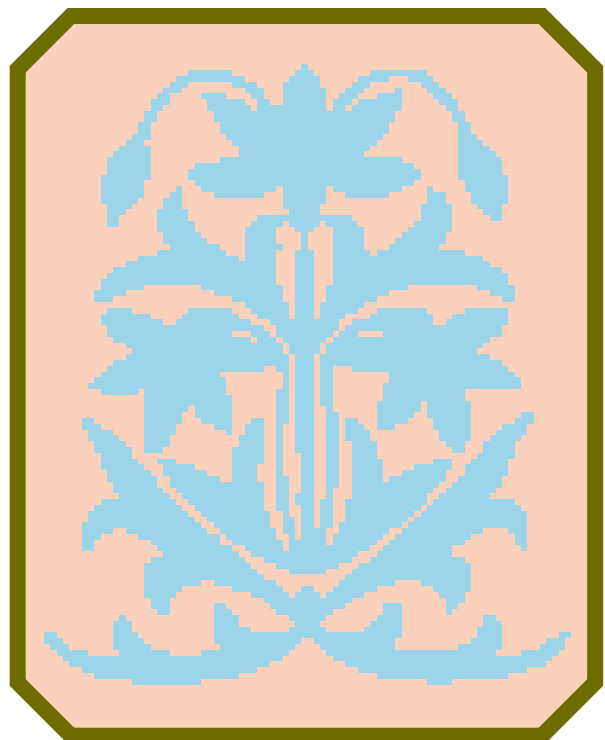


Bangladesh



A CULTURAL PROFILE



Bangladesh



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This cultural profile is designed primarily for volunteers working in organized HOST Programs which match newcomers with volunteers who offer friendship, orientation to the community and an opportunity to practise English or French, if needed.

BANGLADESH TO CANADA

Every year thousands of people come to Canada to start a new life. They come with many different skills and the hope of contributing to their new society. Your interest in reading about Bangladesh may arise from being involved in the HOST Program to provide assistance to newcomers.

ancient heritage. They are proud of their language, culture and customs. Bangladesh faces many challenges including political upheaval, natural disaster, poverty and disease.

Some Bangladeshis who come to Canada are educated people who were well established in their native land. When they come here, however, they sometimes must search for work or spend a long time renewing



This booklet will introduce you to Bangladesh and will help you to understand your new friends' culture. While the cultural profile provides insight into some customs, it does not cover all facets of life. The customs described may not apply in equal measure to all newcomers from this country.

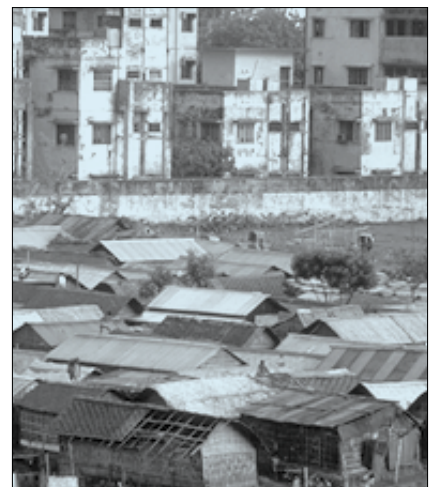
Although Bangladesh is a young country, its people look back on a rich and

their academic qualifications in their new country. Their standard of living may drop while they work to establish themselves here.

Some aspects of life in Canada will probably seem strange to the new arrivals from Bangladesh, our winters, for instance! Remember that you also share some important similarities with your new friends. They will want to know the same things

you would if you moved to a far-away place. What is my new neighbourhood like? Where can I buy food for my family? Which school will my children attend? How do I get around in my new community?

What is important is that you offer your time, concern and friendship. You have much to offer each other.





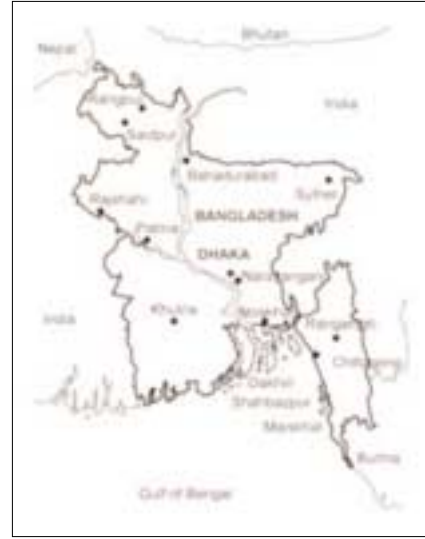
LANDSCAPE AND CLIMATE

Bangladesh is in South Asia, just north of the Bay of Bengal. It is bordered by India on three sides, and by Myanmar, also known as Burma, on the south. It is one of the world's most crowded nations. To understand what that means, keep in mind that more than six times the whole population of Canada lives in a country twice the size of New Brunswick.

Bangladesh has one of the wettest climates in the world and water dominates daily living. Three main rivers and many smaller waterways criss-cross low green and gold plains, carrying boats and rafts laden with goods and people. Regular floods

nourish the soil with river sediment, making the fields of rice, wheat and jute among the richest in the world.

Just as water enriches Bangladesh, it destroys as well. Devastating tropical storms called cyclones hit Bangladesh every few years. In 1991 a cyclone killed 138,000 people and left ten million homeless. Controlling flooding and erosion and building cyclone shelters are major concerns. Bangladeshis adapt to the floods that come with the monsoon rains of summer and autumn. At that time, wading through waist-high water may become a fact of life. Some people even live in floating houses that rise and fall with the waters. In fact, the oldest inscription found here urges people



to store grain before the floodwaters come. Some of the hilly eastern regions receive 5000 millimetres of rainfall per year.

Bangladeshis divide their year into three main seasons. These are: *Barsha*, the monsoon time from June to September, *Sheet*, the cool period from October to February and *Grishma*, the hot season which occurs from March to May. Most of the year's rainfall comes between June and September. Humidity reaches 95% in the rainy season. Temperatures can range from lows of 5°C in the cool season to highs around 40°C in the hot season.

SUMMARY FACT SHEET	
Official Name:	People's Republic of Bangladesh
Capital:	Dhaka
Type of Government:	Parliamentary Republic
Population:	123 million
Area:	144,000 sq km
Major Ethnic Group:	Bengali
Language:	Bangla (Bengali)
Religion:	Islam
Unit of Currency:	Taka
National Flag:	Bottle-green background with red circle in centre
Date of Independence:	March 26, 1971



A LOOK AT THE PAST

War and peace, riches and ruins, the history of Bangladesh is one of extremes. Mighty empires have risen and fallen. Invaders have swept through the country over and over again. Traders brought riches and customs from far- away cultures. Troops from this region drove Alexander the Great away from India in 325 B.C.

Over the centuries, waves of migration crossed Asia bringing Buddhists and Hindus to the area. They in turn were overwhelmed by the Muslim Mogul dynasty. In the 16th century they formed a province within India's Mogul Empire. By that time the colonial powers of Portuguese, Dutch, French and British traders from Europe were also reaching the area.



When the British gave up India in 1947, they divided it

along religious lines, creating the mainly Muslim states of East and West Pakistan on either side of India's territory. The border between India and East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh, ran through the region of Bengal. East Bengal became East Pakistan. West Bengal remained in India. This divided new country was governed by West Pakistan.



East Pakistanis felt that they suffered economically under the new arrangement and that they had little in common with West Pakistanis. The languages were different. The East spoke Bangla while the West spoke Urdu. West Pakistan also wanted to make Urdu the official language. This was the spark that ignited the fires of nationalism in the eastern state.

Bangladesh declared its independence and civil war broke out in March 1971. The war was short, but bloody. As many as three million people died in nine months of fighting. By November the



Pakistani army was in control of most of East Pakistan. Then India joined the conflict because it was having its own disputes with Pakistan over borders. Pakistan surrendered its eastern part that December and Bangladesh was born. The shattered nation began to rebuild.

Famine wracked Bangladesh in 1974 after floods devastated crops. A series of political crises and military interventions marked the next two decades, as Bangladesh struggled to find stability. Floods crippled the country again in September 1988, leaving an estimated 30 million people homeless. In 1996, the Awami League, the original nationalist party, was elected in a coalition government.

DID YOU KNOW?

Bangladesh has archeological sites of cultures dating back more than 2000 years.



FAMILY LIFE

More than 80% of Bangladeshis live in rural villages. These small settlements are often found along waterways and on river deltas on land that has been built up to protect against floods. Village houses are made of mud or bamboo with thatch or corrugated iron roofing, up to two or three stories high. Animal shelters, small gardens, mango trees and date palms are nearby. When villagers build the earthen platforms that raise their homes above flood levels, they scoop out hollows that become ponds when the floods come.



Rural people live in compounds with their extended families. The head of the household provides for parents, unmarried children and other dependent

relatives. When a son marries he brings his wife to live in the family home, and the bride's new mother-in-law assigns her duties.

Marriage is often arranged by a couple's parents, who look for a complementary partner for their grown son or daughter. The marriage is not valid, however, unless both the man and woman agree to it. The couple themselves may make the match, then ask for their parents' approval. The groom's family carries the proposal to the bride's family, and the two groups celebrate once the details are arranged. In separate wedding showers, friends touch a paste of fragrant turmeric spice to the engaged couple's faces as a symbol of cleansing. The wedding ceremony takes place on a flower-decked platform, led by a cleric called a *kazi*.

Some conservative Muslim women observe the *Qur'an's* instructions to guard their modesty and avoid mixing with men outside their families. Even among less traditional people, men are more likely to go out to the marketplace to socialize or sell goods while women remain at home. Economics, however, can overrule tradition and in poor rural areas where every hand is



needed in the fields, women work beside men.

In rapidly growing cities such as Dhaka, the capital, families tend to live differently. In a typical urban middle-class family, both parents could be well-educated professionals working outside the home. Rather than living in an extended family group, they would live with their children in a busy city district or quiet suburb. Urban people often feel strong ties to their family's home village, however, and return there for holidays.

DID YOU KNOW?

Most Bangladeshi women wear a sari, a colourful five-metre length of fabric they drape into a flowing robe. The sari goes over a petticoat and short blouse. Some choose the *salwar kameez*, a long tunic worn over loose trousers.

THE WORLD OF WORK

DID YOU KNOW?

Bangladesh produces more jute than any other country in the world.

Many urban Bangladeshi men and women have professional careers. They may be engineers, scientists, accountants, educators or doctors. Agriculture, however, is the work of most people in this mainly rural country. The fiery red sunset over a sea of brilliant green paddy fields in the national flag of Bangladesh denotes the lush greenery that can be seen everywhere.



Families work in the fields tending crops, usually rice, although wheat, jute, tea, tobacco and sugar cane are



also grown. Women process the harvest, drying and husking rice. They then also cook, clean and care for the children. Older children learn work skills and habits from their parents, boys from their fathers and girls from their mothers.

Rivers and canals form a huge transportation network. The rivers are like Bangladesh's roads. Ferrying people and goods along them provides employment for many people. Fishing is also an important industry and many fish are caught for consumption as well as export.

The processing of jute ranks as the chief industry in Bangladesh. The raw jute is spun into string and rope at factories. This is then used as a raw material for making a number of finished goods.

Almost one million Bangladeshi women work in clothing factories around Dhaka and Chittagong making T shirts and other garments. This industry is growing very quickly and is a major supplier to Europe and North America.

Weavers, carpet makers, carpenters, potters and metalworkers create useful and beautiful products. Many Bangladeshis also work in their homes making embroidered items, wooden and leather goods and pottery.

Forestry, mining and tourism are other important industries that contribute to national income and employment.

Only 7% of the work force is women, according to government statistics.

DID YOU KNOW?

In the days of the Roman Empire, the exquisite muslin cloths of Bangladesh were extremely popular. Observers worried that demand for *textiles ventalis*, woven of air, would drain the imperial treasury.



SPORTS AND RECREATION

Soccer is the most popular sport in Bangladesh, both in terms of participation and as a spectator event. The country has its own professional league, which features both Bangladeshi and foreign players.

Everywhere on the Indian subcontinent, cricket is a passion. Though Bangladesh is not a cricket test nation, it is one of the strongest sides among the second-tier countries. People also follow the matches of Pakistan, a world power in cricket. The Bangladeshis have hosted international test matches.

Kabaddi, a type of group wrestling, is the national sport of Bangladesh. It is a



physical game, in which teams of six players tag and capture opponents who venture onto their side of the playing field.

Badminton is also extremely popular. It is one of the few sports in which women

participate. Courts can be found even in small villages.

The big cricket, soccer and field hockey matches are played in the National Stadium in Dhaka, where all spectators are male.

Bangladesh sent four athletes to the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta.



DID YOU KNOW?

Bangladeshis enjoy spectacular boat races featuring low, canoe-like craft, powered by 21 people who paddle the boats in the Burgiganga River.

LOOKING AT HEALTH CARE

Bangladesh is working to improve the health of its people. This is a difficult task in a country plagued by poverty and natural disasters. Development agencies estimate that one-half of the population lives without the basic necessities, including adequate health care. Many children are malnourished and vitamin deficient, and there is a high rate of maternal death during childbirth. The average life expectancy is 55 years.

Through various efforts, Bangladesh has actually raised its citizens' average life expectancy by 15 years since 1960. That is in the space of a single generation. The government also



allocates considerable resources to family planning. This has contributed to lowering the high birth rate.

In 1996, approximately two million children were inoculated against polio as part of a government campaign to eradicate the disease.

In rural and hilly areas, people have access to Hindu *ayurvedic*, a Muslim Unani medicine, practised by folk healers called *ojhas* or *fakirs*. These healers are generally called upon to treat



everything from temporary illnesses to chronic diseases to bone fractures and snake bites. They also provide amulets for protection



against sorcery. Wearing one of these is popular among the poor and the middle classes.

The government runs an extensive network of hospitals and dispensaries, and some areas are well-served medically. In remote areas, health care services may be far away. Voluntary organizations provide much of the country's welfare service and Bangladesh is a major recipient of foreign aid.

DID YOU KNOW?

Bangladesh is one of the ten countries most vulnerable to the greenhouse effect.





LEARNING IN BANGLADESH

The government has made primary education both compulsory and free of charge for the first eight years. Primary education begins at age six and lasts for five years. Secondary education begins at age eleven. It lasts for seven years, with a first cycle of five years and a second cycle of two years. At least one-third of all children, however, are not enrolled in school.



For families that can afford it, private schooling is an option. Secondary schools charge fees for tuition, books and supplies. Secondary schools and colleges in the private sector vastly outnumber government institutions.



The literacy rate in Bangladesh is low and the government has undertaken an adult literacy program to eradicate illiteracy by the year 2000.

Life in the countryside can be a struggle and families often need every available pair of hands to help out. Education of both boys and girls is encouraged. Rural girls, who may be expected to care for younger siblings, however, are less likely to attend school than boys. In urban areas, girls receive more encouragement to get an education.

Bangladesh has about 31,700 elementary and high schools. Instruction at these schools, colleges and universities is in Bangla and English.

There are many universities in Bangladesh. The two

largest are the University of Dhaka, founded in 1921 and the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, founded in 1962.

There are 170 colleges and technical schools. Colleges include the Bangladesh College of Textile Technology. Recent figures put the country's combined college and university enrollment at 500,000. Academics and scholars from Bangladesh work at institutions around the world.

DID YOU KNOW?

Probably nowhere in the world do students play such a pivotal role in the politics of a country as the students of Bangladesh. They participated fully in the war of liberation in 1971.

EATING THE BANGLADESHI WAY

“Fish plus rice equals Bengali,” according to one proverb, although there are many other favourite dishes. A typical Bangladeshi meal includes a curry of fish, meat, eggs or vegetables cooked in a spicy sauce, plus yellow lentils called *dhal* and plain rice or *bhat*. Spicy kebabs or a meatball and gravy dish known as *kofta* are popular, as are warm thin flat breads called *chapati*.

Most ingredients for Bangladeshi food are readily available in Canadian cities. Muslims are forbidden to eat pork and may need to examine food labels to



ensure that processed foods are free of pork products. Bangladeshis may wish to find a *halal* meat store where the meat is butchered and prepared according to Islamic religious guidelines.

Drinking alcohol is also prohibited by religious rules. Sweet milky tea known as *chai* is popular. Cold drinks include fresh lime sodas and tender coconut water, otherwise known as *dub*.

Bangladeshi food is often eaten with the fingers. Village people tend to eat that way. Middle-class urban people may or may not use cutlery. It is considered polite and a mark of respect to use the right hand when giving or receiving anything, particularly food. You might hold a glass of water with your left hand, or use both hands to break bread, but food goes into your mouth from your right hand only.

Local desserts are a dream for those with a sweet tooth. Many are creamy, laced with sugar and flavoured with nuts, saffron or cinnamon. One of the most popular is a sweet rice pudding called *kheer*. A Bangladeshi family would prepare this treat for holidays or to welcome guests on a special occasion.

Kheer **Ingredients**

1 L homogenized milk
250 gm basmati rice
500 gm brown sugar
125 gm raisins
Dashes of white cardamom

Preparation

Place rice in colander and rinse with cold water. Bring milk and rice to boil in heavy saucepan. Simmer, tightly covered, for 25 minutes. Add sugar and cardamom. Cool slightly and serve.





COMMUNICATING WITH BANGLADESHIS



Generally speaking, rural people may follow traditional customs more closely and middle-class city people may interpret them more liberally. It is important to be sensitive to your Bangladeshi friends' customs.

Relationships between men and women may seem formal. Touching may not be welcome, so a man might be wise to refrain from offering a handshake for example, to a Bangladeshi woman. Sometimes in Bangladesh men hold hands as an expression of friendship.



Bangla is a distinctive language with its own ornate script, subtle sounds and a rich poetic tradition. There are 57 letters in the Bangla

alphabet. Bangla also has its own number of symbols. The language is an important source of Bangladeshi national pride. When the country was part of Pakistan, the government moved to make Urdu the national language, replacing Bangla in this region. Bangladeshis consider themselves the only people ever to have gone to war mainly to preserve their language.

School children learn English as a compulsory subject which is also spoken in the cities. Bangladesh has both Bangla and English newspapers. The government owns nine radio stations and the only television station.

Here are some *Bangla* words for you to try:

English

How are you?
I'm well
What is your name?
My name is
Snow
Cold
Student
Teacher
Book
No
Good-bye
see you again
I speak a little Bangla

Bangla

Kamon acen?
Bhalo aci
Apnar nam ki?
Amar nam ...
Borof
Thanda
Chattro
Shik-khok
Boi
Na
Aashee
Abar dekha hobe
Ami kichu Bangla bolte pari

DID YOU KNOW?

Tribal people numbering about one million live in the hilly regions of Bangladesh. They grow rice, pumpkin and cotton. Each tribe has its own dialect, rituals and dress. Their ancestors came from Myanmar (Burma).

SPIRITUALITY

About 85% of Bangladeshis are Muslim and almost all belong to the Sunni branch of the faith. Hindus make up the rest except for small communities of Buddhists, Christians and people practising traditional religions. The nation's constitution guarantees full religious freedom which is important to many Bangladeshis.

DID YOU KNOW?

In Bangladesh a festival is called a *mela*. People from all traditions including Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian join the celebrations. Parades and trinket vendors create a joyous carnival mood. *Melas* happen at harvest times, fairs and weddings.

A lunar calendar dictates the timing of Muslim holidays, called *Eids*, and each year they fall 11 days earlier than the previous year.

Observing *Ramadan* is very important to Muslims. For a period of one month Muslims must neither eat nor drink from dawn to dusk. A meal



called *Sehri* is taken just before dawn. Festive homemade dishes are enjoyed at the post-sundown repast called *Iftar*.

The joyous holiday at the end of Ramadan is *Eid-al-Fitr*. Many Bangladeshis travel to their home villages to feast, pray, give presents to each other and donate to the poor.

About nine weeks later comes the *Eid-al-Adha*, which commemorates the prophet Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. Worshippers gather in a large public place to pray together in the morning.

Later, families gather for the ritual slaughter of a cow, goat or lamb.

The most important holiday for Bangladesh's Hindus is *Durga Puja*. Hindus make statues of the goddess *Durga* from bamboo and clay and place them in every temple. *Durga*, goddess of energy, is seated on a lion and holds a different weapon in each of her ten hands. After ten days of celebration and religious services the statues are carried into a river or pond while people dance to the beat of drums. The statues slowly disintegrate in the water, which is considered sacred.





HOLIDAYS

Bangladeshis celebrate all religious holidays with equal enthusiasm. There are three main national holidays. On Martyrs' Day, February 21, the nation mourns the students who were killed in a pro-Bangla demonstration in 1952. The fallen protesters are honoured with processions, songs and floral tributes.

Independence Day, March 26, commemorates the birth of their nation. On that day in 1971 the country declared its independence on the eve of the nine-month war with Pakistan. Citizens attend ceremonies at national monuments and participate in cultural and sporting events.

Victory Day, December 16, marks the end of the 1971 war. There are sombre



elements to this holiday when ceremonies of remembrance are held. Bangladeshis visit the graves of the war dead. It is also a time of jubilation. Festive decorations appear on public buildings and the theme of freedom is expressed in concerts and other cultural programs.

The large Islamic population celebrates *Eid-al-Adha*, or feast of the sacrifice, when people wear colourful clothes and men go to the mosques to pray. Everyone visits relatives and gifts are exchanged.

Most holidays are based on the cycle of the moon.

Good Friday, Easter, Christmas and Boxing Day are also national holidays in Bangladesh. Bengali New Year's Day, called *Pohela Boisakh*, is a festive occasion in mid-April marked by village fairs, athletic competitions and day-long gatherings in city parks.

DID YOU KNOW?

Here are a few lines from the National Anthem of Bangladesh.

My Golden Bengal

My Bengal of gold,
I love you
Forever your skies, your
air set my heart in tune
as if it were a flute
If sadness, oh mother
mine, casts a gloom
on your face,
my eyes are filled
with tears.



THE ARTS AND LITERATURE



Bangladesh enjoys a strong intellectual tradition. According to one saying, what Bangladeshis think today the rest of the region thinks tomorrow.

Bangladeshis love poetry and are proud of their best-known poets. Proprietors display poets' photographs in restaurants and shops.

Rabindranath Tagore, a writer, artist and philosopher, won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. Tagore, whose family's roots were in what is now Bangladesh, was the first Asian to attain that honour. A Hindu who advocated harmony with Muslims, Tagore celebrated "humble lives and their miseries." One of his poems became the national anthem, *Amar Shona Bangla*, My Golden Bengal. The fiery works of the rebel poet, Kazi Nasrul Islam, fostered

national pride during the colonial period.

Music of all kinds is popular in Bangladesh and each form has its own distinct flavour. Classical music, *uchango*, is often based on the works of the poets Islam and Tagore. While the lyrics of the rebel poet are often paired with energetic melodies, Tagore inspired softer, more wistful music.

Villagers have developed their own forms of song over the centuries. Laments called *lalongiti* deal with love and loss, while *polligiti* tell of work and village life. The bamboo flute gives folk music a haunting tone. Pop music is usually sentimental. There is a strong theatrical tradition in the countryside, where performances during *melas*, village fairs, help keep village lore alive. These plays once explored mainly religious or historic themes, but today deal with politics and social issues.

Festival crowds love to watch the remarkable spectacle of



kabigan. This is a debate in verse — quick, rhythmic and improvised on the spot. Each team is made up of about four sharp-witted debaters, who call back and forth, line by line, each matching the other side's rhythm and rhyme. *Kabigan* gives social issues a light-hearted treatment.

Fine weaving and intricate needlework have been points of pride for Bangladeshis down the centuries. Intricate flowers, animals and geometric designs adorn loom embroidered silk called *jamdani*. These were once woven for the imperial households. They continue to be produced today. Embroidered patchwork quilts that tell village stories are also treasured.

Many different kinds of architecture can be found, including carved Hindu temples, domed mosques and the mansions of long-gone princes. There are colossal state monuments in Dhaka as well as a modern National Assembly building designed by the American architect Louis Kahn.





IF YOU WANT TO LEARN MORE

If you want to read more here are a few titles to ask for in your local library.

NOVAK, James J. *Bangladesh: Reflections on the Water*, University Press Library, 1994.

Considered one of the best introductions to the country and its people, this book is both thorough and movingly personal.

NEWTON, Alex, et al. *Bangladesh*, The Lonely Planet, Hawthorne, 1996.

A travel guide.

HARTMANN, Betsy and BOYCE, James K. *A Quiet Violence: View from a Bangladeshi Village*, Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1980.

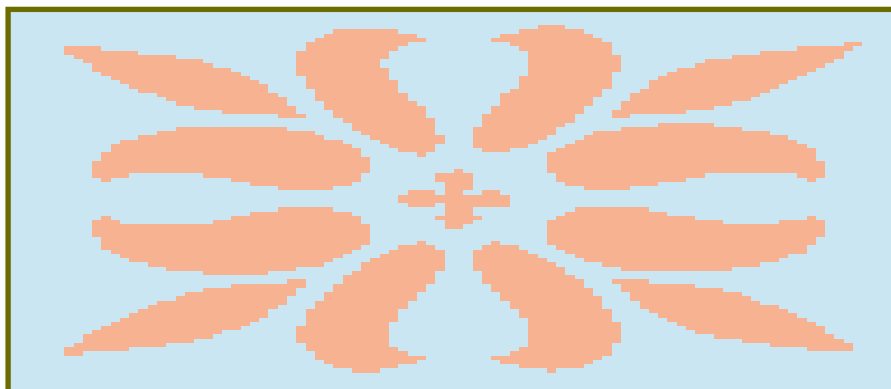
The authors examine the hardships of life in the Bangladeshi village where they lived and worked for nine months.

Web site:

<http://www.asel.udel.edu/~kazi/Bangladesh>

Zunaid Kazi

Kazi, a graduate student, has put together a colourful, entertaining and detailed package of information and illustrations. You can even listen to the roar of a Royal Bengal tiger.





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