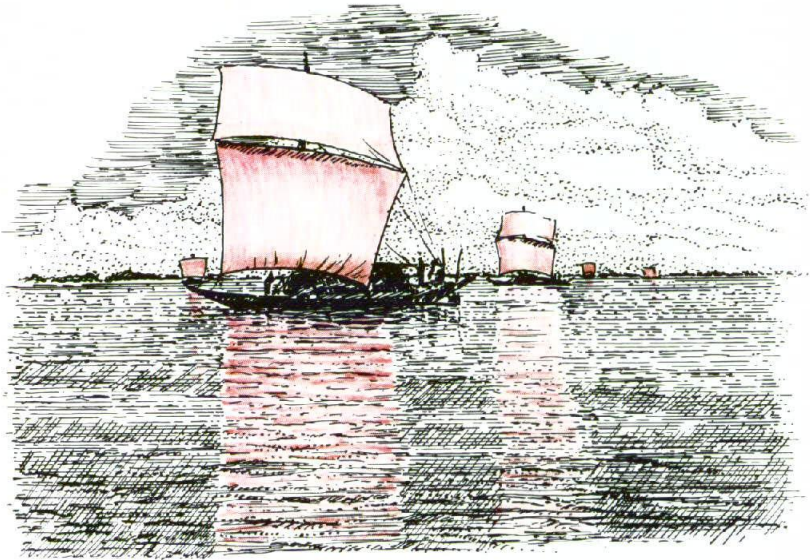


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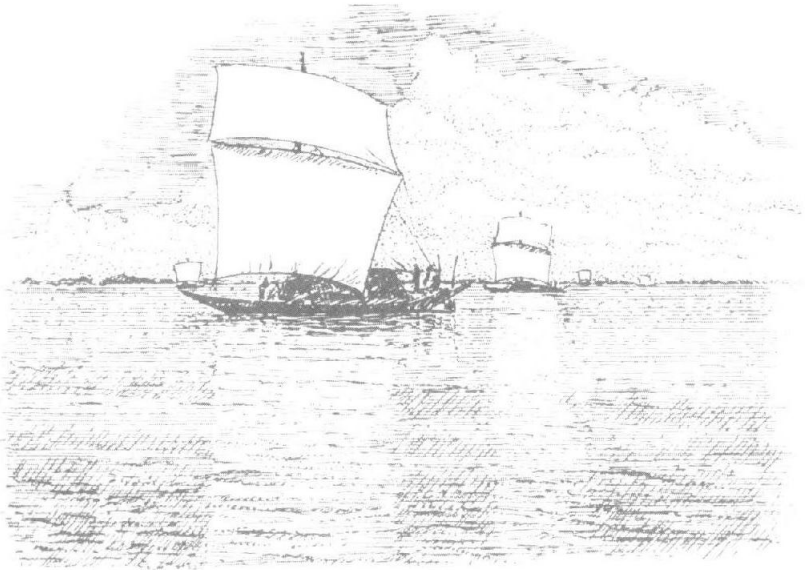
# Bangladesh

a country study



# Bangladesh a country study

Federal Research Division  
Library of Congress  
Edited by  
James Heitzman  
and Robert L. Worden  
Research Completed  
September 1988



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## Foreword

This volume is one in a continuing series of books now being prepared by the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress under the Country Studies—Area Handbook Program. The last page of this book lists the other published studies.

Most books in the series deal with a particular foreign country, describing and analyzing its political, economic, social, and national security systems and institutions, and examining the interrelationships of those systems and the ways they are shaped by cultural factors. Each study is written by a multidisciplinary team of social scientists. The authors seek to provide a basic understanding of the observed society, striving for a dynamic rather than a static portrayal. Particular attention is devoted to the people who make up the society, their origins, dominant beliefs and values, their common interests and the issues on which they are divided, the nature and extent of their involvement with national institutions, and their attitudes toward each other and toward their social system and political order.

The books represent the analysis of the authors and should not be construed as an expression of an official United States government position, policy, or decision. The authors have sought to adhere to accepted standards of scholarly objectivity. Corrections, additions, and suggestions for changes from readers will be welcomed for use in future editions.

Louis R. Mortimer  
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Washington, D.C. 20540



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## Preface

*Bangladesh: A Country Study* supersedes the 1975 *Area Handbook for Bangladesh*. Although much of what characterizes Bangladesh—its status as one of the world's largest but poorest countries and its corresponding need for international aid, its susceptibility to severe natural disasters, and the optimism of its people—has not changed in the years between publication of these two books, a considerable number of major developments have occurred. Just before the *Area Handbook for Bangladesh* went to press in 1975, the founding father of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib), and several members of his family were assassinated. The ensuing years brought two periods of transitional political instability, each followed by relative stability under long-term military regimes. More than a year passed after Mujib's death before Bangladesh Army chief of staff Ziaur Rahman (Zia) emerged as chief martial law administrator in November 1976. Zia assumed the presidency in April 1977, but he, too, became the victim of an assassination plot in May 1981. Army chief of staff Hussain Muhammad Ershad, after considerable hesitation, assumed the position of chief martial law administrator following a bloodless coup in March 1982 and became president in December 1983. By 1986 martial law had been relaxed, and civilian control gradually replaced military rule throughout all sectors of society. In 1988 Ershad continued to consolidate his role as civilian ruler of Bangladesh by calling for parliamentary elections and establishment of Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh. Continual pressure from opposition political forces shook the Ershad regime as the 1980s continued.

The authors of the 1975 work were examining a nation only slightly more than three years old. In contrast, the authors of the new edition have aimed to show the maturity Bangladesh has attained over nearly twenty years of development. Despite the continual adversity faced by Bangladeshis as they confront their historical development, difficult climate, burgeoning population, and fractious political forces, a national identity has emerged (see table A). Although the nation has much to accomplish in order to meet the basic needs of its people, much has been achieved in the 1970s and 1980s. Economic achievements have been made. Persistent demands by the people for basic freedoms and political expression have moved the country toward democratic rule. In international forums, Bangladesh's representatives had taken strong stands against injustice and in defense of their nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The transliteration of Bangla—the national language—varies widely among Bangladeshi and foreign scholars. Common family names may be transliterated in several ways, for example, Choudhury, Chaudri, Chowdhury, and several other variants. Where it is known, the authors have followed the spelling used by the individual. In other instances, the authors have followed the form used by the Bangladesh government; for example, the word *national* is transliterated as *jatiyo*, although many American sources use the less phonetically accurate *jatiya*. To the extent possible, the authors have used the place-names established by the United States Board on Geographic Names, e.g., Dhaka instead of Dacca.

Measurements are given in the metric system; a conversion table is provided to assist readers who want to convert measurements from metric (see table 1, Appendix). A bibliography of works used in researching the book is included. Whereas major sources of information are published in English, the readers of this book, after referring to the English- and other Western-language sources cited in the bibliography, may want to consult Bangla-language sources, such as the daily newspapers *Azad* (Free), *Ittefaq* (Unity), *Sangbad* (News), or *Dainik Bangla* (Daily Bangla); periodicals, such as the weekly *Bichitra* (Variety), *Rahbar* (Guide), or *Sachitra Sandhani* (Seeing Through Pictures); or the armed forces journal *Senani* (Army).

*Table A. Chronology of Important Events*

Period	Description
<b>Ancient Empires</b>	
ca. 1000 B.C. ....	Settlement of Bengal (see Glossary) by Dravidian-speaking peoples
ca. 550-486 B.C. ....	Life of Siddhartha Gautama—the Buddha; founding of Buddhism
ca. 320-180 B.C. ....	Mauryan Empire; reign of Asoka (273-232 B.C.); spread of Buddhism
A.D. ca. 319-ca. 540 ....	Gupta Empire; Classical Age in northern India
606-47 ....	North Indian empire of Harsha
750-1150 ....	Pala Dynasty
1150-1202 ....	Sena Dynasty
<b>Coming of Islam</b>	
1001-1030 ....	Turkish armies led by Mahmud of Ghazni raid into Indian subcontinent
1202 ....	Turkish conquerors defeat Sena Dynasty and overrun Bengal
1206 ....	Establishment of Delhi Sultanate
1341 ....	Bengal achieves independence from Delhi; Dhaka established as capital
<b>The Mughal Period</b>	
1526-30 ....	Babur lays foundation of Mughal Empire
1556-1605 ....	Akbar the Great expands and reforms the empire
1576 ....	Bengal conquered by Mughals
1605-27 ....	Reign of Jahangir; British East India Company opens first trading post in 1612
1658-1707 ....	Reign of Aurangzeb, last great Mughal ruler
1704 ....	Capital of Bengal moved from Dhaka to Murshidabad
1707-1858 ....	Lesser emperors; decline of the Mughal Empire
<b>British Period</b>	
<i>Company Rule</i>	
1757 ....	Battle of Plassey—British victory over Mughal forces in Bengal; British rule in India begins
1793 ....	Britain imposes Permanent Settlement (Land-lease) Act on Bengal, establishing a new landlord system, which turns out to be disastrous for farmers
1835 ....	Institution of British education and other reform measures
1857-58 ....	Revolt of Indian sepoy (soldiers) against British East India Company
1858 ....	British East India Company dissolved; rule of India under the British crown—the British Raj—begins; marks formal end of Mughal Empire
<i>Empire to Independence</i>	
1885 ....	Indian National Congress (Congress) formed
1905 ....	Partition of Bengal into separate provinces of East Bengal (including Assam) and West Bengal



*Table A.—Cont.*

Period	Description
1906 .....	All-India Muslim League (Muslim League) founded
1909 .....	Morley-Minto reforms: separate electorates for Muslims
1912 .....	Partition of Bengal annulled
1916 .....	Congress-Muslim League Pact (often referred to as Lucknow Pact) signed
1919 .....	India Act
1935 .....	Government of India Act
1940 .....	Muslim League adopts Lahore Resolution; "Two Nations" theory articulated by Muslim League leader Mohammad Ali Jinnah and others
1946 .....	"Direct action" day of Muslim League, August 16
<b>Independent Pakistan</b>	
August 15, 1947 .....	Partition of British India; India achieves independence and incorporates West Bengal and Assam; Pakistan is created and incorporates East Bengal (the East Wing, or East Pakistan) and territory in the northwest (the West Wing, or West Pakistan); Jinnah becomes governor general of Pakistan; Liaquat Ali Khan becomes prime minister
October 27, 1947 .....	Undeclared war with India begins
September 11, 1948 .....	Jinnah dies; Khwaja Nazimuddin becomes governor general
January 1, 1949 .....	United Nations-arranged ceasefire between Pakistan and India takes effect
October 16, 1951 .....	Liaquat assassinated; Nazimuddin becomes prime minister; Ghulam Mohammad becomes governor general
October 6, 1955 .....	Iskander Mirza sworn in as governor general, succeeding Ghulam Mohammad, who had retired in ill health the previous month
March 23, 1956 .....	Constitution adopted; Mirza becomes president
August 8, 1956 .....	Muslim League leader Choudhry Mohammad Ali tenders resignation as prime minister and is succeeded the following month by Awami League (People's League) leader Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy
October 7, 1958 .....	President Mirza abrogates constitution and declares martial law
October 27, 1958 .....	Mirza sent into exile; General Mohammad Ayub Khan begins rule
August–September 1965 .....	War with India
March 25, 1969 .....	Ayub resigns as result of public pressure; General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan assumes power; East Pakistani Awami League leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib) arrested and jailed in West Pakistan

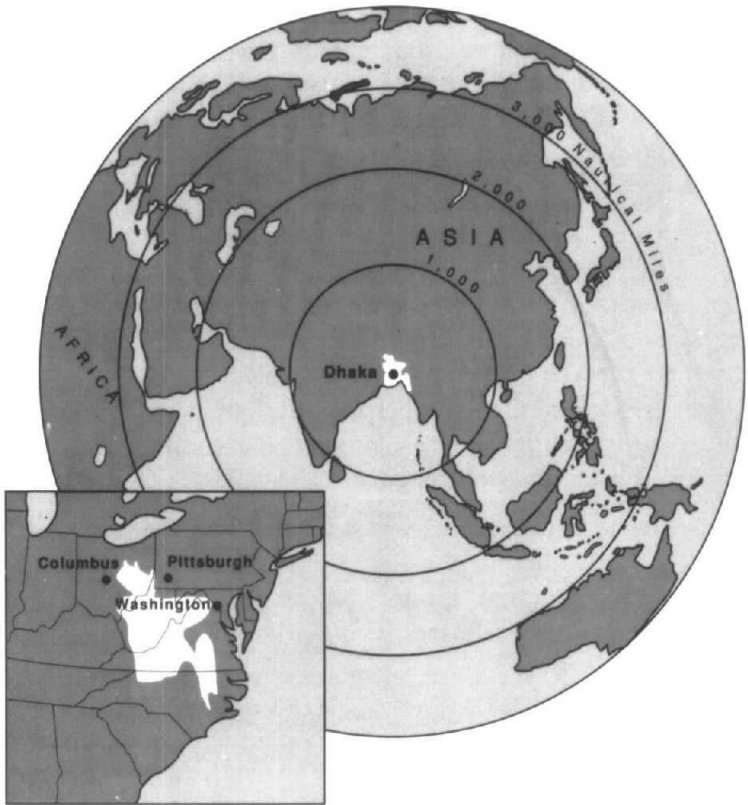
*Table A. — Cont.*

Period	Description
December 7, 1970 . . . . .	First general elections; Awami League under Mujib secures absolute majority in new Constituent Assembly; West Pakistan-dominated government declines to convene assembly
March 26-28, 1971 . . . . .	East Pakistan attempts to secede, beginning civil war; Mujib, imprisoned in West Pakistan, declared provisional president
April 17, 1971 . . . . .	Formal declaration of independence of Bangladesh issued; Mujib named president
December 3, 1971 . . . . .	Pakistan launches preemptive air strikes against India
December 4, 1971 . . . . .	India invades East Pakistan
December 6, 1971 . . . . .	India recognizes Bangladesh
December 16, 1971 . . . . .	Pakistani military forces in East Pakistan surrender to Indian armed forces, marking Bangladeshi independence
<b>Independent Bangladesh</b>	
January 10-12, 1972 . . . . .	Mujib returns from prison in West Pakistan; promulgates interim constitution and is sworn in first as president, then as prime minister
November 4, 1972 . . . . .	Parliamentary Constitution adopted
March 7, 1973 . . . . .	Mujib's Awami League wins overwhelming victory in parliamentary elections
February 22, 1974 . . . . .	Pakistan recognizes Bangladesh
September 17, 1974 . . . . .	Bangladesh admitted to United Nations
December 28, 1974 . . . . .	State of emergency declared as political situation deteriorates; fundamental rights under Constitution suspended
January 25, 1975 . . . . .	Constitution amended, abolishing parliamentary system and establishing presidential system with de facto one-man rule under Mujib
February 25, 1975 . . . . .	Mujib abolishes all parties but one—the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (Bangladesh Peasants, Workers, and People's League), the new name of the Awami League—which is under his direct control
August 15, 1975 . . . . .	Mujib assassinated in "majors' plot"; Khondakar Mushtaque Ahmed installed as president
November 3-7, 1975 . . . . .	Major General Khaled Musharraf killed in coup; Mushtaque resigns; Supreme Court chief justice Abu Sadat Muhammad Sayem becomes president and chief martial law administrator on November 7
November 30, 1976 . . . . .	Army chief of staff Ziaur Rahman (Zia) becomes chief martial law administrator
April 21, 1977 . . . . .	Sayem forced to resign because of "ill health"; Zia becomes president
May 30, 1977 . . . . .	Zia wins 98.9 percent of votes in referendum on his continuance as president
June 3, 1977 . . . . .	Supreme Court justice Abdus Sattar named vice president

*Table A.—Cont.*

Period	Description
April 1978	Zia announces new elections and independent judiciary; lifts ban on political parties
June 3, 1978	Zia elected president
February 18, 1979	Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party wins 207 out of 300 seats in parliamentary election
April 6, 1979	Martial law revoked; Constitution restored in full; Fifth Amendment ratifies all actions of Zia's martial law administration
May 30, 1981	Zia assassinated; Sattar becomes acting president
November 15, 1981	Sattar elected president
March 24, 1982	Sattar ousted in coup engineered by Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad; Constitution suspended, Parliament dissolved, and political parties abolished; Ershad assumes full powers as chief martial law administrator
February 14-15, 1983	Student riots mark first major expression of public opposition to Ershad's martial law administration
March 1982-December 1983	Interim presidency of Abdul Fazal Muhammad Ahsanuddin Chowdhury
December 1983	Ershad assumes presidency
March 21, 1985	General referendum supports Ershad's administration
May 7, 1986	Parliamentary elections give pro-Ershad Jatiyo Party (National Party) majority in Parliament
October 15, 1986	Ershad elected president
November 10, 1986	Parliament passes Seventh Amendment to Constitution, ratifying all actions of Ershad's martial law administration; martial law withdrawn; Constitution restored in full
November 10-12, 1987	"Siege of Dhaka," mass demonstrations by united opposition parties against Ershad's government
December 6, 1987	Ershad dissolves Parliament
March 3, 1988	Parliamentary elections reaffirm Jatiyo Party control of Parliament
June 7, 1988	Eighth Amendment establishes Islam as state religion

## Country Profile



### Country

**Formal Name:** People's Republic of Bangladesh.

**Short Form:** Bangladesh.

**Term for Citizens:** Bangladeshi(s).

**Capital:** Dhaka.

**Date of Independence:** April 17, 1971; eastern part of Pakistan (East Pakistan), 1947-71.

### Geography

**Size:** Total 144,000 square kilometers, land area 133,910 square kilometers.

**Topography:** Broad deltaic plain. Chittagong Hills in southeast, Low Hills in northeast and modest-elevation highlands in north and northwest.

**Climate:** Subtropical monsoon climate, wide seasonal variations in rainfall, moderately warm temperatures, high humidity. Climate generally uniform throughout entire country. Subject to severe natural disasters, such as floods, tropical cyclones, tornadoes, and tidal bores.

## **Society**

**Population:** Officially given at 109,963,551 in July 1988. Eighth largest population in world. Annual growth rate 2.6 percent. Projected to reach more than 140 million by year 2000. About 82 percent live in rural areas, 18 percent in urban areas. In 1988 population density 821 per square kilometer, highest in world. Population control top priority for government.

**Ethnic Groups:** Over 98 percent Bengalis. Approximately 600,000 Biharis (Urdu-speaking, non-Bengali Muslims) and 900,000 members of tribal minority groups. Main tribal groups Chakmas, Marmas, Tipperas, and Mros, living primarily in Chittagong Hill Tracts (see Glossary).

**Languages:** Bangla (official language); English widely used by educated elite. Arabic used in many Muslim homes. Various tribal languages.

**Religion:** In 1988 nearly 83 percent Muslim, 16 percent Hindu, less than 1 percent Buddhist, Christian, and tribal religions.

**Education:** Schools based on British system: five years primary, five years lower secondary, and two years higher secondary. Higher education includes 758 general colleges, 7 universities, and 50 professional colleges. Traditional emphasis on arts and humanities; increased emphasis in late 1980s on technical subjects. Numerous religious-affiliated primary schools. In 1988 national literacy rate officially 29 percent, possibly lower; men 39 percent, women 18 percent; urban 35 percent, rural 17 percent.

**Health:** Life expectancy almost equal for males and females, averaging 55.1 years in 1986. Major health hazards infectious and parasitic diseases, poor nutrition, and inadequate sanitation. High infant mortality rate at 111.9 per 1,000; young children represented 40 percent of deaths annually.

## Economy

**Gross National Product (GNP):** US\$15.6 billion in fiscal year (FY) 1986 at current prices; per capita GNP US\$150; 4.5 percent real growth in FY 1987.

**Agriculture:** Large-scale subsistence farming, labor intensive, heavily dependent on monsoon rains. Main crops rice, jute, wheat, tea, and forestry products. Fisheries of increasing importance.

**Industry:** Jute manufactures, ready-made garments, cotton textiles, seafood processing, and pharmaceuticals.

**Services:** Substantial exported labor, primarily to Persian Gulf nations. As many as 450,000 Bangladeshis abroad in 1987; important source of foreign currency remittances.

**Resources:** Sufficient natural gas for country's nitrogenous fertilizer needs. Abundant proven coal reserves. Offshore and onshore reserves of petroleum. Hydroelectric power and thermal power sources. Biofuels widely used in rural areas.

**Exports:** Approximately US\$819 million in FY 1986. Raw jute and jute manufactures, frozen seafood, ready-made garments, tea, and leather goods. United States, Japan, and Britain largest buyers.

**Imports:** Approximately US\$2.4 billion in FY 1986. Food grains, fuels, raw cotton, fertilizer, and manufactured products. Singapore, Japan, and United States largest suppliers.

**Balance of Payments:** Has had negative trade balance since independence in 1971. Exports represented 30 percent, imports 70 percent of total annual trade in FY 1986.

**Exchange Rate:** 34.20 takas = US\$1 (September 1988).

**Fiscal Year:** July 1 to June 30.

## Transportation and Communications

**Rivers:** Extensive and complex network of some 700 rivers. Major systems Jamuna-Brahmaputra, Padma-Ganges, Surma-Meghna, and Padma-Meghna, all of which flow south to Mouths of the Ganges and into Bay of Bengal. Fifth major system Karnaphuli in Chittagong region. Primary transportation system employing nearly 300,000 small and medium-sized sail- and human-powered country boats. About 8,430 kilometers of navigable waterways.

**Roads:** About 10,890 kilometers of motorable roads in 1986. Despite severe flooding, increasingly important means of moving

people and goods. Extensive network of bridges and ferries cross numerous inland waterways.

**Railroads:** About 2,818 kilometers of track in 1986. Operated by Bangladesh Railways, declining numbers of rolling stock as 1980s progressed.

**Ports:** Chittagong and Chalna major freight-handling ports.

**Airports:** Largest near Dhaka (Zia International Airport) and at Chittagong and Sylhet. National carrier Biman Bangladesh Airlines serving twenty-four cities in twenty countries; domestic service to eighteen regional airports.

## Government and Politics

**Government:** Presidential form of government with popularly elected president and appointed prime minister. 1972 Constitution amended numerous times to reflect new political realities. Unicameral Parliament (known as Jatiyo Sangsad, or House of the People) with 300 members. Elections held in March 1988.

**Politics:** Authoritarian or military regimes have run Bangladesh almost since its inception. Regime in power traditionally controls government and Parliament through single national political party: under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1972–75), the Awami League (People's League); under Ziaur Rahman (1977–81), the Bangladesh Nationalist Party; and under Hussain Muhammad Ershad (since 1982), the Jatiyo Party (National Party). Numerous opposition parties joined periodically in fractious alliances against party in power. In 1988 most important were Awami League, centrist Bangladesh Nationalist Party, leftist Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (National Socialist Party), and conservative, pro-Islamic Jamaat e Islami (Congregation of Islam). Student and workers' wings of these and other parties important players in national politics.

**Justice:** Supreme Court headed by chief justice. Two Supreme Court divisions: High Court Division with seven regional benches, and Appellate Division in Dhaka. Grass-roots judicial system at village level. British-style criminal codes, amended in Pakistan and Bangladesh eras.

**Administrative Divisions:** Divided into four administration divisions headed by commissioners. Divisions divided into twenty-one regions, further subdivided into sixty-four districts (*zilas*). Urban subdivisions in 1988 included four municipal corporations (Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, and Khulna—which corresponded to the

four divisions in name), eighty-seven municipalities (*pourashavas*), and thirty townships (*thanas*). Rural subdivisions included 460 sub-districts (*upazilas*) and 4,401 unions. Popularly elected representative councils (*parishads*) at various administrative levels except divisions and regions.

**Foreign Affairs:** Heavily dependent on massive infusions of foreign development aid, Bangladesh maintains neutral policy. Maintains friendly relations with United States, Soviet Union, and China; close relations with Muslim nations; and proper but watchful relations with neighboring India. Member of Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization, Asian Development Bank, Colombo Plan, Commonwealth of Nations, Customs Cooperation Council, Group of 77, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, International Olympic Committee, International Rice Council, International Telecommunications Satellite Organization, INTERPOL, Islamic Development Bank, Nonaligned Movement, Organization of the Islamic Conference, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, United Nations and all its affiliated agencies, World Federation of Trade Unions, and World Tourism Organization.

## **National Security**

**Armed Forces:** About 102,500 in 1988: army 90,000; navy 7,500; and air force 5,000.

**Military Units:** Most powerful and prestigious Ninth Infantry Division near Dhaka and Twenty-fourth Infantry Division at Chittagong. Other important infantry divisions at Rangpur, Jessore, Bogra, and Comilla—the latter two containing country's armor regiments.

**Equipment:** Army: Type 54/55 tanks, Chinese-made Type 59 main battle tanks, and Type 62 light tanks; 105mm and 122mm howitzers; 60mm and 120mm mortars; and 57mm, 76mm, and 106mm antitank weapons. Navy: Leopard-class Type 41 and Salisbury-class Type 61 frigates and more modern Chinese-made Hegu-class, P4-class, Hainan-class, and Shanghai II-class fast attack craft primarily for use in territorial waters. Air Force: three squadrons, comprising MiG-21s, Chinese-made F-6s and A-5s, Soviet An-26 transports, and American-made Bell 212 and Soviet Mi-8 helicopters.



**Auxiliary Forces:** Important supplement to armed forces. In 1988 consisted of 30,000-member Bangladesh Rifles, 20,000-member Ansars (security guards), and 5,000-member Armed Police, all subordinate to Ministry of Home Affairs. Used to extend governmental authority and ensure law and order in border and internal areas and backup to army in wartime. Village Defence Party of 10 million (males and females) largely involved in village security.



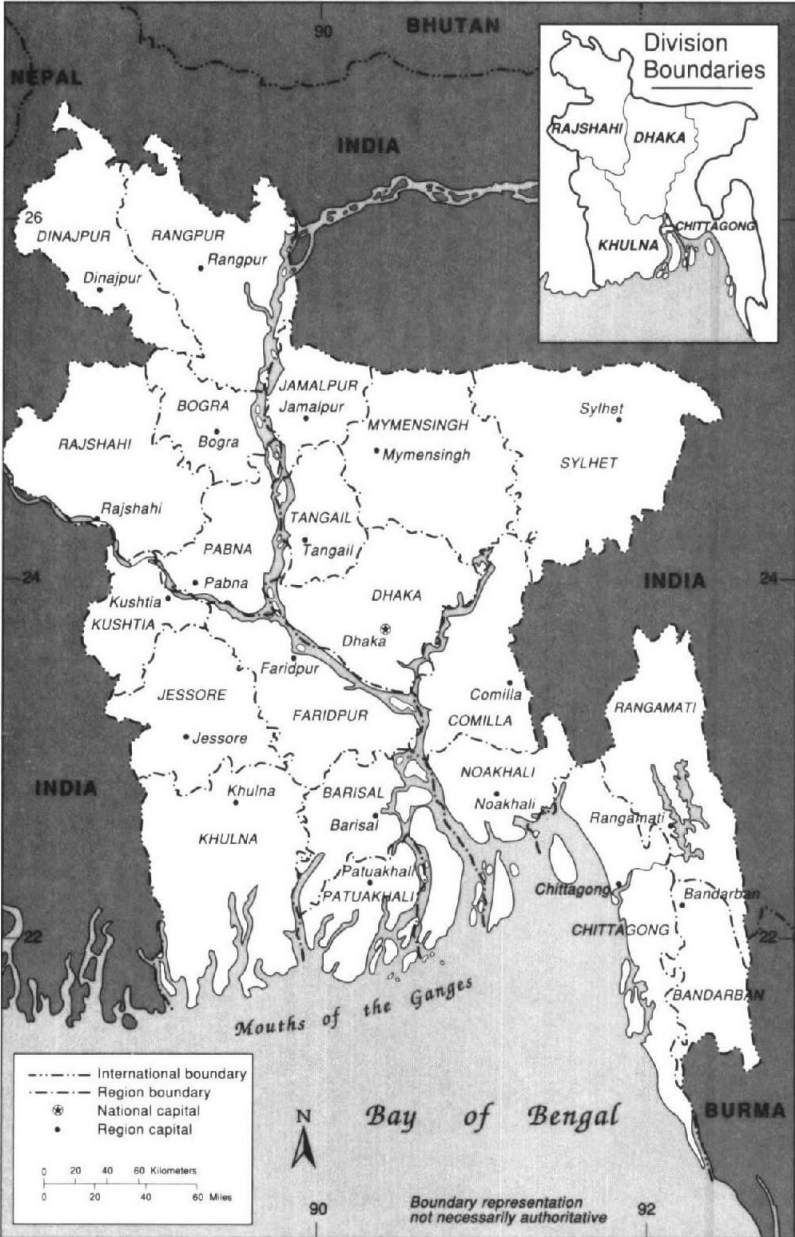


Figure 1. Administrative Divisions of Bangladesh, 1988

## Introduction

THE WORLD FREQUENTLY RECEIVES bad news from Bangladesh. So adverse is the economic situation in Bangladesh that some have referred to it not as a Third World developing nation but as member of the “fourth world,” the poorest of the poor. Its population of 110 million—the eighth largest in the world—lives on constricted land affected by an unkind climate. There is relatively little industry, and most people live at the subsistence level in rural areas. The political system is unstable, characterized by military coups, authoritarian regimes, civil violence, and a poor human rights record. Adding to the nation’s woes are natural disasters. Tropical storms whipping in from the Bay of Bengal have repeatedly devastated the country, causing huge losses of life. In 1988 record floods caused by monsoon rains inundated two-thirds of the country, setting back economic growth. International lending and aid institutions bolster the country, but the problems are so massive that no one predicts near-term major improvements.

Despite its problems, Bangladesh is a land of miracles and heroic accomplishments. Using traditional methods, farmers manage to produce enough food to maintain one of the densest concentrations of rural people in the world. The Bangladeshi people have liberated themselves twice, from the British and from the Pakistanis. Perhaps the greatest deeds are cultural. The Bangla language has a distinguished history in literature and remains one of the most dynamic forces in South Asian arts and humanities. In Bangladesh, local language and artistic forms are combined with the Islamic religion in a special blend of orthodoxy and cultural nationalism. United by strong village traditions, the struggle for existence, the legacy of the freedom movement, the Bangla language, and Islam, most Bangladeshis retain considerable optimism and pride in their nation.

The economic and political situation in Bangladesh has its roots in the complex relationship between its unusual geography and its history during the last 200 years. Most of the country is a low-lying delta where four major river systems come together. The land is subject to heavy annual monsoon flooding followed by a long dry season. The extreme conditions support a fertile environment for agriculture but often demand a high cost from cultivators, who are confronted with the conflicting demands of irrigation systems and flood prevention measures. For these reasons, the area that is Bangladesh remained a frontier until the last few centuries, and the wild characteristics of the frontier still dominate society on newly

formed islands that continually emerge along the courses of silty rivers and along the coast.

High mountain walls to the north and the east block easy access to East Asia and Southeast Asia, orienting the country toward Indian civilization, but from the Indian standpoint Bangladesh stands on the periphery of culture and politics. While the hallmarks of civilization first appeared in northwest India and Pakistan at least 4,000 years ago, and a vibrant urban society existed in north India by 500 B.C., large-scale social organization in the area that became Bangladesh developed only by the seventh century A.D. The peripheral position of Bangladesh allowed the long-term survival there of cultural motifs that had been absorbed into history in most other parts of the subcontinent. Buddhism, for example, survived in Bangladesh as a royal cult and a popular religion long after it had died out in most of India. Even during the Mughal Empire (1526–1858), the neglected eastern wing of the province of Bengal (see Glossary) became part of a pan-Indian political system but remained a scene of political disunity and piracy. Under these conditions the population remained relatively small until the nineteenth century, and there was little indication of the intense pressure on resources that would develop by the twentieth century.

European traders arrived in the region in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by following traditional Indian Ocean trade routes. They found a prosperous Bengal dotted with small commercial centers where a dynamic handloom weaving industry produced world-class textiles. As the power of the Mughal Empire waned in the early eighteenth century, the British East India Company became the dominant force in Bengal, but with fateful consequences. The British chose Calcutta in West Bengal as the center of their operations, resulting in a decisive westward shift of commercial interests and capital. The conquest of Bengal coincided with Europe's Industrial Revolution, driven in its early stages by the mechanization of the British textile industry. British policy deliberately discouraged the export of finished textiles to Britain and instead encouraged the spread of British-made goods in the colonies. The handloom industry was ruined, resulting in the collapse of the old commercial networks in Bengal. Meanwhile, British and Indian entrepreneurs looking for investment opportunities in the East Bengal countryside found that rice would support the growing population in Calcutta and that jute would satisfy the world market for sacking material.

As a result of these forces, during the nineteenth century East Bengal became a purely agricultural society, dominated by rice and jute, with few opportunities in commerce or manufacturing. The

British administration provided some basic public works for irrigation and transportation, encouraged land reclamation, prevented large-scale warfare, and implemented rudimentary public health measure. The policies of the British encouraged population growth but at the same time discouraged the urban and industrial development that had absorbed population increases in Europe. By the twentieth century, rapid population increases were outstripping advances in agriculture, and millions of Bengalis were trapped in subsistence agriculture with no alternative form of livelihood.

As nationalism began to grow in South Asia during the late nineteenth century, it accompanied a worldwide Islamic revival that found a rich field for expression in East Bengal. British education and economic opportunities under the colonial government tended to benefit Hindus, who dominated the jute and rice trade and formed a landlord class, while the mass of poor cultivators were mostly Muslims. The British encouraged communal religious consciousness by implementing limited election systems with separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims, a strategy that preserved the rights of minority communities but also allowed the colonial administration to play one side against the other throughout the early twentieth century. The profound doctrinal differences between Hinduism and Islam, the disproportionate opportunities for Hindus and Muslims in the colonial economy, and the growing political competition created a widening rift between the two religious communities. Muslim leaders in Bengal, aware of the deepening economic crisis there, argued at an early date for the separation of the eastern and western parts of Bengal, allowing the Muslim majority in the east greater expression in determining their destiny. The British government responded by dividing Bengal in 1905 but after only seven years rescinded the order, due to pressure throughout India from nationalist forces dominated, in the eyes of Bengali Muslims, by Hindu interests. By the 1940s, when British and Japanese armies were fighting nearby and famine had killed hundreds of thousands of people, the masses of Muslim Bengalis backed the All-India Muslim League (Muslim League), established in 1906, with its call for a separate Islamic state. Amid widespread communal violence, during which many East Bengal Hindus migrated to Hindu areas of India, East Bengal became part of the new nation of Pakistan in 1947 as the East Wing, or East Pakistan.

The issue of language, which quickly divided East Pakistan and West Pakistan, was a symbol for the unique role of Islam in the culture of East Pakistan. Conversion to Islam in Bengal had been a movement of the masses since the twelfth century, a rebellion against caste ideology that had kept peasants subservient to

landlords. Embracing Islam did not mean the adoption of a new, elite language and culture, however. Instead, the ancient Bangla language, which was based on Sanskrit, remained a vital force and had relatively few imports of Arabic or Persian terminology. The Bangla renaissance, a literary movement in reaction to British education in the late nineteenth century, found its roots in the long and rich history of Bengali folk literature and produced Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore. The love of Bangla that permeated all levels of society had links with a large and well-known religious literature created by mystic poets who spread the love of God regardless of communal differences. The doctrinal positions of Bengali Islam were orthodox, but a wide variety of popular religious practices linked originally to polytheism remained important in the countryside.

This web of Bangla language and culture was alien to the leaders of West Pakistan. Outside of Bengal, the preferred language of South Asian Muslims was Urdu, a combination of Sanskritic languages and Persian with a large admixture of Arabic terms. The reforming ideology of many Muslim nationalists in north and north-west India aimed at a return to the original message of Muhammad and a revival of Islam's Arabic roots. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, expressed the viewpoint of the majority in the Muslim League when he argued for one language—Urdu—that would unify the two wings of the nation. In 1952 the attempts to impose Urdu as the second language in East Pakistan provoked severe riots, leading to the death of two students—an event still remembered in Bangladesh as Martyrs' Day, an annual holiday celebrating the survival of Bangla. Until 1971 the language issue continued to boil, as Bengali nationalists refused to compromise their long-standing cultural traditions.

Neither East Pakistan nor West Pakistan had experienced democratic government until their separation from India in 1947, but the British-educated leaders of the Muslim League were determined to implement parliamentary rule. The task proved nearly impossible. The country was under constant pressure from India, the government and economy had to be constructed anew, ethnic divisions rocked West Pakistan, and neglect of East Pakistan by the central government pushed the nation toward civil war. Amid a political crisis, the minister of defense, General Mohammad Ayub Khan, accumulated increasing powers under the constitution and finally implemented military rule over Pakistan in 1958. He later engineered elections that made him president and allowed a return to parliamentary government dominated by his own party and military interests. The pattern of crisis, military takeover, and return to democracy directed by the generals was to recur in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

After the bloody war of independence in 1971, the leaders of Bangladesh implemented a republican form of government, directed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib). As the new administration tried to cope with huge economic problems, it did not take long for the traditional factionalism of Bengali politics to resurface in the new nation. Mujib's party was committed to socialist reconstruction, but communist and socialist groups advocated further revolutionary change while conservative religious and military interests opposed socialism. Mujib began to implement an authoritarian, single-party dictatorship in 1974, but military factions revolted the following year, killed him along with most of his family, and plunged the nation into a period of chaos. Army chief of staff General Ziaur Rahman (Zia) accumulated more and more power and finally implemented martial law in 1976. He organized his own political party, manipulated elections that packed Parliament with his supporters, and became president in national elections in 1978. The rise to power of military interests followed closely the pattern set earlier by Ayub and the army in Pakistan.

The parallels with Pakistan continued during the 1980s. After the loss of Bangladesh, Pakistani politics had drifted under civilian regimes until 1977, when General Zia ul Haq took control and directed the nation until his sudden death in an air crash in August 1988. His regime slowly returned to a parliamentary government directed by his own party. In Bangladesh, President Zia's assassination in 1981 deprived the country of its most effective leader since independence. After a brief interlude under a weak civilian government, army chief of staff Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad took power in a bloodless coup. Ershad's policies during the 1980s centered on creating his own political party, packing Parliament with his supporters, and winning election as president in 1986. By 1988 Bangladesh was officially a republic with a popularly elected government, but Ershad's Jatiyo Party (National Party) dominated all levels of administration and representative government. The parliamentary system allowed political opposition, however, and a wide range of political parties remained active, headed by the political successors of Mujib and Zia. The political opposition refused to give legitimacy to Ershad and his military supporters and generally declined to participate in parliamentary elections. Instead, the opposition organized periodic demonstrations and strikes that disrupted the country. The opposition was plagued with political factionalism that permeated Bangladeshi politics down to the village level, and frequent states of emergency kept coalitions from forming an effective unified front. Meanwhile, administrative reforms under Ershad's regime allowed the voters



to elect popular representatives to local governing bodies with a wide range of authority, giving local elites and the electorate a real stake in Ershad's political system. In the late 1980s, it appeared that military democracy was entrenched for the long term in Bangladesh.

The grim economic situation remained the most important problem for the young nation. Decades of skewed development under the British, followed by neglect under Pakistan and the destruction caused by the 1971 war, left the country prostrate during the early-1970s. The Mujib and Zia years witnessed major accomplishments in repairing damage and setting up the basic administrative machinery needed to run the country. At no time after independence, however, did Bangladesh experience sustained rates of economic growth sufficient to allow the country to outrun population growth and enter a period of rapid development. With few mineral resources, almost no industrial infrastructure, and a mostly unskilled labor force, Bangladesh depended on imports for most of the basic requirements of a modern nation. Its exports, on the other hand, were agricultural commodities, especially jute, that declined in real value and were subject to uncontrolled fluctuations in world demand. Under these circumstances, the economy depended on large annual inputs of foreign aid. In fact, since independence more than 85 percent of the annual development budget of Bangladesh relied on foreign aid receipts. Without this aid, the country would certainly have experienced disaster; with the aid, the economy achieved stability and even registered moderate advances that allowed it to survive.

In its unenviable status as "largest poorest" country in the world, Bangladesh was a test case for development strategies. The Mujib government nationalized the jute industry and other major industries, and the officially expressed purpose of the country was to build a socialist economy. In the first years after independence, there were serious thoughts of nationalizing all economic endeavors and collectivizing agriculture, a major departure from the traditional system of private ownership. Under the more conservative governments of Zia and Ershad, however, Bangladesh increasingly withdrew from the socialist path, and the administration slowly denationalized commercial and industrial enterprises. As the centrally planned economy declined, decentralized development strategies and private initiative became more important and were supported by large international donors, such as the World Bank (see Glossary) and the International Monetary Fund (see Glossary).

In rural areas, the government administered aid to major irrigation and flood control projects, while allotting an increasing

percentage of resources to local government bodies at the subdistrict (*upazila*) level staffed by civil servants but directed by elected local representatives. This process funneled capital and decision-making power into the hands of relatively wealthy or influential local elites, who then created employment opportunities for land-poor or landless laborers. In urban areas, development concentrated on major infrastructure projects such as power plants, as well as the encouragement of private enterprise for the export sector. By encouraging private industry, the government and international donors aimed to create jobs that would eventually provide an alternate source of income to unskilled or semiskilled laborers. The 1980s witnessed some major industrial advances, including a remarkable expansion of the ready-made garment industry and an export-oriented processed seafood industry. But was it enough? The underlying assumption of these development strategies was that urban capitalists and rural elites could create enough new jobs to outrun population increases in the future. The unanswered questions were whether the masses of poor workers would benefit quickly enough or whether they would rebel as they witnessed the growth of an influential Bangladeshi middle class. Massive popular unrest, encouraged by the political opposition, was an ever-present alternative to the government's development strategies.

The necessity for development aid underlay the foreign policy of Bangladesh, which remained decidedly nonaligned in world politics. During the first few years of independence, a close relationship with India reflected the early political isolation of Bangladesh and its dependence on its big neighbor for military protection as well as economic support. After achieving recognition by most countries, including Pakistan, by 1975 Bangladesh was ready to diversify its international connections when Mujib's death severed the special relationship with India and a concomitant one with the Soviet Union. The subsequent Zia and Ershad governments moved closer to the sources of aid: Japan, the United States, Canada, Western Europe, China, the wealthy Arab nations, and the big international lending agencies. At no time, however, did Bangladesh subordinate its foreign policy to its dependence on foreign donors. As a member of major international forums, such as the United Nations, the Nonaligned Movement, and the Commonwealth of Nations, Bangladesh advocated a new international economic order and an end to superpower interference in the affairs of sovereign states. Bangladesh's status as a populous but poor country without foreign alliances allowed it to take outspoken stands and to play a leading role among the nations of the Third World.

High international visibility and clear neutrality were important security strategies for Bangladesh because the nation's military capacity was insufficient to effectively defend the country against foreign adversaries. The most likely foe was India, which surrounds Bangladesh on three sides and could quickly overrun the country. Disputes with India began during the trauma of separation in 1947, were glossed over during the honeymoon period of the early 1970s, and began again in earnest during the late 1970s. Despite the intense nationalist feelings on both sides of the border, it seemed unlikely that India (or any other nation) would launch an attack, risking world censure and bringing in its wake the inherited problems of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh maintained, with help from China and other nations, an army of 90,000 personnel, a small air force and navy, and several paramilitary border and security forces. The roles of these forces in national defense were in reality subordinate to their roles in internal security. Military leaders repeatedly used the military to launch coups or to maintain order during massive campaigns of civil disobedience by the opposition parties. The army was also involved in ongoing counterinsurgency operations against tribal groups in the Chittagong Hills, where guerrillas of tribal minorities were fighting for independence. The ever-present threat of army intervention guaranteed the continuation of either military regimes or democratic governments that clearly represented the interests of the armed forces.

In the late 1980s, there was still hope for Bangladesh. The gigantic economic disasters predicted in the early 1970s remained possibilities, and many smaller calamities did occur, but Bangladeshis showed a striking ability to survive and make progress. The population continued to increase, but the rate of increase declined. Living conditions remained poor, but starvation was prevented. The government was authoritarian, but the rule of law and parliament continued. The economy advanced very slowly, but it did advance and showed signs of agrarian expansion and industrial diversification. Bangladesh maintained a high profile in international affairs and avoided military conflict with any foreign power, guaranteeing the high levels of foreign aid necessary for economic survival. Through it all, the rich cultural heritage of the Bangladeshis supported a remarkably tolerant Islamic society that held the allegiance of its people.

September 30, 1988

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After the manuscript for this book was completed in the summer of 1988, two calamitous events—both related to weather—occurred in Bangladesh. Floods devastated Bangladesh in the summer of 1988, and in the fall a killer cyclone hit the still-beleaguered nation. As in the past, the resilient people of Bangladesh confronted the disastrous effects on the nation's economy with government assistance and international aid.

The floods—caused by heavy monsoon runoff in the Himalayas—started in August 1988 and were described as the worst in the country's history. Nearly 47 million people and an area of more than 120,000 of the nation's 144,000 square kilometers were affected. In some districts the entire population was left homeless. Flood waters were deeper than ever recorded before, and for the first time Zia International Airport near Dhaka had to be closed when its runways were inundated, an occurrence that further hindered relief operations. Statistics provided by the government were grim: 53 of the country's 64 districts affected; some 4 million hectares of crops completely destroyed and an additional 3 million partially destroyed; and some 100,000 head of cattle lost. Because of improved preparedness over previous years—some 1.5 million tons of food and ample supplies of medicine had been strategically stockpiled, and some 3,000 civilian and military medical teams were dispatched—the loss of human life was mitigated: just over 1,600 died from the direct cause of flooding, and about 500 died from diseases resulting from the floods. The nation's infrastructure, however, suffered considerably. More than 40 railroad bridges, nearly 640 kilometers of railroad track, and nearly 68,000 kilometers of roads were damaged, and more than 10,000 education institutions were partially or completely destroyed. The international community responded with in-kind and financial relief and rehabilitation aid of more than US\$500 million.

Government efforts to rebuild water control projects destroyed in previous years' flooding were too little and too late to withstand the major floods of 1988. In the midst of the flooding, President Ershad called for the cooperation of China, India, Bhutan, and Nepal—the location of the sources of the major rivers that flow from the Himalayas and foothills of the Himalayas into Bangladesh—in determining the cause of his country's misery. Environmental factors upriver, such as heavy deforestation, burgeoning populations, and overutilization of critical resources, were seen as having exacerbated the 1988 flooding. Heavy runoff through the flat, overpopulated, and heavily planted Bangladesh Plain—the catch basin

for the great Himalayan rivers—was too much for the manmade drainage system still recovering from the 1987 floods. Although flood control was seen by some observers as the responsibility of Bangladesh, regional cooperation in water management and land-use policy was essential.

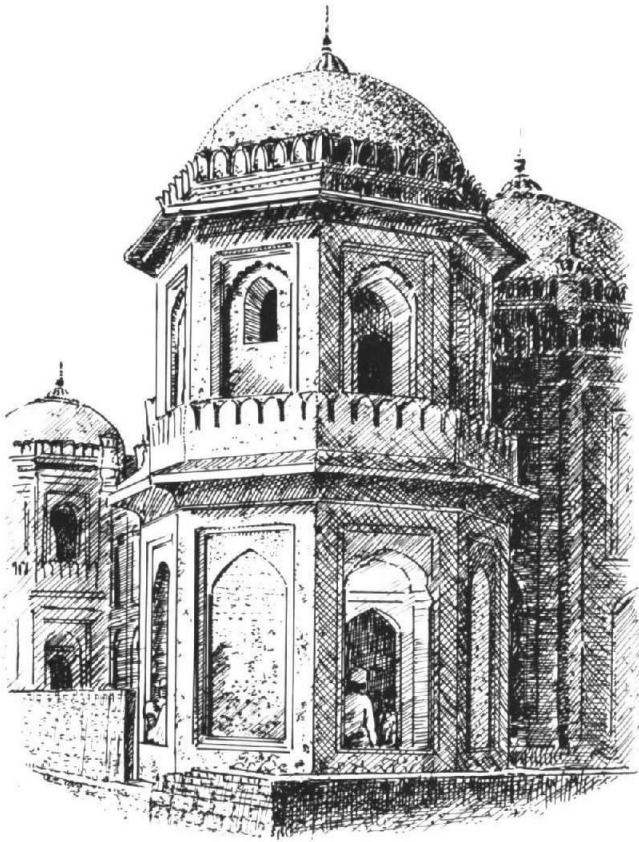
Just three months after the summer floods had hit and the fertile soil was again green with crops, a cyclone hit southeastern Bangladesh November 29–30. About 600 persons were killed, and more than 100 ships and smaller vessels sank or ran aground as 2-meter surges hit coastal areas.

Amidst perennial disasters, Bangladesh continued to gird itself for the 1990s. The number one priority continued to be efforts to reduce the rate of population growth from 2.6 percent to 1.8 percent per annum by 1990. Self-sufficiency in food was next in the order of targeted goals, followed by efforts to further industrialize the country in the ready-made garment, frozen seafood, jute, and leather products industries. The manufacture of electronic components, started only in 1985 and designed for export to Singapore, Hong Kong, and the United States, was seen in 1989 as a key sector for improvement.

May 20, 1989

James Heitzman and Robert L. Worden

## Chapter 1. Historical Setting



*Detail of the Seven Dome Mosque in Dhaka,  
Mughal period, 1526-1858*

**BANGLADESH, FORMERLY THE** East Wing of Pakistan, emerged as an independent nation in December 1971. The exclamation on the occasion—"Joi Bangla! Joi Bangla!" (Victory to Bengal! Victory to Bengal!) was a collective and plaintive cry following a particularly bitter and bloody struggle for freedom. These words echoed the cultural and ethnic disposition of the new state—in short, the ethos of the people—that Bangladesh was to be a culturally and linguistically cohesive unit. Pakistan itself had been created on August 15, 1947, largely the result of communal passions pitting Hindus against Muslims. Pakistan was divided into two wings, separated by 1,600 kilometers of Indian territory, with Islam only a tenuous link between the two wings. Of paramount importance to East Pakistanis was the Bangla (before 1971 usually referred to as Bengali) language and culture, a consideration not appreciated by the West Wing of Pakistan until it was too late.

When Bangladesh joined the community of nations, it was at first recognized by only India and Bhutan. With its fragile and underdeveloped economic infrastructure under extreme duress, its law and order situation challenged by numerous well-armed contingents of unemployed former freedom fighters, its impoverished population agitated by the unfulfilled promise of rising expectations, Bangladesh was, in international circles, given the unfortunate label of "international basket case."

Bangladeshis rejoiced at their attainment of independence and offered their adulation to the first national leader of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib), or the Bangabandhu, the "Beloved of Bangladesh." Yet the future of Bangladesh, envisioned by the Bangabandhu and enshrined in the 1972 Constitution as nationalism, socialism, secularism, and democracy, was as uncertain and ephemeral as the Bengal monsoon. In 1975 Mujib, by then discredited for presiding over a bankrupt and corrupt regime, was assassinated along with most of his family. In the ensuing years, a number of regimes rose and fell in the violent legacy of Bangladeshi politics. Authoritarian and military rule has dominated the short history of Bangladesh. But Bengali society is known for its mercurial politics, and popular demands for a more open government in Bangladesh, while under control in the late 1980s, continued unabated.



## **Early History, 1000 B.C.–A.D. 1202**

For most of its history, the area known as Bangladesh was a political backwater—an observer rather than a participant in the great political and military events of the Indian subcontinent (see fig. 1). Historians believe that Bengal, the area comprising present-day Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal, was settled in about 1000 B.C. by Dravidian-speaking peoples who were later known as the Bang. Their homeland bore various titles that reflected earlier tribal names, such as Vanga, Banga, Bangala, Bangal, and Bengal.

The first great indigenous empire to spread over most of present-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh was the Mauryan Empire (ca. 320–180 B.C.), whose most famous ruler was Asoka (ca. 273–232 B.C.). Although the empire was well administered and politically integrated, little is known of any reciprocal benefits between it and eastern Bengal. The western part of Bengal, however, achieved some importance during the Mauryan period because ships sailed from its ports to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. During the time of the Mauryan Empire, Buddhism came to Bengal, and it was from there that Asoka's son, Mahinda, carried the message of the Enlightened One to Sri Lanka. After the decline of the Mauryan Empire the eastern portion of Bengal became the kingdom of Samatata; although politically independent, it was a tributary state of the Indian Gupta Empire (A.D. ca. 319–ca. 540).

The third great empire was the Harsha Empire (A.D. 606–47), which drew Samatata into its loosely administered political structure. The disunity following the demise of this short-lived empire allowed a Buddhist chief named Gopala to seize power as the first ruler of the Pala Dynasty (A.D. 750–1150). He and his successors provided Bengal with stable government, security, and prosperity while spreading Buddhism throughout the state and into neighboring territories. Trade and influence were extensive under Pala leadership, as emissaries were sent as far as Tibet and Sumatra.

The Senas, orthodox and militant Hindus, replaced the Buddhist Palas as rulers of a united Bengal until the Turkish conquest in 1202. Opposed to the Brahmanic Hinduism of the Senas with its rigid caste system, vast numbers of Bengalis, especially those from the lower castes, would later convert to Islam (see Religion, ch. 2).

## **Islamization of Bengal, 1202–1757**

The Turkish conquest of the subcontinent was a long, drawn-out process covering several centuries. It began in Afghanistan with

*Ancient ruins at Paharpur  
Courtesy Bangladesh  
Ministry of Information*



the military forays of Mahmud of Ghazni in 1001. By the early thirteenth century, Bengal fell to Turkish armies. The last major Hindu Sena ruler was expelled from his capital at Nadia in western Bengal in 1202, although lesser Sena rulers held sway for a short while after in eastern Bengal.

Bengal was loosely associated with the Delhi Sultanate, established in 1206, and paid a tribute in war elephants in order to maintain autonomy. In 1341 Bengal became independent from Delhi, and Dhaka was established as the seat of the governors of independent Bengal. Turks ruled Bengal for several decades before the conquest of Dhaka by forces of the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great (1556–1605) in 1576. Bengal remained a Mughal province until the beginning of the decline of the Mughal Empire in the eighteenth century.

Under the Mughals, the political integration of Bengal with the rest of the subcontinent began, but Bengal was never truly subjugated. It was always too remote from the center of government in Delhi. Because lines of communications were poor, local governors found it easy to ignore imperial directives and maintain their independence. Although Bengal remained provincial, it was not isolated intellectually, and Bengali religious leaders from the fifteenth century onward have been influential throughout the subcontinent.

The Mughals in their heyday had a profound and lasting effect on Bengal. When Akbar ascended the throne at Delhi, a road

connecting Bengal with Delhi was under construction and a postal service was being planned as a step toward drawing Bengal into the operations of the empire. Akbar implemented the present-day Bengali calendar (see Glossary), and his son, Jahangir (1605–27), introduced civil and military officials from outside Bengal who received rights to collect taxes on land. The development of the zamindar (tax collector and later landlord—see Glossary) class and its later interaction with the British would have immense economic and social implications for twentieth-century Bengal. Bengal was treated as the “breadbasket of India” and, as the richest province in the empire, was drained of its resources to maintain the Mughal army. The Mughals, however, did not expend much energy protecting the countryside or the capital from Arakanese or Portuguese pirates; in one year as many as 40,000 Bengalis were seized by pirates to be sold as slaves, and still the central government did not intervene. Local resistance to imperial control forced the emperor to appoint powerful generals as provincial governors. Yet, despite the insecurity of the Mughal regime, Bengal prospered. Agriculture expanded, trade was encouraged, and Dhaka became one of the centers of the textile trade in South Asia.

In 1704 the provincial capital of Bengal was moved from Dhaka to Murshidabad. Although they continued to pay tribute to the Mughal court, the governors became practically independent rulers after the death in 1707 of Aurangzeb, the last great Mughal emperor. The governors were strong enough to fend off marauding Hindu Marathas from the Bombay area during the eighteenth century. When the Mughal governor Alivardi died in 1756, he left the rule of Bengal to his grandson Siraj ud Daulah, who would lose Bengal to the British the following year.

## **European Colonization, 1757–1857**

### **Early Settlements**

The Indian subcontinent had had indirect relations with Europe by both overland caravans and maritime routes, dating back to the fifth century B.C. The lucrative spice trade with India had been mainly in the hands of Arab merchants. By the fifteenth century, European traders had come to believe that the commissions they had to pay the Arabs were prohibitively high and therefore sent out fleets in search of new trade routes to India. The arrival of the Europeans in the last quarter of the fifteenth century marked a great turning point in the history of the subcontinent. The dynamics of the history of the subcontinent came to be shaped chiefly by the Europeans’ political and trade relations with India

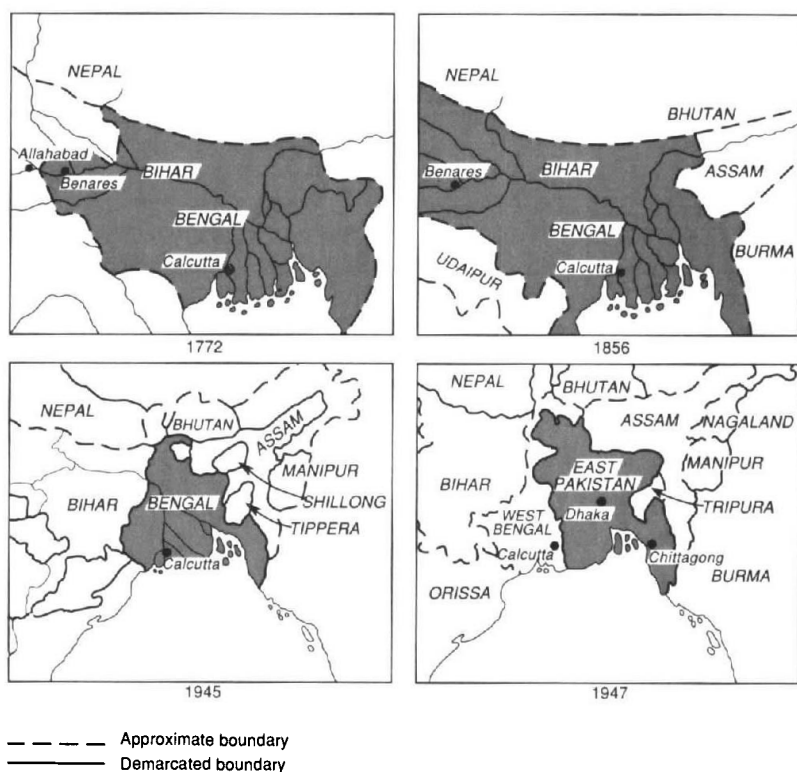
as India was swept into the vortex of Western power politics. The arrival of the Europeans generally coincided with the gradual decline of Mughal power, and the subcontinent became an arena of struggle not only between Europeans and the indigenous rulers but also among the Europeans.

The British East India Company, a private company formed in 1600 during the reign of Akbar and operating under a charter granted by Queen Elizabeth I, established a factory on the Hooghly River in western Bengal in 1650 and founded the city of Calcutta in 1690. Although the initial aim of the British East India Company was to seek trade under concessions obtained from local Mughal governors, the steady collapse of the Mughal Empire (1526–1858) enticed the company to take a more direct involvement in the politics and military activities of the subcontinent. Capitalizing on the political fragmentation of South Asia, the British ultimately rose to supremacy through military expeditions, annexation, bribery, and playing one party off against another. Aside from the superior military power of the British, their ascendancy was fostered by the tottering economic foundations of the local rulers, which had been undermined by ravaging dynastic wars and the consequent displacement of the peasants from the land, which was the principal source of state revenue.

Siraj ud Daulah, governor of Bengal, unwisely provoked a military confrontation with the British at Plassey in 1757. He was defeated by Robert Clive, an adventurous young official of the British East India Company. Clive's victory was consolidated in 1764 at the Battle of Buxar on the Ganges, where he defeated the Mughal emperor. As a result, the British East India Company was granted the title of *diwan* (collector of the revenue) in the areas of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, making it the supreme, but not titular, governing power. Henceforth the British would govern Bengal and from there extend their rule to all of India. By 1815 the supremacy of the British East India Company was unchallengeable, and by the 1850s British control and influence had extended into territories essentially the same as those that became the independent states of India and Pakistan in 1947 (see fig. 2).

### **The British Raj**

Beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century, when the foundations of British rule were effectively laid, the British government showed increasing interest in the welfare of the people of India, feeling the need to curb the greed, recklessness, and corrupt activities of the private British East India Company. Beginning in 1773, the British Parliament sought to regulate the



Source: Based on information from Michael Edwards, *A History of India*, Bombay, 1961, 219, 287, and 343.

*Figure 2. Bengal: 1772, 1856, 1945, and 1947*

company's administration. By 1784 the company was made responsible to Parliament for its civil and military affairs and was transformed into an instrument of British foreign policy.

Some new measures introduced in the spirit of government intervention clearly did not benefit the people of Bengal. The Permanent Settlement (Landlease Act) of Lord Charles Cornwallis in 1793, which regulated the activities of the British agents and imposed a system of revenue collection and landownership, stands as a monument to the disastrous effects of the good intentions of Parliament. The traditional system for collecting land taxes involved the zamindars, who exercised the dual function of revenue collectors and local magistrates. The British gave the zamindars the status and rights of landlords, modeled mainly on the British landed gentry and aristocracy. Under the new system the revenue-collecting rights were often auctioned to the highest bidders, whether or not they

had any knowledge of rural conditions or the managerial skills necessary to improve agriculture. Agriculture became a matter of speculation among urban financiers, and the traditional personal link between the resident zamindars and the peasants was broken. Absentee landlordship became commonplace, and agricultural development stagnated.

Most British subjects who had served with the British East India Company until the end of the eighteenth century were content with making profits and leaving the Indian social institutions untouched. A growing number of Anglican and Baptist evangelicals in Britain, however, felt that social institutions should be reformed. There was also the demand in Britain, first articulated by member of Parliament and political theorist Edmund Burke, that the company's government balance its exploitative practices with concern for the welfare of the Indian people. The influential utilitarian theories of Jeremy Bentham and James Mill stated that societies could be reformed by proper laws. Influenced in part by these factors, British administrators in India embarked on a series of social and administrative reforms that were not well received by the conservative elements of Bengali society. Emphasis was placed on the introduction of Western philosophy, technology, and institutions rather than on the reconstruction of native institutions. The early attempts by the British East India Company to encourage the use of Sanskrit and Persian were abandoned in favor of Western science and literature; elementary education was taught in the vernacular, but higher education in English. The stated purpose of secular education was to produce a class of Indians instilled with British cultural values. Persian was replaced with English as the official language of the government. A code of civil and criminal procedure was fashioned after British legal formulas. In the field of social reforms, the British suppressed what they considered to be inhumane practices, such as suttee (self-immolation of widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands), female infanticide, and human sacrifice.

British policy viewed colonies as suppliers of raw materials and purchasers of manufactured goods. The British conquest of India coincided with the Industrial Revolution in Britain, led by the mechanization of the textile industry. As a result of the British policy of dumping machine-made goods in the subcontinent, India's domestic craft industries were thoroughly ruined, and its trade and commerce collapsed. Eastern Bengal was particularly hard hit. Muslin cloth from Dhaka had become popular in eighteenth-century Europe until British muslin drove it off the market.

## **The Uprising of 1857**

### **A Great Divide in South Asian History**

On May 10, 1857, Indian soldiers of the British Indian Army, drawn mostly from Muslim units from Bengal, mutinied at the Meerut cantonment near Delhi, starting a year-long insurrection against the British. The mutineers then marched to Delhi and offered their services to the Mughal emperor, whose predecessors had suffered an ignoble defeat 100 years earlier at Plassey. The uprising, which seriously threatened British rule in India, has been called many names by historians, including the Sepoy Rebellion, the Great Mutiny, and the Revolt of 1857; many people of the subcontinent, however, prefer to call it India's "first war of independence." The insurrection was sparked by the introduction of cartridges rumored to have been greased with pig or cow fat, which was offensive to the religious beliefs of Muslim and Hindu sepoys (soldiers). In a wider sense, the insurrection was a reaction by the indigenous population to rapid changes in the social order engineered by the British over the preceding century and an abortive attempt by the Muslims to resurrect a dying political order. When mutinous units finally surrendered on June 20, 1858, the British exiled Emperor Bahadur Shah to Burma, thereby formally ending the Mughal Empire. As a direct consequence of the revolt, the British also dissolved the British East India Company and assumed direct rule over India, beginning the period of the British Raj. British India was thereafter headed by a governor general (called viceroy when acting as the direct representative of the British crown). The governor general, who embodied the supreme legislative and executive authority in India, was responsible to the secretary of state for India, a member of the British cabinet in London.

### **Reappraisal of British Policy**

The uprising precipitated a dramatic reappraisal of British policy—in effect a retreat from the reformist and evangelical zeal that had accompanied the rapid territorial expansion of British rule. This policy was codified in Queen Victoria's proclamation of 1858 delivered to "The Princes, Chiefs, and Peoples of India." Formal annexations of princely states virtually ceased, and the political boundaries between British territories and the princely states became frozen. By this time the British territories occupied about 60 percent of the subcontinent, and some 562 princely states of varying size occupied the remainder. The relationship the British maintained with the princely states was governed by the principle of paramountcy, whereby the princely states exercised sovereignty in

their internal affairs but relinquished their powers to conduct their external relations to Britain, the paramount power. Britain assumed responsibility for the defense of the princely states and reserved the right to intervene in cases of maladministration or gross injustice.

Despite Queen Victoria's promise in 1858 that all subjects under the British crown would be treated equally under the law, the revolt left a legacy of mistrust between the ruler and the ruled. In the ensuing years, the British often assumed a posture of racial arrogance as "sahibs" who strove to remain aloof from "native contamination." This attitude was perhaps best captured in Rudyard Kipling's lament that Englishmen were destined to "take up the white man's burden."

As a security precaution, the British increased the ratio of British to Indian troops following the mutiny. In 1857 British India's armies had had 45,000 Britons to 240,000 Indian troops. By 1863 this ratio had changed to a "safer mix" of 65,000 British to 140,000 Indian soldiers. In the aftermath of the revolt, which had begun among Bengalis in the British Indian Army, the British formed an opinion, later refined as a theory, that there were martial and nonmartial races in India. The nonmartial races included the Bengalis; the martial included primarily the Punjabis and the Pathans, who supported the British during the revolt (see *Colonial Origins*, ch. 5).

The transfer of control from the British East India Company to the British crown accelerated the pace of development in India. A great transformation took place in the economy in the late nineteenth century. The British authorities quickly set out to improve inland transportation and communications systems, primarily for strategic and administrative reasons. By 1870 an extended network of railroads, coupled with the removal of internal customs barriers and transit duties, opened up interior markets to domestic and foreign trade and improved links between what is now Bangladesh and Calcutta. India also found itself within the orbit of worldwide markets, especially with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Foreign trade, though under virtual British monopoly, was stimulated. India exported raw materials for world markets, and the economy was quickly transformed into a colonial agricultural arm of British industry.

## **The Nationalist Movement and the Rise of Muslim Consciousness, 1857-1947**

The recovery of the Muslim community from its low status after the 1857 mutiny was a gradual process that went on throughout



the ensuing century. In education, commerce, and government service the Muslims lagged behind the Hindus, who more quickly adapted themselves to rapidly changing socioeconomic conditions. During British rule in India, most industry was Hindu-owned and Hindu-operated. Muslims lagged behind in business and in industry, especially those from eastern Bengal, which had long been regarded as remote from the hub of commerce. The words of Bengali commentator Mansur Ali succinctly describe the Hindu dominance and Muslim inferiority in virtually all spheres of society in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "In Bengal, the landlord is Hindu, the peasant Muslim. The money lender is Hindu, the client is Muslim. The jailor is Hindu, the prisoner is Muslim. The magistrate is Hindu, the accused is Muslim." By remaining aloof from the Western-oriented education system, the Muslims alienated themselves from the many new avenues opening up for the emerging middle class. This self-imposed isolation led to an intensified awareness of their minority role. Curiously, however, it was Muslim opposition to the extension of representative government—a political stance taken out of fear of Hindu dominance—that helped to reestablish rapport with the British, who by 1900 welcomed any available support against mounting Hindu nationalism.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, under the leadership of a Muslim noble and writer, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–98), a beginning was made toward reconciling the traditional views of Indian Muslims and the new ideas and education system being introduced by the British. Syed was responsible for the founding in 1875 of the Muhammadan-Anglo Oriental College (renamed the Muslim University of Aligarh in 1921), where Islamic culture and religious instruction were combined with a British university system. Syed was one of the first Muslims to recognize the problems facing his community under a government ruled by the Hindu majority. He did not propose specific alternatives to majority rule, but he warned that safeguards were necessary to avoid the possibility of open violence between the religious communities of India.

### **The Division of Bengal, 1905–12**

In 1905 the British governor general, Lord George Curzon, divided Bengal into eastern and western sectors in order to improve administrative control of the huge and populous province. Curzon established a new province called Eastern Bengal and Assam, which had its capital at Dhaka. The new province of West Bengal (the present-day state of West Bengal in India) had its capital at Calcutta, which also was the capital of British India. During the next



*Procession in Dhaka honoring the martyrdom of Muhammad's grandson shows clothing, buildings, and other aspects of early nineteenth-century society.*

*Watercolor by Alam Musavvir, ca. 1820  
Courtesy Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka*

few years, the long neglected and predominantly Muslim eastern region of Bengal made strides in education and communications. Many Bengali Muslims viewed the partition as initial recognition of their cultural and political separation from the Hindu majority population. Curzon's decision, however, was ardently challenged by the educated and largely Hindu upper classes of Calcutta. The Indian National Congress (Congress), a Hindu-dominated political organization founded in 1885 and supported by the Calcutta elite, initiated a well-planned campaign against Curzon, accusing him of trying to undermine the nationalist movement that had been spearheaded by Bengal. Congress leaders objected that Curzon's partition of Bengal deprived Bengali Hindus of a majority in either new province—in effect a tactic of divide and rule. In response, they launched a movement to force the British to annul the partition. A *swadeshi* (a devotee of one's own country) movement boycotted British-made goods and encouraged the production and use of Indian-made goods to take their place. *Swadeshi* agitation spread throughout India and became a major plank in the Congress platform. Muslims generally favored the partition of Bengal but could not compete with the more politically articulate and economically

powerful Hindus. In 1912 the British voided the partition of Bengal, a decision that heightened the growing estrangement between the Muslims and Hindus in many parts of the country. The reunited province was reconstituted as a presidency and the capital of India was moved from Calcutta to the less politically electric atmosphere of New Delhi. The reunion of divided Bengal was perceived by Muslims as a British accommodation to Hindu pressures.

### **Development of the Muslim League, 1906–20**

In 1906 the All-India Muslim League (Muslim League) met in Dhaka for the first time. The Muslim League used the occasion to declare its support for the partition of Bengal and to proclaim its mission as a “political association to protect and advance the political rights and interests of the Mussalmans of India.” The Muslim League initially professed its loyalty to the British government and its condemnation of the *swadeshi* movement. It was of an altogether different nature from Congress. Congress claimed to fight for only secular goals that represented Indian national aspirations regardless of religious community. Yet despite its neutral stance on religion, Congress encountered opposition from some leaders in the Muslim community who objected to participation in Congress on the grounds that the party was Hindu dominated. The Muslim League strictly represented only the interests of the Muslim community. Both parties originally were elitist, composed of intellectuals and the middle class, and lacked a mass following until after 1930. The Muslim League looked to the British for protection of Muslim minority rights and insisted on guarantees for Muslim minority rights as the price of its participation with Congress in the nationalist movement. In 1916 the two parties signed the Congress-Muslim League Pact (often referred to as the Lucknow Pact), a joint platform and call for national independence. The essence of the alliance was the endorsement by the Muslim League of demands for democratization in representation; Indianization of administration and racial equality throughout India in return for acceptance by the Congress of separate communal electorates (Muslims voted for and were represented by Muslims, Sikhs voted for and were represented by Sikhs, while the remainder of the population was termed “general” and included mostly Hindus); a reserved quota of legislative seats for Muslims; and the Muslim League’s right to review any social legislation affecting Muslims. The Lucknow Pact was a high-water mark of unity in the nationalist cause, but it also endorsed a scheme that engendered communal rather than national identity. The plan for separate electorates for Muslims, first put into law by the Indian Councils

Act of 1909, was further strengthened and expanded by the India Act of 1919 (the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms).

World War I had a profound impact on the nationalist movement in India. Congress enthusiastically supported the war effort in the hope that Britain would reward Indian loyalty with political concessions, perhaps independence, after the war. The Muslim League was more ambivalent. Part of this ambivalence had to do with the concerns expressed by Muslim writers over the fate of Turkey. The Balkan wars, the Italo-Turkish War, and World War I were depicted in India as a confrontation between Islam and Western imperialism. Because the sultan of Turkey claimed to be the caliph (*khalifa*; literally, successor of the Prophet) and therefore spiritual leader of the Islamic community, many Muslims felt fervently that the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire presaged the destruction of the last great Islamic power. Muslims in India also were alarmed over reports that the Allied Powers contemplated placing some of the holy places of Islam under non-Muslim jurisdiction. In 1920 the Khalifat Movement was launched in response to the news of the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire (see Islam, ch. 2). The Khalifat Movement combined Indian nationalism and pan-Islamic sentiment with strong anti-British overtones.

For several years the Khalifat Movement replaced the Muslim League as the major focus of Muslim activism. An agreement between the leaders of the movement and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi, 1869–1948), the leading figure in Congress, resulted in the joint advocacy of self-rule for India on the one hand and agitation for the protection of Islamic holy places and the restoration of the caliph of Turkey on the other hand. The Khalifat Movement coincided with the inception of Gandhi's call for satyagraha (truth force), a strategy of nonviolent civil disobedience to British rule. The fusion of these two movements was short lived, briefly giving the illusion of unity to India's nationalist agitation.

In 1922 the Hindu-Muslim accord suffered a double blow when their noncooperation movement miscarried and the Khalifat Movement foundered. The outbreak of rioting, which had communal aspects in a number of places, caused Gandhi to call off the joint noncooperation movement. The Khalifat Movement lost its purpose when the postwar Turkish nationalists under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal (later known as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk) abolished the sultanate, proclaimed Turkey a secular republic, abolished the religious office of the caliph, and sent the last of the Ottoman ruling family into exile.

After the eclipse of the Hindu-Muslim accord, the spirit of communal unity was never reestablished in the subcontinent. Congress took an uncompromising stand on the territorial integrity of any proposed postpartition India, downplaying communal differences and seriously underestimating the intensity of Muslim minority fears that were to strengthen the influence and power of the Muslim League. As late as 1938 Gandhi's deputy, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), said, "There is no religious or cultural problem in India. What is called the religious or communal problem is really a dispute among upper-class people for a division of the spoils of office or a representation in a legislature." Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the fiery leader of the untouchables (referred to in Gandhian terminology as harijan—"children of God"), however, described the twenty years following 1920 as "civil war between Hindus and Muslims, interrupted by brief intervals of armed peace."

### **Two Nations Concept, 1930-47**

The political tumult in India during the late 1920s and the 1930s produced the first articulations of a separate state as an expression of Muslim consciousness. Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938), an Islamic revivalist poet and philosopher, discussed contemporary problems in his presidential address to the Muslim League conference at Allahabad in 1930. He saw India as Asia in miniature, in which a unitary form of government was inconceivable and community rather than territory was the basis for identification. To Iqbal, communalism in its highest sense was the key to the formation of a harmonious whole in India. Therefore, he demanded the creation of a confederated India that would include a Muslim state consisting of Punjab, North-West Frontier Province, Sind, and Baluchistan. In subsequent speeches and writings, Iqbal reiterated the claims of Muslims to be considered a nation "based on unity of language, race, history, religion, and identity of economic interests."

Iqbal gave no name to his projected state; that was done by Chaudhari Rahmat Ali and a group of students at Cambridge University who issued a pamphlet in 1933 entitled "Now or Never." They opposed the idea of federation, denied that India was a single country, and demanded partition into regions, the northwest receiving national status as "Pakistan." They made up the name *Pakistan* by taking the P from Punjab, A from Afghania (Rahmat's name for North-West Frontier Province), K from Kashmir, S from Sind, and Tan from Baluchistan. (When written in Urdu, the word *Pakistan* has no letter *i* between the *k* and the *s*.) The name means "the land of the Paks, the spiritually pure



*Ruins of Mainamati, center of a seventh- and eighth-century  
Buddhist kingdom, near modern Comilla  
Courtesy Bangladesh Ministry of Information*

and clean.” There was a proliferation of articles on the theme of Pakistan expressing the subjective conviction of nationhood, but there was no coordination of political effort to achieve it. There was no reference to Bengal.

In 1934 Mohammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948) took over the leadership of the Muslim League, which was without a sense of mission and unable to replace the Khalifat Movement, which had combined religion, nationalism, and political adventure. Jinnah set about restoring a sense of purpose to Muslims. He emphasized the “Two Nations” theory based on the conflicting ideas and conceptions of Hinduism and Islam.

By the late 1930s, Jinnah was convinced of the need for a unifying issue among Muslims, and the proposed state of Pakistan was the obvious answer. In its convention on March 23, 1940, in Lahore, the Muslim League resolved that the areas of Muslim majority in the northwest and the northeast of India should be grouped in “constituent states to be autonomous and sovereign” and that no independence plan without this provision would be acceptable to the Muslims. Federation was rejected and, though confederation on common interests with the rest of India was envisaged, partition was predicated as the final goal. The Pakistan issue brought a positive goal to the Muslims and simplified the task

of political agitation. It was no longer necessary to remain “yoked” to Hindus, and the amended wording of the Lahore Resolution issued in 1940 called for a “unified Pakistan.” It would, however, be challenged by eastern Bengalis in later years.

After 1940 reconciliation between Congress and the Muslim League became increasingly difficult. Muslim enthusiasm for Pakistan grew in direct proportion to Hindu condemnation of it; the concept took on a life of its own and became a reality in 1947.

During World War II, the Muslim League and Congress adopted different attitudes toward the British government. When in 1939 the British declared India at war without first consulting Indian politicians, Muslim League politicians followed a course of limited cooperation with the British. Officials who were members of Congress, however, resigned from their offices. When in August 1942 Gandhi launched the revolutionary “Quit India” movement against the British Raj, Jinnah condemned it. The British government retaliated by arresting about 60,000 individuals and outlawing Congress. Meanwhile, the Muslim League stepped up its political activity. Communal passions rose, as did the incidence of communal violence. Talks between Jinnah and Gandhi in 1944 proved as futile as did the negotiations between Gandhi and the viceroy, Lord Archibald Wavell.

In July 1945 the Labour Party came to power in Britain with a vast majority. Its choices in India were limited by the decline of British power and the spread of Indian unrest, even to the armed services. Some form of independence was the only alternative to forcible retention of control over an unwilling dependency. The viceroy held discussions with Indian leaders in Simla in 1945 in an attempt to decide what form an interim government might take, but no agreement emerged.

New elections to provincial and central legislatures were ordered, and a three-man British cabinet mission arrived to discuss plans for India’s self-government. Although the mission did not directly accept plans for self-government, concessions were made by severely limiting the power of the central government. An interim government composed of the parties returned by the election was to start functioning immediately, as was the newly elected Constituent Assembly.

Congress and the Muslim League emerged from the 1946 election as the two dominant parties. The Muslim League’s success in the election could be gauged from its sweep of 90 percent of all Muslim seats in British India—compared with a mere 4.5 percent in 1937 elections. The Muslim League, like Congress, initially accepted the British cabinet mission plan, despite grave

reservations. Subsequent disputes between the leaders of the two parties, however, led to mistrust and bitterness. Jinnah demanded parity for the Muslim League in the interim government and temporarily boycotted it when the demand was not met. Nehru indiscreetly made statements that cast doubts on the sincerity of Congress in accepting the cabinet mission plan. Each party disputed the right of the other to appoint Muslim ministers.

When the viceroy proceeded to form an interim government without the Muslim League, Jinnah called for demonstrations, or "direct action," on August 16, 1946. Communal rioting on an unprecedented scale broke out, especially in Bengal and Bihar; the massacre of Muslims in Calcutta brought Gandhi to the scene. His efforts calmed fears in Bengal, but the rioting spread to other provinces and continued into the following year. Jinnah took the Muslim League into the government in an attempt to prevent additional communal violence, but disagreement among the ministers rendered the interim government ineffective. Over all loomed the shadow of civil war.

In February 1947, Lord Louis Mountbatten was appointed viceroy and was given instructions to arrange for the transfer of power. After a quick assessment of the Indian scene, Mountbatten said that "India was a ship on fire in mid-ocean with ammunition in her hold." Mountbatten was convinced that Congress would be willing to accept partition as the price for stopping bloodshed and that Jinnah was willing to accept a smaller Pakistan. Mountbatten obtained sanction from London for the drastic action he proposed and then persuaded Indian leaders to acquiesce in a general way to his plan.

On July 14, 1947, the British House of Commons passed the India Independence Act, by which two independent dominions were created on the subcontinent and the princely states were left to accede to either. Throughout the summer of 1947, as communal violence mounted and drought and floods racked the land, preparations for partition proceeded in Delhi. The preparations were inadequate. A restructuring of the military into two forces took place, as law and order broke down in different parts of the country (see *Pakistan Era*, ch. 5). Jinnah and Nehru tried unsuccessfully to quell the passions that neither fully understood. Jinnah flew from Delhi to Karachi on August 7 and took office seven days later as the first governor general of the new Dominion of Pakistan.

## **Pakistan Period, 1947-71**

### **Transition to Nationhood, 1947-58**

Pakistan was born in bloodshed and came into existence on August 15, 1947, confronted by seemingly insurmountable



problems. As many as 12 million people—Muslims leaving India for Pakistan, and Hindus and Sikhs opting to move to India from the new state of Pakistan—had been involved in the mass transfer of population between the two countries, and perhaps 2 million refugees had died in the communal bloodbath that had accompanied the migrations. Pakistan's boundaries were established hastily without adequate regard for the new nation's economic viability. Even the minimal requirements of a working central government—skilled personnel, equipment, and a capital city with government buildings—were missing. Until 1947 the East Wing of Pakistan, separated from the West Wing by 1,600 kilometers of Indian territory, had been heavily dependent on Hindu management. Many Hindu Bengalis left for Calcutta after partition, and their place, particularly in commerce, was taken mostly by Muslims who had migrated from the Indian state of Bihar or by West Pakistanis from Punjab.

After partition, Muslim banking shifted from Bombay to Karachi, Pakistan's first capital. Much of the investment in East Pakistan came from West Pakistani banks. Investment was concentrated in jute production at a time when international demand was decreasing. The largest jute processing factory in the world, at Narayanganj, an industrial suburb of Dhaka, was owned by the Adamjee family from West Pakistan. Because banking and financing were generally controlled by West Pakistanis, discriminatory practices often resulted. Bengalis found themselves excluded from the managerial level and from skilled labor. West Pakistanis tended to favor Urdu-speaking Biharis (refugees from the northern Indian state of Bihar living in East Pakistan), considering them to be less prone to labor agitation than the Bengalis. This preference became more pronounced after explosive labor clashes between the Biharis and Bengalis at the Narayanganj jute mill in 1954.

Pakistan had a severe shortage of trained administrative personnel, as most members of the preindependence Indian Civil Service were Hindus or Sikhs who opted to belong to India at partition. Rarer still were Muslim Bengalis who had any past administrative experience. As a result, high-level posts in Dhaka, including that of governor general, were usually filled by West Pakistanis or by refugees from India who had adopted Pakistani citizenship.

One of the most divisive issues confronting Pakistan in its infancy was the question of what the official language of the new state was to be. Jinnah yielded to the demands of refugees from the Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, who insisted that Urdu be Pakistan's official language. Speakers of the languages of West Pakistan—Punjabi, Sindhi, Pushtu, and Baluchi—were upset that



*Kusumba Mosque, Rajshahi,  
built in 1558, an outstanding example of pre-Mughal architecture  
Lalbagh Mosque, Dhaka, built ca. 1680  
Courtesy Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka*

their languages were given second-class status. In East Pakistan, the dissatisfaction quickly turned to violence. The Bengalis of East Pakistan constituted a majority (an estimated 54 percent) of Pakistan's entire population. Their language, Bangla (then commonly known as Bengali), shares with Urdu a common Sanskritic-Persian ancestor, but the two languages have different scripts and literary traditions.

Jinnah visited East Pakistan on only one occasion after independence, shortly before his death in 1948. He announced in Dhaka that "without one state language, no nation can remain solidly together and function." Jinnah's views were not accepted by most East Pakistanis, but perhaps in tribute to the founder of Pakistan, serious resistance on this issue did not break out until after his death. On February 22, 1952, a demonstration was carried out in Dhaka in which students demanded equal status for Bangla. The police reacted by firing on the crowd and killing two students. (A memorial, the Shaheed Minar, was built later to commemorate the martyrs of the language movement.) Two years after the incident, Bengali agitation effectively forced the National Assembly to designate "Urdu and Bengali and such other languages as may be declared" to be the official languages of Pakistan.

What kept the new country together was the vision and forceful personality of the founders of Pakistan: Jinnah, the governor general popularly known as the Quaid i Azam (Supreme Leader); and Liaquat Ali Khan (1895-1951), the first prime minister, popularly known as the Quaid i Millet (Leader of the Community). The government machinery established at independence was similar to the viceregal system that had prevailed in the preindependence period and placed no formal limitations on Jinnah's constitutional powers. In the 1970s in Bangladesh, another autocrat, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, would enjoy much of the same prestige and exemption from the normal rule of law.

When Jinnah died in September 1948, the seat of power shifted from the governor general to the prime minister, Liaquat. Liaquat had extensive experience in politics and enjoyed as a refugee from India the additional benefit of not being too closely identified with any one province of Pakistan. A moderate, Liaquat subscribed to the ideals of a parliamentary, democratic, and secular state. Out of necessity he considered the wishes of the country's religious spokesmen who championed the cause of Pakistan as an Islamic state. He was seeking a balance of Islam against secularism for a new constitution when he was assassinated on October 16, 1951, by fanatics opposed to Liaquat's refusal to wage war against India. With both Jinnah and Liaquat gone, Pakistan faced an unstable

period that would be resolved by military and civil service intervention in political affairs. The first few turbulent years after independence thus defined the enduring politico-military culture of Pakistan.

The inability of the politicians to provide a stable government was largely a result of their mutual suspicions. Loyalties tended to be personal, ethnic, and provincial rather than national and issue oriented. Provincialism was openly expressed in the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly. In the Constituent Assembly frequent arguments voiced the fear that the West Pakistani province of Punjab would dominate the nation. An ineffective body, the Constituent Assembly took almost nine years to draft a constitution, which for all practical purposes was never put into effect.

Liaquat was succeeded as prime minister by a conservative Bengali, Governor General Khwaja Nazimuddin. Former finance minister Ghulam Mohammad, a Punjabi career civil servant, became governor general. Ghulam Mohammad was dissatisfied with Nazimuddin's inability to deal with Bengali agitation for provincial autonomy and worked to expand his own power base. East Pakistan favored a high degree of autonomy, with the central government controlling little more than foreign affairs, defense, communications, and currency. In 1953 Ghulam Mohammad dismissed Prime Minister Nazimuddin, established martial law in Punjab, and imposed governor's rule (direct rule by the central government) in East Pakistan. In 1954 he appointed his own "cabinet of talents." Mohammad Ali Bogra, another conservative Bengali and previously Pakistan's ambassador to the United States and the United Nations, was named prime minister.

During September and October 1954 a chain of events culminated in a confrontation between the governor general and the prime minister. Prime Minister Bogra tried to limit the powers of Governor General Ghulam Mohammad through hastily adopted amendments to the de facto constitution, the Government of India Act of 1935. The governor general, however, enlisted the tacit support of the army and civil service, dissolved the Constituent Assembly, and then formed a new cabinet. Bogra, a man without a personal following, remained prime minister but without effective power. General Iskander Mirza, who had been a soldier and civil servant, became minister of the interior; General Mohammad Ayub Khan, the army commander, became minister of defense; and Choudhry Mohammad Ali, former head of the civil service, remained minister of finance. The main objective of the new government was to end disruptive provincial politics and to provide the country with a new constitution. The Federal Court, however,

declared that a new Constituent Assembly must be called. Ghulam Mohammad was unable to circumvent the order, and the new Constituent Assembly, elected by the provincial assemblies, met for the first time in July 1955. Bogra, who had little support in the new assembly, fell in August and was replaced by Choudhry; Ghulam Mohammad, plagued by poor health, was succeeded as governor general in September 1955 by Mirza.

The second Constituent Assembly differed in composition from the first. In East Pakistan, the Muslim League had been overwhelmingly defeated in the 1954 provincial assembly elections by the United Front coalition of Bengali regional parties anchored by Fazlul Haq's Krishak Sramik Samajbadi Dal (Peasants and Workers Socialist Party) and the Awami League (People's League) led by Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy. Rejection of West Pakistan's dominance over East Pakistan and the desire for Bengali provincial autonomy were the main ingredients of the coalition's twenty-one-point platform. The East Pakistani election and the coalition's victory proved pyrrhic; Bengali factionalism surfaced soon after the election and the United Front fell apart. From 1954 to Ayub's assumption of power in 1958, the Krishak Sramik and the Awami League waged a ceaseless battle for control of East Pakistan's provincial government.

Prime Minister Choudhry induced the politicians to agree on a constitution in 1956. In order to establish a better balance between the west and east wings, the four provinces of West Pakistan were amalgamated into one administrative unit. The 1956 constitution made provisions for an Islamic state as embodied in its Directive of Principles of State Policy, which defined methods of promoting Islamic morality. The national parliament was to comprise one house of 300 members with equal representation from both the west and east wings.

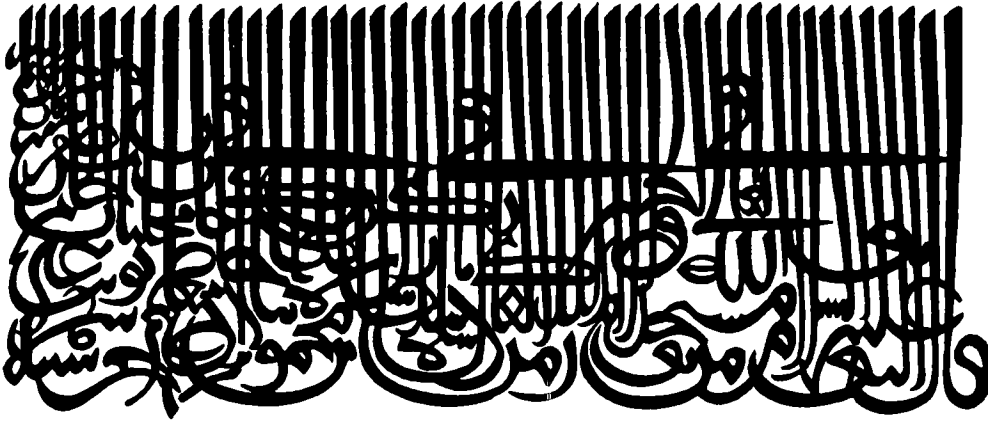
The Awami League's Suhrawardy succeeded Choudhry as prime minister in September 1956 and formed a coalition cabinet. He, like other Bengali politicians, was chosen by the central government to serve as a symbol of unity, but he failed to secure significant support from West Pakistani power brokers. Although he had a good reputation in East Pakistan and was respected for his preparation association with Gandhi, his strenuous efforts to gain greater provincial autonomy for East Pakistan and a larger share of development funds for it were not well received in West Pakistan. Suhrawardy's thirteen months in office came to an end after he took a strong position against abrogation of the existing "One Unit" government for all of West Pakistan in favor of separate local governments for Sind, Punjab, Baluchistan, and North-West

Frontier Province. He thus lost much support from West Pakistan's provincial politicians. He also used emergency powers to prevent the formation of a Muslim League provincial government in West Pakistan, thereby losing much Punjabi backing. Moreover, his open advocacy of votes of confidence from the Constituent Assembly as the proper means of forming governments aroused the suspicions of President Mirza. In 1957 the president used his considerable influence to oust Suhrawardy from the office of prime minister. The drift toward economic decline and political chaos continued.

### **The "Revolution" of Ayub Khan, 1958-66**

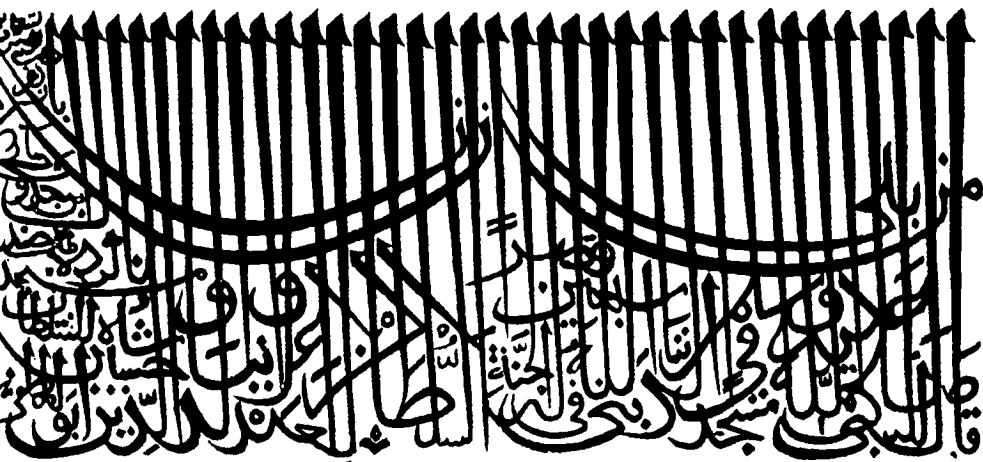
In East Pakistan the political impasse culminated in 1958 in a violent scuffle in the provincial assembly between members of the opposition and the police force, in which the deputy speaker was fatally injured and two ministers badly wounded. Uncomfortable with the workings of parliamentary democracy, unruliness in the East Pakistani provincial assembly elections, and the threat of Baluch separatism in West Pakistan, on October 7, 1958, Mirza issued a proclamation that abolished political parties, abrogated the two-year-old constitution, and placed the country under martial law. Mirza announced that martial law would be a temporary measure lasting only until a new constitution was drafted. On October 27, he swore in a twelve-member cabinet that included Ayub as prime minister and three other generals in ministerial positions. Included among the eight civilians was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a former university lecturer and future leader of Pakistan. On the same day, the generals exiled Mirza to London because "the armed services and the people demanded a clean break with the past." Until 1962, martial law continued and Ayub purged a number of politicians and civil servants from the government and replaced them with army officers. Ayub called his regime a "revolution to clean up the mess of black marketing and corruption."

The new constitution promulgated by Ayub in March 1962 vested all executive authority of the republic in the president. As chief executive, the president could appoint ministers without approval by the legislature. There was no provision for a prime minister. There was a provision for a National Assembly and two provincial assemblies, whose members were to be chosen by the "Basic Democrats"—80,000 voters organized into a five-tier hierarchy, with each tier electing officials to the next tier. Pakistan was declared a republic (without being specifically an Islamic republic) but, in deference to the religious scholars (ulamas—see Glossary), the president was required to be a Muslim, and no law could be passed that was contrary to the tenets of Islam.



The 1962 constitution made few concessions to Bengalis. It was, instead, a document that buttressed centralized government under the guise of “basic democracies” programs, gave legal support to martial law, and turned parliamentary bodies into forums for debate. Throughout the Ayub years, East Pakistan and West Pakistan grew farther apart. The death of the Awami League’s Suhrawardy in 1963 gave the mercurial Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—commonly known as Mujib—the leadership of East Pakistan’s dominant party. Mujib, who as early as 1956 had advocated the “liberation” of East Pakistan and had been jailed in 1958 during the military coup, quickly and successfully brought the issue of East Pakistan’s movement for autonomy to the forefront of the nation’s politics.

During the years between 1960 and 1965, the annual rate of growth of the gross domestic product (see Glossary) per capita was 4.4 percent in West Pakistan versus a poor 2.6 percent in East Pakistan. Furthermore, Bengali politicians pushing for more autonomy complained that much of Pakistan’s export earnings were generated in East Pakistan by the export of Bengali jute and tea. As late as 1960, approximately 70 percent of Pakistan’s export earnings originated in the East Wing, although this percentage declined as international demand for jute dwindled. By the mid-1960s, the East Wing was accounting for less than 60 percent of the nation’s export earnings, and by the time of Bangladesh’s independence in 1971, this percentage had dipped below 50 percent. This reality did not dissuade Mujib from demanding in 1966 that separate



*Two of the finest examples of tughra-style Arabic calligraphy used in Bangladesh, fifteenth century*  
*Courtesy Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka (left)*  
*Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi (right)*

foreign exchange accounts be kept and that separate trade offices be opened overseas. By the mid-1960s, West Pakistan was benefiting from Ayub's "Decade of Progress," with its successful "green revolution" in wheat, and from the expansion of markets for West Pakistani textiles, while the East Pakistani standard of living remained at an abysmally low level. Bengalis were also upset that West Pakistan, because it was the seat of government, was the major beneficiary of foreign aid.

### **Emerging Discontent, 1966–70**

At a 1966 Lahore conference of both the eastern and the western chapters of the Awami League, Mujib announced his controversial six-point political and economic program for East Pakistani provincial autonomy. He demanded that the government be federal and parliamentary in nature, its members elected by universal adult suffrage with legislative representation on the basis of population; that the federal government have principal responsibility for foreign affairs and defense only; that each wing have its own currency and separate fiscal accounts; that taxation occur at the provincial level, with a federal government funded by constitutionally guaranteed grants; that each federal unit control its own earning of foreign exchange; and that each unit raise its own militia or paramilitary forces.

Mujib's six points ran directly counter to Ayub's plan for greater national integration. Ayub's anxieties were shared by many West Pakistanis, who feared that Mujib's plan would divide Pakistan



by encouraging ethnic and linguistic cleavages in West Pakistan, and would leave East Pakistan, with its Bengali ethnic and linguistic unity, by far the most populous and powerful of the federating units. Ayub interpreted Mujib's demands as tantamount to a call for independence. After pro-Mujib supporters rioted in a general strike in Dhaka, the government arrested Mujib in January 1968.

Ayub suffered a number of setbacks in 1968. His health was poor, and he was almost assassinated at a ceremony marking ten years of his rule. Riots followed, and Bhutto was arrested as the instigator. At Dhaka a tribunal that inquired into the activities of the already-interned Mujib was arousing strong popular resentment against Ayub. A conference of opposition leaders and the cancellation of the state of emergency (in effect since 1965) came too late to conciliate the opposition. On February 21, 1969, Ayub announced that he would not run in the next presidential election in 1970. A state of near anarchy reigned with protests and strikes throughout the country. The police appeared helpless to control the mob violence, and the military stood aloof. At length, on March 25 Ayub resigned and handed over the administration to the commander in chief, General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan. Once again the country was placed under martial law. Yahya assumed the titles of chief martial law administrator and president. He announced that he considered himself to be a transitional leader whose task would be to restore order and to conduct free elections for a new constituent assembly, which would then draft a new constitution. He appointed a largely civilian cabinet in August 1969 in preparation for the election, which was scheduled to take place in December 1970. Yahya moved with dispatch to settle two contentious issues by decree: the unpopular "One Unit" of West Pakistan, which was created as a condition for the 1956 constitution, was ended; and East Pakistan was awarded 162 seats out of the 300-member National Assembly.

On November 12, 1970, a cyclone devastated an area of almost 8,000 square kilometers of East Pakistan's mid-coastal lowlands and its outlying islands in the Bay of Bengal. It was perhaps the worst natural disaster of the area in centuries. As many as 250,000 lives were lost. Two days after the cyclone hit, Yahya arrived in Dhaka after a trip to Beijing, but he left a day later. His seeming indifference to the plight of Bengali victims caused a great deal of animosity. Opposition newspapers in Dhaka accused the central government of impeding the efforts of international relief agencies and of "gross neglect, callous inattention, and bitter indifference." Mujib, who had been released from prison, lamented that "West Pakistan has a bumper wheat crop, but the first shipment of food

grain to reach us is from abroad” and “that the textile merchants have not given a yard of cloth for our shrouds.” “We have a large army,” Mujib continued, “but it is left to the British Marines to bury our dead.” In an unveiled threat to the unity of Pakistan he added, “the feeling now pervades . . . every village, home, and slum that we must rule ourselves. We must make the decisions that matter. We will no longer suffer arbitrary rule by bureaucrats, capitalists, and feudal interests of West Pakistan.”

Yahya announced plans for a national election on December 7, 1970, and urged voters to elect candidates who were committed to the integrity and unity of Pakistan. The elections were the first in the history of Pakistan in which voters were able to elect members of the National Assembly directly. In a convincing demonstration of Bengali dissatisfaction with the West Pakistani regime, the Awami League won all but 2 of the 162 seats allotted East Pakistan in the National Assembly. Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party came in a poor second nationally, winning 81 out of the 138 West Pakistani seats in the National Assembly. The Awami League’s electoral victory promised it control of the government, with Mujib as the country’s prime minister, but the inaugural assembly never met.

Yahya and Bhutto vehemently opposed Mujib’s idea of a confederated Pakistan. Mujib was adamant that the constitution be based on his six-point program. Bhutto, meanwhile, pleaded for unity in Pakistan under his leadership. As tensions mounted, Mujib suggested he become prime minister of East Pakistan while Bhutto be made prime minister of West Pakistan. It was this action that triggered mass civil disobedience in East Pakistan. Mujib called for a general strike until the government was given over to the “people’s representatives.” Tiring of the interminable game of politics he was playing with the Bengali leader, Yahya decided to ignore Mujib’s demands and on March 1 postponed indefinitely the convening of the National Assembly, which had been scheduled for March 3. March 1 also was a portentous date, for on that day Yahya named General Tikka Khan, who in later years was to earn the dubious title “Butcher of Baluchistan” for his suppression of Baluch separatists, as East Pakistan’s military governor. The number of West Pakistani troops entering East Pakistan had increased sharply in the preceding weeks, climbing from a precrisis level of 25,000 to about 60,000, bringing the army close to a state of readiness. As tensions rose, however, Yahya continued desperate negotiations with Mujib, flying to Dhaka in mid-March. Talks between Yahya and Mujib were joined by Bhutto but soon collapsed, and on March 23 Bengalis following Mujib’s lead

defiantly celebrated “Resistance Day” in East Pakistan instead of the traditional all-Pakistan “Republic Day.” Yahya decided to “solve” the problem of East Pakistan by repression. On the evening of March 25 he flew back to Islamabad. The military crack-down in East Pakistan began that same night.

### **The War for Bangladeshi Independence, 1971**

On March 25, the Pakistan Army launched a terror campaign calculated to intimidate the Bengalis into submission. Within hours a wholesale slaughter had commenced in Dhaka, with the heaviest attacks concentrated on the University of Dhaka and the Hindu area of the old town. Bangladeshis remember the date as a day of infamy and liberation. The Pakistan Army came with hit lists and systematically killed several hundred Bengalis. Mujib was captured and flown to West Pakistan for incarceration.

To conceal what they were doing, the Pakistan Army corralled the corps of foreign journalists at the International Hotel in Dhaka, seized their notes, and expelled them the next day. One reporter who escaped the censor net estimated that three battalions of troops—one armored, one artillery, and one infantry—had attacked the virtually defenseless city. Various informants, including missionaries and foreign journalists who clandestinely returned to East Pakistan during the war, estimated that by March 28 the loss of life reached 15,000. By the end of summer as many as 300,000 people were thought to have lost their lives. Anthony Mascarenhas in *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood* estimates that during the entire nine-month liberation struggle more than 1 million Bengalis may have died at the hands of the Pakistan Army.

The West Pakistani press waged a vigorous but ultimately futile campaign to counteract newspaper and radio accounts of wholesale atrocities. One paper, the *Morning News*, even editorialized that the armed forces were saving East Pakistanis from eventual Hindu enslavement. The civil war was played down by the government-controlled press as a minor insurrection quickly being brought under control.

After the tragic events of March, India became vocal in its condemnation of Pakistan. An immense flood of East Pakistani refugees, between 8 and 10 million according to various estimates, fled across the border into the Indian state of West Bengal. In April an Indian parliamentary resolution demanded that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi supply aid to the rebels in East Pakistan. She complied but declined to recognize the provisional government of independent Bangladesh.

A propaganda war between Pakistan and India ensued in which Yahya threatened war against India if that country made an attempt to seize any part of Pakistan. Yahya also asserted that Pakistan could count on its American and Chinese friends. At the same time, Pakistan tried to ease the situation in the East Wing. Belatedly, it replaced Tikka, whose military tactics had caused such havoc and human loss of life, with the more restrained Lieutenant General A.A.K. Niazi. A moderate Bengali, Abdul Malik, was installed as the civilian governor of East Pakistan. These belated gestures of appeasement did not yield results or change world opinion.

On December 4, 1971, the Indian Army, far superior in numbers and equipment to that of Pakistan, executed a 3-pronged pincer movement on Dhaka launched from the Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura, taking only 12 days to defeat the 90,000 Pakistani defenders. The Pakistan Army was weakened by having to operate so far away from its source of supply. The Indian Army, on the other hand, was aided by East Pakistan's Mukti Bahini (Liberation Force), the freedom fighters who managed to keep the Pakistan Army at bay in many areas (see *The Liberation War*, ch. 5).

## **Birth of Bangladesh**

### **Early Independence Period, 1971-72**

The "independent, sovereign republic of Bangladesh" was first proclaimed in a radio message broadcast from a captured station in Chittagong on March 26, 1971. Two days later, the "Voice of Independent Bangladesh" announced that a "Major Zia" (actually Ziaur Rahman, later president of Bangladesh) would form a new government with himself occupying the "presidency." Zia's self-appointment was considered brash, especially by Mujib, who in subsequent years would hold a grudge. Quickly realizing that his action was unpopular, Zia yielded his "office" to the incarcerated Mujib. The following month a provisional government was established in Calcutta by a number of leading Awami League members who had escaped from East Pakistan. On April 17, the "Mujibnagar" government formally proclaimed independence and named Mujib as its president. On December 6, India became the first nation to recognize the new Bangladeshi government. When the West Pakistani surrender came ten days later, the provisional government had some organization in place, but it was not until December 22 that members of the new government arrived in Dhaka, having been forced to heed the advice of the Indian military that order must quickly be restored. Representatives of the

Bangladeshi government and the Mukti Bahini were absent from the ceremony of surrender of the Pakistan Army to the Indian Army on December 16. Bangladeshis considered this ceremony insulting, and it did much to sour relations between Bangladesh and India.

At independence, Mujib was in jail in West Pakistan, where he had been taken after his arrest on March 25. He had been convicted of treason by a military court and sentenced to death. Yahya did not carry out the sentence, perhaps as a result of pleas made by many foreign governments. With the surrender of Pakistani forces in Dhaka and the Indian proclamation of a cease-fire on the western front, Yahya relinquished power to a civilian government under Bhutto, who released Mujib and permitted him to return to Dhaka via London and New Delhi.

On January 10, 1972, Mujib arrived in Dhaka to a tumultuous welcome. Mujib first assumed the title of president but vacated that office two days later to become the prime minister. Mujib pushed through a new constitution that was modeled on the Indian Constitution. The Constitution—adopted on November 4, 1972—stated that the new nation was to have a prime minister appointed by the president and approved by a single-house parliament. The Constitution then enumerated a number of principles on which Bangladesh was to be governed. These came to be known as the tenets of “Mujibism” (or “Mujibbad”), which included the four pillars of nationalism, socialism, secularism, and democracy. In the following years, however, Mujib discarded everything Bangladesh theoretically represented: constitutionalism, freedom of speech, rule of law, the right to dissent, and equal opportunity of employment.

### **Fall of the Bangabandhu, 1972–75**

The country Mujib returned to was scarred by civil war. The number of people killed, raped, or displaced could be only vaguely estimated. The task of economic rehabilitation, specifically the immediate goal of food distribution to a hungry populace, was frustrated by crippled communications and transportation systems. The new nation faced many other seemingly insurmountable problems inhibiting its reconstruction. One of the most glaring was the breakdown of law and order. In the wake of the war of independence, numerous bands of guerrillas still roamed the countryside, fully armed and outside the control of the government. Many fighters of the Mukti Bahini joined the Bangladesh Army and thus could legally retain their weapons, but many others ignored Mujib’s plea that they surrender their weapons. Some armed groups took the law into their own hands and set up territories under their own

*The founding father  
of Bangladesh,  
Sheikh Mujibur Rahman  
(1920-75)  
Courtesy Bangladesh  
National Museum, Dhaka*



*Mujib's house in Dhaka  
Courtesy Siria Lopez*



jurisdiction. In time these challenges to central authority contributed to Mujib's suspension of democracy.

Mujib had an unfailing attachment to those who participated in the struggle for independence. He showed favoritism toward those comrades by giving them appointments to the civil government and especially the military. This shortsighted practice proved fatal. Mujib denied himself the skill of many top-level officers formerly employed by the Pakistan Civil Service. Bengali military officers who did not manage to escape from West Pakistan during the war and those who remained at their posts in East Pakistan were discriminated against throughout the Mujib years. The "repatriates," who constituted about half of the army, were denied promotions or choice posts; officers were assigned to functionless jobs as "officers on special duty." Schooled in the British tradition, most believed in the ideals of military professionalism; to them the prospect of serving an individual rather than an institution was reprehensible. Opposed to the repatriates were the freedom fighters, most of whom offered their unquestioning support for Mujib and in return were favored by him. A small number of them, associated with the radical Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (National Socialist Party), even proposed that officers be elected to their posts in a "people's army." From the ranks of the freedom fighters, Mujib established the Jatiyo Rakkhi Bahini (National Defense Force), whose members took a personal pledge to Mujib and became, in effect, his private army to which privileges and hard-to-get commodities were lavishly given (see Postindependence Period, ch. 5).

Despite substantial foreign aid, mostly from India and the Soviet Union, food supplies were scarce, and there was rampant corruption and black marketeering. This situation prompted Mujib to issue a warning against hoarders and smugglers. Mujib backed up his threat by launching a mass drive against hoarders and smugglers, backed by the Jatiyo Rakkhi Bahini. The situation only temporarily buoyed the legitimate economy of the country, as hoarding, black marketeering, and corruption in high offices continued and became the hallmarks of the Mujib regime.

Mujib's economic policies also directly contributed to his country's economic chaos. His large-scale nationalization of Bangladeshi manufacturing and trading enterprises and international trading in commodities strangled Bangladesh entrepreneurship in its infancy. The enforced use of the Bangla language as a replacement for English at all levels of government and education was yet another policy that increased Bangladesh's isolation from the dynamics of the world economy.

Most Bangladeshis still revered the Bangabandhu at the time of the first national elections held in 1973. Mujib was assured of victory, and the Awami League won 282 out of 289 directly contested seats. After the election, the economic and security situations began to deteriorate rapidly, and Mujib's popularity suffered further as a result of what many Bangladeshis came to regard as his close alliance with India. Mujib's authoritarian personality and his paternalistic pronouncements to "my country" and "my people" were not sufficient to divert the people's attention from the miserable conditions of the country. Widespread flooding and famine created severe hardship, aggravated by growing law-and-order problems.

In January 1975, the Constitution was amended to make Mujib president for five years and to give him full executive powers. The next month, in a move that wiped out all opposition political parties, Mujib proclaimed Bangladesh a one-party state, effectively abolishing the parliamentary system. He renamed the Awami League the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (Bangladesh Peasants, Workers, and People's League) and required all civilian government personnel to join the party. The fundamental rights enumerated in the Constitution ceased to be observed, and Bangladesh, in its infancy, was transformed into a personal dictatorship.

On the morning of August 15, 1975, Mujib and several members of his family were murdered in a coup engineered by a group of young army officers, most of whom were majors. Some of the officers in the "majors' plot" had a personal vendetta against Mujib, having earlier been dismissed from the army. In a wider sense, the disaffected officers and the several hundred troops they led represented the grievances of the professionals in the military over their subordination to the Jatiyo Rakkhi Bahini and Mujib's indifference to gross corruption by his political subordinates and family members. By the time of his assassination, Mujib's popularity had fallen precipitously, and his death was lamented by surprisingly few.

The diplomatic status of Bangladesh changed overnight. One day after Mujib's assassination President Bhutto of Pakistan announced that his country would immediately recognize the new regime and offered a gift of 50,000 tons of rice in addition to a generous gift of clothing. India, however, under the rule of Indira Gandhi, suffered a setback in its relations with Bangladesh. The end of the Mujib period once again brought serious bilateral differences to the fore. Many Bangladeshis, although grateful for India's help against Pakistan during the struggle for independence, thought Indian troops had lingered too long after the Pakistan Army was



defeated. Mujibist dissidents who continued to resist central authority found shelter in India (see Foreign Policy, ch. 4).

### **Restoration of Military Rule, 1975–77**

The assassins of Mujib arrested the three senior ranking officers in Mujib's cabinet but installed as president the fourth in charge, a long-time colleague of Mujib and minister of commerce, Khondakar Mushtaque Ahmed. Mushtaque, a conservative member of the Awami League (the name to which the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League reverted after Mujib's death), was known to lean toward the West and to have been troubled by Mujib's close ties with India. Many observers believed him to have been a conspirator in Mujib's assassination. Even so, his role in the new regime was circumscribed by the majors, who even moved into the presidential palace with him. Mushtaque announced that parliamentary democracy would be restored by February 1977, and he lifted Mujib's ban on political parties. He instituted strong programs to reduce corrupt practices and to restore efficiency and public confidence in the government. He also ordered the transfer of all the equipment and assets and most of the personnel of the Jatiyo Rakkhi Bahini to the army and the eventual abolition of the Jatiyo Rakkhi Bahini. Mushtaque promised to dissolve the authoritarian powers that Mujib had invested in the office of the presidency, but the continuing unstable situation did not improve enough to permit a significant degree of liberalization. In order to keep Mujib supporters under control, Mushtaque declared himself chief martial law administrator and set up a number of tribunals that fell outside constitutional jurisdiction.

Despite the economic and political instability during the last years of the Mujib regime, the memory of the Bangabandhu evoked strong emotions among his loyalists. Many of these, especially former freedom fighters now in the army, were deeply resentful of the majors. One of these Mujib loyalists, Brigadier Khaled Musharraf, launched a successful coup on November 3, 1975. Chief Justice Abu Sadat Mohammad Sayem, who had served Mujib in the Supreme Court, emerged as president. Musharraf had himself promoted to major general, thereby replacing Chief of Staff Zia.

In a public display orchestrated to show his loyalty to the slain Mujib, Musharraf led a procession to Mujib's former residence. The reaction to Musharraf's obvious dedication to Mujibist ideology and the fear that he would renew the former leader's close ties with India precipitated the collapse of the new regime. On November 7, agitators of the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal, a leftist but decidedly anti-Soviet and anti-Indian movement, managed to incite troops

at the Dhaka cantonment against Musharraf, who was killed in a firefight. President Sayem became chief martial law administrator, and the military service chiefs, most significantly the army's Zia, became deputy chief martial law administrators. Zia also took on the portfolios of finance, home affairs, industry, and information, as well as becoming the army chief of staff.

It was not long before Zia, with the backing of the military, supplanted the elderly and frail Sayem. Zia postponed the presidential elections and the parliamentary elections that Sayem had earlier promised and made himself chief martial law administrator in November 1976.

### **The Zia Regime and Its Aftermath, 1977–82**

In the opinion of many observers, Zia, although ruthless with his opponents, was the nation's best leader since independence. A dapper military officer, he transformed himself into a charismatic and popular political figure. Once described as having an air of "serene hesitancy and assured authority," Zia had boundless energy and spent much of his time traveling throughout the country. Zia preached the "politics of hope," continually urging all Bangladeshis to work harder and to produce more. Unlike Mujib, Zia utilized whatever talent he could muster to spur on the economy, and he did not discriminate, as Mujib had, against civil servants who had not fully participated in the freedom struggle. Zia was a well-known figure who first emerged nationally during the independence struggle. His "Z Force" (Z for Zia) had been the first to announce the independence of Bangladesh from a captured radio station in Chittagong.

Zia also tried to integrate the armed forces, giving repatriates a status appropriate to their qualifications and seniority. This angered some of the freedom fighters, who had rapidly reached high positions. Zia deftly dealt with the problem officers by sending them on diplomatic missions abroad. Zia made repatriate Major General Hussain Muhammad Ershad the deputy army chief of staff. Having consolidated his position in the army, Zia became president on April 21, 1977, when Sayem resigned on the grounds of "ill health." Zia now held the dominant positions in the country and seemed to be supported by a majority of Bangladeshis.

In May 1977, with his power base increasingly secure, Zia drew on his popularity to promote a nineteen-point political and economic program. Zia focused on the need to boost Bangladeshi production, especially in food and grains, and to integrate rural development through a variety of programs, of which population planning was the most important. He heeded the advice of international

lending agencies and launched an ambitious rural development program in 1977, which included a highly visible and popular food-for-work program.

Fortified with his manifesto, Zia faced the electorate in a referendum on his continuance in office. The results of what Zia called his "exercise of the democratic franchise," showed that 88.5 percent of the electorate turned out and that 98.9 percent voted for Zia. Although some doubts were cast on how fairly the referendum was conducted, Zia was, nonetheless, a popular leader with an agenda most of the country endorsed. Zia consciously tried to change the military bearing of his government, eventually transferring most of the portfolios held by military officers to civilians. Continuing the process of giving his regime a nonmilitary appearance, in June 1977 he chose as his vice president Supreme Court justice Abdus Sattar, a civilian who had long been involved in Bengali politics.

One of the most important tasks Zia faced was to change the direction of the country. Zia altered the Constitution's ideological statement on the fundamental principles, in particular changing the Mujibist emphasis on secularism to "complete trust and faith in almighty Allah." While distancing Bangladesh from India, Zia sought to improve ties with other Islamic nations. Throughout his regime, Zia pursued an active foreign policy, and the legacy of his efforts continued to bear fruit in the late 1980s. In 1980 Zia proposed a conference for the seven nations of the subcontinent (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) to discuss the prospects for regional cooperation in a number of fields. This initiative was successful in August 1983 when the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC—see Glossary) was established.

Zia's administration reestablished public order, which had deteriorated during the Mujib years. Special civil and military tribunals dealt harshly with the multitudes of professional bandits, smugglers, and guerrilla bands. A continuing problem with one of these armed groups led by Kader "Tiger" Siddiqi, a one-time freedom fighter and former enlisted man in the Pakistan Army, was eased when the Janata Party came to power in India in early 1977. The new Indian prime minister, Morarji Desai, discontinued the assistance and sanctuary that Indira Gandhi's government had given to pro-Mujib rebels working against the government.

President Zia's efforts to quiet the military—divided and politicized since independence—were not entirely successful. In late September 1977, Japanese Red Army terrorists hijacked a Japan Air Lines airplane and forced it to land in Dhaka. On September 30,

while the attention of the government was riveted on this event, a mutiny broke out in Bogra. Although the mutiny was quickly quelled on the night of October 2, a second mutiny occurred in Dhaka. The mutineers unsuccessfully attacked Zia's residence, captured Dhaka Radio for a short time, and killed a number of air force officers at Dhaka International Airport (present-day Zia International Airport), where they were gathered for negotiations with the hijackers. The revolts, which attracted worldwide coverage, were dismissed by the government as a conflict between air force enlisted men and officers regarding pay and service conditions (see Organization of the Armed Forces, ch. 5). The army quickly put down the rebellion, but the government was severely shaken. The government intelligence network had clearly failed, and Zia promptly dismissed both the military and the civilian intelligence chiefs. Three of the aspirants to the army chief of staff post, at the time held by Zia, were also removed; in 1981 one of them, Major General Muhammad Manzur Ahmed, was to lead the coup that resulted in the assassination of Zia.

After the Dhaka mutiny, Zia continued with his plans for political normalization, insisting on being called "president" rather than "major general" and prohibiting his military colleagues from holding both cabinet and military positions. In April 1978, Zia announced that elections would be held to "pave the way to democracy," adding that the Constitution would be amended to provide for an independent judiciary as well as a "sovereign parliament." Zia also lifted the ban on political parties. He was supported by a "national front," whose main party was the Jatiyo Ganatantrik Dal (National Democratic Party). As the candidate of the Jatiyo Ganatantrik Dal-led Nationalist Front, Zia won overwhelmingly, taking 76.7 percent of the vote against a front led by General M.A.G. Osmany, the leader of the Mukti Bahini during the war. Shortly after, Zia expanded the Jatiyo Ganatantrik Dal to include major portions of the parties in the Nationalist Front. His new party was named the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and was headed by Sattar. Parliamentary elections followed in February 1979. After campaigning by Zia, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party won 207 of the 300 seats in Parliament with about 44 percent of the vote.

Zia was assassinated in Chittagong on May 30, 1981, in a plot allegedly masterminded by Major General Manzur, the army commander in Chittagong. Manzur had earlier been chief of the general staff and had been transferred to Chittagong in the aftermath of the October 1977 mutiny. He was scheduled for a new transfer to a noncommand position in Dhaka and was reportedly

disappointed over this. The army, under its chief of staff, Major General Ershad, remained loyal to the Dhaka government and quickly put down the rebellion, killing Manzur. In the trials that followed, a sizable number of officers and enlisted men received the death penalty for complicity.

After Zia's assassination, Vice President Sattar became acting president and, as the Constitution stipulates, called for new elections for president within 180 days. Although there was some speculation that Zia's widow, Begum Khaleda Ziaur Rahman, and Mujib's daughter, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, would be candidates, Sattar ran against a number of political unknowns in the November election and won the presidential election with two-thirds of the vote.

Sattar was an elderly man who his critics thought to be ineffective, but his greatest weakness, in the eyes of the military, was that he was a civilian. Although Zia had downplayed his own military background, given up his position of army chief of staff, and adopted civilian dress and mannerisms, he maintained strong links with the armed services. Immediately following the 1981 election, Ershad pushed Sattar for a constitutional role for the military in the governance of the country. After initial resistance, Sattar, faced with the prospect of a coup, agreed to set up the National Security Council in January 1982 with the president, vice president, and prime minister representing the civilian side and the three service chiefs representing the military. In a last attempt to limit the influence of the military, Sattar relieved a number of military officers from duty in the government.

Sattar's decision to curtail military influence in the government provoked an immediate response from Ershad. On March 24, 1982, Ershad dismissed Sattar, dissolved the cabinet and the Parliament, and assumed full powers under martial law. Echoing the words of many past military leaders, Ershad announced that the military, as the only organized power in the nation, had been forced to take over until elections could be held.

Ershad almost immediately assumed the title of "president of the ministers," or prime minister, but to many Bangladeshis he was a usurper, one who overthrew a legitimately elected president and who would reverse the slow liberalization of Bangladeshi politics—the "politics of hope" begun earlier by Zia. The events of March 1982 reflected much of the tumultuous history of the country and, many critics agreed, foreshadowed a turbulent future for the struggling nation of Bangladesh (see *The Ershad Period*, ch. 4).

\* \* \*

Although Bangladesh is a young nation state, a number of good general histories are available that cover the period from its painful birth to the late 1980s. These include Charles Peter O'Donnell's *Bangladesh: Biography of a Muslim Nation*; Talukder Maniruzzaman's *The Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermath*; Marcus F. Franda's *Bangladesh: The First Decade*; Craig Baxter's concise *Bangladesh: A New Nation in an Old Setting*; and Anthony Mascarenhas's *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood*. There are numerous books that deal with Bangladesh's preindependence past as East Pakistan, as part of the British and Mughal empires of India, and as the eastern part of Bengal, a cultural entity reaching back to antiquity. A sampling of some of the excellent general works available might include A.L. Basham's masterpiece, *The Wonder That Was India*; Romila Thapar's *A History of India*; Percival Spear's *India: A Modern History*; Ramesh Chandra Majumdar's *The History of Bengal*; and Shahid Javed Burki's *Pakistan: A Nation in the Making*. For those seeking a comprehensive bibliographic index regarding works covering Bangladesh and its historic role in South Asia, the *Bibliography of Asian Studies* should be consulted. (For further information and complete citations, see Bibliography.)



## Chapter 2. The Society and Its Environment





*Royal Bengal Tiger—the pride of Bangladesh's fauna*

BANGLADESH IS NOTED for the remarkable ethnic and cultural homogeneity of its population. Over 98 percent of its people are Bengalis; the remainder are Biharis, or non-Bengali Muslims, and indigenous tribal peoples. Bangladeshis are particularly proud of their rich cultural and linguistic heritage because their independent nation is partially the result of a powerful movement to uphold and preserve their language and culture. Bangladeshis identify themselves closely with Bangla, their national language.

One of the world's most densely populated nations, Bangladesh in the 1980s was caught in the vicious cycle of population expansion and poverty. Although the rate of growth had declined marginally in recent years, the rapid expansion of the population continued to be a tremendous burden on the nation. With 82 percent of its people living in the countryside, Bangladesh was also one of the most rural nations in the Third World. The pace of urbanization in the late 1980s was slow, and urban areas lacked adequate amenities and services to absorb even those migrants who trekked from rural areas to the urban centers for food and employment. Frequent natural disasters, such as coastal cyclones and floods, killed thousands, and widespread malnutrition and poor sanitation resulted in high mortality rates from a variety of diseases.

In the late 1980s, poverty remained the most salient aspect of Bangladeshi society. Although the disparity in income between different segments of the society was not great, the incidence of poverty was widespread; the proportion of the population in extreme poverty—those unable to afford even enough food to live a reasonably active life—rose from 43 percent in 1974 to 50 percent in the mid-1980s. The emerging political elite, which constituted a very narrow social class compared with the mass of peasants and urban poor, held the key to political power, controlled all institutions, and enjoyed the greatest economic gains. Urban in residence, fluent in English, and comfortable with Western culture, they were perceived by many observers as socially and culturally alienated from the masses. At the end of the 1980s, Bangladeshi society continued to be in transition—not only from the early days of independence but also from the colonial and Pakistani periods as well—as new values gradually replaced traditional ones.

Nearly 83 percent Muslim, Bangladesh ranked third in Islamic population worldwide, following Indonesia and Pakistan. Sunni Islam was the dominant religion among Bangladeshis. Although

loyalty to Islam was deeply rooted, in many cases beliefs and observances in rural areas tended to conflict with orthodox Islam. However, the country was remarkably free of sectarian strife. For most believers Islam was largely a matter of customary practice and mores. In the late twentieth century fundamentalists were showing some organizational strength, but in the late 1980s their numbers and influence were believed to be limited. Promulgated in June 1988, the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution recognizes Islam as the state religion, but the full implications of this measure were not apparent in the months following its adoption. Hindus constituted the largest religious minority at 16 percent; other minorities included Buddhists and Christians.

Since its birth in 1971, Bangladesh has suffered through both natural calamities and political upheavals. In July–September 1987, for example, the country experienced its worst floods in more than thirty years, and floods during the same period in 1988 were even more devastating. In 1987 more than US\$250 million of the economic infrastructure was destroyed, the main rice crop was severely damaged, and an estimated 1,800 lives were lost. The 1988 floods covered more than two-thirds of the country, and more than 2,100 died from flooding and subsequent disease. The country also underwent a period of political unrest fomented by major opposition political parties. Enduring uncertainties as the 1990s approached were bound to have an impact on social development, especially in the areas of education, development of the labor force, nutrition, and the building of infrastructure for adequate health care and population control.

## **Geography**

### **The Land**

The physiography of Bangladesh is characterized by two distinctive features: a broad deltaic plain subject to frequent flooding, and a small hilly region crossed by swiftly flowing rivers. The country has an area of 144,000 square kilometers and extends 820 kilometers north to south and 600 kilometers east to west. Bangladesh is bordered on the west, north, and east by a 2,400-kilometer land frontier with India and, in the southeast, by a short land and water frontier (193 kilometers) with Burma. On the south is a highly irregular deltaic coastline of about 600 kilometers, fissured by many rivers and streams flowing into the Bay of Bengal. The territorial waters of Bangladesh extend 12 nautical miles, and the exclusive economic zone of the country is 200 nautical miles.

Roughly 80 percent of the landmass is made up of fertile alluvial lowland called the Bangladesh Plain. The plain is part of the larger Plain of Bengal, which is sometimes called the Lower Gangetic Plain. Although altitudes up to 105 meters above sea level occur in the northern part of the plain, most elevations are less than 10 meters above sea level; elevations decrease in the coastal south, where the terrain is generally at sea level. With such low elevations and numerous rivers, water—and concomitant flooding—is a predominant physical feature. About 10,000 square kilometers of the total area of Bangladesh is covered with water, and larger areas are routinely flooded during the monsoon season (see *Climate; River Systems*, this ch.).

The only exceptions to Bangladesh's low elevations are the Chittagong Hills in the southeast, the Low Hills of Sylhet in the northeast, and highlands in the north and northwest (see fig. 5). The Chittagong Hills constitute the only significant hill system in the country and, in effect, are the western fringe of the north-south mountain ranges of Burma and eastern India. The Chittagong Hills rise steeply to narrow ridge lines, generally no wider than 36 meters, 600 to 900 meters above sea level. At 1,046 meters, the highest elevation in Bangladesh is found at Keokradong, in the southeastern part of the hills. Fertile valleys lie between the hill lines, which generally run north-south. West of the Chittagong Hills is a broad plain, cut by rivers draining into the Bay of Bengal, that rises to a final chain of low coastal hills, mostly below 200 meters, that attain a maximum elevation of 350 meters. West of these hills is a narrow, wet coastal plain located between the cities of Chittagong in the north and Cox's Bazar in the south.

About 67 percent of Bangladesh's nonurban land is arable. Permanent crops cover only 2 percent, meadows and pastures cover 4 percent, and forests and woodland cover about 16 percent. The country produces large quantities of quality timber, bamboo, and sugarcane. Bamboo grows in almost all areas, but high-quality timber grows mostly in the highland valleys. Rubber planting in the hilly regions of the country was undertaken in the 1980s, and rubber extraction had started by the end of the decade. A variety of wild animals are found in the forest areas, such as in the Sundarbans on the southwest coast, which is the home of the world-famous Royal Bengal Tiger. The alluvial soils in the Bangladesh Plain are generally fertile and are enriched with heavy silt deposits carried downstream during the rainy season.

## **Climate**

Bangladesh has a subtropical monsoon climate characterized by wide seasonal variations in rainfall, moderately warm temperatures,

and high humidity. Regional climatic differences in this flat country are minor. Three seasons are generally recognized: a hot, humid summer from March to June; a cool, rainy monsoon season from June to October; and a cool, dry winter from October to March. In general, maximum summer temperatures range between 32°C and 38°C. April is the warmest month in most parts of the country. January is the coldest month, when the average temperature for most of the country is 10°C.

Winds are mostly from the north and northwest in the winter, blowing gently at one to three kilometers per hour in northern and central areas and three to six kilometers per hour near the coast. From March to May, violent thunderstorms, called northwesterers by local English speakers, produce winds of up to sixty kilometers per hour. During the intense storms of the early summer and late monsoon season, southerly winds of more than 160 kilometers per hour cause waves to crest as high as 6 meters in the Bay of Bengal, which brings disastrous flooding to coastal areas.

Heavy rainfall is characteristic of Bangladesh. With the exception of the relatively dry western region of Rajshahi, where the annual rainfall is about 160 centimeters, most parts of the country receive at least 200 centimeters of rainfall per year (see fig. 1). Because of its location just south of the foothills of the Himalayas, where monsoon winds turn west and northwest, the region of Sylhet in northeastern Bangladesh receives the greatest average precipitation. From 1977 to 1986, annual rainfall in that region ranged between 328 and 478 centimeters per year. Average daily humidity ranged from March lows of between 45 and 71 percent to July highs of between 84 and 92 percent, based on readings taken at selected stations nationwide in 1986 (see fig. 3; table 2, Appendix).

About 80 percent of Bangladesh's rain falls during the monsoon season. The monsoons result from the contrasts between low and high air pressure areas that result from differential heating of land and water. During the hot months of April and May hot air rises over the Indian subcontinent, creating low-pressure areas into which rush cooler, moisture-bearing winds from the Indian Ocean. This is the southwest monsoon, commencing in June and usually lasting through September. Dividing against the Indian landmass, the monsoon flows in two branches, one of which strikes western India. The other travels up the Bay of Bengal and over eastern India and Bangladesh, crossing the plain to the north and northeast before being turned to the west and northwest by the foothills of the Himalayas (see fig. 4).

Natural calamities, such as floods, tropical cyclones, tornadoes, and tidal bores—destructive waves or floods caused by flood tides

rushing up estuaries—ravage the country, particularly the coastal belt, almost every year. Between 1947 and 1988, thirteen severe cyclones hit Bangladesh, causing enormous loss of life and property. In May 1985, for example, a severe cyclonic storm packing 154 kilometer-per-hour winds and waves 4 meters high swept into southeastern and southern Bangladesh, killing more than 11,000 persons, damaging more than 94,000 houses, killing some 135,000 head of livestock, and damaging nearly 400 kilometers of critically needed embankments. Annual monsoon flooding results in the loss of human life, damage to property and communication systems, and a shortage of drinking water, which leads to the spread of disease. For example, in 1988 two-thirds of Bangladesh's sixty-four districts experienced extensive flood damage in the wake of unusually heavy rains that flooded the river systems. Millions were left homeless and without potable water. Half of Dhaka, including the runways at the Zia International Airport—an important transit point for disaster relief supplies—was flooded. About 2 million tons of crops were reported destroyed, and relief work was rendered even more challenging than usual because the flood made transportation of any kind exceedingly difficult.

There are no precautions against cyclones and tidal bores except giving advance warning and providing safe public buildings where people may take shelter. Adequate infrastructure and air transport facilities that would ease the sufferings of the affected people had not been established by the late 1980s. Efforts by the government under the Third Five-Year Plan (1985–90) were directed toward accurate and timely forecast capability through agrometeorology, marine meteorology, oceanography, hydrometeorology, and seismology. Necessary expert services, equipment, and training facilities were expected to be developed under the United Nations Development Programme (see Foreign Assistance, ch. 3).

## **River Systems**

The rivers of Bangladesh mark both the physiography of the nation and the life of the people. About 700 in number, these rivers generally flow south. The larger rivers serve as the main source of water for cultivation and as the principal arteries of commercial transportation. Rivers also provide fish, an important source of protein. Flooding of the rivers during the monsoon season causes enormous hardship and hinders development, but fresh deposits of rich silt replenish the fertile but overworked soil. The rivers also drain excess monsoon rainfall into the Bay of Bengal. Thus, the great river system is at the same time the country's principal resource and its greatest hazard.

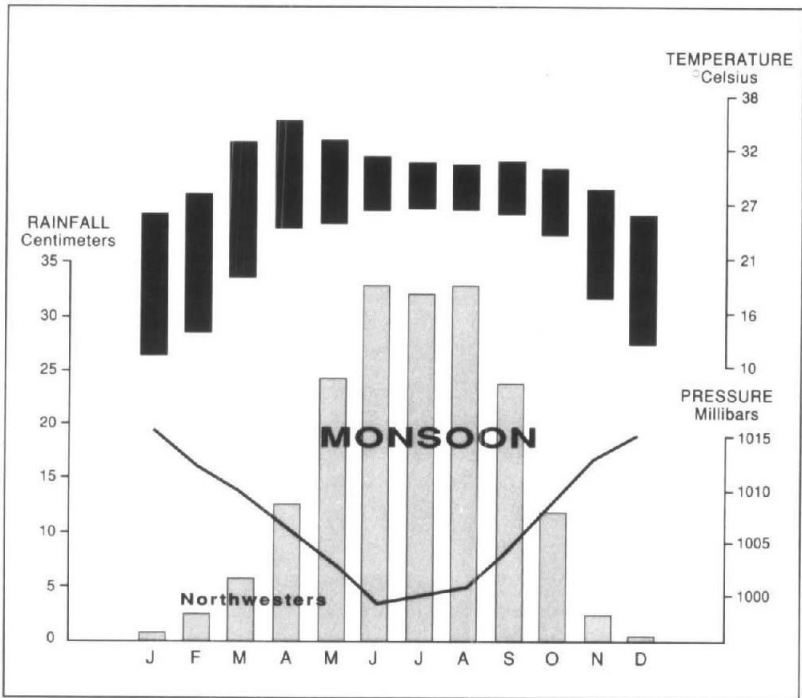


Figure 3. Typical Rainfall, Temperature, and Pressure at Dhaka

The profusion of rivers can be divided into five major networks (see fig. 5). The Jamuna-Brahmaputra is 292 kilometers long and extends from northern Bangladesh to its confluence with the Padma. Originating as the Yarlung Zangbo Jiang in China's Xizang Autonomous Region (Tibet) and flowing through India's state of Arunachal Pradesh, where it becomes known as the Brahmaputra ("Son of Brahma"), it receives waters from five major tributaries that total some 740 kilometers in length. At the point where the Brahmaputra meets the Tista River in Bangladesh, it becomes known as the Jamuna. The Jamuna is notorious for its shifting sub-channels and for the formation of fertile silt islands (*chars*). No permanent settlements can exist along its banks.

The second system is the Padma-Ganges, which is divided into two sections: a 258-kilometer segment, the Ganges, which extends from the western border with India to its confluence with the Jamuna some 72 kilometers west of Dhaka, and a 126-kilometer segment, the Padma, which runs from the Ganges-Jamuna confluence to where it joins the Meghna River at Chandpur. The

Padma-Ganges is the central part of a deltaic river system with hundreds of rivers and streams—some 2,100 kilometers in length—flowing generally east or west into the Padma.

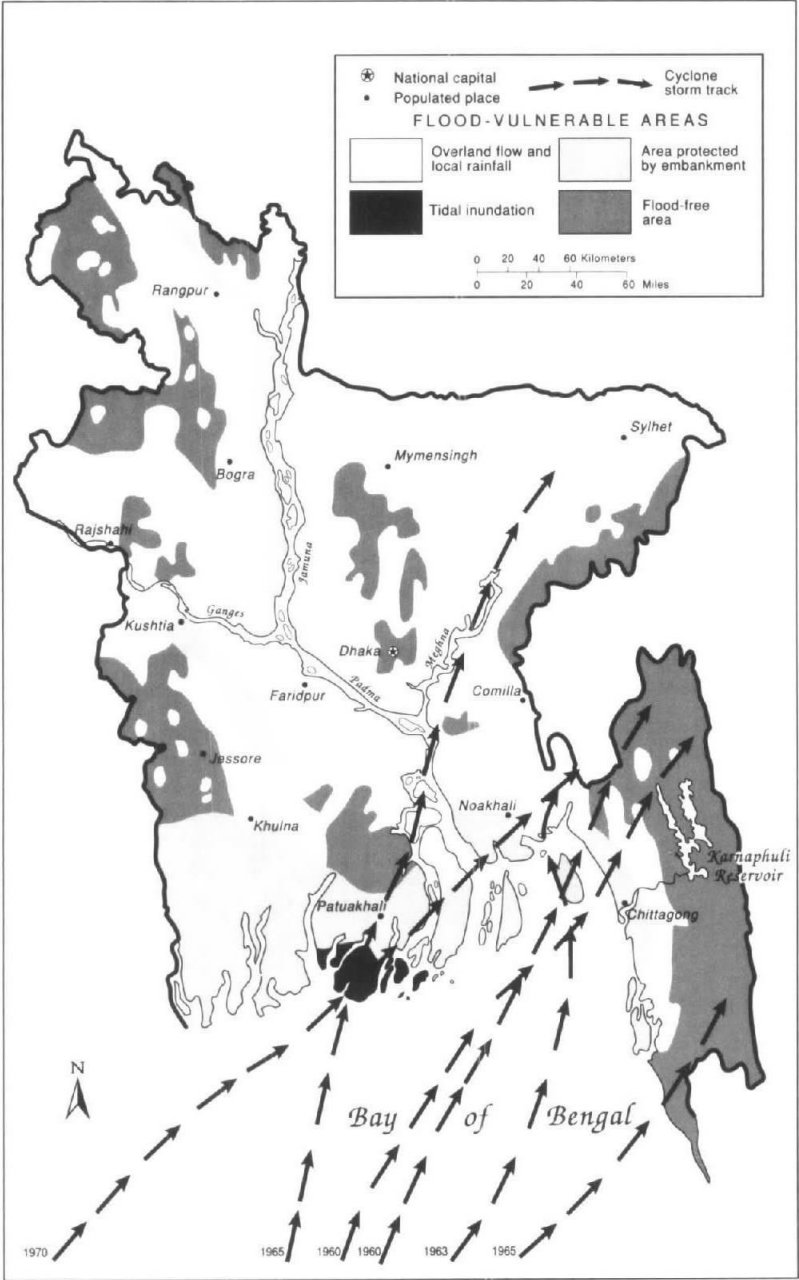
The third network is the Surma-Meghna system, which courses from the northeastern border with India to Chandpur, where it joins the Padma. The Surma-Meghna, at 669 kilometers by itself the longest river in Bangladesh, is formed by the union of six lesser rivers. Below the city of Kalipur it is known as the Meghna. When the Padma and Meghna join together, they form the fourth river system—the Padma-Meghna—which flows 145 kilometers to the Bay of Bengal.

This mighty network of four river systems flowing through the Bangladesh Plain drains an area of some 1.5 million square kilometers. The numerous channels of the Padma-Meghna, its distributaries, and smaller parallel rivers that flow into the Bay of Bengal are referred to as the Mouths of the Ganges. Like the Jamuna, the Padma-Meghna and other estuaries on the Bay of Bengal are also known for their many *chars*.

A fifth river system, unconnected to the other four, is the Karnaphuli. Flowing through the region of Chittagong and the Chittagong Hills, it cuts across the hills and runs rapidly downhill to the west and southwest and then to the sea. The Feni, Karnaphuli, Sangu, and Matamuhari—an aggregate of some 420 kilometers—are the main rivers in the region. The port of Chittagong is situated on the banks of the Karnaphuli. The Karnaphuli Reservoir and Karnaphuli Dam are located in this area. The dam impounds the Karnaphuli River's waters in the reservoir for the generation of hydroelectric power (see *Technological Advances*, ch. 3).

During the annual monsoon period, the rivers of Bangladesh flow at about 140,000 cubic meters per second, but during the dry period they diminish to 7,000 cubic meters per second. Because water is so vital to agriculture, more than 60 percent of the net arable land, some 9.1 million hectares, is cultivated in the rainy season despite the possibility of severe flooding, and nearly 40 percent of the land is cultivated during the dry winter months. Water resources development has responded to this “dual water regime” by providing flood protection, drainage to prevent overflowing and waterlogging, and irrigation facilities for the expansion of winter cultivation. Major water control projects have been developed by the national government to provide irrigation, flood control, drainage facilities, aids to river navigation and road construction, and hydroelectric power. In addition, thousands of tube wells and electric pumps are used for local irrigation. Despite severe resource





Source: Based on information from M. Aminul Islam, et al. (eds.), *Bangladesh in Maps*, Dhaka, 1981, 14, 17.

Figure 4. Flood and Cyclone Vulnerability, 1960-80

constraints, the government of Bangladesh has made it a policy to try to bring additional areas under irrigation without salinity intrusion (see Agriculture, ch. 3).

Water resources management, including gravity flow irrigation, flood control, and drainage, were largely the responsibility of the Bangladesh Water Development Board. Other public sector institutions, such as the Bangladesh Krishi Bank, the Bangladesh Rural Development Board, the Bangladesh Bank, and the Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation were also responsible for promotion and development of minor irrigation works in the private sector through government credit mechanisms (see Money and Banking, ch. 3).

## **Population**

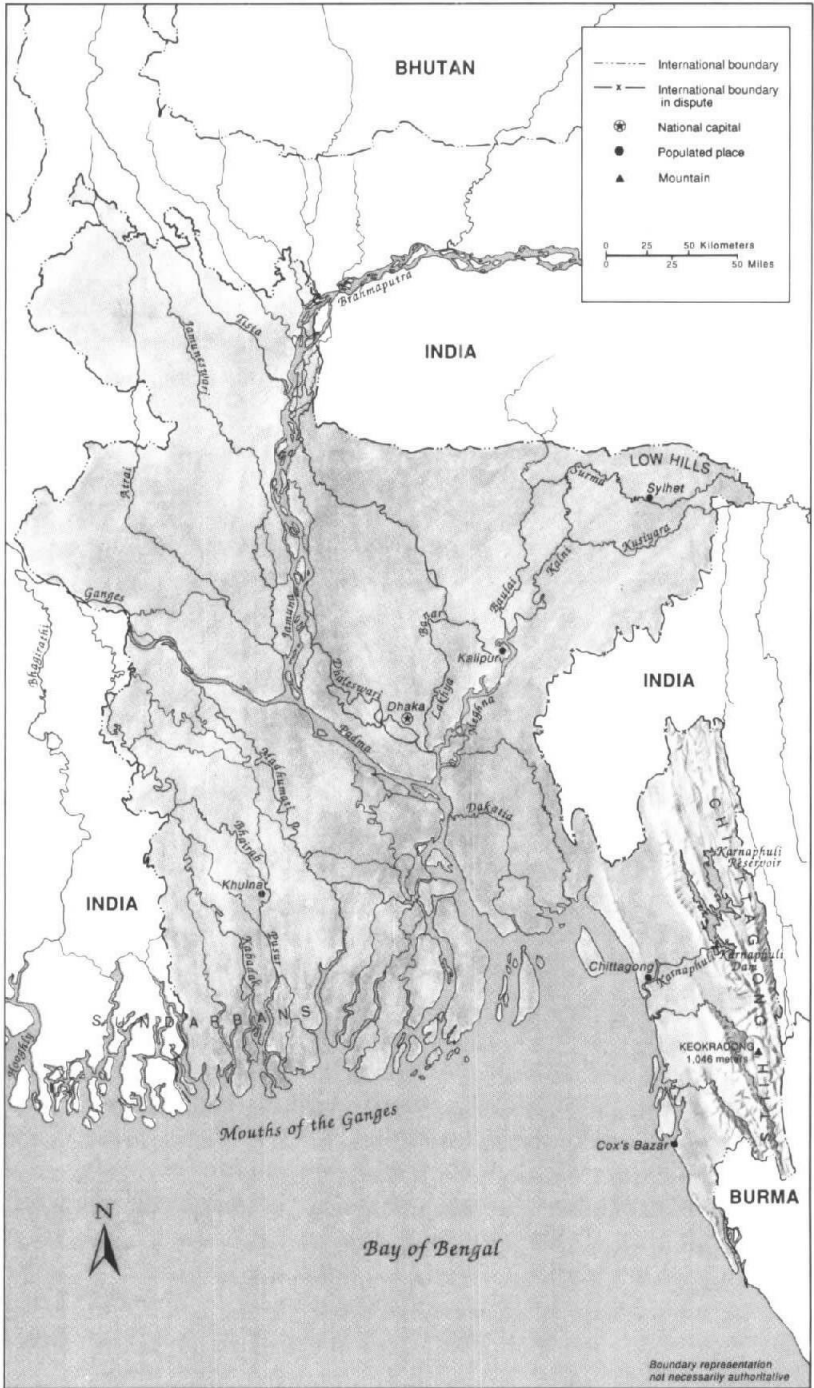
### **Population Structure and Settlement Patterns**

In the 1980s, Bangladesh faced no greater problem than population growth. Census data compiled in 1901 indicated a total of 29 million in East Bengal (see Glossary), the region that became East Pakistan and eventually Bangladesh. By 1951, four years after partition from India, East Pakistan had 44 million people, a number that grew rapidly up to the first postindependence census, taken in 1974, which reported the national population at 71 million. The 1981 census reported a population of 87 million and a 2.3 percent annual growth rate (see Population Control, this ch.). Thus, in just 80 years, the population had tripled. In July 1988 the population, by then the eighth largest in the world, stood at 109,963,551, and the average annual growth rate was 2.6 percent. According to official estimates, Bangladesh was expected to reach a population of more than 140 million by the year 2000.

Bangladesh's population density provided further evidence of the problems the nation faced. In 1901 an average of 216 persons inhabited one square kilometer. By 1951 that number had increased to 312 per square kilometer and, in 1988, reached 821. By the year 2000, population density was projected to exceed 1,000 persons per square kilometer (see fig. 6; table 3; table 4, Appendix).

The crude birth rate per 1,000 population was 34.6 in 1981. This rate remained unchanged in 1985, following a 20-year trend of decline since 1961, when it had stood at 47 per 1,000. The rural birth rate was higher than birth rates in urban areas; in 1985 there were 36.3 births per 1,000 in the countryside versus 28 per 1,000 in urban areas. The crude death rate per 1,000 population decreased from 40.7 in 1951 to 12 per 1,000 in 1985; the urban crude death

*Bangladesh: A Country Study*



*Figure 5. Topography and Drainage, 1988*

rate was 8.3, and the rural crude death rate was 12.9. The infant mortality rate per 1,000 live births was 111.9 in 1985, a distinct improvement from as recently as 1982, when the rate was 121.9. Life expectancy at birth was estimated at 55.1 years in 1986. Men and women have very similar life expectancies at 55.4 and 55, respectively. With an average life expectancy of 58.8 years, urban dwellers in 1986 were likely to live longer than their rural counterparts (average life expectancy 54.8 years). The sex ratio of the population in 1981 was 106 males to 100 females (see fig. 7; table 5, Appendix).

In the late 1980s, about 82 percent of the population of Bangladesh (a total of 15.1 million households) resided in rural areas. With the exception of parts of Sylhet and Rangamati regions, where settlements occurred in nucleated or clustered patterns, the villages were scattered collections of homesteads surrounded by trees. Continuous strings of settlements along the roadside were also common in the southeastern part of the country.

Until the 1980s, Bangladesh was the most rural nation in South Asia. In 1931 only 27 out of every 1,000 persons were urban dwellers in what is now Bangladesh. In 1931 Bangladesh had fifty towns; by 1951 the country had eighty-nine towns, cities, and municipalities. During the 1980s, industrial development began to have a small effect on urbanization. The 1974 census had put the urban population of Bangladesh at 8.8 percent of the total; by 1988 that proportion had reached 18 percent and was projected to rise to 30 percent by the year 2000.

In 1981 only two cities, Dhaka and Chittagong, had more than 1 million residents. Seven other cities—Narayanganj, Khulna, Barisal, Saidpur, Rajshahi, Mymensingh, and Comilla—each had more than 100,000 people. Of all the expanding cities, Dhaka, the national capital and the principal seat of culture, had made the most gains in population, growing from 335,928 in 1951 to 3.4 million in 1981. In the same period, Chittagong had grown from 289,981 to 1.4 million. A majority of the other urban areas each had between 20,000 and 50,000 people. These relatively small cities had grown up in most cases as administrative centers and geographically suitable localities for inland transportation and commercial facilities. There was no particular concentration of towns in any part of the country. In fact, the only large cities close to each other were Dhaka and Narayanganj.

## **Migration**

Although Bangladesh has absorbed several waves of immigrants since the onset of the twentieth century, the overall trend has been

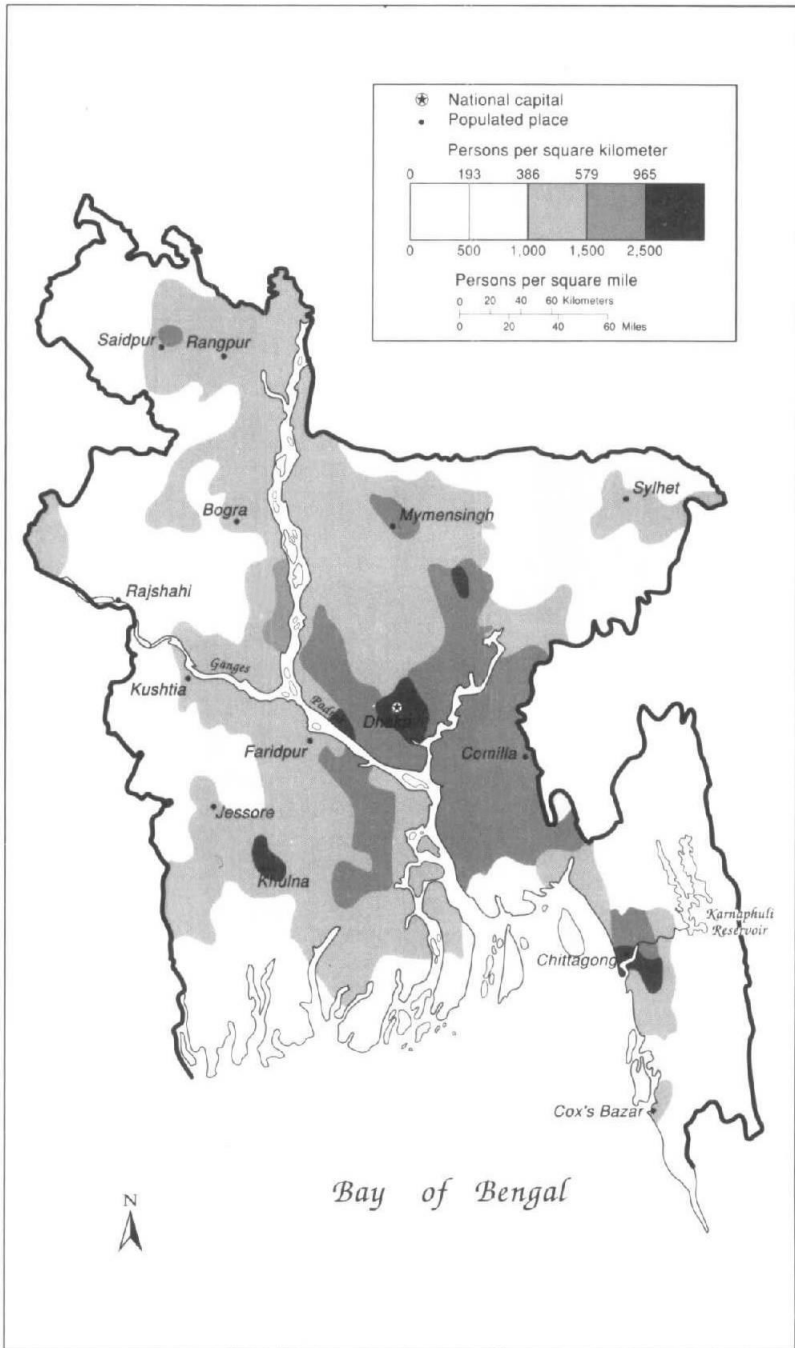


Figure 6. Population Distribution, 1988

a steady emigration of people driven *out* by political and economic problems. Following the partition of British India in 1947, more than 3 million Hindus may have migrated from East Pakistan; during the same period some 864,000 Muslim refugees immigrated to East Pakistan from India. The operation of the Pakistani military in East Pakistan in 1971 caused an estimated 8 to 10 million refugees to cross the border into India in one of the great mass movements of modern times (see *Birth of Bangladesh*, ch. 1). After the independence of Bangladesh, most of these refugees returned, although an undetermined number remained in India. After independence, Bangladesh received some 100,000 stranded Bangladeshis from former West Pakistan. About 600,000 non-Bengali Muslims, known as Biharis, who had declared their allegiance to Pakistan during the 1971 war, continued to reside in Bangladesh.

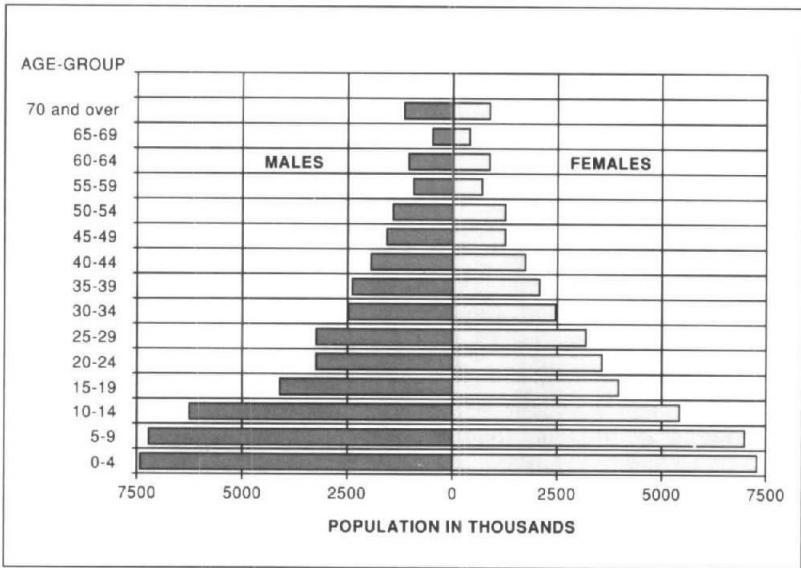
It has been reported that, beginning in 1974, thousands of Bangladeshis moved to the Indian state of Assam, and, in the 1980s, some tribal groups from the Chittagong Hills crossed into the Indian state of Tripura for political reasons, contributing to bilateral problems with India (see *Foreign Policy*, ch. 4; *Insurgency in the Chittagong Hills*, ch. 5). Bangladeshis also migrated to the Middle East and other regions, where a large number of skilled and unskilled persons found work (see table 6, Appendix; *Export Sectors*, ch. 3). Bangladesh also lost some highly skilled members of the work force to Western Europe and North America.

Internal migration indicated several recognizable trends. Because of increasing population pressure, people in the 1980s were moving into areas of relatively light habitation in the Chittagong Hills and in parts of the Sundarbans previously considered marginally habitable. Agrarian distress caused some movement to urban areas, especially Dhaka. Because of the inhospitable urban environment and the lack of jobs, many newcomers returned at least temporarily to their villages, especially during the harvest season. Unemployment, however, was even higher in the countryside and was a long-term national problem in the mid-1980s (see table 7, Appendix).

### **Population Control**

Bangladesh's working-age population was increasing almost 1.5 million per year in the 1980s. This rate of population growth kept the people poor and the country dependent on foreign aid. Population control and family planning, therefore, were a top priority of the government and social workers.

In the mid-1980s, there were indications that government and nongovernment agency efforts were beginning to pay off.



Source: Based on information from Bangladesh, Ministry of Planning, Bureau of Statistics, Statistics Division, *Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh, 1987*, Dhaka, July 1988, 40-41.

*Figure 7. Age-Sex Distribution, 1981 Census*

Population growth had declined from 3 percent to 2.3 percent between 1961 and 1981. Contraceptive practices increased from 12.7 percent of eligible couples in 1979 to 25 percent in mid-1985. Of the methods available, sterilization was the most commonly sought in government plans through fiscal year (FY—see Glossary) 1990. A continuous demographic survey also showed a decline in fertility rates and an increase in the female marriage age. But undercutting this progress was the uneven application of the family planning program in rural areas, which constituted the most populous sections of the nation.

In 1985 there were reported only 3,716 family planning facilities in the country and a total of 15,619 family planning personnel, of whom 4,086 were male in a country where the females were traditionally reserved when discussing sexual matters with men. Even when they were physicians, men were reluctant to discuss sexual matters with women. From 1980 to 1985, only about 55 percent of national family planning goals were achieved.

### **Ethnicity and Linguistic Diversity**

Bangladesh is noted for the ethnic homogeneity of its population. Over 98 percent of the people are Bengalis, predominantly

Bangla-speaking peoples. People speaking Arabic, Persian, and Turkic languages also have contributed to the ethnic characteristics of the region.

A member of the Indo-European family of languages, Bangla (sometimes called Bengali) is the official language of Bangladesh. Bangladeshis closely identify themselves with their national language. Bangla has a rich cultural heritage in literature, music, and poetry, and at least two Bengali poets are well known in the West: Rabindranath Tagore, a Hindu and a Nobel laureate; and Kazi Nazrul Islam, a Muslim known as the "voice of Bengali nationalism and independence." Bangla has been enriched by several regional dialects. The dialects of Sylhet, Chittagong, and Noakhali have been strongly marked by Arab-Persian influences. English, whose cultural influence seemed to have crested by the late 1980s, remained nonetheless an important language in Bangladesh.

Biharis, a group that included Urdu-speaking non-Bengali Muslim refugees from Bihar and other parts of northern India, numbered about 1 million in 1971 but had decreased to around 600,000 by the late 1980s. They once dominated the upper levels of Bengali society. Many also held jobs on the railroads and in heavy industry. As such they stood to lose from Bangladesh independence and sided with Pakistan during the 1971 war. Hundreds of thousands of Biharis were repatriated to Pakistan after the war.

Bangladesh's tribal population consisted of 897,828 persons, just over 1 percent of the total population, at the time of the 1981 census. They lived primarily in the Chittagong Hills and in the regions of Mymensingh, Sylhet, and Rajshahi. The majority of the tribal population (778,425) lived in rural settings, where many practiced shifting cultivation. Most tribal people were of Sino-Tibetan descent and had distinctive Mongoloid features. They differed in their social organization, marriage customs, birth and death rites, food, and other social customs from the people of the rest of the country. They spoke Tibeto-Burman languages. In the mid-1980s, the percentage distribution of tribal population by religion was Hindu 24, Buddhist 44, Christian 13, and others 19.

The four largest tribes were the Chakmas, Marmas (or Maghs), Tipperas (or Tipras), and Mros (or Moorangs). The tribes tended to intermingle and could be distinguished from one another more by differences in their dialect, dress, and customs than by tribal cohesion. Only the Chakmas and Marmas displayed formal tribal organization, although all groups contained distinct clans. By far the largest tribe, the Chakmas were of mixed origin but reflected more Bengali influence than any other tribe. Unlike the other tribes, the Chakmas and Marmas generally lived in the highland



valleys. Most Chakmas were Buddhists, but some practiced Hinduism or animism.

Of Burmese ancestry, the Marmas regarded Burma as the center of their cultural life. Members of the Marma tribe disliked the more widely used term *maghs*, which had come to mean pirates. Although several religions, including Islam, were represented among the Marmas, nearly all of the Marmas were Buddhists (see Buddhism, this ch.).

The Tipperas were nearly all Hindus and accounted for virtually the entire Hindu population of the Chittagong Hills. They had migrated gradually from the northern Chittagong Hills. The northern Tipperas were influenced by Bengali culture. A small southern section known as the Mrungs showed considerably less Bengali influence.

The Mros, considered the original inhabitants of the Chittagong Hills, lived on hilltops and often fortified their villages. They had no written language of their own, but some could read the Burmese and Bangla scripts. Most of them claimed to be Buddhists, but their religious practices were largely animistic.

Tribal groups in other parts of the country included Santals in Rajshahi and Dinajpur, and Khasis, Garos, and Khajons in Mymensingh and Sylhet regions. Primarily poor peasants, these people all belonged to groups in the adjoining tribal areas of India.

## **Social System**

### **Transition to a New Social Order**

Bangladesh did not exist as a distinct geographic and ethnic unity until independence. The region had been a part of successive Indian empires, and during the British period it formed the eastern part of a hinterland of Bengal, which was dominated by the British rulers and Hindu professional, commercial, and landed elites. After the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, present-day Bangladesh came under the hegemony of the non-Bengali Muslim elites of the West Wing of Pakistan. The establishment of Bangladesh, therefore, implied the formation of both a new nation and a new social order.

Until the partition of British India in 1947, Hindus controlled about 80 percent of all large rural holdings, urban real estate, and government jobs in East Bengal and dominated finance, commerce, and the professions. Following partition, a massive flight of East Bengali Hindus effectively removed the Hindu economic and political elite and cut the territory's ties to Calcutta (see Pakistan Period, 1947-71, ch. 1). After the emigration of the Hindus,

Muslims moved quickly into the vacated positions, creating for the first time in East Bengal an economy and government predominantly in Muslim hands. These vastly increased opportunities, especially in the civil service and the professions, however, soon came to be dominated by a West Pakistani-based elite whose members were favored by the government both directly and indirectly. Soon after independence in 1971, an ill-prepared Bangladeshi elite moved into the areas vacated by West Pakistanis. Except for members of small non-Bengali caste-like Muslim groups known as “trading communities,” Bangladeshi Muslims almost immediately established control over all small- and medium-sized industrial and commercial enterprises. The 1972 nationalization of non-Bengali-owned large industries accelerated the establishment of control and influence by the indigenous community (see *The Economic Context*, ch. 3).

The sudden rise of a new managerial class and the expansion of the civil and military bureaucracy upset the balance in both the urban and the rural sectors. Party affiliation, political contacts, and documented revolutionary service became the main prerequisites for admission to the rapidly growing new elite of political and industrial functionaries; the established middle class and its values played lesser roles. In the countryside, new elites with links to the villages bought property to establish their socio-political control. Also taking advantage of the situation, the rural political elite amassed fortunes in land- and rural-based enterprises. The result was the growth of a new, land-based, rural elite that replaced many formerly entrenched wealthy peasants (in Bangla, *jotedars*).

## **Rural Society**

The basic social unit in a village is the family (*paribar* or *gushti*), generally consisting of a complete or incomplete patrilineally extended household (*chula*) and residing in a homestead (*bari*). The individual nuclear family often is submerged in the larger unit and might be known as the house (*ghar*). Above the *bari* level, patrilineal kin ties are linked into sequentially larger groups based on real, fictional, or assumed relationships.

A significant unit larger than that of close kin is the voluntary religious and mutual benefit association known as the “the society” (*samaj* or *millat*). Among the functions of a *samaj* might be the maintenance of a mosque and support of a mullah. An informal council of *samaj* elders (*matabdars* or *sardars*) settles village disputes. Factional competition between the *matabdars* is a major dynamic of social and political interaction (see *Dominance of Local Elites*, ch. 4).

Groups of homes in a village are called *paras*, and each *para* has its own name. Several *paras* constitute a *mauza*, the basic revenue and census survey unit. The traditional character of rural villages was changing in the latter half of the twentieth century with the addition of brick structures of one or more stories scattered among the more common thatched bamboo huts.

Although farming has traditionally ranked among the most desirable occupations, villagers in the 1980s began to encourage their children to leave the increasingly overcrowded countryside to seek more secure employment in the towns. Traditional sources of prestige, such as landholding, distinguished lineage, and religious piety were beginning to be replaced by modern education, higher income, and steadier work. These changes, however, did not prevent rural poverty from increasing greatly. According to the FY 1986 Household Expenditure Survey conducted by the Ministry of Planning's Bureau of Statistics, 47 percent of the rural population was below the poverty line, with about 62 percent of the poor remaining in extreme poverty. The number of landless rural laborers also increased substantially, from 25 percent in 1970 to 40 percent in 1987.

### **Urban Society**

In 1988 about 18 percent of the population lived in urban areas, most of which were villages or trade centers in rural areas. Urban centers grew in number and population during the 1980s as a result of an administrative decentralization program that featured the creation of subdistricts (*upazilas*—see Glossary; Local Administration, ch. 4). In appearance these small urban areas were generally shabby. Most of the urban population merely congregated in ramshackle structures with poor sanitation and an almost total lack of modern amenities. Towns were populated mostly by government functionaries, merchants, and other business personnel. Most dwellings contained nuclear families and some extended family lodgers. A few households or a neighborhood would constitute a *para*, which might develop some cohesiveness but would have no formal leadership structure. With the exception of a small number of transients, most town populations consisted of permanent inhabitants who maintained connections with their ancestral villages through property or family ties. Most towns had social and sporting clubs and libraries. Unlike in the rural areas, kinship ties among the town population were limited and fragile.

### **Family, Household, and Kinship**

Family and kinship were the core of social life in Bangladesh. A family group residing in a *bari* would function as the basic unit

of economic endeavor, landholding, and social identity. In the eyes of rural people, the *chula* defined the effective household—an extended family exploiting jointly held property and being fed from a jointly operated kitchen. A *bari* might consist of one or more such functional households, depending on the circumstances of family relationship. Married sons generally lived in their parents' household during the father's lifetime. Although sons usually built separate houses for their nuclear families, they remained under their fathers' authority, and wives under their mothers-in-law's authority. The death of the father usually precipitated the separation of adult brothers into their own households. Such a split generally caused little change in the physical layout of the *bari*, however. Families at different stages of the cycle would display different configurations of household membership.

Patrilineal ties dominated the ideology of family life, but in practice matrilineal ties were almost as important. Married women provided especially important links between their husbands' brothers' families. Brothers and sisters often visited their brothers' households, which were in fact the households of their deceased fathers. By Islamic law, women inherited a share of their fathers' property and thus retained a claim on the often scanty fields worked by their brothers. By not exercising this claim, however, they did their brothers the important service of keeping the family lands in the patrilineal line and thus ensured themselves a warm welcome and permanent place in their brothers' homes.

Marriage is a civil contract rather than a religious sacrament in Islam, and the parties to the contract represent the interests of families rather than the direct personal interests of the prospective spouses (see Islam, this ch.). In Bangladesh, parents ordinarily select spouses for their children, although men frequently exercise some influence over the choice of their spouses. In middle-class urban families men negotiate their own marriages. Only in the most sophisticated elite class does a woman participate in her own marriage arrangements. Marriage generally is made between families of similar social standing, although a woman might properly marry a man of somewhat higher status. Financial standing came to outweigh family background in the late twentieth century in any case. Often a person with a good job in a Middle Eastern country was preferred over a person of highly regarded lineage.

Marriages are often preceded by extensive negotiations between the families of the prospective bride and groom. One of the functions of the marriage negotiations is to reduce any discrepancy in status through financial arrangements. The groom's family ordinarily pledges the traditional cash payment, or bride-price, part

or all of which can be deferred to fall due in case of divorce initiated by the husband or in case the contract is otherwise broken. As in many Muslim countries, the cash payment system provides women some protection against the summary divorce permitted by Islam. Some families also adopt the Hindu custom of providing a dowry for the bride.

Of the total population in 1981, an estimated 34 million were married. A total of 19 million citizens of marriageable age were single or had never married, 3 million were widowed, and 322,000 were divorced. Although the majority of married men (10 million) had only one wife, there were about 580,000 households, between 6 and 10 percent of all marriages, in which a man had two or more wives.

Although the age at marriage appeared to be rising in the 1980s, early marriage remained the rule even among the educated, and especially among women. The mean age at marriage in 1981 for males was 23.9, and for females 16.7. Women students frequently married in their late teens and continued their studies in the households of their fathers-in-law. Divorce, especially of young couples without children, was becoming increasingly common in Bangladesh, with approximately one in six marriages ending in this fashion in the 1980s.

Typical spouses knew each other only slightly, if at all, before marriage. Although marriages between cousins and other more distant kin occurred frequently, segregation of the sexes generally kept young men and women of different households from knowing each other well. Marriage functioned to ensure the continuity of families rather than to provide companionship to individuals, and the new bride's relationship with her mother-in-law was probably more important to her well-being than her frequently impersonal relationship with her husband.

A woman began to gain respect and security in her husband's or father-in-law's household only after giving birth to a son. Mothers therefore cherished and indulged their sons, while daughters were frequently more strictly disciplined and were assigned heavy household chores from an early age. In many families the closest, most intimate, and most enduring emotional relationship was that between mother and son. The father was a more distant figure, worthy of formal respect, and the son's wife might remain a virtual stranger for a long time after marriage.

The practice of *purdah* (the traditional seclusion of women) varied widely according to social milieu, but even in relatively sophisticated urban circles the core of the institution, the segregation of the sexes, persisted. In traditional circles, full *purdah* required the

complete seclusion of women from the onset of puberty. Within the home, women inhabited private quarters that only male relatives or servants could enter, and a woman properly avoided or treated with formal respect even her father-in-law or her husband's older brother. Outside the home, a woman in purdah wore a veil or an enveloping, concealing outer garment.

The trappings of full purdah required both a devotion to traditional practice and the means to dispense with the labor of women in the fields. For most rural families the importance of women's labor made full seclusion impossible, although the idea remained. In some areas, for example, women went unveiled within the confines of the *para* or village but donned the veil or the outer garment for trips farther from the community. In any case, contact with men outside the immediate family was avoided.

The segregation of the sexes extended into social groups that had rejected full purdah as a result of modern education. Although urban women could enjoy more physical freedom than was traditional and the opportunity to pursue a professional career, they moved in a different social world from their husbands and often worked at their professions in a specifically feminine milieu.

### **Women's Role in Society**

Available data on health, nutrition, education, and economic performance indicated that in the 1980s the status of women in Bangladesh remained considerably inferior to that of men. Women, in custom and practice, remained subordinate to men in almost all aspects of their lives; greater autonomy was the privilege of the rich or the necessity of the very poor. Most women's lives remained centered on their traditional roles, and they had limited access to markets, productive services, education, health care, and local government. This lack of opportunities contributed to high fertility patterns, which diminished family well-being, contributed to the malnourishment and generally poor health of children, and frustrated educational and other national development goals. In fact, acute poverty at the margin appeared to be hitting hardest at women. As long as women's access to health care, education, and training remained limited, prospects for improved productivity among the female population remained poor.

About 82 percent of women lived in rural areas in the late 1980s. The majority of rural women, perhaps 70 percent, were in small cultivator, tenant, and landless households; many worked as laborers part time or seasonally, usually in post-harvest activities, and received payment in kind or in meager cash wages. Another 20 percent, mostly in poor landless households, depended on casual

labor, gleaned, begging, and other irregular sources of income; typically, their income was essential to household survival. The remaining 10 percent of women were in households mainly in the professional, trading, or large-scale landowning categories, and they usually did not work outside the home.

The economic contribution of women was substantial but largely unacknowledged. Women in rural areas were responsible for most of the post-harvest work, which was done in the *chula*, and for keeping livestock, poultry, and small gardens. Women in cities relied on domestic and traditional jobs, but in the 1980s they increasingly worked in manufacturing jobs, especially in the ready-made garment industry (see Ready-made Garments, ch. 3). Those with more education worked in government, health care, and teaching, but their numbers remained very small. Continuing high rates of population growth and the declining availability of work based in the *chula* meant that more women sought employment outside the home. Accordingly, the female labor force participation rate doubled between 1974 and 1984, when it reached nearly 8 percent. Female wage rates in the 1980s were low, typically ranging between 20 and 30 percent of male wage rates.

### **Social Classes and Stratification**

Society in Bangladesh in the 1980s, with the exception of the Hindu caste system, was not rigidly stratified; rather, it was open, fluid, and diffused, without a cohesive social organization and social structure (see Hinduism, this ch.). Social class distinctions were mostly functional, however, and there was considerable mobility among classes. Even the structure of the Hindu caste system in Bangladesh was relatively loose because most Hindus belonged to the lower castes.

Ostensibly, egalitarian principles of Islam were the basis of social organization. Unlike in other regions of South Asia, the Hindu caste-based social system had a very limited effect on Bangladeshi Muslim social culture. Even the low-caste *jolhas* (weavers) had improved their social standing since 1971. Although several hierarchically arranged groups—such as the *syeds* (noble born) and the *sheikhs*, or *shaykhs* (also noble born)—were noticeable in Bangladesh Muslim society, there were no impenetrable hereditary social distinctions. Rather, fairly permeable classes based on wealth and political influence existed both in the cities and in the villages.

Traditional Muslim class distinctions had little importance in Bangladesh. The proscription against marriage between individuals of high-born and low-born families, once an indicator of the social gap between the two groups, had long ago disappeared; most



*Women serve as a major  
part of the Bangladeshi  
work force.*

*Courtesy Embassy of  
Bangladesh, Washington*



*Women at work in a  
telephone assembly  
plant, Dhaka*

*Courtesy Bangladesh  
Ministry of Information*



matrimonial alliances were based on wealth and power and not on the ties of family distinction. Also, many so-called upper class families, because of their traditional use of the Urdu language, had become alienated in independent Bangladesh.

Although Hindu society is formally stratified into caste categories, caste did not figure prominently in the Bangladeshi Hindu community. About 75 percent of the Hindus in Bangladesh belonged to the lower castes, notably *namasudras* (lesser cultivators), and the remainder belonged primarily to outcaste or untouchable groups. Some members of higher castes belonged to the middle or professional class, but there was no Hindu upper class. With the increasing participation of the Hindus in nontraditional professional mobility, the castes were able to interact in wider political and socioeconomic arenas, which caused some erosion of caste consciousness. Although there is no mobility between Hindu castes, caste distinctions did not play as important a role in Bangladesh as in they did in the Hindu-dominated Indian state of West Bengal. Bangladeshi Hindus seemed to have become part of the mainstream culture without surrendering their religious and cultural distinctions.

## **Religion**

### **Religion and Society**

Nearly 83 percent of the population of Bangladesh claimed Islam as its religion in the 1980s, giving the country one of the largest concentrations of Muslims in the world. Although initially Bangladesh opted for a secular nationalist ideology as embodied in its Constitution, the principle of secularism was subsequently replaced by a commitment to the Islamic way of life through a series of constitutional amendments and government proclamations between 1977 and 1988 (see Constitution, ch. 4). In spite of a history of religious strife, Bangladeshi Muslims tended to be accommodating toward adherents of other religions. The Muslim community in the Bengal region developed independent of the dominant Islamic trends in India. The preservation of pre-Islamic cultural elements from Buddhist and Hindu periods made the commitment to Islam uniquely Bangladeshi. Features of Bangladeshi Hinduism, which differed in some respects from Hinduism in other parts of South Asia, influenced both the practices and the social structure of the Bangladeshi Muslim community (see table 8, Appendix).

In spite of the general personal commitment to Islam by the Muslims of Bangladesh, observance of Islamic rituals and tenets varies according to social position, locale, and personal considerations. In rural regions, some beliefs and practices tend to incorporate

elements that differ from and often conflict with orthodox Islam. Islamic fundamentalists, although a rather limited force in the past, had begun to gain a following, especially among the educated urban youth, by the 1980s.

Estimated to make up 18.5 percent of East Pakistan's population in 1961, the Hindu proportion of the population had shrunk to about 13.5 percent by 1971. Steady Hindu emigration to India and Burma throughout the 1960s accounted for most of the decline. Although the Hindu population increased in size after 1971 and had reached 10.6 million by 1981, its relative proportion of the total population continued to decrease. In 1987 Hindus represented nearly 16 percent of the population. Other minority religious groups counted in the 1981 census included approximately 538,000 Buddhists, about 275,000 Christians, and nearly 250,000 categorized as "others," probably members of tribal religions.

## **Islam**

### *Tenets of Islam*

In the Arabian town of Mecca in A.D. 610, the Prophet Muhammad preached the first of a series of divine revelations. Muhammad, an uncompromising monotheist, made himself unpopular with his fellow Meccans, who benefitted from the town's thriving pilgrimage business and numerous polytheist religious sites. Censured by Mecca's leaders, in 622 Muhammad and a group of his followers were invited to the town of Yathrib, which came to be known as Medina (from *Madinat an Nabi*, meaning the Prophet's City), and made it the center of their activities. This move, or *hijra*, marked the beginning of the Islamic era and of Islam as a historical force. The Muslim calendar, based on a 354-day lunar year, begins in 622. In Medina, Muhammad continued to preach, eventually defeating his opponents in battle and consolidating the temporal and spiritual leadership of Arabia before his death in 632.

After Muhammad's death, his followers compiled his divinely inspired speeches in the Quran, the scripture of Islam. Other sayings and teachings of Muhammad and the examples of his personal behavior became the *hadith*. Together they form the Muslim's comprehensive guide to spiritual, ethical, and social living.

The *shahadah*, or testimony, succinctly states the central belief of Islam: "There is no god but God [Allah], and Muhammad is his Prophet." This simple profession of faith is repeated on many occasions; recital in full and unquestioning sincerity makes one a Muslim. Islam means "submission to God," and he who submits

is a Muslim. The God whom Muhammad preached was not unknown to his countrymen, for Allah is the Arabic word for God rather than a particular name. Instead of introducing a new deity, Muhammad denied the existence of the minor gods and spirits worshiped before his ministry.

Muhammad is called the “seal of the Prophets”; his revelation is said to complete for all time the series of biblical revelations received by the Jews and the Christians. Prophets and sages of the Judeo-Christian tradition, such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (Ibrahim, Musa, and Isa, respectively, in the Arabic Islamic canon) are recognized as inspired vehicles of God’s will. Islam, however, reveres as sacred only God’s message, rejecting Christianity’s deification of the messenger. It accepts the concepts of guardian angels, the Day of Judgment, the general resurrection, heaven and hell, and the immortality of the soul.

The duties of the Muslim, which form the “five pillars” of the faith, are recitation of the *shahadah* (*kalima* in Bangla), daily prayer (*salat*; in Bangla, *namaḥ*), almsgiving (*zakat*; in Bangla, *jakat*), fasting (*sawm*; in Bangla, *roja*), and pilgrimage (*hajj*). The devout believer prays after purification through ritual oblations at dawn, midday, mid-afternoon, sunset, and nightfall. Prescribed genuflections and prostrations accompany the prayers that the worshiper recites while facing Mecca. Whenever possible, men pray in congregation at a mosque, led by a prayer leader; on Fridays they are obliged to do so. Women may attend public worship at mosques, where they are segregated from men, although most women commonly pray at home. A special functionary, the muezzin, intones a call to prayer to the entire community at the appropriate hours; those out of earshot determine the prayer time from the position of the sun. Public prayer is a conspicuous and widely practiced aspect of Islam in Bangladesh.

Almsgiving consists of a variety of donations to the poor, debtors, slaves, wayfarers, beggars, and charitable organizations. Once obligatory, although not strictly a tax, almsgiving in modern times is voluntary but usually expected.

The ninth month of the Muslim calendar is Ramadan, a period of obligatory fasting in commemoration of Muhammad’s receipt of God’s revelation. During the month all but the sick, the weak, pregnant or lactating women, soldiers on duty, travelers on necessary journeys, and young children are enjoined, as appropriate to their state in life, from eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual intercourse during daylight hours. The wealthy usually do little or no work during this period, and some businesses close for all or part of the day. Since the months of the lunar calendar revolve

through the solar year, Ramadan falls at various seasons in different years. Summertime fasting imposes considerable hardship on those who must do physical work. Id al Fitr, a feast celebrated throughout the Islamic world, marks the end of the month of fasting. Gifts, the wearing of new garments, exchanges of sweetmeats, almsgiving, and visits to friends and relatives are some of the customs of this great religious festival.

Islam dictates that at least once in his or her lifetime every Muslim should, if possible, make the *hajj* to Mecca to participate in special rites held there during the twelfth month of the Muslim calendar. The Prophet instituted this requirement, modifying pre-Islamic custom to emphasize the significance of the sites associated with the history of Abraham, the founder of monotheism and the father of the Arabs through his son Ishmail (Ismail in the Arabic Islamic Canon). The pilgrim, dressed in a white seamless garment, abstains from sexual relations, shaving, haircutting, and nail-paring. Highlights of the pilgrimage include kissing a sacred black stone; circumambulating the Kaabah shrine (the sacred structure reportedly built by Abraham that houses a stone sacred to Islam); running between the hills of Safa and Marwa in imitation of Hagar, Ishmail's mother, during her travail in the desert; and standing in prayer on the Plain of Arafat.

The permanent struggle for the triumph of the word of God on earth—the *jihād*—represents an additional duty of all Muslims. Although this concept continues to be used to justify holy wars, modernist Muslims see the *jihād* in a broader context of civic and personal action. In addition to specific duties, Islam imposes a code of ethical conduct that encourages generosity, fairness, honesty, and respect and that forbids adultery, gambling, usury, and the consumption of carrion, blood, pork, and alcohol.

A Muslim stands in a personal relationship to God; there is neither intermediary nor clergy in orthodox Islam. Those who lead prayers, preach sermons, and interpret the law do so by virtue of their superior knowledge and scholarship rather than any special powers or prerogatives conferred by ordination.

During his lifetime, Muhammad was both spiritual and temporal leader of the Muslim community. He established the concept of Islam as a total and all-encompassing way of life for both individuals and society. Muslims believe that God revealed to Muhammad the rules governing decent behavior. It is therefore incumbent on the individual to live in the manner prescribed by revealed law and on the community to perfect human society on earth according to the holy injunctions. Islam recognizes no distinction between religion and state. Religious and secular life merge,

as do religious and secular law. In keeping with this conception of society, all Muslims traditionally have been subject to religious law.

### ***Early Developments in Islam***

After Muhammad's death in A.D. 632 the leaders of the Muslim community chose Abu Bakr, the Prophet's father-in-law and one of his earliest followers, to succeed him as caliph (from *khalifa*; literally, successor of the Prophet). At that time, some persons favored Ali, the Prophet's cousin and husband of his daughter Fatima, but Ali and his supporters recognized the community's choice. The next two caliphs, Umar and Uthman, enjoyed the recognition of the entire community, although Uthman was murdered. When Ali finally succeeded to the caliphate in 656, Muawiyah, governor of Syria, rebelled in the name of his kinsman Uthman. After the ensuing civil war Ali moved his capital to Kufa (present-day Karbala in Iraq), where a short time later he too was assassinated.

Ali's death ended the last of the so-called four orthodox caliphates and the period in which the entire Islamic community recognized a single caliph. Muawiyah then proclaimed himself caliph of Damascus. Ali's supporters, however, refused to recognize Muawiyah or his line, the Umayyad caliphs; they withdrew in the first great schism of Islam and established a dissident faction known as the Shias (or Shiites), from Shiat Ali (Party of Ali) in support of the claims of Ali's line to the caliphate based on descent from the Prophet. The larger faction of Islam, the Sunnis, claims to follow the orthodox teaching and example of Muhammad as embodied in the Sunna, the traditions of the Prophet. The Sunni majority was further developed into four schools of law: Maliki, Hanafi, Shafii, and Hanbali. All four are equally orthodox, but Sunnis in one country usually follow only one school.

Originally political in nature, the difference between the Sunni and Shia interpretations took on theological and metaphysical overtones. Ali's two sons, killed in the wars following the schisms, became martyred heroes to Shia Islam and repositories of the claims of Ali's line to mystical preeminence among Muslims. The Sunnis retained the doctrine of leadership by consensus. Despite these differences, reputed descent from the Prophet still carries great social and religious prestige throughout the Muslim world. Meanwhile, the Shia doctrine of rule by divine right grew more firmly established, and disagreements over which of several pretenders had the truer claim to the mystical power of Ali precipitated further schisms. Some Shia groups developed doctrines of divine leadership, including a belief in hidden but divinely chosen leaders. The Shia creed,

for example, proclaims: "There is no god but God: Muhammad is the Prophet of God, and Ali is the Saint of God."

### *Islam in Bangladesh*

The wholesale conversion to Islam of the population of what was to become Bangladesh began in the thirteenth century and continued for hundreds of years (see Islamization of Bengal, 1202-1757, ch. 1). Conversion was generally collective rather than individual, although individual Hindus who became outcastes or who were ostracized for any reason often became Muslims. Islamic egalitarianism, especially the ideals of equality, brotherhood, and social justice, attracted numerous Buddhists and lower caste Hindus. Muslim missionaries and mystics, some of whom were subsequently regarded as saints (usually known as *pirs* in Bangladesh) and who wandered about in villages and towns, were responsible for many conversions.

Most Muslims in Bangladesh are Sunnis, but there is a small Shia community. Most of those who are Shia reside in urban areas. Although these Shias are few in number, Shia observance commemorating the martyrdom of Ali's sons, Hasan and Husayn, is widely observed by the nation's Sunnis.

The tradition of Islamic mysticism known as Sufism appeared very early in Islam and became essentially a popular movement emphasizing love of God rather than fear of God. Sufism stresses a direct, unstructured, personal devotion to God in place of the ritualistic, outward observance of the faith. An important belief in the Sufi tradition is that the average believer may use spiritual guides in his pursuit of the truth. These guides—friends of God or saints—are commonly called fakirs or *pirs*. In Bangladesh the term *pir* is more commonly used and combines the meanings of teacher and saint. In Islam there has been a perennial tension between the *ulama*—Muslim scholars—and the Sufis; each group advocates its method as the preferred path to salvation. There also have been periodic efforts to reconcile the two approaches. Throughout the centuries many gifted scholars and numerous poets have been inspired by Sufi ideas even though they were not actually adherents.

Sufi masters were the single most important factor in South Asian conversions to Islam, particularly in what is now Bangladesh. Most Bangladeshi Muslims are influenced to some degree by Sufism, although this influence often involves only occasional consultation or celebration rather than formal affiliation. Both fakirs and *pirs* are familiar figures on the village scene, and in some areas the shrines of saints almost outnumber the mosques. In some regions

the terms *fakir* and *pir* are used interchangeably, but in general the former connotes an itinerant holy man and the latter an established *murshid*, a holy man who has achieved a higher spiritual level than a *fakir* and who has a larger following.

Ever since Sufism became a popular movement, pious men of outstanding personality reputed to have gifts of miraculous powers have found disciples (*murids*) flocking to them. The disciple can be a kind of lay associate earning his living in secular occupations, consulting the *pir* or *murshid* at times, participating in religious ceremonies, and making contributions to the support of the *murshid*. In addition, he may be initiated into a brotherhood that pledges its devotion to the *murshid*, lives in close association with him, and engages in pious exercises intended to bring about mystical enlightenment.

The Qadiri, Naqshbandi, and Chishti orders were among the most widespread Sufi orders in Bangladesh in the late 1980s. The beliefs and practices of the first two are quite close to those of orthodox Islam; the third, founded in Ajmer, India, is peculiar to the subcontinent and has a number of unorthodox practices, such as the use of music in its liturgy. Its ranks have included many musicians and poets.

*Pirs* do not attain their office through consensus and do not normally function as community representatives. The villager may expect a *pir* to advise him and offer inspiration but would not expect him to lead communal prayers or deliver the weekly sermon at the local mosque. Some *pirs*, however, are known to have taken an active interest in politics either by running for public office or by supporting other candidates. For example, Pir Hafizi Huzur ran as a candidate for president in the 1986 election. The *pirs* of Atroshi and Sarsina apparently also exerted some political influence. Their visitors have included presidents and cabinet ministers.

Although a formal organization of ordained priests has no basis in Islam, a variety of functionaries perform many of the duties conventionally associated with a clergy and serve, in effect, as priests. One group, known collectively as the *ulama*, has traditionally provided the orthodox leadership of the community. The *ulama* unofficially interpret and administer religious law. Their authority rests on their knowledge of sharia, the corpus of Islamic jurisprudence that grew up in the centuries following the Prophet's death.

The members of the *ulama* include *maulvis*, imams (see Glossary), and mullahs. The first two titles are accorded to those who have received special training in Islamic theology and law. A *maulvi* has pursued higher studies in a *madrassa*, a school of religious



*The Star Mosque in Dhaka  
Courtesy Siria Lopez  
An example of colonial-era architecture, a house in old Dhaka  
Courtesy Siria Lopez*



education attached to a mosque (see Religious Education, this ch.). Additional study on the graduate level leads to the title *maulana*.

Villagers call on the mullah for prayers, advice on points of religious practice, and performance of marriage and funeral ceremonies. More often they come to him for a variety of services far from the purview of orthodox Islam. The mullah may be a source for amulets, talismans, and charms for the remedying of everything from snakebite to sexual impotence. These objects are also purported to provide protection from evil spirits and bring good fortune. Many villagers have implicit faith in such cures for disease and appear to benefit from them. Some mullahs derive a significant portion of their income from sales of such items.

In Bangladesh, where a modified Anglo-Indian civil and criminal legal system operates, there are no official sharia courts (see Judiciary, ch. 4). Most Muslim marriages, however, are presided over by the *qazi*, a traditional Muslim judge whose advice is also sought on matters of personal law, such as inheritance, divorce, and the administration of religious endowments (*waqfs*).

In the late 1980s, the ulama of Bangladesh still perceived their function as that of teaching and preserving the Islamic way of life in the face of outside challenges, especially from modern sociopolitical ideas based on Christianity or communism. Any effort at modernization was perceived as a threat to core religious values and institutions; therefore, the ulama as a class was opposed to any compromise in matters of sharia. Many members of the ulama favored the establishment of an Islamic theocracy in Bangladesh and were deeply involved in political activism through several political parties. Most members of the ulama were also engaged in carrying on the *tabligh* (preaching movement), an effort that focuses on the true sociopolitical ideals of Islam and unequivocally discards all un-Islamic accretions. *Tabligh* attracted many college and university graduates, who found the movement emotionally fulfilling and a practical way to deal with Bangladesh's endemic sociopolitical malaise.

A number of Islamic practices are particular to South Asia, and several of them have been subject to reforms over the years. For example, the anniversary of the death of a *pir* is observed annually. Popular belief holds that this anniversary is an especially propitious time for seeking the intercession of the *pir*. Large numbers of the faithful attend anniversary ceremonies, which are festive occasions enjoyed by the followers of the *pir* as well as orthodox Muslims. The ceremonies are quite similar in form and content to many Hindu festivals. Several nineteenth- and twentieth-century fundamentalist reform movements, aimed at ridding Islam

of all extraneous encroachments, railed against these and similar practices. Nevertheless, the practice of *pir* worship continued unabated in the 1980s.

Nonorthodox interpretations of Islamic beliefs and practices pervaded popular religion in Bangladesh in the 1980s. Hindu influences can be seen in the practice of illuminating the house for the celebration of Shabi Barat (Festival of the Bestowal of Fate), a custom derived from the Hindu practices at Diwali (Festival of Lights). Rituals to exorcise evil spirits (*jinni*) from possessed persons also incorporated Hindu influence. Often, villagers would fail to distinguish between Hindu and Muslim shrines. For example, shrines called *satyapir*, which dot rural Bangladesh, are devoted to a Hindu-Muslim synthesis known as Olabibi, the deity for the cure of cholera. This synthesis is an intriguing superimposition of the Hindu concept of divine consort on the stern monotheistic perception of Allah.

Post-1971 regimes sought to increase the role of the government in the religious life of the people. The Ministry of Religious Affairs provided support, financial assistance, and endowments to religious institutions, including mosques and community prayer grounds (*idgahs*). The organization of annual pilgrimages to Mecca also came under the auspices of the ministry because of limits on the number of pilgrims admitted by the government of Saudi Arabia and the restrictive foreign exchange regulations of the government of Bangladesh. The ministry also directed the policy and the program of the Islamic Foundation, which was responsible for organizing and supporting research and publications on Islamic subjects. The foundation also maintained the Bayt al Mukarram (National Mosque), and organized the training of imams. Some 18,000 imams were scheduled for training once the government completed establishment of a national network of Islamic cultural centers and mosque libraries. Under the patronage of the Islamic Foundation, an encyclopedia of Islam in the Bangla language was being compiled in the late 1980s.

Another step toward further government involvement in religious life was taken in 1984 when the semiofficial Zakat Fund Committee was established under the chairmanship of the president of Bangladesh. The committee solicited annual *zakat* contributions on a voluntary basis. The revenue so generated was to be spent on orphanages, schools, children's hospitals, and other charitable institutions and projects. Commercial banks and other financial institutions were encouraged to contribute to the fund. Through these measures the government sought closer ties with religious establishments within the country and with Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Although Islam played a significant role in the life and culture of the people, religion did not dominate national politics because Islam was not the central component of national identity. When in June 1988 an "Islamic way of life" was proclaimed for Bangladesh by constitutional amendment, very little attention was paid outside the intellectual class to the meaning and impact of such an important national commitment. Most observers believed that the declaration of Islam as the state religion might have a significant impact on national life, however. Aside from arousing the suspicion of the non-Islamic minorities, it could accelerate the proliferation of religious parties at both the national and the local levels, thereby exacerbating tension and conflict between secular and religious politicians. Unrest of this nature was reported on some college campuses soon after the amendment was promulgated.

## **Hinduism**

Unlike Islam, Hinduism lacks a single authoritative scripture and a historically known founder. In a sense Hinduism is a synthesis of the religious expression of the people of South Asia and an anonymous expression of their worldview and cosmology, rather than the articulation of a particular creed. The term *Hinduism* applies to a large number of diverse beliefs and practices. Although religion can best be understood in a regional context, the caste system, beliefs, rituals, and festivals of the Hindus in Bangladesh—about 16 percent of the population—are peculiarly Bengali.

A distinction has sometimes been made between the religion of the "great tradition" and the popular religion of the "little tradition." The great (or Sanskritic) tradition, sometimes called Brahmanism, developed under the leadership of Hinduism's highest caste group, the Brahmans, who as the traditional priests, teachers, and astrologers enjoy numerous social privileges. The great tradition preserves refined and abstract philosophical concepts that exhibit very little regional variation. At this level, there is emphasis on unity in diversity and a pervasive attitude of relativism.

Hindu philosophy recognizes the Absolute (Brahma) as eternal, unbounded by time, space, and causality and consisting of pure existence, consciousness, and bliss. The highest goal is release (*moksha*) from the cycle of birth and rebirth and the union of the individualized soul (*atman*) with Brahma. To attain this goal, a person may follow one of several methods or paths of discipline depending on his or her own temperament or capacity. The first of these paths is known as the way of works (*karma marga*). Followed by most Hindus, it calls for disinterested right action—the performance of one's caste duties and service to others—without

personal involvement in the consequences of action. The way of knowledge (*jnana marga*) stresses union by eliminating ignorance; mental error rather than moral transgression is considered the root of human misery and evil. The way of devotion (*bhakti marga*) advocates union by love; its essence is a complete and passionate faith in a personal deity.

For most of its adherents, Hinduism encompasses a variety of devotions and sects that center on one or more of the great gods and are expressed at least partly in a regional context. The great tradition recognizes a trinity of gods, who are actually forms of absolute Brahman: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer. Brahma receives little notice; everyday devotion tends to center on the worship of Vishnu and Shiva (known by a variety of names) and their countless respective consorts.

The worship of Shiva has generally found adherents among the higher castes in Bangladesh. Worship of Vishnu more explicitly cuts across caste lines by teaching the fundamental oneness of humankind in spirit. Vishnu worship in Bengal expresses the union of the male and female principles in a tradition of love and devotion. This form of Hindu belief and the Sufi tradition of Islam have influenced and interacted with each other in Bengal. Both were popular mystical movements emphasizing the personal relationship of religious leader and disciple instead of the dry stereotypes of the Brahmans or the ulama. As in Bengali Islamic practice, worship of Vishnu frequently occurs in a small devotional society (*samaj*). Both use the language of earthly love to express communion with the divine. In both traditions, the Bangla language is the vehicle of a large corpus of erotic and mystical literature of great beauty and emotional impact.

On the level of the little tradition, Hinduism admits worship of spirits and godlings of rivers, mountains, vegetation, animals, stones, or disease. Ritual bathing, vows, and pilgrimages to sacred rivers, mountains, shrines, and cities are important practices. An ordinary Hindu will worship at the shrines of Muslim *pirs*, without being concerned with the religion to which that place is supposed to be affiliated. Hindus revere many holy men and ascetics conspicuous for their bodily mortifications. Some people believe they attain spiritual benefit merely by looking at a great holy man.

Hindu ethics generally center on the principle of ahimsa, non-injury to living creatures—especially the cow, which is held sacred. The principle is expressed in almost universally observed rules against eating beef. By no means are all Hindus vegetarians, but abstinence from all kinds of meat is regarded as a “higher” virtue.





*A musical "duel" between two poets  
Courtesy Bangladesh Ministry of Information*

High-caste Bangladeshi Hindus, unlike their counterparts elsewhere in South Asia, ordinarily eat fish.

Common among Hindus is the acceptance of the caste system as the structure of society. For virtually all Hindus, even those in revolt against some aspects of the system, caste is taken for granted as the way of life. To be considered Hindu, a group must identify itself in some way as a unit in the caste hierarchy. One cannot join a caste; one is born into it and lives, marries, and dies in it.

Hindus in Bangladesh in the late 1980s were almost evenly distributed in all regions, with concentrations in Khulna, Jessore, Dinajpur, Faridpur, and Barisal. The contributions of Hindus in arts and letters were far in excess of their numerical strength. In politics, they had traditionally supported the liberal and secular ideology of the Awami League (People's League) (see *Early Independence Period, 1971-72*, ch. 1; *Party Politics*, ch. 4). Hindu institutions and places of worship received assistance through the Bangladesh Hindu Kalyan Trust (Bangladesh Hindu Welfare Trust), which was sponsored by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Government-sponsored television and radio also broadcast readings and interpretations of Hindu scriptures and prayers.

## **Buddhism**

Buddhism in various forms appears to have been prevalent at the time of the Turkish conquest in 1202 (see *Islamization of Bengal, 1202-1757*, ch. 1). The invading armies apparently found numerous monasteries, which they destroyed in the belief that they were military fortresses. With the destruction of its centers of learning, Buddhism rapidly disintegrated. In subsequent centuries and up through the 1980s nearly all the remaining Buddhists lived in the region around Chittagong, which had not been entirely conquered until the time of the British Raj (1858-1947; see *Glossary*). In the Chittagong Hills, Buddhist tribes formed the majority of the population, and their religion appeared to be a mixture of tribal cults and Buddhist doctrines. According to the 1981 census, there were approximately 538,000 Buddhists in Bangladesh, representing less than 1 percent of the population.

The ethical teachings of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 550-486 B.C.), stress a middle path between physical indulgence and ascetic mortification. The practice of Buddhism is concerned with salvation rather than with metaphysical speculation. Salvation consists of freeing oneself from the cycle of rebirth into lives of evil, pain, and sorrow; to accomplish this, one must renounce society and live a simple life of self-discipline. Those who renounce society often are organized into one of the many monastic orders.

There are several monasteries in the Chittagong Hills area, and in most Buddhist villages there is a school (*kyong*) where boys live and learn to read Burmese and some Pali (an ancient Buddhist scriptural language). It is common for men who have finished their schooling to return at regular intervals for periods of residence in the school. The local Buddhist shrine is often an important center of village life.

Essentially tolerant, Buddhism outside the monastic retreats has absorbed and adapted indigenous popular creeds and cults of the regions to which it has spread. In most areas religious ritual focuses on the image of the Buddha, and the major festivals observed by Buddhists in Bangladesh commemorate the important events of his life. Although doctrinal Buddhism rejects the worship of gods and preserves the memory of the Buddha as an enlightened man, popular Buddhism contains a pantheon of gods and lesser deities headed by the Buddha.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs provides assistance for the maintenance of Buddhist places of worship and relics. The ancient monasteries at Paharpur (in Rajshahi Region) and Mainamati (in Comilla Region), dating from the seventh to ninth century A.D., are considered unique for their size and setting and are maintained as state-protected monuments.

## **Christianity**

Christianity's first contact with the Indian subcontinent is attributed to the Apostle Thomas, who is said to have preached in southern India. Although Jesuit priests were active at the Mughal courts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the first Roman Catholic settlements in what became Bangladesh appear to have been established by the Portuguese, coming from their center in Goa on the west coast of India. During the sixteenth century the Portuguese settled in the vicinity of Chittagong, where they were active in piracy and slave trading. In the seventeenth century some Portuguese moved to Dhaka.

Serious Protestant missionary efforts began only in the first half of the nineteenth century. Baptist missionary activities beginning in 1816, the Anglican Oxford Mission, and others worked mainly among the tribal peoples of the Low Hills in the northern part of Mymensingh and Sylhet regions. Many of the Christian churches, schools, and hospitals were initially set up to serve the European community. They subsequently became centers of conversion activities, particularly among the lower caste Hindus.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs provided assistance and support to the Christian institutions in the country. In the late 1980s,



the government was not imposing any restrictions on the legitimate religious activities of the missions and the communities. Mission schools and hospitals were well attended and were used by members of all religions. The Christian community usually enjoyed better opportunities for education and a better standard of living. In the late 1980s, Christianity had about 600,000 adherents, mainly Roman Catholic, and their numbers were growing rapidly.

## **Education**

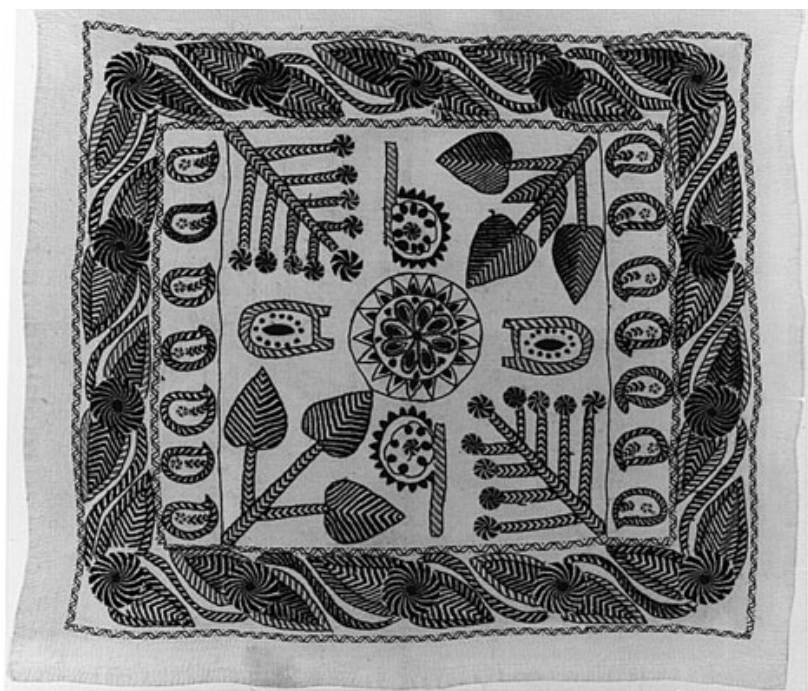
### **The British Legacy**

At the beginning of the nineteenth century a system of liberal English-language schools based on the British model was instituted in the region that now constitutes Bangladesh. The emphasis on British education led to the growth of an elite class that provided clerical and administrative support to the colonial administration but did not develop practical skills or technical knowledge. The new elite became alienated from the masses of the people, who had no access to the new education system.

During the Pakistan period, there was a general awareness of the need to restructure the education system to meet the needs of the new nation. A 1959 report by Pakistan's National Commission on Education recommended a series of reforms that would reorganize the structure of education. These reforms included emphasis on broad-based and technical education. In the successive five-year plans and other national economic policy documents developed during the Pakistan period, a need was articulated to shift the focus of education away from rote memorization and to expand facilities for scientific and technological education (see *The Economic Context*, ch. 3). But the impact of such policies was not felt in East Pakistan, and, with only a few exceptions, a liberal elite-based education system with very little awareness of life in the countryside was in place when Bangladesh became independent.

### **Education System**

In the 1981 census only 19.7 percent of the total population was counted as literate. The literacy rate was 17 percent in rural areas and 35 percent in urban areas. The urban-rural gap shrank slightly between 1961 and 1981, primarily because of the influx of rural Bangladeshis to urban areas. The adult literacy rate in 1988 remained about equal to the 1981 level, officially given as 29 percent but possibly lower. The education system also had had a discriminatory effect on the education of women in a basically patriarchal society. The female literacy rate in 1981 (13.2 percent) was



*Nakshi kantha-style embroidered quilt from Chapai, Nawabganj  
Courtesy Joyce Rahim*

about half the literacy rate among men (26 percent) nationally. The gap was even greater in rural areas, where 11.2 percent women and 23 percent of men were literate. (In 1988 the literacy rate was 18 percent for women and 39 percent for men.) The national school attendance rate in 1982 was 58.9 percent for ages 5 to 9; 20.9 percent for ages 10 to 14; and 1.9 percent for ages 15 to 24. The estimated 1988 student-teacher ratio was fifty-four to one in primary schools, twenty-seven to one in secondary schools, and thirteen to one in universities. Approximately 10 million students of all ages attended school in 1981.

The base of the school system was five years of primary education. The government reported a total of nearly 44,000 primary schools enrolling nearly 44 million students in 1986. Recognizing the importance of increasing enrollments and improving quality, the government made universal primary education a major objective of its educational development plans, which focused on increasing access to school, improving teacher training, and revising the primary school curricula. As a result, the share of primary education by the mid-1980s increased to about 50 percent of the public education expenditure. Although enrollment in the entry class rose over time, the ability of the primary education sector to retain students in school and increase the literacy rate did not match

government goals. Throughout the system a high annual dropout rate of 20 percent existed in 1988. Studies suggested that no more than 10 to 15 percent of those attending primary schools retained a permanent ability to read and write. The Third Five-Year Plan (1985-90) envisaged reducing the rural-urban gap in education, establishing facilities for the enrollment of 70 percent of children of primary-school age, and placing emphasis on keeping children in school longer.

Bangladesh had 8,790 secondary schools with 2.7 million students in 1986. Secondary education was divided into two levels. The five years of lower secondary (grades six through ten) concluded with a secondary school certificate examination. Students who passed this examination proceeded to two years of higher secondary or intermediate training, which culminated in a higher secondary school examination after grade twelve. Higher secondary school was viewed as preparation for college rather than as the conclusion of high school. Development efforts in the late 1980s included programs to provide low-cost vocational education to the rural populace. Efforts also focused on the establishment of science teaching facilities in rural schools, as compulsory science courses were introduced at the secondary level. The government also had provided training for science teachers and supplies of scientific equipment. In spite of many difficulties over the years, the number of both secondary schools and students, particularly females, increased steadily. For example, whereas there were 7,786 secondary schools for boys and 1,159 for girls in 1977, the number of boys' schools had decreased to 7,511 while girls' schools had increased to 1,282 by 1986. The number of students increased as well. In 1977 there were 1.3 million boys and 450,000 girls in secondary schools; by 1986 there were 1.9 million boys and 804,000 girls. Enrollment in technical and vocational schools increased in a similar manner. Secondary education for the most part was private but was heavily subsidized by the state budget. Nationalization of private schools was a standing government policy.

Development of the education system depended largely on the supply of trained teachers. In 1986 about 20 percent of the estimated 190,000 primary-school teachers were adequately trained; at the secondary-school level, only 30 percent of the teachers were trained. Contributing to the shortage of trained teachers was the low socioeconomic standing of educators. The social image of teachers had been gradually eroded, making it difficult to recruit young graduates to the profession. The high proportion of poorly trained teachers led to lower standards of instruction. Despite these problems, the number of secondary-school teachers increased from 83,955 in 1977 to 99,016 in 1986, according to government figures.

In 1986 there were forty-nine primary-school teacher training institutes and ten secondary-school teacher training colleges. In addition to regular degree, diploma, and certificate programs, various crash programs and correspondence courses also were available. The Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education also had started an experimental program of teacher training under the auspices of Rajshahi University.

At the postsecondary level in 1986, there were 7 universities, 758 general colleges, and 50 professional (medical, dental, engineering, and law) colleges. More than 25 percent of the colleges were government managed; the rest were private but received substantial government grants. The private colleges were gradually being nationalized. In the 1980s, emphasis was being placed on the development of science teaching facilities in nongovernment colleges. Twelve government colleges were selected to offer graduate courses during the Third Five-Year Plan.

In addition to four general-curriculum universities—the University of Dhaka, Rajshahi University, Chittagong University, and Jahangir Nagar University—there were the University of Engineering and Technology in Dhaka, the Agricultural University in Mymensingh, and the Islamic University in Tongi (near Dhaka). The total enrollment in the 7 universities in 1986 was estimated at 27,487, of which 80 percent were male. Universities were self-governing entities with 95 percent of their total expenditures paid through government block grants. The University Grants Commission, created in 1973, coordinated the funding and activities of the universities. A large number of scholarships and stipends were offered to students in education institutions at all levels.

The number of college students increased from 238,580 in 1980 to 603,915 in 1986, according to government statistics. During that period, female enrollment increased from 29,000 to 115,000. Qualitative improvement, enrollment stabilization, interuniversity rationalization of departments, and controlled expansion were some of the government objectives for college education in the mid- and late 1980s.

Curricula in nongovernment institutions of higher education focused mostly on the humanities and social sciences. Many government colleges and universities, however, offered advanced courses in natural, physical, and biological sciences. Sophisticated courses in language and literature, philosophy and philology, fine arts, and folk culture also were offered at the universities. Advanced research degrees, including doctorates, were offered in several disciplines of science, the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences. Faculty

members at the government colleges and universities were usually well qualified, but research facilities were limited.

To remove the heavy bias toward liberal arts education, greater attention was being focused in the late 1980s on technical education, which received the third highest allocation, after primary and secondary education, in the Third Five-Year Plan. In addition to four engineering colleges, Bangladesh had eighteen polytechnic institutes, four law colleges, two agricultural colleges, a graphic arts institute, an institute of glass and ceramics, a textile college, a college of leather technology, sixteen commercial institutes, and fifty-four vocational institutes in 1986. The nation also had ten medical colleges and one dental college, offering both graduate and postgraduate training. In addition, there were twenty-one nursing institutes, a music college, and a college of physical education.

Because secondary and higher education benefited the small middle and upper classes and because the government defrayed a portion of the costs of private higher institutions through grants, the poor in effect subsidized the education of the affluent. This situation was most evident at the university level, where about 15 percent of the education budget was devoted to less than 0.5 percent of the student population. The technical education sector, which experienced some growth in the late 1980s, nevertheless failed to provide the numbers and kinds of personnel required for economic development. Most university training also failed to equip its recipients with marketable professional skills.

### **Religious Education**

The national government supported Islamic education at several levels. In the late 1980s, efforts were being made to modernize the *madrassa* (school of religious education attached to a mosque) system and to introduce secular subjects in the *madrassa* curriculum under the Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board. In 1986 there were 4,118 *madrassas* and 638,926 students under the aegis of the government-supervised system. By 1985 forty *madrassas* had been established for female students. There were primary, secondary, and postsecondary *madrassas*, which, except for one in Sylhet run directly by the government, were attached to mosques and dependent on public charity and endowments. Most of these institutions had poor physical facilities and equipment. The objective of *madrassa* education during the Third Five-Year Plan was to modernize the system through the introduction of science courses. The program included the provision of science laboratories and equipment to 200 *madrassas* as part of the ongoing scheme for development of secondary education. In addition, similar facilities were to be

provided in a limited way to another 125 *madrasas*. Furthermore, financial benefits to the *madrasa* teachers were raised so they would achieve parity with teachers at secular secondary schools.

*Madrasa* graduates usually assumed posts as imams at mosques or became teachers at nominally secular schools. Traditionally, they often would take up both occupations, since many primary schools were located in village mosques.

### **Role of English and Arabic in Education**

Following the birth of Bangladesh, Bangla came to replace English as the medium of instruction. Bangla also became the sole national language and the standard language of communications. The initial shortage of Bangla textbooks and other instructional materials was alleviated by the accelerated production of textbooks in the vernacular under the patronage of government education departments. The Bangla Academy also played a pioneering role in this area. In the 1980s, British education was maintained marginally through private English-language institutions attended by upper class children. English continued to be offered as an elective subject in most institutions of higher education and was offered as a subject for bachelor's and master's degrees.

Initially, Arabic also lost ground in independent Bangladesh. This trend ended in the late 1970s, however, after Bangladesh strengthened its ties with Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich, Arabic-speaking countries. An unsuccessful attempt was made in 1983 to introduce Arabic as a required language in primary and secondary levels (see *The Ershad Period*, ch. 4). In the late 1980s, Arabic was studied in many Muslim homes in Bangladesh as an integral part of religious instruction. Aside from courses in religious schools, however, Arabic was not a popular subject at the college and university level.

### **Education Planning and Policy**

Public expenditures for education were very low in Bangladesh. As a percentage of the gross domestic product (GDP—see *Glossary*), the level of expenditure for education in 1983 was approximately 1.3 percent, a figure that did not rise substantially through 1988. On the average, the sectoral share of education in the total development expenditure of the government between 1973 and 1983 was only 4.1 percent; in 1985 it was only 3.1 percent.

The Third Five-Year Plan included efforts to improve quality by restructuring higher secondary and college education, making it more cost effective, and introducing management controls and performance evaluations. Community-based nonformal education

approaches seemed to hold promise as an alternative means of providing basic arithmetic and reading skills. For instance, the Bangladesh Rural Development Board has been able to achieve low dropout rates, especially for females, in nonformal primary schooling, keeping operating costs fairly low and capital expenditures at a minimum.

The Ministry of Education and Culture was responsible for planning, financing, and managing education at all levels. The ad hoc Bangladesh Education Commission was appointed in 1972 to investigate and report on all major aspects of education. In 1987 another high-level body—the National Education Commission—was instituted. Its August 1988 recommendations were for compulsory free education; reforms in *madrassa*, medical, and law education; and removal of student politics from the campus. It was expected that the commission's recommendations would be addressed in the fourth and fifth five-year plans covering the period up to the year 2000.

## **Health**

Although Bangladesh had a basic health care infrastructure in the 1980s, much remained to be done, particularly in rural areas, where the majority of the people faced critical health problems. The main dangers to health in the late 1980s were much the same as they were at the time of independence. The incidence of communicable disease was extensive, and there was widespread malnutrition, inadequate sewage disposal, and inadequate supplies of safe drinking water. The fertility rate was also extremely high. Only 30 percent of the population had access to primary health care services, and overall health care performance remained unacceptably low by all conventional measurements (see table 9, Appendix). Life expectancy at birth in FY 1985, according to official Bangladesh statistics was estimated at 55.1 years, as opposed to 61 years in comparable developing countries. Morbidity and mortality rates for women and children were high. Infant mortality rates exceeded 125 deaths per 1,000 live births, the maternal mortality rate was 6 per 1,000 live births, and 56.1 percent of infants suffered from chronic malnutrition. More than 45 percent of rural families and 76 percent of urban families were below the acceptable caloric intake level. About two-thirds of all families received insufficient protein and vitamins.

## **Disease and Disease Control**

Communicable diseases were the major health hazards in the 1980s. Poor nutrition and sanitation fostered the spread of

infections. Infectious diseases—cholera, dysentery, diarrhea, measles, diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, and poliomyelitis—and parasitic diseases such as malaria, filariasis, and helminthiasis—were responsible for widespread illness and numerous deaths. Although not reported among government statistics, tuberculosis was believed to be an increasingly serious health problem, with 90,000 deaths and 110,000 new cases occurring annually. Disease in the late 1980s was most prevalent in rural areas; treatment was more readily available in the cities. A mid-1980s survey indicated that deaths due to diarrheal diseases, malnutrition, and pneumonia accounted for 16.3 percent, 13.1 percent, and 10.8 percent of all deaths, respectively. The percentages for other diseases were as follows: prematurity and birth injury (8.6 percent), cardiovascular accidents (4.5 percent), tetanus (4.4 percent), pulmonary tuberculosis (3.3 percent), measles (2.7 percent), and other causes (36.3 percent).

Young children suffered disproportionately from diseases, and they accounted for 40 percent of deaths annually. Major killers of young children were severe diarrhea and neonatal tetanus caused by unsanitary treatment of the umbilicus. Until the mid-1980s, only 3 percent of Bangladeshi children received immunization against common infectious diseases. Consequently, potentially avoidable illnesses like tetanus, pertussis, and measles accounted for nearly half of infant deaths and more than a third of childhood deaths.

By the late 1980s, a massive immunization program had eliminated smallpox, and highly effective treatments had contained cholera. Malaria, however, once thought to have been eradicated, again had become a major health problem by 1988. The ongoing malaria control program needed to be strengthened by improving indigenous scientific knowledge of the disease and by spraying wider areas with effective chemicals. Several national and international research facilities were involved in disease control research.

Noncommunicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, mental illness, gastrointestinal disorders, cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, respiratory disease, and urogenital diseases were increasing in frequency in the 1980s. Cases of vitamin A deficiency causing night blindness and xerophthalmia, iron deficiency anemia, iodine deficiency, protein-calories deficiency, and marasmus also were on the increase.

Although no incidence of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) had been reported in Bangladesh through mid-1988, the National Committee on AIDS was formed in April 1986. The committee drew up a short-term action plan that called for public awareness programs, augmented laboratory facilities, training of relevant



personnel, publication of informational booklets, and health education programs.

Before the mid-1980s, disease control programs focused mainly on Western-style curative services, but the emphasis was shifting in the late 1980s toward a larger role for prevention. The government's main preventive health program—the Universal Immunization Program—was initiated in 1986 with the assistance of the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund in eight pilot subdistricts (*upazilas*; see Local Administration, ch. 4). The government aimed to provide protection through immunization against six major diseases for children under two years of age and to vaccinate women of childbearing age against tetanus. The program helped to increase the rate of full immunization of children below 1 year of age from less than 3 percent to 36.5 percent, and of children between 12 and 24 months from less than 3 percent to 55.8 percent.

In the case of maternal health care, a national program to train and supervise traditional birth attendants (*dhais*) was started in 1987. In addition, a long-range program to improve maternal and neonatal care, which addressed issues of health care delivery and referral on a national scale, was approved in 1987. The government in 1988 upgraded its nutrition policy-making capacity by creating the National Nutrition Council, but planning and implementation of specific programs remained insufficient. Other programs with nutrition implications include food-for-work, "vulnerable-group feeding," and vitamin A distribution programs.

Alternative systems of medicine, including the traditional Hindu *ayurvedic* medical system based largely on homeopathy and naturopathy, the Muslim *unani* (so-called "Greek" medicine) herbal medical practice, and Western allopathic medicine were available. For most villagers, the most accessible medical practitioner was the village curer (*kobiraj*). It is estimated that 70 percent of the rural population did not have access to modern medical facilities in the late 1980s.

## **Health Care Facilities**

The Ministry of Health and Family Planning was responsible for developing, coordinating, and implementing the national health and mother-and-child health care programs. Population control also was within the purview of the ministry (see Population Control, this ch.). The government's policy objectives in the health care sector were to provide a minimum level of health care services for all, primarily through the construction of health facilities in rural areas and the training of health care workers. The strategy of



*A rural family planning center  
Courtesy Bangladesh Ministry of Information  
An operating table at a  
voluntary sterilization clinic in Sylhet  
Courtesy Siria Lopez*

universal health care by the year 2000 had become accepted, and government efforts toward infrastructure development included the widespread construction of rural hospitals, dispensaries, and clinics for outpatient care. Program implementation, however, was limited by severe financial constraints, insufficient program management and supervision, personnel shortages, inadequate staff performance, and insufficient numbers of buildings, equipment, and supplies.

In the late 1980s, government health care facilities in rural areas consisted of subdistrict health centers, union-level health and family welfare centers, and rural dispensaries. A subdistrict health center in the mid-1980s typically had a thirty-one-bed hospital, an outpatient service, and a home-service unit staffed with field workers.

Some of the services, however, were largely nonoperative because of staffing problems and a lack of support services. Health services in urban areas also were inadequate, and their coverage seemed to be deteriorating. In many urban areas, nongovernment organizations provide the bulk of urban health care services. Programming and priorities of the nongovernment organizations were at best loosely coordinated.

A union-level health and family welfare center provided the first contact between the people and the health care system and was the nucleus of primary health care delivery. As of 1985 there were 341 functional subdistrict health centers, 1,275 rural dispensaries (to be converted to union-level health and family welfare centers), and 1,054 union-level health and family welfare centers. The total number of hospital beds at the subdistrict level and below was 8,100.

District hospitals and some infectious-disease and specialized hospitals constituted the second level of referral for health care. In the mid-1980s, there were 14 general hospitals (with capacities ranging from 100 to 150 beds), 43 general district hospitals (50 beds each), 12 tuberculosis hospitals (20 to 120 beds each), and 1 mental hospital (400 beds). Besides these, there were thirty-eight urban outpatient clinics, forty-four tuberculosis clinics, and twenty-three school health clinics. Ten medical college hospitals and eight postgraduate specialized institutes with attached hospitals constituted the third level of health care.

In the mid-1980s, of the country's 21,637 hospital beds, about 85 percent belonged to the government health services. There was only about one hospital bed for every 3,600 people. In spite of government plans, the gap between rural and urban areas in the availability of medical facilities and personnel remained wide. During the monsoon season and other recurrent natural disasters, the already meager services for the rural population were severely disrupted.

### **Medical Education and Training**

In 1986 Bangladesh had about 16,000 physicians, 6,900 nurses, 5,200 midwives, and 1,580 "lady health visitors," all registered by the government. The annual output of new physicians (both graduate and postgraduate) and dentists, despite some annual fluctuations, helped improve health care in the 1978-86 period. In 1978 there were 822 graduates. A high of 1,848 was reached in 1982, but the number of graduates slumped to 985 in 1986.

Medical education and training was provided by ten medical colleges and eight postgraduate specialized medical institutes. One dental college, twenty-one nursing institutes, eight medical assistant training schools, and two paramedical institutes trained ancillary

medical personnel. The quality of medical education and training was considered satisfactory by observers. The Third Five-Year Plan incorporated several measures to expand facilities for the training of specialists and for in-service training of health administrators in management skills. For example, eight field-training subdistrict health complexes had been developed to impart education and training in community medicine. Schemes for improving education in indigenous systems of medicine were taken up, and their implementation was continued as the 1990s approached. The general shortage of physicians and nurses was aggravated by their emigration to the oil-rich countries of the Middle East and to the industrialized countries of the West. Immediately after independence, about 50 percent of the medical graduates sought employment abroad; this trend was later arrested, but special incentives had to be provided to keep medical professionals in the country.

### **Medicinal Drugs and Drug Policy**

The per capita consumption of Western drugs in Bangladesh was about US\$1 per year in the late 1980s. According to a government statement in 1982, although most people had no access to life-saving drugs, a large number of wasteful and undesirable medicinal products were manufactured and marketed mostly under commercial pressure. A national drug policy promulgated in 1982 was aimed at simplifying the range of drugs available and at improving the logistics of drug distribution at reasonable prices. The policy identified sixteen guidelines for the evaluation of medicinal products for the purpose of registration. The registration of more than 1,700 products was canceled and these were gradually withdrawn from use. *Unani*, *ayurvedic*, and other homeopathic medicines were also brought under this policy.

Under the new policy, in order to promote local enterprise, foreign companies were no longer allowed to manufacture antacid and vitamin preparations. The policy identified 150 essential drugs for therapeutic purposes. Attempts to increase local production of drugs continued, and the government provided Bangladeshi firms with generous industrial loans and other assistance. Some essential drugs were also being manufactured at government plants.

As the 1980s came to a close, Bangladeshi society had made some remarkable advances in social development, education, and health care. Severe national disasters, however, in addition to political discontent, contributed to the negation of any net advances. Ever optimistic, Bangladeshis continued their age-old struggle against the land and sought ways to accommodate the burgeoning society.

## *Bangladesh: A Country Study*

Nafis Ahmad's *An Economic Geography of East Pakistan*, although outdated, remains the most useful broad survey of the geography of Bangladesh. It can be supplemented by Ahmad's *A New Economic Geography of Bangladesh*, Haroun er Rashid's *An Economic Geography of Bangladesh*, and O.H.K. Spate and A.T.A. Learmonth's standard work, *India and Pakistan: A General and Regional Geography*.

The most useful sources on population are the Bangladesh government's *Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh*, *Statistical Pocketbook of Bangladesh*, and *Third Five-Year Plan, 1985-1990*, and the World Bank's *World Development Report* on Bangladesh.

Despite a general dearth of writing on Islam in Bangladesh, works worth considering include Rafiuddin Ahmed's *Islam in Bangladesh* and *Essays on the Muslims of Bengal*. Peter J. Bertocci's "Bangladesh: Composite Cultural Identity and Modernization in a Muslim-Majority State" is also helpful.

The standard work on the Bangladeshi social system is A.K. Nazmul Karim's *The Dynamics of Bangladesh Society*. Mohammad Afsaruddin's *Rural Life in East Pakistan* provides insight into rural social dynamics. Much of this book remains relevant to the changing society of Bangladesh. A collection of readings, edited by Robert D. Stevens, Hamzi Alavi, and Peter J. Bertocci, *Rural Development in Bangladesh and Pakistan*, examines changes in rural society. A.K.M. Aminul Islam's *A Bangladesh Village* is a study of change and tension in a village society in the process of transformation.

Shamsul Huque's *Education in Bangladesh* briefly reviews education issues. *Disaster in Bangladesh*, edited by Lincoln C. Chen, deals with several health, nutrition, and work force issues. *Family Planning Program in Bangladesh*, published by the Ministry of Health and Family Planning, is a useful review of family planning initiatives and programs. The annual *Bibliography of Asian Studies*, published by the Association for Asian Studies, has entries for numerous useful studies on Bangladesh since independence. *Bangladesh: A Select Bibliography of English Language Periodical Literature, 1971-1986* by Joyce L. and Enayetur Rahim provides a comprehensive survey of periodical literature since independence. (For further information and complete citations, see Bibliography.)