

# Bangladesh Studies

## HUM 1201

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# Land and People of Bangladesh



# Identification

**Bangladesh** is a combination of the Bengali words, Bangla and Desh, meaning the country or land where the Bangla language is spoken.

The country formerly was known as East Pakistan.



# Location and Geography

- Bangladesh straddles the Bay of Bengal in south Asia.
- To the west and north it is bounded by India;
- To the southeast, it borders Myanmar.
- The capital city, Dhaka, is near the point where those river systems meet. The land is suitable for rice cultivation.
- In the north and the southeast the land is more hilly and dry, and tea is grown.
- The [Chittagong Hill Tracts](#) have extensive hardwood forests.
- The hilly areas of the northeast and southeast are occupied by much smaller tribal groups.
- In 1998 an accord was reached between the armed tribal group Shanti Bahini and the government.



# Demography

- Bangladesh is the most densely populated non island nation in the world.
- With approximately 180 million inhabitants living in an area of 55,813 square miles, there are about 2,240 persons per square mile.
- The majority of the population (98 percent) is Bengali, with 2 % belonging to tribal or other non-Bengali groups.
- Approximately 87 percent of the population is Muslim, 12 % is Hindu, and 1 % is Buddhist, Christian, or other. Annual population growth rate is at about 2 %.
- In the early 1980s the annual rate of population increase was above 2.5 %, but in the late 1990s it decreased to 1.9 %.
- The success of population control may be due to the demographic transition (decreasing birth and death rates), decreasing farm sizes, increasing urbanization, and national campaigns to control fertility (funded largely by other nations).



# Linguistic Affiliation

- The primary language is Bangla, called Bengali by most non natives, an Indo-European language spoken not just by Bangladeshis, but also by people who are culturally Bengali. This includes about 300 million people **from Bangladesh, West Bengal, and Bihar, as well as Bengali speakers in other Indian states.**
- The language dates from well before the birth of Christ. Bangla varies by region, and people may not understand the language of a person from another district.
- Language differences mirror social and religious divisions.
- Bangla is divided into two fairly distinct forms: *sadhu basha*, learned or formal language, and *cholit basha*, common language.
- Sadhu basha is the language of the literate tradition, formal essays and poetry, and the well educated. Cholit basha is the spoken vernacular, the language of the great majority of Bengalis.



# Symbolism

- The most important symbol of national identity is the Bangla language.
- The flag is a dark green rectangle with a red circle just left of center. Green symbolizes the trees and fields of the countryside; red represents the rising sun and the blood spilled in the 1971 war for liberation.
- The national anthem was taken from a poem by Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and links a love of the natural realm and land with the national identity.
- Islamic religious identity has become an increasingly important element in the national dialogue. Many Islamic holy days are nationally celebrated.



# History of Ethnological Origin: Emergence of the Nation

- The creation of the independent nation represents the triumph of ethnic and cultural politics.
- The region that is now Bangladesh has been part of a number of important political entities, including Indian empires, Buddhist kingdoms, the Moghul empire, the British empire and the Pakistani nation.
- Until 1947 Bangladesh was known as East Bengal province and had been part of Great Britain's India holding since the 1700s.
- The ethnic groups of Pakistan and the Indian Muslims who left India after partition were greatly different in language and way of life from the former East Bengalis: West Pakistan was more oriented toward the Middle East and Arab Islamic influence than was East Pakistan, which contained Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and British cultural influences.





# History of Ethnological Origin: Emergence of the Nation

- From the beginning of Pakistan's creation, the Bengali population in the east was more numerous than the Pakistani population in the western wing, yet West Pakistan became the seat of government and controlled nearly all national resources.
- West Pakistanis generally viewed Bengalis as inferior, weak, and less Islamic.
- From 1947 to 1970, West Pakistan reluctantly gave in to Bengali calls for power within the government, armed forces, and civil service, but increasing social unrest in the east led to a perception among government officials that the people of Bengal were unruly and untrustworthy "Hinduized" citizens.
- This was evident in Prime Minister Nazimuddin's attempt in 1952 to make Urdu, the predominant language of West Pakistan, the state language.



# History of Ethnological Origin: Emergence of the Nation

- Through the 1960s, the Bengali public welcomed a message that stressed the uniqueness of Bengali culture, and this formed the basis for calls for self-determination or autonomy.
- The Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was largely a Bengali party which called for autonomy for the east. Sheikh Mujib wanted to reconfigure Pakistan as a confederation of two equal partners.
- His party won one of 162 seats in the East Pakistan provincial assembly and 160 of the three hundred seats in the National Assembly. The Awami League would control national politics and have the ability to name the prime minister.
- West Pakistan began to move more troops into the east, and on 25 March 1971, the Pakistani army carried out a systematic execution of several hundred people, arrested Mujib, and transported him to the west. On 26 March the Awami League declared East Pakistan an independent nation, and by April the Bengalis were in open conflict with the Pakistani military.



# History of Ethnological Origin: Emergence of the Nation

- In a 10-month war of liberation, Bangladeshi units called Mukhti Bahini (freedom fighters), largely trained and armed by Indian forces, battled Pakistani troops throughout the country in guerrilla skirmishes.
- In early December 1971, the Indian army entered Bangladesh, engaged Pakistani military forces with the help of the Mukhti Bahini, and in a ten-day period subdued the Pakistani forces.
- On 16 December the Pakistani military surrendered.
- In January 1972, Mujib was released from confinement and became the prime minister of Bangladesh.
- Bangladesh was founded as a "democratic, secular, socialist state," but the new state represented the triumph of a Bangladeshi Muslim culture and language.
- The administration degenerated into corruption, and Mujib attempted to create a one-party state. On 15 August 1975 he was assassinated, along with much of his family, by army officers.



# History of Ethnological Origin: Emergence of the Nation

- General Ziaur Rahman became martial law administrator in December 1976 and president in 1977.
- On 30 May 1981, Zia was assassinated by army officers. His rule had been violent and repressive, but he had improved national economy.
- After a short-lived civilian government, a bloodless coup placed Army chief of staff General Mohammed Ershad in office as martial law administrator; he later became president.
- Civilian opposition increased, and the Awami League, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), and the religious fundamentalist party Jamaat-i-Islami united in a seven-year series of crippling strikes. In December 1990, Ershad was forced to resign.
- A caretaker government held national elections early in 1991. The BNP, headed by Khaleda Zia, widow of former President Zia, formed a government in an alliance with the Jamaat-i-Islami.
- Political factionalism intensified over the next five years, and on 23 June 1996, the Awami League took control of Parliament. At its head was Sheikh Hasina Wazed, the daughter of Sheikh Mujib.



# National Identity of Bengal

- Bangladeshi national identity is rooted in a Bengali culture that transcends international borders and includes the area of Bangladesh itself and West Bengal, India.
- Symbolically, Bangladeshi identity is centered on the 1971 struggle for independence from Pakistan. During that struggle, the key elements of Bangladeshi identity coalesced around the importance of the Bengali mother tongue and the distinctiveness of a culture or way of life connected to the floodplains of the region.
- Being Bangladeshi in some sense means feeling connected to the natural land–water systems of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and other rivers that drain into the Bay of Bengal.
- The great poets of the region, Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nurul Islam have enshrined the Bengali sense of the beauty and power of the region's nature.



# Ethnic Relations in Bangladesh

- The most significant social divide is between Muslims and Hindus. In 1947 millions of Hindus moved west into West Bengal, while millions of Muslims moved east into the newly created East Pakistan.
- Violence occurred as the columns of people moved past each other. Today, in most sections of the country, Hindus and Muslims live peacefully.
- Both groups view themselves as members of the same culture.
- From 1976 to 1998 there was sustained cultural conflict over the control of the southeastern Chittagong Hill Tracts. In 1998, a peace accord granted those groups a degree of autonomy and self-governance. These tribal groups still do not identify themselves with the national culture.



# Urbanism, Architecture, and the Use of Space

- Bangladesh is still primarily a rural culture, and the gram or village is an important spatial and cultural concept even for residents of the major cities. Most people identify with a natal or ancestral village in the countryside.
- Houses in villages are commonly rectangular, and are dried mud, bamboo, or red brick structures with thatch roofs.
- Houses have little interior decoration, and wall space is reserved for storage. Furniture is minimal, often consisting only of low stools.
- People sleep on thin bamboo mats. Houses have verandas in the front, and much of daily life takes place under their eaves rather than indoors. A separate smaller mud or bamboo structure serves as a kitchen ( ranna ghor ), but during the dry season many women construct hearths and cook in the household courtyard.



# Culture and Language





# Culture and Language of Bangladesh

- The Culture of Bangladesh is intertwined with the culture of the Bengal region.
- It has evolved over the centuries encompasses the cultural diversity of several social groups of Bangladesh.
- The Bengal Renaissance of the 18th early 19th centuries..noted Bengali writers, saints, authors, scientists, researchers, thinkers, music composers, painters, film-makers have played a significant role in the development of Bengali culture.



# Music, Dance, Drama

- The music dance styles of Bangladesh may be divided into three categories: classical, folk, modern.
- The classical style has been influenced by other prevalent classical forms of music dances of the Indian subcontinent.
- Several dancing styles in vogue in the northeastern part of the Indian subcontinent, like Manipuri Santhali dances, are practiced, but Bangladesh has developed its own distinct dancing styles.
- Bangladesh has a rich tradition of folk songs, with lyrics rooted in vibrant tradition spirituality, mysticism, devotion. Such folk songs revolve around other themes, including love. The most prevalent folk songs music traditions include Bhatiali, Baul, Marfati, Murshidi, Bhawaiya.
- Lyricists like Lalon Shah, Hason Raja, Kangal Harinath, Abbas Uddin, many unknown anonymous lyricists have enriched the tradition of folk songs of Bangladesh.



# Media and cinema

- The Bangladeshi press is diverse, outspoken and privately owned.
- Over 200 newspapers are published in the country.
- Bangladesh Betar is the state-run radio service.
- The British Broadcasting Corporation operates the popular BBC Bangla news and current affairs service.
- Bengali broadcasts from Voice of America are also very popular.
- Bangladesh Television (BTV) is the state-owned television network. There more than 40 privately owned television networks, including several news channels.
- Freedom of the media remains a major concern, due to government attempts at censorship and harassment of journalists.
- The cinema of Bangladesh dates back to 1898 when films began screening at the Crown Theatre in Dhaka.
- The first bioscope in the subcontinent was established in Dhaka that year. The Dhaka Nawab Family patronized the production of several silent films in the 1920s and 30s. In 1931, the East Bengal Cinematograph Society released the first full-length feature film in Bangladesh, titled the Last Kiss.
- The first feature film in East Pakistan, Mukh O Mukhosh, was released in 1956.



# Festivals and celebrations

- **Eid ul-Fitr:** As the most important religious festival for the majority of Muslims, the celebration of Eid ul-Fitr has become a part of the culture of Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh declares the holiday for three days on Eid-ul Fitr. But practically, all schools, colleges, and offices remain closed for a week. This is the happiest time of the year for most of the people in Bangladesh.
- **Eid ul-Azha:** Eid ul-Azha is the second most important religious festival. The celebration of this festival similar to Eid ul-Fitr in many ways. The only big difference is the Kurbanı or sacrifice of domestic animals. Numerous temporary marketplaces of different sizes called hat operate in the big cities for sale of Qurbani animals (usually cows, goats, and sheep). In the morning on the Eid day, immediately after the prayer, affluent people thank God for the animal and then sacrifice it.



# Festivals and celebrations

- Pohela Boishakh
- Language day
- Nobanno
- Durga Puja
- Weddings
- Sports



# Language of Bangladesh

- The national language and official language of Bangladesh is Bengali according to the third article of the Constitution of Bangladesh.
- With 98% of Bangladeshis fluent in Bengali (including dialects) as their first language, Bangladesh is the only monolingual country in South Asia.
- Bengali Language Implementation Act, 1987 made it mandatory to use Bengali in all government affairs except in the cases of foreign relations.
- According to 2011 census, Bengali is predominantly spoken by 98% of the country's population and it also serves as the national language of the nation.
- The indigenous people of northern and southeastern Bangladesh speak a variety of native languages.



# Indo-Aryan languages

- The lowlands of Bangladesh form the eastern half of the ethno-linguistic region of Bengal and the Bengali language is spoken by the majority of the country's inhabitants.
- Bengali branch:
- Bengali proper: spoken all over the country.
- Chittagonian: Spoken in the South–East region of Chittagong, it is often considered to be a dialect of Bengali, but both languages are largely mutually unintelligible.
- Sylheti: Spoken by Sylhetis in the North–East region of Sylhet, generally considered as a dialect of Bengali but is sometimes viewed as a separate language
- Non-Bengali Languages:
- Chakma: Spoken in the Chittagong Hill Tract Region. Unrelated to the Tibeto-Burman languages commonly found in the region.
- Hajong: Originally a Tibeto-Burman language that has shifted over time to an Indic language.
- Marma: Originated from Tibeto-Burman language and mother tongue of Marma ethnic people.
- Rohingya: Spoken in Arakan State, Burma and by refugees from that region, currently living in Bangladesh's Chittagong Division. It is also often called Arkani by native speakers.
- Bihari: Spoken primarily by the refugees from Bihar State, India.



# Tibeto-Burman languages

- The mountainous areas along the northern and eastern edges of the Indian Subcontinent are inhabited primarily by speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages. Indigenous Tibeto-Burman-speaking communities are found through the northern, eastern, and especially the southeastern parts of Bangladesh.
- Chin languages: Aho, Khumi
- Koch
- Garo: also a major language of Meghalaya State, India
- Meitei Manipuri: also a major language of Manipur State, India
- Mizo: also a major language of Mizoram State, India
- Rakhine/Marma: also a major language of Arakan State, Burma
- Tripuri languages: a major language group of Tripura State, India





# Other Languages

- **English:** English is used marginally in the judiciary.[6] Before the commencement of the Bengali Language Implementation Act, 1987, English had a considerable presence in official affairs, but since 1987 the usage of English has waned significantly in government. Due to the British colonization of the country, English is still a widely spoken and commonly understood language in Bangladesh.
- **Arabic:** Arabic (عربي) was an official language ever since the territory of the modern state People's Republic of Bangladesh became a part of the Bengal Sultanate. However some disagree and believe the presence of Arabic came before during the Delhi Sultanate.
- **Urdu:** Urdu (اردو) was an official language in post-partition 1947 to 1971. It is still spoken by some refugees from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (most are now Bangla speakers), and in Old Dhaka. They are also living in other parts of Bangladesh.

