

# ***US FORCES INDOPACIFIC CULTURE GUIDE***



## **BANGLADESH**



**U.S. AIR FORCE**



# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success (Photo: US Army medic discusses techniques with Bangladesh Army soldiers during a training exercise).



The guide consists of 2 parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” introduces the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on South Asia.

Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Bangladeshi society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location.



This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training (Photo: Bangladesh Army engineers conduct counterattack role-playing during a multinational peacekeeping exercise).

For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) website at <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/> or contact the AFCLC Region Team at [AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil).

**Disclaimer:** All text is the property of the AFCLC and may not be modified by a change in title, content, or labeling. It may be reproduced in its current format with the expressed permission of the AFCLC. All photography is provided as a courtesy of the US government, Wikimedia, and other sources.

## PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

### What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.



Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic, representing the importance Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

### Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### **Cultural Domains**

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.



We can organize behaviors and belief systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, social and political systems, and others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the ways a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### **Social Behaviors across Cultures**

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even categorize those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques. Conversely, industrialized nations have more sophisticated market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption.

Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional

historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.



## Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the



world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an

accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

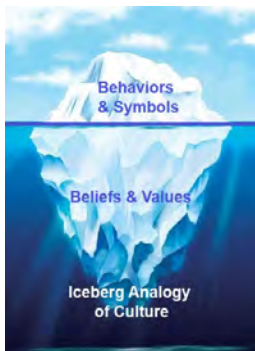
## Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true—regardless of whether there is evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

## Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).



In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel throughout South Asia, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

## CULTURAL DOMAINS

### 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which

members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.

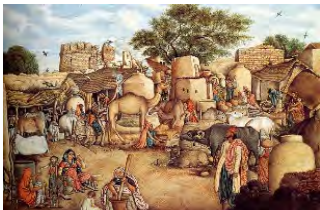


South Asia comprises 5 countries on the mainland: India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, and 2 island countries, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, located south of India in the Indian Ocean. Over thousands of years, many different ethnic and cultural groups migrated through and settled in South

Asia. The region's first civilization, the Indus Valley Civilization, emerged in modern-day Pakistan around 3000 BC. Inhabitants developed a complex writing system, built well-planned cities, and manufactured bronze tools (Photo: Indus Valley Civilization vessel, 2600-2450 BC).

Beginning with the Mauryan Empire (325-185 BC), the region experienced several cycles as empires consolidated and then splintered into smaller kingdoms and states before consolidating again. The Gupta Empire (320-550 AD) ushered in a period of peace and security known as the Classical Age. During this period, South Asians made major advances in literature, art, mathematics, medicine, and astronomy. The Hindu religion also rapidly developed and spread.

Following the fall of the Gupta Empire, warring kingdoms and Central Asian invaders known as the Mughals competed for dominance through the 15th century. During the 16th century, a series of Mughal rulers gradually conquered most of South Asia, founding the Mughal Empire and spreading Islam. At the height of their power in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Mughals greatly influenced art, literature, and architecture (Illustration: A village scene by a Mughal Empire painter).



Meanwhile, the Portuguese had reached India in the late 15th century. By the early 17th century the French, British, and Portuguese were competing for control of the international spice trade as well as influence over Mughal leaders. The British emerged victorious, taking control of most of the subcontinent, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives by the late 18th century. Remote Bhutan and Nepal remained independent monarchies throughout the subsequent British colonial era.

Anti-British nationalist movements arose in the early 20th century. The Indian National Congress Party emerged as the largest anti-colonial movement but failed to attract Muslims, who feared Hindu dominance. Instead, Muslims formed their own nationalist party, the All-India Muslim League, which advocated for a separate independent Muslim state. In response to these nationalist pressures, the British government divided most of its South Asian colonial empire into 2 independent nations – Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority India – in 1947. Sri Lanka gained independence a year later. In 1965 the Maldives

regained its independence from Britain, and in 1971, Bangladesh declared and won its independence from Pakistan.

Since gaining independence, India has remained a fairly stable democracy, while Pakistan has resorted to intermittent periods of military rule. Bhutan and Nepal have explored transition from monarchies to democracies. Sri Lanka emerged from a 26-year civil war in 2009, while the Maldives and Bangladesh have struggled to improve their democratic governance.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community.

South Asia's strategic position between East Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia, along with its ethnic diversity, greatly influenced its political and social systems. From ancient times, traders, migrants, and conquerors from various places and cultures passed through or settled in the region. These peoples included the Persians, Scythians, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, and Afghans (Photo: Jhong village in Nepal).



Historically, South Asia consisted of hundreds of kingdoms and principalities that no empire could control for long. Even under British colonial rule, over 200 rulers retained control of minor territories. Despite this

fragmentation, the British colonial bureaucracy successfully administered these varied polities and interests for over 150 years, eventually becoming the framework for South Asia's post-independence governments.

Today, India retains the region's most stable democratic political system. Pakistan began restoring democratic processes in 2008, while Bangladesh and the Maldives struggle with corruption and unstable leadership transitions. Sri Lanka maintains democratic institutions despite leadership's harsh

tactics against political opposition. Nepal's government has dissolved several times since electing its first President in 2008, remaining deadlocked over drafting a new constitution. Bhutan largely closed itself off to the world, ceding control of its foreign relations to India between 1949-2007. Thereafter, the Bhutani king has been directing democratization efforts, overseeing the first parliamentary elections in 2007.

With India the dominant power in South Asia, the other South Asian countries are wary of its intentions. Pakistan especially rejects India's role as a regional leader. Ongoing territorial disputes between India and Pakistan have erupted in armed clashes several times since independence and compelled both countries to test nuclear weapons in 1998.

Meanwhile, relations between India and China are strained for several reasons – most notably because of China's close ties with Pakistan, rivalry over access to resources and regional influence, and ongoing territorial disputes. The US has strong ties to the region and seeks deeper economic, political, and security cooperation (Photo: US Airman with Bangladeshi schoolboys).



Modern South Asia encompasses hundreds of ethnicities, whose group identities influence regional politics. For example, ethnic nationalism prompted Bengalis to declare independence from Pakistan, establishing Bangladesh as the only ethnically homogenous state in South Asia. Seeking to create an independent Tamil state within Sri Lanka, Tamil insurgents fought and lost a 26-year civil war against the majority Sinhalese in 2009.

India is home to thousands of tribal groups, where both religion and ethnicity are powerful forces in politics. Although officially abolished in India and antithetical to the Islamic belief system, the ancient Hindu-based caste system still plays a role in South Asian society. This system organizes society into a set of hierarchical and hereditary groups. At the bottom of the caste

system are the **Dalits** (the “oppressed” or “downtrodden”), who are largely impoverished and uneducated, and who face strong discrimination.

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

South Asia is the birthplace of 2 major world religions, Hinduism and Buddhism. Hinduism’s roots trace back to the Vedic Period (ca. 1750-500 BC). During the Gupta Empire from the 4th-6th centuries, these early beliefs and traditions evolved into the foundations of modern Hinduism. Today, large majorities of the populations of India and Nepal are Hindu.

Siddhartha Gautama, who achieved enlightenment and became “the Buddha,” founded Buddhism around 500 BC. In the ensuing centuries, Buddhism spread through South Asia into East and Southeast Asia. Starting in the 4th century AD, Buddhism began to decline in South Asia, virtually disappearing from the region by the 12th century. While the percentage of South East Asian Buddhists is small, Bhutan and Sri Lanka have Buddhist majorities and Nepal a significant Buddhist community (Illustration: Wall painting in a Bhutan Buddhist temple).



Beginning in the 8th century, Muslims spread Islam throughout much of the North and West of South Asia, culminating in the founding of the Muslim Mughal Empire in the 16th century. Although the early Mughal rulers tolerated other religions, later rulers sometimes persecuted followers of other religions.

Under British colonial rule, South Asians were generally free to practice the religion of their choice. Religious tensions between

Hindus and Muslims led to the breakup of the British Empire into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan.

Today, South Asians continue to profess diverse religious beliefs. In addition to its majority Hindu population (80%), India is home to Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs, among other traditions. While Sri Lanka recognizes no state religion, its constitution gives “foremost place” to Buddhism, which is the state religion of Bhutan. Although both Pakistan (96% Muslim) and India enshrine religious freedom in their constitutions, increasing Islamic governance in Pakistan and growing Hindu nationalism in India create tensions with minority religious groups in both countries.

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are important to South Asians. The traditional South Asian ideal family consists of several generations of the male line living in one household, along with their wives, minor children, and unmarried adult daughters. Women leave their parents' home when they marry and join their husband's family. Inheritance passes from father to son, and traditionally the family engages in business or a craft together (Photo: Khasia people in Bangladesh).



In many South Asian families, parents have a great deal of influence over their children's marriages. Arranged marriages are common, and young women often marry older men. In some regions, families encourage their children to marry within their caste. Hindus consider marriage to be an eternal bond, a belief that contributes to low divorce rates. Of note, polygyny, the practice of a man having multiple wives, is legal in most South Asian countries. Two exceptions are India,

which outlawed polygyny for Hindus (non-Hindus may engage in the practice), and Nepal, which outlawed polygyny completely.

A growing rural-urban divide in economic and educational opportunities across South Asia results in notable differences in rural and urban family life. The traditional family structure is still common in rural areas, where families engage in agricultural or village economies. In urban centers, where more educational and economic opportunities are available, the household is usually much smaller and family structures are much more diverse.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles (Photo: Nepalese woman).



South Asia's dominant philosophies and religions (Hinduism and Islam) privilege the male's role as leader and

provider and stress female subordination. Despite progressive gender equality policies, South Asian women face continued challenges to their participation in the political system, the labor market, and education. While laws supporting equal rights exist in many South Asian countries, the legal systems often remain discriminatory and rarely uphold such laws.

In much of South Asia, women still assume the traditional roles of wives and mothers. Access to education is unequal in India, Pakistan, and Nepal, where fewer girls than boys enroll in school. South Asian girls typically marry at a young age, and over 35% of South Asian women have a child before age 20.

Women also face discrimination in the workforce. Across the region, women comprise only 19% of employment outside of agriculture, and their participation in the labor force has declined since 1990. South Asian women do participate in politics, having served as heads of state in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal,

and Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, women remain underrepresented in politics, holding only less than 23% of the seats in national parliaments.

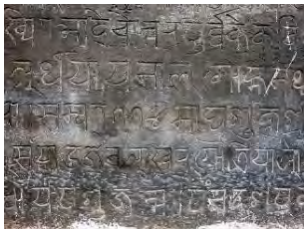
The Maldives has topped the South Asian countries in gender equality surpassing Sri Lanka, ranking 81st among 189. Nepal also has relatively high gender equality, with over 82% of Nepalese women employed across nearly all sectors.

Homosexuality is illegal in every South Asian country except Nepal. Homosexuals suffer discrimination and stigmatization across most of South Asia.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

South Asia is linguistically diverse – about 450 languages are in daily use in India alone, although most are spoken only within very limited geographical regions. South Asia's languages



belong to 4 groups: Indo-European (languages such as Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu, are spoken widely in India and Pakistan), Dravidian (such as Tamil, spoken in India and Sri Lanka), Sino-Tibetan (such as Dzongkha, spoken in Bhutan) and Austro-Asiatic (such as Santhali, spoken in India) (Photo: 17th century stone inscription in Nepal, written in 15 languages).

Many South Asians are multilingual, although some regions exhibit more linguistic diversity than others. For example, while Hindi is India's national language, the government recognizes English as a subsidiary official language and grants official status to 21 other languages. By contrast, most people in Bangladesh speak Bangla as their first language, while Dzongkha is Bhutan's only official language. In Pakistan, large populations speak Punjabi, Sindhi, and Saraiki, yet the

government is slowly transitioning the official language from English to Urdu, mother tongue of only 8% of the population.

South Asians generally consider English a sign of education or elite status. The British colonial powers that controlled most of South Asia during the 19th and early 20th centuries promoted the use of English. Since independence, English has remained a national or official language in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, where it is often used in official government business alongside local languages. Nepal also uses English unofficially in government and business. The only countries that do not use English to conduct official business are Bangladesh and Bhutan.

South Asians use a variety of scripts, some developed in the region and others adopted from abroad. For example, Hindi, Nepali, and Sanskrit, spoken in India and Nepal, use variations of the Devanagari script from northern India. By contrast, Urdu and Sindhi, spoken in India and Pakistan, use the Arabic



script from the Middle East. Of note, to write Punjabi, Pakistanis use the Arabic script, while Indians use the Devanagari script (Illustration: “India” written in Hindi Devanagari script).

While some South Asians avoid confrontation during interactions, others are more demonstrative. Generally, South Asians value respect in interpersonal relations. Of note, specific greetings, customs, and traditions used to demonstrate respect within interactions can differ significantly by region and culture.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Traditionally valuing education, South Asian societies have established various types of formal institutions of learning. Prior to the colonial period, most education took place in religious institutions such as the Hindu **gurukula** (a school headed by a **guru**, or teacher), Buddhist monasteries, and Islamic **madrasas** (religious schools). Schools taught a variety of subjects, including religion, philosophy, warfare, medicine, astronomy, literature, mathematics, and logic.

During the colonial period, the British introduced secular education in the English language with the goal of spreading Western ideas and creating a class of South Asians that could support the British bureaucracy. The British suppressed instruction in South Asian literature, religion, and philosophy in order to “modernize” residents. Educated South Asians in turn opened their own schools that advocated South Asian history and culture. This rising consciousness among the South Asian elite contributed to nationalist movements of the early to mid-20th century, eventually leading to independence for most of South Asia.



Today, South Asian leaders view education as a tool for developing the region. The South Asian nations invested heavily in education in the first decade of the 21st century, resulting in an increase in primary school enrollment rates from 75% in 2001 to 89% in 2010. Despite this success, 28 million South Asian children remain unenrolled, disproportionately girls, while approximately 1/3 of students receive low quality education that leaves them without basic literacy and math skills (Photo: School children in India).

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. Conversely, in most South Asian cultures, establishing and maintaining relationships with others can take precedence over accomplishing a task in the most efficient manner. Networking is very important in South

Asia, as introductions through a reputable 3rd party can facilitate relationship-building by providing immediate credibility with a new contact.

Concepts of personal space differ throughout the region. While many Indians prefer to have at least an arm's length of space, Pakistani men tend to stand closely when speaking. In some regions, interactions between men and women may be restricted. In other regions, unrelated men and women may not interact at all. This segregation is particularly true in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and northwest India, where many wealthy and middle-class Muslim and Hindu families follow a tradition called



***pardah***. This practice dictates that women are secluded in their family homes and wear veils on the rare occasions they go outside.

The rhythm of daily life changes during religious festivals and holidays. For example, during the Muslim month of Ramadan, many restaurants close and people enjoy a shorter work day. During the 5-day Hindu festival Diwali, participants open their doors and windows so the goddess of wealth may enter. Religious space is also subject to a variety of traditions restricting dress, actions, and types of participants, depending on the religion or local culture. For example, men must remove their shirts when entering some Hindu temples, while the Haji Ali dargah, a Muslim shrine in India, is off-limits to women (Photo: Performers celebrating Republic Day in India).

Some practices concerning the use of space are common across the region. For example, visitors typically remove their shoes upon entering a home, temple, or mosque, and sometimes before entering an office or other private spaces.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most of South Asia's forms of artistic expression reflect the diversity of the region's cultures and ethnicities as well as the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Elaborate Hindu

temples in India, Buddhist domed shrines in Nepal, and Islamic art and architecture, such as the world famous Taj Mahal, illustrate the artistic variety of South Asian culture.

Traditional dance, art, and literature have experienced revival following a period of suppression under the British colonial powers. Ancient epic poems, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, inspire modern mask and puppet theater, as well as television series. Contemporary novelists and poets explore a unique South Asian perspective while writing in both local languages and English. India features a thriving movie industry based in Mumbai. Known as Bollywood (a term constructed by combining Bombay and Hollywood), it is the world's largest film industry (Photo: Dancers performing at an Indian cultural event).



Cricket is the most popular sport in South Asia where India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka each having won the Cricket World Cup at least once. India and Pakistan have a strong cricket rivalry and have used cricket games as diplomatic ice breakers. India also is experiencing a Kabaddi revival – a 4,000 year old game combining elements of wrestling and rugby. Additionally, many South Asians enjoy soccer and field hockey.

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

South Asian cuisine is known for its variety and simplicity. Most meals are based on a staple, usually flat wheat bread in the North and Northwest and rice in the East and South. South Asians eat both bread and rice with lentils, beans, vegetables, and yogurt prepared with chilies and other spices. Because meat is expensive, most South Asians consume it only on special occasions. Of note, observant Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol; many Hindus do not eat beef or are vegetarians; and

many Buddhists are vegetarians. Coffee is popular in the South, while tea is more common in the North.

Malnutrition, malaria, HIV/AIDS, and unsanitary drinking water are major health concerns throughout South Asia. Since 1990, chronic malnutrition has declined by almost half in South Asia, falling from 61% to 35%. However, the number of children who are stunted, underweight, or under height remains high and has even increased in some countries.



While most countries have implemented programs to fight the spread of malaria and HIV/AIDS, these programs are hindered by poor quality healthcare systems. Approximately 6% of South Asians lack access to clean drinking water. Consequently, dysentery and other waterborne diseases are prevalent and a major cause of death among children (Photo: American and Nepali doctors provide medical care during PACANGEL Project Hope in 2014).

South Asian countries face many challenges in providing healthcare to their growing populations. Unequal socioeconomic development has resulted in significant disparities in health and access to healthcare. As an exception to these trends, Sri Lankan life expectancy rates are significantly higher than the region's average due to the governmental provision of universal healthcare.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. While most South Asians practiced subsistence agriculture prior to the arrival of Europeans, the region also produced spices and luxury items. Jewelry and fine woven goods are made both for local consumption and trade with East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.

Despite building communication, road, and rail infrastructure across South Asia, the British colonial administration did little to develop and modernize South Asian economies. At

independence in 1947, the former British colonies in South Asia were some of the poorest countries in the world.

The South Asian nations followed different economic development trajectories following independence. India and Pakistan both implemented economic systems that mix market economics with significant government planning and control. Over the last 60 years, both countries have undergone periods of strong economic growth. In contrast, Bhutan closed its borders to external economic and cultural influences until the 1990s, retaining its traditional agrarian economy.

South Asia as a whole has averaged 6% economic growth over the last 20 years. The economies of India and Pakistan have diversified into industrial, service, and technology sectors. By contrast, the economies of Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives remain largely undeveloped. Despite its strong overall economic growth, South Asia faces numerous economic challenges, including almost 260 million people living in poverty. Even in India, with its relatively developed economy, much of the population has not reaped benefits from economic progress – 42% of the Indian population is employed in agriculture, with few farmers able to grow more than they need to subsist (Photo: Street vendors in India).



The region's economies are still recovering from the 2008 global financial crisis, which reduced demand for South Asian exports and slowed investment in the region.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Since the end of the colonial period, as South Asian economies have developed at different rates, modern technology has spread unevenly through the region.

India has made extensive investments in its transportation infrastructure, creating the world's 2nd largest road network and a rail system that ranks among the busiest in the world. Despite these modern alternatives, many Indians still use oxen, camels, or even elephants for labor and transport, even in urban areas. Pakistan's existing infrastructure is deteriorating due to government neglect. Nepal has very little modern transportation infrastructure, limiting its residents to non-mechanized means of



transport outside the capital city of Kathmandu (Photo: Train station in India).

While most countries reported cell phone and Internet usage rates between 0% and 3% in 2004, Internet usage grew rapidly over the next decade, with most countries reporting usage rates over 34% by 2017. Cell phones are very popular, with most countries reporting usage of at least 87 subscriptions per 100 people in 2018. The Maldives leads the region, with an average of 166 cell subscriptions per 100 people.

South Asia faces challenges in meeting its growing energy demand. India is the world's 3rd largest energy consumer and the 2nd largest producer of coal, which supplies more than half its energy needs. Bhutan is South Asia's only net energy exporter, distributing about 70% of its generated electricity to India. Nuclear and hydropower are growing sources of energy.

Bhutan and Nepal have been slow to pursue international trade and investment. Other South Asian countries have had more open economic policies, but their international trade and investment relationships often suffer from internal instability and lack of resources. With greater economic openness since the 1980s and recent improvements in domestic stability, South Asian nations are developing greater economic partnerships with countries such as China, the US, and Japan.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize South Asian society at large, we will focus on specific features of Bangladeshi society.

# PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

## 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

### Overview

Bangladesh occupies the Ganges River delta and comprises the eastern portion of the historical region of Bengal. Over the centuries, Bengal was led by a series of Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim rulers before coming under British control in the 18th century. In 1947, East Bengal was governed by Pakistan. Since its 1971 emergence as Bangladesh following a bloody war of independence, the country has experienced economic growth amidst weak governance, poverty, political violence, and demographic and environmental strains.

### Early History

**The Vedic Period:** The region's earliest inhabitants were likely Dravidian tribespeople.



Around 1,500 BC, Aryans from Central Asia migrated into the Indus Valley along the border of present-day India and Pakistan, then gradually moved east into Bengal. This period's name is derived from **Vedas**, the Sanskrit (Hinduism's ancient literary and liturgical language – see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*) word for “knowledge.” The *Vedas* refers to a set of texts from this period describing everyday life, religion and worship, and societal roles within the caste system (see p. 14 of *Political and Social Relations*). Siddhartha Gautama established Buddhism at the end of the Vedic Period and likely shared his teachings in Bengal (see p. 7-8 of *Religion and Spirituality*). At that time, Bengal was divided among several small Vedic kingdoms (Photo: Bangladeshi landscape).

### The Mauryan Empire

In 321 BC, Chandragupta Maurya, ruler of the northern Indian Vedic kingdom of Magadha, began a swift expansion that was

continued by his son, Bindusara, and then grandson, Ashoka. At its peak, between 260-232 BC, the Mauryan Empire covered a vast territory from present-day Afghanistan in the West across Bengal to the modern-day Indian state of Assam (east of Bangladesh).



Profoundly affected by the destruction required to extend the empire, Ashoka converted to Buddhism and promoted its spread. Furthermore, he erected stone pillars etched with moral teachings on peace, tolerance, and charity, and constructed **stupas**, monuments to hold sacred Buddhist relics (see p. 8 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Although the Mauryan Empire gradually declined then collapsed after Ashoka's death, Buddhism continued to thrive in Bengal (Photo: Coins from the Mauryan Empire).

Subsequently, various Central Asian groups invaded and migrated to the region. Although this era is sometimes known as the “Dark Ages,” civilization flourished on the Indian subcontinent as trade and cultural ties developed across land and sea. During this period, the “Silk Road” from the Mediterranean Sea to China emerged, further strengthening the region's trade ties to East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.



### The Gupta Empire

Under the leadership of Chandra Gupta, the ancient Vedic kingdom of Magadha reemerged around 319 AD. This new Gupta Empire conquered and absorbed Bengal around 350, fully integrating it into its vast trade networks. Historians commonly refer to the Gupta era as India's “classical period” as a result

of its achievements in art, literature, and science. The Guptas' eventual decline was expedited by Hun invaders from Central Asia. Political control in Bengal then passed to local and regional leaders for several centuries (Photo: Coin from the Gupta Empire).

## The Pala Dynasty

Between the 8th-12th centuries, Bengal was ruled by the Pala dynasty. At its height in the 9th century, the Pala Empire stretched across modern-day Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Known as Bengal's Golden Age, this period brought significant cultural flowering and the construction of Buddhist temples, monasteries, and learning centers (see p. 1 of *Learning and Knowledge*). After slowly disintegrating for several decades, the empire fell in the late 12th century to the Sena dynasty (Illustration: 16th-century Portuguese depiction of Bengalis).



## The Sena Dynasty

The Sena unified Bengal then expanded their empire to include much of northeastern India. Although their rule was short, lasting just a century, the Sena dynasty had a significant impact, namely the revival of Hinduism in the region.

## Raiders and Migrants from Abroad

Meanwhile, Central Asian groups had continued their invasions and incursions into the sub-continent. After 200 years of raids, Muslim Afghans succeeded in conquering a large swath of northern Indian territories in the early 13th century. They eventually formed the Delhi Sultanate, an Islamic kingdom ruled by sultans (leaders) centered in Delhi (India's modern-day capital). In 1202, Afghan Muslims also conquered Bengal. For the next 2 centuries, the region was ruled by a series of Muslim sultans, some independent and others subjects of the Delhi Sultanate.

## The Bengal Sultanate

This arrangement continued in the 14th-16th centuries under the Bengal Sultanate, the first unified Bengali kingdom ruled by Muslims. Besides alternately proclaiming its sovereignty and pledging allegiance to the Delhi Sultanate, the Bengal Sultanate also was controlled occasionally by a loose confederacy of Muslim and Hindu leaders known as the **Baro-Bhuiyans** or 12 Feudal Rulers.

The Bengal Sultanate was a cosmopolitan trading power with an economy focused on shipbuilding and textile manufacturing. During this period, the region acquired the name **Bangalah** (Bengal) for the first time, as a distinct Bengali identity began to form. The Sultanate had both a multi-ethnic (Bengali, Turkic, and Arab) and multi-religious (Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist) population.

**The Arrival of the Europeans:** Meanwhile, Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama had arrived on the southwest Indian coast in 1498, ushering in a long era of European activity on the subcontinent. Soon, Dutch, English, French, and Danish merchants and traders were establishing trading posts throughout the region. In the early 16th century, the Bengal sultan granted Portuguese merchants permission to settle and conduct business in the port of Chittagong (in modern-day Bangladesh's southeast), beginning the era of European influence in Bengal (Illustration: 16th-century Portuguese map of Bengal's Ganges River delta).



### The Mughal Empire

What came to be known as the Mughal Empire began when Babur of Kabul, Afghanistan invaded and took control of territories in modern-day

eastern Pakistan and northern India in 1526. The Bengal sultan successfully negotiated a treaty with Babur, thus temporarily saving Bengal from Mughal invasion. Nevertheless, the Mughals persisted, and after several decades, Mughal leader Akbar defeated the last Bengal sultan in 1576. Bengal then became a **subah** (province) ruled by a **subahdar** (governor) in the Mughal Empire.

Although the Mughals were a Muslim dynasty, Akbar and some of his successors were tolerant of all religions. Nevertheless, Muslim settlers received preferential treatment, helping to spread Islam in Bengal (see p. 4-5 of *Religion and Spirituality*). In 1608, Dhaka (Bangladesh's modern-day capital) became the capital of the Mughal province of Bengal. However, Bengal's

remoteness from the Empire's capital in Delhi rendered the Mughal province difficult to govern, even permitting several autonomous Hindu states to exist within the province. Bengali ethnic and linguistic identity further solidified during this period, supporting the development of a distinct Bengali culture.

Unlike his predecessors, Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707) enforced policies that favored Islam over other religions, contributing to Buddhism's further decline in Bengal (see p. 8 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Aurangzeb focused on forcefully expanding the empire, eventually gaining control of most of the Indian peninsula. In the 18th century, the Mughal Empire began to decline, resulting in the loss of key territories to the Hindu Marathas in 1738. A year later, Nadir Shah of Persia (Iran) sacked Delhi and conquered the Mughals.



The Mughals left a lasting influence on South Asia's art, culture, and religious diversity. Within Bengal, the Mughal years brought significant economic growth as its cotton and silk textiles attracted worldwide demand (Photo: Dhaka's Lalbagh Fort, a 17th-century Mughal fortress complex).

### The British East India Company

Meanwhile, other Europeans sought to participate in South Asia's lucrative trade in cotton, silk, indigo, tea, and other luxury goods. Consequently, the British government chartered the British East India Company (EIC), permitting it to form its own armies. In 1634, the Mughal Empire gave permission for English traders to conduct business in Bengal, and in 1717, granted them preferential trading arrangements over other Europeans. In 1690, a Bengali **nawab** (hereditary ruler) allowed the EIC to establish its base in Kolkata (also known as Calcutta, a city in the present-day Indian state of West Bengal). Nevertheless, disputes over trading rights between the Mughals and English occasionally descended into violent conflict.

**The Nawabs of Bengal:** With the Mughal Empire's decline, Bengal began to regain its autonomy under the leadership of a

series of local *nawabs*. In the first half of the 18th century, these rulers helped Bengal maintain its successful economy, while resisting Hindu Maratha and Muslim Afghan invaders.

In 1756, Siraj-ud-Daulah became Bengal's *nawab*. Frustrated by the EIC's abuse of trade privileges and new EIC fortifications in Kolkata, Siraj demanded that all Europeans dismantle their trading posts and leave Bengal. While the French and Dutch complied, the English refused. Consequently, Siraj marched on Kolkata and ousted the English. Siraj also captured and imprisoned the surviving English defenders, prompting significant outcry in England when one account described their holding cell as the "Black Hole of Calcutta."

**The Battle of Plassey:** In retaliation, the EIC under Robert Clive overran and retook Kolkata in early 1757. Concurrently, the EIC began plotting Siraj's overthrow. Meanwhile, the *nawab* allied with the French, who sought to acquire the trade the English would have to abandon if they lost. The armies met in mid-1757 at the Battle of Plassey (Palashi, a village in the Indian state of West Bengal). Although the Bengalis and French consisted of some 50,000 well-armed troops as compared to the EIC's 3,000, the EIC emerged victorious because they had bribed Bengali general Mir Jafar to refrain from fighting. With its victory, the EIC established Britain's military and political supremacy in Bengal and positioned it for expansion across South Asia (Illustration: An 18th-century painting of Robert Clive meeting with Mir Jafar after the Battle of Plassey).



Britain's economy benefitted greatly from exports of the sub-continent's raw materials and the addition of the South Asian market as a destination for its manufactured goods. The South Asians resented the exploitation of their resources for English gain and the competition from English merchants that threatened and ultimately destroyed native industries. The effects on Bengal were particularly harsh. The English confiscated wealth from its treasury; mandated direct payments

from the *nawabs* to EIC officers; introduced a new land tenure system and raised land taxes; and imposed cash-crop farming in place of food crops. This hemorrhage of wealth and resources directly contributed to a 1770 famine in which some 1/3 of Bengalis starved to death.

Discontent rose, culminating in an 1857 uprising by Hindu and Muslim soldiers serving in the EIC's armies. After suppression of the rebellion, British Queen Victoria dissolved the EIC and annexed India (including Bengal) as a formal British colony. This move ushered in a period of British colonial control known as the British **Raj** or "rule" that would continue until 1947.

### The British Raj

The British *Raj* had both positive and negative effects on the region. For example, the British constructed railroads, improved agriculture, and built quality



educational institutions. Nevertheless, native residents became second class citizens as British nationals held the highest posts in the governmental bureaucracy. Further, the British implemented policies that undermined native cultural practices and imposed burdensome taxes. Moreover, with its "divide and rule" strategy, the British exploited religious divisions between Hindus and Muslims to prevent unity and maintain their hold (Photo: 1880s Dhaka).

**The Indian National Congress:** Beginning in the mid-19th century, a group of young, mostly European-educated South Asians harnessed growing nationalist sentiment to advocate for autonomy. In 1885, they formed the Indian National Congress (INC), which welcomed members from all ethnicities and faiths. Consequently, Hindus eventually dominated the organization.

**The 1905 Partition of Bengal:** Bengal's economic output was enormously important to the *Raj*, yet the British found the province difficult to govern, especially given the ongoing agitation for autonomy. In 1905, the British partitioned Bengal into 2 parts: Hindu-majority Western Bengal (comprising the modern-day Indian state of West Bengal plus parts of other

states) with a capital in Kolkata and Muslim-majority Eastern Bengal (comprising the modern-day state of Bangladesh plus several other far eastern modern-day Indian states) with a capital in Dhaka. Hindu Bengalis immediately protested, labeling the partition another example of Britain's "divide and rule" strategy to thwart their independence goals.

**The All-India Muslim League:** By contrast, some Muslim Bengalis supported the partition, considering it their chance to gain some political power. In 1906, Muslims gathered in Dhaka to form the All-India Muslim League, advocating the protection and advancement of South Asian Muslims' civil rights.

Ongoing protests compelled the British to reverse the partition in 1911 and reorganize and downsize the province so that Bengal comprised solely the 5 predominantly Bangla-speaking regions (Bangla is the language of Bengalis – see p. 1-2 of *Language and Communication*).



Nevertheless, this temporary partition foreshadowed what would become a permanent split in 1947 (Photo: Bengalis and British in 1919).

Following Bengal's reunification, the INC and Muslim League advocated for self-

government, despite some resistance. Meanwhile, the British continued to drain Bengal of its wealth and largely destroyed its cotton industry. A famine in 1943 resulted in some 3-5 million Bengali deaths. As the Muslim League, the INC, and a host of other political parties competed for votes in legislative elections, Muslim-Hindu violence erupted in Kolkata in 1946 and soon spread in and beyond Bengal.

## Independence and Partition

With resources needed at home for post-World War II recovery, the British decided to withdraw from the subcontinent. On August 15, 1947 through what came to be known as the partition of India, the British *Raj* became 2 independent states, Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan.

Without accounting for local preferences, the British arbitrarily chose to split Bengal along the 1905 partition lines, with West Bengal becoming part of India and East Bengal (modern-day Bangladesh) aligning with Pakistan, even though East Bengal was separated from Pakistan proper by some 1,100 mi of Indian territory. The partition caused waves of violence as millions of Muslims and Hindus migrated from India to Pakistan and vice-versa. As a result, around 500,000 people died and millions were displaced (Photo: The Hindustan Times announces independence in August 1947).



### East Pakistan

From the beginning, East Bengal (renamed East Pakistan in 1955) resented the dominance of the more powerful though less populous West Pakistan. Besides their geographic separation, language and cultural differences divided the 2 populations, even though they had a common religious identity. Although well represented in Pakistan's legislature, Bengalis had little influence in the executive branch. Consequently, they had little recourse when, in 1948, Pakistan President Jinnah announced that Pakistan's official language, Urdu, would remain the sole language, causing widespread protest among the Bangla-speaking majority in East Pakistan.

**The Bangla Language Movement:** Defying a ban on public gatherings, students at the University of Dhaka and other activists gathered for a protest in Dhaka on February 21, 1952. The Pakistan authorities met the demonstrators with violence, resulting in the death of 12 students (this incident is commemorated today by an annual holiday – see p. 2 of *Time and Space*). The deaths provoked a long period of civil unrest in East Pakistan. In 1956, the Pakistani government relented and granted Bangla official status alongside Urdu.

Meanwhile, Pakistan was experiencing significant political turmoil. In 1949, Bengali nationalists formed the Awami League (AL – see p. 5-6 of *Political and Social Relations*) as an

alternative to the West Pakistan-dominated Muslim League. In 1956, a new constitution granted equal representation to the 2 halves of Pakistan, yet by 1958 Pakistan, was controlled by a military dominated by West Pakistanis.

Through the 1960s, East Pakistan continued to be underrepresented in government, as the military received little development aid. Bengalis demonstrated their discontent with frequent protests and uprisings. Concurrently, the AL under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (known as Sheikh Mujib) advocated East Pakistan's autonomy. In late 1970, the government's slow response to a cyclone that killed about 1 million people in East Pakistan compelled many Bengalis to support Sheikh Mujib and the AL in elections a month later. Despite a landslide victory for the AL, Pakistani authorities prevented Sheikh Mujib from

rightfully serving as Prime Minister (PM) of Pakistan (Photo: A **Shaheed Minar**, a monument to the martyrs of the Bangla Language Movement, at the University of Chittagong).



### War of Independence

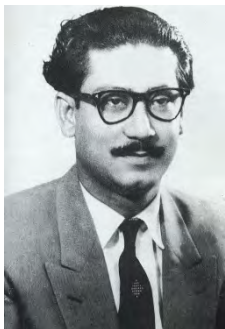
In early March 1971, Sheikh Mujib organized a public gathering in Dhaka, where he advised Bengalis to prepare for a war of independence. On March 25, the Pakistani Army attacked, shelling neighborhoods and killing civilians. Sheikh Mujib was arrested and flown to West Pakistan as some 10 million Bengalis fled to India. The remaining AL leaders also retreated to India, forming a government-in-exile in Kolkata.

The Bengalis immediately organized a resistance whose prominent leader, Army Maj Zia ur-Rahman (known as Zia Rahman), confirmed East Pakistan's independence declaration in a radio address from Chittagong (see p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*). After the city's capture by the Pakistani Army, Zia Rahman retreated to the border with Burma, where he organized bands of guerrillas. Meanwhile, student militants organized as the **Mukti Bahini** or "freedom fighters."

The resistance had several small victories, which were generally overshadowed by the Pakistani Army's indiscriminate raids and killing. Primary targets included Hindu Bengalis in addition to intellectuals, members of the political opposition, and anyone suspected of sympathy with the Bengali cause, which international observers labeled a genocide. Although the Indian government provided training and arms to the resistance, it was initially reluctant to become involved in the conflict. This stance changed in early December, when Pakistan attacked several key military installations in India. On December 3, India declared war against Pakistan. Just 2 weeks later, Pakistan surrendered. During the conflict, up to 1 million people died and some 200,000 women suffered sexual violence.

### **The Republic of Bangladesh**

After his release from Pakistani custody in early 1972, Sheikh Mujib (pictured in the 1950s) returned to assume the post of PM of the new country of Bangladesh ("Land of the Bengals"). Over the next few years, paramilitary forces loyal to Pakistan made occasional attacks. Further, widespread flooding in 1974 caused famine, which further contributed to lawlessness and political turmoil. A new constitution outlined a secular state with a parliamentary government, which was recognized by the international community in 1974. Faced with crisis, Sheikh Mujib restricted the powers of the legislature and judiciary, declared a state of emergency, and became a virtual dictator. In August 1975, a group of Bangladeshi army officers and politicians assassinated Sheikh Mujib and most of his family.



Political turmoil continued, with a coup and counter-coup. Former resistance leader Zia Rahman took control and in 1978, assumed the Presidency. In 1979, he lifted martial law and allowed multi-party elections, which were dominated by his Bangladesh National Party (BNP – see p. 5-6 of *Political and Social Relations*). Although Zia Rahman was accused of corruption by international observers, his tenure brought improved law and order, increased food production, and better

education. Nevertheless, political instability continued, with Zia Rahman (pictured) withstanding numerous coup attempts until his assassination in May 1981 by army officers during yet another unsuccessful coup.



**Military Rule:** Vice President Abdus Sattar was elected President in 1981, yet real power was held by Army Lt Gen Hussein Mohammad Ershad. In early 1982, Ershad ousted Sattar and seized power in a bloodless coup. In the late 1980s, the AL and BNP organized a series of strikes and demonstrations intended to force Ershad's resignation. Ershad agreed to step down in December 1990 and was

later imprisoned on a variety of charges.

**Democracy amidst Instability:** With the 1991 elections, democracy was restored. However since then, Bangladesh has had significant political instability. The 2 main political parties, the AL and BNP, have advocated violent acts against each other, boycotted elections and parliamentary proceedings, and generally hindered democratic processes. Further, whichever party is not in power typically calls for strikes and demonstrations called *hartal*, which disrupt everyday life and often result in injuries and deaths.

Since the 1980s, the AL has been led by Sheikh Mujib's daughter, Sheikh Hasina Wased (known as Sheikh Hasina) and the BNP by Zia Rahman's widow, Khaleda Zia ur-Rahman (known as Khaleda Zia). From 1991-2009, they alternated the position of PM.

**Khaleda Zia's First Term:** With the BNP's 1991 electoral victory, Khaleda Zia became Bangladesh's first female PM. Over her 5-year term, Khaleda Zia introduced notable administrative and educational reforms and infrastructure projects. The AL's boycott of the 1996 election meant Khaleda Zia and the BNP had no opposition and thus won an overwhelming victory. Nevertheless, Khaleda Zia bowed to public protests weeks later and resigned.

**Sheikh Hasina's First Term:** AL candidate Sheikh Hasina won the next elections for PM. In 1998, a monsoon (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*) flooded 2/3 of the country for 2 months, leaving some 30 million people homeless. Nevertheless, during Sheikh Hasina's first term, a negotiated end to a 20-year insurgency among ethnic minorities in the Chittagong Hills Tract in southeastern Bangladesh was reached.

**Khaleda Zia's Second Term:** In the 2001 elections, voters returned the BNP to power and Khaleda Zia (pictured with then-US Secretary of State Kerry in 2016) again PM. During Khaleda Zia's second term, AL leader Sheikh Hasina survived an assassination attempt as the country experienced an uptick in terrorist activity. Despite Khaleda Zia's campaign promises to curb corruption, it continued to plague the political process.



In 2006, Khaleda Zia resigned as PM to transfer power to a caretaker President, who oversaw elections. Due to continuing unrest, the caretaker declared a state of emergency and cancelled the elections. He also began a campaign to end corruption, resulting in the conviction of some 116 politicians. Both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina were arrested on charges of corruption and extortion, though eventually released without trial to ensure their parties' participation in the planned elections.

**Sheikh Hasina's Second Term:** In 2008, Sheikh Hasina's AL won in a landslide, making her PM again in January 2009. Just a month later, resentment over corruption and low wages led a paramilitary unit called the Bangladeshi Rifles to stage an unsuccessful mutiny, killing 74 people, including 54 officers.

**War Crimes Tribunal:** A war crimes tribunal (International Crimes Tribunal or ICT) was formed in 2010 to try those accused of human rights abuses during the 1971 war of independence. However, observers charge that the tribunal is aiming to consolidate the AL's position by unlawfully arresting, convicting, and executing its political opponents, namely the leaders of BNP and its allies (see p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*).

**Sheikh Hasina's Third Term:** During the 2014 elections, the BNP accused the AL of corruption and refused to participate unless the incumbent AL agreed to ensure fair elections. When the demands went unmet, the BNP sought to suppress voter turnout. Nevertheless, the vote took place as scheduled with the AL victorious and Sheikh Hasina reconfirmed as PM. Viewing the AL victory as unlawful, the BNP organized a nationwide blockade and series of strikes in early 2015. In response, AL activists attacked BNP head Khaleda Zia's motorcade. Meanwhile, Islamist activists (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*) targeted Bangladeshis supportive of the country's secular foundations, murdering 4 bloggers in 2015.

Other events contributed to instability. In 2017, floods destroyed a significant portion of the rice crop, causing food prices to rise. The same year, some 700,000 Rohingya refugees entered Bangladesh fleeing genocide in neighboring Burma (see p. 10 of *Political and Social Relations*), straining government resources. In 2018, former PM and BNP leader Khaleda Zia was convicted of embezzlement and sentenced to 12 years imprisonment, though her supporters claim the case was politically motivated.

**Sheikh Hasina's Fourth Term:** The decades-long pattern of strikes and demonstrations continued leading up to the November 2018 elections. The BNP and other opposition groups were prevented from freely campaigning; opposition candidates were arrested, disqualified, or assaulted; and opposition supporters were jailed.



On election day, violent demonstrations left 17 dead. The AL won in a landslide, with an AL-led coalition winning 288 out of 300 Parliament seats and returning Sheikh Hasina to the PM's office. International observers

noted several irregularities, such as ballot-box stuffing and voter intimidation. Nevertheless, Sheikh Hasina began her third consecutive term in early 2019 (Photo: US Secretary of State Pompeo with Sheikh Hasina in 2018).

## Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. Bengali stories typically tell of the exploits of heroes, who are charitable, clever, loyal, and honorable, providing models of proper behavior. Others warn of evil spirits or relate the adventures of mystical creatures.

### The Bald Woman

Once upon a time, a man had 2 wives, 1 younger than the other. The younger wife constantly mistreated the older 1, making her do all the hard work and withholding food from her. One day, in a fit of rage, the younger wife ripped the hair off the older wife's head, making her completely bald.

The older woman fled into the forest intending to die. She passed a cotton plant on the way, then paused, made a broom of some



sticks, and swept the area around the plant clean. Pleased, the cotton plant gave her a blessing. The same thing happened with a plantain tree and a bull, whose pen she swept clean. Next, she came to a hut, where a wise man was meditating. After hearing her plight, he instructed her to plunge once into a nearby lake. She did and emerged a beautiful young woman with a full head of dark, long hair. The wise man then gave her a wicker basket full of gold, pearls, and precious stones and told her that the basket would never empty. Overjoyed, the woman headed home, and on the way, she met the plants and bull. In gratitude, they each gave her gifts of magic shells that would grant her jewelry, leaves that would provide her food, and branches that would give her cotton and silk clothing. Upon seeing the older wife's good fortune, the young wife left to find the wise man. On the way, she ignored the plants and bull and after receiving the instructions, failed to follow them. After dipping herself twice in the lake, she emerged old and bald (Photo: Lake in Bangladesh).

## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

People's Republic of  
Bangladesh  
গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ  
(Bengali)

***Gônoprojatontri  
Bangladesh***

### Political Borders

India: 2,574 mi  
Burma: 168 mi  
Coastline: 360 mi

### Capital

Dhaka

### Demographics

Bangladesh has a population of about 162.7 million, making it the world's 8th most populous country. Occupying a land area smaller than the US state of Iowa, Bangladesh is also 1 of the world's most densely populated countries. With a current growth rate of 1% per year, the population is projected by some estimates to increase to about 200 million by 2050. Experts suggest such growth will strain the nation's resources and environment significantly and potentially lead to large-scale cross-border migration. Today, some 62% of Bangladeshis live in rural areas. The largest urban areas include the capital city of Dhaka, followed by Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, and Sylhet.



The flag's center. The disk represents the rising sun and the sacrifice of Bangladeshis to achieve independence, while the green field symbolizes Bangladesh's lush vegetation.



## Geography

Located in South Asia on the northeastern edge of the Indian subcontinent, Bangladesh borders India to north, east, and west and shares a short border with Burma in the southeast. To the south, Bangladesh's coastline faces the Bay of Bengal, an extension of the Indian Ocean. Bangladesh's total land area is about 50,260 sq mi, making it about the same size as Nepal.

Broad, subtropical lowlands characterized by rich, fertile soils and lush greenery and a wide variety of flora and fauna dominate Bangladesh's interior. Covering some 80% of the country, these low-lying river delta plains (pictured) are fed by hundreds of navigable rivers and channels that flow from the Himalayan

Mountains located just north of Bangladesh. In the Southwest, a large mangrove forest borders eastern India and is home to the region's famed and endangered Bengal tiger. Three of the country's most economically significant waterways are the



Ganges (also called the Padma), Jamuna (also called the Brahmaputra), and Meghna rivers. The Ganges unites with the Jamuna and later the Meghna and numerous smaller rivers to form a large delta in the South that eventually empties into the Bay of Bengal. Along the coast, a dense and wide network of interconnected waterways creates a marshy and fissured coastline. Bangladesh's highest point, Keokradong peak, reaches 4,035 ft in the nation's hilly southeast.

## Climate

Bangladesh experiences a tropical climate, characterized by mild winters (October-March) and short, hot, and humid summers (March-June). The June-October monsoonal period is characterized by heavy rains that often cause extensive flooding (see "Natural Hazards" below). In the warmest month of May, temperatures average 84°F but can soar to over 116°F during periods of intense heatwaves. Meanwhile, winter months are cooler, averaging 66°F in January.

## Natural Hazards

Bangladesh experiences monsoons, floods, cyclones (known as typhoons or hurricanes in other parts of the world), and drought. About 80% of Bangladesh's landmass lies on a floodplain and is less than 16 ft above sea level, making the country vulnerable to disastrous flooding. Monsoonal rains often overwhelm the capacity of rivers, which then flood heavily-populated river deltas. Such flooding regularly forces mass evacuations, causes extensive damage to infrastructure, cripples agriculture, necessitates humanitarian aid, and significantly strains already scarce government resources (Photo: The Buriganga river flowing through Dhaka).

The frequent flooding also erodes Bangladesh's densely populated riverbanks, forcing thousands of residents to resettle elsewhere, often in already overcrowded cities. Moreover, experts suggest climate change and



associated rising sea levels will worsen Bangladesh's displacement issues. According to some studies, some 9.6 million Bangladeshis risk being displaced due to rising water by 2020. In the absence of monsoonal rains, drought is a persistent problem, particularly in the North. Finally, southern coastal regions are vulnerable to destructive cyclones. In 1 of the 20th century's worst natural disasters, a 1970 cyclone caused over 500,000 deaths. In 1991, another storm killed some 138,000 people. Most recently, Cyclone Bulbul killed 20 and displaced some 2 million in 2019.

## Environmental Issues

A lack of environmental protection measures combined with population pressures and rapid urbanization have resulted in serious water, land, and air pollution. The widespread use of pesticides and fertilizers in agriculture, the dumping of untreated wastewater, and naturally occurring arsenic contaminate water sources and destroy marine habitats. Drought and falling water tables, particularly in the North, contribute to intermittent shortages of potable water. Deforestation and destruction of

wetlands through harmful, exploitative farming and fishing activities degrade and erode soil and wetland habitats and result in loss of biodiversity. Finally, thick air pollution caused by unregulated industrial activities and vehicle emissions is a serious problem, particularly in heavily populated and industrialized urban centers like Dhaka.

## Government

Bangladesh is a constitutional republic with a parliamentary government. The country is comprised of 8 divisions, administered by local governments. Adopted in 1972, Bangladesh's constitution outlines the structure of government and defines the fundamental rights of Bangladeshi citizens.

## Executive Branch

The President, who is head-of-state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, is indirectly elected by the national legislature (see "Legislative Branch" below) and may serve up to 2 consecutive 5-year terms. While presidential powers are largely ceremonial, the President exercises several important functions, notably making appointments in government and representing Bangladesh in the international arena. The current President, Abdul Hamid, first took office in 2013 and is currently serving his second term following his reelection in early 2018.



Executive power is vested in the Prime Minister (PM), who is head-of-government. With the support of a Cabinet of Ministers, the PM oversees the country's day-to-day affairs. Appointed by the President, the PM is the leader of the political party that holds the most seats in the legislature. Bangladesh's current PM, Sheikh Hasina Wased (known as Sheikh Hasina – pictured on the right with US officials), began her fourth term as PM in 2019.

## Legislative Branch

Bangladesh's legislature is a single-chamber House of the Nation (HoN or **Jatiya Sangsad**) composed of 350 seats. Of those, 300 are filled in single-seat territorial constituencies by a simple majority popular vote. The remaining 50 seats are

reserved for women, who are nominated by the 300 directly-elected HoN members in a proportional representation vote. All members serve 5-year terms. The HoN controls all legislative powers, including amending the constitution, appointing positions in government, and approving declarations of war (Photo: The *Jatiya Sangsad* building in Dhaka).



### Judicial Branch

The judiciary consists of a Supreme Court, civil courts,

criminal courts, and special courts and tribunals. As the highest court, the Supreme Court has the power to constitutionally review all laws and hear appeals from lower courts. It is organized into an Appellate Division staffed by 7 justices and a High Court Division comprised of 99 justices. The President appoints all justices, who serve until retirement at age 67.

### Political Climate

Since Bangladesh's 1971 independence (see p. 10-11 of *History and Myth*), the nation's political arena has been characterized by violence, corruption, and instability. Transitions of power have been plagued by scandals and voting irregularities (see p. 11-14 of *History and Myth*), often initiated by the 2 main opposing parties – the Awami League (AL), led by current PM Sheikh Hasina, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Khaleda Zia ur-Rahman (known as Khaleda Zia – see p. 12-13 of *History and Myth*).

When not in power, both BNP and AL encourage supporters to engage in political protests, which often evolve into violent and deadly clashes. Since 2014, election-related violence has claimed the lives of hundreds and injured thousands of Bangladeshis. Parties frequently encourage supporters to engage in disruptive labor strikes and transport blockades. Further, they often boycott elections, resulting in depressed voter turnout and skewed election results (see p. 12-14 of *History and Myth*).

The deeply rooted tensions between the 2 political factions are linked to a heated, personal rivalry between the families of

Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. The animosity between the 2 leaders stems in part from a decades-long debate as to who officially declared independence for Bangladesh – Sheikh Hasina’s father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (known as Sheikh Mujib), or Khaleda Zia’s husband, Zia ur-Rahman (known as Zia Rahman). Both men were key figures in the war of independence and independent Bangladesh’s early years before their assassinations in 1975 and 1981, respectively (see p. 11-12 of *History and Myth*). Although the dispute was finally settled in 2009, when a Bangladeshi court ruled that Sheikh Mujib’s speech qualified as the country’s first call for independence rather than Zia Rahman’s radio broadcast, considerable friction still exists between the 2 families (Photo: Bangladeshi Navy personnel greet the US PACOM Commander).



Tensions between BNP and AL escalated again in 2018, when BNP’s Khaleda Zia was convicted of embezzlement (see p. 14 of *History and Myth*).

Condemned by her supporters as politically motivated, this move prevented her from participating in the elections held in late 2018. Amid heated protests from BNP, the AL won by a landslide, ushering in Sheikh Hasina’s fourth term as PM (see p. 14 of *History and Myth*). Adding to the tension are a war crime tribunal’s recent arrests, convictions, and executions of several members of BNP and its allies, notably the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), Bangladesh’s largest Islamist party. Many Bangladeshis see the tribunal’s activities as politically motivated, and international human rights observers charge that the trials do not adhere to international standards.

Besides widespread corruption, weak governance, and ongoing political violence, Bangladesh also grapples with high poverty levels (see p. 1-2 of *Economics and Resources*), demographic strains, environmental stresses, and rising Islamist militancy (see “Security Issues” below). These issues further strain Bangladesh’s embattled political system and present challenges to the construction of democratic processes and institutions.

## Defense

The Bangladeshi Armed Forces (BAF) are a unified military force consisting of ground, maritime, and air branches, with a joint strength of 163,050 active duty and 63,900 paramilitary troops. The BAF primarily maintain internal security by performing domestic counter-terrorism operations, supporting disaster relief and humanitarian assistance efforts, and safeguarding the nation's energy reserves and critical infrastructure. The BAF also regularly participate in military exercises with the US, India, and other allies, and consistently provide troops for United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations in Africa and the Middle

East (Photo: BAF personnel participate in a UN peacekeeping exercise).



**Army:** a well-equipped, well-trained force of 132,150 active-duty troops, which divide into 9 command divisions, a

special forces battalion, 28 maneuver brigades and regiments (including armored and light), 11 combat support brigades, an aviation regiment, and an air defense brigade.

**Navy:** consists of 16,900 active-duty personnel equipped with 2 tactical submarines, 5 principal surface combatants and frigates, 50 patrol and coastal combatants, 5 mine warfare/mine countermeasures vessels, 15 amphibious landing ships and craft, 9 logistics and support vessels, and various naval aviation equipment. The Navy also includes a Special Warfare and Diving Command of 300 active-duty troops.

**Air Force:** consists of 14,000 active-duty personnel divided into a fighter squadron, 3 fighter/ground attack squadrons, a ground attack squadron, 3 transport squadrons, 2 training squadrons, and 4 transport helicopter squadrons. The Air Force has 84 combat capable aircraft, 31 helicopters, and air-launched missiles.

**Paramilitary:** consists of 63,900 troops divided into 20,000 Security Guards, 5,000 Rapid Action Battalion members, 38,000 Border Guards, and 900 Coast Guard members.

## Bangladesh Air Force Rank Insignia



Aircraftman 1



Leading  
Aircraftman



Corporal



Sergeant



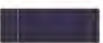
Warrant  
Officer



Senior  
Warrant Officer



Master  
Warrant Officer



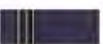
Pilot  
Officer



Flying  
Officer



Flight  
Lieutenant



Squadron  
Leader



Wing  
Commander



Group  
Captain



Air  
Commodore



Air  
Vice-Marshal



Air  
Marshal



Air  
Chief Marshal

## Security Issues

The movements and activities of Islamist activists dominate Bangladesh's security environment. Another pressing security concern is the political and social unrest in neighboring Burma, which has forced thousands to seek refuge in Bangladesh.

**Regional Islamist Extremism:** Radical Islamist groups, including both domestic groups and large transnational organizations, operate within Bangladesh and regularly conduct attacks within the country. Since September 2015, Bangladesh has suffered over 24 terrorist attacks, notably a July 2016



bombing of a Dhaka bakery that killed over 20. Increasingly, Islamist groups target secular activists, members of the political elite, foreigners, and even bloggers (see p. 14 of *History and Myth*). Some observers assert that

Bangladesh's current economic and political instability (see p. 1-2 of *Economics and Resources* and "Political Climate" above) leaves Bangladesh increasingly vulnerable to the influence of Islamist extremists (Photo: US and Bangladeshi personnel).

While Bangladeshi authorities have successfully disbanded some domestic Islamist militant groups, several have re-formed. Moreover, some domestic groups have increased their influence by developing ties to large, international terrorist organizations, though the full extent of the linkages remains unclear. Such international organizations include Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), an affiliate of the Al Qaeda terrorist organization that operates primarily in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Burma, and Bangladesh; and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as Daesh, ISIL, and IS), a notoriously brutal militant Islamist group that has controlled territory in Iraq and Syria. Pakistan-based radical Islamist groups, like the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban), also pose significant threats.

**Rohingya Refugee Crisis:** The Burmese government's violent persecution of the Rohingya, a Muslim minority group, has forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees to flee into Bangladesh. The crisis escalated dramatically in late 2017, when some 700,000 Rohingya refugees crossed into Bangladesh in just 2 months. Although Bangladesh maintains an open border with Burma to allow the flow of refugees and alleviate the growing humanitarian crisis, it struggles to adequately accommodate the displaced Rohingya populations, despite significant foreign aid. Temporary camps, located along the Burmese border, tend to lack proper sanitation, clean water, and food, with residents disproportionately suffering from respiratory infections, diarrhea, and other ailments (Photo: Rohingya refugees cross into Bangladesh).



**Bangladesh and Pakistan:** Bangladesh shares a historically contentious relationship with Pakistan, punctuated by the violent 1971 separatist war between the 2 nations that claimed the lives of some 1 million people and displaced 10 million others (see p. 10-11 of *History and Myth*). While the 2 have sought to repair ties in recent years in the interest of regional security, the events of the war continue to overshadow bilateral relations. Relations have especially worsened since 2013, when Bangladesh's war crimes tribunal (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*) began convicting and executing politicians for their support to Pakistan during the war.

## Foreign Relations

Located on important trade routes and transit points linking India, China, and Southeast Asia, Bangladesh occupies an important geostrategic location, which influences its foreign policy. Since the 1970s Bangladesh has pursued a policy of "non-alignment," avoiding formal alliances with any major power. Instead, it has cultivated numerous strategic relationships in order to grow the Bangladeshi economy, strengthen the military, and enhance its diplomatic position. Consequently, Bangladesh

has successfully fostered close ties with US, the EU, India, and China, among other important powers. As a moderate, Muslim-majority state, Bangladesh also strives to counter extremist Islamist voices and improve the image of Muslims worldwide.

Today, Bangladesh is an active member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), an organization of 120 countries that advocates peaceful, multilateral cooperation between developing nations and the developed world. Bangladesh is also a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the



primary international pan-Islamic organization that seeks to safely and peacefully protect the interests of the world's Muslim communities. Bangladesh is also a member of global groups such as the UN, International Monetary

Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization (Photo: Bangladeshi and US military officials participate in an opening ceremony for military exercises).

**Regional Cooperation:** Bangladesh engages with several regional organizations in pursuit of South Asian stability. For example, Bangladesh is active in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. Both aim to alleviate the region's poverty, foster collaborative trade, and counter regional terrorism and organized crime, among other stabilizing initiatives. It is also an active participant in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, which promotes economic and political cooperation among South Asian nations.

**Relations with the US:** Although the US supported Pakistan during the 1971 war of independence (see p. 10-11 of *History and Myth*), Bangladesh and the US have since developed friendly relations, cultivating close diplomatic ties based on shared interests in strengthening Bangladesh's and the region's security, governance structures, rule of law, and economy. Recently, US assistance to Bangladesh has focused on

mitigating the impact of natural disasters and climate change, reducing poverty, improving physical infrastructure, and countering violent extremism (Photo: Bangladeshis assist US forces in delivering medical supplies following a cyclone).



The 2 nations formally engage in numerous dialogues and agreements which have forged strong economic alliances and led to close military cooperation. For example, the US-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue addresses a broad range of governance, civil society, and environmental issues and facilitates trade and investment between the 2 nations. In addition, the US-Bangladesh Dialogue on Security Issues facilitates bilateral cooperation on security issues that affect regional stability. A proponent of a zero-tolerance policy for terrorism, Bangladesh also participates in the bilateral Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative with the US and the US-led, multinational Antiterrorism Assistance program, which seek to counter the spread of extremist Islamists and their ideology through mutual military cooperation and counterterrorism training.



As a result of these efforts, the US and Bangladeshi militaries have fostered solid ties, frequently participating in military education exchanges, combined training, and bilateral exercises that promote information sharing, interoperability between forces, and deeper maritime cooperation. Finally, the US is a major donor of foreign aid to Bangladesh, allocating over \$350 million in 2019 to

develop Bangladeshi health and education infrastructure, ensure food security, and improve disaster preparedness and response, among numerous other initiatives (Photo: A Bangladeshi girl performs a traditional dance).

## Ethnic Groups

Some 98% of Bangladesh's population are Bengali, generally considered an ethno-linguistic group (see p. 1-2 of *Language and Communication*).

Non-Bengalis primarily divide into 2 groups. The first includes some 27 indigenous groups often collectively called the **Adivasi**. Together, they comprise some 1.8% of the population, according to a government estimate, though many observers believe this estimate is low. Bangladesh's constitution recognizes these 27 groups as ethnic minorities but does not view them as indigenous groups. Many of these groups have their own languages (see p. 3 of *Language and Communication*) (Photo:



Members of the indigenous Khasia community in Sylhet).

The *Adivasi* mostly occupy the border areas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region in the Southeast, though groups are also found in

Bangladesh's North. The largest groups include the Santal, Chakma, Marma, Garo, and Mandi. While most indigenous inhabitants of the Chittagong Hills Tract region are Buddhists (see p. 7-8 and 10 of *Religion and Spirituality*), groups in other areas are predominantly Hindu or Christian (see p. 10 of *Religion and Spirituality*) or have maintained their own belief systems.

The **Biharis** comprise the other non-Bengali group. The term *Biharis* refers to Urdu-speaking Muslims, who moved into the region mainly from various parts of present-day India, after the 1947 partition (see p. 8-9 of *History and Myth*). Today, they live primarily in and around Dhaka and number some 500,000.

## Social Relations

Bangladeshi society today tends to divide along rural-urban, male-female, and rich-poor lines. Generally, urban dwellers, males, and the wealthy enjoy broader access to educational and economic opportunities and hold more respected positions in society. Stark differences in social freedoms and inequalities

before the law exist for women, many of whom also experience domestic violence (see p. 3-4 of *Sex and Gender*) and childhood marriage (see p. 4 of *Family and Kinship*).

India's traditional social hierarchy, known as the caste system, also plays a role in Bangladeshi society. In this system, traditionally associated with Hinduism, individuals are born into an ascribed social class with associated occupations, cultural

identities, and social expectations. While there are hundreds of castes and thousands of sub-castes, they group into 4 main **varnas**, or groups of castes: the **Brahmin**, a class of priests and intellectuals; the **Kshatriyas**, soldiers and administrators; the



**Vaishya**, merchants, farmers, and artisans; and the **Shudra**, servants and laborers. Individuals who were not members of a **varna** were known as **Dalits**, or “downtrodden.” Considered outcasts, **Dalits** historically performed only the most menial of tasks such as waste removal, leather tanning, and human remains disposal (Photo: A Bangladeshi woman waits with her child to receive medical care).

Muslims in Bangladesh, particularly in rural areas, historically also recognized a caste system, though it was less complex. It too defined several marginalized occupations as belonging to the lowest social category such as fisherman, sweeper, barber, blacksmith, goldsmith, and cobbler, among others.

Today, most of these caste system categories are insignificant in day-to-day life. The exception are the **Dalits**, still acknowledged as a social category by most Bangladeshis, both Hindu and Muslim. In Bangladesh, **Dalits** experience significant social exclusion and discrimination. They disproportionately comprise the very poor, tend to live in substandard housing on community peripheries, and often lack access to basic social services such as education and healthcare. According to a 2006 study, they comprise around 1% of the population.

Other minority groups also experience societal discrimination and abuse. For example, outside groups such as the government, frequently disregard the rights of *Adivasi* groups,

particularly regarding land ownership and language use (see p. 4 of *Learning and Knowledge*). *Adivasi* groups also tend to experience higher rates of malnutrition, substandard housing, poor health, inadequate



access to education, and a lack of economic opportunity (Photo: A US military member hands out candy to students at a rural school during a 2019 US humanitarian assistance engagement in Lalmonirhat).

After Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence with Pakistan (see p. 10-11 of *History and Myth*), many *Biharis* opted to stay in Bangladesh and consequently received Bangladeshi citizenship. By contrast, those who requested transfer to Pakistan were denied Bangladeshi citizenship and effectively rendered stateless when they were unable to relocate to Pakistan. They remained in this legal limbo with few rights until a 2008 court ruling granted them Bangladeshi citizenship.

Despite their legal status today, the *Biharis* remain marginalized in Bangladeshi society. Many still live in temporary



quarters originally erected in the 1970s as relief camps. Long stigmatized for their perceived support to Pakistan during the 1971 war for independence, *Biharis* continue to experience discrimination in access to employment, healthcare, government services, and education (see p. 3-4 of *Learning and Knowledge*) (Photo: US Airmen pose with children and teachers at a primary school in Sylhet following a bilateral military training exercise).

### 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

#### Overview

According to the 2013 census, some 89% of Bangladesh's population are Muslim and about 10% Hindu. The remainder are primarily Christian and Buddhist. Smaller numbers of Bangladeshis are followers of traditional religions and Baha'ism.

In 1998, Bangladesh amended its 1972 constitution (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*) to name Islam as the country's official religion.



However, the law also stipulates that the state cannot grant privileges to any 1 religion and instead must promote the equal status of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and other religions. The constitution also guarantees freedom of religion, allowing Bangladeshis to worship according to their personal beliefs. Nevertheless, the constitution also restricts individuals from exercising these rights in a manner that transgresses common moral

boundaries, jeopardizes public order, or infringes on the religious rights of others. While the government promotes religious tolerance, Bangladesh struggles with interreligious tension and religiously motivated violence, primarily propagated by Islamist extremists on religious and ethnic minorities (Photo: Chandanpura Mosque in Chittagong).

#### Islam

##### Origins of Islam

Muhammad, who Muslims consider God's final Prophet, was born in Mecca in 570 in what is today Saudi Arabia. Muslims believe that while Muhammad was meditating in the desert, the Archangel Gabriel visited him over a 23-year period, revealing the Qur'an, or "Holy Book," to guide their everyday lives and shape their values.

## Meaning of Islam

Islam is a way of life to its adherents. The term Islam literally means submission to the will of God, and a Muslim is “a person who submits to God.”

## Muslim Sects

Islam is divided into 2 sects: Sunni and Shi'a. Sunnis are distinguished by their belief that the leader (**Caliph**) of the Muslim community (**Ummah**) should be elected. Conversely, Shi'a Muslims believe the religious leader should be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

## Five Pillars of Islam

There are 5 basic principles of the Islamic faith.

- **Profession of Faith (*Shahada*):** “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger.”
- **Prayer (*Salat*):** Pray 5 times a day while facing the Ka'aba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The Ka'aba is considered the center of the Muslim world and a unifying focal point for Islamic worship (Photo: US Marine at the Ka'aba in 2012).
- **Charity (*Zakat*):** Donate a percentage of one's income to the poor or needy.
- **Fasting (*Sawm*):** Abstain from food, drink, and sexual relations from sunrise to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan.
- **Pilgrimage to Mecca (*The Hajj*):** Perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia once in a lifetime.



## Shared Perspectives

Many Islamic tenets parallel those of Judaism and Christianity. In fact, Muslims consider Christians and Jews “people of the Book,” referring to biblical scriptures, because they also believe in one God.

**Abraham:** All 3 faiths trace their lineage to Abraham, known as *Ibrahim* in Islam. However, Christians and Jews trace their descent to Abraham, his wife Sarah, and their son Isaac; while Muslims trace theirs to Abraham and his Egyptian concubine, Hagar, and their son Ishmael.

**Scriptures:** Much of the content of the Qur'an is similar to teachings and stories found in the Christian Bible's Old and New Testaments, and Muslims view Islam as a completion of previous revelations to Jewish and Christian prophets. However, Muslims believe Jews and Christians altered God's word and that Muhammad received the true revelation of God.

**Jesus:** The 3 religions differ significantly in their understanding of the role of Jesus. While Christians consider him the divine Messiah who fulfills Jewish Scriptures, Jews are still waiting for the Messiah to come. Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet but do not acknowledge his divinity or the Christian Trinity.



**View of Death:** Muslims believe that God determines the time of death and birth. While people grieve the loss of

family members or friends, they do not view death as a negative event, as Muslims believe that a person who lived a good life goes on to live in Heaven (Photo: Bangladeshis pray during a ceremony at the US Embassy in Dhaka).

### Concept of Jihad

The concept of jihad, or inner striving, is a fundamental element within Islam. Traditionally, it is the principled and moral pursuit of God's command to lead a virtuous life. It should not be confused with the publicized violence often associated with jihad. Most Muslims are strongly opposed to terrorism and consider it contrary to Islamic beliefs.

### Ramadan

Observed during the 9th month of the Islamic lunar calendar (see p. 3 of *Time and Space*), Ramadan is a month-long time for

inner reflection, self-control, and focus on God. During this time, Muslims who are physically able fast from dawn to sunset. Many Muslims believe that denying their hunger helps them to learn self-control, appreciate the difficulties of the poor, and gain spiritual renewal – by fasting, a Muslim learns to appreciate the good in life. Muslims typically break their daily fast at sunset with a meal known as **iftar**. Out of respect, non-Muslims should avoid daytime eating, drinking, and smoking during Ramadan.

Ramadan includes several holidays:

- **Lailat al-Qadr:** This “Night of Power” marks Muhammad’s receipt of the first verses of the Qur’an.
- **Eid al-Fitr:** This “Festival of Fast-Breaking” celebrates Ramadan’s end and is a national holiday in Bangladesh.

Another important holiday is celebrated when the Hajj ends, about 70 days following the end of Ramadan.

- **Eid al-Adha:** This “Festival of Sacrifice” commemorates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael (or Isaac, according to Christians), as proof of his loyalty to God. *Eid al-Adha* is also a national holiday in Bangladesh.

**Sufi Tradition:** Some Bangladeshis follow the Sufi tradition of Islam, characterized by

mysticism and ritualistic prayer. In the past, followers venerated Sufi teachers believed to hold special spiritual powers as healers and saints. Today, their shrines and tombs (**mazars**) continue to be places of pilgrimage (Illustration: Early 19th-century depiction of a mosque in Dhaka).



## The Arrival and Spread of Islam in Bangladesh

Some scholars believe Islam first appeared in the region as early as the 7th century AD, when Arab traders on their way to the subcontinent’s Southwest passed through the region. Islam first experienced significant growth beginning in the 13th century,

when Sufi missionaries began to convert large numbers of Hindus and Buddhists. The religion gained additional followers and converts over centuries of Muslim migration (see p. 4-5 of *History and Myth*) and through the continued efforts of Sufi missionaries.

## Hinduism

### Origins of Hinduism

The earliest traces of Hinduism date back to religious practices of the Aryans during the Vedic Period (ca. 1,750-500 BC – see



p. 1 of *History and Myth*). The pantheon of Vedic gods included elemental deities such as Surya (the sun god) and Agni (the fire god), with Indra as the chief god. The Aryans orally conveyed descriptions of

deities, rituals and hymns of worship, and teachings about social structure and behavior in the 4 *Vedas*, which were eventually transcribed over the period 1,000 BC-500 AD.

Later sacred writings include the *Brahmanas*, *Upanishads*, the *Dharma Shastras*, and the *Puranas*, which provide guidelines for **Brahmins** (priests), outline Hinduism's major tenets and concepts, prescribe social classes (see p. 14 of *Political and Social Relations*), and relate tales of Hindu mythology (Photo: The Kantanagar Hindu Temple dates to the early 18th century).

### Concepts in Hinduism

- **Dharma:** the duty to fulfill one's social and spiritual roles in life
- **Samsara:** what Westerners term "reincarnation;" the cycle of continual birth, death, and rebirth until one is able to break free (**moksha**)
- **Karma:** the concept that one's current circumstances derive from deeds committed in past lives

- **Varnas:** the system of social hierarchy commonly referred to as caste (see p. 14 of *Political and Social Relations*)

A Hindu seeks to achieve 3 aims during his life. The first is *dharma*, or duty, in both spiritual and social contexts. The second is *artha*, or material wealth, and the third is *kama*, or pleasure.

### The Hindu Pantheon

The Hindu pantheon includes millions of gods and goddesses. Some of these, the “greater” gods, are common to most Hindus, while “lesser” gods vary from village-



to-village. Together, the gods **Vishnu** (the preserver) and **Shiva** (the destroyer) along with **Brahma** (the creator) periodically create, destroy, and recreate the world. Generally, *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, and **Mahadevi** (or **Devi**), the great goddess, have supreme power and overshadow Brahma in popularity (Photo: Bangladeshis celebrate the birthday of Lord Krishna).

Many gods and goddesses have so-called avatars or other forms. For example, *Brahma* is also known as **Rama** or **Krishna**, his most famous avatars, while *Shiva* appears as **Mahadev** and **Nataraja**, the “great god” and the god of dance, respectively. Deities also have partners of the opposite sex, known as consorts, and animal “vehicles” that convey them from place to place. *Brahma*’s wife is **Saraswati**, the most beautiful in the pantheon and the goddess of creativity, learning, and music. *Vishnu*’s female partner is **Lakshmi**, the goddess of wealth, while *Shiva*’s consort is **Parvati**, one of whose avatars is **Mahadevi**, the great goddess.

### Hindu Practices

As Hinduism evolved, rituals shifted from animal sacrifices in open-air venues to more symbolic worship in a temple. Usually dedicated to a particular deity, temples today house shrines, where devotees offer flowers and food in return for blessings. In the temple, Brahmin priests act as intercessors between the worshiper and the deity.

At home, the faithful perform **puja** (devotion) to their preferred god or gods in much the same way. Hindus also commonly make pilgrimages to holy sites such as temples, caves, rivers, and sacred cities. The Hindu calendar abounds with numerous holy days and festivals. Among the most significant and widely celebrated are **Durga Puja** (symbolic triumphs of good over evil, see p. 2 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*); **Holi**, the festival of color, which ushers in spring; and **Diwali**, the festival of lights.

### The Spread of Hinduism in Bangladesh

Hinduism spread across the subcontinent as part of the expansion of the early Mauryan and Gupta empires, then again during the Sena Dynasty (see p. 1-3 of *History and Myth*). Despite the spread of Islam beginning in the 13th century, Hinduism retained its dominance for centuries, even through the Muslim Mughal period (see p. 4-5 of *History and Myth*). As late as the 1870s, slightly more Hindus lived in the region of modern-day Bangladesh than Muslims. The number of Hindus in the region reduced significantly after the 1947 partition of India (see p. 8-9 of *History and Myth*). Yet even at independence in 1971, they still comprised some 23% of the population (Photo: Hindu temple in Dhaka in 1885).



## Other Religions

### Buddhism

**Origins of Buddhism:** In the 6th century BC, a prince named Siddhartha Gautama became dissatisfied with Hinduism's explanations of the human condition. Gautama set out in search of truth and the meaning of life. He reportedly achieved enlightenment while sitting under a Bodhi tree in what is now Bihar in northern India.

**Buddhist Theology:** Gautama, who became known as the "Buddha" (Enlightened One), determined that humans are fated to suffer, that suffering is caused by greed or desire, and that it can be stopped by following a particular spiritual path that includes unselfish living and meditation.

Aside from these so-called Noble Truths, there are 2 basic laws in Buddhism – the law of causation (similar to the Hindu concept of *karma*) and the law of impermanence, the idea that change is constant (related to the Hindu idea of *samsara*). Given these conditions, the goal of Buddhists is to conquer suffering and achieve **nirvana** (*moksha* in Hinduism), a state of peace and unity with the universe.



Although Buddhism, like Hinduism, is based on a voluminous set of scriptures, there is no god or gods in Buddhism. Instead, devotees venerate the Buddha as a god-like figure. Bangladesh is home to many Buddhist temples, shrines, and **stupas** (Buddhist monuments). Buddhist households typically display small figurines of the Buddha (Photo: The Buddha Dhatu Jadi temple in Bandarban City).

### The Spread of Buddhism in Bangladesh

In the 3rd century BC, Ashoka, leader of the Mauryan Empire (see p. 1-2 of *History and Myth*), embraced Buddhism, erecting stone pillars etched with Buddhist teachings and *stupas* to hold Buddhist relics across the northern regions of the sub-continent. Although Buddhism became the region's most prominent religion during the Mauryan Empire, it was later largely displaced by Hinduism. Nevertheless, the area of modern-day Bangladesh remained an important center of Buddhist scholarship for centuries (see p. 1 of *Learning and Knowledge*), when the religion spread to Tibet and evolved into the form practiced by a minority in the region today. Although Buddhism eventually declined in much of South Asia, it spread widely and rapidly in Southeast and East Asia.

### Christianity

The Europeans who arrived in the region beginning in the 16th century did not seek to actively promote Christianity. While the Portuguese established Roman Catholic and the English opened Anglican churches, neither supported a comprehensive

missionary effort among the native population. It is likely that Armenian Christian merchants brought the religion to the region even before the Portuguese. Despite the lack of widespread proselytization efforts, small Christian communities emerged across the country (Photo: Bangladeshi Christians in Chittagong light candles at a relative's grave).



## Religion Today

Most Bangladeshis are deeply spiritual, with Islamic and Hindu beliefs permeating daily life. Bangladesh observes Muslim and Hindu celebrations as national holidays, with religious events serving as popular social occasions. Reflecting Bangladesh's historical religious diversity, a variety of mosques, temples, shrines, and churches are scattered throughout the country.

### Islam

Bangladesh is notably the world's third largest Muslim majority nation after Indonesia and Pakistan. Nearly all Bangladeshi Muslims adhere to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, a generally tolerant school of thought that emphasizes community consensus and the primacy of the Qur'an over later Islamic teachings. Bangladesh is also home to small populations of Shi'a and Ahmadi Muslims, who are primarily non-citizens.

Islam permeates daily life in Bangladesh. According to a 2012 study, 80% of Bangladeshi Muslims reported Islam is very important in their lives, while some 53% regularly participate in religious services at mosques. Moreover, many Muslim children attend Qur'anic schools, either in addition to or instead of attending public schools, where they learn the practices and morals of Islam and memorize Qur'anic verses in Arabic.

Notably, Bangladesh hosts the ***Bishwa Ijtema***, the world's largest Muslim gathering after the Hajj in Mecca and the Arba'een in Iraq. As many as 5 million Muslims participate in the annual event, which lasts 3 days and celebrates Muslim unity, mutual respect, and commitment to Islamic values.

## Hinduism

Some 10% of Bangladeshis, or 16 million people, are Hindu, giving Bangladesh the world's third largest Hindu population after India and Nepal. While Hindus live across the country, large concentrations exist in Gopalganj, Dinajpur, Sunamganj, and parts of Chittagong Hill Tracts, as well as in the cities of Sylhet, Mymensingh, Khulna, Jessore, and Chittagong.

## Buddhism

Bangladeshi Buddhists prescribe to the Theravada tradition, which more strictly adheres to scripture and is considered the more orthodox form of Buddhism. Most Buddhists are members of non-Bengali, indigenous populations living in the southeastern Chittagong Hill Tracts (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*).

## Christianity

The nation's Christian population is predominantly Roman Catholic. Concentrating in Barisal, Gournadi, Baniarchar, Monipuripara, Christianpara, Gazipur, and Khulna, Bangladesh's Christian churches serve as important sources of social, medical, and educational services for their members.

Some non-indigenous groups are predominantly Christian, notably the Garo.

## Interfaith Tensions

While Bangladesh's government seeks to promote religious tolerance, it struggles to curb rising religious conflict. Most violence stems from the activities of various groups harboring extremist Islamist ideologies. In recent years, these groups have increasingly targeted

religious and ethnic minorities, with most incidents occurring between fundamentalist, radical Islamists and Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians. In 2014, for example, Muslim groups attacked, looted, or damaged some 1,100 Hindu homes and shops and vandalized 169 Hindu temples. In the last several years, such bouts of violence have flared more frequently, increasing interfaith tensions (Photo: Entrance to Dhaka's Hussaini Mosque).



## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

Extended family units serve as the social safety net for Bangladeshis. Accordingly, they consider their relationships with and responsibilities toward their extended family members of paramount importance. They particularly value and respect their elder relatives. Although urbanization has led to smaller family units, extended relatives still maintain close connections.

### Residence

In rural areas, where some 2/3 of Bangladesh's population lives, extended families consisting of multiple generations typically live together. In densely populated urban areas, households are smaller than rural residences, often consisting of just a nuclear family (2 parents and their children).

**Rural:** Extended families in rural areas typically reside in a **bari**, a homestead consisting of multiple 1-2-room standalone structures (**chulas** – “eating units”), each occupied by a nuclear family. Most homesteads feature an outdoor kitchen and courtyard (**uthan**), which are considered the extended family's private space. They also typically feature a **kanta**, a small garden that often houses a well or hand pump for collecting water.

Many homesteads also have a **ghar**, an area set aside for male family members to socialize and host

guests. Buildings are typically constructed of mud bricks, wood, metal sheets, or bamboo and have thatched roofs. Structures in low-lying, flood-prone areas often sit on stilts or platforms. Many rural areas lack basic sanitation and access to clean water due to groundwater's contamination with naturally-occurring arsenic and salt from rising sea levels (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*) (Photo: A small village in rural Bangladesh).



**Urban:** Although most Bangladeshis still live in rural areas, the country is experiencing rapid urbanization, with experts predicting that over 50% of Bangladeshis will live in cities by 2050. Further, Bangladesh's urban areas regularly swell with seasonal migrants, with up to 1/2 million people moving from the

countryside to Dhaka for part of each year. In 2018, Dhaka was ranked as 1 of the world's most densely populated cities.



Homes in urban areas exhibit a wide variety of architectural styles, from British colonial period structures to high-rise apartments dating to the 1970s-80s. Some 35% of

housing in Dhaka is categorized as “slums,” where residents use salvaged and makeshift materials to construct temporary homes (**bustees**) that are often at risk of structural collapse. These informal settlements are often highly polluted and vulnerable to floods and fires (Photo: Overview of Dhaka).

## Family Structure

Family is the basic social unit in Bangladesh, and most Bangladeshis marry and have children. Sons commonly remain at home after marriage, while daughters move to their husbands' parents' home. Even if they move to a new town or city for education or work, individuals maintain close ties with their extended families.

While the oldest male is typically the head of the household, the oldest female generally manages the household and kitchen. Descent is traced through the father, and Bangladeshis remain particularly close with their **gusti** (relatives who share a common great-grandfather). Elder family members serve as a source of guidance for younger members, and children typically care for their parents as they age. Many families, both Muslim and Hindu, follow a tradition called **purdah**, whereby women live secluded in their homes and cover their heads when outdoors (see p. 1 of *Sex and Gender*).

**Polygyny:** This term refers to the practice of a man having multiple wives simultaneously. In Bangladesh, both Muslim and Hindu men may marry up to 4 women, provided that their wives consent and that the husband can financially support them equally. While exact statistics are unavailable, reports indicate that the practice of polygyny has been declining in recent years.

### Children

Bangladeshis view their children as a blessing and spend significant time teaching them to have a strong work ethic and about their roles in the family and society. To prepare them for their future role as head of a household, Bangladeshi families generally favor male children with more attention, better educational opportunities, and less household responsibility (see p.1 of *Sex and Gender*) (Photo: A Bangladeshi mother and child receive a medical examination from a US Navy Petty Officer).



**Birth:** During the seventh month of a pregnancy, the mother-to-be is honored with a **shad** (baby shower), during which she receives gifts from friends and family. In rural areas, a woman typically returns to her parent's home to give birth, usually in a ritually-prepared space called the **atur ghar**. In the Islamic tradition, the father whispers the **adhan** (call to prayer) into a baby's right ear and the profession of faith in his left immediately following the birth. During the mother's recovery, she and the baby may wear amulets or receive a soot mark on their foreheads or feet to protect them from malicious spirits. After a week, the family performs a ceremony called the **aqiqah**, during which the parents announce the child's name, slaughter an animal, hold a feast, and distribute food to the neighbors while offering thanks to God.

**Circumcision:** Bangladeshi boys traditionally underwent circumcision sometime between the ages of 4-10, signifying their membership in the Islamic community. Today, a traditional provider performs the procedure at the child's home in rural areas, while urban families typically prefer medical facilities. A large feast and celebration often follows the procedure.

## Child Exploitation

Due to their families' dire economic circumstances, many Bangladeshi children are forced to work, sometimes enduring dangerous and slave-like conditions in the mining, agriculture, and manufacturing sector, where child labor laws are routinely ignored or not forced. Further, sexual and physical abuse, abandonment, and trafficking of children remain significant problems (see p. 4 of *Sex and Gender*). Finally, early marriage is widespread due to legal loopholes, with some 60% of girls married before the age of 18 as of 2018.

## Marriage

Bangladeshi parents traditionally arrange their children's marriages with the assistance of a **ghatak** (matchmaker). Families typically consider many aspects of a potential mate such as class, education, social standing, and family heritage, usually in a consultation with a religious leader. While arranged marriages are still common, many couples today use online matchmakers or dating websites to find a suitable partner. Others choose their own mate based on mutual attraction.

**Dowry and Bridewealth:** Many marriages in Bangladesh involve an exchange of money or property between families to solidify the marriage bond or fulfill religious tradition. In the past, disputes over the dowry (**joutuk**), a payment made by the bride's family to the groom's family, often provoked violence. Consequently, dowry payments are illegal today. However, the practice still occurs among some Hindu and Muslim families, though the dowry is usually just a small symbolic gift for the couple to start their new life.

Bangladeshi Muslim grooms traditionally pay a **mahr** or so-called bridewealth to the bride, which becomes her sole property. A legal requirement for Islamic marriages, the **mahr** symbolizes the bride's financial independence. Further, some women rely on the payment in the event of a husband's death or after a divorce.

**Weddings:** Bangladeshi weddings traditionally last several days, each with a specific ceremony. For example, during the **gae halud** (“turmeric ceremony”), the bride and groom



separately receive friends and family, who present them with gifts. Visitors rub turmeric (flowering plant of the ginger family) on their faces and hands to give them glowing skin, while female relatives use henna (a plant-based dye) to create elaborate designs on the bride’s hands and feet.

Next comes the **akht** ceremony, considered the legal declaration of marriage within Islamic tradition. The ceremony is typically held at the bride’s home, where her younger

siblings often playfully “block” the groom’s entrance until he gives them gifts or sweets. The ceremony is overseen by a **qazi** (Islamic judge), who records the marriage in a **ka’been** (registry) and guides the couple through a series of vows and statements, although the couple typically does so in separate rooms (Photo: A Bangladeshi woman wearing typical wedding attire – an elaborate **shari**, see p. 1 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*, gold jewelry, colorful makeup, and henna hand decorations).

Later, the groom’s family hosts the **bou bhat** (“bride feast”) for family and friends. Families often erect a colorful tent decorated with lights and marigold flowers to host the celebration, which features music, dancing, and **tabla** drumming (see p. 4 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*). This event marks the first time that the bride and groom appear together as a couple.

## Divorce

Historically rare due to the social and religious importance of marriage, divorce has become more common. Between 2006-16, the divorce rate nearly doubled to 1.1 per 1,000 people, though this rate is still significantly lower than the US rate (3.2 in 2016). Some credit the higher divorce rate to increased economic and social opportunities for women. Divorce is more common and less stigmatized in urban areas.

## Death

Funeral customs differ by religious affiliation. According to Islamic tradition, Bangladeshi Muslims bury their loved ones as soon as possible after death, usually within 24 hours. The deceased's family gathers to wash, perfume, and wrap the body in a **kafan** (simple white burial shroud), with some families also placing the body in a simple wooden casket. Male relatives transport the deceased to a mosque or other site where a cleric offers prayers (Photo: The **Tara Masjid** or Star Mosque in Dhaka).



Next, relatives deliver the deceased to a cemetery for burial. Family members and friends gather for the graveside funeral service, during which they pray for the deceased and offer condolences to the family. Afterwards, the family hosts a gathering for friends and relatives to offer further condolences and prayers. Relatives often visit the gravesites of their loved ones at the anniversary of a death or in observation of *Eid al-Fitr* (celebration observing Ramadan's end – see p. 4 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

After a death, Bangladeshi Hindus typically initiate mortuary rites within a few hours. While deceased infants or children typically are buried or set afloat on a river, Hindus prefer to cremate adults, as it is considered the quickest way to release the spirit into the rebirth cycle (see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*). The deceased is bathed, clothed, and covered with flowers. Male mourners accompany the deceased to the cremation grounds, while female mourners grieve at home. At the cremation grounds, the deceased is placed on a funeral pyre, which the deceased's oldest son lights after reciting scriptural verses.

Following the cremation, the ashes are collected for scattering in a holy river. Members of the immediate family then observe a period of mourning, during which they perform various cleansing rituals and observe certain religious and dietary restrictions. A few days after the cremation, family members often gather to share a meal and donate to the poor or to a charity in honor of the deceased.

## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

While traditional Bangladeshi society privileged men over women in most spheres, recent decades have seen significant improvement in women's education, health, and political empowerment. Nevertheless, Bangladeshi women continue to experience discrimination and gender-based violence.

### Gender Roles and Work

**Domestic Labor:** Traditionally, Bangladeshi women are responsible for childcare and household duties. Poor and lower-class women also commonly perform agricultural labor, though cattle tending is traditionally a male task. Even if they work outside the home, women retain responsibility for household duties, spending an average of 5.6 hours daily on such chores, compared to just 1.5 hours for men.



Some Hindu and Muslim women follow a tradition called ***purdah***, whereby they live secluded in their family homes and leave only when accompanied by male relatives. Since a woman symbolizes a family's honor, *purdah* is meant to protect her from exploitation or negative influences. *Purdah* can also be a status symbol or proof that the family is wealthy enough to forego a wife's income (Photo: Bangladeshi women spread rice to dry).

**Labor Force:** In 2019, about 36% of Bangladeshi women worked outside the home, a significantly higher rate than in neighboring India (21%) but lower than the US rate (56%). However, experts believe that this rate is likely higher, since women who labor in low-wage, low-status informal sector jobs are not included in these statistics. Women represent some 80% of workers in garment manufacturing (see p. 2-3 of *Economics and Resources*), where they often experience unsafe working conditions (see p. 1 of *Time and Space*), labor

exploitation, and physical and sexual abuse. Further, high production targets often force garment workers to work beyond legal limits (see p. 1 of *Time and Space*).

Nevertheless, Bangladeshi women are represented in all sectors and all levels, and women occupy some 18% of large company board seats as of 2018, 1 of Asia's highest rates and higher than the US rate (16%). However, women typically receive less pay and fewer promotions than their male colleagues.

### Gender and the Law

While Bangladesh's constitution guarantees women and men equal rights and protections, the government sometimes fails to enforce women's rights. Further, some laws – particularly those regarding family, property, and inheritance – tend to discriminate against women. Furthermore, some laws vary based on religious affiliation. For example, under Islamic law, daughters are entitled to inherit just half the amount that sons receive, and under Hindu law, a widow's right to her husband's property is limited to her

lifetime. Upon her death, the property reverts to his male heirs (Photo: A US Navy Rear Adm speaks with Bangladeshi female cadets during a training exercise).



Following divorce, Islamic law grants the father automatic custody of children. Although the mother can petition the court for guardianship, she loses custody

if she remarries. Most such disputes are handled by a network of religious, community-based courts (*shalish*). Women and impoverished Bangladeshis often face harsh punishments such as whipping or public humiliation and social shunning that are otherwise not a part of the formal justice system.

### Gender and Politics

Women have a long history of political participation. Since the 1980s, 2 women have led Bangladesh's 2 main political parties, with both women serving multiple terms as Prime Minister (PM – see p. 12 of *History and Myth*). In 2017, Bangladesh extended by 25 years a provision reserving 50 parliamentary seats for

women (see p. 4-5 of *Political and Social Relations*). Other laws require political parties to increase the quota of women serving on their central committees, with a goal of 1/3 women by 2020. While women have held several cabinet positions, most female officeholders tend to occupy positions with little political power. As of 2019, women occupy the 50 reserved seats plus 22 directly elected posts, together accounting for 21% of parliamentary seats – a higher rate than in neighboring India (13%) but lower than the US (24%). At the local level, the number of female candidates has actually decreased in recent years.

### Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Unlike some other Muslim-majority countries, Bangladesh criminalizes domestic violence, offers no leniency for “honor killings” (killing a son or daughter for having a relationship or marrying without family consent), and does not allow a rapist to avoid punishment by marrying his victim. Further, a 2010 domestic violence law strengthened prevention and protection provisions, while mandating harsh punishments for perpetrators. Nevertheless, GBV is widespread. In a 2016 study, some 67% of married Bangladeshi women reported experiencing spousal violence and 19% sexual violence. Further, women are vulnerable to GBV from other sources. Every year, dozens of women experience violence associated with dowry disputes (see p. 4 of *Family and Kinship*). In a handful of cases, male assailants throw acid on women in so-called “acid attacks” as punishment for their rejection. Rohingya girls and women in refugee camps (see p. 10 of *Political and Social Relations*) tend to experience high rates of sexual violence (Photo: US PACOM Commander Harris greets PM Sheikh Hasina in 2017).



Women often fail to report GBV due to social stigma, lack of access to support services, or fear of further harassment from perpetrators or the authorities. Even if crimes are reported, authorities often fail to take appropriate action, tending to view

these incidents as private matters. Recent reforms, notably standardized guidelines for reporting and investigating such crimes, aim to address this issue.

**Trafficking:** Bangladesh is a source, transit point, and destination for the forced labor and sex trafficking of men, women, and children. Victims typically receive job offers in the Middle East, Europe, or the US, only to incur steep debts or fees from unlicensed “recruitment agencies,” forcing workers into debt bondage. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to trafficking, with many women promised domestic work opportunities only to be sold into sex slavery.

### Sex and Procreation

Bangladeshis consider sexual intimacy a private matter. Due largely to successful family planning campaigns, fertility rates in Bangladesh have fallen from 6.8 births per woman to 2.1 between 1975-2020, on par with neighboring India (2.35) but

slightly higher than in the US (1.8) (Photo: US First Lady Melania Trump poses with International Women of Courage Awardee Sharmin Akter of Bangladesh).



### LGBTQ Issues

Bangladeshi law criminalizes homosexual activity, with punishment up to 10 years in prison,

though this law is rarely enforced. LGBTQ individuals face significant abuse and discrimination, notably by police who harass, arrest individuals, or prevent registration of LGBTQ advocacy organizations. In recent years, prominent LGBTQ activists have been attacked and some killed by religious extremists.

Bangladesh recognizes transgender or intersex people known as *hijra* as a separate “third” gender. This ruling grants them legal rights and privileges such as access to education, employment, and healthcare, though they still tend to face stigmatization and discrimination.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Language Overview

Bangladesh's official language is Bangla (also known as Bengali), spoken by 98% of the population. Members of Bangladesh's non-Bengali ethnic minorities speak some 40 other languages and dialects. Generally, if Bangladeshis do not share a first language, they communicate in Bangla or English. Bangla is also widely spoken in neighboring India and is 1 of India's 22 official languages. It is also the world's sixth most widely spoken language (Photo: Sign in Bangla).



### Bangla

Spoken as a first language by about 81% of the population, Bangla is Bangladesh's primary language of government, business, and education. A member of the Indo-Aryan group of the Indo-European language family and closely related to Sanskrit (the ancient language of Hindu religion, literature, and ritual), Bangla incorporates loanwords from other languages, such as Urdu, Arabic, Persian, Hindi, and English.

Over the centuries, 2 styles of Bangla developed, differing primarily in vocabulary and pronoun and verb usage. **Sadhubhasa** (সাধুভাষা – “elegant speech”) emerged from 16th-century literary works, and by the 19th century, became the dominant form for all formal communications, both written and oral. By contrast, **Chaltibhasa** (চলিতভাষা – “current speech”) emerged from dialects spoken in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta – a city in neighboring India). In the early 20th century, writers began to use *Chaltibhasa* instead of *Sadhubhasa*, and today has largely replaced *Sadhubhasa* for all written forms and most oral communication among educated Bengalis. Language use also differs according to social class, education, and religion. Further, several regional dialects of Bangla are spoken in the country.

When the region was part of Pakistan in the mid-20th century (see p. 7-8 of *History and Myth*), Bangla served as an important symbol of Bengali nationalism. In 1952, local residents rebelled when the Pakistani government declared Urdu as the national language (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*). Today, Bangladesh recognizes the martyrs of the Bangla Language Movement with an annual holiday (see p. 2 of *Time and Space*).



**Writing System:** The Bangla script derives from the Brahmi script, 1 of 2 ancient Indian scripts. Bangla is written from left to right in horizontal lines. Each

letter represents a consonant and carries an inherent schwa (ə) vowel sound (pronounced like the “a” in “about”). If a word requires a letter with a different vowel sound, a writer modifies the letter with a particular mark called a **kar**, though vowels can also be written as independent letters if needed. A distinctive horizontal line called the **matra** runs along the top of letters and words, and the end of a sentence is marked by a vertical line or period (Photo: US Air Force and Bangladeshi engineers work together at a school in Lalmonirhat).

While Bangladeshis commonly use Arabic numerals, they often use the ancient Vedic numbering system to write large numbers. Terminology and comma placement differentiate this system from the standard Western system. For example, 100,000 is described in the Vedic system as 1 **lakh** or 1,00,000 and 10 million as 1 **crore** or 1,00,00,000. Accordingly, 1 million is 10 **lakhs**.

## English

During the 200 years of British presence in the region (see p. 5-8 of *History and Myth*), English was the de facto administrative language. While it has not been officially recognized as a second language today, English is widely used in government, business, education, and the media and is a mandatory subject from primary through post-secondary school. While most educated

Bangladeshis speak and write impeccable English, less-educated Bangladeshis are sometimes semi-fluent in English.

**Banglish:** Some Bangladeshis speak **Banglish**, a mixture of Bangla and English. In 2012, the High Court of Bangladesh banned the use of *Banglish* in television and radio programs to discourage the practice (Photo: Bangladeshi Brig Gen converses with US Air Force Col).



### Other Languages

Bangladesh's non-Bengali minority groups (see p. 13 and 15 of *Political and Social Relations*) typically speak other varieties as their first languages. The most widely-spoken other languages include Indo-European varieties like Chittagonian (13 million speakers), Sylheti (8.5 million speakers), and Rangpuri (10.3 million speakers). Some linguists consider Chittagonian and Sylheti to be dialects of Bangla. Bangladesh is also home to varieties from the Sino-Tibetan, Dravidian, and Austroasiatic language families.



Bangladesh's 1 million Rohingya refugees (see p. 10 of *Political and Social Relations*) speak Rohingya, while many of its 500,000 **Biharis** (see p. 13 and 15 of *Political and Social Relations*) speak Urdu, also called Bihari in Bangladesh.

While Bangladeshis have the legal right to education in their mother tongue (see p. 4 of *Learning and Knowledge*), in practice most schools provide instruction only in Bangla with little emphasis on indigenous history or culture. Consequently, many minority languages are threatened with extinction (Photo: Bangladesh's Armed Forces Institute of Pathology's Chief Virologist visits the Regional Health Command-Pacific).

## Communication Overview

Communicating competently in Bangladesh requires not only knowledge of Bangla, but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

## Communication Style

Bangladesh's traditional social hierarchy (see p. 14 of *Political and Social Relations*) continues to influence communication patterns. Accordingly, Bangladeshis treat people of different ages, genders, and backgrounds with varying levels of respect. For example, individuals in junior positions are deferential and highly respectful of authority figures and people of high status.



Generally friendly and hospitable, Bangladeshis value courtesy, cooperation, and respect during their interactions. They often avoid contentious issues and

keep negative opinions to themselves. Bangladeshis usually prefer to provide affirmative answers to requests, often refraining from providing negative responses as a means of politeness. Accordingly, foreign nationals should not consider vague answers, such as “maybe” or “I’ll try” as promises of action (Photo: US Ambassador Miller greets residents of Lalmonirhat).

## Greetings

Bangladeshi Muslims typically greet each another with the Arabic phrase “**Assalam ‘alaikum**” (“peace be upon you”) and respond with “**Vaalaikum salaam**” (“and unto you, peace”). Bangladeshi Hindus greet one another by saying **namaskar**, which translates as “I pay my respects to you.” Following the verbal greeting, some men shake hands, especially those

accustomed to interacting with foreign nationals. When greeting members of the opposite sex, foreign nationals should wait for their conversation partner to initiate the handshake. Devout Muslims may decline to touch a member of the opposite sex, preferring to greet with a nod or slight bow.

## Names

Traditionally, Bangladeshi Muslims rarely have family names. Instead, most males have a religious plus a personal name(s) (such as Muhammad Hafiz). Some males supplement these names with an honorific name or title, the most common being Khan, Chaudhry, and Shah, that may appear anywhere in the name. Bangladeshi Muslim women rarely have religious names. Instead, they tend to have 1-2 personal names (such as Jameela Nasreen). Some women add an honorific title to the personal names such as Begum (used for married women), Sultana, or Khatoon. Some Bangladeshi Muslims living abroad adopt surnames to fit Western conventions. Women may or may not adopt a name from their husband upon marriage. Children rarely share any names with their parents (Photo: US Army officer speaks with refugees in Bangladesh).



By contrast, Bangladeshi Hindus typically have a given name (first name), sometimes a middle name, and a surname (last name). Upon marriage, a Hindu woman commonly takes her husband's family name.

## Forms of Address

Typically, only close friends address each other by first names. Instead, Bangladeshis use titles to indicate respect, social status, education, profession, and age. For example, when interacting with elders, Bangladeshis append a suffix to the person's name, such as **bhayya** (elder brother), **apa** (elder

sister), **chacha** (uncle), and **khala** (aunt) to demonstrate respect. Among colleagues, Bangladeshis often use professional titles such as “Engineer” or “Doctor” combined with the name. Muslim Bangladeshis also use the honorifics **Janab** and **Begum**, the equivalent of Mr. and Mrs., while the title **Sheikh** historically denotes a religious leader.

### Conversational Topics

Bangladeshis are often inquisitive and tend to use humor to establish rapport. They typically begin conversations with friendly, personal questions about family, marital status,

occupation, educational background, and hobbies. Foreign nationals should feel free to discuss these and similar topics such as food and positive observations about Bangladesh, though they should avoid



discussions about religion, poverty, and politics (Photo: US Air Force Maj speaks with a student in Lalmonirhat).

### Gestures

While Bangladeshis use gestures to augment their words, they consider certain hand gestures rude or inappropriate. Bangladeshis do not point with a single finger. Instead, they “point” with an extended arm with the palm facing down, though some Bangladeshis prefer to point with their chins. To beckon someone, they move the fingers toward the body. The US “OK” gesture indicates a positive occurrence, though Bangladeshis consider the thumbs-up sign offensive. A nod of the head means “yes,” while shaking the head sideways means “no.” As with their left hand (see p. 4 of *Time and Space*), Bangladeshis consider the feet to be unclean and typically refrain from showing their soles or using their feet to point or move objects.

### Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.

## Useful Words and Phrases

English	Romanized Bangla	Bangla
Hello (Muslim)	Assalam aleikum	আসসালামু আলাইকুম
Goodbye (Muslim)	Allaa hafez	আল্লাহ হাফিজ
Hello/ Goodbye (Hindu)	Naamaskaar	নমস্কার
Good morning	Suprobhat	সুপ্রভাত
Good night	Shubh ratri	শুভ রাত্রি
Yes/ No	Hang/ Naa	হ্যাঁ / না
I don't know	Janina	জানিনা
Please	Pleez	প্লীজ।
Thank you	D'oh noh baad	ধন্যবাদ
Excuse me	Shu nun	শুনুন
Sorry	Sori	সরি
How are you?	Ka mohn aa ch'en?	কেমন আছেন?
I am fine	B'a loh achi	ভালো আছি
What's your name?	Aap nar naam ki	আপনার নাম কি?
My name is...	Aa mar naam...	আমার নাম ...
Where are you from?	Apni kotha theke eshechhen?	আপনি কোথা থেকে এসেছেন?
I'm from...	Aa mar desh...	আমার দেশ
Do you speak English?	Aap ni ki ing re ji bohl te paa ren	আপনি কি ইংরেজি বলতে পারেন?
I don't understand	Buj te parlam na	বুঝতে পারলাম না।
Help!	Ba cha o	বাঁচাও!
How?	Kaemon?	কেমন?
Where?	Kothay?	কোথায়?
When?	Kokhon?	কখন?
What?	Ki?	কি?
Why?	Keno?	কেন?
Who?	Ke?	কে?
How much?	Koto?	কত?
What time is it?	Koyta baje?	ক 'টা বাজে?

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 73.9%
- Male: 76.7%
- Female: 71.2% (2018 estimate)

### Early History of Education

Before the introduction of formal education, regional residents informally transmitted values, skills, and beliefs to younger generations. By the 6th century, networks of Buddhist and Brahman (Hindu) religious schools emerged throughout Bengal, teaching subjects such as arts, logic, philosophy, and religious education. In subsequent centuries, the region became a prominent center of Buddhist learning (Photo: Ruins of a Buddhist monastery at Paharpur dating to the 8th century).



Under Muslim rule beginning in the 13th century (see p. 3 of *History and Myth*), Islamic educators introduced formal methods of teaching Qur'anic verses, Islamic rituals and duties, Arabic, grammar, and literature at schools known as **madrasas** and **maktabs**. Concurrently, Hindu schools known as **pathshalas** or **tols** instructed students in Sanskrit (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*) and religious studies.

### Education Under the British

These systems of religious education prevailed until the 19th century, when British colonial authorities (see p. 7 of *History and Myth*) introduced the British educational system. In 1823, the British opened English-language schools, primarily in urban areas, to educate and train a limited number of local residents as civil servants. Meanwhile, most of the Muslim population continued to attend religious schools, while indigenous groups (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*) largely lacked formal education opportunities.

In the mid-19th century, the colonial government began to extend access to education, while promoting the English language. To appease unrest following the annulled 1905 partition of Bengal (see p. 7-8 of *History and Myth*), the British opened the University of Dhaka in 1921. Enrolling some 850 students across 12 departments in its inaugural year, the institution quickly became the region's center of intellectual life.

### Education in East Pakistan

Following the region's becoming part of Pakistan with the 1947 partition (see p. 8-9 of *History and Myth*), its new government made significant changes to the public education system. Besides adopting Urdu as the language of instruction (see p. 9 of *History and Myth* and p. 2 of *Language and Communication*),



it aligned the curricula of West and East Pakistan (see p. 8-9 of *History and Myth*) and attempted to recruit additional teachers and build new schools. Access to higher education improved

with the opening of the University of Rajshahi in 1953 and the University of Chittagong in 1966. Nevertheless, the reforms were largely ineffective, and the region continued to lag in educational access and attainment. Literacy rates between 1951-61 only grew from 19% to 20%, and the number of primary schools actually decreased amidst high dropout rates (Photo: The US Ambassador speaks with students at Hazi Joynuddin High School in Dhaka).

### Modern Education System

Following Bangladesh's 1971 independence (see p. 10-11 of *History and Myth*), the government nationalized all primary schools and mandated universal primary education through grade 5. While authorities proclaimed education a priority for the new nation, access and attainment scarcely improved. In 1981, literacy rates remained at 20% and in the following year, only 59% of children aged 5-9 were attending school.

With a series of reforms and initiatives, recent decades have seen significant improvements. For example, female primary school enrollment rates have increased substantially, while innovative initiatives such as boat schools for students in flood-prone areas have extended the reach of education. Further, the 2010 National Education Policy standardized pre-primary education, modernized religious curricula, and increased compulsory education to grade 8. The 2012 National Curriculum framework established instruction in a variety of practical skills, notably innovation, life and career, and information, media, and technology (Photo: A primary school in Mirpur).



Despite these gains, challenges remain. Poverty forces many children to leave school to pursue work (see p. 4 of *Family and Kinship*). Further, access to education remains uneven, especially in rural areas, where long distances to school combined with the high cost of supplies prevents some children from attending. Consequently, dropout rates are high, with only



60% of the students enrolling in grade 1 reaching grade 10. Experts estimate that some 4.3 million children aged 6-13 remained unenrolled in 2019. Further, government spending on education as a share of GDP is around

2%, South Asia's second lowest rate and lower than most other countries at similar levels of development (Photo: Schoolgirls in Lalmonirhat).

Bangladesh's minority groups exhibit significant educational disparities from the majority population (see p. 14-15 of *Political and Social Relations*). For example, **Biharis** (see p. 13 of

*Political and Social Relations*) have rather low educational attainment and high illiteracy rates. While the 2010 National Educational Policy stated that all Bangladeshis have the right to education in their own language, most schools provide instruction only in Bangla, creating significant language barriers for indigenous children (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*). Further, instruction generally is lacking, even for Bangla-speaking children. For example, according to a 2018 study, some 35% of Bangladeshi third-graders could not read Bangla fluently. Finally, Rohingya children residing in refugee camps (see p. 10 of *Political and Social Relations*) have access to limited educational offerings (Photo: US Airman with students of Goainghat Primary School in Syhlet).



Bangladesh's education system divides into general schools with a technical/vocational option, Islamic learning centers (see "Religious Education" below), and private institutions, most following British curricula and known as "English Medium" schools. At the primary level, some 85% of students attend general schools, with the remainder divided between religious and English schools. At the secondary level, the proportion attending general schools dips to almost 2/3, with 30% attending religious and 5% English schools.

**Pre-Primary:** In 2010, the government introduced 1 year of compulsory pre-primary education for 5-year-olds. Consequently, the number of first graders with pre-primary experience increased from 50%-96% between 2012-15.

**Primary:** With the 2010 reforms, primary school comprises grades 1-8, though students must pass an exam after grade 5 to continue their studies. Primary school subjects include Bangla, English, moral and religious education, Bangladesh studies, mathematics, social environment, and natural environment. Some 98% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in

primary school in 2018, up from 80% in 2000. After completing grade 8, students must pass an exam to continue to secondary school.

**Secondary:** Non-compulsory secondary school consists of 2 programs: junior secondary comprising grades 9-10 and senior secondary with grades 11-12. Some 67% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in junior secondary in 2018, though some 40% of students typically drop out at some point. At the senior level, just 38% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in 2017.

Secondary students may choose between general (academic) and technical/vocational tracks. Within the general track, students choose a specialized field of study, such as humanities, sciences, or business, based on their aptitude and interests. Core subjects include Bangla, English, Bangladesh studies, mathematics, and information technology. The proportion of students enrolling in technical/vocational education is only around 3%. Vocational programs prepare students for employment immediately upon graduation or for admission into specialized technical colleges.

**Post-Secondary:** Post-secondary enrolment has tripled since 2000, and today Bangladesh's 135 public and private universities and thousands of colleges enroll more than 3 million



students. Accounting for 72% of all post-secondary students, the National University of Bangladesh enrolled around 2 million students in its 2,300 affiliated colleges in 2017. The University of Dhaka, Bangladesh's oldest and most influential post-secondary institution, enrolled some 35,000 students in 2016 (Photo: University of Dhaka).

To accommodate the growing numbers of students seeking higher education, networks of private institutions have flourished, enrolling almost 34,000 students in 2017. As of 2018, 21% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in higher

education, and in 2018, 10% of Bangladesh's workforce had received a post-secondary degree. The primary languages of instruction in post-secondary institutions are Bangla and English.

### Religious Education

By law, public schools must offer Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian religious instruction in grades 3-10. Students attend separate lessons according to their faith and cannot opt out. Occasionally, schools lack trained religious teachers, especially in the minority religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. In such cases, officials generally allow local religious institutions or parents to hold religious studies classes or exempt students from the religious education requirement.

**Islamic Education:** Muslim students may attend state-regulated *madrasas* known as **Aliyah** or independent *madrasas* called **Qawmi** as an alternative to general schooling. Over 10,000 *madrasas* enrolled almost 2.5 million students in 2017.

Under the supervision of governmental authorities and using standardized textbooks approved by the government, *Aliyah madrasas* offer courses in Bangla, English, moral studies, Bangladesh studies, general mathematics, social studies, and environmental science in addition to Islamic religious instruction. Students pass through 5 stages over 16 years, from **Ebtedayee** (grades 1-5), **Dakhil** (6-10), **Alim** (11-12), **Fazil** and **Kamil**

(higher education). *Fazil* and *Kamil madrasas* are typically affiliated with the theology-focused Islamic University, which enrolls some 8% of Bangladesh's post-secondary students.



instruction and Arabic, though they typically introduce the basic principles in other subjects such as language, mathematics, science, and history. *Qawmi madrasas* also provide courses from primary through post-secondary levels (Photo: *Madrasa* in Dhaka).

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Bangladeshis tend to have a flexible view of time and invest considerable amounts of it to building close relationships. Due to population density, Bangladesh's public areas typically act as an extension of residents' working and living spaces.

### Time and Work

Bangladesh's workweek runs from Sunday-Thursday, with business hours varying by type of establishment. Government offices are typically open from 9am-4pm, and some open for limited hours on Saturday. Private sector employees typically work 9am-5pm, and shops are typically open from 10am-8pm.

Restaurants are generally open 7am-11pm, although some close for an afternoon break between 3pm-7pm. Banks generally open from 10am-4pm. Museum hours vary but tend to be shortened on Fridays and closed Sundays. During Ramadan (see p. 3-4 of *Religion and Spirituality*) the work day is typically 2 hours shorter (Photo: A street market stall in Dhaka).



**Working Environment:** Bangladesh's legal workweek is 48 hours, with an 8-hour day/6-day week, though the week can be extended to 60 hours with overtime pay. Bangladesh sets a minimum wage, although rates vary by labor sector. Employees are entitled to 11 paid holidays, subject to employer preference. Nevertheless, laws are routinely ignored and underenforced, and penalties are insufficient for deterring violations. Employees frequently work beyond legal limits and are often denied fair compensation. In addition, child labor remains a significant problem (see p. 4 of *Family and Kinship*). Bangladesh's garment industry (see p. 3 of *Economics and Resources*) regularly consists of numerous safety violations and has had several serious factory fires and structural failures over the past decades. For example, the Rana Plaza collapse killed some 1,100 and injured another 2,500 workers in 2013.

## National Holidays

These holidays occur on fixed dates:

- February 21: Language Martyrs' Day
- March 17: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Birthday
- March 26: Independence Day
- April 14: Bengali New Year
- May 1: May Day (Labor Day)
- August 15: National Mourning Day
- December 16: Victory Day
- December 25: Christmas Day

These holidays occur on variable dates according to the appropriate calendar.

Islamic holidays:

- **Eid al-Fitr:** End of Ramadan
- **Eid al-Adha:** Muslim Festival of Sacrifice
- **Ashura:** Holiday honoring the death of Husayn ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad
- **Eid e-Milad-un Nabi:** Celebrates the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday
- **Shab e-Barat:** Night of Deliverance

Hindu holidays:

- **Krishna Janmashtami:** Birth of Lord Krishna
- **Durga Puja:** Festival of the goddess Durga

Buddhist holiday:

- **Buddha Purnima:** Birth of Buddha

**Time Zone:** Bangladesh adheres to Bangladesh Standard Time (BST) which is 6 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 11 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Bangladesh does not observe daylight savings time.

**Bangladeshi Calendars:** While Bangladeshis frequently use the Gregorian (Western) calendar, the government also issues the Bangla Calendar, a combination lunar-solar calendar that has 12 months of 30 or 31 days. Unlike the Western Calendar, the Bangla Calendar's new year begins on April 14. The government uses the Bangla calendar for some tax and administrative purposes.

Hindus also use lunar and solar calendars to calculate religious festivals and establish dates for certain celebrations and rituals (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*). According to these calendars, the new day begins at sunrise.

Muslims use the **Hijiri** (Islamic) calendar to establish holidays. Since it is based on lunar phases, dates fall 11 days earlier each year in relation to the Western calendar. The calendar's 12 months each have 30 days or fewer. Days begin at sunset on what the Western calendar would show as the previous day. For example, each new week begins at sunset on Saturday, and the Muslim holy day of Friday begins on Thursday evening.

### Time and Business

While Bangladeshis typically have a relaxed view of time, they tend to expect punctuality from foreign nationals. Meetings often run over allotted times, participants frequently deviate from formal agendas, and final decisions tend to be delayed. Bangladeshis value interpersonal relationships in business settings and spend significant time cultivating good relations, often through rapport building and small talk. Bangladeshi companies tend to have a strict hierarchy, which means management usually makes final decisions. Managers tend to demand respect and obedience from their subordinates, who typically avoid direct disagreements or challenges. Further, managers avoid reprimanding or critiquing their subordinates in public, and communications generally tend to be indirect (see p. 4 of *Language and Communication*) (Photo: A US Air Force Capt shakes hands with a Bangladeshi airman).



## Personal Space

As in most societies, the use of personal space depends on the nature of the relationship. Bangladeshis tend to maintain about an arm's length distance when conversing with strangers or the opposite sex but stand closer to family and friends.

**Touch:** Although social touching and displays of affection between family and close friends are common, foreign nationals should wait for Bangladeshis to initiate contact. While friends of the same gender may hold hands, Bangladeshis consider displays of affection between the opposite sexes inappropriate. Further, Bangladeshis use only the right hand when eating, gesturing, passing and receiving items, and shaking hands because traditionally the left hand is used for personal hygiene and considered unclean. Foreign nationals should adhere to this custom to avoid offense.

**Eye Contact:** During greetings and discussions, eye contact indicates sincerity and active listening, though subordinates may occasionally divert their eyes from superiors to show respect. Members of the opposite sex tend to avoid prolonged direct eye contact.

## Photographs

Military or government offices, mosques, temples, and airports tend to prohibit photography. Foreign nationals should acquire a Bangladeshi's permission before taking his photo.

## Driving

In 2016, Bangladesh's rate of traffic-related deaths was 15 per 100,000 people, significantly lower than neighboring India (23) and slightly higher than in the US (12). In urban areas, drivers tend to speed and ignore traffic laws. In rural areas, roads and highways are often poorly maintained, lack adequate markings, illumination, barriers, and shoulders and are prone to flooding. Unlike Americans, Bangladeshis drive on the left side of the road (Photo: A Dhaka street).



## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Bangladesh's traditional dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect the country's diverse religious influences, colonial past, agricultural foundation, and modern global trends.

### Dress and Appearance

**Women:** Women's dress is a mix of traditional and the latest fashion trends, though styles are typically modest. The traditional and still most common women's garment is the



**shari**, a piece of cloth several yards in length that is wrapped around the body with the loose end draped over the shoulder or, alternatively, over the head like a veil. Ways of wrapping a *shari* vary according to region and other factors such as socioeconomic status and religious affiliation. *Sharis* are typically colorful and incorporate elaborate patterns, intricate embroidery, and hand-stitching. While cotton is popular for everyday wear, silk is favored for special occasions. Women also wear the **salwar-kameez** (tapered ankle-length trousers or *salwar* beneath a long, tunic-like garment, *kameez*). This style is worn for both formal and daily activities and is typically paired with an **orna** (a draped scarf) (Photo: Bangladeshi women at a US Embassy reception).

Some women prefer Western-style dresses or skirts/pants with loose-fitting blouses. Many women combine traditional *sharis* with modern blouses, often incorporating lace, velvet, and decorated fringes, resulting in a wide range of fashion styles. Some Muslim women wear the hijab, headscarf, common in other Muslim-majority countries, though the style is not native to Bangladesh.

**Men:** Bangladeshi men wear both Western-style clothes such as suits, jeans, and collared, button-down shirts or T-shirts and traditional garments such as the **lungi**, ankle-length,

wraparound skirt tied at the waist. Many men combine styles such as pairing the *lungi* with a buttoned shirt or vest. Another common outfit is the ***kurta*** (long loose, collarless shirt) worn with ***paejama*** or ***churidar*** (tapered cotton pants). For special occasions, men often wear ***sherwani*** (a long, coat-like garment) over the *kurta* and complete the outfit with decorated ***nagra*** (slippers). Some Muslim men wear a skullcap ***topi***, headwrap.

## Recreation and Leisure

For most Bangladeshis, recreation and leisure time is about family and friends. Bangladeshi families frequently visit each other's homes to share meals (pictured) or to celebrate special events and religious festivals. On weekends and holidays, families enjoy going to the cinema, theater, and concerts or visiting relatives in the countryside. Some men like to gather in cafes for tea and conversation.



## Festivals and Holidays:

Bangladeshis recognize a variety of holidays and festivals that reflect ethnic, national, and religious traditions. For example, on ***Pahela Baishakh*** (Bengali New

Year) Bangladeshis of all faiths gather to celebrate Bengali culture with processions, plays, songs, and fairs, often wearing special red-and-white clothing and enjoying traditional festive foods. On Independence Day, Bangladeshis gather for military parades, concerts, and boat races. In February, they celebrate ***Shaheed Dibas*** (Language Martyrs' Day), which honors those killed during the 1952 demonstrations in support of the Bangla language (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*).

Other holidays mark religious events. For example, during the 3-day Islamic celebration of ***Eid ul-Fitr*** (see p. 4 of *Religion and Spirituality*), Bangladeshis enjoy fireworks, festive meals, and fairs. The Hindu celebration of ***Durga Puja*** commemorates the symbolic triumphs of good over evil and involves processions of celebrants carrying statues of the goddess *Durga* to a nearby river for immersion.

## Sports and Games

**Sports:** Cricket is Bangladesh's most popular sport, with its national team competing regularly in the Asia Cup and other tournaments. Domestic leagues attract passionate followers, and children and adults alike enjoy impromptu games in streets and parks. Other popular sports include soccer, badminton, field hockey, basketball, tennis, swimming, and wrestling. With its numerous rivers, Bangladesh also has a rich tradition of **nouka baich** (rowing competitions) with boats manned by upwards of 100 people (Photo: US Navy sailor plays cricket with Bangladeshi sailors).



### Traditional Sports:

Bangladeshis typically play a variety of traditional sports during holidays, festivals, and family gatherings. Bangladesh's national sport, **kabaddi** or **ha-du-du**, is a contact sport that requires a member of a team to tag as many members of the opposing team as possible and return to his side of the field without being tackled, all within a single breath. Bangladesh's national team frequently medals in the sport at international competitions.

A mix of choreographed dance and sport, **Lathi Khela** is a traditional Bangladeshi martial art form involving fighting with bamboo sticks. Originating as a form of dueling to resolve community disputes, the sport has many variations today.

**Games:** Board games familiar to Westerners such as parcheesi, chess, and snakes and ladders have ancient South Asian roots and remain popular. Bangladeshis also enjoy card games and kite fighting, when players attempt to "snag" an opponent's kite with their own.

## Performance Arts

**Music:** Bangladesh has a rich history of traditional music, typically divided into 2 categories: **Hindustani** (classical) and **Deshi** (folk). Originating in the northern Indian subcontinent,

*Hindustani* music incorporates Arab and Persian influences. Typical instruments include the **sitar** (a long-necked, fretted lute), the **sarod** and **dotara** (pictured – both short-neck lutes without frets), **sarangi** (a type of bowed violin), and the **shehnai** (a reed instrument similar to an oboe). Elements of *Hindustani* music include the **raga** (melody) and **tala** (rhythm), with musicians often improvising over a base of drone notes with the rhythm set by tuned drums (**tabla**).

Bangladeshi folk music divides into 2 types – **bhatiali**, traditionally associated with fishermen, and **bhawaiya**, associated with ox-cart drivers, among others. Much folk music focuses on poetic vocals, though some also includes instrumental accompaniment.



Another prominent genre is devotional **baul** music, traditionally sung by *Sufi* mystics (see p. 4 of *Religion and Spirituality*) and accompanied by the single-stringed **ektara** and cymbals.

In recent decades, many Bangladeshi artists have combined international styles with domestic musical traditions. For example, in **adhunik gaan** (“contemporary songs”) artists mix traditional instruments with modern synthesizers, rhythms, and lyrics.

Since the 1980s, rock has become popular, with heavy metal and hip-hop artists composing songs in both Bangla and English. Western and Indian pop genres are also popular.

**Dance and Theater:** In addition to a variety of classical dance styles that are popular across the Indian subcontinent, Bangladesh is home to several unique dances. A common defining feature of South Asian traditional dance is the use of hand gestures and facial expressions to convey meaning to the audience. Another is the use of bells on dancers’ ankles to draw attention to their footwork and provide a source of rhythm. A common form, **kathak**, traditionally depicts religious scenes from sacred Hindu literature.

Other dances depict Islamic stories. For example, *jari* honors the death of a revered Muslim figure and features dancers sporting red handkerchiefs and bells. *Dhali*, performers dance with bamboo swords in rhythm with drums. Other dances accompany folk music, such as *baul* devotional dances and *ghatu*, a courtship dance that traditionally features erotic lyrics along with male dancers dressed as women (Photo: Bangladeshi girls dressed to perform a traditional dance).



Bangladesh is also home to *jatra*, Bengali folk theater, which developed from 16th-century performances of Hindu religious stories. Today, themes include Hindu mythology, love, tragedy, and heroism. Performances, often held outdoors, typically last for several hours and include poetry, song, instrumental music, and improvisation. Besides *jatra* troupes, some 300 theater groups are active in Bangladesh, performing adaptations of plays from well-known international and domestic playwrights (Photo: Bangladeshi dancers perform during the closing ceremonies of a United Nations peacekeeping exercise).



**Cinema:** Bangladesh's film industry, known as Dhallywood, a reference to American "Hollywood," produces some 60 films annually, typically action films, melodramas, and musicals. Recently,

Bangladeshi filmmaker Mostofa Sarwar Farooki has directed several international award-winning films focusing on life for Bangladesh's middle class and urban youth, founding the country's "new wave" cinema movement.

## Literature

Bengali literature first flourished in the 16th century, when writers received official patronage from the Mughal rulers (see p. 4-5 of *History and Myth*). Chandidas was a prominent poet whose Hindu-influenced verses on love inspired many subsequent writers, artists, and religious leaders. Meanwhile, poets Alaol and Abdul Hakim wove Islamic stories and morals into their epic poems and romantic tales, focusing on the connection to divine love as understood in Sufism (see p. 4 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Literature also flourished in the late 19th-early 20th centuries during the so-called Bengali Renaissance. For example, Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, used everyday Bangla language to develop new forms of prose, focusing on themes of Hindu-Muslim unity and the lives of the working class. In the early 20th century, national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam sparked calls for national liberation in his poems condemning British colonialism (see p. 7-9 of *History and Myth*). In recent decades, writers have focused on regional conflicts and social critique.

## Arts and Crafts

Many of Bangladesh's folk arts and crafts stem from the region's renowned weaving techniques and traditions. For example, **jamdani** is a type of muslin or silk woven fabric noted for its Persian-inspired floral and geometric designs. Traditionally worn by royalty of the Mughal Empire (see p. 4-5 of *History and Myth*), the fabric is often utilized today in *sharis*. Needlework also has a rich history in Bangladesh, with elaborate quilts called **nakshi kantha** (pictured) traditionally depicting local historical events and myths. Contemporary artists today often utilize recycled materials and incorporate both naturalistic and abstract designs. Other arts and crafts include bamboo stools and musical instruments; woven baskets and prayer mats made from jute or cane; conch-shell jewelry; carved wooden toys and decorations; ceramics; metalwork; painted masks; and decorative calligraphy.



## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Traditional cuisine and dining etiquette play an important role in Bangladeshi culture and identity. Drawing on Islamic, Hindu, and local influences, Bangladeshi cuisine is diverse and extensive, typically incorporating fresh ingredients accented by aromatic, bold, and spicy flavors.

### Dining Customs

Bangladeshis supplement 3 daily meals with light midmorning and afternoon snacks. Lunch is typically the largest and main meal, though dinner may also be substantial, especially in urban areas. Family meal preparation is characterized by daily grocery shopping and is typically a time-consuming process usually performed by women (Photo: Fruits and vegetables on display at a Dhaka market).



Guests frequently drop by unannounced, often in the late morning or late afternoon. During these informal visits, hosts typically serve tea paired with light snacks such as cakes, pastries, and fruit. If guests arrive during mealtime, hosts often invite the guests to dine with the family. When formally visiting a Bangladeshi home for a meal, guests tend to arrive a few minutes late. Hosts usually serve their guests first and as a sign of respect, may encourage guests to finish their portions before serving themselves or their family.

After guests finish their food, the host typically offers several additional servings. During large, formal social gatherings like weddings, men and women may eat separately. In some rural or more traditional households, female and male family members eat separately on a regular basis, especially when unrelated male guests are present.

Most Bangladeshis eat only with their right hand (see p. 4 of *Time and Space*), using their fingers and thumb to scoop food into their mouths. While some wealthy families eat at a table, in rural areas or in poorer homes, diners commonly sit on mats on the floor.

## Diet

Rice is Bangladesh's most common staple, though wheat, which is typically baked into various flatbreads, also features prominently. Fish is another primary component of Bangladeshi diets and is served grilled, fried, or dried and complemented with rice and vegetables. Lamb, goat, and chicken are also common sources of protein, though Bangladeshis often reserve meat for special occasions. In some areas, residents consume iguanas, wild boar, wood pigeons, and other wild game.

Curries are popular nationwide, yet preparation varies widely. Made by combining various spices like cumin, ginger, coriander, turmeric, and pepper with herbs and fresh or dried chili peppers, curries are served with fish, meat, and vegetables.

Bangladesh's fertile soils yield a variety of native vegetables and fruits which are available year-round. Popular vegetables include lentils, carrots, cucumbers, cauliflower, peas, eggplant, cabbage, and radishes. Native fruits include tomatoes, lychee, jackfruit, **jambura** (pomelo, a large citrus fruit), guava, mango, papaya, watermelon, and bananas (Photo: A market sells food for consumption after the daily fasting period during the Islamic holiday of Ramadan – see p. 3-4 of *Religion and Spirituality*).



Many Bangladeshis adhere to certain dietary restrictions. Observant Muslims (see p. 9 of *Religion and Spirituality*) consume neither pork nor alcohol, though these habits are changing among some urban dwellers. In addition, they observe particular rules of animal slaughter and meat preparation to ensure that food is **halal**, allowed by Islamic law. Meanwhile, some Hindus (see p.

10 of *Religion and Spirituality*) are strictly vegetarian and acquire their protein through beans, soy, and dairy products.

### Popular Dishes and Foods

Breakfast tends to be a light meal of fruit, yogurt, and rice, which typically is served mixed with salt and green chilies or as **muri** (puffed rice). A common lunch consists of white rice or flatbreads served with lentils, fish, yogurt, and a wide range of vegetable dishes such as **bhorta** (stewed, mashed eggplant, potato, or other vegetable mixed with chopped onion, mustard oil, coriander, and green chili) and **bhaji** (fried vegetables). Alternatively, lunch may include **biryani** (fragrantly spiced rice fried with vegetables, egg, and meat or fish) or curries served with flatbread.

Dinner incorporates similar fare. Popular dishes include **daal** (a thick lentil stew spiced with turmeric, coriander, cumin, fennel, and ginger, among other spices); **kebab** (grilled meat – pictured); and **halim** (lentil soup slow cooked with lamb or chicken and various spices). Desserts are available at **misti** (sweet shops) across the country. Popular varieties include numerous milk-based sweets such as **payesh** and **shemai**, rice or noodles (respectively) cooked in milk and sugar; **misti doi** (sweetened yogurt); and **roshogolla** (cottage cheese dough balls soaked in sugary syrup).



### Beverages

Bangladeshis drink **cha** (tea), served plain or with milk and sugar, throughout the day. Coffee is also widely available. Bangladeshis also enjoy freshly squeezed juices from limes, dates, sugarcane, papaya, mangos, and coconuts as well as yogurt-based drinks flavored with spices or fruit juice. The government requires Bangladeshis to obtain licenses to purchase and consume alcohol, which is available in some restaurants and hotels. Most large cities also have illegal bars, though the police regularly raid and disband such establishments. In rural areas, some Bangladeshis enjoy home-made alcoholic beverages, typically distilled from rice.

## Eating Out

Bangladeshis who can afford it enjoy eating out at urban restaurants and cafes, particularly on special occasions. Restaurants range from upscale establishments serving regional and international foods to small casual eateries. Restaurants commonly add a 10% service charge to bills, but waiters may expect an additional tip for good service. In more casual cafes, it is acceptable to simply round up the bill.



Common across the country, street stalls sell a variety of foods ranging from light snacks to hearty meals. Common items include **phuchka** (deep fried bread stuffed with mixtures of potatoes, chickpeas, onions, chilies, and spices and topped with sour tamarind sauce); **chatpoti** (bowls of spiced chickpeas and chopped potato or bread topped with onions, coriander, green chilies, and grated, hardboiled egg); **mughlai parata** (spiced scrambled egg and vegetables wrapped in flat bread and fried); and **samosas** (pastries with savory fillings) (Photo: A woman separates rice).

## Health Overview

The overall health of Bangladeshis has improved significantly since the nation's 1971 independence due primarily to the combined efforts of the Bangladeshi government, civil society, and various international aid organizations. Between 1971-2020, life expectancy at birth jumped from approximately 47 to 74 years. Meanwhile, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased from 148 to 28 deaths per 1,000 live births, which is below the South Asian average of 35.

Moreover, maternal mortality fell from 569 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 173 in 2017, slightly higher than India's rate and the South Asian average but remaining notably higher than the US rate (14). Despite these advances, Bangladeshis continue to experience high rates of communicable diseases, while an inadequate healthcare infrastructure significantly hinders their access to preventative care and medical treatment.

## Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Composed of several approaches, traditional Bangladeshi medicine emphasizes the use of nutrition, exercise, and herbal remedies rather than surgical methods to identify and treat the basic causes of illness (Photo: A man sells a variety of herbs and spices in a Bangladeshi market).



First described in ancient Indian texts from around 300 BC, the **Ayurvedic** system ("science of life" in Sanskrit) was designed to stabilize and rejuvenate **doshas** (the 3 main bodily energies of air, bile, and phlegm). Treatments include eating foods based on body type, physical exercise, yoga, and meditation.

A second system, **Unani**, derives from Islamic traditions and focuses on treatments based on herbal remedies. Lastly, another popular practice is homeopathy (a form of alternative medicine developed in 18th-century Germany, which involves a patient ingesting diluted plant, mineral, and animal substances to trigger the body's natural system of healing). Notably, some 28% of treatments administered in public hospitals and clinics involve a form of traditional or alternative therapy.

## Modern Healthcare System

Bangladesh's healthcare system confronts a variety of challenges. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, which regulates the nation's healthcare industry, is underfunded, fragmented, institutionally weak, and fails to efficiently allocate resources across the public hospitals and clinics it manages.

In 2019, the government announced plans to implement a universal health insurance scheme that would provide free medical care at public facilities for all Bangladeshis. Currently, high out-of-pocket costs keep many Bangladeshis – particularly the poor, unemployed, disabled, and elderly – from receiving proper medical care. Moreover, although the majority of the

population lives in rural areas, hospitals and clinics concentrate in cities and significantly underserve rural dwellers. Further, both private facilities and government-run medical centers are often poorly maintained and ill-equipped.

Bangladesh also faces a severe shortage of trained medical professionals. According to recent estimates, Bangladesh has about 3 physicians per 10,000 people, notably lower than the World Health Organization's recommendation of 23. Moreover, many public sector providers lack the professional knowledge and capacity to perform complex, specialized medical procedures. Meanwhile, private facilities often employ unregulated, untrained, informal health workers. This shortage of educated personnel plus inadequate hospital capacity makes modern healthcare inaccessible to a large portion of the population.

In rural regions where demand is higher, staff often work long hours at small, dilapidated clinics. Consequently, patients often

must wait for extended periods before receiving even basic medical treatment.



Further, demographic trends such as a rapidly growing and aging population will likely burden the already overstretched

healthcare system with rising costs and significantly higher demand in the coming years (Photo: A US Air Force paramedic treats a Bangladeshi mother and child).

### Health Challenges

As is common in developing countries, the rate of non-communicable disease has increased and now accounts for the majority (67%) of all deaths. In 2017, the top causes of death included cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, cancer, and diabetes. Preventable “external causes” such as car accidents, suicide, and other injuries, resulted in about 8% of deaths. Widespread poverty elevates rates of child malnutrition: as of 2019, almost 23% of Bangladeshi children under the age of 5

were underweight, about 1/2 suffered from anemia, and 28% were stunted.

Communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, malaria, hepatitis, typhoid, dengue fever, and pneumonia are common, causing 26% of all deaths in 2016. Frequent and severe floods, cyclones, and other natural disasters (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*) lead to shortages of clean water, food, and medicine, leaving affected communities particularly vulnerable to outbreaks of communicable diseases.



Further, flooding from annual monsoonal rains creates large pools of standing water, worsening the spread of vector-borne diseases like malaria and dengue fever, which are carried by mosquitos and other insects. Meanwhile, Bangladeshis who lack access to clean water and sanitation facilities also risk infection from parasites and bacteria and associated waterborne diseases (Photo: Children walk along flooded rice fields).

Communicable diseases are most prevalent in the Northwest, the Chittagong Hills region, the central delta areas most prone



to flooding, and in heavily overcrowded urban areas, where improper sewage and waste management worsen sanitation problems. Finally, naturally-occurring arsenic pollutes drinking water in some areas

(see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*) and causes arsenic poisoning-related ailments such as skin lesions, cancer, edema, and enlargement of organs, among other issues (Photo: A US Navy physical therapist evaluates a Bangladeshi patient).

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

Following the region's alignment with Pakistan after the 1947 partition of India (see p. 8-9 of *History and Myth*), the government introduced a policy of industrialization based on local raw materials such as cotton and jute. Nevertheless, the economy stagnated, then the war for independence (see p. 10-11 of *History and Myth*) severely damaged regional infrastructure. In 1971, newly-independent Bangladesh faced extensive poverty amid re-occurring famines.

To promote economic growth, the government instituted a series of 5-year plans focused on encouraging private investment and liberalizing and connecting the economy with regional and world partners. With these reforms, supported by billions of dollars of foreign aid, the economy began to grow steadily, averaging 4-5% growth by the 1990s.

While setbacks occurred, often due to severe weather (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*), the economy gradually began to outperform expectations, due largely to growth in the agricultural sector and garment industry (Photo: Bangladeshi women in a rice field).



Since the mid-1990s, Bangladesh has sustained its economic growth, averaging 5.7% per year, even during the 2008-09 global financial crisis. Since 2009, per capita income has increased nearly 3-fold, and the number of people living in extreme poverty, earning under \$1.25 per day, has decreased from 19% of the population to less than 9%. In 2019, Bangladesh's expected growth rate of around 7.3% was predicted to be the world's second highest. Remittances from some 2.5 million Bangladeshis living abroad have helped to boost the economy in recent years, accounting for \$15.5 billion in 2018 and topping \$18.32 billion in 2019.

Nevertheless, Bangladesh continues to face serious economic challenges. Poverty remains a serious issue, with some 1/4 of Bangladeshis living below the poverty line. Further, workers often labor in hazardous conditions (see p. 1 of *Time and Space*), and with the garment industry accounting for some 80% of total exports, Bangladesh's trade-based and undiversified economy remains highly vulnerable to global economic shocks. Consequently, the government has enacted further reforms. The seventh 5-year plan (2016-20) targets 3 general areas of improvement: GDP growth, new jobs, and poverty reduction; inclusiveness in the development process; and sustainable development.

### Microloans

Bangladesh is home to Grameen Bank, a microcredit institution that issues loans to Bangladeshis lacking access to traditional banking. The bank's founder, Muhammed Yunus, won the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for pioneering the microloan concept. By some estimates, microloans helped as many as 10 million Bangladeshis, primarily women, leave poverty between 1990-2008. Today, some 750 microfinance institutions serve 30 million Bangladeshis.

### Services

Accounting for 54% of GDP and 40% of employment in 2018, the services sector is the largest component of Bangladesh's economy. Important subsectors include retail and commercial sales, transport, tourism, and banking.

**Tourism:** Tourism has grown steadily over the past several years, contributing to some 4.4% of GDP and providing 2.4 million jobs in 2018. Nevertheless, foreign tourists comprised just 2.67 of over 35 million visitors that year. Attractions include historical sites in Dhaka and Chittagong, the Sundarbans mangrove forest, and the beaches near Cox's Bazar. Nevertheless, Bangladesh has experienced a decrease in tourism since the influx of Rohingya refugees (see p. 10 of *Political and Social Relations*).

**Special Economic Zones (SEZ):** In an effort to attract foreign capital, the government aims to create 100 SEZs by 2030, where companies will receive certain tax and duty exemptions. The government hopes the SEZs will add 10 million new jobs and \$40 billion in annual exports.

## Industry

As the second largest component of the economy, the industrial sector accounts for 29% of GDP and 21% of employment as of 2018. Important subsectors are manufacturing and construction.

**Manufacturing:** Dominated by the textile and ready-made garment industries, manufacturing accounts for 18% of GDP. In 2018, Bangladesh was the world's second-largest apparel supplier after China, with almost 7% of the global market.

**Construction:** Construction comprises some 7.5% of GDP and employs almost 3.5 million Bangladeshis across some 4,000 firms as of 2017. Experts believe construction will continue to fuel economic and employment growth through the next decade.

**Mining:** In 2015, mining and quarrying accounted for some 1.6% of GDP, producing cement components, coal, iron and steel, natural gas, petroleum, salt, and stone.

## Agriculture

The agricultural sector consists of farming, livestock, fishing, and forestry and accounts 13% of GDP and 40% of employment in 2018. Most agriculture occurs on small, family-owned farms.



### Farming and Livestock:

More than 70% of Bangladesh's territory is dedicated to cultivation. Rice is the dominant crop, making up some 90% of total food grains. Other

important crops include wheat, jute, sugar cane, peas, beans, lentils, spices, tea, among other fruits and vegetables. Bangladesh's most common livestock are cattle, buffalo, goat, sheep, and poultry (Photo: A Bangladeshi farmer).

**Fishing:** Bangladesh's rivers and seacoast offer opportunities for aquaculture and open-water fishing of pomfret, hilsa, carp, tilapia, shrimp, and catfish, among others. Fishing comprised 3.6% of GDP in 2017 and about 1/4 of agricultural products or some 4.13 million metric tons. Bangladesh ranks third in the world in inland fish and fifth in aquaculture production.

**Forestry:** Home to the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest, and with about 17.5% of its territory covered by woodlands, Bangladesh has a developed forestry industry. The forest sub-sector produces timber and fuelwood and makes up some 3% of GDP and employed 1.5 million Bangladeshis in 2015 (Photo: A boatman in the Sundarbans).



### Currency

Bangladesh's currency is the Bangladeshi **taka** (ট) issued in 9 banknote values (1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 500, 1,000) and 3 coin values (1, 2, 5). ট1 subdivides into 100 **poisha** issued in 5 coin values (1, 5, 10, 25, 50), though these are rarely used today. Between 2014-20, \$1 was worth around ট84.93.

### Foreign Trade

In 2018, exports totaled \$39.25 billion and imports \$60.5 billion. Exports included garments, knitwear, agricultural products, frozen fish and seafood, jute and jute goods, and leather. The largest buyers included the EU, the US, and China. Bangladesh's top imports included cotton, machinery and equipment, chemicals, iron and steel, and foodstuffs purchased from Thailand, India, China, Indonesia, and Singapore.

### Foreign Aid

Foreign aid comprised some 2% of GDP in 2018, including some \$4.12 billion in official development assistance, mostly related to economic infrastructure and services. Primary contributors have been the International Development Association (\$1.45 billion), Japan (\$1.36 billion), and the Asian Development Bank (\$426 million). In 2019, the US provided some \$350 million.

## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

Despite ongoing improvements, Bangladesh struggles to maintain an adequate physical infrastructure and energy supply to support its growing population and economy. In recent decades, Bangladesh has adopted modern telecommunications and information technology.

### Transportation

Besides walking, the most common methods of everyday transport in Bangladesh are public buses and small vehicles such as cycle rickshaws (pictured);

auto rickshaws called **tempos** or **CNGs**

(because they run on compressed natural gas); and taxis, motorcycles, and private cars. Further, with Bangladesh's extensive waterways,

boats are common forms of transport, ranging from large paddlewheel steamers called **rockets** to **noukas**, small vessels navigated with poles and oars.



Recently, the government has initiated construction on Bangladesh's first metro system in Dhaka. An elevated line was expected to open by the end of 2019 and carry some 60,000 passengers per hour. A second elevated line will be complete by the end of 2020, while an underground metro is scheduled to open by 2026.

**Roadways:** In 2018, Bangladesh had almost 230,000 mi of roadways, 30% of which were paved. A plan to expand all roads and highways by 2032 is underway, and the government has initiated construction on the Padma Bridge to connect the Southwest with the rest of the country. By some reports, Bangladesh has Asia's second worst roads, with monsoon-related flooding commonly restricting road access. Following a

major bus accident in Dhaka in 2018, thousands of students protested the country's inadequate road conditions.

**Railways:** The state-owned Bangladesh Railway oversees close to 1,800 mi of railways serving 455 stations and almost 78 million passengers in 2017. While the rail system is in poor condition due to underfunding and neglect, the government plans to invest some \$135 million between 2019-22 to increase fleet size and some \$512 million to extend service to Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh's far Southeast. The



system is part of the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR), a 106,000 mi long network with 28 partner countries. In 2016, Bangladesh received a \$1.5 billion loan from the Asian Development Bank to further develop its portion of the TAR (Photo: A crowded train in Bangladesh).

**Ports and Waterways:** With some 3,700 mi of navigable waterways and many river ports, Bangladesh relies on water transport for both commercial and private purposes. Handling 103 million tons of cargo in 2018, Chittagong Port is Bangladesh's primary seaport, followed by Mongla Port.

**Airways:** Bangladesh has 18 airports, of which 16 have paved runways. In 2018, Bangladeshi airports served some 17.2 million passengers, 3/4 of them passed through Dhaka's Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. Bangladesh's national carrier, Biman Airways, and several foreign airlines connect Dhaka with European and Asian destinations.

## Energy

Bangladesh has the capacity to produce some 2/3 of its total energy needs, importing the remainder from India, Indonesia, and China. With some of the largest natural gas reserves in the Asia-Pacific region, Bangladesh has historically relied on natural gas for electricity generation. In 2016, natural gas accounted for over 80% of total electricity generation. However, with increasing demand and rapidly decreasing reserves, the government is seeking to lessen its dependence on natural gas and diversify

its energy mix. Specifically, it aims to increase power generation by solar and wind from the current 5% to 10% by 2020 and meet 50% of its electricity needs with coal by 2030.

## Media

While Bangladesh's constitution recognizes freedom of speech, laws criminalize hate speech and the 2018 Digital Security Act restricts online content. Journalists frequently face lawsuits and harassment from government officials, resulting in some self-censorship. Bangladeshis have access to a variety of print and online media outlets. The most widely-read Bangla-language newspapers are *Bangladesh Pratidin* and *Prothom Alo*, though a variety of English newspapers are also popular such as the *Daily Star*, *New Age*, the *New Nation*, and the *Daily Sun* (Photo: Bangladeshi and US military personnel hold a press briefing about a joint disaster response exercise in Dhaka).



**Radio and TV:** Some 31 television channels

operate in Bangladesh, notably the state-owned Bangladesh Television (BTV) and the privately-owned ATN Bangla. In recent years, Indian channels have become increasingly popular. Popular radio stations include the public Betar-Radio Bangladesh and private Radio Today FM and ABC Radio.

## Telecommunications

As of 2018, Bangladesh had some 94 mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 people compared to just 0.4 fixed-line telephone subscriptions. While some users in urban areas have multiple mobile phone lines, the number of users among the rural population is also rapidly increasing.

**Internet:** Some 81 million Bangladeshis (or about 1/2 the population) used the Internet in 2017, with 93% gaining access through mobile phones. The broadly-written Digital Security Act suppresses online media freedoms, criminalizing negative speech about political leaders and Bangladesh's history. The government occasionally monitors, censors, and blocks online content.



For more information on  
the Air Force Culture and Language Center visit:  
[airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC](http://airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC)

For more information on  
Pacific Air Forces visit:  
<http://www.pacaf.af.mil>



## CULTURE GUIDE

Access all of the AFCLC's expeditionary culture field  
guides in our mobile app!



GET IT ON  
**Google Play**



Available on the iPhone  
**App Store**



DoD Enterprise Mobility  
**Personal Use  
Mobile Apps**