

Bangladeshi Immigrants in Buffalo



Please note that this is a very basic guide, and these facts will not be applicable to all Bangladeshi-Americans you meet.

A Few Facts about Bangladesh

The People's Republic of Bangladesh borders India, Burma (also known as Myanmar), and the Bay of Bengal in South Asia. Bangladesh derives its name from the words *Bangla* and *Desh*, loosely translated as 'the land where Bangla is spoken'.¹ A densely populated country, Bangladesh is home to an estimated 168,957,745 people, living on an area of 148,460 square kilometers, or 56,977 sq. miles (the size of Iowa).² More than 98% of Bangladeshis speak Bangla (also known as Bengali), and approximately 89% practice Islam. Some Bangladeshis (about 10%) practice Hinduism.³

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Bangladesh only recently won independence. Before colonial rule ended in 1947, Bangladesh was part of British India, referred to as the East Bengal Province. During decolonization, local officials partitioned Britain's territorial holdings, creating India and Pakistan. Despite being separated by more than 1,000 miles, Pakistan gained control over the East Bengal Province and renamed it East Pakistan.

Between 1947 and 1971, economic and political tensions frayed relations between East and West Pakistan. West Pakistan served as the seat of government and enjoyed almost unilateral control over the nation's financial and military resources. The Bengali people of East Pakistan, led by the Awami League, demanded greater self-determination, staging rallies and other acts of civil disobedience in protest of West Pakistan policies. In the 1970 elections, the people of East Pakistan voted Awami League leaders into office, but West Pakistani officials disputed the elections, arrested League leaders, and executed Bengali dissenters.

In 1971, the Bengali of East Pakistan waged a war of liberation against West Pakistan. With the military support of India, the Awami League and local militias defeated West Pakistan, but the war cost at least 300,000 Bangladeshi civilians their lives. Awami League leader Sheikh Mujibur declared Bangladesh's independence in January 1972 and served as the nation's first prime minister, but his time as leader was short-lived. Bangladeshi military officials assassinated Mujibur in 1975.⁴

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Bangladeshis today continue to fight for democracy despite facing serious social, political, and environmental challenges. After 15 years of military control, the country became a parliamentary republic in 1990.⁵ Despite persistent elections and universal suffrage, Bangladesh ranks poorly on *The Economist's* Democratic Index on the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture.⁶ In recent years, state leaders have curbed population growth and expanded education, but the country still struggles with pervasive poverty, natural disasters like tsunamis and flooding, and growing religious extremism.⁷

Bangladeshi Immigrants in the United States

In the last thirty-five years, Bangladeshis have been the fastest growing Asian American population in the United States. In 1980, there were an estimated 5,000 Bangladeshis in the United States. By 2014, the population had grown to 277,000.⁸ Large Bangladeshi communities exist in Washington, D.C., Detroit, and

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Los Angeles. The largest enclave, however, resides in New York City, where an estimated 76,000 Bangladeshis have settled.⁹

The majority of Bangladeshi immigrants have enjoyed a clear path to U.S. citizenship. Many Bangladeshis entered the U.S. with visas acquired through the green card lottery system, which are offered to individuals from countries with low immigration rates to the U.S.¹⁰ A smaller number qualified as refugees based on natural disasters or persecution (religious or political) in Bangladesh.¹¹ Approximately 68% of Bangladeshis in the U.S. are foreign-born, and 51% of that population have naturalized as U.S. citizens.¹² The other 32% of the Bangladeshi population was born in the U.S., earning citizenship by birthright. 185,370 of the 277,000 Bangladeshis in the U.S. (67%) are currently citizens of the United States.

Bangladeshi Immigrants in Buffalo

Bangladeshi immigrants have relocated to Buffalo, New York, at a pace that has surprised many. The size of Buffalo's Bangladeshi population is unknown. The U.S. Census estimates that 316 Bangladeshis live in Buffalo, but Liberty Yellow Taxi alone employs about 367. Some community leaders claim there are more than 1000.¹³ Foyzor Rahman, who came to Buffalo after living in various states, says that there were very few Bangladeshis in Buffalo until 2006, when a couple of families trickled in from Long Island. In 2012, more Bangladeshis resettled from New York City, as well as from other states like Michigan and Massachusetts.¹⁴ Today, Bangladeshis in Buffalo are ubiquitous, says Karim, a Bangladeshi transplant and owner of the Street Café and Halal Market on Main Street. "You never used to see a Bangladeshi when you walked in Buffalo," he explained, "Now, on every street, every store I go into, there is someone who is Bangladeshi!"¹⁵

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Most Bangladeshis cite economic forces as the reason for the growth of their community in Buffalo. Mahbubul Haq, founder and director of the Bangladesh Society of Buffalo, explains that the cost of living, lack of job opportunities, and cramped lifestyle in other large cities have motivated families to seek work and homes elsewhere.¹⁶ "I had to work two jobs, day and night, to be able to pay my mortgage...and there was never time to spend with my family," explained one Bangladeshi man interviewed by the *Buffalo News*. He relocated from New York City to Buffalo because housing costs were far lower and the quality of life far higher.¹⁷

Other Bangladeshis believe that immigrants come to Buffalo for cultural reasons. Dr. Khalid Qazi (who is familiar with the Bangladeshi community through mosque activities) cites the

September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center as a rationale for many families to leave New York City, fearing that anti-Muslim sentiment might result in reprisals.¹⁸ Pulling Bangladeshis to Buffalo is the network of ten mosques in the city. *Buffalo News* reporter Emma Sapon explains that Bangladeshi families “buy houses around existing mosques.” Islamic institutions like the Masjid Zakaria mosque on Sobieski Street in the Broadway-Fillmore area have attracted Bangladeshis and spurred resettlement.¹⁹

Since arriving in Buffalo, Bangladeshi immigrants have established vibrant communities across the East Side. *The Buffalo News* reports that Bangladeshi families frequently rent or purchase homes in neighborhoods like Broadway-Fillmore, Genesee-Moselle, Fillmore-Leroy and Kensington.²⁰ In turn, Bangladeshi resettlement has driven prices up in some of these neighborhoods, prompting Haq to warn recent arrivals about predatory landlords and property sellers. Dilapidated homes are being sold above their actual value, he explains, and require considerable investment to meet housing codes and remain habitable. He counsels Bangladeshi immigrants to choose housing wisely.²¹

Still, Haq remains optimistic about Bangladeshi resettlement in Western New York, describing Buffalo as a “mini Bangladesh.” In 2013, he created the Bangladesh Society of Buffalo to foster a sense of community and cultural identity among Bangladeshi immigrants in Buffalo. The Bangladeshi Society also plays an important political role, serving as a community liaison with municipal agencies and advocating for resources and reform.²² They have contributed to multi-group solidarity efforts, including rallies and petitions, to insist that Buffalo welcome all religious and ethnic groups.²³

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Cultural Attributes

Religious Traditions and Social Values

Most Bangladeshi Americans are Muslim, primarily belonging to the Sunni sect, though a small segment of the population identifies as Hindu, Christians, or non-religious (secularist).²⁴ In Buffalo, Bangladeshi communities are devoutly Muslim, and have begun to pool their resources to create new religious institutions to accommodate their growing population. They have founded three new mosques, including the Buffalo Islamic Cultural Center on Walden Avenue, a multigenerational community center where Bangladeshis and others can access religious, educational, and recreational services.²⁵

Family Structures

Bangladeshis value family, and each household tends to live in close proximity to relatives. The strength of Bangladeshi communities in the U.S. owes in large part to these familial loyalties. As in other communities, however, family structure can create internal tensions. According to the *New York Times*, many Bangladeshis in New York City suffer from isolation and poverty. Some immigrant families who expected to live the “American Dream” of prosperity have found the social and economic transition to U.S. society tumultuous. Bangladeshi women have struggled especially. In traditional Bangladeshi homes, patriarchal norms govern housework, recreation, and household decision-making. Limited English proficiency and arranged marriages serve as additional barriers to social inclusion and civic participation in the U.S. Many Bangladeshi American women report that they suffer acculturative stress due to gender-based inequality.²⁶

Language and Education

According to Nadia Nashir, Assistant Superintendent of Multilingual Education for the Buffalo Public Schools, a growing number of Bengali-speaking students are enrolled in the Buffalo Public Schools each year.²⁷ In fact, as of 2015, Bangla is the seventh most spoken language in the school district.²⁸

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While Bangladeshi Americans nationwide enjoy high levels of educational attainment, language barriers have presented some difficulties for Bangladeshi students in Buffalo.²⁹ Some Bangladeshi students may have learned English before entering Buffalo public schools, because English and Bangla are taught in Bangladesh. However, Bangladesh suffers from poverty, so many children drop out of school after a few years due to economic or familial constraints, particularly in rural settings. Moreover, Bangladesh’s school system struggles with teacher absence and variable teacher quality.³⁰ Recent arrivals in Buffalo may have had little access to education.

Despite these challenges, Bangladeshi immigrants have created an informal cultural and Bangla-language school that meets in the Broadway Market on Saturdays. This group provides an opportunity for children and their families to retain a sense of shared cultural identity while preserving fluency in the Bangla language.

Employment Skills and Experiences

Bangladeshi Americans in Buffalo actively contribute to the local economy. Bangladeshis are represented in various local professions, including professors, psychiatrists, medical practitioners, engineers, and small business owners. Bangladeshi entrepreneurs have opened grocery stores, restaurants, a hardware shop, and even a language school that teaches Bangladeshi children every Saturday. A number of Bangladeshis who recently arrived from New York City have found work as Buffalo cab drivers. Liberty Yellow Taxi, for example, has grown

533% since in the past five years. What was once a fleet of 75 vehicles has grown to 400, and 91% of the owners and operators of the taxis are Bangladeshis.³¹

To highlight Bangladeshi entrepreneurialism, Emma Sapong of *The Buffalo News* profiled Atiqur Rahman, a post office administrator and small business owner. Rahman, an accountant by trade, has recently opened an accounting firm and a hardware store on the east side of Buffalo. Rahman helps Bangladeshis in Buffalo file their taxes, develop business plans, create corporations, and acquire city and state permits, among other things. “The

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Bangladeshi community is growing really fast and many people are trying to figure out business ideas,” he explained, “So more people are stopping by my office to start something.”³²

A Few Notes on Cultural Norms

While Bangladeshis are a diverse population, it can be helpful to account for some cultural norms and expectations among Bangladeshis in Buffalo:

- Muslim Bangladeshis may not drink alcohol or consume pork.
- Hindu Bangladeshis will avoid beef.
- Bangladeshis emphasize cleanliness, especially near sacred texts or locations, and shoes are removed in mosque or temple.
- In general, Bangladeshis might not smile or make direct eye contact. Rather than interpreting this as an unfriendly gesture, it should be understood that a formal manner confers respect and demonstrates maturity.
- Regarding personal appearance, men generally adopt Western clothing styles; women commonly wear a brightly-colored *saree*, a long piece of fabric that is wrapped in various ways to serve as a dress and covering.
- While this norm is changing, Bangladeshis customarily live in multigenerational homes and visit relatives frequently.
- Most Bangladeshis avoid arriving early or late to an event, and are unlikely to decline an invitation even when they cannot attend.³³

Resettlement Experiences

Bangladeshis in Buffalo have proven a major force in the revitalization of neighborhoods on the east side of Buffalo. As Emma Sapong reports, Bangladeshis transform one block at a time, purchasing properties ravaged by poverty and blight and restoring both the houses and communities around them. Within years of resettlement, Bangladeshis have rebuilt homes, opened stores, and founded mosques.

Local “founders” like Nazmal Bhuiyan have shared the blueprint to success in Buffalo with Bangladeshi family and friends in New York City, spurring resettlement since 2005. The strategy has been to purchase houses on the cheap at the Buffalo tax foreclosure auction and to renovate them until they become suitable “homes.” Bhuiyan, for example, used his wages as a New York City tax driver to buy a home on Woltz Avenue for \$4,500. He then spread the word, convincing others – an estimated 200 families – to move to Buffalo. Indeed, Bangladeshis were becoming homeowners for a fraction of the price it cost them to rent apartments in New York City.³⁴

Many Bangladeshis have transformed fixer-uppers into rental properties, and changed themselves from financially strapped tenants to enterprising landlords. Saleen Khan, for example, struggled to make ends meet as a taxi driver in New York City. Exorbitant rent prices forced him and his wife to share a two-bedroom apartment with another couple. In Buffalo, however, Khan bought and restored a home large enough to rent out to others. In an interview with Emma Sapong, Khan reflected proudly on his journey, “It’s funny because I didn’t have the money to be a tenant in New York City, but in Buffalo I’m a landlord.”³⁵

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Most Bangladeshi praise Buffalo, but some worry that social and religious intolerance is growing. Farhana Rahman, a sophomore at Olmsted High School, has described her experience in Buffalo’s public schools enjoyable and academically rigorous.³⁶ Her sister, Farzana Sume, also enjoys Buffalo and has not experienced many barriers to social integration.³⁷ However, a number of men in the mosque have expressed concern about anti-Muslim rhetoric on local talk shows. Like members of the Bangladeshi Society of Buffalo, they hope to raise awareness about diverse religious and ethnic groups and spread a message of tolerance.

Local Resources

WNY Muslim Association

4011 Bailey Ave.
Buffalo, NY 14226

Muslim Public Affairs Council of WNY

Contact: Dr. Khalid Qazi
6343 Transit Road Suite 1
Depew, NY 14043
Phone: (716) 683-1840
kqazi@mpac.org

Access of WNY

609 Ridge Rd.
2nd Floor
Lackawanna, NY 14218

International Institute of Buffalo

864 Delaware Ave.
Buffalo, NY 14209
iib@iibuff.org
Phone: (716) 883-1900

Catholic Charities

20 Herkimer St.
Buffalo, NY 14213
Phone: (716) 842-0270

Jewish Family Services

70 Barker St.
Buffalo, NY 14209
Phone: (716) 883-1914

Jericho Road Community Health Center

184 Barton St.
Buffalo, NY 14213
Phone: (716)-348-3000

Coordinated Refugee/Asylee Legal Services (The CRLS Project)

237 Main St.
Suite 1015
Buffalo, NY 14203
Phone: (716) 853-3087

Street Café and Halal Foods

2614 Main St.
Buffalo, NY 14214
Parkside, Main Street
Phone: (716) 205-7142

Bangla Bazaar (grocery)

2290 Fillmore Ave.
Buffalo, NY 14214
Phone: (716) 834-1021

Madina Pharmacy

1105 Broadway St.
Buffalo, NY 14212
Phone: (716) 424-2433

Madina Accounting

178 Stanislaus St.
Buffalo, New York 14212
Phone: (716) 984-0445

Bangladesh Community at Buffalo Facebook Page

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Bangladesh-Community-At-Buffalo/188589184486364>

Partnership for the Public Good

www.ppgbuffalo.org

617 Main St., Suite 300, Buffalo NY 14203

¹ Michael S. Harris and Elizabeth Lloyd, "Bangladesh," in Carol R. Ember and Melvin Ember, eds., *Countries and Their Cultures* (New York: Macmillan, 2001), 167.

² "South Asia: Bangladesh." The World Factbook. Accessed May 17, 2016. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/print_bg.html; See also "Bangladesh." UNdata: A World of Information. November 15, 2015. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Bangladesh>.

³ "South Asia: Bangladesh." The World Factbook. Accessed May 17, 2016. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/print_bg.html

⁴ For more on the political history of Bangladesh, see Harris and Lloyd, "Bangladesh," 168-169.

⁵ "South Asia: Bangladesh." The World Factbook. Accessed May 17, 2016. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/print_bg.html

⁶ "Democracy Index 2015: Democracy in an Age of Anxiety." The Economist. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=EIU-Democracy-Index-2015.pdf&mode=wp&campaignid=DemocracyIndex2015>.

⁷ Nadia Murshid and Arup Sanyal, "What Was Shahbag Up Against?" *Economic & Political Weekly* (June 2013).

⁸ "The Bangladeshi Diaspora in the United States." Migration Policy Institute. July 2014. Accessed May 17, 2016. file:///C:/Users/steve/Downloads/RAD-Bangladesh (1).pdf.

⁹ "The Bangladeshi Diaspora in the United States." Migration Policy Institute. July 2014. Accessed May 17, 2016. file:///C:/Users/steve/Downloads/RAD-Bangladesh (1).pdf.

¹⁰ Emma Sapong, "Bangladeshis Transforming Buffalo, One Block at a Time." *The Buffalo News*, December 12, 2015. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/east-side/bangladeshis-transforming-buffalo-one-block-at-a-time-20151212>.

¹¹ For more on South Asian refugees, see "2015 UNHCR Subregional Operations Profile - South-East Asia." UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e487546.html>.

¹² "The Bangladeshi Diaspora in the United States." Migration Policy Institute. July 2014. Accessed May 17, 2016. file:///C:/Users/steve/Downloads/RAD-Bangladesh (1).pdf.

¹³ Emma Sapong, "Bangladeshis Transforming Buffalo, One Block at a Time." *The Buffalo News*, December 12, 2015. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/east-side/bangladeshis-transforming-buffalo-one-block-at-a-time-20151212>.

¹⁴ Foyzor Rahman, "Bangladeshi Immigrants in Buffalo." Interview by author.

¹⁵ Karim, "Bangladeshi Immigrants in Buffalo." Interview by author.

¹⁶ Mahbubul Haq, "Bangladeshi Immigrants in Buffalo." Interview by author.

¹⁷ Emma Sapong, "Bangladeshis Transforming Buffalo, One Block at a Time." *The Buffalo News*, December 12, 2015. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/east-side/bangladeshis-transforming-buffalo-one-block-at-a-time-20151212>.

¹⁸ Khalid Qazi, "Bangladeshi Immigrants in Buffalo." Interview by author.

¹⁹ Emma Sapon, "Bangladeshis Transforming Buffalo, One Block at a Time." *The Buffalo News*, December 12, 2015. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/east-side/bangladeshis-transforming-buffalo-one-block-at-a-time-20151212>.

²⁰ Emma Sapon, "Bangladeshis Transforming Buffalo, One Block at a Time." *The Buffalo News*, December 12, 2015. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/east-side/bangladeshis-transforming-buffalo-one-block-at-a-time-20151212>.

²¹ Mahbubul Haq, "Bangladeshi Immigrants in Buffalo." Interview by author.

²² Mahbubul Haq, "Bangladeshi Immigrants in Buffalo." Interview by author.

²³ An example of the cultural institutions evolving in Buffalo, see "Bangladesh Community at Buffalo." Facebook. Accessed May 17, 2016. https://www.facebook.com/Bangladesh-Community-At-Buffero-188589184486364/info?tab=page_info.

²⁴ "South Asia: Bangladesh." The World Factbook. Accessed May 17, 2016. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/print_bg.html

²⁵ Emma Sapon, "Bangladeshis Transforming Buffalo, One Block at a Time." *The Buffalo News*, December 12, 2015. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/east-side/bangladeshis-transforming-buffalo-one-block-at-a-time-20151212>.

²⁶ Kirk Semple, "Bangladeshi Women, Isolated in New York City, Need More Support, Advocates Say." *The New York Times*, August 13, 2015. Accessed May 17, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/nyregion/bangladeshi-women-isolated-in-new-york-city-need-more-support-advocates-say.html?_r=0.

²⁷ Nadia Nashir, "Bangladeshi Immigrants in Buffalo." Interview by author.

²⁸ Emma Sapon, "Bangladeshis Transforming Buffalo, One Block at a Time." *The Buffalo News*, December 12, 2015. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/east-side/bangladeshis-transforming-buffalo-one-block-at-a-time-20151212>.

²⁹ The Migration Policy Institute notes that a greater percentage of Bangladeshis over 25 years of age have Bachelor's and advanced degrees than the general U.S. population. 28% have a bachelor's degree and 25% have advanced degrees, whereas in the U.S. only 20% of people over 25 have a Bachelor's and only 11% have advanced degrees. "The Bangladeshi Diaspora in the United States." Migration Policy Institute. July 2014. Accessed May 17, 2016. [file:///C:/Users/steve/Downloads/RAD-Bangladesh \(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/steve/Downloads/RAD-Bangladesh%20(1).pdf).

³⁰ "2014 Human Development Report." United Nations Development Programme. July 24, 2014. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/hdr/2014-human-development-report.html>.

³¹ Emma Sapon, "Bangladeshis Transforming Buffalo, One Block at a Time." *The Buffalo News*, December 12, 2015. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/east-side/bangladeshis-transforming-buffalo-one-block-at-a-time-20151212>.

³² Emma Sapon, "Biz Talk: East Side Entrepreneur Helps Bangladeshi Immigrants Get Settled in Buffalo," *The Buffalo News*, February 21, 2016. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/east-side/bangladeshis-transforming-buffalo-one-block-at-a-time-20151212>.

³³ "South Asia: Bangladesh." The World Factbook. Accessed May 17, 2016. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/print_bg.html

³⁴ Emma Sapon, "Bangladeshis Transforming Buffalo, One Block at a Time." *The Buffalo News*, December 12, 2015. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/east-side/bangladeshis-transforming-buffalo-one-block-at-a-time-20151212>.

³⁵ Emma Sapon, "Bangladeshis Transforming Buffalo, One Block at a Time." *The Buffalo News*, December 12, 2015. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/east-side/bangladeshis-transforming-buffalo-one-block-at-a-time-20151212>.

³⁶ Farhana Rahman, "Bangladeshi Immigrants in Buffalo." Interview by author.

³⁷ Farzana Sume, "Bangladeshi Immigrants in Buffalo." Interview by author.