

# Asian Language & Culture Awareness

## Bengali Language & Culture



*New York State Asian Languages Bilingual/ESL  
Technical Assistance Center  
(ALBETAC)*



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## BENGALI

The People's Republic of Bangladesh is located in South Asia. It is situated between India and Myanmar (Burma) with the Bay of Bengal at its southern border.

The official languages of Bangladesh include Bengali, also known as Bangla, and English. Bengali also has official language status in India and is spoken by 8.1% of the population, primarily in the Indian state of West Bengal

Please see the following chart for pertinent information on the country of Bangladesh.



<b>FACTS ON BANGLADESH</b> (from the CIA World Factbook) <a href="https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/">https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/</a>	
<b>Area</b>	143,998 sq. km.
<b>Population</b>	156,050,883 (July 2009 est.)
<b>Capital</b>	Dhaka
<b>Administrative Divisions</b>	6 divisions
<b>Chief of State</b>	Zillur Rahman, President
<b>Political System</b>	Parliamentary Democracy
<b>Exchange Rate</b>	69.047 taka (BDT) = 1 U.S. dollar (2009 est.)
<b>GDP* (per capita)</b>	\$1,600 (2009 est.)
<b>Flag</b>	

***Note to Teachers:***  
***The word Bangladesh means the country (desh) of the Bengali language (Bangla). Most immigrants who speak Bengali are from Bangladesh.***

\* *Gross Domestic Product*

To learn more about Bangladesh, you may visit the following website:

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>

*The CIA World Factbook*

## EDUCATION

EDUCATION AND LITERACY RATES IN BANGLADESH				
Country	Years of Compulsory Schooling	Literacy Rate (Age 15 and over can read and write)		
		Total %	Male	Female
Bangladesh	5 years	47.9%	54.0%	41.4% (2001 Census)

### SOURCES:

- Statistics for the Literacy Rates are from the CIA's *The World Factbook*.  
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2103.html>
- Statistics for Compulsory Schooling are from the *Commonwealth of Nations* website.  
<http://www.commonwealth-of-nations.org/Bangladesh/Education>

**Note to Teachers:** *The education system in Bangladesh is divided into four levels-*

- *Primary - Grades 1 through 5*
- *Secondary - Grades 6 through 10*
- *Higher Secondary - Grades 11 through 12*
- *Tertiary - Beyond Grade 12*

## DEMOGRAPHICS

- **Bengali Speaking Population in the USA, NYS and NYC**

### ❖ Facts and Figures

BENGALI SPEAKING POPULATION IN THE UNITED STATES AND NEW YORK STATE <sup>1</sup>	
	<i>Number of people (5 years and older) who speak Bengali at home</i>
United States	190,090
New York State	73,166

*According to the 2008-2009 NYC BESIS\*, there are 4,548 ELLs whose native language is Bengali. These students comprise 3.0% of New York City's total ELL population of 149,225 students.<sup>2</sup>*

*\*Bilingual Education Student Information Survey*

### SOURCES

1. U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2008 American Community Survey
2. The 2008-2009 Demographics of New York City's English Language Learners, The Chief Achievement Office-Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners, New York City Department of Education, Fall 2009

## BENGALI LANGUAGE AND WRITING

The Bengali language, also known as Bangla, is a member of the Indo-European language family. There are many dialects of the Bengali language. Please see the following chart for the four main dialects and the areas in which they are spoken.

DIALECTS OF THE BENGALI LANGUAGE	
Bengali Dialect	Spoken in:
Radha	West Bengal, India
Pundra or Varendra	Northern parts of West Bengal, Bangladesh
Kamrupa	Northeastern Bangladesh
Bangla	All other parts of Bangladesh

There are two standard written forms of Bengali:

- Shadhubasha - an elegant and genteel form of writing used in literary works, and
- Chalitbhasa - a more current style of writing that reflects colloquial language.

Today, both spoken and written Bengali are modeled on Chalitbhasa and are used in daily communication. Most Bengali speakers are fluent in Chalitbhasa as well as the regional

dialect of the community in which they live. It is important to note that Chalitbhasa is also the form of the Bengali language used in the media.

Some interesting features of the Bengali language are:

- The Bengali alphabet is a syllabic alphabet that uses symbols for consonants and vowels and diacritic marks.
- The Bengali alphabet consists of eleven vowels, thirty-five consonants and eleven vowel diacritics.
- Bengali is written from left to right and from top to bottom.
- There is no differentiation between upper and lowercase.

***Note to Teachers: Bengali word order follows the pattern of subject/object/verb and the negative is placed at the end of the sentence. Please be aware that these linguistic differences may cause confusion for your Bengali students who are learning English.***

### SOURCES:

- "Bengali language." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2010. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 08 Feb. 2010 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/60785/Bengali-language>>.
- "Bengali Alphabet." *Omniglot: Writing Systems and Languages of the World*. 1998-2010. 08 Feb. 2010 <<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/bengali.htm>>

The following chart provides some useful phrases in Bengali that will help create a welcoming and supportive environment for your Bengali English language learners.

USEFUL PHRASES FOR THE CLASSROOM		
English	Pronunciation	Bengali (Writing)
Hello!	Assalamualikum	আসসালামু আলাইকুম
My name is ...	Amar nam...	আমার নাম
What is your name?	Apnar nam ki	আপনার নাম কি?
How are you?	Kemon achen / acho?	কেমন আছেন?
Fine. (answer to "How are you?")	Bhalo	ভাল
Thank you.	Dhonyyobad	ধন্যবাদ
You're welcome. (answer to "thank you")	N/A Welcome is OK	আপনাকে স্বাগতম
Welcome. (as a greeting)	N/A Welcome is OK	স্বাগতম
Good-bye.	Biday / Khoda-Hafiz	বিদায়/ খোদা হাফেজ
Please sit down.	Doya kore boshun / bosho	দয়া করে বসুন
Please stand up.	Doya kore daran / darao	দয়া করে দাঁড়ান
Let's begin.	Shuru kora jak	শুরু করা যাক
Good.	Bhalo	ভাল
Very good.	Khuub Bhalo	খুব ভাল
Try again.	Abar chesta korun/ koro	আবার চেষ্টা করুন
This is the homework.	Eta barir kaj	এটা বাড়ির কাজ
Please open your book.	Doya kore boi kholo	দয়া করে বই খুলুন
Do you understand?	Bujhte parchen / parcho?	আপনি কি বুঝেছেন?

To learn more about the Bengali language, you may visit the following website:

<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/bengali.htm>

*Omniglot: Writing Systems and Languages of the World*



## BENGALI BILINGUAL PROGRAMS IN NEW YORK CITY

- *John Adams High School*



*John Adams High School\**

Over the past few years, a large number of Bengali immigrants have relocated to the Ozone Park area of Queens due to changes in the economic environment and property value factors. To respond to the needs of this new community, John Adams High School has established a Bengali bilingual program, staffed by four dedicated Bengali bilingual teachers, to educate these youngsters who have relocated with their families. One hundred fifty (150) students are currently enrolled in the bilingual program.

<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/27/Q480/default.htm>

The bilingual program provides instruction in native language arts, English language arts, English as a second language, mathematics, science and social studies. Native language arts instruction is differentiated to address students' needs. Instructional materials and resources from Bangladesh are adapted and utilized in the classroom to continue to develop students' proficiency in the Bengali language. The writing process is taught in both the Bengali and English language arts classes. The intent is to help students bridge the language gap and transfer their native language knowledge and skills to English.

The subject areas of Mathematics, Living Environment and Global History are taught in English with native language support. Teachers utilize the English-Bengali subject area glossaries, as well as bilingual and native language dictionaries, to help students comprehend the new subject area material. After school tutoring programs in Global History and Living Environment provide additional support for students. In addition, The South Asian Club provides students with the opportunity to socialize with one another and learn together.



*Bengali Parent Conference*

[http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/uploads/005/578/Bengali\\_Parent\\_Involvement.pdf](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/uploads/005/578/Bengali_Parent_Involvement.pdf)

\*Author: Xbxg 32000

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## THE CULTURE

- *Religion*

The religions practiced in Bangladesh include Islam, Hindu, Christianity, Buddhism and tribal religions. Islam, recognized as the state religion in June of 1988, is followed by 89.5% of the population. Most Muslims are Sunnis; however, there is a small community of Shia Muslims in Bangladesh. Followers of the Hindu religion comprise 9.6% of the population, while the remaining 0.9 % is comprised of Buddhists, Christians and followers of various tribal religions.



*The Star Mosque\**

*Dhakeshwari Temple\*\**



To learn more about religion in Bangladesh, you may visit the following website:

<http://leweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

*A Country Study: Bangladesh (Scroll down the list to Chapter 2 and select Religion.)*

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>

*The CIA World Factbook: Bangladesh-Religion*

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*\*\*Author: Original uploader was Ragib at bn.wikipedia (<http://bn.wikipedia.org>)*

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- **Family**

Here are some interesting facts about family life in Bangladesh

- The extended family, *chula*, is the basic social unit in rural Bangladesh.
- Members of the extended family work jointly owned lands.
- Food is prepared and shared with all extended family members, usually from a common kitchen.
- One or more of the extended family units form a *bari*.
- Married sons usually live in their father's household. However, when the father dies, the sons separate and form their own households within the *bari*.
- Married sons submit to their father's authority, while daughters submit to the mother-in-law's authority.

To learn more about the Bengali family, you may visit the following websites:

<http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html>

*A Country Study: Bangladesh*

<http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Bangladesh.html>

*Countries and Their Cultures: Bangladesh*

- **Customs and Manners**

- Bengali speaking people share a deep-rooted admiration for their linguistic and cultural heritage.
- The Bengali people are renowned for their hospitality, political awareness, love for discussion (*adda*) and civic engagement and their admiration and love of poetry.
- Among the rest of South Asians, Bengalis are fondly mentioned for their love of fish and rice.
- The customary greeting for Muslims is *asalamu alaikum* and the response is *wa alaikum salam*.
- The Bengali people respect their elders for their age and wisdom.
- It is expected that the eldest or most senior male will make decisions that are in the best interest of the group in both family and business matters.
- Men and women do not shake hands with one another.

To learn more about the Bengali customs and manners, you may visit the following websites:

<http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Bangladesh.html>

*Countries and Their Cultures*

<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/bangladesh.html>

*Kwintessential*

- **Cultural Dos and Don'ts**

- ❖ **Do...**

- ...bring pastries or candy, especially chocolates, when visiting someone's home.
- ...offer your gift with two hands.

- ...take a seat when invited to do so because it is considered improper for a visitor to sit on the floor or ground. If a chair is not available, a low stool or bamboo mat will be provided by the host.
- ...pass dishes, eat and drink with the right hand because the left hand is considered unclean.

### ❖ Don't

- ...give money as a gift
- ...open a gift in front of the giver because it is considered bad manners to do so.
- ... start to eat until the eldest person at the table begins eating.
- ...kiss or hug in public.

### • Calendar

Both the Gregorian and the Bengali calendar are used in Bangladesh. The Bengali Calendar is a solar calendar. It is comprised of twelve months organized into six seasons. The Bengali calendar is used to mark the holidays that are specific to the Bengali culture as well as the beginning and ending dates of the six seasons. Some interesting facts about this calendar follow.

- The Bengali New Year, *Poyela Boishakh*, is celebrated on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April.
- The six seasons of the Bengali year are: Summer, Rainy or Monsoon, Autumn, Dry, Winter and Spring.
- The Bengali day begins and ends at sunrise. There are seven days in a week and three hundred sixty five days in a year. The first five months of the year are comprised of thirty one days, while the remaining seven months are comprised of thirty days.
- An additional day is added to the month of *Falgun* (February-March) in each leap year of the Gregorian calendar.

To learn more about the Bengali calendar, you may visit the following website:

[http://www.mukto-mona.com/Special\\_Event/\\_bengali\\_calendar.htm](http://www.mukto-mona.com/Special_Event/_bengali_calendar.htm)

*The Bengali Calendar: A proud possession*

### • Holidays

Many national and religious holidays are celebrated in Bangladesh. The following chart provides information on the major national and religious holidays.

HOLIDAYS CELEBRATED IN BANGLADESH		
Holiday	Date	Significance
Poyela Boishakh New Year's Day	April 14	Celebrates the first day of the new year according to the Bengali calendar.
National Mourning Day	February 21	Commemorates those who gave their lives to establish Bangla as a state language of Pakistan during the Language Movement of 1952.
Independence Day	March 26	Celebrates Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan

HOLIDAYS CELEBRATED IN BANGLADESH		
Holiday	Date	Significance
May Day	May 1	Honors workers
Rabindra & Nazrul Jayanti	May	Festival honoring the Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, who also wrote the Bengali national anthem, and the National Poet of Bangladesh, Kazi Nazrul Islam
Muharram	December 7, 2010	The Islamic New Year
Mawlid Al Nabi	February 15, 2011	The Prophet Muhammad's Birthday
Ramadan	August 1, 2011	Ramadan, the month of fasting, begins
Eid al-Fitr	August 30, 2011	Ramadan ends
Eid al-Adha	November 6, 2011	Festival of Sacrifice
Durga Puja	September/October*	Annual festival honoring the Hindu goddess, Durga

\* Usually held during the Bengali month of Ashshin (September-October); sometimes held during the following month of Kartik (October-November.)

To learn more about Bengali holidays, you may visit the following website:

<http://www.bangladeshtourism.gov.bd/festivals1.php>

National Web Portal of Bangladesh, Tourist Toolkit: Festivals

- **Bengali Surnames**

COMMON BENGALI SURNAMES*			
Acharya	Bose	Dey	Gupta
Bagchi	Chakrabarti	Debnath	Maitra
Bandopadhyay	Chakrabarty	Dutta	Moitra
Banerjee	Chatterjee	Gangapadhyay	Mandal
Bhattacharya	Chattopadhyay	Gangopadhyay	Mondal
Basak	Das	Ganguly	Mukerji
Basu	DasGupta	Ghosh	Mukherjee
Bhattacharyya	De	Guha	Sen
Bhowmick	Deb	Guhathakurta	Sett

\*SOURCE: <http://hearnames.com/name-categories/bengali-hindu-names/bengali-surnames.html>  
HearNames.com

- ***Cuisine of Bangladesh***

The Bengali people are noted for their love of food. Bengali dishes blend both sweet and spicy flavors. Meals usually consist of fish, vegetables and rice, as well as a sweet for dessert. Mustard oil is used for cooking and the spices used to flavor food include mustard, fenugreek seed, cumin seed, aniseed and black cumin seed. Some examples of Bengali cuisine are listed below.

- **Bhapa** is a main dish in which fish and vegetables are steamed with oil and spices. Fish and vegetables steamed in a banana leaf have a smoky, musty scent and flavor.



***Panta Ilish\**** - a popular dish served during *Poyela Boishakh* (the Bengali New Year) festivities

- **Ghanto** is a dish that consists of finely chopped or grated vegetables cooked with ground spices. Fish can also be added to this dish.
- **Muri** is a snack food of puffed rice.
- **Rosogolla** is a sweet dessert made from milk

***Porobarir Chamcham*** - a Bangladeshi dessert



To learn more about Bengali cuisine, you may visit the following websites:

<http://www.culturalindia.net/indian-food/bengali-cuisine.html>

*Cultural India: Bengali Food*

<http://nyasworld.blogspot.com/2010/03/bengali-cuisine.html>

*Niya's World: Bengali Cuisine*

<http://www.indobase.com/recipes/category/bengali-recipes.php>

*Indobase: Recipes*

<http://www.deshicookingrecipes.com/intro.html>

*Introduction to Bengali Cooking*

\*Author: Tahmid Munaz

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## FACTS OF INTEREST

- **Did you know that...**

➤ The longest uninterrupted natural beach in the world, Cox's Bazaar, is located on the Bay of Bengal in Bangladesh. It is 120 kilometers in length and 152 kilometers south of the city of Chittagong.



*Cox's Bazaar Beach\**

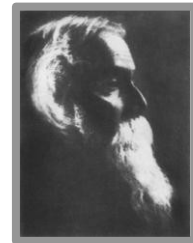
➤ The 2006 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Dr. Muhammed Yunus from Bangladesh for his pioneering work in microfinance.

➤ One of the world's most renowned Nobel Laureate Economists is Dr. Amartya Sen, a Bengali Indian citizen whose book, *Development as Freedom*, has proven a paradigm shift in thinking about human development.

➤ Bengali was made an official language of Sierra Leone in 2002 in order to honor the Bangladeshi peacekeeping force from the United Nations that was stationed there.

➤ UNESCO has declared February 21<sup>st</sup>, the official mark of the Bengali Language Movement, as International Mother Language Day.

➤ The first Asian to win a Nobel Prize was the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. He also wrote the national anthems of Bangladesh and India in the Bengali language.



*Rabindranath Tagore*

➤ The national animal of Bangladesh is the tiger.

➤ Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) was a noted Indian filmmaker who made all of his movies in Bengali. In 1992, he received an Academy Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences.

➤ The largest Mangrove Forest in the world is located in Bangladesh, at the confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna Rivers. It is part of the Sundarbans National Park and home to the Royal Bengal Tiger. It has been designated a World Heritage site by UNESCO.



*Mangrove Forest at Sundarbans National Park\*\**

For more information, you may visit the following websites:

<http://nobelprize.org/>

*Nobelprize.org: The Official Web Site of the Nobel Prize*

<http://www.pbs.org/opb/thenewheroes/meet/yunus.html>

*PBS Meet the New Heroes: Muhammad Yunus*



<http://www.satyajitray.org/>

*Life, Films and Filmmaking of Satyajit Ray*

[http://www.eoearth.org/article/Sundarbans\\_mangroves](http://www.eoearth.org/article/Sundarbans_mangroves)

*Encyclopedia of Earth*

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/798>

*World Heritage Convention: The Sundarbans*

<http://www.kolkatabirds.com/sunderbans.htm>

*Sundarbans National Park and Reserve*

<http://www.banglaembassy.com.bh/pages/Image5.htm>

*Cox's Bazaar of the Bay of Bengal*

\*Author: *Shahnoor Habib Munnum*

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\*\*Author: *V. Malik* (<http://www.flickr.com/people/46048665@N00>) from *New Delhi & Pune, India*

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

### • *Bengali Literature in English Translation*

#### ➤ Parabaas Translation

<http://www.parabaas.com/translation/>

This website features translations of literary works by famous Bengali writers. Literary genres featured include poetry, short stories, essays and memoirs. Book excerpts are featured as well.

### • *Bengali Wisdom – Proverbs and Sayings*

- A handful of love is better than an oven full of bread.
- (A) Half-truth is more dangerous than (a) falsehood.
- It is easier for the son to ask from the father, than for the father to ask from the son.
- Pity without help does little good.
- The one who does not make you happy when he arrives makes you happy when he leaves.
- The more cowherds there are, the worse the cows are looked after.
- There is no man or thing without defect, and often they have two or three of them.

For additional Bengali proverbs, you may visit the following websites:

[http://www.special-dictionary.com/proverbs/source/b/bengali\\_proverb/](http://www.special-dictionary.com/proverbs/source/b/bengali_proverb/)

*51 Bengali Proverbs*

### • *Famous Quotes*

- In the uncivilized state of affairs nobody's poor - fruits, vegetables and meats from the forest, water from the river and shade from the trees are equally available to all ... no one expects or collects more than what he or she requires ... no one's richer or poorer than the other ... Poverty results from civilization, social structure. *Bankim Chandra Chatterjee*

- The world is indeed a mixture of truth and make-believe. Discard the make-believe and take the truth. *Sri Ramakrishna*
- Literature is not the direct expression of any emotion. Emotion only supplies the occasion which makes it possible to bring forth the creative act. *Rabindranath Tagore*
- Enemies of liberty and friends of despotism have never been, and never will be, ultimately successful. *Raja Ram Mohan Roy*

For additional Bengali quotes, you may visit the following websites:

<http://bengalonline.sitemarvel.com/bangla-quotes.asp?author=RR>

*bengalonline.sitemarvel.com*

[http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/r/ramakrishna\\_2.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/r/ramakrishna_2.html)

*BrainyQuote*

### • ***Famous Bengali Americans***

- Fazlur Khan (1929-1982): Architect and structural engineer; responsible for a number of innovations in the construction of skyscrapers; designed the John Hancock Center and Willis Tower, formerly known as the Sears Tower.
- Norah Jones (b. 3/30/1979): Daughter of renowned sitarist, Ravi Shankar and Sue Jones; singer, songwriter, pianist and actress; Grammy Awards winner.
- Jawed Karim (b.1979): Co-founder of YouTube.
- Amar Bose (b. 11/2/1929): Founder and Chief Executive Officer of the Bose Corporation.
- Joya Dass: journalist; financial news reporter for CNN and ABC; host of AVS (Asian Variety Show).

For more information on famous Bengali Americans, you may visit the following website:

<http://drfazlurkhan.com/>

*Dr. Fazlur Rahman Khan*

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1289528/>

*IMDb - Internet Movie Database (Norah Jones)*

<http://www.southasianwomen.org/congress/participant.html>

*South Asian Women's Leadership Forum, Congress 2008*

<http://founderbios.com/jawed-karim.php>

*Founder Bios.com*

<http://www.radiohof.org/pioneer/amarbose.html>

*Radio Hall of Fame*