

History

For much of history, the state that we today call Bangladesh has been a part of a greater India and was known only as Bengal; what happened elsewhere on the subcontinent affected Bengal. The history of the modern state of Bangladesh has been short and, rarely, sweet. Born in a war that some call genocide, the nation's history has been filled with an almost unnaturally large guest list of villains, tyrants, soldiers and politicians, as well as one or two ever so rare heroes.

Prior to the creation of Bangladesh, the history of Bengal was one that seemed to involve the constant meddling of foreign powers – sometimes this resulted in the glow of cultural splendour, but more often than not it descended into the tears of war.

BUDDHISM IN BANGLADESH

Strange though it may now seem in such an overwhelmingly Muslim country, Buddhism in Bangladesh is no small player in the nation's history and culture. Countrywide it's the third major religion but in certain areas, such as Chittagong division, Buddhists make up an impressive 12% of the population.

It's not mere numbers though that makes Bangladesh important in the Buddhist world, but history. It's not far from Bodhgaya (in present-day India, where the Buddha reached enlightenment) to Bengal, and the region has played a huge part in the development of Buddhism, including the creation of the mystical Tantric Buddhism.

By the reign of the great Indian Buddhist emperor Ashoka (304–232 BC), Buddhism was firmly entrenched as the number one religion of Bengal and, aside from a few minor blemishes, it continued to thrive in the region until the 12th century AD, making Bengal the last stronghold of Buddhism in an increasingly Hindu and Muslim dominated subcontinent.

In the 6th century, Sasanaka, a powerful Buddhist king, founded the Gauda Empire in Bengal, which was eventually overthrown by the warrior king Sri Harsa, who ruled the Bengal area until the 8th century.

Gopala, a Kshatriya tribal chief from Varendra, became the founding figure of the Buddhist Pala dynasty (8th to 11th centuries). He was succeeded by his son Dharmapala, who established the gigantic Sompura Vihara in Varendra, known today as Paharpur (p104).

In the 12th century, Hindu *senas* (armies) came to rule Bengal, and crushed Buddhism. Surviving Buddhists retreated to the Chittagong area. In less than a century the *senas* were swamped by the tide of Islam.

Virtual Bangladesh (www.virtualbangladesh.com/history/overview.html) gives a simple overview of a complicated history.

The army (known to the Greeks as *Gangaridai*) that chased Alexander the Great from India in 325 BC was supported by 4000 trained elephants and horses.

TIMELINE

Back in time

The earliest mention of the region is in the 9th century BC Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, which tells of Prince Bhima's conquest of eastern India, including Varendra, an ancient kingdom in what is now Bangladesh.

326 BC

Storming out of ancient Greece, Alexander the Great subdues most of western Asia but flees India when word reaches him that the *Gangaridai* people of Bengal have amassed an army on the banks of the Ganges.

262 BC

Chandragupta Maurya creates an empire, then known as *Pundravardhana Bhukti*, now as *Mahasthangarh*. It spreads across northern India under his grandson, the emperor Ashoka, whose conversion to Buddhism in 262 BC has a lasting effect.

Though somewhat beaten, Buddhism never totally died out in Bangladesh and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts there are several monasteries which lean to Myanmar (Burma) for religious inspiration and a number of schools in which children learn to read Burmese and Pali (an ancient Buddhist language). As in neighbouring Myanmar, many Buddhist men in this region spend a part of their lives as monks. The large number of Burmese refugees who have fled the terror of their country have brought their religion with them and this has had a profound effect on Bangladeshi Buddhism. The Ministry of Religious Affairs helps to maintain Buddhist religious sites.

THE MUSLIM PERIOD

They took some time to arrive, but when they did they left a legacy that continues to define the country to this very day. The arrival of the Muslims began with the trickle of a few Sufi (Muslim mystic) missionaries in the 12th century and the construction of the odd mosque on the fringes of Bengal. Then came Mohammed bin Bakhtiar (a Khilji from Turkistan) who, with only 20 men under his command, made short work of capturing Bengal and bringing the area under the rule of the sultanate of Delhi, the centre of Muslim power in India.

Under the Muslims, Bengal entered a new era. Cities developed; palaces, forts, mosques, mausoleums and gardens sprang up; roads and bridges were constructed; and new trade routes brought prosperity and a new cultural life. In 1576 Bengal became a province of the mighty Mughal Empire, which ushered in another golden age in India. Mughal power extended over most of Bengal except the far southeast around Chittagong, and it was during this period that a small town named Dhaka emerged from obscurity to become the Mughal capital of Bengal.

BRITS ABROAD

For decades the Portuguese, Dutch, British and French tussled for influence over the subcontinent, but it was the British East India Company that prevailed.

It was during the reign of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (1618–1707) that a Bengali nawab (Muslim prince) sold three local villages to the British East India Company. Today one of those villages is a mega-city that goes by the name of Kolkata (Calcutta). From here the British gradually extended their influence to take in all of Bengal and finally all of the subcontinent, but the going was far from easy.

It has been said that the British Raj ushered Bengal into a period of growth and development, but historians hotly dispute this. To quote Monty Python, 'What have the Romans actually done for us?' The answer is that the British brought a great many positive changes to India, particularly in regard to infrastructure, law and government. Conversely, they also brought a great many

In his book *Heroes* (1987) the ever-emotive John Pilger discusses ordinary people in extraordinary situations. The words he dedicates to Bangladesh luridly evoke the fervour of its formation and the passion of the people involved.

Originally a mere clerk for the British East India Company, Robert Clive rose to become local head of the company and, eventually, the effective ruler of Bengal.

4th century AD

In the 4th century AD, northern India comes under the imperial rule of the Guptas; during their reign Buddhism reaches its zenith. The Guptas succumb to a wave of White Hun invasions.

1202

The Muslims storm into Bengal and quickly convert the region. The Mameluk sultanate is established, until the Tughlaq dynasty overthrows it in 1320. The Tughlaqs are defeated by another wave of Muslim invaders in 1398.

1342–1487

Under the Ilyas Shahi dynasty, a distinct Bengali identity begins to form. The city of Gaud emerges as a cosmopolitan metropolis, remaining the centre of power until the capital is moved to Dhaka in 1608.

bad things, including dictatorial agricultural policies and the establishment of the zamindar (feudal landowner) system, which many people consider responsible for draining Bengal of its wealth, damaging its social fabric and directly contributing to today's desperate conditions in Bangladesh.

Most Hindus cooperated with the British, entering British educational institutions and studying the English language. The majority of Muslims, on the other hand, refused to cooperate, preferring to remain landlords and farmers. This religious dichotomy formed a significant basis for future conflict.

Though the British Raj has long since been relegated to the history books, the truth remains that the British adventure in South Asia remains one of the most significant events in the history of both Bangladesh and Britain. Today trade ties are strong between both nations and a large proportion of Britain's Asian community hails from Bangladesh. Whereas once upon a time it was Britain exporting its culture and industry to India, recent years have seen something of a reversal, especially in regards to culture with Indian art, food, film and philosophy being exported to Britain.

PARTITION & PAKISTAN

At the close of WWII it was clear that European colonialism had run its course. The Indian National Congress continued to press for Indian self-rule and the British began to map out a path to independence.

With the Muslim population of India worried about living in an overwhelmingly Hindu-governed nation, the Muslim League was formed. It pushed for two separate Muslim states in South Asia. Lord Mountbatten, Viceroy of British India, realising the impossibility of the situation and, quite possibly looking for a quick British escape, decided to act on these desires and partition the subcontinent.

The Partition of East Pakistan did not lead to the extraordinary levels of bloodshed that marked the creation of West Pakistan, which led to the deaths of an estimated half a million people.

Though support for the creation of Pakistan was based on Islamic solidarity, the two halves of the new state had little else in common. Furthermore, the country was administered from West Pakistan, which tended to favour itself in the distribution of revenues.

The Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, emerged as the national political party in East Pakistan, with the Language Movement as its ideological underpinning. The 1971 national elections saw the Awami League win with a clear majority; in East Pakistan it won all seats but one. Constitutionally, the Awami League should have formed the government of all Pakistan but faced with this unacceptable result, President Khan postponed the opening of the National Assembly.

In July 2002, Pakistani president Musharraf visited Bangladesh and expressed his regret at excesses carried out by Pakistan during the Liberation War.

1575

Under the command of Akbar, the Mughals show the Bengali sultan Daud Karrani who the boss is at the Battle of Tukaroi. His defeat announces the beginning of the Mughal adventure in Bengal.

1707

The last great Mughal ruler Aurangzeb dies and the Mughal empire is thrown into disarray. Bengal has long had autonomy, and now breaks away completely from the rest of the empire.

1756–57

Suraj-ud-Daula, the nawab of Bengal, attacks Calcutta. British inhabitants are packed into an underground cellar, where most of them suffocate. To avenge them Robert Clive kills Suraj-ud-Daula and becomes the de facto ruler of Bengal.

WAR & PEACE

At the racecourse rally of 7 March 1971 in Dhaka (at what is now Ramna Park), Sheikh Mujibur (Mujib) stopped short of declaring East Pakistan independent. In reality, however, Bangladesh (land of the Bangla speakers) was born that day. Sheikh Mujib was jailed in West Pakistan, igniting smouldering rebellion in East Pakistan.

When the Mukti Bahini (Bangladesh Freedom Fighters) captured the Chittagong radio station on 26 March 1971, Ziaur Rahman, the leader of the Mukti Bahini, announced the birth of the new country and called upon its people to resist the Pakistani army. President Khan sent more troops to quell the rebellion.

General Tikka Khan, known to Bangladeshis as the 'Butcher of Balochistan', began the systematic slaughter of Sheikh Mujib's supporters. Tanks began firing into the halls of Dhaka University. Hindu neighbourhoods were shelled and intellectuals, business people and other 'subversives' were hauled outside the city and shot.

By June the struggle had become a guerrilla war. More and more civilians joined the Mukti Bahini as the Pakistani army's tactics became more brutal. As documented in media reports at the time, and in several book-length studies since, napalm was used against villages, and rape was both widespread and systematic, although the actual number of women affected remains disputed.

By November 1971 the whole country was suffering the burden of the occupying army. During the nine months from the end of March 1971, 10 million people fled to refugee camps in India.

With border clashes between Pakistan and India becoming more frequent, the Pakistani air force made a pre-emptive attack on Indian forces on 3 December 1971, precipitating a quick end. Indian troops crossed the border, liberated Jessore on 7 December and prepared to take Dhaka. The Pakistani army was attacked from the west by the Indian army, from the north and east by the Mukti Bahini and from all quarters by the civilian population.

By 14 December the Indian victory was complete and West Pakistan had been defeated, but at what cost? According to Bangladeshi sources around three million people were killed in the nine month war, 200,000 women raped and 10 million people forced from their homes. Pakistani sources claim that

Visit Dhaka University (www.univdhaka.edu) – the setting of significant moments in history and now a repository of historical records.

POLITICS & STUDENTS

Probably nowhere in the world do students play such a pivotal role in politics as in Bangladesh. Students today are empowered by recent tradition, stemming largely from the key role they played in the Liberation War. When the war started it was no mistake that the Pakistanis aimed their tanks first at Dhaka University. Many students were among the intellectuals targeted for death.

1758–1857

The British East India Company controls Bengal but their policies hardly endear them to the Bengalis. The Sepoy Mutiny further inflames local passions. Westminster intervenes and in 1857 the British government takes over control of India.

1885–1905

Supported by Hindus and Muslims, the Indian National Congress is founded in 1885. But the division of Bengal in 1905 by Lord Curzon, seen as a religious partition, prompts the formation of the All India Muslim League.

1947

Pakistan and India come to life. Pakistan is divided into two regions, in the Punjab and Bengal. Bengal is known as East Pakistan. A bloody exodus occurs as Hindus move to India and Muslims to East or West Pakistan.

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE INTELLECTUALS

Immediately following Sheikh Mujib's arrest on 26 March 1971, all hell broke out. Blaming the Hindu intellectuals for fomenting the rebellion, the generals immediately sent their tanks to Dhaka University and began firing into the halls, killing students. This was followed by the shelling of Hindu neighbourhoods and a selective search for intellectuals, business people and other alleged subversive elements. One by one they were captured, hauled outside the city and shot in cold blood. Over the ensuing months, the Pakistani soldiers took their search for subversives to every village. By then, if there had ever been a distinction made between intellectuals and Hindus, it was gone. When captured, men were forced to lift their lungis (sarongs) to reveal if they were circumcised; if not, they were slaughtered.

The perpetrators were never punished; indeed today they are heroes. General Tikka Khan, for example, retired in comfort and years later, in 1989, this 'grand old man' of the Pakistani army, as he was affectionately called, became the Governor-General of Punjab Province.

26,000 deaths occurred, whilst the international community quote anything from 200,000 to three million deaths.

BIRTHING PAINS

The People's Republic of Bangladesh was born into chaos – it was shattered by war, had a ruined economy and a totally disrupted communications system. Henry Kissinger once described the newly independent Bangladesh as an 'international basket case'. As if to reinforce this point, famine struck between 1973 and 1974 and set the war-ravaged country back even further.

After a couple of years of tumultuous power struggles, General Ziaur Rahman, now the head of the army, took over as martial-law administrator and assumed the presidency in late 1976.

The overwhelming victory of President Zia (as Ziaur Rahman was popularly known) in the 1978 presidential poll was consolidated when his party, the newly formed Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), won two-thirds of the seats in the parliamentary elections of 1979. Martial law was lifted and democracy returned to Bangladesh. Zia proved to be a competent politician and statesman. Assistance began pouring in and over the next five years the economy went from strength to strength.

Though the country progressed economically during the late 1980s, in early 1990 the economy began to unravel and massive rallies and hartals (strikes) were held. During this period Zia's wife, Begum Khaleda Zia, who had no political experience, became head of the BNP and, in the ensuing election, the Awami League won about 33% of the vote compared to the BNP's 31% – but the BNP won about 35 more seats in parliament. Begum Khaleda Zia became prime minister in 1991.

In Bangladesh: From a Nation to a State (1997), Craig Baxter discusses the development of national identity throughout history. A comprehensive and ambitious work that contextualises the nationalistic pride evident in Bangladesh today.

1952

The Pakistani government declares that Urdu will be the national language. Riots break out in Dhaka and on 21 February, 12 students are killed by the Pakistani army. Pakistan's waning democracy gives way to military government.

1970

A catastrophic cyclone kills around 500,000 people in East Pakistan. The Pakistani government appears to do little. War between East and West Pakistan looms large on the horizon.

1971

War breaks out between East and West Pakistan. After nine months, the Indian army intervenes in December. Within two weeks, Pakistan's General Niazi surrenders and Sheikh Mujib takes over the reins of an independent government.

Never fully accepting the election result, the Awami League, headed by Sheikh Hasina, began to agitate against the BNP. A long and economically ruinous period of hartals (strikes) eventually brought down the BNP government in June 1996, and the Awami League took power.

THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT(ER)

The past eight or nine years have seen no respite in the political twisting and turning. Khaleda Zia's Nationalist Party and its three coalition partners won the 2001 elections. Arguing that the elections were rigged, the now-opposition Awami League began parliamentary boycotts. In August 2003, two opposition Awami League politicians were murdered, triggering a spate of hartals. In February 2004, the opposition called a series of general strikes in a failed attempt to force the government from power.

The Bangladeshi constitution states that at the end of its tenure the government must hand power over to an unelected, neutral caretaker government who must organise elections within 90 days. In January 2007, with elections due and neither side able to agree on a suitable caretaker government, and street protests over the stalemate becoming increasingly large and violent, a military-backed caretaker government under the leadership of Fakhruddin Ahmed took over. One of its first acts was to declare emergency rule, postpone the elections to late 2008 and ban all political activity. In the meantime they promised to stamp out the corruption that in recent years had seen Bangladesh rated the world's second most corrupt nation after Nigeria. For much of 2007 the caretaker government was genuinely popular with many Bangladeshis, but by August of that year a curfew was imposed on many Bangladeshi cities after students took to the streets demanding an end to the emergency.

The country has suffered from a series of low-key bomb attacks by local Islamic militant groups, but in general Islamic militancy hasn't taken root here in the way many feared it might. Other good news can be found in the economy, which, in recent years, has been steadily growing at around 5% to 6% per annum, fuelled primarily by the country's burgeoning textile industry. Though still one of the world's poorest and least developed nations, Bangladesh normally manages to feed itself and, so long as the 2008 elections pass without hitch, the future of the country looks brighter than it has done for years and the 'basket case' metaphor can be safely laid to rest.

The exact origin of the word Bangla is unclear, but is thought to derive from the Dravidian-speaking *Bang* tribe that lived in the region around 1000 BC.

See Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org) for reports on human rights in Bangladesh.

1974–6

A state of emergency is declared in 1974 and Sheikh Mujib proclaims himself president. He and most of his household are killed in a military coup on 15 August 1975. His surviving daughter Sheikh Hasina becomes prime minister in 1996.

1981

During an attempted military coup in May, President Zia is assassinated in Chittagong. Justice Abdul Sattar is appointed as acting president and, as candidate for the BNP, wins 66% of the vote in the ensuing general election.

2007

Fakhruddin Ahmed's caretaker government declares emergency rule and arrests former prime ministers Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajed. Elections are rescheduled for late 2008. Cyclone Sidr leaves 3500 dead.

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

It is Bangladeshi curiosity that you will encounter first, in the form of awestruck stares and a line of questioning that begins with your country, ends with your marital status and takes in your academic qualifications, opinion about Bangladesh and your observations about the state of the world. Yes, Bangladeshis are curious and worldly wise. It's almost as if Bangladesh keeps its finger on the pulse of the world to spite the world's apathy towards it. From American politics to Australian cricket, there are opinions aplenty.

The streets are the economic, social and political veins of human activity. Markets burst into life on back streets at night, students and businessmen stand on street corners to exchange ideas over cha (tea), and politicians are held accountable by protestors on the main roads.

This eagerness to squeeze the juice out of all endeavours goes hand in hand with Bangladeshi pride. Bangladesh's bloody history is a proud one. The legacy of ordinary people turned heroes resonates today to spur Bangladeshis on to shape their country's identity. You will be frequently asked, 'what do you think of Bangladesh?'. Regardless of your answer, you will be run through a check list of national assets and regaled again with the history of the country's birth.

Fortunately, this national pride is not of the ilk that gives license to rest on the laurels of previous triumphs. Rather, it is a pride that is driven by a sense that while Bangladesh is economically poor it is intellectually rich. The right to an education is valued, along with a duty to be educated. It isn't uncommon to be asked, 'What is your country?', followed immediately by, 'What is your academic qualification?'.

Your 'all men are equal' sensibilities will be thrown into turmoil when a self-righteous businessman commands an employee to move an ashtray slightly left of its current location. You will wonder just how much everyone really loves Bangladesh after the 100th request to help a stranger on the street obtain a visa for your country.

But above all, the prevailing impression you will have about Bangladeshis is their overwhelming and sincere hospitality. In a country where it is a privilege and honour to welcome travellers, it is indeed a privilege and an honour to be welcomed.

LIFESTYLE

Poverty & Economy

Circumstance always seems to be stacked against Bangladesh in its bid for economic security. Every time the country takes a step forward some event,

Bd Chat (www.bdchat.com) is the Bangladeshi Facebook – the forum contains some interesting topics.

For serious news, take a look at either Online News Bank (<http://onlinenewsbank.com>) or the online version of national newspaper the *Daily Star* (www.thedailystar.net).

STARING

For most of us, visiting Bangladesh is the closest we'll come to achieving celebrity status. Anything unusual is a crowd magnet. After a few minutes, you get the feeling that you wouldn't be met with more dumbstruck looks if you were dressed in drag, and moon-walking down the street (though we wouldn't test this).

Keep it in perspective. You may be the most interesting thing that's happened for a long time. Believe it or not, the best way to gain control of the situation can be to engage with the audience. Start to interact and you may discover that what was once a crowd has become company. But if you don't have the energy for conversation and can feel your rage-o-meter creeping into red, seek refuge in a shop.

CHILD LABOUR

As if cyclones, floods and civil strife aren't enough, Bangladesh has another dark blotch to its name – child labour. It's estimated that there are 4.9 million working children in Bangladesh (Unicef 2005 report). More than half of these children are working in the agricultural sector, but there are also domestic workers, garage assistants, porters and brick makers. However, it's the use of underage children (under 14) in the textile factories supplying clothing to the West that has caught the most attention. Under pressure from the UN, child labour in the textile factories was banned in 1994, but it is thought to continue regardless. In 2006 British supermarket chain Tesco was accused of selling clothes manufactured in factories using child labour. In some of these factories the working conditions are indeed horrendous and the hours very long – at least from the perspective of a Westerner, but this is where the problems arise. Nobody doubts that the use of child labour is a terrible thing but, thanks to dreadful levels of poverty, many of these children simply have no choice but to work. If the children are barred from the legal textile factories, they may end up in the unregulated, illegal factories, or involved in brick-breaking, begging or prostitution.

An interesting short film on this subject can be viewed on www.insightnewstv.com.

Tiziana Baldizzoni's *Tales from the River: Brahmaputra* (1998) is a lavish coffee-table travelogue. Sumptuous photos and text capture the Indian, Tibetan and Bangladeshi lives that shape and are shaped by the Brahmaputra.

The subcontinental head waggle is a ubiquitous form of nonverbal communication. Wagging the head from side to side in response to a question may mean 'no', or 'not sure', while a single tilt to one side is a sign of assent or agreement.

crop failure, population growth, corruption, cyclone or flood seems to push it back again. Back in the mid-70s the number of people living below the poverty line was around 83%, but things are slowly improving and today, that figure has been reduced to 40%. Even so, problems of inequality and unemployment are rife for Bangladesh's rural poor, who comprise the majority of the population. At least 28% of the population are without regular work and of those who are working a great many are involved in highly unpredictable, seasonal agriculture for pitiful wages and security. This goes some way to explaining the fact that 30% of the population live on less than US\$1 per day and that, on average, four people live on one person's earnings.

In avenues of health, Bangladesh is also making some progress though a lot still remains to be done. Bangladesh is one of the few developing countries on target to meet the Millennium Development Goals of reducing its under-five mortality rate to 51 per 1000 live births and reduce its maternal mortality ratio to 143 deaths per 100,000 live births by 2015. Since 1990, Bangladesh has halved its under-five mortality rate from 151 deaths per 1000 live births to 77. Diarrhoea is the leading killer of children in Bangladesh, while drowning accounts for 26% of deaths.

Child labour remains a problem in Bangladesh, despite official denials (see above).

Family

The extended family forms the basis of social and economic life in Bangladesh and remains a cornerstone, despite the recent shift towards nuclear families. The head of the household assumes much of the responsibility and provides for parents, children and other relatives. All may occupy one house or compound area, establishing separate kitchens as the family grows and more independence is sought. Almost all marriages are arranged and when a son marries, his wife is brought to the family home and assumes the duties outlined by her mother-in-law. The family is a tightly knit group, not only for economic and protective reasons, but as a major centre for both recreational and social activities.

Though rural lifestyles have remained largely unchanged for millennia, the small urban middle class live much like their Western counterparts. Young people from richer families are under great pressure to get a good education at a prestigious university.

POPULATION

In July 2007 the population of Bangladesh stood at around 150 million. Since then, it has grown by 1.34% per year, making it the seventh most populated country in the world. Though technically Bangladesh is *only* the fourth most densely populated country in the world, the three countries ahead of it (Monaco, Singapore and Malta) are all tiny city states and therefore Bangladesh, with 1090 people per sq km, is considered by many to be the most densely populated country in the world. By 2015 it's estimated that Bangladesh's population will be 181.5 million.

Despite these frightening figures, Bangladesh has done a reasonable job of reducing its birth rate. Where women in the 1970s were having around seven babies, today the average birth rate is 2.9.

Urbanisation is a big problem as job seekers flock to the cities. At the time of writing, around 25% of the population live in cities and this is expected to grow to 50% by 2025. Massive shanty towns exist on the fringes of the largest Bangladeshi cities and with the urban drift continuing, these will become an ever bigger problem for the government. The least populated area in the country is the Chittagong Hill Tracts, though the government is trying to change this with policies designed to promote an influx of Muslim Bangladeshis to the area. The population of this 13,180-sq-km area is estimated at between one and 1.5 million people.

There is much emigration to the Arab Gulf States and Western nations and this expatriate community, who often go for years without seeing their

*They Ask if we Eat
Frogs: Garo Ethnicity in
Bangladesh*, by Ellen Bal,
is a scholarly examination
of the life and society of
the Garo tribe from the
Mymensingh area.

A NOBEL BANK

Founded in 1976 by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, the Grameen Bank now operates services in virtually every village in Bangladesh (some 79,000 at the last count) and has provided micro credit to over seven million Bangladeshis.

Yunus opposes the traditional concept that a borrower must be educated to be risk-worthy and that micro-loans can't be profitable. He feels that if financial resources are available to poor, landless people at existing commercial terms, millions of small families with millions of small pursuits can create a development wonder.

Grameen Bank targets destitute women as Yunus believes that women are more reliable and tend to plough money into the needs of the family while men more often spend it on themselves. By the bank's statistics, the default rate is around 2% and it claims that about a third of the borrowers have crossed the poverty line.

Under the bank's lending formula, prospective borrowers form small groups who vet each others loan requests and ensure weekly paybacks. If one member fails to pay, the group receives no further loans; peer pressure tends to keep things straight.

The programme is not without its sceptics. The bank's claims are difficult to verify because of slow reporting. Its default rate calculation may be suspect; some say that by normal banking standards the rate would be much higher.

Repayment of loans begins after the first week; many borrowers complain that this is too limiting. Some don't know how they'll use the loan, but because the money is there and they're eligible, they accept it. Reportedly, some borrowers lie about the purpose of the loan and use it for personal reasons such as dowry demands.

In the past decade the bank has expanded its activities enormously and alongside various trusts and funds it also runs separate communications, energy, education and even knitwear businesses, all with the goal of helping the poor of Bangladesh.

There is little doubt that the Grameen Bank has become the most recognised Bangladeshi business on the world stage and there is equally little doubt that it has made a positive impact on millions of lives. It was thanks to this that in 2006 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the bank's founder, Muhammad Yunus and to the Grameen Bank itself.

family, send a significant proportion of their income back to Bangladesh. These remittances are an important part of the nation's economy.

RELIGION

Only Indonesia, Pakistan and India have a larger Muslim population than Bangladesh. Around 83% of Bangladeshis are Muslim, 16% are Hindu, leaving Christians and Buddhists to make up the remaining 1%.

Islam

Bangladesh's Muslim majority is almost entirely Sunni. Although there is a very small (but vocal) fundamentalist minority, the Liberation War – during which some fanatics collaborated with the Pakistanis because they believed that rebelling against Pakistan, the 'land of the pure', was a crime against Islam – affected the general attitude towards fundamentalist Islam.

On the Indian subcontinent, Islam was mostly spread by Sufis, followers of a branch of Islam from Central Asia. Sufism is a philosophy that holds that abstinence, self-denial and tolerance – even of other religions – are the route to union with God. Sufi missionaries were able to convert Hindus in Bangladesh with beliefs that have similarities to some branches of Hinduism. Major Sufi sects in Bangladesh include the Naqshbandhis, originally from Central Asia, and the Chishtis, which was founded in Ajmer, India.

Islamic fundamentalism, though present in Bangladesh, has not become the problem that it has in Pakistan, Indonesia or even India.

The Departed Melody by former Chakma chief and member of the legislative assembly Raja Tridiv Roy is an all-encompassing account of the history, culture and political dispossession of the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

TRIBAL PEOPLE

The tribal population of Bangladesh numbers almost one million. They generally live in the hilly regions north of Mymensingh, the Sylhet area, and more than 500,000 are concentrated in the wooded Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The major tribal groups living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are the Bengali-looking Chakma and the Burmese-looking Marma (or Maghs), who are also found in Cox's Bazar and the Khepupara region near Kuakata. Both these tribal groups are primarily Buddhist. These, and the other smaller tribes inhabiting this region, are sometimes collectively known as Jhumias, from *jhum*, their method of slash-and-burn agriculture. Despite their population size, the Chakma are not the original inhabitants of the area – that honour goes to the Mros, who traditionally live in fortified hilltop villages. The Mros have no written language of their own and though many claim to be Buddhist, a lot of their religious practises are in fact largely animistic.

The Garos (or Mandi, as they call themselves) are the largest group living in the hilly regions north of Mymensingh and the Garo Hills. Interestingly they have a higher literacy rate than Bengalis, yet few make it into higher education. They are said to number close to 100,000.

The tribes in the Mymensingh area were originally nomads from the eastern states of India and China, and those in the Chittagong Hill Tracts originate from Myanmar (Burma). They have distinct cultures, art, religious beliefs, superstitions, farming methods and attire.

Many of the tribes still have very little contact with the outside world, but as modern civilisation encroaches on their territories, more and more of the younger villagers are moving to urban areas for employment. The Chakmas, for instance, now make saris and tribal jewellery and have established, or joined, weaving industries. They have begun to accept Western education and clothing, and even use Western medicine in lieu of herbs and mantras.

Found within the broad racial group of the plains people, who make up the vast majority of Bangladeshis, are subgroups who, although apparently integrated into the culture, continue to pursue strikingly different lives. The Bauls, for example, are wandering beggar-minstrels, whose sexual freedom and fondness for *bhong* (marijuana) are abhorred by the mainstream, but they are good musicians and are welcomed at weddings and parties.

BEHAVIOUR IN MOSQUES

One person's tourist attraction is another person's place of worship, so it is important to respect religious etiquette.

You may not be permitted to enter a mosque either because you are a non-Muslim or female (or perhaps both). Sometimes you may simply have to forgo close inspection during prayer times. If in doubt, ask, and be respectful of the answer.

If you *are* granted admittance, behave with appropriate solemnity and decorum. Displays of affection are highly inappropriate, as is smoking. Never step over or walk in front of someone praying. Ask permission before taking photographs.

A way of showing respect and increasing your chance of gaining entry is by dressing appropriately. Women, if not wearing a *salwar kameez* (a long, dress-like tunic over baggy trousers), should at least wear long pants, long sleeves and a headscarf. Shorts and singlets are inappropriate for men. Both sexes should take care not to rock up in dirty and/or tatty clothing.

Hinduism

The Hindu minority was persecuted during the Pakistani era, but since 1971, relations between Hindus and Muslims have by and large been peaceful. One notable exception was in 1992, when the destruction of India's Babri mosque by Hindu fanatics unleashed a wave of violence against Bangladeshi Hindus. Since Partition in 1947, many Hindus have fled to India.

Buddhism

Buddhists today are mostly tribal people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. A small ethnic Bangladeshi community also exists. The once-flourishing Buddhist culture faded under pressure from Hinduism before the arrival of Islam (see p19), but its influence lingered in the styles of sculpture and the generally relaxed way of life.

Christianity

Although there is a small Christian population, mostly descendants of Portuguese traders, there is quite a strong Christian presence courtesy of foreign aid organisations and missionary groups. Since overt proselytising is forbidden by the government, these groups focus on providing aid and serving Christians in the community, rather than attempting to make converts.

WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

One thing you may notice quite quickly is the absence of women on the streets and in the marketplaces. All the shopkeepers, produce sellers and hawkers are men, and the outright majority of those doing the buying, the tea sipping, and the standing around are men.

Strict *purdah* (the practice of keeping women in seclusion in keeping with the Quranic injunction to guard women's modesty and purity) is not widely observed in Bangladesh. It is sometimes found in middle- to lower-class families, who tend to be the most conservative element of society, but most of the poorer segment cannot afford the luxury of idle females. The generally progressive upper class, with the benefit of an urban education, consider themselves too sophisticated to put up with it. Even in the absence of *purdah*, however, cultural tradition and religious custom serve to keep women 'under wraps', and relationships between men and women outside of the family are very formal.

The birth of a daughter is met with less fanfare than that of a son. Though there has been a massive increase in the amount of girls attending school in the past few years (now 85% of male and female children attend primary

On the Brink in Bengal, by Francis Rolt, is an out-of-print travelogue focusing on the author's encounters with the minority tribal populations in and around the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The annual *Biswa Jtama*, an international Muslim gathering second in size only to the haj (pilgrimage) to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, is held on the outskirts of Dhaka, usually in January.

Bangla2000 (www.bangla2000.com) is a popular portal to news, entertainment, sport, business and lifestyle links.

TASLIMA NASRIN & THE POLITICS OF SHAME

Dubbed the 'Salman Rushdie of Bangladesh', Taslima Nasrin became Bangladesh's most internationally famous writer with the publication of her book *Lajja* (Shame) in 1993.

Lajja is the fictional story of the Dutta family, Bangladeshi Hindus victimised by Islamic extremists. It's based on the real-life destruction of the Babri mosque in India in 1992 by Hindu extremists, which unleashed a wave of religious violence in India and Bangladesh that left hundreds dead. *Lajja* details the atrocities committed against an innocent minority, and the Dutta's indignation at being branded second-class citizens in their own country.

Born in 1962, Nasrin started writing at the age of 15. Over the years she has written seven novels and numerous short stories, essays, poems and newspaper articles. She first drew the ire of Islamic extremists in 1990 in a series of newspaper features where she criticised some Islamic statutes, described herself as an atheist and called the Quran obsolete. Nasrin has since said, 'I don't believe in the Quran...I've called for the abolition of Quranic law on the grounds that it is a discriminatory law which oppresses women in Bangladesh'.

When *Lajja* was first published it caused a storm – huge street protests by Islamic militants calling for her death took place, hartals (strikes) were held in support of her arrest, and some Islamic clerics declared a fatwa (death sentence for blasphemy) against her. Rather than acting to protect her, Begum Khaleda Zia's government banned the book in Bangladesh, confiscated her passport and put out an arrest warrant for her. With the help of various humanitarian organisations in the West, Nasrin eventually managed to flee to Europe in 1994, where she was awarded the prestigious Sakharov prize for freedom of thought.

Nasrin returned to Bangladesh in September 1998 to be with her cancer-stricken mother and her arrival relit the protests. Further fatwas were issued, as were further arrest warrants on the basis of 'hurting people's religious feelings'. She was eventually forced out of Bangladesh again and fled to India, but life hardly improved for her there. In March 2007, the All India Ittehad Millat Council offered 500,000 rupees for her beheading, while in August 2007 she was attacked during a book launch in the Indian city of Hyderabad. In March 2008 she was forced out of India and went into hiding in an undisclosed location in western Europe.

For more about Nasrin see her website <http://taslimanasrin.com/>.

school compared to 46% in 1991). Despite this, only around 31% of women are literate (compared to 54% of men). Most marriages are arranged by parents, and in rural villages the general marriageable age for girls is well below the legal minimum of 18 years.

Poorer Bangladeshi women bear the brunt of many of the country's problems. Numerous pregnancies, hard work and a poor diet mean that many women suffer ill health. Among the wealthier classes, a high number of women go to university and there are many professional women.

There are a number of development projects that are directed at women's concerns. These focus on training programmes about health care and legal representation and are intended to foster independence and self-sufficiency. There are also signs that the government is taking women's rights increasingly seriously. In response to increased public anger over violence against women, the government introduced a law in 2002 making acid attacks (usually committed by family members over marital disputes) punishable by death. There is still a long way to go though, as was demonstrated in early 2008 when male protestors took to the streets to air their grievances over a new law entitling women to the same inheritance rights as men.

MEDIA

The press in Bangladesh is relatively free. Newspaper ownership and content are not subject to government restriction and there are hundreds of daily and weekly publications, mostly in Bengali. However, the government does seek to influence newspapers through the placement of its advertis-

Scout around the superb website of the Sustainable Development Networking Programme (www.sdnbd.org) for detailed information on poverty, environmental, women's and tribal issues in Bangladesh.

ing, and media-rights organisation, Reporters Without Borders, reports that journalists are targeted by Islamists and Maoist groups as well as government politicians.

There are eight English-language daily newspapers. The ones with the most international news and, reputedly, the most unbiased reporting are the *Daily Star* and the *Independent*. The *Bangladesh Observer* is also fairly good, as is *New Age*. Satellite TV has revolutionised local TV viewing habits and there are now nearly more channels than you can handle (though still rarely anything to watch!). These are mostly entertainment channels from India such as the various Star channels (films, music) and Zee TV, but you'll also find CNN, Discovery, BBC and other European channels.

The national government TV broadcaster is BTV. You may prefer an early night than an evening spent with this channel, though it does have nightly news in English, as does Radio Bangladesh. Satellite channel ATN Bangla is the biggest private TV channel in Bangladesh. Check local newspapers for broadcast times.

SPORT

Cricket is enormously popular in Bangladesh, and Indian satellite TV broadcasts it practically nonstop. In 2000 Bangladesh earned Test and one-day international status, but maybe an even more momentous event in Bangladeshi cricket occurred in 1999 when the national team qualified for the World Cup and became national heroes by beating Pakistan. This rare victory was the cause of national rejoicing, and the prime minister described it as the greatest day in the country's history.

Though not as popular as in other parts of the world, Bangladeshis enjoy their football (soccer) more than most people on the subcontinent. It goes without saying that Manchester United are far and away the most popular team (yawn, yawn). Most big premiership and international matches are shown on TV.

The national sport of Bangladesh is kabaddi, in which two teams battle each other by capturing members of the opposing team. The 'raider' enters the opposition's half and has to 'tag' as many opponents as he can, while continuously chanting 'kabaddi-kabaddi' to prove he is not taking any breaths. If the opposing team manages to detain the raider in its half until he takes another breath, the raider is declared out.

Women don't play much sport, except for badminton, which is one of the country's most popular sports.

ARTS

The people of the Bengal region share a similarity of language, dress, music and literature across the national boundaries. Weaving, pottery and terracotta sculpture are some of the earliest forms of artistic expression and the necessities of clothing and cooking utensils also provided a medium for aesthetic creation.

Literature, too, had an early place. Hindu and Buddhist translations and local mythology were preceded by theatre groups, whose rural wanderings date back 2000 years.

Architecture

The oldest and most basic Bangladeshi building style is *bangla*. A classic example of this 2500-year-old style is the bamboo-thatched hut with a distinctively curved roof, still seen in villages today.

Of remaining ancient architectural styles, most are religious. The oldest of these are the Buddhist structures built between the 4th and 7th centuries.

Sirajul Islam's multi-volume *Banglapedia* covers history, politics, culture and government. This complete library will adorn the bookshelf but encumber the backpack. Fortunately it's available in a no-frills online form at <http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/>.

Expatriate Games – 662 days in Bangladesh, by Mark Trenowden, takes this popular genre away from the wine-filled clichés in the south of France to the noise-filled days in Dhaka.

These generally consisted of a square plinth surmounted by a circular plinth and topped by a dome, which tapered off sharply near the top – this was known as the Gupta style. The great brick temples and monasteries at Mahasthangarh (p103), Comilla (p142) and Paharpur (p104) all date from this period.

The earliest surviving Hindu buildings are the tall, god-lined towers (that are still built in southern India today). A perfect 18th-century example of this can be seen in Puthia (p117), while the Kantanagar temple (p111) near Dinajpur is a good example of home-grown Hindu temple architecture.

When the Muslims first arrived in the area that is now Bangladesh they set about creating mosques so stunning that modern Bangladeshi architecture has been hard pushed to catch up. Of particular note are the mosques of the Turkistan Khiljis period (13th to 15th centuries), including the famous Shait Gumbad Mosque (p89) near Bagerhat and the Goaldi Mosque (p72) at Sonargaon. From 1576 to 1757 the Mughals ruled Bengal and altered the simple design of preceding Muslim architecture, without following the traditional designs employed in India. The best examples are Dhaka's Lalbagh Fort (p53) and Sat Gumbad Mosque (p58).

Once the British arrived on the scene, the art of religious architecture was largely thrown out the window and energy was focused instead on grandiose public buildings and palaces. The Hindu rajbaris – the generic name for palaces built by the zamindar (feudal landowners) – are a uniquely Bengali construction from this period. Although rajbaris are essentially very large Georgian or Victorian country houses, the cosmopolitan ideas of their owners were often expressed in a barrage of neo-Renaissance features, creating a mixture of styles. Many rajbaris are in ruins after being vacated at Partition in 1947.

Most public structures built during the British era combined Renaissance and Mughal styles. Examples of this include Curzon Hall (p55) at Dhaka University, and Carmichael College (p106) in Rangpur.

Many government circuit houses resemble the British bungalow style, with high-pitched corrugated-iron roofs and low verandas.

Modern architecture has been less kind to Bangladesh with the most notable modern building being the very '70s style National Assembly building (p58), designed by American architect Louis Kahn to incorporate bold geometrical patterns. The orthodox Islamic architecture of Baitul Mukarram Mosque (p55) is interpreted with very sharp and spare lines.

Literature

Best known in the literature of Bangladesh are the works of the great Bengali poets Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976), whose photos are displayed in restaurants and shops countrywide. Tagore received international acclaim in 1913 when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for his book *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings). Despite his Hindu upbringing, Tagore wrote from a strong cultural perspective that transcended any particular religion. He celebrated 'humble lives and their miseries' and supported the concept of Hindu-Muslim unity. His love for the land of Bengal is reflected in many of his works, and a portion of the lyrics in one of his poems was adopted as the national anthem.

The 'rebel poet' and composer Kazi Nazrul Islam is considered the national poet. When the country was suffering under colonial rule, Islam employed poetry to challenge intellectual complacency and spark feelings of nationalism.

Of modern writers, the most famous by far is the exiled feminist writer Taslima Nasrin (see p30).

Get down with the kids at www.banglamusic.com and learn all about the happenings in the world of Bangla pop.

Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Interpreter of Maladies* covers the theme of emigration and displacement amongst Bangladeshis.

NAKSHI KANTHA

Once only found among a woman's private possessions, *nakshi kanthas* (embroidered quilts) can be seen in Bangladesh hanging on the walls of upmarket hotels, offices and in museums. The humble but indigenous *nakshi kantha* has become an artistic symbol, not just of Bangladeshi women but the nation as well.

Traditionally, *nakshi kantha*-making was mostly done in the central and western divisions of Bangladesh. They are made from worn-out clothing, particularly saris, and six or so layers of material are stitched together in a way that leaves a rippled surface. They are often given as wedding gifts to a daughter leaving home, or to a grown son as a reminder of his mother. Besides the usefulness of recycling old material, there is also a folk belief that a *nakshi kantha* made from old material brings good luck. The jealous gods won't harm someone dressed in rags – infants are often dressed in *nakshi kantha* nappies for this reason.

Nakshi kanthas share many motifs with another female art form, the ground drawings made with powder called 'alpanas'. Alpanas have a long connection to religious rites held to bring rain, protect families, celebrate the harvest and secure a successful new rice sowing. The lotus symbol, often the central symbol, evokes both sun and water. The plant opens as the sun rises and, seemingly dead in the dry season, revives as soon as the water rises. The tree-of-life motif is an ancient fertility symbol. In one ritual, a newlywed couple plant a banana sapling to mark their new life together. Patterns made of twined leaves relate back to the tree-of-life. Images of fish and rolling waves reflect the dominance of the rivers on the Bangladeshi landscape.

There are women's cooperatives that produce *nakshi kantha* commercially. One good place to look is Aarong in Dhaka (p66).

Folk Art

Weaving has always held a special place in the artistic expression of the country. In the 7th century, the textiles of Dhaka weavers found their way to Europe, where they were regarded as *textiles ventalis* (fabrics woven of air).

The most artistic and expensive ornamental fabric is the *jamdani* (loom-embroidered muslin or silk), which was exclusively woven for the imperial household centuries ago and evolved as an art form under the influence of Persian design.

Needlework has become a cottage industry. Most well known are *nakshi kantha* (see above), embroidered and quilted patchwork cloths that hold an important place in village life, with the embroidery recording local history and myth. There are women's cooperatives that produce *nakshi kantha* commercially.

Modern Art

The paintings on rickshaws and trucks, the most pervasive form of popular culture, are purveyors of history and myth (see boxed text, p34).

The turbulence of life in Bangladesh has given artists much to express, which they do with wondrous artistry and diversity. The Shilpakala Academy (p65), just next to the National Museum in Dhaka, showcases some of the finest contemporary work. The Osmani Auditorium (p65) also has good examples, such as Zianul Abedin's powerful depictions of famine, while the National Museum (p55) has a section devoted to modern Bangladeshi art.

Cinema

Dhaka, or Dhallywood as the local movie fanzines call it, has a thriving film industry that produces 150 to 200 films annually. Every commercial movie follows the immortal formula of romance, comedy, violence and song-and-dance, often spliced together in ways gloriously free of Western

The Art of Kantha Embroidery, by Naiz Zaman, uses drawings and photographs to explain the technique of *nakshi kantha* and give a face to the women involved in its production.

Get with the stars at www.dallywood.com profiling all the big names in Bangladeshi cinema and offering a brief historical analysis.

RICKSHAW ART

Your first and last impression of Bangladesh is likely to be the rainbow colours of a cycle rickshaw. More than just a cheap and environmentally sound form of transport, the humble rickshaw is a work of art and a fleet of rickshaws the finest art gallery Bangladesh can conjure up. Art passing by on wheels needs to be bold and eye-catching, and able to be taken in quickly. Rickshaw artists aim to decorate the vehicles with as much drama and colour as possible, and paint images that are both simple and memorable. This is street art for the ordinary man, and it is unashamedly commercial.

Maliks, the owners of rickshaw fleets, commission *mistris* (rickshaw makers) to build and decorate the machines to their specification. The artists working in the *mistris*' workshop learn on the job, sometimes starting out as young as 10, when they work decorating the upholstery and smaller sections of the vehicle.

The main 'canvas' is recycled tin, from a drum of cooking oil for example. This forms the backboard of the rickshaw. Enamel paints are used. The artist may also decorate the seat, handlebars, the curved back of the seat, the chassis, the hood, and just about every other surface. The handlebar decorations in particular can be wildly elaborate, with intricate coloured plastic tassels 20cm long.

All the dreams of the working man appear on rickshaws. Common themes include idealised rural scenes; wealthy cities crammed with cars, aeroplanes and high-rise buildings; unsullied natural environments; and dream homes with sports cars parked outside. Images of Bangladeshi and Indian film and pop stars are by far the most popular designs. The portraits often make the actors plumper than in real life – a slim figure isn't a fantasy when so many go hungry. The images of women with heart-stopping stares are a great contrast to the real women on the street, who by custom avoid eye contact with unfamiliar men.

Another theme is animals behaving as humans. Many are just playful: birds playing music, or lions, tigers and deer dancing and singing in a wedding procession. Others have coded messages, such as a fat lion sitting in the back of the rickshaw roaring at a skinny pedal-pushing deer, or a tiger (Bangladesh?) feasting on a cow (India?).

In the more pious Muslim towns such as Sylhet and Maijdi, rickshaw paintings have fewer human or animal figures, due to the Islamic injunction against depicting living creatures. In their place appear landscapes and religious imagery such as crescent moons and stars, Arabic calligraphy, Mecca and the Taj Mahal. Islamic green is the main colour used on these rickshaws. For a short time Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein were seen grinning off the back of some rickshaws, though their popularity seems to have rapidly diminished.

Mass-produced photographic images of film stars applied to the backboard are increasingly challenging the hand-painted art, especially in Dhaka. The rise of motorised traffic in the big cities is another threat to the non-polluting rickshaw industry. Some people say that nowadays the smaller towns of Mymensingh and Tangail have the freshest and most original rickshaws tinkling by on the streets.

notions of plot continuity. Given the ban on anything sexually explicit, movie makers are pushing the boundaries of what sexually implicit entails. They may not be high art but they are certainly entertaining, both for the audience participation and the fact that an understanding of Bengali probably wouldn't make them any less obscure.

Environment

THE LAND

First, let's state the obvious – Bangladesh is flat and wet; very flat and very wet. The two exceptions to this are the hills around Sylhet, which mark the beginnings of the hills of Assam, and the steep mountains of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which run along the Myanmar (Burma) border. In fact, in a country as famous for being flat as Bangladesh is, it might come as something of a surprise to learn that the highest peak in the country (1230m-high Mt Keokradang in the Chittagong Hill Tracts) is only 100m lower than the highest peak in Scotland.

Bangladesh has a total area of 143,998 sq km, roughly the same size as England and Wales combined. It is surrounded to the west, northwest and east by India, and shares a southeastern border with Myanmar for 283km. To the south is the Bay of Bengal.

The great Himalayan rivers, the Ganges and Brahmaputra, divide the land into six major regions which correspond to the six governmental divisions: northwest (Rajshahi), southwest (Khulna), south-central (Barisal), central (Dhaka), northeast (Sylhet) and southeast (Chittagong).

Almost all the Bangladesh coastline forms the Mouths of the Ganges, the final destination of the Ganges River, and the largest estuarine delta in the world. The coastal strip from the western border to Chittagong is one great patchwork of shifting river courses and little islands. Over the whole delta area, which extends into India, the rivers make up 6.5% of the total area.

In all of Bangladesh, the only place that has any stone is a quarry in the far northwestern corner of Sylhet division, bordering India. That is one reason you will see bricks being hammered into pieces all over the country: the brick fragments are substituted for stones when making concrete.

Ganges, the 2007 BBC TV series and DVD, is a sumptuously filmed exploration of the Ganges River, its people and its wildlife. The last programme in the series focuses largely on the Sundarbans.

WATER WORLD

Floods are almost the first thing that people think of when talk turns to Bangladesh, but even so, if you arrive by air during the monsoon season, you'll be astounded at how much of the country appears to be under water – around 70%. And this will probably be just the normal flooding that occurs. When there is a *real* flood, even the fish start to feel a little out of their depth! Many first-time visitors to Bangladesh assume that the flooding is due to heavy rainfall during that time of year. In fact, local rainfall is only partly responsible – most of the water comes pouring down the Padma (known as the Ganges upstream in India), the Meghna and the Jamuna (Brahmaputra) Rivers.

For Bangladeshis, annual flooding is a fact of life and one that, with an ever-increasing population, bad land management and global climate change, is only likely to get worse. However, much of the flooding (which affects about a third of the country) is regarded by farmers as beneficial, as worn soils are replenished with nutrients. It's when the rivers rise above their normal limits that problems arise.

Major flooding struck northwest Bangladesh and Chittagong in 2007, but in 2004 really heavy flooding over much of the country resulted in the deaths of around 800 people, while in 1998 all three of the country's major rivers reached flood levels at the same time and 16 million people were left homeless. In Dhaka, even houses on fairly high ground were inundated, and Zia airport was covered with water and had to be shut down.

WILDLIFE

Animals

Bangladesh is home to the Royal Bengal tiger and other members of the cat family including leopards and the smaller jungle cat. Tigers are almost exclusively confined to the Sundarbans, but their smaller relations prey on domestic animals all over the country. There are three varieties of civet, including the large Indian civet, which is now listed as an endangered species. Other large animals include Asiatic elephants (mostly migratory herds from Bihar), a few black bears in Chittagong division, wild pigs and deer. Monkeys, langurs, gibbons (the only ape on the subcontinent), otters and mongooses are some of the smaller animals.

Reptiles include various ocean turtles, mud turtles, river tortoise, pythons, crocodiles and a variety of venomous snakes. The voluble gecko, named for the sound it makes, is known here as *tik-tiki*.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

The Royal Bengal tiger is endangered and although the government has set aside three areas within the Sundarbans as tiger reserves (see p93), numbers are low.

Other rare or threatened species include the Indian elephant, the hoolock gibbon, the black bear and the Ganges River dolphin. Reptiles under threat include the Indian python, the crocodile and various turtles.

Many of the diverse bird species are prolific, but some are vulnerable, including Pallas' fishing eagle and Baer's pochard.

The Sundarbans Tiger Project (www.sundarbans-tigerproject.info) tells you all you ever wanted to know about tigers, the Sundarbans and the on-going conservation projects taking place there.

BIRD-WATCHING

Sitting like a cushion between the plains of India, the hills of Myanmar (Burma) and just a mere Yeti's footstep from the Himalaya, the waterways of Bangladesh are a bird-watchers dream. The country contains more than 650 species of birds – almost half of those found on the entire subcontinent.

The country's positioning means that Bangladesh attracts both Indian species in the west and north of the country, and Malayan species in the east and southeast. It is also conveniently located for migrants heading south towards Malaysia and Indonesia, and those moving southwest to India and Sri Lanka. In addition, there are a number of Himalayan and Burmese hill species that move into the lowlands during the winter.

The plundered Madhupur National Park (p77) is an important habitat for a variety of owls, including the rare brown wood owl, wintering thrushes and a number of raptors. The Jamuna River floods regularly, and from December to February provides winter habitats for waterfowl, waders and the occasional black stork.

The low-lying basin of Sylhet division has extensive natural *haors* (wetlands), and during winter it is home to huge flocks of wild fowl, including Baer's pochard and Pallas' fishing eagle, along with a great number of ducks and skulkers. The remaining fragments of evergreen and teak forests are also important habitats, especially along the Indian border near the Srimangal area, where the blue-bearded bee-eater, red-breasted trogon and a variety of forest birds are regularly seen.

One of two important coastal zones is the Noakhali region, particularly the islands near Hatiya, where migratory species and a variety of wintering waders (including large numbers of the rare spoon-billed sandpiper, Nordman's greenshank and flocks of Indian skimmers) find suitable refuge.

The Sundarbans (p92), with its miles of marshy shorelines and brackish creeks, supports a number of wetland and forest species, along with large populations of gulls and terns along the south coast. Eight varieties of kingfisher have been recorded here, including the brown-winged, the white-collared, the black-capped and the rare ruddy kingfisher.

The most exciting time of year for bird-watching is during winter, from November to March.

Plants

About 10% of Bangladesh is still forested. Half of the forest is in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and a quarter in the Sundarbans, with the rest scattered in small pockets throughout the country.

The forests fall into three distinct regional varieties: the tidal zones along the coast, often mangrove but sometimes hardwood, in much of the Sundarbans; the sal trees around Dhaka, Tangail and Mymensingh; and the upland forests of tropical and subtropical evergreens in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and parts of Sylhet.

Away from the forests, Bangladesh is still a land of trees. Lining the old trunk road in the west are huge rain trees, and every village is an arboreal oasis, often with spectacular *oshot* (banyan) trees. The red silk-cotton (kapok) tree is easily spotted throughout the countryside in February and March, when it loses its leaves and sprouts myriad red blossoms. Teak was introduced into the Hill Tracts in the 19th century and the quality approaches that of Myanmar.

Flowering plants are an integral part of the beauty of Bangladesh. Each season produces its special variety of flowers. Among them is the prolific water hyacinth, its carpet of thick green leaves and blue flowers giving the impression that solid ground lies underneath. Other decorative plants that grow easily are jasmine, water lily, rose, hibiscus, bougainvillea, magnolia and an incredible diversity of wild orchids in the forested areas.

NATIONAL PARKS & FOREST RESERVES

For many years, conservation has been on the back burner in government circles, but at last the government has woken up to its immense natural wealth and in recent years several new parks have opened, and old ones have had security, facilities and care beefed up.

Bhawal National Park (p74) Comprising regrowth sal forest and open picnic spots. There are a few walking trails, and its proximity to Dhaka makes it a popular escape from the city.

Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary (p139) An easy-to-visit region of semi-open coastal forest and grassland that is home to wild Asian elephants. There are walking trails and viewing platforms.

Lowacherra National Park (p154) A beautiful tropical forest containing diverse insect and bird life and a number of primates. The park has walking trails, tribal villages and eco guides, and is one of the most rewarding and easiest national parks to visit.

Madhupur National Park (p77) A degraded sal and mixed forest with some remaining old growth. A fascinating place, with plenty of wildlife and increasingly easy to visit.

Rema Kalenga Wildlife Sanctuary (p156) The least visited of the three protected forests around Srimangal, but its walking trails reveal a wealth of wildlife.

Satchari National Park (p156) A virtual continuation of the Lowacherra National Park, but the tropical evergreen forest here is less frequently visited. Has several walking trails, and is an excellent park for bird-watching and primates.

Sundarbans National Park (p92) The finest natural area in the country, mostly due to its impenetrable jungle and maze of rivers. Located in the southern half of the Khulna division, it's part of the world's largest mangrove forest and home to the world's largest population of Bengal tigers.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Bangladesh faces huge environmental problems, but having turned a blind eye for years the government is finally starting to implement plans and ideas that we could all learn from.

Starting with the bad news (which usually boils down to over-population): farmland soils are being damaged by overuse, rivers are being polluted by chemical pesticides and forests are being chopped down at an alarming rate. The water table is under threat as deep tube-wells extract clean water for drinking.

The world's single surviving wild *Corypha taliera* Roxab palm tree grows in the grounds of Dhaka University.

Wild buffaloes and rhinoceroses once inhabited the Sundarbans, but became extinct last century.

Bird-watchers will enjoy *A Photographic Guide to the Birds of India & the Indian Subcontinent* by Bikram Grewal and Bill Harvey. It has useful maps and pictures, and is compact enough to take with you.

The Sustainable Development Networking Programme (www.sdnbd.org) is one of the most valuable sources for environmental, agricultural, social and developmental information.

Annual flooding during the monsoonal season is part of life in Bangladesh. Some experts are questioning whether the flooding is getting worse, and, if so, whether deforestation in India and especially Nepal (which causes increased runoff), is the reason. Another theory holds that the river beds have become choked with silt from once-forested land, making flooding more severe. Regardless, there has been increased pressure to 'do something' and find a 'permanent solution'. Part of the problem of doing anything, however, is that the country depends on regular flooding for its soil fertility, and simply building massive dykes along river banks could be disastrous for agricultural output.

With the continuance of global warming, Bangladesh, as one of the 10 countries most vulnerable to a rise in sea level, will be drastically affected. And, if predications are correct, a 1m rise in the Bay of Bengal would result in a loss of 12% to 18% of the country's land.

Loss of land is just one consequence – severe flooding and reduced agricultural potential are almost inevitable. This is indeed a cruel twist of fate, since Bangladesh, as a poor, agricultural society, has contributed very little to global warming. Even with assistance from the Dutch, who are helping to devise a strategy to cope with rising water levels, the question remains whether Bangladesh will have the capacity to develop and apply the appropriate technology.

However, there is some good news. Bangladesh is now taking environmental issues very seriously and has implemented policies that should make richer Western nations cringe in embarrassment that they haven't adopted them. Responding to the high levels of litter, much of which was plastic, Bangladesh has become one of the first countries to almost completely ban plastic bags. The only places you will see plastic bags are where there are no viable alternatives for carrying certain goods. Everywhere else, goods are now packaged in paper or jute bags (so also supporting the local jute industry).

The government has also taken steps to reduce the horrendous pollution levels in Dhaka – caused largely by vehicle emissions – by banning all petrol and diesel vehicles from the capital and replacing them with cleaner, greener (and cheaper to run) CNG (compressed natural gas) vehicles. This has worked so well that the project has been extended to Chittagong and, with the amount of CNG fuel stations multiplying rapidly across the

ARSENIC POISONING

As if war, floods and famine weren't tumultuous enough for Bangladesh, the 1970s also marked the beginning of its exposure to arsenic poisoning.

In the early 1970s people were relying on ponds and rivers for drinking water. The lack of sanitation at these sources was killing around 250,000 children annually. To address this, NGOs instigated massive tube-well projects to tap into underground water sources but, in doing so, neglected to test arsenic levels in the water. The presence of arsenic is a natural phenomenon, likely originating from the Himalayan headwaters of the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers. Bangladesh's special receptivity to dangerously high levels of arsenic has been attributed to its high quantity of arsenic-absorbing mud.

The battle over who is to blame for this crisis rages on. Meanwhile, more people than anyone seems to be able to count are dying every year. The social impact of this manifests itself in ostracism of affected people – children are turned away from school, and women are divorced and deserted. Physical symptoms (which often only show after a decade or so of drinking poisoned water) often begin with blisters on palms and soles, which may later become cancerous.

Needless to say, when you buy bottled water, always check that it reads 'arsenic free' and that the seal is unbroken.

THE CYCLONE ZONE

Every few years it seems Bangladesh is hit by another disaster. While there are periodic floods and droughts, the most catastrophic disaster in terms of human life are cyclones.

Bangladesh is in the world's worst area for cyclones, averaging one major storm every three years. The worst months are May and June, and October and November, and the area where damage tends to most frequently occur is in the east around Chittagong and Cox's Bazar.

People still talk about the 1970 cyclone when between 300,000 and 500,000 people died. The 1991 cyclone, which occurred during big spring tides, was stronger, affected over twice as many people and destroyed four times as many houses. However, the death toll of between 140,000 and 200,000 was less than half that of the 1970 disaster.

Halfway through the research period for this book, Cyclone Sidr, the strongest storm in 15 years, struck the southwest coast and left 3500 people dead. It's generally acknowledged that the death toll would have been far higher were it not for the early warning system that was installed after the 1991 storm.

Another major reason for the reduction of fatalities was the presence of storm shelters, a number of which were constructed since 1970. Some are multi-functional, serving as schools as well as shelters, though in the investigation following Sidr it was discovered that many of shelters had fallen into such a state of disrepair as to have been unusable. Others were occupied by 'criminal elements'.

country, it will hopefully come into effect across the nation within the lifetime of this book.

Finally, the government has created a number of new national parks in the past couple of years and have stepped up environmental education for the public. All this makes Bangladesh a country that should be lauded for its environmental awareness, and shows that there is hope for the rest of the world!

Food & Drink

The fiery curries and delicately flavoured biryanis that make up so much of Bangladeshi cuisine will keep your taste buds drooling throughout your adventures in this country. Bengalis (both in Bangladesh and India's West Bengal) consider their food to be the most refined in the subcontinent and though this causes debate, everyone is in agreement that Bengali sweets truly are the finest you can dip your sticky fingers into. Chinese food has made its presence strongly felt, with decent Chinese restaurants popping up in all but the most obscure places.

Bengali Cooking: Seasons & Festivals, by Chitrita Banerji and Deborah Madison, has the approval of Bengali food aficionados. It contains a smorgasbord of recipes and authoritative insights into the historical and cultural role of Bengali food.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Thanks to its small size, it's no real surprise to learn that Bangladeshi food is not nearly as varied as that of its neighbours and, out in the rural sticks, many dishes begin to look and taste the same after a while. If you are arriving from India you will quickly notice that meat forms a much more important part of the daily diet than in Hindu India – you will also find that in most places the level of hygiene is higher! A typical Bangladeshi meal includes a curry made with vegetables and either beef, mutton, chicken, fish or egg, cooked in a hot spicy sauce with mustard oil and served with *dahl* (cooked yellow lentils) and plain rice. Rice is considered a higher-status food than bread – therefore, at people's homes you will generally be served rice.

Many menus refer to *bhuna* (or *bhoona*), which is the delicious process of cooking spices in hot oil and is the basis for many Bangladeshi dishes. It also refers to a specific type of dry curry cooked in coconut milk (more common in India than Bangladesh). Another common dish is *dopiaza* (literally 'double onions'), which, as the name suggests, contains large amounts of onion added to the curry in two separate stages. Finding purely vegetarian dishes can be quite difficult because in Bangladesh meat is highly prized. Ask for *bhaji* which, as well as being a ball of fried vegetables (such as the onion *bhaji*) is also a general term for a simple vegetable curry. A mixed vegetable dish would be *shobji bhaji*. At fancy dinners an all-vegetarian meal would not be well received.

The three main forms of rice dishes that you're likely to encounter are biryani, *pula* (also known as *polao*), which is similar to biryani but without the meat, and *bhat* (plain rice). Rice and lentils mixed together and cooked is called *khichuri* and is perfect for upset tummies. In restaurants, chicken tikka is also common and usually served with Indian-style naan (slightly puffed wholewheat bread cooked in a tandoori oven).

Fish is every Bangladeshi's favourite meal. Traditionally it's all been about freshwater fish and most Bangladeshis have long considered saltwater fish a poor cousin, but with the rivers and lakes becoming overfished, the Bengalis are reassessing their relationship with marine life.

The fish you are most likely to eat – boiled, smoked or fried – are *hilsa* and *bhetki*. These are virtually the national dishes of Bangladesh and it's said they can be prepared in around 50 different ways. Smoked *hilsa* is very good, but be prepared to pay five-star prices for it. *Bhetki* is a variety of sea bass with lots of flesh and few bones. It's one of the best fish you'll eat and is served in midrange restaurants along with prawn and crab dishes.

Beef is widely available, although the quality is low. Kebabs come in a wide variety including *shami kebab*, made with fried minced meat, and *shish kebab*, which is prepared with less spice and usually with mutton or beef.

The Book of Indian Sweets, by Satarupa Banerjee, is a godsend for those who develop a craving for *roshogullas* (a syrupy dessert) and other teeth-rotting Bengali treats.

Tea: Addiction, Exploitation and Empire, by Roy Moxham, is a sweeping and disturbing behind-the-scenes look at the tea industry. It reveals the blood that was spilt in Sylhet to make your cuppa.

A Bengali breakfast is usually *bhaji* or *dahl* on *rooti* (chapati). It's not always vegetarian, though – sometimes there's a lump of bone served on top.

The Bangladeshis have a sweet tooth, and there are many sugar-loaded desserts. One popular dessert is *misti doi* (sweetened yoghurt) and everyone loves jaggery, a fudge-like sweet made from sugarcane or date palm.

DRINKS

There are very few sources of drinking water in the country that are guaranteed to be safe. People in Dhaka are advised to boil and filter tap water. In a restaurant, even if the water comes from a tube well, it can easily be contaminated by the glass.

It's possible to buy bottled water nearly everywhere, but local newspapers have revealed that quite a few brands are made by companies that don't actually filter the water all the time. If the filter breaks, for example, they might choose not to jeopardise their business by stopping production. When buying bottled water from outdoor stalls, make sure that the plastic cap has not been tampered with in any way. Recycling takes many forms, including 'rebotling' water. See also boxed text on arsenic poisoning, p38.

Nonalcoholic Drinks

Maybe one of the best reasons for going to Bangladesh is for the milky sweet tea known as cha! Costing just Tk 2 or Tk 3 a cup and available everywhere, each cup is made individually (rather than stewing all day), meaning that it leaves the undeniably excellent Indian version for dead. It also means that it's no problem getting tea without sugar (say *chini na* or *chini sera*), but as sweetened condensed milk will be used it doesn't make much difference.

The magic words to get a pot of tea, usually with just one weak tea bag, are 'milk separate'. Miming a tea bag produces hilarity but not much else. Coffee is difficult to find and those who can't do without should consider buying a jar of the instant stuff in Dhaka.

International soft drinks, such as Pepsi, Coke and Sprite, are readily available throughout the country and cost between Tk 10 and Tk 20.

Fresh lime sodas are generally available at the better restaurants in Dhaka and at some of the top-end hotels outside Dhaka. Sometimes it's no more than antacid – highly recommended for an upset stomach.

Green coconut water is a safe and refreshing drink, and is helpful in treating diarrhoea. A whole young coconut costs about Tk 5.

Lassi, the refreshing yogurt drink found throughout India, is not as common in Bangladesh.

Alcoholic Drinks

Every major town has at least one government-owned shop selling alcohol, but they're invariably hidden in very discreet locations (to avoid upsetting Islamic sensibilities). The 'selection' is usually only hard liquor such as whisky. In Dhaka, Chittagong, Cox's Bazar and Teknaf you can sometimes find Asian whisky and cans of Heineken or Tiger beer sold on the sly; the price is at least Tk 160 per can.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Budget restaurants are all very similar; plain rooms where men shovel down rice, *dahl* and maybe a meat curry, as quickly as possible. In the cheapest places, notions of hygiene are pretty basic; extra rice might be served by hand, for instance. In low-end restaurants, it's rare to see women eating, but they are welcomed. Some restaurants have family rooms, often just a curtained

Bengalis use the pith of the banana tree as a vegetable.

There is no such thing as 'curry' – the word is a purely British invention taken from the Tamil word *kari* (black pepper) and used to describe any spicy dish.

Bengali Spice (www.bengalispice.com) is a well-maintained, colourful site with recipes and information for Bengali food lovers.

POTTY FOR PAAN

The red patches that coat walls and roads throughout Bangladesh aren't blood but the delicately disposed of remnants of *paan*. Ubiquitous throughout the subcontinent (though most people will be glad to hear that it's not quite as common in Bangladesh as India) *paan*, a melange of betel nut, lime paste and spices wrapped in an edible *paan* leaf, is the perfect finish to any meal. Sold by *paan-wallahs*, whose little stalls dot the streets of every town and city, *paan* is eaten as a digestive and breath-freshener (though as the teeth of heavy users are horribly rotten, we remain sceptical over breath-freshener claims!). The betel nut is mildly narcotic and many people get heavily addicted to it. In addition to its digestive properties, certain *paan* mixtures are said to enhance a man's performance where it counts – though we're yet to meet a woman who'll back this claim!

There are two basic types of *paan*: *mitha* (sweet) and *saadha* (mixed with tobacco). For an unaccustomed Westerner either form tastes very bitter, but if you want to partake just pop the parcel in your mouth and chew slowly. When you've had enough find a nice, freshly painted white wall and spit the blood-red mess onto it.

booth, where women and families are supposed to eat. These offer a welcome opportunity for both men and women to go 'off stage'.

In Dhaka you can also find excellent Indian, Thai, Chinese and Korean restaurants. Outside Dhaka, the only cuisine that you'll find besides Bangladeshi food is Chinese, or rather a Bangladeshi interpretation of Chinese, which you'll find everywhere, even in small towns. The prevalence of Chinese restaurants is something of a mystery, given that there are estimated to be only around 700 Chinese people in Bangladesh! Prices at these establishments typically start at Tk 100 a dish, but the cost can almost triple in Dhaka. For a foreign tourist, Chinese restaurants are something of a godsend – aside from the fact that you can finally get your jaws around something other than curry and rice, they also provide a handy escape from the hordes.

Quick Eats

Breads and biscuits are available everywhere, and in some small towns they might be all that you feel like eating. 'Salt' biscuits are usually not salty, just not the usual extremely sweet variety.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

The Bengali culinary tradition evolved on the basis of what was available and, given the scarcity of meat, vegetarianism was often necessary. This means that if you can make yourself understood, you should be able to find some delicious meatless meals. You may have to explain that by 'no meat' you mean any kind of animal, including fish, and that just a little bit isn't OK.

If in doubt you can always resort to fresh fruit, which isn't so poor a consolation, given the range. Major fruit-growing areas include the hilly fringes of Sylhet division, the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Rajshahi division.

Oranges and bananas are the most common fruits on sale in winter. Mango orchards along the banks of the Padma in Rajshahi division are said to grow the best mangoes.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Traditionally, Bengali meals are served on the floor. Each person sits on a *pati* (a small piece of straw carpet). In front of the *pati* is a large platter or banana leaf, around which bowls are placed.

Bengali Food on the Web
(www.angelfire.com/country/bengalifood/)
offers easy-to-find and easy-to-make recipes.

In a Bengali meal, flavours are usually fused by introducing the more delicate-tasting dishes first, followed by the stronger ones.

DOS & DON'TS

- It is courteous to use only the right hand to receive or give things. This is especially important when it comes to food. The left hand is considered unclean, given its use in the bathroom.
- You may break bread with both hands, but *never* put food into your mouth with the left.
- Water may be drunk from a glass with the left hand because it is not being directly touched.
- Always wash your hands before you eat – for the sake of courtesy as well as of hygiene.

For the uninitiated, eating in the proper Bengali fashion involves disregarding everything you've ever been taught about table manners. *Do* slurp, *do* burp and, above all, *do* play with your food. Eating with your hands is not only functional, but is also said to allow for an appreciation of textures before they are enjoyed by the tongue.

EAT YOUR WORDS

It's hard to get what you want if you can't explain what it is. For more on the Bengali language, including pronunciation tips, see the Language chapter (p190). See also the Menu Decoder (p44) for more Bengali terms.

Useful Phrases

Can you recommend a ... ?

café
restaurant

একটা ভাল ... কোথায়
হবে বলেন তো?
ক্যাফে/রেস্টুরায়া
রেস্তোরা

qk-ta b'a-lo ... koh-t'a-e
ho-be boh-len toh?
kq-fe-te-ri-a
res-toh-ra

**Where would you go
for (a) ... ?**

cheap meal
local specialities

...জন্য কোথায়
যাবো?
সস্তা খাবারের
এখানকার বিশেষ
খাবারের

john-no koh-t'a-e
ja-boh?
shos-ta-e k'a-ba-er
e-k'an-ka-r bi-shesh
k'a-ba-er

**I'd like to reserve a
table for ...**

(two) people
(eight) o'clock

রিজার্ভ করতে চাই।
...আমি একটা টেবিল
(দুই) জনের জন্য
(আটটার) সময়

aa-mi ... qk-ta te-bil
ri-zarv kohr-te chai
(dui) jo-ner john-no
(aat-tar) sho-moy

**What would you
recommend?**

What's in that dish?

আপনি কি খেতে
বলেন?
এই খাবারে কি কি
আছে?

aap-ni ki k'e-te
boh-len?
ei k'a-ba-re ki ki
aa-ch'e?

I'll have that.

I'm vegan.

আমি ওটা নিব।
আমি মাছ মাংস ডিম
দুধ খাই না।
আমি ভেজিটেরিয়ান।

aa-mi oh-ta ni-boh
aa-mi maach mang-shoh
dim dud' k'ai na
aa-mi ve-ji-te-ri-an

I don't eat (meat/chicken/fish/eggs).

আমি (মাংস/মুরগী/মাছ/ডিম) খাই না।

aa-mi (mang-shoh/mur-gi/mach/dim) k'ai na

Is this bottled water?

এটা কি বাতলর পানি?

e-ta ki boh-toh-ler pa-ni?

Not too spicy, please.

মশলা কম, প্লিজ।

mosh-la kom pleez

No more, thank you.

আর না, ধন্যবাদ।

aar naa d'oh-noh-baad

| | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| I'm allergic to ... | আমার ... -এ অ্যালার্জি আছে। | <i>aa-mar ... -e q-lar-ji aa-ch'e</i> |
| nuts | বাদাম | <i>baa-dam</i> |
| shellfish | চিংড়ি মাছ | <i>ching-ti maach'</i> |
| Please bring ... | ... আনেন প্লিজ। | <i>... aa-nen pleez</i> |
| an ashtray | একটা এয়াসট্রে | <i>qk-ta qsh-tre</i> |
| the bill | বিলটা | <i>bil-ta</i> |
| a fork | একটা কাটা | <i>qk-ta ka-ta</i> |
| a glass | একটা গ্লাস | <i>qk-ta glash</i> |
| a knife | একটা ছুরি | <i>qk-ta ch'u-ri</i> |
| a menu | মেনু | <i>me-nu</i> |
| a spoon | একটা চামুচ | <i>qk-ta cha-much</i> |
| That was delicious. | খুব মজা ছিল। | <i>k'ub mo-ja ch'i-loh</i> |

Menu Decoder

MAINS

| | | |
|-----------------------|------------|---|
| <i>bhaji</i> | ভাজি | a ball of fried vegetables; also general term for vegetable curry |
| <i>bhat</i> | ভাত | rice |
| <i>bhuna/bhoona</i> | ভুনা | food fried in spices over high heat for a long period |
| <i>biryani</i> | বিরিয়ানি | rice casserole, often cooked with chicken, beef, mutton and/or vegetables |
| <i>dahl</i> | ডাল | cooked yellow lentils |
| <i>dopiaza</i> | দোপিয়াজা | curry cooked with lots of onions |
| <i>gorur mangsho</i> | গরুর মাংস | beef |
| <i>hilsa/ilish</i> | ইলিশ | species of fish |
| <i>kalia</i> | কালিয়া | rich, spicy meat curry, often with potatoes |
| <i>kebab</i> | কাবাব | small pieces of meat, skewered and usually cooked over charcoal |
| <i>khasir mangsho</i> | খাসির মাংস | mutton |
| <i>kofta/bora</i> | কোফতা/বড়া | ground meat or vegetables bound by spices and egg |
| <i>korma</i> | কোরমা | meat cooked in a mild yogurt sauce and butter |
| <i>mach</i> | মাছ | fish |
| <i>mangsho</i> | মাংস | meat |
| <i>murgi</i> | মুরগী | chicken |

SNACKS

| | | |
|------------------------|--------------|---|
| <i>alur chop</i> | আলুর চপ | fried potato cutlet |
| <i>choptoti</i> | চটপটি | hot chickpeas with potato, egg, spices and tamarind sauce |
| <i>luchi</i> | লুচি | deep-fried flatbread |
| <i>moghlai paratha</i> | মগলাই পারাটা | <i>paratha</i> stuffed with egg, vegetables and spices; delicious for breakfast |
| <i>paratha</i> | পারাটা | thick flatbread, lightly fried in oil or ghee |
| <i>puri</i> | পুরি | deep-fried bread stuffed with <i>dahl</i> or mashed potato |
| <i>samosa</i> | সামুসা | wheat-flour pastry triangle stuffed with spiced vegetables or minced meat |
| <i>shingara</i> | শিঙ্গারা | similar to a samosa but round and with a slightly heavier filling, typically spiced potatoes or liver |

DESSERTS

| | | |
|--------------------|-------------|--|
| <i>firni/paish</i> | ফিরনি/পায়স | rice pudding cooked with milk, sugar, flavouring and nuts, popular at Eid celebrations |
| <i>halua</i> | হালুয়া | common dessert made with carrot or pumpkin, butter, milk and sugar |

| | | |
|-------------------|----------|--|
| <i>jorda</i> | জরদা | yellow sweet-rice with saffron, almonds and cinnamon |
| <i>kalojam</i> | কাল জাম | fried milk-and-flour balls, soaked in syrup |
| <i>kheer</i> | কীর | rice pudding with thick milk |
| <i>molidhana</i> | মলিধানা | milk-based dessert similar to <i>halua</i> |
| <i>pitha</i> | পিঠা | blanket term for all kinds of cakes or pastries, including specific varieties such as <i>chitoi</i> , <i>dhupi</i> , <i>tokti</i> , <i>andosha</i> , <i>puli</i> , <i>barfi</i> and <i>pua</i> |
| <i>rosh malai</i> | রস-মালাই | <i>roshogulla</i> floating in a thick milk |
| <i>roshogulla</i> | রসগোল্লা | soured-milk balls boiled in syrup |
| <i>shemai</i> | সমাই | vermicelli cooked in milk and sugar |
| <i>shirni</i> | শিরনি | rice flour with molasses or sugar |
| <i>shondesh</i> | সন্দেশ | milk-based dessert, one of the best available |
| <i>shooji</i> | সুজি | semolina, almond and pistachio nuts |

OTHER

| | | |
|----------------|-------|------------------------|
| <i>cha</i> | লেব | milky, sweet tea |
| <i>chamoch</i> | চামুচ | spoon |
| <i>churi</i> | ছুরি | knife |
| <i>dim</i> | ডিম | egg |
| <i>glas</i> | গ্লাস | glass |
| <i>kata</i> | কাটা | fork |
| <i>lebu</i> | লেবু | lemon, lime |
| <i>morich</i> | মরিচ | chilli |
| <i>pani</i> | পানি | water |
| <i>rooti</i> | রুটি | <i>chapati</i> (bread) |
| <i>shobji</i> | সবজি | vegetable |

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