

Bangladeshis in Britain



At the annual *Baishakhi Mela* New Year's festival in London



Curry eateries are as much a part of British life as fish-and-chip shops

British Bangladeshis emigrated to the UK primarily from Sylhet, a region in the northeast of Bangladesh, where Sylheti is spoken as a dialect of the Bengali language. In the Tower Hamlets section of London, almost 33 % of the population now has a Bangladeshi background. Because of the large London community – the youngest and fastest-growing in Britain – Bangladeshis in Bangladesh and India refer to their London 'cousins' as *Londonis*. Other important communities in the UK are found in Bradford, Oldham, Luton and Birmingham, as well as smaller clusters in Sunderland, Newcastle, Cardiff and Manchester. According to the National 2001 Census around 300,000 Bangladeshis live in the United Kingdom. Current estimates, however, suggest that there might be as many as 500,000 living in the UK.

Bangladesh used to be part of British India, and people from that region started coming to Britain in the early 19th century, looking for a better life, though still only in small numbers. The numbers went up dramatically in the 1970s, one major reason being the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971: After the independence of India and Pakistan from Britain in 1947, Bangladesh had become part of Pakistan. But relations between West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) soon grew bad, and the war caused many Sylhetis to flee¹. Many of them settled in London's Tower Hamlets neighbourhood, around Spitalfield and Brick Lane, in overcrowded living conditions.

The Bangladeshi immigrants there found mainly low-paying jobs as unskilled workers in small factories, in the textile trade, as mechanics, and as cooks or waiters when the 'Indian restaurant' concept started to become popular. The early male immigrants spoke only little English, and were poorly educated and illiterate². This greatly limited their possibilities to communicate with the British or to enjoy the benefits³ of higher education. This lack of education caused a high unemployment rate when a decline in the textile industry throughout East London took place.

Apart from unemployment, the Bangladeshi community in London also had to face racial discrimination and the rise of the skinhead scene. Skinheads would come to Brick Lane to attack the Bangladeshis and vandalize⁴ their flats and shops. These actions reached a first sad climax when in 1978 a 25-year-old Bangladeshi textile worker, Altab Ali, was murdered on his way home by three teenage boys.

Today, the *Londonis* are generally much more accepted than in the past, and Brick Lane (also called 'Banglatown' or 'Curry Capital') is the centre of a vibrant⁵ Bangladeshi community and cultural scene, where street signs, shop ads, and neon signs are in Bengali, their native tongue. ('Bengali' is also an alternative name for 'Bangladeshi'.) And big, colourful events such as the outdoor celebrations in London each spring for the Bengali New Year (*Baishakhi Mela*) have become hugely popular far beyond the Bangladeshi community.

¹to flee [fli:] to be forced to leave one's country (e. g. in a war) • ²illiterate [i'litrət] unable to read or write • ³benefit ['benifit] advantage • ⁴to vandalize ['vændlaɪz] to damage, to destroy • ⁵vibrant ['vaɪbrənt] full of life and action

Nevertheless, Bangladeshis in the UK still face problems such as unemployment, overcrowded living spaces, and health problems. And, like many immigrants who start new lives in a country with a completely different culture, they have to deal with problems such as ignorance, discrimination, and the so-called 'threat of the unknown'. These are only a few factors why many Bangladeshis still find it difficult to fully integrate into British society.

Feeling somehow 'left out' may partly explain why some Bangladeshis seek the comfort of their own community, with parents strongly



Whether it is an arranged or a love marriage, Bengali couples in traditional dress are a common sight at weddings.

6controversial [ˌkɒntrəˈvɜːʃl] kontrovers

encouraging their children to attend Bengali classes to learn their native language and to maintain their traditions. One such tradition is the arranged marriage. A combination of both Bengali and Muslim traditions, this form of marriage is still very attractive to many Bengali parents and grandparents as a way for the Londonis and the Bangladeshi-born to stay connected. Though more and more Bangladeshis now ignore tradition and marry for love, arranged marriages still exist and are a topic of controversial⁶ discussion in Britain.

Over the past 40–50 years, the British Bangladeshis have come a long way. Life in Britain no longer only means bad housing, low-paying jobs, poor education, unemployment and discrimination. While all that still exists, there are also plenty of stories of Bangladeshis finding success as IT specialists, doctors, teachers, or whatever else they choose to do. Bangladeshis are also represented in politics and the media: Baroness Uddin was the first Bengali and Muslim woman to enter into the House of Lords, and Bengali TV presenters are no longer anything unusual. And the Bangladeshi actors Shefali Chowdhury and Afshan Azad both starred in the *Harry Potter* films, contributing to the British media landscape and – moreover – to diversity in Britain.



1 Comprehension

- Structuring:** To show you have understood the text, work with a partner to decide what the main idea behind each paragraph is. Then write a heading for each paragraph.
- Summarizing:** Write a summary containing the most important facts from the text. Then exchange summaries with a partner for peer editing. (Watch for both language and content when editing.)



2 A newspaper article

- You are working for a quality newspaper and have been asked to write an article about Bangladeshi immigrants in London. Use the text above and the Internet, and refer to S22 in your book's Skills section regarding the proper writing style.
- Present your article in class. You could either read it out or put it on a wall-newspaper.



3 Internet research with presentation

In groups of three, choose one immigrant group that can be found in large numbers in Germany (e.g. Turks, Greeks, Italians, immigrants from Balkan states, ...). Do Internet research to prepare a presentation (S28 in your book). Include the following subjects in your research and results:

- country of origin
- reasons for leaving home country (political situation, religious conflicts, job situation, etc.)
- preferred area to settle in Germany; reasons
- second- and third-generation immigrants
- role of traditions from old country

Lösungsvorschläge: 1 a) Section 1: A few facts / Basic information; Section 2: Arriving in large numbers; Section 3: No education, low-paying jobs; Section 4: Discrimination; Section 5: Increased acceptance / A part of everyday life in the UK; Section 6: Room for improvement / Still facing problems; Section 7: Traditional vs. modern life; Section 8: Happy ending? / Success stories
Ex. 1 b), 2 & 3: Individuelle Antworten