

O Amar Londoni Bhaisab (My Dear Brother from London)

Bangladesh: a history

There is evidence to suggest that occupation of the land of Bangladesh goes back 10,000 years. But due to its climate and flooding, evidence of human habitation is swept away. What a crying shame! Still, there is much that the land of Bangladesh can offer for those who seek it and so it may be a treasure trove for intrepid archaeologists.

It is said that Buddha himself shared some of his teaching in Bangladesh. And there is such a thing as the Buddhist Era in Bangladesh. But modern-day Bangladesh has had influence from Hinduism until the Muslims and Islam came to change that. The 9-10 per cent or so of Hindus remaining in Bangladesh do still enjoy some influence and clout within modern day Bangladesh.

Ancient Bangladesh has had marks left by no less than seven powers including the Khalji from Afghanistan, followed by the Moghuls, Portuguese, French, Dutch, Danes and the British. So, Bangladesh has a rich history of wealth, peace and stability. It's such a shame now that it is far away from peace and tranquillity.

The Islamic way of life took its step into Bangladesh when Mahmud of Ghazni crossed the Khyber Pass and then continued from the 12th century onwards. One can only assume that the strong message and simplicity of Islam captured the heart of the Bangladeshis.

The Brits brought their culture and trading skills through the name of the British East India Company and the land of Bengal remained as the 'Jewel in the Crown' of the British Empire. And it is enough to say that the wealth of Bengal was looted by the British.

Bangladesh remains a land of agriculture, but as many agriculturalists will tell you, agriculture yields very little. It is an intensive endeavour with very little in return, which is why our ancestors looked to other sources of income. Hence the drive to move abroad and seek a better future and this is where the UK comes in.

Bangladesh: an introduction

Bangladesh is a relatively new country formed in 1971 after the War of Independence from Pakistan. It was formerly known as East Pakistan. Its neighbouring countries are India and Myanmar. Bangladesh's population is an estimated 168 million. Its political status is a parliamentary republic. And its capital city, Dhaka, is one of the largest in the world with an estimated population of 16.62 million and growing.

Bangladesh is beset by national strikes. This seems to be the only tool in the political parties' way of venting their disapproval of the policies, twists and turns of the government of the day. But is this affective and who suffers in the end? It's the poor and destitute. When strikes are called, it's not just businesses which shut down, people fear to walk through the streets, vehicles and buses are set alight and there is a general atmosphere of fear.

There really is no progress in Bangladesh, as when a political party comes to power, it reverses the policies of the opposition and so there is no stability or constancy. People, business and investors do not know where they stand – one day a policy is allowed, the next day it's illegal.

There is a general culture amongst the Bangladeshis to resort to the law in matters of dispute and there is not a single family in the land of Bangladesh who does not have a grievance against another party (usually a close family member). And so, the culture of launching a case against someone is rampant. The upshot of all this is that the justice system is clogged up with cases. It takes years and years sometimes generations for a case to be settled.

If Bangladesh were a person who would she be? What would be her characteristics? I think she would have the following characteristics:

- Tenacious
- Open-minded
- Caring (motherly)
- Remindful
- Determined
- Generous
- Happy (even though financially humble)
- Opportunist
- Resilient
- Strength of spirit

Bangladesh has a rich history, which is now creating a lot of interest amongst archaeologists, in particular about the early inhabitant of the land of Bengal.

The Londonis

The 'Londonis' as they are known in Bangladesh, are those Bangladeshis who migrated to the UK in search of a better life and who have settled in the UK. They enjoy a very high status in Bangladesh and are mostly from the region of Sylhet. Sylhet is a region north east of Bangladesh neighbouring Assam, India. The Sylhetis are the main group of Bangladeshis who have settled in the UK.

This high status is mainly due to the wealth of the Londonis. Cash is king in Bangladesh and Londonis like to splash the cash while they are holidaying. This high status means that most things come easy for the Londonis. One of the areas of simplicity comes with getting a second, third or fourth wife (as the religion of Islam allows). And it is not uncommon for elderly men to choose their teenage brides. Of course, the attraction for the teenage age brides is the British passport and a guarantee of a better life when their husbands bring them over to the UK.

This is also the practise of UK citizens marrying relatives as a way of supporting the family. The culture is to marry the first or second cousins as a way to economically assist the wider family. Sometimes this is fruitful but at other times it ends in divorce and acrimony.

Bangladesh has a population of about 168 million. That makes it amongst the most populated country in the world. Now if you consider a population as something burdensome, I think that's a shame. If, however, you consider your population as something positive, an asset which can be put to good use, things are suddenly in Bangladesh's favour. Why not consider your population as a work

force which can be utilised for the betterment of the nation? People are only too eager to work in Bangladesh, they only need to be given a chance.

If we can place these people into employment, build the country's infrastructure with their hands, we will certainly go a long way towards population usability. Look at China, the most populated country in the world: it uses its population to its advantage, securing and safeguarding employment for its population. As a result, it is on course to becoming the largest economy in the world.

In contrast, Bangladesh has high unemployment and joblessness. There are few jobs around and where there is employment; candidates bribe their way in, not giving a chance to people who can do the job.

When and why did the Bangladeshis arrive in the UK and what impact did it have on Bangladesh?

Bangladeshis started to arrive in the UK in the 1970s. Many of the early generations did not see a need to bring their families over from Bangladesh, which is one of the reasons my late eldest brother and elder sister are still in Bangladesh and never joined us in the UK. My eldest brother made a hash of his entry clearance interview and was not allowed in and as for my elder sister, it was said 'What is the point in bringing girls over here?' This sort of narrow-mindedness led to a whole generation of women to be left in Bangladesh.

Why are they here? The simple reason is seeking to improve the quality of their lives. Our first generation of Bangladeshis came to the UK for financial reasons; for a better life for them and their families.

Myself, I come from Bangladesh and specifically Sylhet. Sylhetis number around 10 million and are from the north east of Bangladesh. They are the main ethnic group to migrate to the UK from Bangladesh.

It was my father who came to the UK in the late Sixties. I was born in Bangladesh and joined my father in the UK when I was about six years old along with my mother and older brother.

My father worked in a factory and that's all I know about his life of work. But he did quite well; he'd bought a house in Birmingham and lots of land back in Bangladesh. We grew up in the UK and after my father's death we moved to London to join our maternal uncle. And thus, our story starts as residents of London and our life begins as British-Bangladeshis.

One of the impacts of migration to the UK was that skilled and capable left Bangladesh and contributed to what is known as 'brain drain': when the skilled population or workforce leaves their native lands in search for a better life elsewhere.

The Indian restaurant trade is almost all owned by British-Bangladeshis and the trade did much for the curry to become among the favourite food for the Brits. The trade is a testament to the entrepreneurial nature of Bangladeshis.

Initially it was only the males who came to the UK and they worked hard and alone. There are stories of bed sharing since they did not have the means to rent proper rooms. They cooked for themselves and those who could not cook had to rely on their friends to do so.

There was no rush for the first generation Bangladeshis to bring over their families as the feeling was those who came over would make a quick buck and return to their families. I think it took them a while to think about settling with their wives and children in the UK. Nevertheless, they took the step of bringing their loved ones over and there began the story of the Bangladeshis in Britain.

Even though Bangladesh's GDP has sky-rocketed and the literacy rate has increased, people still live in abject poverty, unemployment is still high to the extent that many do not see any benefit in studying; they say 'What is the point spending time and money in studying when there is no employment at the end of all your efforts and I will most likely end up working in the paddy fields for a living.'

The yearly floods and natural disasters are a danger to the small country's development. And yet, people just take it within their stride and continue with their lives, continue with what they have until the next time.

Position of women

Although Bangladesh has made much improvement in educating its population (especially girls), unfortunately the practise of taking children out of education and into work due to poverty still exists. Nevertheless, Bangladesh is to be congratulated regarding this area of development.

In fact, one of the reasons why Bangladeshis have such large families is because it is hoped that once grown up, children can be a source of income for the family. However, Bangladesh is not alone in this practise and this is the practise of many poverty-stricken places in the world. And unfortunately for girls, boys are more sort after as there is a greater chance of them becoming breadwinners for their families and girls are seen as burdensome and an expense. Therefore, girls are married off as soon as possible.

The position of women in Bangladeshi culture is deeply intertwined with religion. And the religion of Islam in particular. We have all heard the complaints that Islam treats women like second-class people. But there are many who point out that Islam gave the women honour and dignity. Contrary to popular perception Islam has given women many rights: it gave women the right to vote; the right to study and education; the right to work and earn their own earnings; the right to inherit wealth; the right to be a mother and a wife and much more besides. Those who treat women like second-class citizens do so due to culture and not because anything Islam stipulates.

There exist very few services and facilities for women to access. This is the case even though the country's two main political parties are headed by women: Begum Khaleda Zia of the BNP party and Sheik Hasina of the Awami League.

Currently British Bangladeshi women are faring better than their sisters in Bangladesh. Even then I would say that there still exists an underlying attitude problem towards women. They are still seen as the inferior gender and are treated in sexist ways.

But thankfully things are changing for the better albeit at a snail's pace. Bangladesh remains a very conservative society and generally women are protected by their guardians from exploitation and mistreatment. The primary role of women remains as wives and mothers. However, in the region of Sylhet, girls have very little say in who they get married to. The choice of a groom is left to guardians or mothers and fathers. This is where the problem of forced marriages rears its head. This is also the place where marriages of convenience take place. This naturally must change, and girls should be given choice in who they choose as life partners.

Family life

Thankfully, family and family values remain a priority for Bangladeshis and British-Bangladeshis. This is one of the reasons why Bangladeshis get married relatively soon after they become adults. There exists a great importance on family honour and much value is placed on choosing a good family to marry into.

Be safe

Bangladesh can be either an unsafe place for non-residents or it can be a safe place if you adhere to local traditions. The Bangladesh that holidaymakers and backpackers see is not the real Bangladesh. There is a hidden culture where relatives stab you in the back; where lying is a way of life; where you cannot trust the rickshaw driver, who will rip you off given the slightest of chances; where there still exist forced marriages; where you really cannot trust anyone.

This scenario is not made up, it's real and happening. And the saddest part of it is that you cannot trust your own family members. Although there is great importance placed by Bangladeshi society, on family values of commitment, honesty and loyalty to the family, but these values are under attack and families are starting to lose them due to the societal practices.

It is said that there is good and bad in every society and Bangladesh certainly has more than its fair share of bad in its community. And it is also said that those closest to you hurt you the most. This is because you trust your family member not to deceive you or to break your trust. But this trust cannot be placed on the people of Bangladesh.

If you are a British-Bangladeshi going to Bangladesh, be careful. Especially with the signing of documents and where money is concerned. It is said in truth that the native Bangladeshi will sell you twice over in the Bangladeshi market place. Such is their craftiness and ill-intentions. This is a side of Bangladeshi culture that very few Westerners will see. But if they spend enough time there, they will experience it first hand, like I did.

This culture is one of family feuds both within families as well as against other families and it is a culture of 'might is right'. But people simply must change if the society is to get anywhere and progress. They must leave their lies and deception and they must build an honest society.

Although things are improving economically, there remains a very bad culture in Bangladesh. The culture that I talk about is jealousy, lies cheating and deceit. I wanted to invest in Bangladesh, but I could not find a single person to trust with my money.

I know of someone who was supposed to sell some property for someone in London and send the money over to the person residing in London. Do you know what he did? He sold the property and

took the money for himself. Basically, he stole the money. This incident happened between close family members. There are numerous examples of this type of deception; in fact it is rife.

Work

It must be said that Bangladeshis are generally hard workers and this quality has been passed on to British-Bangladeshis living in the UK. Although there was a culture of benefits dependency, things are changing. The new generation are fast going into employment and into other fields of work besides the catering field.

There was a culture of first-generation Bangladeshis working hard in the UK and sending money back home to support families and extended families. Not only that, people saved up enough money to build new homes and establish businesses. This practise remains to this day and should be something the Bangladeshis are proud of. It is a status symbol to not only have the ancestral homes in the villages, but to have apartments (known as bashas) in the towns and cities. No generation has done more than the Sylheti generation regarding investment in Bangladesh.

Natural disasters and climate

More than 50 per cent of Bangladesh is under water during the rainy season. And cyclones are common. Bangladesh has more than its fair share of floods and cyclones but over the years it has seen a reduction in deaths due to floods and cyclones. This is probably due to better preparation and warning systems in place. So, on that front it must be said, Bangladesh is improving.

However, it still has to deal with what is now known as 'global warming'. I once heard someone say that Bangladesh will be under water soon as the sea level rises due to global warming. But this prediction has yet to come to pass. And certainly, there have been no commotions about this recently. Does this mean that the threat has gone away or just that people ignore such predictions? To tell you the truth, whether the predictions are correct or not, people's survival spirit will go on and Bangladesh will carry on regardless.

Bangladesh is a land of water: rain, rivers and sea all combining to make Bangladesh a land of water. Annual floods and the monsoon season thrash mainland Bangladesh and these are the time relatives of British-Bangladeshis make their most ardent requests for financial help. And this help comes through cash wired to relatives mainly in the Sylhet area. Those who do not have relatives in the UK simply have to do the best they can. Many people die during the floods, as well as the cyclones and during the winter time. So, it can be said that Bangladesh is a country left to the whims of the weather.

Yes, there are predictions that if the sea level rises by just one metre, 20 million people will be displaced in Bangladesh. But do people seem worried about this? Not really, life just carries on.

My view is that if life gives you lemon, make lemonade. So, if Bangladesh has been blessed with water, why not turn it into an advantage? Why not think about ways to turn this water into a usable asset? Build dams, make use of hydro energy. But I fear that these types of solutions have been proposed but because of political conflict, there is no political will as the parties are squabbling and too busy with power struggles to be able to construct a positive solution to the water problem.

My initial question is why work hard all year round when all your efforts are washed away every year by the floods? The answer is simple: people have no choice but to carry on regardless. There is no option of not to do anything because that will mean starvation.

Foreign Aid

Bangladesh is still dependent on foreign aid. But this aid (which usually comes after a cyclone or flood or another natural disaster) does not reach the people. Rather, it is pocketed by corrupt government officials. And it is not without evidence that Transparency International labelled Bangladesh as the most corrupt country in the world (between 2001 and 2004). So, is there any point in sending aid to Bangladesh? And donors know full well that the aid will not reach the people, so why continue to give aid?

My suspicion is that the aid comes with conditions. These are financial conditions. One might typically suspect that in return for aid money, donors are given access to the raw materials such as natural gas and access to the market of the Bangladeshi population.

So, I can't imagine that such a capitalist and greedy nation as the United States would give the sum of 40 billion dollars since 1971 without asking for favours in return.

Identity has a say

The second-generation Bangladeshis (British-Bangladeshis) are leaving the Bangladeshi characteristics – they are beginning to become British. Language for example; Bengali is being replaced by English as the language being spoken at home, so they are losing their mother-tongue.

I always ask myself 'In what language do I think?' and the answer is English. Does that make me English, even though I was born in Bangladesh?

A person's identity is a personal choice. Nobody can dictate your identity to you. And so, for me I identify myself as British-Bangladeshi. Not rejecting my roots and parental identity but also recognising that Britain is my home and English is my language. But I remember while on holiday in Bangladesh I started to think in Bengali. So, I suppose much of our identity depends on our environment, if we allow it to be.

There are a significant number of Hindu, Buddhist and Christian populations within Bangladesh's borders, but Islam is officially the religion of Bangladesh as the Muslims form the largest group.

Bangladeshi hospitality is second to none. Visitors are treated with warmth and cordiality and every guest or visitor is entitled to a cup of tea and biscuits as an obligation. If you visit a Bangladeshi at his or her home, you will unquestionably be honoured, as honouring the guest is part of Bangladeshi culture. And this culture comes from Islam. There will at least be a hot cup of tea and biscuits prepared for you and if it's dinner or lunch time, there will be a plate ready for you.

The staple food of Bangladesh is rice (its many varieties) as well as fish (and its many varieties). Meat is a luxury for the poor, but this is changing as poverty levels seem to be declining; even though this is happening very slowly.

A love of songs and Indian movies is what the Bangladeshis whether from London or Bangladesh are made of. I can say that within my generation of British-Bangladeshis, there is a great love for Hindi

music and films. I recall with fondness that my friends were the first to see the latest Bollywood films and to hear the latest songs. So much so that they can add the Hindi language to their language repertoire. What makes Bollywood films so enticing is that they are mainly musicals and they are almost always about love and this is what captures their audience.

Spirituality

Bangladesh remains a land of spirit and spiritual leaders. There are three main religions which call for spiritual enlightenment: Islam (the majority in Bangladesh are Muslims and believe in Islam), Hinduism and Buddhism (who are a minority). The Hindu and Buddhist spiritualists ask mankind to reject this temporal life and seek spiritual enlightenment with the ultimate goal of becoming one with nature.

No spiritual conversation can take place in Bangladesh without mentioning the name of Sha Jalal, the great spiritualist. Sha Jalal is seen as a saint by his admirers. His tomb in Sylhet is venerated by what I would call those as ignorant of the Shariah. He was a great figure in Sylheti spiritualism even though he was a native of Turkey from where he emigrated and settled in Sylhet hundreds of years ago.

People engage in un-Islamic traditions at his tomb and do things which could easily take them out of the fold of Islam, even if they do these things through ignorance.

Some complain that the people practise actions which are close to heretical behaviour and a clear deviation of what Sha Jalal called for himself which is the detachment from the worldly life and ascension to the higher values. Sha Jalal was a Sufi, and this is what Sufis call for.

The spiritualism seen in Bangladesh is one of Sufism and mystics and the 'enlightened' people. But thankfully this brand of Islam is not embedded in Bangladeshi culture. Instead what we see is groups such as Tabligi Jamaat and Jamat-e-Islam making headway for the hearts and minds of the Muslim population.

Mysticism and Sufism has not had much of an impact in British-Bangladeshis. Yes, you get the one or two 'saints' but for the most part British-Bangladeshis have been influenced by Ikhwan-ul-Muslimeen, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Al-Muhajiroon and the two main Islamic groups in Bangladesh – Jamat-e-Islam and Tabligi Jamaat.

All Islamic groups have noticed that there is a problem with the moral and social standards amongst the Muslims. So, why is there such a decline in moral and social standards? Many point to the effect that Capitalism has had on the Bangladeshi society. With the development of the criteria of benefit (if it's in your benefit, then do it and don't worry about the moral or ethical consequences) and harm (if it harms you, then stay away from it and don't worry about the moral or ethical consequences) there has been an absolute disaster where the moral fibre is concerned. It is now a society riven with those calling for the social, ethical and moral betterment and those calling for greed and ravenous behaviour, each at loggerheads.

People did not tell lies before, whereas now lying is a way of life; they did not break their word, were reliable, whereas now people cannot be trusted. Ask anyone of age and they will tell you that things were much better in the previous generations. Money used to be a means to an end but now

acquiring money is the end game. These values directly contradict the Islamic way of life. A way of life which asks mankind to live and exist in accordance with the moral and ethical values.

Islam also called mankind to acknowledge the spirit and spiritual value. It called mankind to recognise that there is a creator of the universe and that He alone is the Creator of the universe and everything in it. He called mankind to live within His injunctions if mankind is to truly prosper.

Political situation of Bangladesh

They are held back by political upheaval, a political situation where the two main political parties (Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party) settle scores and leave the public in the middle to fend for themselves. There is a third party, Jamat-e-Islam who appeals to the moderate political Islamic persuasion.

Bangladesh politics has not moved far from the War of Independence and the hunting of the so called 'war criminals' who sided with Pakistan during the War of Independence. Awami League continues to hunt the 'traitors' who worked with Pakistan and bring about 'justice' for them even after such a long time.

It is enough to say that these three political parties are at each other's throats, leaving most of the public at the receiving end of endless strikes (hartal) and score-settling between them. The Awami League and Bangladesh National Party (BNP) believe that that Bangladesh should remain a secular state, whereas Jamat-e-Islam believes it should be a 'democratic Islamic State'.

Bangladesh is a wonderful country with great potential, it happens to be one the leaders in garment production as well footwear. The problem is that it, I fear, will be eaten up by the local superpower, India. Many of the British-Bangladeshis and the Bangladesh National Party complain that Awami League is too close to India, allowing India to take over the role that a Bangladeshi government should have.

I can't help but think that the local superpower, India, is behind much of what's going on in Bangladesh's politics. After all, Sheik Hasina, the current head of state is so intertwined with India and it is an open secret that she is an agent of India. Also, historically, the role that India played in Bangladesh's Liberation War in helping Bangladesh's hand in separating from Pakistan leads me to think that Bangladesh is another one of India's puppets.

Many argue that Bangladesh is anything but an independent state. That it is controlled and run by India. In fact, I once read an intelligence report that commented that the Bangladeshi secret service was highly infiltrated by the Indian secret service and so Bangladesh has little influence over its own affairs.

What is unfortunate is the politicisation of education facilities, with unrest and turbulence which is not conducive to proper study and development. Students are too busy playing politics when they should be studying. Therefore, those who can afford it send their children to private schools or they send them abroad for their studies. What happens then is the brain drain, where serious students with expert skills go abroad and do not contribute to their native land of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is infamous for its red tape and bureaucracy. Rules and policies are never stable, they change all the time, especially after a change in government. This is a big sign of political weakness,

disability and score-settling. The ones who suffer from this bureaucracy are those who must deal with the bureaucrats. When you have to buy or sell property; when you have to apply for a visa; when you want to set up a business; if you want to apply for a loved one to join you abroad and have to deal with the immigration department. In all of these circumstances you will be astounded at the bureaucracy you have to deal with.

What of Bangladesh's future? Well, what type future Bangladesh will have depends on the three dominate political parties and how they progress or regress. They are or should be representing the people's wishes and there needs to be a leadership of a new kind, through the entity of Jamat-e-Islam. They need to provide the people with a new leadership based on Islam and they need to do it alone without a coalition or alliance with any other group.

I would support a government formed by Jamat-e-Islam simply because they reflect my moderate view of Islam. They have achieved a lot over the time they have been in Bangladesh and I believe they are reflective of the beliefs of the people of Bangladesh. They need to have the patience and confidence that they can go all the way and form a viable government for the people of Bangladesh.

There are signs that Bangladesh is doing relatively well in some areas and that there is great potential in other areas. It is doing well in literacy rates; economic development and development of women's rights. But we as Muslims must remember that that we must choose developments which agree with our creed; thus, the development of women's rights, for example, must not be tainted with Western culture or values.