

# **Diasporic Culture of Bangladesh - 18th to 20th Centuries**

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## **Abstract**

*From time immemorial the mass movement of people and tribe has been going on. The area which now constitutes SAARC countries is no exception. Bangladesh is one of the important members of SAARC. It has however a rich history of its own. The land of Bangladesh being extremely fertile and the climate moderate, the outward movement of people seemed to have been less in the past. Rather more and more people were drawn to its bound from different directions for settlement giving rise to a unique growth of mixed cultural development.*

*Any significant diaspora of Bangladeshi people seems to be of recent origin. This is more due to exploring the outside world rather than finding alternative locations for livelihood. The people of Bangladesh have deep feelings for their culture and their language. These two things they would never give up wherever they go.*

*In the present article I have however emphasised that a dramatic change has recently occurred in the diasporic culture of Bangladesh owing to an unprecedented growth of population. It is a small country of 55,000 square miles but now has a population of about 160 million. The outside movement of people are thus taking place in extensive manner.*

*In this article I have also made a historical review of the diasporic culture of Bangladeshi people. I have examined the causes of this movement, and touched upon the nature of this diaspora. I have also indicated the destinations to*

*which the people of Bangladesh are heading for. This story of diaspora of Bangladeshi people is a mixed one some successful and others are awfully disastrous. But I have found out some unique characteristics of this diaspora which have transformed the culture of the people themselves and the places to which they went.*

## **Introduction**

In Greek, diaspora simply indicates ‘scattering across’ or ‘dispersal’, but in English language it has a specific meaning i.e. the scattering of people. It is in this context that this paper would examine the diasporic culture of Bangladesh from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries.

The mass movement of people and tribes has been going on for centuries. There were some 80 million Europeans who had “emigrated voluntarily or as convicts or indentured labourers to North America, and 20 million African slaves” to different countries since the eighteenth century (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 583). In the twentieth century after the World War II an astonishing degree of migration took place driven by the demand of the most developed countries of the world for labour including both skilled and unskilled workers. At present migration takes place to provide skills and support service to maintain the globalised economy. Thus there is a continuous flow of professional and skilled personnel to different parts of the world sponsored by big multinational companies. In order to sustain prosperity and competitiveness every country now needs fresh people i.e. to rely on ‘brain circulation.’

The movement of people from Bangladesh to other regions of South Asia or the SAARC countries and beyond in any large scale is, however, a recent phenomenon. Bangladesh, for many

centuries, has been a place of relative peace, political stability and economic prosperity. Hence, there was no need for people to move out of the country. Rather many nations came here taking advantage of its economic prosperity, secular culture, and religious tolerance, contributing to the growth of a newer culture (See Chowdhury and Ahmed 2011).

During the medieval period people from the nearby Indian provinces and from far off places like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia came to Bengal and settled here. Soon a mixture of culture started which influenced the language, culture, dress and food habits of both the settlers and the indigenous people (See Islam and Mahmud 2011). Bengal or Bangladesh has largely benefited from this diasporic culture being exposed to a wider world and a wider culture. The Arabs, Iranians, Pathans, Turks, Armenians, British, Dutch and the French contributed immensely to the cultural development of the Bangladeshis. They also enriched the Bangla language.

From the middle of the eighteenth century the movement of people from the area that now constitutes Bangladesh slowly started. Though there was no particular reason for this migration, people moved outside to fulfil their individual dreams, and also to use their skilled potential. Some even went as ordinary labour force. It was initially to the new capital of British India, Kolkata. Kolkata was gradually becoming the hub of all administrative, industrial and commercial activities of British India drawing people of all kinds – educated and uneducated, skilled and unskilled workers to its bound. Soon a group of people from East Bengal settled down in Kolkata with their own culture and ways of life, influencing the culture of the new metropolis. East Bengalis with their peculiar local dialect formed a distinct cultural group. Later a large number of big

*Zamindars* or landlords from East Bengal moved to Kolkata where they built their temporary mansions adding a new stratum to the metropolitan culture (Chaudhuri et al. 2008: 127).

The single most important element which heralded the dawn of modern India in the nineteenth century was the English education. This education began to be imparted in Dhaka, the present capital of Bangladesh in the early nineteenth century by the British government and the first Government English School in the subcontinent was founded in Dhaka in 1835. This school and subsequently a college founded in Dhaka in 1841 proved cataclysmic in changing the ways of life in Bangladesh. Soon English educated Bengalis arrived on the scene who as junior partners of the British rulers spread all over the subcontinent looking after administration and educational developments of colonial India. Initially in the neighbouring provinces and later to distant lands, the English educated East Bengalis moved, and wherever they went they soon built up a mini East Bengal where they continued their own culture and ways of life. At the same time they also influenced the local ways of life.

The neighbouring Assam in the north East India is a case in point. Many educated Bengalis went to the province in the mid nineteenth century as officials, teachers and businessmen. Since then the movement of Bangladeshis to Assam countryside and the cities like Shillong has continued. The first settlement of Bengalis in Shillong took place in 1864. The British government in India, particularly in the eastern and north-eastern parts, came to depend significantly on the Bengalis as they were the first to receive English education. The trend continued for a long time and in the second half of the nineteenth century, a large number of Bengalis went to Shillong, the capital of Assam to work for the British government. It was the Bengalis who up to 1897

dominated as the ‘native employees’ of the government. “The leading provision and department stores, book stalls and so on tended also to be owned by Bengalis” (Virtual Tourist: Online).

From the early twentieth century a large number of peasants both Hindus and Muslims went to Assam to cultivate lands which were then waste lands or which the Assamese would not dare to bring under cultivation. All these swelled the population of Bengalis in Assam. These Bengalis took with them their culture and ways of life which greatly influenced the local people. They now constitute the third major linguistic group in Meghalaya (8.95 per cent). The movement of Bengalis to Assam was not however free from any problem. Rather it gave birth to many issues which till today bother the local as well as central government of India, and India’s relations with Bangladesh.

The Departure of the British and the creation of India and Pakistan in 1947 opened further doors for Bangladeshis to step out into different parts of the world. Though still there was no such acute pressure, the people moved outside taking advantage of their new freedom to various countries to improve their socio-economic life. The newly independent countries of India and Pakistan also opened various opportunities for employment and business. After the partition, there was however an exodus of Hindu population to India particularly to West Bengal where they formed the largest group of refugee population. Similarly a large number of Muslim populations came to East Pakistan, especially to the capital Dhaka from India particularly from West Bengal. This led to the assimilation of a new culture (Dani et al. 1962: 154-5).

Initially only a handful of Muslim population of East Pakistan moved to West Pakistan particularly to the city of Karachi which was then the capital of Pakistan. In fact it was in

Karachi that the largest settlement of the Bengalis took place in Pakistan. These settlers included educated and uneducated workers, skilled and unskilled labourers, businessmen and various professional people. They settled down in different parts of the city, and also lived in various government colonies. As usual they clung largely to their own culture and ways of life. Their food habits or dress did not change much.

The bitter relations between the two wings of Pakistan leading to the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 cut short this first flow of Bengalis to Pakistan. In fact after the emergence of Bangladesh, the number of Bengalis of Bangladeshi origin in Karachi dwindled down to only 10,000. However, since then the number has been increasing through migration though the exact number is not known.

At present there are numbers of Bengali colonies in Karachi, often called ‘mini Bangladesh.’ Bengali communities are often found in the same areas where Myanmar (Burma) people in Pakistan are found, due to a shared culture and similar language. Among the Bangladeshi colonies in Karachi, ‘Chittagong Colony’ is very famous. It is so-called probably because people of Chittagong origin might have settled there first. Mostly Bangladeshi things dominate this place. When one walks through the colony, one can see the colourful Bengali signboards, *Bhasani* caps, *lungis* and *kurtas*. The Chittagong Colony has a Bazaar which is famous throughout Pakistan as the centre for Dhaka cloth. It is also the headquarters for the local Bengali language daily newspaper *Qaumi Bandhan*.

### **Middle East, Europe, America and Canada**

The emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign independent country in 1971 completely changed the situation in the country

so far as migration was concerned. A war ravaged the country, the socio-economic conditions of Bangladesh in the initial period, were under great stress. Added to this was the burden of rising numbers of population which was hitherto not severely felt much or to which the nation did not give much attention. But very soon the burden of population pressure was felt particularly as the economic sector did not recover as fast as was expected. Moreover, as citizens of a free country, the movement of population to outside places for the improvement of one's socio-economic life became much easier and government also encouraged it by making it easy to travel. So started the formation of a diaspora of Bangladeshi people towards the last decades of the twentieth century. About this time some countries of the world badly needed labour- both skilled and unskilled for the development and modernisation of their countries. The developed countries continued to have this labour to maintain their prosperity and competitiveness as well as for fulfilling their social welfare commitments. But there were other countries which became labour hungry to utilise their newly found wealth to change the face of their age old countries. This is the area which is known as the Middle East. The governments of the Middle Eastern countries adopted massive programmes to develop and modernise their countries and sought both skilled and unskilled labour from all over the world to implement these programmes. Thus there took place an unprecedented movement of work force to the Middle East. A large supply came from the South Asian countries including Bangladesh. There is however a major difference in this movement of people to the Middle East. The Middle East countries did not accept these workers as some kind of migrants but treated them as guest workers for a limited period. However, many of these workers stayed there for many years and have almost converted their status as settlers.

The movement of Bangladeshis, however, to Europe particularly Britain and America was a kind of potential migrants. Many were given entry as simple migrants or settlers. Hence their status and prospect for settling down permanently was more likely. Meanwhile the situation in Bangladesh was becoming desperate with the ever increasing pressure of population. The increased population and lack of employment forced many to emigrate, the government this time encouraged it more vigorously providing all kinds of facilities even training. Hence the movement of Bangladeshis to different parts of the world increased further and the destinations this time were not only the Middle East, Europe or America but also new countries like Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Malaysia.

The people of Bengal first went to England in the eighteenth century. “They worked as lascars, seamen, in the British merchant marine, and the first lascars from ‘Chatgaon’ and ‘Juhangeer Nuggur’ were reported in the London docks as early as 1765” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 598). They found their way in East London. Ever since then East London has become the home of diasporic Bangladeshis. At present one fifth of the Bangladeshi community in Britain “live around the old docklands area of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 598).

However, the diaspora of Bangladeshis in Britain was not at this time a massive figure. In fact only a handful of them trickled down to the shores of Britain till the middle of the twentieth century. “In 1951, only 5000 people who were born in Bangladesh were recorded in Britain” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 598). However, the scenario began to change. Over the next twenty years, the number rose to 170000, an astonishing rise. By 2001, the number further increased to 283,000. “This



rise was almost due to immigration. Less than half of the present Bangladeshi community were born in the United Kingdom” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 598).

Initially the Bangladeshi population in Britain worked in various places mostly as unskilled labourers in factories, hospitals, transports and shops. Very soon an enterprising section of them moved to the restaurant business selling Bangladeshi cuisine or rather Indian cuisine for which the local population developed a taste. In course of time the number of Bangladeshi restaurants increased phenomenally becoming a significant part of British economy. It is curious to note that those restaurants owned by the Bangladeshis are generally known as Indian restaurants because at the beginning it was easier for the locals to identify them with India. Today the influence of these restaurants upon the indigenous people has become so deep rooted that it has changed their food habits.

### **Bangladeshis Abroad: Settler Societies**

It is interesting to note that diaspora leads to many cultural changes. It changes the migrants themselves, the societies they move to and finally the places of their origin. As has been mentioned already the Bangladeshi diaspora in any significant manner is a very recent phenomenon. That is why the overseas Bangladeshi community is still a very young one. Hence they are yet unable to evolve their own traditions in a new society. Among the immigrants in the developed world, only in the United Kingdom there has emerged a second generation. In other countries as migration only started towards the end of the twentieth century the second generation is only now of school going age. Whereas in the countries of guest workers the Middle East, Malaysia, Italy, Japan, etc., the Bangladeshi community

“lack continuity since they consist of only temporary migrants separated from their families” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 612).

### **Circulation of Culture**

The Bangladeshis who are now living abroad despite their employment and new environment, cling to Bangladeshi culture and ethos. They continue to keep ‘strong family values and work ethics.’ The notions of handing down religious and moral values including ‘honesty, respect and faithfulness in marriage’ have been kept alive. These Bangladeshis practice their religion very seriously and also are very conscious to keep their culture alive and are not willing to forget their roots. They watch Bengali films, listen to Bengali music and try to visit Bangladesh as frequently as possible (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 612-3).

They have also set up a network among themselves. This networking grows big where the numbers of Bangladeshis are greater. As communities grow bigger they need more formal relationships. Wherever there is a sizable number of Bangladeshis they set up cultural associations, drama and music groups. They also organise schools for learning Bangla language and literature. Any town with a reasonably sized Bangladeshi community has cultural and social associations.

Those cultural and social associations follow typical Bangladeshi socio-cultural activities and create a circulation of foreign culture in a new country. Thus they nowadays celebrate International Mother Language Day on 21st February commemorating the martyrs of the Language Movement of Bangladesh, the *Pahela Baisak*, the first day of the Bengali year, *Iftar* parties or breaking fast parties during month of Ramadan, Eid Reunions, Victory Day Celebrations, Bengali Film

Festivals, Cultural shows of Bangladeshi dance and music etc. Many of the big and rich Bangladeshi associations abroad nowadays invite intellectuals, academics, artists and others from Bangladesh to give lectures and read papers on Bangladesh and Bangladeshi culture, and have Bangla cultural shows. “They also arrange youth exchange visits between their host countries and sports team and schools in Bangladesh” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 612-3).

### **Language**

The most important aspect of culture is the language, and the Bangladeshis living abroad have put much importance in preserving their language, and even handing down it to the succeeding generations. For this they have to work hard. The majority of the Bangladeshis living overseas speak Bangla at home. The culture of Bangla language has nowadays become easier with communication revolution. Anywhere in the world wherever they live, the Bangladeshis can now have regular contact with Bangla language through Bangladesh satellite television channels. Bangladeshis living in the Middle East, USA, UK, and Australia have access to different Bangladeshi channels. “In Britain, a British Bengal Station, Channel S, has been broadcasting since 2004” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 615). Also in Australia and Canada there are Bengali Radio Stations. “More long established are Bengali language newspapers. More easily accessible are CDS, Videos, DVDs and more recently download facilities through websites such as mybanglamusic.com Bangladeshis abroad can keep up-to-date with the latest in Bangladeshi music and cinema” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 615).

However, “a more conscious effort is needed to maintain the language skills of the second generation-especially to raise them to a standard where they can go beyond day-to-day communication and appreciate Bengali literature” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 615). Various efforts are now being successfully made in this regard.

The emotional aspect of clinging to their own language is best shown during the time of the Nazrul and Rabindra Jayanti - i.e. the Celebration of birth days of two of the greatest poets of Bengal. To these has now been added the International Mother Language Day on 21 February. Commenting on the Celebration of Ekushey February, the martyr day of the language movement Cheesman and Khanum (2007: 616) state that the day:

... had been a regular feature of expatriate life, as in Bangladesh, but the UN Resolution declaring 21 February as the International Mother Language Day provided an opportunity to extend the occasion to a celebration of other languages spoken in the countries where Bangladeshi communities live. It also presented a legitimate opportunity for Bangladeshi communities to take the lead.

The Celebration of Ekushe February has also added a new feature in the cultural initiative of the diasporic people. They also wish to physically transfer some of the cultural symbols from home to their new lands of settlement. Thus they have already installed one of the most unique cultural symbols from home i.e. the Shaheed Minar of Dhaka (Martyrs Memorial) to the new homeland. Shaheed Minar has been erected in many places throughout the world. “The first was built in Oldham, Lancashire, England, but the most significant, outside Bangladesh, was erected in the heart of the largest overseas Bangladeshi community in East London in 1999” (Cheesman

and Khanum 2007: 616). The example is now being set in many other countries. Even in Tokyo where there is not a large Bangladeshi community, a Shaheed Minar has been recently constructed.

### **Family and Marriage**

It is a general pattern that the diasporic people marry within their own community. There are various reasons for that. The experiences of the Bangladeshis in Britain are however a bit different. “Across the world and across the centuries, male pioneers have traditionally established their positions [abroad] and then brought wives from the home country when they felt sufficiently secure” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 617). The Bangladeshis in Britain did exactly the same and there was a huge migration of Bangladeshi girls to Britain as wives. The restrictions imposed on the entry of wives for a while put a break on this kind of South Asian immigration. “In Britain this resulted in split families” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 617). Bangladeshi men married in Bangladesh but were unable to bring their families back to Britain. Thus the wives were left back and the children who were born grew up in Bangladesh and in many cases entered Britain at an advanced age with little knowledge of English and the British system of life. It was even more difficult for them when they entered the job market which forced them to accept very ordinary jobs.

The situation has changed recently for the better and the Bangladeshis could now easily marry girls from their home towns or villages and bring them to Britain. This system of marrying girls or boys from home country still persists though a different environment has now emerged. In Britain today there

is a large pool of young men and women but the tradition of marrying someone from Bangladesh still persists.

The system of marriage is also traditional. Arranged marriages are the norm among expatriate Bangladeshis, and in practice some are even forced to enter into arranged marriages. However, most are done in accordance with mutual consent, and work well. It is interesting to note that every young man and woman born and brought up in Britain not only accepts but also welcomes arranged marriage. The family structure of Bangladeshis overseas thus remains strong. It is not only in the case of marriages but also in other spheres of life like respect for elderly and looking after the aged parents, the traditions continue.

## **Food**

It is interesting to note that the food habits of the expatriates have not changed to any marked degree. They continue their old food habits. Although it is true that at the beginning they had problems and they missed their ‘home cooking’, as numbers of expatriates increased, enterprising businessmen and shop keepers started bringing food from Bangladesh. Initially what the Bangladeshis missed very much were the typical spices with which they cooked their food. But now all these are easily available even in high-street shops, and Bangladeshis can now have in their every-day meals menu items like Bangladeshi vegetables, Bangladeshi fishes like *hilsah*, *rui* and *pabda* and Bangladeshi sweets like *rashmalai*, *rashgolla* and *shandesh*.

By establishing Bangladeshi, though actually called Indian, restaurants in thousands the Bangladeshis even have spread their food habits among the host community. There are now about 9,500 ‘Indian’ restaurants and takeaways in Britain, 85% of

them owned by the Bangladeshis (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 620). The sub continental cuisine has become a very common thing among the host British community.

### **Impact of Bangladeshi Communities on Society**

Settlers and migrant communities also have a deep impact on the host society, and the Bangladeshis have already shown that. The Bangladeshi guest workers in the Middle East are building networks, infrastructure and eating traditions which are changing the host countries whether those countries have noticed it or not. Bangladeshis in their diverse activities have caused significant changes in the culture and social life of the host countries. Many organised bodies have also been formed in this connection. Bangladeshi Associations, as they are usually called, have set out their goals in terms of participating and changing the socio-economic lives of their host countries and even for that matter of Bangladesh. Already they have participated vigorously in the life of the host countries including becoming elected members of Parliament, Councils and other bodies. They have contributed significantly to the economy of the country as well as in the cultural field by organising musical events, building Shaheed Minars and holding exhibitions and fairs of various kinds.

It is in the United Kingdom, which houses the oldest and largest overseas Bangladeshi community where Bangladeshi impact has been most profound. The UK may provide insights into how the inter-relationships may develop in other countries.

Brick Lane in Spitafields in East London where there is the largest concentration of Bangladeshis outside Bangladesh has already shown what things might come out in the future. The place is already recognised as *Bangla town* or Town of the

Bangladeshis where names of streets are even shown both in English and Bengali. It has also been found that “the ‘Cockney’ English of East London is developing a Bangladeshi/ Sylheti accent and Bengali words are gradually becoming part of the vocabulary of the white Cockneys” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 624).

As has also been indicated Bangladeshis have changed the entire eating habits of the British through their dominance in the Indian Restaurant trade. “Chicken tikka masala, a dish invented in Britain by Bangladeshis, is now one of the favourite meals of Britain, Samosas have become a standard item on British business buffet lunches” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 624) and curry seems to be a favourite among children. “South Asian food is now so thoroughly naturalised as British that ready-made meals are sold in supermarkets” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 624). It is very much revealing that such a tiny per cent of diasporic population can “have such a profound impact on so intimate a feature of the mainstream culture of a nation” (Cheesman and Khanum 2007: 624).

The Bangladeshi Restaurants are now also playing a significant role in the British economy. The annual turnover of these restaurants is nearly 320 million pounds and accounts for about ten per cent of the nation’s restaurant trade. It is estimated that about 70000 people are directly employed by the restaurants and as much as 50000 people are indirectly engaged as suppliers and other service providers. It is not only this; the Bangladeshis in London are also contributing to the global importance of the city of London through economic activities by providing South Asian cuisine.



## **Conclusion**

The diasporic culture of South Asian countries within and outside the SAARC region may vary much. The Bangladeshi diaspora is only settling down, hence it will take some time to fully develop its cultural implications. Even in the United Kingdom, where there is a long tradition and largest concentration of population, the second generation of Bangladeshis are only in their twenties or early thirties. In other places the second generation is mere school going children.

However, there is another aspect of this diasporic movement in certain parts of the world especially in the Middle East where the status of this population is that of guest workers or impermanent communities of short visitors. The Bangladeshi workers in the Middle East have so far experienced a mixed fortune. Some have successful stories of their journey, others have tragic experiences but most of them are now becoming conscious of their rights. They wish to have a peaceful existence while engaged in their activities. They earn money and remit some of it to help relations or to invest for their own sake back at home. It is this peaceful existence which they wish to be ensured as their human rights and for which they seek protection from the Bangladeshi Embassies. They are now asserting that as they have become an integral part of the host country's economic life they should be allowed to live permanently, finalise their married life and bring families from home. These guest workers have started demanding their full rights as guest workers and probably in the future would become a settler community. When that happens, the face of the Middle East would greatly change. But the diaspora of Bangladeshis would continue perhaps in new directions as in South East Asia, East Asia and Japan and also in the newly found destination, Italy.

Whatever happens in the future, and wherever they go, the Bangladeshis would definitely take their culture with them and spread them among the host community. There are two areas in which the diasporic Bangladeshis would have a huge impact on the host society. First, in the food sector and second the language. Bangladeshis are very good in marketing Bangladeshi cuisine, and they soon would open outlets for it by establishing restaurants which would be visited by both the host as well as settler communities. Next, relates to the survival of the Bangladeshi language. They have already shown that they have history, the tradition and skills to show others how they can preserve their own language and traditions in a multi-lingual environment. Thus there are many ways in which the Bangladeshis can take leading roles in the societies where they have settled.

As the subject of diaspora is very important and has global implications involving community relationships, peace and harmony, there is a need to carry out extensive research. Researches can be undertaken on various subjects like cultural evolution, family relationships, the position and role of women, new attitudes on religion, approaches to politics, the environment and entrepreneurship, changes in aspirations of specific communities which develop migrant traditions and removal of legal barriers for settlers for establishing a happy and peaceful new home.

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