

# Exploring the Bengali Culture

## Background



Bangladesh is situated in the southeastern part of Asia, sharing borders with India and Myanmar. During the eighth century, people from Arabia, Persia, and Turkey migrated to this region. The Bangladesh climate is characterized by high temperatures, high humidity, and heavy rainfall—including devastating cyclones that originate from the Bay of Bengal during spring and fall. The Bengal region includes numerous and very diverse communities. It is also known as the land of spices.

## Traditions and Customs

The majority of Bengalis practice Islam, with the exception of those in western Bangladesh who practice Hinduism. Bangladesh's architecture consists of Islamic art, as seen in the form of arches, domes, and minarets (tall towers) often found on mosques, mausoleums (tombs), and forts. Bangladesh is a hierarchical society, and people are respected because of their age and position.



## Holidays and Celebrations



*Pohela Falgun* is a popular festival celebrating the first day of spring in February each year. They dress in vibrant colors, with many wearing multi-colored clothing, and institutions often organize cultural programs. *Pohela Boishakh*, meaning Happy New Year, is celebrated on April 14 each year. Businesses serve faithful customers sweetmeats, and Bengalis wear festive white and red colored dresses and flowers for hair decorations. Traditional festival meals include *ilish bhaji* (fried fish), *panta bhat* (watered rice), and special *bhartas* (pastes). Bengalis also celebrate quite elaborate, large weddings with typically 1,000 to 10,000 guests.

## Education and Literacy

Bengali children are expected to attend school until grade 12. The literacy rate is approximately 74%. Bangla, also known as Bengali, is spoken by 98% of the population and is the official language.



## Health Disparities

The leading health issues of Bengalis include a high incidence of stroke, heart disease, pulmonary disease, diabetes, and neonatal disorders.

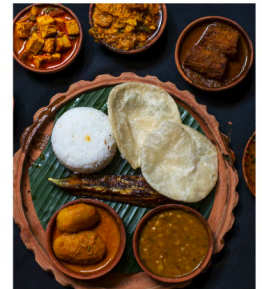
## Traditional Food Practices

In Bangladesh, spices are used to flavor food for taste and health benefits. Bangladeshi herbs include cinnamon, cardamom, black pepper, green cardamom, red chili, coriander seeds, fennel, clove, almond, nutmeg, joyphal, cumin, and fenugreek seeds. Bangladesh abounds with a large variety of tropical and sub-tropical fruits like bananas, mangoes, watermelon, pineapple, jackfruit, guava, litchi, green coconut, limes, lemons, dragon fruit, papaya, and ber fruit. Many Bengalis eat with their hands and share foods from a common dish. For dinner, guests are generally served in the order of seniority, with the oldest served first. The left hand is considered unclean, so diners are expected to eat, pass dishes, and drink with their right hand. Also, meal seating is often segregated by gender. The father is considered the king of the household and takes financial responsibility, though the mother usually makes the food-purchasing decisions. Both parents are involved with caring for the children, and extended family members often assist. Typically, the grandparents and mothers cook and care for the children.



## Considerations for WIC Educators and Counselors

- Bangalis are typically indirect communicators and may need to be approached with softened messages. Personal space for Bengalis is generally not an issue as they tend to stand close when speaking to someone of the same gender.
- Early marriage in Bangladesh is a common issue, with over 34 million child brides; this has led to increased maternal mortality and morbidity.
- Prenatal care and treatment for medical conditions are often avoided among pregnant Bengalis.
- The prevalence of exclusive breast/chestfeeding is about 36%. Breast/chestfeeding is generally only done in the privacy of one's home.
- Complementary foods are traditionally added at about six months of age. Bengalis typically start with porridge, smashed rice, or potatoes, then a mix of rice, legumes, chicken, or fish mashed with spinach and a small amount of oil.



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