Social Events

Weddings

Weddings in Bangladesh are sacred, festive occasions that involve large numbers of family members. They take place over a period of several days for all social classes, rich and poor alike. Pre-engagement rituals precede the wedding ceremony. They include *adan pradan*, in which a priest studies the bride's and groom's ancestral records to be sure the marriage partners are of different lineages. After the marriage is agreed upon, a senior member of the bridegroom's family brings the engagement ring to the bride in her home. Another tradition is a visit that the bride's family makes to that of the groom, to

bless him in a priest's presence. The groom's family in turn does the same, and both families exchange gifts.¹¹³

Other rituals take place the day before the wedding. Female friends and members of the bride's family attend to her and bring her gifts and good wishes and help to adorn her for the wedding. They sing together and decorate her hands with designs that they draw with henna dye. The bride and groom continue to exchange gifts from their respective households.

The wedding ceremony begins with the arrival of the groom and his family at the bride's house, heralded by noise-making from bells and conches. As he enters her household, an attendant sprinkles water over the doorstep. The wedding ceremony then takes place, with a priest officiating and chanting religious mantras. This ceremony marks the point at which the bride officially becomes the responsibility of the groom, a passage from her parents' household to his. After the ceremony, a feast takes place, as elaborate as the groom's budget will allow.^{114, 115}



© Mohammed Mustafizur Rahman
Bengali bride

Guests at a wedding will want to enter into the happy spirit of the event and offer congratulations to the bride and groom.

Exchange 18: Congratulations on your wedding!

Soldier:	Congratulations on your wedding!	apnaaR beebaaheR jeno obeenomon janaay!
Local:	We are honored you could attend.	aapnee taaktee paRey amRaa shon-maaneetoo

On the day after the wedding, the newlyweds depart for the groom's household, usually the home of his parents. The bride enters her father-in-law's house where she is ritually welcomed. A reception takes place in the evening at the couple's new home, and members of both families mingle together.

¹¹³ Bangladesh.com. "Wedding Customs of Bangladesh." c.1995–2007.
<http://www.bangladesh.com/wedding-customs/>

¹¹⁴ WebBangladesh.com. "Traditional Muslim Marriage of Bangladesh." c.2000–2001.
http://www.webbangladesh.com/history_culture/history_traditionalmarriage_001.htm

¹¹⁵ Bangladesh.com. "Wedding Customs of Bangladesh." c.1995–2007.
<http://www.bangladesh.com/wedding-customs/>

Funerals

Whether one is Muslim, Hindu, or a member of another religion, the loss of a family member is felt keenly in Bangladeshi culture. Funeral traditions vary, but it is always appropriate to express heartfelt condolences to a grieving family member.

Exchange 19: I would like to offer my condolences.

Soldier:	I would like to give my condolences to you and your family.	aamee apnaaR o apnaaR poReevaRey jeno shok pRokaash koRee
Local:	Thank you.	danavaad

Muslim Funerals^{116,117}

In a traditional Muslim funeral, the body is buried as soon as possible after death so that decomposition of the body is not delayed. Islamic law also requires that the body be bathed and covered before burial. Those who prepare the body traditionally wrap it in a white shroud.



© bangladeshboat / flickr.com
Digging graves after cyclone

Male members of the family carry the wooden casket on their shoulders as they walk to the burial site. Sometimes the deceased is not enclosed in a coffin; no covering is added aside from the white shroud. The men in attendance cover their heads as a sign of respect for the deceased.

Family members toss or shovel earth onto the coffin after it has been lowered into the ground. After the funeral ends, guests go to the home of the deceased's family to express condolences. The grieving period continues for three days, and during this time family members pray for the deceased.

¹¹⁶ BMJ. Education and Debate. Gatrads, A.R. "Muslim Customs Surrounding Death, Bereavement, Postmortem Examinations, and Organ Transplants." 20 August, 1994.
<http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/309/6953/521>

¹¹⁷ Everyculture.com. Harris, Michaels S. and Elizabeth Lloyd. "Culture of Bangladesh."
<http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Bangladesh.html>

Exchange 20: Please be strong.

Soldier:	Please be strong.	daaya koRey shokta hon
Local:	We will try.	amRaa cheshta koRbo

Hindu Funerals

Hindu believers expect that reincarnation will take place and the deceased will enter another lifetime. The deceased's life and actions determine the next life that he or she will be born into. In a traditional ceremony, the body is removed to a funeral pyre to a place along a riverbank. Prayers follow. The mourners cremate the body and scatter the ashes in the river.

Do's and Don'ts

Do use your entire *right* hand only to summon a person.

Do use your right hand only to eat, shake hands, or pass an object.

Do remove your shoes before you enter a mosque or temple.

Do not stare at or make advances to women in public or private.

Do not engage in overt expressions of affection with the opposite sex.

Do not touch someone on the head, unless the person is a small child.

Do not receive a present or pass an object to someone with your left hand. The left hand is considered unclean.

Do not point to anybody with a finger. Use the entire *right* hand instead.

Do not point upward with the middle finger. It is obscene in the U.S. and equally so in Bangladesh.

Do not use obscene or indecent language within earshot of Bangladeshi citizens. Many may be familiar with American slang.

Urban Life

Urbanization in Bangladesh has proceeded swiftly. In 1951, the country was almost entirely rural with only 4.3% of the population living in urban areas.¹¹⁸ By 1988, this figure increased to 18%, and the urban areas were mostly rural trade areas or villages.¹¹⁹ As of 2001, the country's percentage of urbanites was 23.4%, and a World Bank study predicts that an estimated 40% of the population will be urban by 2025.¹²⁰ The rapid increase of urbanization has led to the rise of megacities such as Dhaka (2001 population approximately 7.7 million),¹²¹ capital of Bangladesh.



© philippe tarbouniech
Dhaka river traffic

Urban Jobs and Workforce

Bangladesh's urban populations began to grow quickly in the 1980s when the government created new centralized subdistricts (*upazilas*) in which people could live. Although located in rural areas, these subdistricts were part of an urbanization pattern that resulted in the weakening of people's ties with their ancestral villages. The new small towns lacked a structure of formal leadership, and the housing consisted of "ramshackle structures" with almost no city services provided.¹²² People living in these new areas held jobs as merchants, government bureaucrats, and business employees.

Even though the majority of people in Bangladesh still work in rural areas, the city continues to become more important to the country's economy.¹²³ The major part of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) is generated from jobs found in the city. These jobs, mostly low-paying, are found in textile production, trades, manufacturing, and construction services.¹²⁴ Because



© MC Master Chef / flickr.com
Brick mason

¹¹⁸ Bangladesh National Report. "World Environment Day 2005: From Grim City to Green City." June 2005. http://www.sdnpsbd.org/sdi/international_days/wed/2005/bangladesh/index.htm

¹¹⁹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Studies: Bangladesh*. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment. Social System. Urban Society." 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

¹²⁰ Bangladesh National Report. "World Environment Day 2005: From Grim City to Green City." June 2005. http://www.sdnpsbd.org/sdi/international_days/wed/2005/bangladesh/index.htm

¹²¹ Citypopulation.de/Bangladesh. 31 July 2007. <http://www.citypopulation.de/Bangladesh-UA.html>

¹²² Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Studies: Bangladesh*. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment. Social System. Urban Society." 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

¹²³ Encyclopedia of the Nations. "Bangladesh Working Conditions." c.2007.

<http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Asia-and-the-Pacific/Bangladesh-WORKING-CONDITIONS.html>

¹²⁴ Bangladesh National Report. "World Environment Day 2005: From Grim City to Green City." June 2005. http://www.sdnpsbd.org/sdi/international_days/wed/2005/bangladesh/index.htm

wages are low, many workers leave the country to work in countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Malaysia, where they can earn more money.¹²⁵ They send their earnings home, and this income contributes substantially to the Bangladeshi economy.

Although the majority of urban dwellers in Bangladesh are laborers, a middle class also exists, made up of mid-level office managers and small business owners. They are represented by strong public-sector unions with ties to the political parties, and general strikes are frequent and long-lasting.¹²⁶ There is also a small upper class in Bangladesh. Many of its members have descended from wealthy Muslim merchants and officials from Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan.



Across the country, the household income of those living in urban areas is higher than that of rural residents. At the same time, inequality of income is higher in urban areas and this trend is increasing. As more of the landless rural population flees to the cities, the urban gulf between rich and poor widens.¹²⁷

The inequality of urban income is apparent in the slums of megacities such as Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Here, around three million residents have found shelter from environmental disasters that strike repeatedly. For instance, in the cyclone of 1970, high winds generated a tidal wave and floods which killed close to a million people.¹²⁸ The devastating effects of events such as this and less powerful annual storms have caused refugees from rural areas to stream into the cities. These farmers or landowners who have lost everything can barely survive in the slums of large cities where there are few jobs. In slum areas, many people live in small, hand-made shelters made of burlap and cardboard. The only available work is marginal, unstable, and very low-paying wage jobs from the informal sector, for which workers must compete on a daily basis. Ultimately, whether it is urban or rural, the highest levels of poverty in Bangladesh are found in disaster-prone areas or associated areas of refuge.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Encyclopedia of the Nations. "Bangladesh Working Conditions." c.2007.
<http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Asia-and-the-Pacific/Bangladesh-WORKING-CONDITIONS.html>

¹²⁶ Encyclopedia of the Nations. "Bangladesh Working Conditions." c.2007.
<http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Asia-and-the-Pacific/Bangladesh-WORKING-CONDITIONS.html>

¹²⁷ Bangladesh National Report. "World Environment Day 2005: From Grim City to Green City." June 2005. http://www.sdnbd.org/sdi/international_days/wed/2005/bangladesh/index.htm

¹²⁸ BBC News. Sutherland, Ben. "Bangladesh Boat Diary: The Launch." 29 October 2007.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7058892.stm

¹²⁹ BBC News. Sutherland, Ben. "Bangladesh Boat Diary: The Launch." 29 October 2007.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7058892.stm

Daily Urban Life and Living Conditions

A large number of the urban houses in Bangladesh are modern and have amenities such as running water and electricity. The building materials are often the same as in the countryside, bricks and mud, and the houses are built in close rows. More expensive homes are designed in European architectural styles. It is also common to find many people living in multistoried apartment buildings in cities such as Dhaka.

For the urban poor in Bangladesh, living conditions are dire. They often live in substandard housing without adequate electricity, water and sanitation infrastructure, or other municipal services. They may work in construction jobs, such as digging ditches or chipping rocks and brick to create gravel, for less than a dollar a day. Often they are supporting large families, which means that nobody in the family has the resources to eat three full meals a day.¹³⁰



© Michael Foley
Slum housing

People living in cities have generally lost their strong connections to family members in their ancestral villages. Even so, they continue to identify with their home village and try to visit yearly. They also retain social ties with family and friends living in the city, frequently calling or visiting.

Exchange 21: What is your telephone number?

Soldier:	What is your telephone number?	apnaaR fon nambaR koto?
Local:	My phone number is 913324764321	amaaR fon nambaR hulo: noy ak teen teen doowee chaaR shaat_choy chaaR teen doowee ak

For recreation, Bangladeshis attend soccer games, a nationally popular team sport. They are physically active. Many men participate in sports that include badminton, tennis, wrestling, and field hockey. People of all ages participate in kite-flying. They make their

¹³⁰ The New York Times. Mydans, Seth. "Life in Bangladesh Delta: On the Edge of Disaster." 21 June 1987.
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B0DE3DC1E39F932A15755C0A961948260&sec=&spoon=&pagewanted=1>

own kites of paper or cloth, cutting them into original designs and decorating them artistically in bright colors.¹³¹

Bangladeshis are patrons of entertainment, avidly attending movie theaters and plays staged by educational institutions or amateur groups. In Dhaka, theater groups have a centuries-old tradition of producing plays, sometimes the works of European writers. People listen to radio programs and watch a variety of television programs. They attend concerts to hear the works of musicians such as Ustad Alauddin and Ustad Ayet Ali Khan, both internationally famous instrumentalists.¹³² Classical, devotional, traditional, and other kinds of music are popular throughout the country, including the tribal areas.

Education^{133, 134}

At independence, Bangladesh inherited the British model of a liberal education system that focused on educating elites in government and industry. This helped a certain class of urban residents, but technical education that would engage a broader class of people throughout the country was lacking. Thus, by 1981, a census revealed that only 20% of the population was literate, with 35% literacy in the cities and only 17% in rural Bangladesh. Further, the literacy rate for women was only half that for men, again with urban women having the highest rate of literacy.¹³⁵



Literacy has since improved, although figures vary for the percentage of the total population designated as literate (able to read and write over the age of 15). The U.S. State Department claims that literacy in Bangladesh stands at 62%, with 61% attendance in schools.¹³⁶ However, the CIA puts the literacy figure lower, at 43.1%. The same source further analyzes that out of this total number of literate adults, 53.9% are male and 31.8% are female, according to a 2003 estimate.¹³⁷ Those students from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds are most likely to gain the most literacy and complete their education through high school and college.

¹³¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. "Bangladesh Recreation." 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-33450/Bangladesh>

¹³² Bangladesh.com, People's Republic of Bangladesh. "Discover the Culture of Bangladesh." c.1995–2007. <http://www.bangla2000.com/Bangladesh/art-&-culture.shtm>

¹³³ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Studies: Bangladesh*. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Education." 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

¹³⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. "Bangladesh Education." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-33445/Bangladesh>

¹³⁵ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Studies: Bangladesh*. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment. Education. "Education System." 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

¹³⁶ Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

¹³⁷ CIA World Factbook. "Bangladesh." 12 February 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>

The British model still in use has three levels: primary for those up to ten years of age, secondary, which runs through high school and college prep, and college. Education at the primary level is free. Because it is not mandatory, however, only around half of the children in Bangladesh attend school. Many begin around age five or six, but as the need increases for girls to work in the home and boys in the fields, attendance drops off. Secondary school is marked by different levels, with public exams concluding each level. At the higher education level, there are over 600 colleges in Bangladesh. Most are affiliated with one of three main universities: University of Dhaka, University of Chittagong, or University of Rajshahi. Several medical colleges provide education through postgraduate level, and each is attached to a university hospital. Engineering and law colleges provide professional and vocational education. Other vocational schools offer education in agriculture, home economics, arts and crafts, and social welfare.¹³⁸

Health Issues ¹³⁹

The general population's health in Bangladesh has suffered from lack of access to health care for many. People who suffer from illnesses that could otherwise be treated are not able to get medical care, and infectious diseases such as cholera have taken a high toll. This is especially true in the areas that lack safe drinking water and have inadequate sewage disposal.



Exchange 22: Is there a hospital nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a hospital nearby?	kaachekachee kono haashpataal aatchey?
Local:	Yes, in the center of town.	ha, shohRer teek maachkanee

Malaria and tuberculosis are also serious health threats for which treatment has been lacking for much of the population. In recent years, laboratories and hospitals have researched treatments for these diseases, leading to effective cures.

¹³⁸ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. "Administration and social conditions » Education." 2008.
<http://www.britannica.com/bps/topic/51736/Bangladesh>

¹³⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. "Bangladesh Health and Welfare." 2008.
<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-33446/Bangladesh>

Exchange 23: Is Dr. Banerjee in, sir?

Soldier:	Is Dr. Banerjee in, sir?	daaktoR baanaRjee eshasin kee saR?
Local:	No.	naa

Malnutrition in particular is a severe and ongoing problem in Bangladesh. Approximately half of the country's children under the age of six show evidence of malnutrition such as low weight and stunted growth. Malnutrition, along with poverty in general, is linked to a number of factors such as access to health facilities, access to education, natural disasters, and infrastructure development. Poverty and malnutrition are most severe in the northwest, the tribal areas of Chittagong Hills, and a central section of the delta where flooding has been extreme.¹⁴⁰

Exchange 24: Do you know what is wrong?

Soldier:	Do you know what is wrong?	aapnee jaanen kee chaamela hwechey?
Local:	No.	naa

Life expectancy in Bangladesh has increased from 55 years of age in 1985 to 63 years of age for 2007. Infant mortality rates have similarly improved. In 1985, over 125 infants died for every 1,000 live births. For 2007, that figure had dropped to 60 infant deaths for every 1,000 live births.^{141, 142} Gains in life expectancy and infant mortality are attributed to better access to health care and improved quality of services. Government hospitals serve the population in urban areas with no charge for services, although patients must pay for medical supplies and prescription drugs.

¹⁴⁰ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and the UN World Food Programme. "Local Estimation of Poverty and Malnutrition in Bangladesh." 2004. <http://www.povertymap.net/publications/doc/SAE%20-%20Final%20Report%20-%20May%202004.pdf>

¹⁴¹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Bangladesh*. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment. "Health." 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

¹⁴² CIA World Factbook. "Bangladesh." 12 February 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>

Transportation and Traffic ^{143, 144, 145}

Bangladesh's main transportation system is its network of inland waterways, which provides inexpensive transportation to areas hard to reach by land. The boats carry not only foreign and domestic cargo for shipping, but also passengers from town to town.

Exchange 25: Can you take me there?

Soldier:	Can you take me there?	aapnee aamakey ookaana neeye jete paaRbin?
Local:	Yes, I can.	ha, aamee paRboo

Vessels include oceangoing ships used in the delta as well as river barges called “country boats” that are navigated by crews using poles and oars. Because of seasonal fluctuations in water level, it is sometimes necessary to pull the boats, using ropes from onshore.



There is an extensive network of surface roadways in the country. They are mostly unpaved due to the difficulty and expense of frequent maintenance resulting from yearly flooding and drought or from the expense of materials. Rivers and streams often shift their courses, resulting in damage to roads, in many cases submerging and destroying them completely. Their instability also means that there are few bridges in Bangladesh, since the river course may change. The main roads are paved with cement and concrete. Secondary roads are either covered with brick, gravel, or stone, or they simply consist of packed earth.

Many people in urban areas use cars for transportation.

¹⁴³ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. “Bangladesh Transportation.” 2008.
<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-33442/Bangladesh>

¹⁴⁴ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Bangladesh*. “Chapter 3: The Economy. Transportation and Communications.” 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

¹⁴⁵ CIA World Factbook. “Bangladesh.” 12 February 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>

Exchange 26: Where can I rent a car?

Soldier:	Where can I rent a car?	kotaay gaaRee baaRa petey paaRee?
Local:	Downtown.	shohoRee

Cars are less useful, however, when trying to reach other cities since the roads may be impassable. Urbanites rely more on motorcycle rickshaws that are motor powered and bicycle rickshaws that are often drawn by migrant workers. Both are more efficient and reliable than cars.

Exchange 27: Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?	kaachekachee kono baalo gaaRee shaaRoneR mistRee aachey?
Local:	Yes.	ha

The country also has a limited railway system, first built by the British when they ruled the country. The total length of rail line is 2,768 km (1,720 mi).

Exchange 28: Is there a train station nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a train station nearby?	kaachekachee kono treynasteysan aachey?
Local:	No.	naa

Restaurants and Marketplace

Restaurants

Restaurants in the cities in Bangladesh serve a variety of international foods, as well as local foods which tend to



© Javan Makhmal
Curry Dinner

be spicy and rich. Meat, including lamb, chicken, and fish is served in most restaurants. There are very few vegetarian restaurants in Bangladesh, although vegetables are served with most meals. Curry dishes are very popular and the main ingredients are varied.

Exchange 29: What type of meat is this?

Soldier:	What type of meat is this?	etaa keeshin mangshoo?
Local:	Lamb.	baRaR

In restaurants where foreigners eat, the establishment and waiters expect diners to tip for customer service. Tips they receive supplement the low wages that the service staff earn or in some cases it provides their main source of income. The term for tipping in Bangla is baksheesh.¹⁴⁶

Exchange 30: May I have a glass of water?

Soldier:	May I have a glass of water?	aami kee ek glash jol peetey paRee?
Local:	Yes, right away.	ha, ekooney aanchee

Virtually all restaurants offer a variety of drinks, including traditional drinks such as coffee or tea.

Exchange 31: I would like coffee or tea.

Soldier:	I would like coffee or tea.	aamee kofee ba chaaha kaaboo
Local:	Sure.	neesh-chooe

¹⁴⁶ Parjatan.org. "Travels in Bangladesh." No date. <http://www.parjatan.org/>

Diners may want to know whether a particular kind of meal, such as breakfast, lunch, or dinner is being served. Depending on the time of day, they have to adjust their eating expectations.

Exchange 32: Are you still serving breakfast?

Soldier:	Are you still serving breakfast?	aapnaRaa kee ekono praatoRaash deechin?
Local:	Yes.	ha

A group of people dining at a restaurant may wish to pay their bill separately or put it all on one tab. Regardless of the manner of payment, diners should expect to pay cash and have it available when they ask for the bill. The main exception is in Dhaka, where upscale restaurants may take credit cards as payment.

Exchange 33: Put this all in one bill?

Soldier:	Put this all in one bill?	shob kachoo akshingey bil kuRoon
Local:	Okay.	teek aachey

In the cities, street stalls and food carts are common in side streets and corners, selling different kinds of food. Patrons can buy snacks, sweetened tea with milk, coffee, and complete meals from these outdoor eateries. The price is fixed and cash is usually required; credit cards are not accepted as payment at such small establishments. It is necessary to change one's money into the local currency before paying for food at street stalls and at most restaurants.¹⁴⁷



© bengalfoam / flickr.com
Street food, Dhaka

¹⁴⁷ Bangladesh.com. "Money of Bangladesh." c1995-2007. <http://www.bangladesh.com/currency/>

Exchange 34: Do you accept US currency?

Soldier:	Do you accept US currency?	aapnaRaa aameReekaR daalar nen?
Local:	No we only accept Taka.	naa, aamRa shudoo taakaa nee

Marketplace

Handicraft shops and bazaars in the cities sell goods such as wood works, paintings, brassware, and products made of shell, bamboo, cotton, and leather. When buying handicrafts from vendors who sell these and other items, bargaining is the norm. Bangladeshis are skilled at bargaining, and advertised prices are usually more than the seller expects to receive for the product. Vendors expect customers to bargain.



Exchange 35: Can I buy a carpet with this much money?

Soldier:	Can I buy a carpet with this much money?	aamee ey taakaa deeyey ekta karpet kinta paRee?
Local:	No.	naa

When shopping and trying to buy an item at a crowded shop, the buyer should be aware that at bazaars and other places that offer services, forming a line is not a usual practice. Instead, it is more customary to push against others in trying to maintain one's place in the crowd. This manner of getting waited on is also typical at post offices and train stations.¹⁴⁸

A shopper can examine an item closely to be sure that the quality matches the price he or she is willing to pay.

¹⁴⁸ Everyculture.com. "Culture of Bangladesh." c2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Bangladesh.html>

Exchange 36: May I examine this close up?

Soldier:	May I examine this close up?	amee etaa kaachi neye dekbo?
Local:	Sure.	neesh-chooe

If the price for an item is too high, the customer can walk away. He is under no obligation to buy an item that he has been considering or looking at.

Exchange 37: How much longer will you be here?

Soldier:	How much longer will you be here?	aapnee aaR kaatokoni kaana takben?
Local:	Three more hours.	aaRoo teen konta

After comparing prices, a buyer can shop around and return to a certain store where the price for a particular item seemed most reasonable.

Exchange 38: Do you have any more of these?

Soldier:	Do you have any more of these?	aapnaR kee eytaa aRo aachey?
Local:	No.	naa

If someone is insistent on making an unwanted sale, the buyer can politely decline the offer.

A buyer may have a currency denomination that seems too large for the cost of the item being purchased. In that case, asking whether the seller can give change is advisable. The best policy, however, is to have the correct denomination for a purchase.

Exchange 39: Can you give me change for this?

Soldier:	Can you give me change for this?	aapni kee aamaakey etaa koochRoo koR ey deetaa paRen?
Local:	No.	naa

In Dhaka and in the shops in larger cities, banks and shops are available to change money into local currency. They can also provide the correct denominations of money for a purchase. Credit cards are accepted in Dhaka. In other cities, such services are unlikely. As with restaurants, the buyer should ideally have the correct money in hand, in the local currency, before making a purchase. Stores are likely to be a possible source for change only if one buys something from them.

Dealing with Beggars

In Bangladesh, there are many people who beg in the cities. They include children who work in shifts. Many of the beggars are also old, crippled, or lepers who cannot earn a living. For other poor people, begging is a way to earn a living. Regardless of their circumstances, beggars in Bangladeshi cities can be aggressive, and it is best to ignore them if others are around. The alternative is giving money to a large group of beggars, for if they see someone handing out money, they are likely to congregate and pursue the source with intent.



If a visitor does give money, it should be given when others are not around and in just a small amount. However, it is best to avoid distributing money altogether.

In 2006, the Citicorp Foundation, a large financial institution, started a loan project for beggars in Bangladesh. Working jointly with a micro-credit bank in Bangladesh, the company began providing small, interest-free loans as a way to fight poverty. Half of the Bangladeshi population earns less than USD 1 per day, and the loans were targeted at this group. As part of their agreement to take the loan, recipients would be trained in basic literacy and finances. To involve them in productive work, the project would also require that recipients commit to income-generating work such as selling items or processing food. Terms allowed the borrower to choose his or her area of investment.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ BBC News. Rahman, Waliur. "Loans Deal for Bangladesh Beggars." 7 February, 2006. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4687032.stm

Rural Life

Rural Economy

Three-fourths of the Bangladeshi population is rural, employed almost entirely in farming and agricultural work.¹⁵⁰ Many have barely been able to make a living. Of the entire rural labor force in Bangladesh, one half is made up of landless peasants whose earnings are among the lowest of all categories of workers in Bangladesh.¹⁵¹ Even though rural earnings improved somewhat in the 1990s, the poverty rate for agricultural wage laborers has been especially high. A 2004 study showed that close to 19% of the rural poor could not afford to eat three meals a day. Some small gains in rural employment have been the result of diversifying crops, increasing cereal production, and modernizing rice farming practices.¹⁵²



A rural-to-urban movement began in the 1980s, when young people began moving from villages to the cities in search of jobs. This was accompanied by erosion in tradition, in which family backgrounds such as prominent lineage and landholding were no longer seen as highly prestigious. Instead, prestige was being associated more with stable jobs linked to modern education. The effects of this population shift out of the countryside included greater poverty in urban areas, since there were not enough jobs for the rural migrants.

During this same period, the number of rural laborers who did not own land also increased, jumping from 25% in 1970 to 40% in 1987.¹⁵³ Those who do own land hold fewer than three acres on average, which they divide into small plots. Landowners who own over five acres are considered among the higher class in rural Bangladesh. Other factors that determine class in rural areas are one's level of education and occupation.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. "Bangladesh." c.2007.

http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761553817_2/Bangladesh.html

¹⁵¹ Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Bangladesh." May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

¹⁵² DFID. Department for International Development. Sen, Binayak and Muftafa K. Mujeri, Quazi Shahabuddin. "A Country Case Study on Bangladesh." "Operationalizing Pro-Poor Growth." A Joint Initiative of AFD, BMZ, (GTZ, KfW Development Bank), DFID, and the World Bank. October 2004. <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/pubs/files/oppgbangladesh.pdf>

¹⁵³ U.S. Library of Congress. A Country Study: Bangladesh. Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment. Social System. "Rural Society." 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

¹⁵⁴ Everyculture.com. "Culture of Bangladesh." c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Bangladesh.html>

Exchange 40: Do you own this land?

Soldier:	Do you own this land?	aapni kee ey jomitaar maaleek?
Local:	Yes.	ha

One main source of income for many Bangladeshi farmers has been the raising of goats. According to a late 20th century study on goat production in southwestern Bangladesh, farmers were able to earn a profit by raising goats. The animals were also a food source, providing fat and protein to the diet. The farmers in the study, with an average of 11 goats per farm, used the animals for their milk, meat, skins, and manure for fertilizer. They used money from the sale of these products to pay for education, land, food, clothing, and crop cultivation.¹⁵⁵



© Peter Casier
Goats

Famine from Rat Invasion

In recent weeks, an exploding population of rats has invaded the Chittagong Hills region, continuing into India's Mizoram state, destroying bamboo forests and crops. The rural population is now close to famine as a result. This situation happens around every 50 years when the bamboo plants that cover the region blossom, providing a food source that rats devour. Many of the people living in this region rely on the bamboo plants for most of their material culture. Bamboo is used to make fences, furniture, houses, fish traps, musical instruments, and medicines. The shoots from the plants are also a food source. The rats not only strip the bamboo, they also eat all the stored grain and strip the fields of their crops; the farmers are left with nothing but roots to survive on.^{156, 157}

Rural Health Issues¹⁵⁸

Health problems in Bangladesh have been especially severe in rural areas where the health care infrastructure has been weakest. Infectious diseases here have taken a high toll also because of inadequate sewage disposal and lack of access to safe drinking water.

¹⁵⁵ Livestock Research for Rural Development. Paul, D.C. and M.F. Haque, M.S. Alam. "Goat Production in South-West Region of Bangladesh." December 1991.

<http://www.fao.org/ag/AGA/AGAP/FRG/lrrd/lrrd3/3/dulal2.htm>

¹⁵⁶ *Vanity Fair*. Shoumatoff, Alex. "Waiting for the Plague [pp 204–220]." December 2007.

¹⁵⁷ BBC News. Dummett, Mark. "Rats Destroy Crops in Bangladesh." 8 February 2008.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7234213.stm

¹⁵⁸ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. "Bangladesh Health and Welfare." 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-33446/Bangladesh>

Malaria has also been a serious health risk in rural Bangladesh. In recent years, however, eradication programs have reduced the risk of this disease by spraying marshes and swamps with insecticides.

Although malnutrition is high in rural Bangladesh, it is higher in the cities. In 1985, for instance, over 76% of urban families compared to 45% of rural families did not receive adequate nutrition. This difference exists because people in rural areas have the ability to grow a small garden or trade for local produce that is available. In the cities, this advantage is lacking.¹⁵⁹



© Peter Casier
Nutrition checkup

The number of rural health centers has increased, and many in the countryside who lack access to hospitals can still receive professional medical services.

Exchange 41: Is there a medical clinic nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a medical clinic nearby?	kaachekachee kono daaktaRkanaa aachey?
Local:	Yes, over there.	ha, owe jey okaaney

Many people continue to consult alternative practitioners, either to maintain a state of health or to get treatment for illness. These practitioners include homeopaths, herbal healers, and ayurvedic doctors who treat patients through diet, based on traditional Indian theories of health. Many nonprofessional doctors in rural areas combine their methods of treatment, using some modern medical practices as well as alternative. Such practitioners who lack medical training, however, have been accused of dispensing treatments that harm patients, such as providing antibiotics indiscriminately.

Those living in rural areas who do not have easy access to medical clinics are forced to seek help from the nearest source for emergency conditions.

¹⁵⁹ U.S. Library of Congress. A Country Study: Bangladesh. Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment. "Health." 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

Exchange 42: My arm is broken, can you help me?

Soldier:	My arm is broken, can you help me?	aamaR haadt bengey gaatchey ektoo shaajo kurbin
Local:	Yes, I can help you.	ha, aamee aapnakey shaahjo koortee paRee

Pollution in rural Bangladesh has caused widespread illness. In a study completed in 2000, researchers identified 492 villages that had high levels of naturally-occurring arsenic in the groundwater.¹⁶⁰ Health problems that result from intake of arsenic include skin lesions, cancer, enlargement of internal organs, edema, and other severe ailments. Authors of the study note that when the affected persons transfer to a nutritious diet with clean water, some effects of the arsenic poisoning may be reversed, but not all. The study concludes that to avoid arsenic poisoning among millions of people, wells need to be capped and the water tested regularly.



Researchers have found a high incidence of bird flu in rural areas throughout the country. As of February 2008, the virus was present in 35 out of the 64 districts in Bangladesh. Although the virus has not caused infections to appear in humans, health officials have given anti-viral medicine to around 800 farmers.¹⁶¹ Taking additional precautionary measures, the government has confined many people to their homes and set up isolation units in hospitals.

Education

The British model of liberal education that Bangladesh inherited focused on educating elites in government and industry, leaving rural people's needs unaddressed. It did not include technical and vocational subjects that would directly help working class and rural people gain employment. For this reason and also because fewer schools existed in rural Bangladesh, literacy has traditionally been lower in rural areas. By 1981, a census revealed that literacy was only 17% in rural Bangladesh, compared to 35% in the cities.

¹⁶⁰ National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. Cited in Environmental Health Perspectives. "Groundwater Health Contamination in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India." c2000. <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-63322036.html?Q=food in Bangladesh>

¹⁶¹ AFP. "Bird Flu Spreads in India, Bangladesh Amid Massive Slaughter." 4 February 2008. http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5jwwFkyAUqTxFF93pM4WS_SEKLuRw

Further, the literacy rate for women was only half that for men, with rural women having the lowest rate of literacy at 11% (compared to 23% for rural men).¹⁶²

Since that time, the national school system has expanded its curriculum. Now, vocational education is available in different subjects. Engineering and law colleges provide specialized study for those who wish to gain knowledge in these fields. Other vocational schools offer courses in agriculture, arts and crafts, and home economics. Training in these subjects can directly benefit people in rural areas since they can apply it to profitable use in their daily lives.

Children in the countryside begin school around six years of age. As they get older, attendance drops off, especially for poor rural children. Girls are taken out of school at an early age to help with housework or childcare, and boys begin missing school to work in the fields. They help with herding animals, harvesting crops, and hauling water. Few rural children graduate from high school, even fewer children receive a university education.¹⁶³

Transportation^{164, 165, 166}

Although air and railway transportation are available in Bangladesh, some railway operations close periodically because of torrential rains and flooding. For rural Bangladeshis, the country's network of inland waterways is the most useful and reliable method of transportation. This system, providing low-cost transport to areas hard to reach by land, carries passengers from town to town and carries their goods to market. The main rural vessels are flat barges known as "country boats." They are navigated through shallow water using poles and oars. Sometimes workers onshore pull the boats with ropes to move them through shallow stretches.



© Javan Makhmal
Bamboo boat

Rural roads are mostly unpaved packed earth because of the cost of paving, often undone by yearly drought and flooding. Maintenance and materials are expensive; therefore, roads are frequently impassable. The rivers and streams often change course, submerging or ruining the roads. If country roads are paved (most are not), the materials used are usually stone, sun-baked brick, or gravel. Shifting of rivers also limits and prohibits the building of bridges, since the rivers they cover can shift their course.

¹⁶² U.S. Library of Congress. "A Country Study: Bangladesh." Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment. Education. "Education System." 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

¹⁶³ Everyculture.com. "Culture of Bangladesh." c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Bangladesh.html>

¹⁶⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. "Bangladesh Transportation." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-33442/Bangladesh>

¹⁶⁵ U.S. Library of Congress. A Country Study: Bangladesh. Chapter 3: The Economy. "Transportation and Communications." 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

¹⁶⁶ CIA World Factbook. "Bangladesh." 12 February 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>

Most rural dwellers seldom use cars for transportation, given the cost of buying a car and the instability of roadways. Rural people frequently travel using two-wheel carts drawn by buffalo or horses. They also use motorcycle rickshaws and bicycle rickshaws that are drawn by self-employed laborers, often migrant workers. In the delta region, especially characterized by unstable ground that floods periodically, travelers use an extensive system of ferryboats.

Tribal Distribution

Most of the country's tribal groups live in southeastern Bangladesh near the borders with India and Myanmar, a region of dense jungle and steep hills and valleys.

Exchange 43: Do you know this area very well?

Soldier:	Do you know this area very well?	aapnee ee elaakataa bhaalo kuRa chenin?
Local:	Yes.	ha

In this area, the Chittagong Hills Tracts, the tribal inhabitants are indigenous non-Muslims. Two of the main tribes are the Chakma and the Marma. The Chakma live in the Karnaphuli River valleys of Chittagong. They own the lush Rangamati area, which is open to visitors.¹⁶⁷ The Marma, who are Buddhists, also live in the Chittagong Hills region. Both tribes speak a language known as Arakanese, part of the Tibeto-Burman language group.



© Dan Weber
Barua, Chakma and Marma boys

Other Buddhists related to the people of Myanmar have formed tribes in the Chittagong Hills Tracts, and they speak a variety of dialects.^{168, 169} Approximately 531,000 people in this southeastern area speak languages classified as Tibeto-Burman.¹⁷⁰

The tribal peoples are self-reliant and cling to old traditions. They weave their own cloth and make clothing, and grow their own grain and vegetables. They follow the rituals and practices of their ancestors, such as hunting with bows and arrows or making traditional

¹⁶⁷ DiscoveryBangladesh.com. "Destination Bangladesh: Hill Tracts and Lakes." No date.

http://www.discoverybangladesh.com/dream_dest_hill_tracks.html

¹⁶⁸ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. "Bangladesh Ethnic Composition and Distribution." 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-33431/Bangladesh#409344.hook>

¹⁶⁹ Joshua Project. Marma of Bangladesh. 11 January 2008.

<http://www.joshuaproject.net/peopctry.php?rog3=BG&rop3=113113>

¹⁷⁰ Ethnologue. "Languages of Bangladesh." c.2008.

http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=BD

handicrafts. Many of the tribal families are matriarchal, and the women are the main producers.¹⁷¹ Each tribe has its distinct customs, style of dress, and dialect. In trying to preserve their way of life, many tribal inhabitants of the Chittagong region have taken up arms against Bengali Muslims trying to settle in the region. Since the mid-1970s, there has been periodic violence in the region resulting from the ongoing ethnic tension.¹⁷² A 1998 peace agreement gave tribal people limited autonomy and rights to govern themselves.¹⁷³

Many tribal people of the Garo background live in Dhaka. Their origins were Tibet, China, and Bhutan, and then they migrated to India, living as nomads. Eventually they settled in the Bangladesh region. Missionaries converted them from their religion, a mixture of Hinduism and animism, to Christianity. They became mostly Catholics, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Baptists. The Garos have a matrilineal social organization, in which the youngest daughter inherits most of the property that is passed on.¹⁷⁴

Village Life and Gender Roles¹⁷⁵

Much of the rural life in Bangladesh centers around streams and rivers since homes in rural areas do not have running water. People must go to the nearest river to wash themselves, their clothes, and cooking implements. Some people have access to a pump where they can get water, but it may not be close enough to their house. If they are forced to carry several buckets of water to their homes from a long distance, the work becomes more difficult than simply carrying clothing to the river. The river also serves other purposes. Children use it as a place of recreation, swimming after school or in their free time, and rural people use it as a source of fish.¹⁷⁶



The houses that villagers live in are made of dried mud, brick, or bamboo, with thatch roofs. Because flooding is so common, houses are often built on wooden or earthen platforms to keep the house above the water line. Furniture and decoration is minimal, and goods are stored against walls. Thin mats made of bamboo are used for sleeping. Families spend much of their social time on the veranda in the front of their house. The kitchen (*rana ghor*) is usually in a separate structure made of bamboo or mud.

¹⁷¹ DiscoveryBangladesh.com. "Destination Bangladesh: Hill Tracts and Lakes." No date. http://www.discoverybangladesh.com/dream_dest_hill_tracks.html

¹⁷² Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. "Bangladesh Ethnic Composition and Distribution." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-33431/Bangladesh#409344.hook>

¹⁷³ Everyculture.com. "Culture of Bangladesh." c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Bangladesh.html>

¹⁷⁴ Worldcook.net. "Bangladesh – Daily Life – 3." No date. http://www.worldcook.net/Worldtravel/Bangladesh/Daily_life_3.htm

¹⁷⁵ Everyculture.com. "Culture of Bangladesh." c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Bangladesh.html>

¹⁷⁶ Worldcook.net. "Bangladesh – Daily Life – 1." No date. http://www.worldcook.net/Worldtravel/Bangladesh/Daily_life.htm

Alternately, when the weather is dry, women build hearths and cook in the courtyard of their household.

Villagers are friendly to visitors who need help. Any questions should be directed to the men in the village.

Exchange 44: Is there lodging nearby?

Soldier:	Is there lodging nearby?	kaachekachee kono taagbaaR jaaygaa aachey?
Local:	Yes	ha

The entire village household is part of a patrilineal extended family compound. Besides being close to a pond or river, it is placed within reasonable distance of rice fields and trees that produce fruit such as jackfruit and mangoes. Beyond being the site where one lives and provides for one's family, the household village is the center of the family's ancestral identity. Even after family members move to the city, they try to stay in connection with their ancestral village.

Men are the heads of household, and they work outside the home. Women's sphere is the home, where they are responsible for childcare, food preparation, and keeping the household clean and running smoothly. Women do not venture out beyond their villages unaccompanied by men. They are not expected to socialize with men outside their families. For this reason, men do most of the shopping since it means they must go into crowded markets and interact with others. Only men go into the mosques for prayer; women are limited to doing prayers and religious practice in the home.

Who's in Charge

When trying to locate someone in charge, visitors should look for the man who holds a formal position of authority or owns a large amount of land. Prestige is reckoned by those two factors.



© Arttu Manninen
Village elder

Exchange 45: Can you take me to your mayor?

Soldier:	Can you take me to your mayor?	aapnee amaakey aapnadeR meyror kaachee neye jetey paRben?
Local:	Yes.	ha

Authority in all cases is reserved for men—husbands, fathers, and brothers. In villages, a hierarchy exists according to who holds the most financial and political power (as determined by land ownership and occupation).

Exchange 46: We need your help.

Soldier:	Respected mayor we need your help / advice / opinion.	maanunyo meyoR aamee apnaaR shaahjo / oopodesh / matamot chaaychee
Local:	Yes.	ha

Disputes in villages are settled by village elders known as *matabdars* or *sardars*.¹⁷⁷ Men who occupy these positions often belong to factions that compete for political control. There may be considerable interaction and sometimes animosity between them.

Border Crossings and Checkpoints

The long, porous border between Bangladesh and India has remained open, although not without major problems. Smugglers have crossed the border with small arms and narcotics, especially since the increase in tension between Pakistan and India that spiked in the 1980s. Also, Islamist insurgents have used the border between Bangladesh and India as a passage into India. Such illegal activity is common because of the lack of border security and lack of physical barriers. One of the worst border violations has been large-scale, illegal migration of Bangladeshis into India, resulting in migrants settling in West Bengal, Assam, and northeastern states. Weak border demarcation has contributed to the weak security. In many areas, the border runs through the middle of villages or actual houses so that one side of the house is in Bangladesh and the other in India. Also,

¹⁷⁷ U.S. Library of Congress. A Country Study: Bangladesh. Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment. Social System. "Rural Society." 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

border security and police are often paid off to allow the smuggling and illegal immigration to take place.^{178, 179}

Bangladesh and India have had clashes over border issues, the last in March 2005 when Bangladeshis fired on Indian security forces trying to construct border fencing. The Indian government said the fence was meant to stop illegal border crossings, including cross-border rebel activity. Planning for construction of the 8-ft-high barbed-wire fence began in 1985.^{180, 181} In late 2006, India installed sophisticated radar and reconnaissance systems along its border to stop any possible Al Qaeda activity coming from Bangladesh.¹⁸²

People continue to cross the Bangladeshi-Indian border with relative ease even though the number of transit points authorized for crossing is limited.

Exchange 47: Where is the nearest checkpoint?

Soldier:	Where is the nearest checkpoint?	shaapchey kaacheR chekpoynt kotaay?
Local:	It's two kilometers.	doowee kilomeetaR dooR

Bangladesh's border with Myanmar is also porous. Large numbers of refugees and insurgent fighters from Myanmar have in the past crossed this small border illegally. Also, separatist groups have created a market for guns and weapons along the border.^{183, 184}



© colonos / flickr.com
Burmese refugees, Bangladesh

¹⁷⁸ South Asian Terrorism Portal. SATP. Lakshman, Kanshan, and Sanjay K. Jha. "India-Bangladesh: Restoring Sovereignty on Neglected Borders." c.2001.

<http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume14/Article7.htm>

¹⁷⁹ India Defence. "Bangladesh Army Chief in India to Boost Bilateral Defence Ties." 25 February 2008.

<http://www.india-defence.com/reports-3754>

¹⁸⁰ BBC News. "India-Bangladesh Border Gunfire." 4 March 2005.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4319515.stm

¹⁸¹ Wordpress.org. Ali, Syed Sajjad. "Fencing the Porous Bangladesh Border." 14 December 2006.

<http://www.worldpress.org/Asia/2603.cfm>

¹⁸² The Australian. Loudon, Bruce. "India Fortifies Bangladesh Border." 17 October 2006.

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,20593983-2703,00.html>

¹⁸³ E-Bangladesh. "BD-Myanmar Border Guarded." 2 October 2007. <http://www.e-bangladesh.org/2007/10/02/bangladesh-myanmar-border-guarded/>

¹⁸⁴ Nagarealm.com. "Flourishing Arms Market Along Bangladesh Myanmar Border." 18 December 2005. <http://nagarealm.com/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1403>

Exchange 48: Is this all the ID you have?

Soldier:	Is this all the ID you have?	apnaaR kee eytayak maatra poReechaay patRo?
Local:	Yes.	ha

The border between Bangladesh and Myanmar was sealed off in 2007, with Bangladesh forces on a state of alert.¹⁸⁵

Exchange 49: Please get out of the car.

Soldier:	Please get out of the car.	daaya koRey gaaRey tekey baR hon
Local:	OK.	aatchaa

Smugglers also transport illegal goods between Bangladesh and Myanmar. This has been an ongoing and large-scale practice. Much of the smuggling activity has centered around Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh's southern Chittagong region.

Exchange 50: Show us the car registration.

Soldier:	Show us the car registration.	gaaReetaR RejistReyshanta daakan
Local:	OK.	aatchaa

Smuggled goods from Myanmar include cloth, sandals, umbrellas, iron locks, torches, and foods such as chickpeas, rice, and fish. From Bangladesh, smugglers transport

¹⁸⁵ Free Rohingya Campaign. "Bangladesh-Myanmar Border Sealed to Prevent Rohingya Muslim Refugee Influx." 25 January 2007.
http://www.freerohingyacampaign.org/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=34&Itemid=9

medicines, fuel oil, and fertilizer into Myanmar. Drugs and weapons are also part of the smuggling trade going both ways.¹⁸⁶

Exchange 51: Are you carrying any guns?

Soldier:	Are you carrying any guns?	apnaaR shaangey kee kono bondook aachey?
Local:	Yes.	ha

The two countries met in 2003 and signed an agreement to meet every six months and discuss issues of border security. They exchanged lists of citizens who had been detained by both countries and discussed their repatriation.¹⁸⁷

Landmines¹⁸⁸

The Bangladeshi government signed a treaty banning landmines in 1998 and ratified it in 2000. The treaty became effective on 1 March 2001. The government co-sponsored a UN resolution in favor of banning landmines and voted to support the resolution on 29 November 2001. In the years since then, it has continued to report implementation of the treaty.

Although the Bangladeshi government claims it has not produced or exported landmines, it has acknowledged having a stockpile of mines in its possession. In February 2005, the government destroyed thousands of stockpiled landmines, but in 2007, it reported that it was keeping 12,500 of the weapons in accordance with its treaty.

The Bangladeshi Army has been training police officers and university forestry students on how to handle and de-arm landmines.

¹⁸⁶ Asian Tribune. Al Mahmud, Abdullah. "Bangladesh-Myanmar Border: Safe Haven for Smugglers." 21 May 2003. http://www.asiantribune.com/oldsite/show_news.php?id=4403

¹⁸⁷ The Hindu. Habib, Haroon. "Bangladesh, Myanmar Conclude Border Talks." 23 May 2003. <http://www.hinduonnet.com/2003/05/23/stories/2003052300951500.htm>

¹⁸⁸ Landmine Monitor. "Bangladesh." 2007. <http://www.icbl.org/lm/2007/bangladesh>

Exchange 52: Is this area mined?

Soldier:	Is this area mined?	ee elaakaay kee maayn potaa?
Local:	Yes.	ha

In the past, the Burmese Army planted mines along the border not only to force bribes from smugglers but also to stop cross-border insurgency. Most of these mines were planted in the Chittagong Hills area. Armed insurgent groups have also used landmines along Bangladesh's borders and within the country. Bangladeshi citizens have been injured, disabled, and killed from landmines buried in unmarked areas. The Bangladeshi Army now claims that most of the mines have been cleared.

Family Life

Family Roles and Responsibilities¹⁸⁹

In both rural and urban areas, the extended family is the basic economic unit and the source of social identity. Family members often belong to one economic enterprise, such as a small business or a farm, and the foundation of an individual's identity is his or her family. Family members often own property jointly and share in its resources.

Exchange 53: Where do you work, sir?

Soldier:	Where do you work, sir?	aapnee moshaay kotaay kaatch koRen?
Local:	I am a farmer, sir.	aamee moshaay aak chaashaa

The father is the head of the household and the oldest male is respected as the head of the extended family. Married sons typically live with the father, a tradition that especially holds true in the countryside. When the father dies, each son and his wife and children move out to establish a separate residence.

An extended family can include parents, children, and the children's grandparents. Three or four generations often live under one roof or in separate, adjoined houses.



© MC Master Chef / flickr.com
Family

Exchange 54: Does your family live here?

Soldier:	Does your family live here?	apnaaR poReevaaR kee ekaanee taakey?
Local:	Yes.	ha

Kinship ties are strong between brothers and sisters. Married women who have brothers spend considerable time visiting them, thus keeping family connections strong within their immediate families.

¹⁸⁹ Library of Congress. A Country Study: Bangladesh. Chapter 2 - The Society and Its Environment. "Family, Household, and Kinship." 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

Exchange 55: Do you have any brothers?

Soldier:	Do you have any brothers?	apnaaR kono bhaay aachi kee?
Local:	Yes.	ha

Labor within a family is divided by gender. If the family owns a farm, the men are responsible for working the fields and marketing the products and livestock. Whether the income is from farming or from a service or industrial job, men are responsible for earning income to support the family. In one household, the wage earners of the family may include the father, his grown sons, and other older male relations who live there.



© Steve Evans
Muslim man

Exchange 56: Are you the only person who has a job?

Soldier:	Are you the only person in your family who has a job?	apnaaR poReevaaRey aapni kee aakmaatro kaatch koRen?
Local:	No.	naa

Women work in the home, and children often help with the farm work or housework. All family members contribute to the family's welfare, and they function as an interconnected and unified network.

Status of Women, Elderly, and Children

Not only is the family closely interconnected, but each person within the family has a certain position and role in its hierarchy. In this way, the work of daily life is organized so that it flows efficiently.

In Bangladesh, the woman's role is primarily domestic. She is responsible for running her household. She also teaches her children their roles and disciplines them.

Exchange 57: Are these your children?

Soldier:	Are these your children?	eRey kee apnaaR chelamey?
Local:	Yes.	ha

A woman accumulates security and respect in her husband's household if she gives birth to a son. Since they support their parents in their old age and carry on the family lineage, sons are highly cherished. Because of this, mothers tend to indulge their sons and discipline their daughters more strictly, teaching them early on about their duties around the house. Traditionally, the relationship between a mother and her son is more close, enduring, and intimate than the relationship between a father and his son. Since the father is an authority figure who demands obedience, his relationship with his children is more distant than would be the mother's.



Parents will often take their young children out of school to help the family with housework or field work. For this reason, the dropout rate is high in primary school.

Exchange 58: Do your children go to school?

Soldier:	Do your children go to school?	aapnaaR cheylamegee eskooley jaay?
Local:	Yes.	ha

Segregation of the sexes is a practice that has remained strong in Bangladesh. Women have traditionally been secluded. They generally occupy private areas within the home

¹⁹⁰ Library of Congress. A Country Study: Bangladesh. Chapter 2 - The Society and Its Environment. "Family, Household, and Kinship." 1988. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

and are not allowed to circulate freely in society. Married or single, it is generally frowned upon for women to fraternize with males that are not from their family.

Exchange 59: Are you married?

Soldier:	Are you married?	aapni kee bibaahito?
Local:	Local : No.	naa

Even if a woman holds a job outside the household (and this would usually only happen in urban areas), her primary role is still to care for her family. Among rural families, women frequently work outdoors, gardening, planting, doing household chores, and caring for animals. Alongside this, they may earn money from doing piecework in their homes. It is unlikely that a woman would accept a job for wages if it took her outside her home. In rural Bangladesh, a woman seldom ventures away from her family household or her neighborhood. To do so, she must wear a veil and be accompanied by her husband or family members.



© E / flickr.com
Skilled village needleworker

Inquiries about a woman should be addressed to her husband or the person escorting her, rather than directly to the woman.

Exchange 60: Is this your wife?

Soldier:	Is this your wife?	eeni kee apnaaR stRee?
Local:	Yes.	ha

In accordance with Islamic law, Bangladeshi women have inheritance rights. They are in line to inherit money or property from parents, and they traditionally receive less than men. In practice, however, it is the men who usually inherit all the property. (Hindu farmers also follow the practice of leaving property to their sons.) If a woman does receive an inheritance of land and she defers to her brother, passing it on to him, she generally earns a position of permanent stature in his household.



© Steve Evans
Modern woman

Some Bangladeshi women have attained high positions of prominence in national, political life. They are of educated backgrounds and from families who can afford to give their daughters this level of education. Such families are also likely to have political connections that can help their children gain high professional positions.

Elderly

The elderly in Bangladesh traditionally live in extended families, where family members care for them. Elderly people do not have pensions or retirement plans and have only family members to rely on for support.

Exchange 61: Is this your entire family?

Soldier:	Is this your entire family?	eytekee apnaaR shaaRa poleevaaR?
Local:	Yes.	ha

Both adults and children extend utmost respect to elderly people, who are considered sources of wisdom. As men age, family members continue to consult them for decisions concerning the family or the family business, since they are the most senior men. Male elders continue to be responsible for the welfare of the family group, even in a consulting role if they can no longer work.

At the dinner table, family members serve grandparents and parents before anyone else, with men taking precedence over women. Family members tend to the needs of their parents and grandparents and include them in the family's social life. Out of respect, they make sure that the elders are not left alone or unattended to.



© Steve Evans
Elderly man

Marriage, Divorce, and Birth

Significant life changes in Bangladesh, marriage, divorce, and birth signal major reorganization of the family structure. Marriage and birth are always causes of great celebration, but divorce is shunned unless absolutely necessary, since it tears the fabric that holds the family together.

Marriage^{191, 192}

Under the laws of Islam, the majority religion among the Bangladeshis, marriage is based on a contract and is not considered a sacrament. The father or legal guardian of a man and woman who wish to marry initiates the contract, which is then negotiated. The marriage contract legitimizes sexual relations and children born of the marriage. It also sets forth spousal duties and rights, which differ according to gender. For instance, it specifies that a good Islamic husband should possess qualities such as sanity, economic solvency, and physical presence (he's not absent). The husband also has the contractual right to restrict his wife's movements, although this varies according to culture.

After a Bangladeshi parent (usually the father) decides that his young son or daughter is ready to marry, he tries to find a marriage partner. The father frequently will talk to other family members, close friends or enlist the services of an intermediary to find a suitable spouse. Furthermore, the socio-economic status and level of education typically are comparable between the two families. These are important criteria when considering new in-laws. The child or young adult who is to marry usually has the opportunity to select several prospective spouses, from which the father typically makes the final decision.¹⁹³



© A.K.M. Monjurul Hoque Topu
Young Couple

Once a woman marries, the marriage contract prescribes that she, as a woman, become the center of the home and the family's domestic values. Women are responsible for bearing and raising children. Within the role of marriage, men become the heads of households who mediate with the world outside the home.

Exchange 62: How many people live in this house?

Soldier:	How many people live in this house?	ey baaReetey kojen bowshobaash koRen?
Local:	Ten.	dosh chon

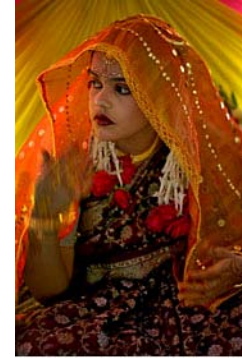
¹⁹¹ Brandeis University. The Feminist Sexual Ethnics Project. Special Focus: Islam. Ali, Kecia. "Marriage Contracts in Islamic Jurisprudence." 19 June 2003.

<http://www.brandeis.edu/projects/fse/Pages/marriagecontracts.html>

¹⁹² Harvard University. Field, Erica. "Consequences of Early Marriage for Women in Bangladesh." September 2004. <http://ipc.umich.edu/edts/pdfs/FieldEM904.pdf>

¹⁹³ Everyculture.com. Culture of Bangladesh. "Marriage, Family, and Kinship." c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Bangladesh.html>

Husbands and wives in Bangladesh do not demonstrate their affections publicly. This trait is in accordance with the Islamic principle of maintaining social harmony by controlling one's natural impulses. It is common for family members to show emotions at home, but public conduct should be subdued, indirect, and respectfully polite.



© philippe tarbounch
Young bride

Men are usually 25 years of age or older when they marry, but girls may be much younger, often between 15 and 20 years old.¹⁹⁴

Marrying girls at very young ages is a widespread practice in Bangladesh, especially in poor, rural areas. South Asia has the highest rate of child marriages in the world. Within this context, the rate of girls marrying under age 17 in Bangladesh was four times higher than that of India for the year 2000.¹⁹⁵ Such child marriages, arranged by the parents, are indicators of very low literacy among the young women, as well as a high rate of childbearing. Numerous attempts to institute laws of consent have not slowed the practice.

*Divorce*¹⁹⁶

In Bangladesh, divorce, as with marriage, is based on the country's dominant religion, Islam. Islamic law generally discourages divorce, viewing it as a last resort for a troubled marriage. Divorce is, however, legal and not difficult to obtain in Bangladesh. It involves a simple process of dissolving the marriage contract, most often by repudiation (*talaq*), in which the husband states that the marriage is ended. He does not need his wife's consent to do this. A three-month waiting period follows to make sure the wife is not pregnant. If she is not, she can remarry. Alternately, her husband can take her back into the marriage within the three-month period. After the third repudiation, which is final, he can no longer take her back. A woman who is divorced in this way is entitled to keep her dowry, although in practice it may be difficult for her to get it since it is under her husband's control.¹⁹⁷ She usually returns to her father's household after divorcing.

In another kind of divorce, a wife can divorce her husband by compensation. This requires that she return to him the dowry he provided her at marriage. (A dowry system has been illegal in Bangladesh but the practice is followed anyway.) Alternately, she could provide a sum of money as payment for ending the marriage. Traditional legal practice, which varies according to region, requires that the husband consent to this divorce, which is final after a three-month waiting period. The parties may remarry afterward if they both consent.

¹⁹⁴ Everyculture.com. Culture of Bangladesh. "Marriage, Family, and Kinship." c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Bangladesh.html>

¹⁹⁵ Harvard University. Field, Erica. "Consequences of Early Marriage for Women in Bangladesh." September 2004. <http://ipc.umich.edu/edts/pdfs/FieldEM904.pdf>

¹⁹⁶ Brandeis University. The Feminist Sexual Ethnics Project. Special Focus: Islam. Ali, Kecia. "Divorce." 01 July 2003. <http://www.brandeis.edu/projects/fse/Pages/divorce.html>

¹⁹⁷ Harvard University. Field, Erica. "Consequences of Early Marriage for Women in Bangladesh." September 2004. <http://ipc.umich.edu/edts/pdfs/FieldEM904.pdf>

Exchange 63: Are these people part of your family?

Soldier:	Are these people part of your family?	eynaRa kee apnaaR boReevaaRer lok?
Local:	No	naa

In theory, an Islamic couple can divorce for several causes and it may be initiated by either party, not only the husband. In practice, however, the wife may find it difficult to obtain a divorce, even if the marriage contract is violated. Different schools of law interpret the divorce law in different ways. The Hanafi school disallows most women from divorcing no matter how severe the cause. A woman's husband could be imprisoned, abusing her, or simply not supporting her, and these would not be grounds for the wife to initiate divorce. Under the Maliki jurisprudence system, on the other hand, a woman can obtain divorce for many reasons, including injury, non-support, and abandonment.

Islamic law in Bangladesh requires that every attempt be made to save the marriage. Before divorcing, a husband and wife should try to resolve their differences by seeking mediation from relatives on both sides of the family. If this fails to solve their problems, then a divorce may proceed. The three-month waiting period begins, which may end either in reconciliation or, ultimately, final divorce.

*Birth and Birth Ceremonies*¹⁹⁸

When childbirth approaches, a Bangladeshi woman returns to her native home to give birth. When her child is born, the family contacts the father to tell him of the birth. Shortly after hearing the news, the father and his close male family members will visit the newborn child. During its infancy, the baby is continuously watched over by the other women in the family and by close female friends. Babies are usually breastfed and so remain near their mothers when they sleep. When a baby cries, it receives immediate attention from one of the doting women in the household.



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New baby

The birth of a child is a time when the family prepares a feast and gives the baby a ritual haircutting. Other features of the birth ritual are believed to protect the child from harmful spirits. These customs include tying an amulet around the baby's waist and using soot to blacken the area around the baby's eye sockets. A soot mark is also placed on the sole of the baby's foot and on its forehead.

¹⁹⁸ Everyculture.com. Culture of Bangladesh. "Marriage, Family, and Kinship." c.2007.
<http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Bangladesh.html>

Naming Conventions¹⁹⁹

Conventions for naming and addressing others follow the hierarchical societal patterns in Bangladesh. Age and social standing are revered in Bangladesh society. These traits determine the level of respect that is accorded to someone as well as how they are addressed. A suffix is added to the end of a name to indicate respect based on factors such as position or age. This same convention can also denote closeness or familiarity with another person.

If two family members address each other and the named person is older than the person speaking, the speaker uses the person's first name and adds a suffix.

Gender also plays a role in naming, in that the senior male who is the leader of a group is addressed in such a way that this position of authority is acknowledged. In general, however, age is the most significant determining factor that affects naming. If two people of the same age address each other, they can use first names. Otherwise, the age difference must be recognized by appending the name.

Titles can replace personal names to convey respect. The term *Bahadur*, meaning "Sir," is respectful to use when addressing a man. If speaking to a woman, *Begum*, or "Madam," can be used in place of a first name. Both terms are appropriate for business meetings.



¹⁹⁹ Kwintessential Cross Cultural Solutions. "Bangladesh: Language, Culture, Customs, and Etiquette." No date. <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/bangladesh.html>