

 AFCLC

U.S. FORCES INDOPACIFIC
CULTURE GUIDE

Papua New Guinea



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.



The guide consists of two parts:

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

Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Papua New Guinean 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.



For further information, contact the AFCLC Region Team at AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil or visit the AFCLC website at <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/>.

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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 because it represents the premium 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 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, and 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 way 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 group 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 complex 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.

12 Domains of Culture



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

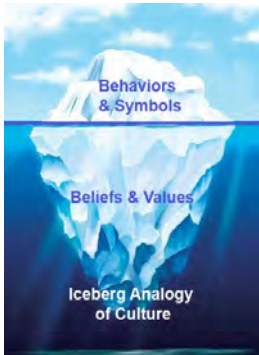
An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true—regardless 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 through Oceania, 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.

Oceania comprises some 20 sovereign nations, states, and territories that span a large portion of the Western Pacific Ocean, from Australia, Papua New Guinea (PNG), and Palau in the West to French Polynesia in the East. The region is so diverse that experts typically divide it into four sub-regions: Australia and New Zealand, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. While the people in each of the sub-regions share certain traits, all belong to the greater Oceania region. Furthermore, Oceania is characterized by distinct cultures that typically have more in



common with each other than with cultures in other parts of the world. While Hawaii is notably a critical part of Polynesia, since it is a US state, it is not included in this guide.

Archaeological evidence suggests early humans first occupied Australia as early as 65,000 years

ago, and parts of PNG and the Solomon Islands some 45,000 years ago. In contrast, humans only reached some islands in Polynesia as recently as 1000 BC. Historians tend to agree that early waves of migrants from Southeast Asia first settled in Australia and Melanesia, and later waves occupied Micronesia and Polynesia.

Many early inhabitants subsisted as seafaring hunter gatherers, typically consuming marine life and island vegetation. These early seafarers domesticated plants and animals, transporting

them between islands. As agricultural techniques became more advanced, residents cleared forests and transformed their island environments for cultivation and raising livestock.

Portugal's Ferdinand Magellan was the first notable European explorer to reach Oceania, when in 1521 he briefly landed on the Mariana Islands. Thereafter, English, French, German, and Spanish explorers sought to trade with and colonize the region. By the late 18th century, traders, whalers, and missionaries had settled across Oceania, bringing disease and weapons from Europe, resulting in the death of many islanders. Meanwhile, European powers and the US began to incorporate much of the region as official territories and colonies – political and social legacies that continue to influence the region today.

During the early 20th century, Japan sought to grow its influence in the Pacific Islands. When Germany withdrew its navy from Micronesia during World War I,



Japan occupied the former German colonies in 1914, incorporating Micronesia into its expanding empire as an agricultural settler colony. In the 1930s, Japan built military fortifications in Micronesia before moving into Melanesia and Southeast Asia during the Pacific War. By 1942, the Japanese military had occupied large swathes of Oceania, which became the site of some of the war's most significant and violent battles. Over 215,000 Japanese, Australians, Americans, and indigenous islanders died in Oceania between 1942-45.

Over the subsequent decades, calls for independence grew across Oceania. While Australia and New Zealand had gained independence from Britain in the early 20th century, the island nations won independence much later. Samoa was the first, gaining independence from New Zealand in 1962. Several other countries achieved independence afterwards, with Palau the most recent in 1994. Others remain US or French territories. Apart from Australia and New Zealand, which joined in 1945,

most of Oceania joined the United Nations between the late 1970s and 1990s, after decolonization processes empowered them with the territorial sovereignty required for membership.

During the mid-late 20th century, many isolated islands in the region became sites for British, French, and US atomic testing and other military operations. The nuclear and missile tests have caused permanent loss of access to traditional homelands,



including the forced removal of some inhabitants, and exposure to radiation causing significant health issues.

In the early 21st century, indigenous groups across Oceania began campaigns to

assert their rights and culture, largely led by Aboriginal Australians and Maori in New Zealand. In recent years, many of the smaller island nations have increased attention to climate change, as rising ocean levels will affect inhabitants of Oceania to a greater extent than other regions. Several nations have joined organizations to combat climate change and promote conservation, often collaborating to amplify the small island states' pro-environment message in global fora.

Nevertheless, the region is not always united. In early 2021, Micronesian nations withdrew from the Pacific Islands Forum, an international organization that focuses on regional issues, due to a dispute over their representation in the group. Despite the recent political clash, as of 2025, Oceania remains largely stable and focused on combating the consequences of climate change, notably the rising sea levels, bleached coral reefs, and localized disasters like increasingly powerful storms and wildfires.

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. European and Japanese colonial rule drastically changed society in Oceania. Further, the subjugation

of the indigenous population, import of South and East Asian workers, and arrival of European and Japanese immigrants during the 19th-20th centuries permanently altered the region's ethnic and racial makeup, which today varies by location.

While residents of Australia and New Zealand are primarily of European ancestry, those of other nations identify mostly as indigenous to specific islands. Some claim broader identities, as Melanesians, Micronesians, or Polynesians. Some nations such as Fiji and Palau also have significant immigrant populations.

Although all nations in Oceania are nominally democratic, their political structures are varied and relations with former colonial powers continue to influence present-day society. Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu are sovereign nations. Of these countries, Australia, New Zealand, PNG, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu are constitutional monarchies with parliamentary systems. King Charles III of the United Kingdom is head-of-state, represented by a Governor-General, and an elected Prime Minister (PM) serves as head-of-government.

Tonga is also a constitutional monarchy led by a hereditary king, who is head-of-state and commander-in-chief. An elected parliament selects a PM, who is ceremoniously appointed by the King. Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, and Vanuatu are parliamentary republics. In Fiji, Samoa, and Vanuatu, a PM serves as head-of-government and a President head-of-state, known as **O le Ao Mamalu o le Malo** (head-of-state) in Samoa. In Kiribati and Nauru, the elected President is head-of-state and government.

The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and Palau are Freely Associated States (FAS) under three distinct Compacts of Free Association (COFA) agreements with the US. Each country's COFA outlines its unique terms with the US, while recognizing its sovereignty



and voluntary participation in the COFA, including an independent foreign policy. Under the COFA, among other terms, the US provides visa-free access to the US and payment for access to land for military installations in FAS territories.

Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and American Samoa are US territories, though their relations with the US government vary. Guam is an unincorporated organized territory, the CNMI an unincorporated territory and commonwealth, and American Samoa an unincorporated unorganized territory. While residents of Guam

and the CNMI are US citizens, those of American Samoa are considered US nationals, who may reside in the US and apply for citizenship.



Likewise, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna are French territories, whose

relations with the French government vary. French Polynesia—comprising the Gambier Islands, Marquesas Islands, Society Islands, Tuamotu Archipelago, and Tubuai Islands—is a semi-autonomous overseas country. New Caledonia and Wallis and Futuna are territories known as overseas collectivities.

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.

Many of Oceania's early inhabitants led rich spiritual lives. While little is known of early religions, many were likely polytheistic. Early inhabitants recognized gods and spirits that constructed the universe and influenced everyday life, believing in connections between the natural and spiritual worlds. Accordingly, many Oceanic people venerated ancestral spirits, which influenced outcomes in agriculture, war, pregnancy, and other events.

When European explorers reached Oceania in the 16th century, they introduced Christianity for the first time. In the 17th century, Spanish Roman Catholic missionaries operating from their base in the Philippines began gaining converts across the northern part of the region. In the late 18th century, British Protestant missionaries began proselytizing in eastern Polynesia. By the 19th century, various branches of Christianity had become well established in Oceania, as Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, and Seventh-day Adventists all established missions in the region.



Residents of several nations in Oceania rejected the colonial introduction of Christianity. Some spiritual leaders sought to isolate their communities from Christianity, while others combined local religious traditions with those of Christianity to form syncretic religions. However, in the 1970s, Christian movements opposed to traditional and syncretic religions flourished in the region. Many of these movements were Pentecostal.

Nevertheless, after centuries of colonization and missionary work, today, most people in Oceania are Christian. Over 90% of inhabitants in Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia identify as Christian. Of the small island nations, Fiji is the most religiously diverse. Although most Fijians identify as Christian, over 30% are Hindu or Muslim, primarily due to a large immigrant population. Notably, New Zealand is the only nation in Oceania in which Christianity is not the majority religion, as nearly half of New Zealanders identified with no religion.

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 fundamental elements of Oceanic societies. Regional inhabitants tend to maintain strong

connections with family members, supporting them emotionally and financially, while providing physical care for elderly or ailing kin if needed. Although residence patterns differ across the region, multiple generations often reside together in one



household or live in close proximity. In some regions, female-headed households are common.

Most Oceania residents live in urban areas, notably 100% of Nauruans and over 92% of residents of Guam and

the CNMI. However, some 74% or more of residents of PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu live in rural areas. As such, housing types vary significantly within and between nations. In much of the region, residents tend to live on one or a handful of principal islands, with the rest scarcely populated or uninhabited. Urbanization has changed life in many areas. As both men and women take advantage of the enhanced educational and employment opportunities available in urban areas, family structures have become more diverse.

Due to Oceania's diversity, courtship and marriage traditions vary significantly by group and location. While close family ties mean relatives have some influence over children's choice of spouses, men and women increasingly choose their own partners. Some couples marry in civil, religious, or traditional ceremonies, while others cohabit but remain unwed.

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.

Some cultures in Oceania recognize a broad range of genders besides male and female. Although the cultures of Oceania tend to be patriarchal (men hold most power and authority) and privilege the male's role as provider and leader, some societies are traditionally matrilineal (inheritance, property, and the family name pass from mother to daughter), where mothers determine

a man's rank and status. In some places, primarily in Micronesia and Polynesia, society is organized into a hierarchical system based on heredity, in which rank and status are determined by sex-defined lineages. Conversely, society is more egalitarian (the principle that all people are equal) in Melanesia, where strong, persuasive men often achieve rather than inherit power.

Despite most countries' progressive gender equality laws and policies, women face continued challenges to their participation in the workforce. In much of the region, women still assume the traditional roles of wives and mothers, often having to balance both domestic duties and employment. Workforce participation rates vary by country. As of 2022, nearly as many women as men were employed in PNG and the Solomon Islands, while the ratio is closer to 50% in Fiji and Samoa.

As of late-2024, women held 46% nearly half of parliamentary seats in New Zealand, over 45% in Australia, and 9% in Fiji. Women occupied 9% or fewer of parliamentary seats in most other countries in the region. Only New Zealand has had multiple women heads-of-state. Women have been historically more involved in traditional than national political affairs.

Fertility rates have fallen significantly in recent decades, with Australia, Wallis and Futuna, and Palau averaging less than two children per woman. Women in Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Guam typically have an average of three children, though the rates have declined by about half since 1960. Abortion laws vary by country. While Australia's laws are the least restrictive, Palau and Tonga prohibit abortion with no explicit legal exception.

Australia and New Zealand are the only countries in the region that have legalized same-sex marriage. Although same-sex relations are permitted in some cultures, the governments of Kiribati, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Tuvalu criminalize homosexuality.



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.

Oceania's linguistic diversity is unique, as the region contains more than 1,000 languages – over 20%

of the world's total. PNG alone is home to over 840 languages, more than any other country in the world. Despite this linguistic variety, some linguistic groups are spoken by only a few dozen people. Consequently, some regional languages have become or soon will be extinct, as the children of native speakers opt to learn more widely spoken languages and dialects. English is commonly spoken in much of Oceania and is at least one of the official languages (in addition to indigenous languages) in most states that are not French territories.

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) or 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.

While education has improved across the region in recent years, quality and attainment vary. Social instability, poverty, economic inequality, natural disasters, and emigration negatively impact the delivery and quality of education. Generally, children from poor and rural backgrounds are less likely to attend school and more likely to receive a lower-quality education. While literacy rates in much of Oceania are above 90%, they are much lower in PNG and the Solomon Islands.

Public investment in education varies widely by location and does not always correlate to quality educational systems. In recent years, the Solomon Islands government has spent some 10-13% of GDP on education, though about one in four women remain illiterate. Meanwhile, Vanuatu spends below 5% of GDP on education and has a literacy rate of nearly 89%. Enrollment rates also vary widely. While over 96% of students of the appropriate age in Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, and New Zealand are enrolled in primary education, less than 75% are enrolled in PNG, RMI, and the Solomon Islands.

Many countries have 2-year community colleges but lack 4-year post-secondary institutions. Australia, New Zealand, and PNG have several colleges and universities, as do Guam and the CNMI. The University of the South Pacific was founded in 1968 with its main campus in Fiji and now has campuses in several other countries. Still, many residents travel to Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, or institutions outside the region to pursue post-secondary degrees.



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. While this concept of time remains true for some countries in Oceania, in others, establishing and maintaining relationships takes precedence over meeting deadlines, punctuality, or efficiently accomplishing tasks. The workday tends to run on a similar schedule as in the US, though some businesses keep more informal hours or close for midday breaks, extending their hours into the evening. Social events often start at flexible times, after enough guests arrive.

While concepts of personal space vary by country, keeping an arm's length is the norm. Handshakes are usually the most common form of greeting, though nodding to acquaintances or

kissing close friends and family on the cheek are typical in many places. Conversational touching tends to be minimal except among close friends or family. While direct eye contact is



common in places such as Fiji and PNG, intermittent or indirect eye contact is the norm in Kiribati, Samoa, and among certain groups like Aboriginal Australians.

The rhythm of daily life typically changes during national holidays, many of which reflect Christian traditions and historical events. As most countries in Oceania were colonies, many people celebrate national independence days with fanfare.

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. Much of Oceania's art, architecture, dance, music, poetry, and sports reflect the region's Pacific location, colonial history, and modern global trends. Although dress varies by location and group, many people in Oceania follow recent US or European fashion trends and wear traditional attire only for holidays, special occasions, or ceremonies.

Music and dance vary greatly by country. Global rock and pop music, along with local variants that feature folk and country genres, are common across Oceania. Traditional music and dance in Micronesia and Polynesia tend to be connected with storytelling and poetry, while Melanesian dances usually emphasize movement, rituals, and the supernatural world. In Australia, indigenous dances are typically closely connected with music and song.

The most popular sport across the region is rugby, particularly in Australia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. National teams compete in rugby matches internationally and across Oceania. Some locals have relocated to play for international teams, becoming a mainstay of the sport. Some 20% of players in the 2011 Rugby World Cup identified as Pacific Islanders. In Micronesia, sports

introduced by Japan and the US are most popular: baseball in the FSM and Palau, and basketball in RMI. Soccer, known in many areas as football, is also widely played across Oceania. Other popular sports include cricket, swimming, and field athletics.



Traditional handicrafts such as woodcarving, leatherwork, and weaving are prevalent in many parts of Oceania. While literature was primarily an oral tradition in much of the region, popular novelists and poets have recently explored their unique history and cultural heritage.

Australia's Patrick White won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973 for his psychological narrative work.

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.

While cuisine varies across the region based on local products and tastes, residents tend to rely on many of the same staple ingredients, notably seafood, starches like taro, cassava, and yams, and tropical fruits. Many dishes are cooked in coconut milk, and dried coconut is a popular ingredient. Pit-roasted pig, fish, and vegetables are common cuisine for ceremonies and celebrations in much of the region. The consumption of high-calorie, processed foods and Western-style fast food has become increasingly common in recent decades.

Health in Oceania has improved in recent decades as evidenced by decreased infant mortality rates and longer life expectancies. While Australia and New Zealand have more physicians per person than the US, all other countries have far fewer. Accordingly, many residents seek healthcare outside their home nation if immigration policies, personal finances, or government programs allow for treatment abroad. Inhabitants of isolated islands and rural areas face challenges to healthcare access.

Noncommunicable diseases, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and chronic respiratory disease, account for most of the deaths in Oceania, though communicable diseases account for over 25% of deaths in Kiribati and the Solomon Islands and over 35% in PNG. Indigenous and low-income inhabitants often face more health challenges than their compatriots. Obesity is a significant problem – of the world’s 10 countries with the highest rates of obesity, 8 are in Oceania. The availability of imported processed and preserved foods are largely responsible for Oceania’s high levels of obesity.

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. It details how countries allocate their resources by sector, trade



with other countries, give or receive aid, and pay for goods and services within their borders.

Prior to colonization, most regional inhabitants subsisted on fishing, farming, and localized trade. In the colonial era, foreign

governments and companies extracted natural resources such as minerals, agricultural products, oil, and fish. Today, tourism is the largest sector in much of Oceania. While Australia and New Zealand have advanced economies and financial markets, most other nations rely on foreign aid. Many inhabitants are also reliant on remittances from relatives living abroad. Economic dependence on foreign governments and organizations has caused many governments in the region to pursue rapid expansion of their tourism and extractive industry sectors.

Australia is by far the largest economy in Oceania, with GDP over \$1.6 trillion in 2024. GDP per capita in Australia and New Zealand is more than double that of other countries in Oceania. Fiji, Palau, Nauru, and the US and French territories tend to have relatively high living standards, with GDP per capita generally above \$10,000. On the other hand, GDP per capita in Kiribati,

and the Solomon Islands is below \$3,000, where many residents live below the poverty line.

From 2020-21, Oceania confronted the collapse of the tourism industry and decreased remittances, largely due to COVID-19 pandemic. Assuming the pandemic continues to recede and trade and tourism rebound, experts suggest GDP growth will average 4% in 2023 before stabilizing at 3% in 2024-2027.

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Roads form the primary infrastructure in Oceania, though quality varies by country and tends to deteriorate in rural areas. Ports and piers are vital for local transportation and trade. Though air infrastructure is substandard in many places, airports are essential for tourism and reducing many islands' isolation.



Despite some investment in solar energy on outer rural islands, Oceania is largely dependent on fossil fuels. Apart from Australia, much of the region has limited energy resources and must import oil and gas to meet growing energy needs. Some countries, notably New Zealand, generate a large share of energy from hydropower.

New Zealand ranks highest in Oceania in a 2024 worldwide press freedom ranking. Observers generally consider media to be free in much of the region, though journalists are sometimes victims of government intimidation, threats of censorship, and eroding independence. Telecommunications infrastructure varies. As of 2022, Palau had the highest rate of mobile phone users at over 133 subscriptions per 100 people, compared to less than 40 in the FSM and RMI. Internet use ranges from about 27% in PNG to nearly 95% in Australia.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Oceanic society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in PNG.

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 *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 *Political and Social Relations*). Siddhartha Gautama established Buddhism at the end of the Vedic Period and likely shared his teachings in Bengal (see *Religion and Spirituality*). At that time, Bengal was divided among several small Vedic kingdoms.

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 *Religion and Spirituality*). Although the Mauryan Empire gradually declined then collapsed after Ashoka's death, Buddhism continued to thrive in Bengal.

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.

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 *Learning and Knowledge*). After slowly disintegrating for several decades, the empire fell in the late 12th century to the Sena dynasty.

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.



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 *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 *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.

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.

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.

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 *Language and Communication*). Nevertheless, this temporary partition foreshadowed what would become a permanent split in 1947.

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.

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 *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 *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.

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 *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 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 *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 *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 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 *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 *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 *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 for a fourth term in 2019. Elections in 2023 were won by Mohammad Shahabuddin Chuppi for President. Interim Prime Minister Muhammad Yunus was selected in 2024,

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.

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name

People's Republic of
Bangladesh
গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ
(Bengali)

***Gôno*projatôntri
Bangladesh**

Political Borders

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

Capital

Dhaka

Demographics

Bangladesh has a population of about 168.7 million, making it the world's 8th most populous country in 2024. Occupying a land area smaller than the US state of Iowa, Bangladesh is also one of the world's most densely populated countries. With a current growth rate of 0.89% 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 59% of Bangladeshis live in rural areas. The largest urban areas include the capital city of



Dhaka, followed by Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, and Sylhet.

Flag

The Bangladeshi flag features a green field with a large red disk positioned slightly to the left of the

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 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.

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 in 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. More recently, Cyclone Yaas killed 2 and displaced some 1.3 million in 2021.

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, Mohammad Shahabuddin Chuppu took office in April 2023.



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 PM, Sheikh Hasina Wazed (known as Sheikh Hasina), began her fifth term as PM in early-2024. Sheikh Hasina resigned her position August 5, 2024 amid widespread student protests. Muhammad Yunus is now the interim Prime Minister as of August 24, 2024.

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.

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 *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 *History and Myth*), often initiated by the 2 main opposing parties – the Awami



League (AL), led by former PM Sheikh Hasina, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Khaleda Zia ur-Rahman (known as Khaleda Zia) (see *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 *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 *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.

Tensions between BNP and AL escalated again in 2018, when BNP’s Khaleda Zia was convicted of embezzlement (see *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 *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 *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 173,650 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.

Army: a well-equipped, well-trained force of 132,150 active-duty troops, which divide into 10 command divisions, 2 special forces battalions, 39 maneuver brigades and regiments (including armored and light), 2 combat support brigades, an aviation regiment, and an air defense brigade.



Navy: consists of 27,500 active-duty personnel equipped with 2 tactical submarines, 5 principal surface combatants and frigates, 48 patrol and coastal combatants, 5 mine warfare/mine countermeasures vessels, 21 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. In 2023, the first submarine base was operationalized.

Air Force: consists of 14,000 active-duty personnel divided into 1 fighter squadron, 3 fighter/ground attack squadrons, 1 ground attack squadron, 3 transport squadrons, training and operational conversion unit squadrons, and 3 transport helicopter squadrons. The Air Force has 71 combat capable aircraft, 45 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



Air Chief
Marshal



Air
Marshal



Air Vice-
Marshal



Air
Commodore



Group
Captain



Wing
Commander



Squadron
Leader



Flight
Lieutenant



Flying
Officer



Pilot
Officer



Officer
Cadet



Master
Warrant
Officer



Senior
Warrant
Officer



Warrant
Officer



Sergeant



Corporal



Leading
Aircraftman



Aircraftman 1

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 939 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 *History*

and Myth). Some observers assert that Bangladesh's current economic and political instability (see *Economics and Resources* and "Political Climate" above) leaves Bangladeshis increasingly vulnerable to the influence of Islamist extremists.

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.



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 *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 *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.

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 *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.

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 \$560 million in 2020 to

develop Bangladeshi health and education infrastructure, ensure food security, and improve disaster preparedness and response, among numerous other initiatives.

Ethnic Groups

Some 99% of Bangladesh's population are Bengali, generally considered an ethno-linguistic group (see *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% 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 *Language and Communication*).

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 *Religion and Spirituality*), groups in other areas are predominantly Hindu or Christian (see *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 *History and Myth*). Today, they live primarily in and around Dhaka and number some 300,000.

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 *Sex and Gender*) and childhood marriage (see *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.

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 2023 estimates, they comprise around 3-4% 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 *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.

After Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence with Pakistan (see *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 *Learning and Knowledge*).

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

According to the 2022 census, some 91% of Bangladesh's population are Muslim and about 8% 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 *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 one 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.

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
- **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.

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 *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.

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 *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 *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 *Political and Social Relations*), and relate tales of Hindu mythology.

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 *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.

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 *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 *History and Myth*). Despite the spread of Islam beginning in the 13th century, Hinduism retained its dominance for centuries, even though the Muslim Mughal period (see *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 *History and Myth*). Yet even at independence in 1971, they still comprised some 23% of the population.



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.

The Spread of Buddhism in Bangladesh

In the 3rd century BC, Ashoka, leader of the Mauryan Empire (see *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 *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.

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, 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 8% of Bangladeshis, or 13.7 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 *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.

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 59% 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 *Political and Social Relations*).



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 2022, Dhaka was ranked as one 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 25% 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. The 2022 Census found that 1.8 million people live in slums throughout the country. Nearly 0.88 million of those are located in 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 **pardah**, whereby women live secluded in their homes and cover their heads when outdoors (see *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 *Sex and Gender*).



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 enforced. Further, sexual and physical abuse, abandonment, and trafficking of children remain significant problems (see *Sex and Gender*). Finally, early marriage is widespread due to legal loopholes, with some 51% of girls married before the age of 18 as of 2019.

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.

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 *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 2006-23, the divorce rate nearly doubled to 1.1 per 1,000 people, though this rate is still significantly lower than the US rate (2.5). 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.

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 *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 *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

Historically, the social system in Papua New Guinea (PNG) was mostly patriarchal, meaning men held most power and authority, and patrilineal (inheritance, property, and the family name passes from father to son). However, some clans (extended family) in rural PNG are matriarchal and matrilineal. Today, men hold most positions of power in government and business. As of 2021, PNG ranks 160 of 161 countries in the United Nations (UN) Gender Inequality Index.



Gender Roles and Work

Domestic Work: In most clans, men are the heads-of-household and primary decisionmakers in family affairs. Women are often responsible for domestic work, such as cleaning, cooking, childcare, gardening, and gathering food, among other responsibilities. In matrilineal societies, primarily in Milne Bay Province and on some small islands, women are responsible for decisions about family and land. In urban areas, men and women may both work outside the home and more often make decisions together.

Labor Force: As of 2023, about 51% of women worked outside the home, slightly lower than neighboring Indonesia (53%) and lower than the US (57%). Women are relatively underrepresented in PNG's economy. As of 2022, women held about 18% of senior and middle management positions lower than Indonesia (35%) and the US (32%). High rates of gender-based violence contribute to the gender employment gap, as women often avoid or miss work due to safety and related issues.

Gender and the Law

Although PNG's constitution (see *Political and Social Relations*) guarantees gender equality, laws fail to ensure equal pay and protect women against sexual harassment. While PNG has laws against domestic violence and rape, systemic violence against women creates a generally unsafe environment.

PNG does not provide paid parental leave for all workers. In the public sector, women are guaranteed 6 weeks of paid maternity leave before and 6 weeks after giving birth. However, the private sector does not guarantee maternity leave, and it is often unpaid. Men are not guaranteed parental leave.

Gender and Politics

Papua New Guinean women first gained the right to vote in 1964. PNG has one of the world's worst female representation records (see *Political and Social Relations*), as women are continuously underrepresented in elections. Only nine women have been elected since independence in 1975 (see *History and Myth*). To



correct this lack of representation, Prime Minister Peter O'Neill (see *History and Myth*) initially supported a proposal to reserve 22 parliamentary seats for women as part of the 2011 Equality and Participation Act. However, the Act never became law. As of 2024, women comprise less than 3% of seats in Parliament, lower than Indonesia (22%), the US (28%), and Australia (38%).

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

PNG is one of the world's most dangerous places for women. According to a UN study in 2014, over 90% of women and girls experience violence on public transportation. About 62% of men report having raped a woman or girl at least once. Nearly two-thirds of women experience GBV, and on average, a woman is beaten every 30 seconds. Although some laws have expanded the definitions of abuse, assault, and family violence, GBV remains common. In 2021, a criminal code amendment added the criminalization of sorcery accusations (see *Religion and Spirituality*). However, 12 women were accused of sorcery in Enga Province that year. The women were sexually assaulted and burned, resulting in serious injuries and four deaths.

The law stipulates sentences of 10-15 years for rape, with longer sentences for aggravated rape cases. However, PNG fails to provide comprehensive legal protections for survivors and does not prosecute most perpetrators. In 2020, only 250 people were

prosecuted and 100 convicted out of some 15,444 reported domestic violence cases. In large part due to lack of funding, resources for GBV survivors, such as medical treatment, legal assistance, shelters, and counselling services, are limited.

Primarily due to cultural sensitivities and social stigma, child abuse and incest are underreported. In a 2014 report, over half of the 3,000 GBV survivors surveyed were children and one in six were under 5-years-old. The age of sexual consent is 16 for unmarried girls and 14 for boys, increasing the risk of sexual abuse and violence among children.

Sex and Procreation

PNG's fertility rate declined from 6 births per woman in 1960 to 3.7 in 2024, higher than Indonesia (1.9) and the US (1.7), and Australia (1.5).

As of 2014, sexual and reproductive health policies promote family planning options with free and legal contraceptives available across health facilities. However, the prevalence of contraceptive use is only 37% as of 2018, significantly lower than the East Asia and Pacific average (76%). PNG is one of the most unsafe places for pregnancy, with high maternal death rates. Although the maternal mortality ratio declined from 312 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000 to 171 in 2023, it remains much higher than the US (19) and Australia (3). Abortion is illegal except in cases to save a woman's life.



Homosexuality in PNG

PNG maintains a law from the Australian colonial era (see *History and Myth*) that criminalizes sexual relations between men, with punishment of up to 14 years imprisonment. Homosexual individuals are often targeted for harassment, extortion, assault, and murder. Consequently, underreporting of harassment and crime is common, primarily due to social stigma.

At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for PNG. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.

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 42 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 seventh most widely spoken language.

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 *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 *History and Myth*). Today, Bangladesh recognizes the martyrs of the Bangla Language Movement with an annual holiday (see *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.

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 *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.

Other Languages

Bangladesh's non-Bengali minority groups (see *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. 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 *Political and Social Relations*)



speak Rohingya, while many of its 300,000 **Biharis** (see *Political and Social Relations*) speak Urdu, also called Bihari in Bangladesh. While Bangladeshis have the legal right to education in their mother tongue (see *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.

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 *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.

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.

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.



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 *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/ 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	হাঁ / 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: 77%
- Male: 77%
- Female: 77% (2022 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.

Under Muslim rule beginning in the 13th century (see *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 *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 *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 *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 *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 *History and Myth*), its new government made significant changes to the public education system. Besides adopting Urdu as the language of instruction (see *History and Myth* and *Language and Communication*), it aligned the curricula of West and East Pakistan (see *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.

Modern Education System

Following Bangladesh's 1971 independence (see *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.

Despite these gains, challenges remain. Poverty forces many children to leave school to pursue work (see *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



65% of the students enrolling in grade 1 reaching grade 10. Experts estimate that some 5 million children aged 6-13 remained unenrolled in 2023. Further, government spending on education as a share of GDP is around 1.8%, one of South Asia's lowest rates and lower than most other countries at similar levels of development.

Bangladesh's minority groups exhibit significant educational disparities from the majority population (see *Political and Social Relations*). For example, **Biharis** (see *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 *Political and Social Relations*). Further, instruction



generally is lacking, even for Bangla-speaking children. For example, according to a 2019 study, only 21% of Bangladeshi third-graders can read and understand Bangla fluently. Finally, Rohingya children residing in refugee camps (see *Political and Social Relations*) have access to limited educational offerings.

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 80% 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. As of 2021, enrollment in pre-primary stood at 36%.

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 93% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in

primary school in 2023, 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 72% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in junior secondary in 2023, though some 32% of students typically dropout at some point. At the senior level, just 57% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in 2023.

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 in 2023 is around 7%. 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 160 public and private universities and thousands of colleges enroll more than 4.7



million students. Accounting for over 45% of all post-secondary students, the National University of Bangladesh enrolled around 3.5 million students in its over 2,000 affiliated colleges in 2024. The University of Dhaka, Bangladesh's oldest and most influential post-secondary institution, enrolled some 44,895 students in 2024.

To accommodate the growing numbers of students seeking higher education, networks of private institutions have flourished, enrolling 36% students in 2020. As of 2023, 20% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in higher

education, and in 2020, 15% 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. Some 10,000 *madrasas* enrolled almost 2.8 million students in 2023.

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 16,000 of Bangladesh's post-secondary students.

By contrast, independent *Qawmi madrasas* tend to focus on Islamic religious 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.

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 *Religion and Spirituality*) the work day is typically 2 hours shorter.



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 *Family and Kinship*). Bangladesh's garment industry (see *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 *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 *Language and Communication*).



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 2021, Bangladesh's rate of traffic-related deaths was 19 per 100,000 people, higher than neighboring India (15) and also higher than in the US (14). 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.



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).

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 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 *History and Myth*).

Other holidays mark religious events. For example, during the 3-day Islamic celebration of **Eid ul-Fitr** (see *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.



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** (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 *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.



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.



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 *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 *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 *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 *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*** 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.



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 *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.

Many Bangladeshis adhere to certain dietary restrictions. Observant Muslims (see *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 *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); 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); **chotpoti** (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).

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 1971-2023, life expectancy at birth jumped from approximately 47 to 75 years. Meanwhile, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased from 148 to 30 deaths per 1,000 live births, which is above the South Asian average of 28.

Moreover, maternal mortality fell from 569 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 123 in 2020, slightly higher than India's rate and the South Asian average but remaining notably higher than the US rate (21). 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.



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 7 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.

Health Challenges

As is common in developing countries, the rate of non-communicable disease has increased and now accounts for the majority (70%) of all deaths. In 2019, 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 7% of deaths. Widespread poverty elevates rates of child malnutrition: as of 2020, almost 23% of Bangladeshi children under the age of 5

were underweight, about 43% suffered from anemia, and 28% were stunted.

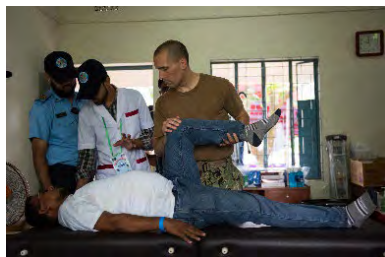
Communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, malaria, hepatitis, typhoid, dengue fever, and pneumonia are common, causing 23% of all deaths in 2019. Frequent and severe floods, cyclones, and other natural disasters (see *Political and*



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.

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 *Political and Social Relations*) and causes arsenic poisoning-related ailments such as skin lesions, cancer, edema, and enlargement of organs, among other issues.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

Following the region's alignment with Pakistan after the 1947 partition of India (see *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 *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 *Political and Social Relations*), the economy gradually began to outperform expectations, due largely to growth in the agricultural sector and garment industry.

Since the mid-1990s, Bangladesh has sustained its economic growth, averaging 5% per year, even during the 2008-09 global financial crisis. Although per capita income has increased nearly 3-fold since 2009, the number of people living in poverty has also increased from 9% of the population to 28%. In 2023, Bangladesh's GDP growth rate was 5.8% and is forecasted to remain at 6-6.5% through 2024. Remittances from some 2.5 million Bangladeshis living abroad have helped to boost the economy in recent years, accounting for \$23 billion or 5.3% of GDP in 2023.

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 *Time and Space*), and with the garment industry accounting for some 85% 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 eighth 5-year plan (2021-2025) targeted 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 51% of GDP and 41% of employment in 2023, 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 3% of GDP and providing 2.23 million jobs in 2022. Bangladesh received 9.24 million international tourist arrivals in 2023, a 43% increase from 2022. Attractions include historical sites in Dhaka and Chittagong, the Sundarbans mangrove forest, and the beaches near Cox's Bazar. However, Bangladesh has experienced a decrease in tourism since the influx of Rohingya refugees (see *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 33% of GDP and 22% of employment as of 2023. Important subsectors are manufacturing and construction.

Manufacturing: Dominated by the textile and ready-made garment industries, manufacturing accounts for 22% of GDP. In 2023, Bangladesh was the world's second-largest apparel supplier after China, with almost 6% of the global market.

Construction: Construction comprises some 8% of GDP and employs almost 3.5 million Bangladeshis across some 4,000 firms as of 2019. Experts believe construction will continue to fuel economic and employment growth through the next decade.

Mining: In 2019, mining and quarrying accounted for some 2% 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 11% of GDP and 37% of employment in 2023. 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.

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 22% of GDP in 2023 and about 23% of agricultural products or some 20 million tons of fish. Bangladesh ranks 3rd globally for fish extraction from open water bodies and 5th 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 3.5% of GDP and employed 1.5 million Bangladeshis in 2019.

Currency

Bangladesh's currency is the Bangladeshi **taka** (₳) issued in 9 banknote values (1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 500, 1,000) and 3 coin values (1, 2, 5). ₳1

subdivides into 100 **poisha** issued in 5 coin values (1, 5, 10, 25, 50), though these are rarely used today. In 2025, \$1 was worth around ₳121.43



Foreign Trade

In 2023, exports totaled \$54.5 billion and imports \$66.4 billion. Exports included garments, knitwear, agricultural products, frozen fish and seafood, jute and jute goods, and leather. The largest buyers included the US (16%), Germany (15%), the UK (8%), Spain (7%) and Poland (6%). Bangladesh's top imports included machinery and equipment, fuels and chemical products, and metals purchased from China (34%), India (17%), and Indonesia (5%), Singapore (5%) and Malaysia (4%).

Foreign Aid

Foreign aid comprised some 2.2% of GDP in 2022, including some \$7.0 billion in official development assistance, mostly related to economic infrastructure and services. Primary contributors for 2021-2022 were Japan (\$2.3 billion), the World Bank Group (\$1.1 billion), France (\$214.5 million), and Germany (\$192 million). In 2021 and 2022, the US provided some \$418.3 and \$375.6 million, respectively.

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; 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 opened at the end of 2019 and carries some 60,000 passengers per hour. A second elevated line was completed at 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 2,288 mi of railways and an average of 1,800 trains daily which carry an estimated 110 million passengers. Despite having the second largest railway network in South Asia, Bangladesh Railway faces numerous problems including a lack



of modernization, overcrowding and congestion, and corruption and mismanagement. A 2020 World Bank report noted that only 25% of trains are air-conditioned and the average

speed is only 20 mph, which is significantly lower than other countries in this region.

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 118.3 million tons of cargo in 2022, Chittagong Port is Bangladesh's primary seaport, followed by Mongla Port.

Airways: Bangladesh has 17 airports, of which 16 have paved runways. In 2023, Bangladeshi airports served some 17.4 million passengers, 1/2 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 2023, natural gas accounted for nearly 70% 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 3% to 10% by 2025 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*.

Radio and TV: Some 39 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 2023, Bangladesh had some 191 mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 people compared to less than one fixed-line telephone subscription. 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 131 million Bangladeshis (or about 77% of the population) used the Internet in 2023, with over 90% 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.



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