



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

With 55,598 square miles (143,998 square kilometers), Bangladesh is about the same size as Wisconsin. The mostly fertile delta is broken up by hills in the east. Rivers and channels run throughout the country; the three largest rivers are the Padma (Ganges), Jamuna, and Meghna. Winter (October–March) is cool and mild; summer (March–June) is hot and humid. The monsoon season (June–October) brings most of Bangladesh's yearly rain; floods, tidal waves, and cyclones are common. Many areas are rich in resources such as natural gas and timber. Bangladesh has a wide variety of flora and fauna. The endangered Royal Bengal tiger and the large Indian civet are found within the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarban, along the southwest coast. Monkeys, gibbons, wild boars, dolphins, crocodiles, and more than six hundred species of birds and one hundred species of reptiles all inhabit Bangladesh. A dwindling number of elephants reside in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, in the southeast.

History

Historians believe Bangladesh may take its name from the Bang tribe that settled in the region around 1000 BC. The first written record dates to Alexander the Great's campaigns in India in the fourth century BC. According to legend, Alexander's generals refused to fight the armies of the mighty Gangaridai and Prasioi civilizations in Bengal.

Buddhism spread during the Mauryan Empire, which rose

to power toward the end of the fourth century BC. The empire eventually disintegrated into a number of small kingdoms. Various Buddhist and Hindu rulers controlled the area until AD 1204. In the 13th century, Muslims began to conquer Hindus and subsequently ruled for five hundred years. The British East India Company took control in 1757, ceding authority to the British government in 1857.

When British rule ended in 1947, the area became part of the new nation of Pakistan, called East Pakistan. While linked by religion, the two areas were separated culturally and geographically. East Pakistan did not feel it enjoyed equality with West Pakistan. In 1956, student protests led to the adoption of Bangla as the state language. Calls for autonomy peaked in 1971 and were followed by a nine-month civil war. The war eventually involved India, which had been flooded by refugees. After a stranded Pakistani army surrendered to Indian forces, Bangladesh became independent. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of the Awami League political party, became the first president and is considered the father of the country. However, he was assassinated in a 1975 coup.

Following a shaky interim period, General Ziaur Rahman governed from 1977 to 1981, when he was assassinated. Hussain Mohammed Ershad took control and governed until 1990, when public protests forced his resignation. Free national elections in 1991 brought Khaleda Zia, widow of Ziaur Rahman, to office. Challenged by natural disasters, regional problems, and a long-running insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Khaleda eventually bowed to strikes and public pressure and resigned. A neutral caretaker government held elections in 1996. Voter turnout was high, and Sheikh Hasina (daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and

leader of the Awami League) led her party to victory over Khaleda's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Hasina signed a peace treaty in 1997 with Chakma tribal leaders to end the Chittagong Hill Tracts war, give local people more autonomy, and open the door to economic and tourist development for that region. However, the 2001 national elections produced a decisive victory for Khaleda and the BNP, though they were marked by widespread political violence. Hasina accepted defeat and peacefully transferred power, becoming the first prime minister to complete a term in office since Bangladesh's independence. Despite this positive step, instability and strikes continued. In January 2007, amid widespread violence between supporters of the BNP and the Awami League, President Iajuddin Ahmed declared a state of emergency, canceled elections, and installed a caretaker government, which governed until elections in December 2008 brought Hasina back to power.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Bangladesh's population of 156.1 million is growing at an annual rate of 1.55 percent. Bangladesh is one of the world's most densely populated countries. Approximately 27 percent of its residents live in cities. Most Bangladeshis live in one of thousands of small villages, though urbanization is increasing. Except for about 250,000 *Biharis* (Muslims who immigrated from Bihar, India) and numerous small tribal groups that together comprise 2 percent of the population, Bangladeshis consider themselves a homogeneous people. They have an Indo-European heritage, with some Arab, Persian, and Turkic influence. The people of West Bengal (a state in eastern India that borders Bangladesh) are of the same ethnic group as the Bangladeshis, but they are mostly Hindus and refer to themselves as Bangalis.

Language

Bangla, the country's official language, is derived from Sanskrit but contains some Persian, Arabic, Turkic, and English vocabulary. Spoken Bangla has several distinct dialects, the strongest (most guttural) of which are spoken in the northeastern and southeastern districts of Bangladesh. Most Bangla dialects are soft and somewhat musical. People with a university education usually speak English. They incorporate into spoken English various colloquialisms derived from Bangla. The *Biharis* speak Urdu. Small ethnic groups along the southeast border and elsewhere speak their own languages. Due to the influence of Indian media, many Bangladeshis (especially the youth) can understand Hindi.

Religion

Bangladesh has one of the largest Muslim populations in the world. Around 89.5 percent of the people are Muslim, mostly Sunni. Muslims pray five times daily. The midday *jumm'ah* service on Friday is the most important prayer time. Muslims accept the *Qur'an* as scripture revealed to the prophet Muhammad by *Allah* (God) through the angel Gabriel. Hindus (9.6 percent) comprise the other major religious

group, followed by Buddhists.

Muslims do not drink alcohol or eat pork. Hindus do not eat beef. Muslims fast from sunrise to sundown during the month of *Ramazan*. Each evening the fast is broken with special snacks called *iftar*. It is polite for non-Muslims to avoid daytime public eating, drinking, or smoking during *Ramazan*. Bangladeshis stress cleanliness near holy books and places. They remove their shoes before entering mosques and temples.

General Attitudes

A calm, serious face is considered a sign of maturity. Therefore, while Bangladeshis might not smile in public, they are not being unfriendly. It is not customary to thank someone for a favor. Although the word *dhannabad* (thanks) exists, Bangladeshis avoid using it in everyday life. Instead, one returns the favor. However, people do use *dhannabad* in formal situations. Bangladeshis value the group more than the individual, so family needs come first. Friendships are expected to be strong and durable. Being connected to someone in power is highly valued.

Social classes play an integral but diminishing role in Bangladesh. For example, class is still an important factor in the choice of a marriage partner. The way a woman is treated by her husband's family is often determined by her father's wealth; if her father is poor, she may be treated poorly. One's social image or status is guarded carefully, and individuals can become very angry if insulted or defamed. Fatalism plays an important role in people's lives. Many are content to lead simple, modest lives without various material comforts.

Personal Appearance

Although many men wear Western-style clothing, especially in urban areas, women generally wear a traditional *saree*—a long piece of printed cloth wrapped around the body in a special way. Jewelry is important in a woman's wardrobe; it also serves as financial security. Women do not wear pants. Adults do not wear shorts. Some men wear white religious clothing called *pajama* (like a Western pajama bottom) and *panjabi* (like a knee-length pajama top). Men in rural villages often wear a *lungi* (a circular piece of cloth knotted at the waist and extending to the ankles) with a *genji* (like an undershirt). Some Muslim women wear burqas.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Muslim Bangladeshis greet each other with the phrase *Assalaamu alaikum* (Peace be upon you). The response is *Waalaikum assalaam* (And peace be upon you). One may also raise the right hand to the forehead, palm curved and relaxed, in a salute-like gesture. Men also might shake hands, each holding his hand to his heart afterwards. One does not shake hands with, kiss, or embrace a member of the opposite sex in public. A common Hindu greeting is *Nomoshkaar* (Hello). At parting, a Muslim might say *Khoda hafiz* (May God be with you). *Ashi* (So long) is common for all groups.

In addressing others, Bangladeshis add different suffixes

to names to show respect and closeness. For example, a man adds *-bhabhi* (wife of older brother) to the name of his friend's wife, even though they have no family ties. The terms “sister” and “brother” are used as commonly for friends and colleagues as for family members. Age difference mostly determines how to address another person. A person of the same age usually is addressed by name, whereas an older person (regardless of how few years separate the two) may be addressed by name plus a family-related suffix (e.g., older brother, uncle, older sister, aunt) or by the suffix alone. So, a young adult might address an older woman by adding *-apa* (older sister) to her name or simply by calling her *apa*.

Gestures

Peers of the same sex show sincerity by establishing eye contact during conversation. However, one looks down to show respect for an older person or someone of higher social standing. In most cases, it is impolite to cross one's legs or smoke in the presence of an elder, regardless of what the older person does. One does not point the bottom of the shoe or foot at a person because this is thought to lower that person's worth. Bangladeshis are also sensitive about one's foot making contact with books or other reading materials. If a person's foot accidentally touches a book, the person apologizes by touching the book with the fingertips of the right hand, then touching the chest, and then the lips.

Pointing with the chin is polite; whistling or winking in public is not. Beckoning with the index finger is very rude. In general, it is impolite to beckon adults, but beckoning may be done with the palm turned down and all fingers waving together. A slight tilt of the head to one side indicates agreement. Personal space is very small between friends but significant between superiors and subordinates. Younger bus passengers give seats to older riders if they are in the same or higher class.

Visiting

Bangladeshis visit each other often and unannounced, usually in the late morning or late afternoon. Hospitality is a national trait; hosts offer guests tea and some simple snacks. It is considered rude for the guest to decline the offer. Guests visiting at mealtime usually are invited to eat.

At social occasions, most Bangladeshis avoid being the first or among the last to arrive. When people are invited to an event but cannot go, they still say they will try to attend. Saying “no” may be interpreted as not valuing the host's friendship. The entire extended family is included in an invitation. Indicating an ending time on the invitation is rude.

Because Bangladeshis are class conscious, they avoid inviting people of a higher class who they think they cannot entertain satisfactorily. Also, people evade certain invitations, such as birthday parties, if they feel they cannot take a proper gift. Dinner guests are not expected to bring gifts, but they usually reciprocate the dinner invitation.

Eating

Bangladeshis generally do not use knives and forks at home, but they do use spoons to eat sweets. They eat food with the right hand; the left hand is reserved for personal hygiene. To

maintain decency and cleanliness, people do not let *shu'ra* (a sauce commonly served with meals) touch above their knuckles when they eat. Urban Bangladeshis typically eat a light breakfast around 6 or 7 a.m., followed by snacks (often leftovers) and then lunch at 1 p.m. Around 5 or 6 p.m., an afternoon snack is eaten, and dinner is served around 10 p.m.

Bangladeshis do not converse much during a meal, especially at home. Food is not passed around the table; rather, plates are taken to a main dish for serving. One places bones and other food wastes on bone plates so they are separate from one's meal. On special occasions, children often eat first. Men and women eat separately at large social gatherings (such as weddings). At restaurants, the wealthiest person often pays for everyone's meal, particularly among relatives. Eating out is rare for most people, but Chinese restaurants are popular with the middle and upper classes.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Due to economic necessity, extended families often share the same dwelling; however, the nuclear family is becoming more typical among the younger generation. Children, especially sons, are expected to care for their elderly parents. Bangladesh has no social security system or nursing homes. Grandparents or older siblings are responsible for child care when the parents are away or working.

Society is male dominated and men are protective of their female relatives. Women are discouraged from being out alone after sunset. Except in the upper class, women generally have a low status in society, but there is a growing movement to promote women's rights.

Housing

Most housing in Bangladesh is basic by North American standards. In cities, many people live in apartment buildings that contain no insulation besides the thick concrete walls. In the kitchen, sinks are sometimes built into the floor. Refrigerators are a sign of wealth and, as such, are often kept in the living room, where they can be seen. In urban slum areas, houses tend to be small bamboo structures, covered with roofs made of bamboo or tin. In villages and rural areas, people typically live in small clusters of bamboo or mud huts. Energy distribution is often political, meaning that those living in the energy minister's hometown experience the fewest blackouts.

Dating and Marriage

Young Bangladeshis have fewer opportunities for social interaction with people of the opposite sex as they grow older. When men and women go out together, the relationship is expected to lead to marriage. Sexual relations outside of marriage are strongly discouraged; self-restraint is considered an indicator of one's potential to build a strong marriage. Women often marry before they are 18, especially in rural areas. Men marry after they finish their education or have some financial security.

Marriage is often arranged through a *ghatak*

(matchmaker), usually a relative or family friend. If a man and woman get to know each other on their own, the man sends a formal proposal to the woman's parents through an older relative. For weddings, both the bride's and groom's homes are decorated with lights. Bamboo gates, adorned with colorful pieces of cloth, are placed at the entrances. The bride wears a *saree* and jewelry; the groom wears a *shirwani* (knee-length coat), a *pagri* (traditional cap), and *nagra* (flat shoes that curl upward in front). At an initial ceremony, the groom sits on a decorated stage surrounded by gifts. Guests feed him some food and smear *holud* (turmeric) on his face or arms, making his skin glow. The main ceremony takes place the next day. The bride's family initially turns the groom away, demanding a ransom from him. When the groom is allowed to enter, he goes into a room apart from the wife, which completes the ceremony.

A Muslim groom pledges money for the bride's future if the marriage fails; the sum is recorded in the *ka'been* (marriage registry). After marriage, the woman is expected to move to the home of her husband's family. Although polygamy and divorce are legal, both carry a stigma. Having more than one wife is rare, but divorce is slowly becoming more common.

Life Cycle

During the seventh month of a woman's pregnancy, she is honored with a *shat* (baby shower), at which friends and relatives give her clothes and blankets. Several weeks after a baby is born, the baby is given a name, and a black spot is put on its forehead to ward off the "evil eye." At six months, the baby is weaned from breast milk and given a first taste of rice. At age five, all Muslim boys are circumcised. Funeral ceremonies vary by religion. Muslims must bury the deceased within 30 hours of death. Hindus cremate their dead on funeral pyres.

Diet

Rice is the main staple of the Bangladeshi diet. Along with rice, people regularly consume fish and *dal* (a spicy lentil-based soup). Fish and beef are popular but too expensive for the poor. Except for carrots and cucumbers, vegetables are fried in oil. Bangladeshis prefer foods spiced with such ingredients as cumin, ginger, coriander, tumeric, and pepper. Locally available fruits include tomatoes, mangoes, litchis, jackfruit, guavas, watermelons, bananas, and papaya. Food is often marinated in *shu'ra* (made from chopped onions and spices marinated in warm cooking oil). A good *shu'ra* is considered an index of fine cooking. People usually do not eat dessert after meals, but they eat sweets on special occasions. Two popular sweets (*rashogolla* and *kalojam*) are variations of dough boiled in syrup.

Recreation

Men enjoy soccer, field hockey, cricket, table tennis, and badminton. Visiting friends and relatives is a form of recreation that reinforces the family support network. Televisions and VCRs are popular in cities. Movie theaters are plentiful. Hindi movies (musicals or action shows) from India are favorites, and the youth enjoy films from the United

States. There are no nightclubs in Bangladesh. Most people do not travel for pleasure. Families and young people enjoy picnics. With the exception of handball, girls are discouraged from playing sports. The most popular boys' game, *ha-dudu* or *ka-baddi*, is played on a square court. While continually saying "hadud-du-du," one team's player enters the other side's area and tries to touch as many of the other players as possible. If he returns to his side while still repeating the words without having taken a breath, the other team loses the players he touched and his team gains an equal number of its own players back (from previous rounds). However, if he is trapped by the opposite team and is forced to take another breath, he is out and the opposing team gains one of its members back. The first team to eliminate all players on the other side wins.

The Arts

Bangladeshis are proud of their artistic tradition, which is much older than their young country. They appreciate poetry, music, and literature. Bangali poetry, known for its passion and emotion, reflects the character of the Bangladeshi people. Folk dances are often based on everyday themes and activities. Contemporary music and dance draw heavily on folk traditions and forms. Improvisation has traditionally been a hallmark of Bangali music and dance.

Magnificent Islamic mosques provide a visual foundation for contemporary architects, who blend native appearance with Western structural elements. Decorative arts thrive in several media. Ricksha carts (small carriages pulled by a bicycle) are brightly decorated, and domestic items are beautified by paint, engraving, and embroidery.

Holidays

Political and cultural holidays follow the Western calendar, while religious holidays follow the lunar calendar (so they are on different days each year). Seasons and the New Year (known as *Pahela Baishak*) are determined by a Bangla calendar. Political holidays include *Ekushe*, or *Shaheed Dibash* (21 February, honoring six people killed in a 1952 political protest), Independence Day (26 March, when independence was declared), Labor Day (1 May), and Victory Day (16 December, when independence was actually achieved). The most important Islamic holidays are *Eid al-Fitr* (at the end of *Ramazan*), *Eid al-Azha* (commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son), and *Shab-i Barat* (a special night for asking blessings). Some Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian feasts are also celebrated as national holidays.

The *Eid* holidays begin with prayer services and are marked by three days of feasting and visiting. Children commonly bow and touch the feet of older people in the extended family to show respect. The older people then give the children gifts, usually money. Bangladeshis customarily exchange one-third of the meat sacrificed during *Eid al-Azha* as gifts (they donate one-third to the poor and keep one-third). During *Shab-i Barat*, neighbors exchange sweets.

SOCIETY

Government

The prime minister is currently Sheikh Hasina. The president (currently Zillur Rahman) is head of state and has mostly ceremonial duties. Members of the 300-seat *Jatiya Sangsad* (National Parliament) are elected to five-year terms. The BNP, the Awami League, and various smaller parties are represented in the *Jatiya Sangsad*. The voting age is 18.

Economy

Agriculture employs the majority of the labor force—mostly as subsistence farmers. Rice is the most important crop. The garment industry produces clothing for many nations. Garments have replaced jute, a plant whose fiber is used to make carpets, as the main export. Bangladesh is one of the world's largest jute exporters, but the development of synthetic fiber products has threatened its continued importance. Other exports include tea, leather, and shrimp. The country imports most of its consumer goods and food. Wages sent home from the roughly three million Bangladeshis working abroad are spent mostly on consumer items or property. The government encourages expatriates and their families to invest the money in Bangladesh rather than spend it. Inflation, corruption, debt, and lack of industrial diversity hinder strong development. The currency is the *taka* (BDT).

Transportation and Communications

Roads are not extensive and most are not paved. Traffic moves on the left. The main forms of public transportation include buses (often crowded), rickshas, and *baby-taxis* (three-wheeled motor scooters). For private transport, most people walk or ride bicycles. Private taxis are expensive but safe. Because of the many rivers but few bridges, land transportation links are poorly developed. However, rivers are used to transport people and goods throughout the country. Railways are also important.

Telephones are available in urban areas. Cell phones are beginning to fill the gap in rural areas, where landlines are not available. An increasing number of Bangladeshis have access to television, and most have radios. Few people have internet access, though the number of cybercafes is growing. Mail delivery is slow; private courier services are preferred.

Education

Public schooling exists, however many children drop out after a few years due to economic need or family choice. About 60 percent of Bangladeshis have attended some form of schooling. Primary school begins at around age six and lasts five years. Those students who attend secondary school may choose to study a trade or prepare to attend a university. Less than 2 percent graduate from universities. The wealthy can attend school overseas or afford private instruction in Bangladesh.

Health

Bangladesh's high infant mortality rate is due partly to

widespread malnutrition. Malaria, cholera, hepatitis, typhoid, and other illnesses cause many deaths each year. Life expectancy is higher in urban areas than in rural areas. Sanitation is poor and water is not potable in most areas. Hospital care is free but inadequate for most people's needs. Expensive private clinics provide better care. Rural services are limited.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	156,118,464 (rank=7)
Area, sq. mi.	55,598 (rank=94)
Area, sq. km.	143,998

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	129 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	116 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$1,600
Adult literacy rate	54% (male); 41% (female)
Infant mortality rate	53 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	68 (male); 71 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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