



Bangladesh

Introduction

Official Name: People's Republic of Bangladesh
Nationality: Bangladeshi
Area: 144,000 square kilometers (55,599 square miles)
Languages: Bangla (official, also known as Bengali), English
Currency: Taka (BDT)
Location: Southern Asia, bordered by India and Burma (Myanmar) with coastline on the Bay of Bengal

Statistical Information

Population	150.5 million
0-14 years	33.1 percent
15-64 years	63.4 percent
65+ years	3.5 percent
Birth rate	29 births/1,000
Death rate	8 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate	3.09 children/woman
Pop. growth rate	2.056 percent
Life expectancy	62.8 years
Literacy	43.1 percent
HIV/AIDS rate	less than 0.1 percent
Below poverty line	45 percent
Ethnic groups	98 percent Bengali 2 percent other (includes tribal groups, non-Bengali Muslims)
Religion:	83 percent Muslim 16 percent Hindu 1 percent other

Economy

Despite domestic and international efforts to improve the economy, Bangladesh has fewer resources than it needs to support its population. Nearly two-thirds of Bangladeshis are employed in the agriculture sector, whose growth is threatened by frequent cyclones and floods. The country also struggles with slow implementation of reforms, inefficient industries, an excess of unskilled labor, and insufficient power

supplies. On the positive side, the economy has grown five to six percent over the past several years.

Government

Capital: Dhaka

Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy divided into six administrative divisions: Barisal, Chittagong, Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi, and Sylhet. Bangladesh presently has a caretaker government which will remain in office until a general election is held. The president is the chief of state and is elected for a five-year term by the National Parliament. The current president ran unopposed in 2002, and so the scheduled election was not held. Cabinet positions are currently filled with caretaker advisers; the chief caretaker adviser is roughly equivalent to a prime minister. The legislature consists of the one-house National Parliament, or Jatiya Sangsad, which consists of 300 seats. Members of the National Parliament are popularly elected from their territorial constituencies for five-year terms.

Climate

Bangladesh has a tropical monsoon climate, with heavy rains during the summer monsoon season. Winters are dry and cool. From mid-April to mid-October, southern and southeastern winds bring heavy precipitation from the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, causing major flooding, as much of Bangladesh is low-lying. Temperatures range from around 68°F in January to 86°F in April.

Environmental Concerns

Many Bangladeshis are landless and are forced to cultivate low-lying and flooding-prone areas. Water-borne diseases are prevalent in surface water, and water pollution from pesticides contaminates many fishing grounds. Falling water tables in the northern and central parts of the country cause water shortages, and groundwater sometimes becomes contaminated due to naturally occurring arsenic in the

soil. Soil degradation and erosion, deforestation, and overpopulation are also serious problems for Bangladesh.

History

Peoples from southern and central Asia and India first migrated to the land that is now Bangladesh around 2000 B.C. The exact origin of the word “Bangla” or “Bengal” is unknown, although it is believed to be derived from Bang, a Dravidian-speaking tribe that settled in the region around 1000 B.C. Whatever the origins of the name, the region has been called Bengal since ancient times.

Around the seventh century B.C., the Aryan kingdom of Gangaridai was formed in Bengal. This kingdom is mentioned in Greek and Roman sources; the Gangaridai likely traded and possibly even provided mercenaries for the Greek and Roman Empires. The kingdom of Gangaridai was later united with the Indian state of Bihar under the Magadha and Maurya Empires. Bengal was later part of the Gupta Empire, from the third to the sixth centuries A.D. After the collapse of the Gupta Empire, a Bengali named Shashanka established the first autonomous Bengali kingdom in the seventh century A.D. This kingdom was short-lived and soon gave way to anarchy. Bengal was repeatedly conquered by kingdoms from Tibet, central India, and Kashmir.

Frustrated with the political situation, the Bengali people chose to elect a popular military leader, Gopala, as the king of Bengal. This was possibly the first and only democratic election in the medieval Indian subcontinent. Gopala was a Buddhist and established the Buddhist Pala Dynasty. The dynasty supported the Mahayana and Tantric schools of Buddhism. Gopala brought peace and prosperity back to Bengal, and subsequent Pala kings sought to expand Bengal’s borders, spreading over much of the Indian subcontinent. The Palas remained in power for around 400 years.

Hemanta Sen usurped power from the Palas in 1095 and established the Sena Dynasty. The Senas were orthodox Hindus, and under their rule Buddhism’s popularity declined sharply and the Hindu caste system was introduced.

In the 12th century, Islam was first introduced to Bengal by Sufi missionaries, and then spread throughout the country by Muslim conquests. Bakhtiar Khiliji, a Turkish general, conquered large parts of Bengal. For the next several hundred years, the region was ruled by dynasties of sultans. By the 16th century, the Islamic Mughal Empire controlled

Bengal, and Dhaka had become an important provincial center.

Late in the 15th century, European traders arrived in Bengal. Their influence grew until the British East India Company gained control of Bengal after the British defeated the Mughals at the Battle of Plassey in 1757. The Bengalis resented British occupation, and in May of 1857 a large-scale rebellion broke out, known as the Sepoy Mutiny. This prompted the British government to seize Bengal from the British East India Company and make it a colony.

During the colonial period, Bengal suffered a number of devastating famines, including the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 that claimed three million lives.

When the British partitioned India in 1947, Bengal was partitioned along religious lines. The primarily Hindu western part became part of India and the primarily Muslim eastern part became the East Bengal state of Pakistan. The new province was later renamed East Pakistan.

There was immediate tension between the state of East Pakistan and the rest of Pakistan. Even though East Pakistan had a larger population and more economic weight, Pakistan’s military and government were dominated by upper classes from the west. In 1952, the Bengali Language Movement pushed for Bengali to be recognized as the official language of Pakistan, since it was the native language of the demographically larger East Pakistan. The Pakistani government instead made Urdu the national language, sparking demonstrations and rallies all over East Pakistan. The movement reached its climax when police killed three student demonstrators on February 21, 1952.

The Muslim Awami League arose as the political voice of the Bengali people of East Pakistan. It pushed for autonomy in the 1960s, and in 1966 its leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was jailed. In 1970, a massive cyclone devastated the coast of East Pakistan, and the Bengali population was furious when the central government responded poorly. Tensions rose to a boiling point when, also in 1970, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was barred from taking the office of prime minister of Pakistan even though his Awami party had won a majority in Parliament. President Yahya Khan staged compromise talks with Mujib, but instead arrested him on March 25, 1971. He launched Operation Searchlight, a military assault on East Pakistan aimed at bringing the province back under control. The president’s methods were bloody and brutal, and targeted intellectuals and Hindus, many of whom fled to India. An estimated 300,000 to

3 million people died in the massacres, most of them ethnic Bengalis.

Exiled Awami leaders in India began the Bangladesh Liberation War, which lasted for nine months. In December of 1971, India was pulled into the war on the side of the Bengalis. India's involvement turned the tide, and on December 16, 1971, the Indian army achieved a decisive victory over the Pakistanis. The Country of Bangla was established the following day.

On January 11, 1972, the new country changed its name to Bangladesh, established itself as a parliamentary democracy under the leadership of now-president Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and signed a friendship treaty with India. Economic and political difficulties led Mujib to increase presidential powers until he was killed in a political coup on August 15, 1975.

After two further coups on November 3 and 6, Major General Ziaur Rahman assumed the presidency in April 1977. Four years later, he was killed in a failed coup attempt. On March 24, 1982, Lt. General Hossain Mohammed Ershad took power. He was forced to resign in December of 1990 after Western powers felt that, with the Communist threat neutralized, Bangladesh no longer needed a dictator.

In 1991, Bangladesh once again became a democracy, but democratic rule lasted only through three administrations. In May and June of 2006, millions of Bengali workers began striking, demonstrating and blocking highways in and around Dhaka, cutting off major connecting routes. The government responded with heavy repression; within the first week of the strike, three workers had been killed, 3,000 injured, and thousands more were thrown in prison.

In January 2007, the president declared a state of emergency and suspended elections in the face of corruption, political violence, and disorder. A caretaker government was appointed to facilitate the transfer of power; the nonpartisan caretaker government has been working to root out corruption within the government. Many high-ranking officials as well as lesser party members have been arrested on charges of corruption. The government's goal is to hold free and fair elections before the end of 2008.

Ethnic Groups

Bangladesh is fairly ethnically homogeneous. Ninety-eight percent of its population is Bengali, peoples descended from early immigrants from southern Asia and India.

The small remaining percentage of Bangladeshis are members of minority communities. Some are Urdu-speaking Biharis, from the Bihar region of India. The Biharis supported West Pakistan during the Bangladesh Liberation War, and became refugees when they were left behind by the Pakistanis after the liberation of Bangladesh. Also called stranded Pakistanis, most Biharis are denied citizenship, and many of them were born and still live in refugee camps across Bangladesh. Other Bangladeshis are members of tribal groups, such as the Chakma from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. There are around 33 such tribal groups in Bangladesh.

Religion

Bangladesh is a primarily Muslim nation, but it has been both Buddhist and Hindu at various points during its ancient history. Remnants of those dynasties can still be seen in certain areas of Bangladesh today.

Eighty-three percent of Bangladeshis are followers of Islam. The vast majority of Muslims in Bangladesh are Sunnis; the Bihari ethnic minority is predominantly Shi'a.

Around 16 percent of Bangladeshis are devout Hindus. The Western part of Bengal, now a part of India, is the home of most Bengali Hindus.

A very small percentage of Bangladeshis, mostly tribal groups, are Buddhist. Bangladeshi Buddhists are found mainly in the southeastern areas of Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Today, most Bangladeshi Buddhists adhere to the Theravada school, but during the Pala Dynasty, Mahayana Buddhism was the dominant form. The region of Bengal is also considered to be the birthplace of the Tantric, or mystic, school of Buddhism.

There is a small population of Christians in Bangladesh, and tribal animism is practiced in remote areas.

Culture

Food—Rice and fish are the foundations of the Bangladeshi diet. Fish, meats, and vegetables are cooked in a spicy curry sauce that may incorporate cumin, coriander, cloves, garlic, cinnamon, and other spices. Muslims do not eat pork; Hindus do not eat beef. *Ruti* is a circular flatbread commonly eaten in the mornings with leftover curry. *Dal* is a thin soup based on legumes which is poured over rice. A sweet, homemade yogurt is a common finish to a special meal. Bangladeshis do not traditionally use silverware; they eat with the

fingertips of their right hand. Silverware is usually only found in restaurants in cities. Bangladeshis usually drink water with their meals, and they always wash their right hand with water before filling their plates with food.

Social status—Clothing is an important indicator of social status; finer cloth and more elaborate embroidery is worn by well-to-do Bangladeshis. Gold jewelry is a status symbol for women. Concrete houses with tile roofs are also a symbol of wealth; color televisions, electricity, and telephones are other items associated with the wealthy. A man with high status will not be seen carrying anything; he will engage an assistant or laborer to carry things for him.

Marriage—Marriages are nearly always arranged and take place when the father decides the child is ready. Usually men are 25 or older, while women are 15 to 20 at the time of marriage. Although Muslim law allows polygamous households, a man with multiple wives is rare in Bangladesh. Parents generally seek a mate for their child who is equal in terms of economic status, educational background, and piousness. Divorce is a social stigma, and family pressure ordinarily prevents divorce in Bangladesh. Divorce is hardest on a woman, who must return to her father's household if her husband divorces her.

Children—Children are raised within the extended family and learn early on that individual desires are secondary to the needs of the entire family group. Children are taught to follow orders based on age; a younger child must follow the commands of an older child or adult. Boys are circumcised between ages five and 10.

Education—Most children begin school at five or six, and many drop out before finishing primary school to work in the house or in agriculture. The higher the socioeconomic status of a family, the more likely their children are to complete their primary educations. Higher education is greatly valued, and those who attend college or university are accorded high status. Bangladesh has a number of good universities, and competition for admission is usually intense. University life in Bangladesh is difficult. A four-year university degree may take five to eight years to complete due to frequent university closings. Students and faculty are highly polarized along political lines, and strikes, protests, and even occasional political violence are common as

student groups work for political agendas or fight for new members.

Etiquette—Male-female interaction is closely chaperoned, and men and women do not shake hands with each other. Individuals of the same sex, however, may stand or sit very close to one another. Visitors are always asked to sit, and if no chairs are available the host will find a stool or bamboo mat. It is improper for a visitor to sit on the floor or ground. The host will also offer a guest something to eat. In crowded public places, it is not cultural for Bangladeshis to form lines to wait for service. Instead, receiving service is dependent on pushing and maintaining one's place within the crowd. It is not considered impolite to stare openly.

Arts—Traditional Bengali music involves instruments such as the harmonium, tabla, and sitar. Traditional dance is characterized by a rural thematic element with specific head, foot, and hand movements. Dance is almost exclusively a female activity. Plays form an important part of village life, and traveling plays move throughout the countryside.

Dress

The traditional garment for men is the *lungi*, a cloth tube skirt that hangs down to the ankles, worn by nearly all Bangladeshi men. Men who consider themselves to be of high socioeconomic status wear pants and a shirt or loose white cotton pants and a long white shirt.

Many Bangladeshi women wear the traditional *sari*, which is a long unstitched piece of cloth ranging from four to nine meters in length. There are various traditional ways of draping the sari, but the most common style is for the sari to be wrapped around the waist and draped over the shoulder, baring the midriff. The sari is usually worn with a blouse which has short sleeves and a low neck and is usually cropped above the waistline. Sari blouses may be adorned with embellishments like beads and mirrors for festive occasions. Especially in urban areas, some women opt for the *salwar kameez*, loose trousers that are narrower at the ankles (*salwar*) and a long tunic with open side seams below the waistline (*kameez*). Occasionally young women wear Western styles of clothing.

Travel/Transportation

Most roads in Bangladesh are in poor condition and poorly maintained. The streets of Dhaka are extremely congested with taxis, bicycle rickshaws, cars, overloaded buses, and trucks. Fatal head-on collisions on inter-city roads are common; large

crowds quickly gather at the site of a vehicular accident and can become violent or unruly.

Driving is on the left side of the road in Bangladesh, which may be confusing to Americans. City roads are narrow, and streetlights are rare even in some urban areas. Driving at night is especially dangerous.

Since Bangladesh is a country of rivers, ferries and other boats are a popular means of public transportation. Ferries are typically overloaded and top-heavy, which makes them susceptible to capsizing, particularly during the monsoon season from May to October or during thunderstorms or sudden gusting winds. Bangladesh experiences dozens of fatalities every year from riverboat accidents.

Visitors should consider applying for an international driving permit (IDP) if they intend to drive in Bangladesh. An IDP is a document which allows a motorist to operate a vehicle in another nation when accompanied by a valid driver's license from their own country. An IDP is not a license in and of itself; it is a translation of an American or Canadian driver's license.

Travelers can apply for an IDP in the United States or Canada before traveling. The American Automobile Association (AAA) and the American Automobile Touring Alliance are the only organizations in the U.S. authorized by the State Department to issue IDPs. The Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) is authorized to issue IDPs to Canadian citizens. The cost of an IDP is under \$20, and the application will need to be accompanied by two passport-sized photos.

Illness/Injury

Medical facilities in Bangladesh are often inadequate even in tourist areas. Several hospitals in Dhaka, including Apollo Hospital and Square Hospital, have emergency rooms that are around the level of a community hospital. Hospitals in the provinces are generally less well equipped and supplied. There have been reports of counterfeit medications within Bangladesh, but medications from major hospitals or pharmacies are generally reliable. Ambulance service is limited, even within urban areas. Serious conditions or invasive procedures usually require evacuation to a better-equipped facility in Bangkok or Singapore.

Crime

Incidents of crime and violence are more common in lower-income residential or congested commercial areas, but are becoming more common in wealthy

residential areas as well. Urban crime in Bangladesh is comparable to crime in a metropolitan area of the U.S., and can be organized or opportunistic. Crime in Bangladesh commonly encompasses home or auto burglary, theft, pickpocketing, assault, fraud, carjacking, armed and unarmed robbery, and rape. Visitors should use common sense and avoid walking alone after dark, carrying large amounts of money, or wearing expensive jewelry, all of which create a target of opportunity.

Safety and Security

The country of Bangladesh is in a self-declared state of emergency. The security situation changes daily; Americans can check with the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka for current security information.

Demonstrations, political protests, and *hartals* (nationwide strikes) are banned during the state of emergency. Before the president declared a state of emergency, demonstrations and strikes were scheduled regularly. In August 2007 demonstrators staged protests in several cities around Bangladesh which became violent. Authorities had to impose a curfew to restore calm. Even a protest intended to be peaceful can turn violent at any time, and Americans should avoid areas of demonstration or groups of striking workers.

In 2005, a banned Islamic terrorist group, Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), claimed responsibility for nearly 500 small bomb blasts which killed two people and wounded others. Bangladesh executed six JMB leaders on March 29, 2007, for complicity in JMB attacks. JMB and other terrorist groups are small but may erupt in violence at any time.

U.S. and Canadian citizens are advised against traveling to remote areas within the three districts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts because of kidnappings of foreign nationals and other security issues. Any foreign national traveling within the Chittagong Hill Tracts is required to register with the local government.

Foreigners traveling in the Teknaf, Kutupalongm Ukhia, and Ramu areas of the Cox's Bazar district should exercise caution due to incidents of kidnapping, arms and narcotics smuggling, and clashes between Bangladeshis and Rohingya refugees.

Americans traveling or living in Bangladesh can keep up to date on the current security situation by monitoring the Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs website at <http://travel.state.gov>.

Entry/Exit Requirements

A valid passport, visa, and onward/return ticket are required to enter Bangladesh. Bangladesh no longer offers airport or landing visas; travelers should ensure that they have a valid visa before traveling to Bangladesh.

It is important to have the right type of visa for your stay in Bangladesh, since it is very difficult to change your immigration status once you are in the country. For more information on visas, contact the Embassy of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 3510 International Dr. NW, Washington, D.C. 20008 or visit the embassy website at www.bangladoot.org.

When leaving the country, there is a departure tax imposed on all foreigners except children under the age of 2. The tax varies based upon destination. The departure tax for foreigners bound for the United States is highest, at US \$43; this cost is built into the price of a departure ticket.

Departing foreign nationals may also be required to submit an income tax clearance certificate/income tax exemption certificate to airline officials. For more details, contact the Embassy of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Immunizations

There are no required immunizations for entry into Bangladesh in most cases. Yellow fever is not a risk in Bangladesh; however, travelers are required to present proof of yellow fever inoculation if entering Bangladesh from a country at risk for yellow fever.

Travelers to Bangladesh may want to consider all or some vaccines for diseases which are a high risk in Bangladesh. Malaria is a risk in many areas of Bangladesh, but it is not considered a risk in the city of Dhaka; speak to a travel health professional about taking a course of antimalarial drugs before traveling to Bangladesh. The antimalarial drug chloroquine is not effective against the strains of malaria present in Bangladesh, and should not be used as a preventative for that region. Purchase antimalarial drugs in the United States before traveling, as drugs found abroad may be less effective, or even counterfeit and possibly dangerous.

There is little data about the prevalence of Japanese encephalitis in Bangladesh, but it is presumed to be widespread, with a transmission season from July to December, as in India. Travelers spending time in rural areas or in the area of a known outbreak of Japanese encephalitis should consider being vaccinated.

Travelers to Bangladesh have a high risk of contracting hepatitis A, and should consider being vaccinated. The risk of contracting the disease increases with the amount of time spent in country and is highest for those who spend time in rural areas or eat in settings with poor sanitation.

Typhoid vaccination is recommended for travelers visiting smaller cities or villages in South Asia where exposure might occur. Polio vaccination is also recommended for any unvaccinated person traveling to South Asia. A full course of polio vaccination takes up to eight months, so be sure to plan ahead.

Special Circumstances

Land disputes are very common in Bangladesh due to the sheer density of the population, and are very difficult to resolve. Court cases can last years and still not end in a final determination of legal ownership. Usually, it is not a black-and-white case of one rightful owner and one land-grabber. Most often, it is a case of an owner who believes he has historical ownership of the property and an owner who has recently purchased the property. One has been swindled, both have deeds, and it is nearly impossible to determine who should have rightful ownership. American citizens who wish to purchase property in Bangladesh should be aware of the risks and purchase from a seller whose ownership of the property is beyond doubt. The American Embassy has on file over 20 cases of American citizens who claim to have been victimized in land disputes.

Electricity

Residential and commercial circuits in Bangladesh use 220V/50Hz, so travelers or foreign residents will need a power converter to use American appliances, which are designed to run on 120V/60Hz. You will most likely need a set of plug adapters as well, since receptacles in Bangladesh can be type A, but could also be types C, D, G, or K; American plugs are either types A or B.