

SOUTH ASIAN, BENGALI

ବ୍ୟାଙ୍ଗି



Pawel Biernowski

Location: With a population of 300,000 in Myanmar, Bengali-speaking people are the largest South Asian language group in the country, more than twice the size of the second-place Tamil-speaking community. They are concentrated around Sittwe and other areas of Rakhine State on the Bay of Bengal, and in Myanmar's two largest cities, Yangon and Mandalay. Over 280 million Bengali-speaking people live throughout the world,¹ with 164 million in Bangladesh and 107 million in India. The name Bangladesh is derived from the word Bengali, and India's West Bengal state is named after this group. Bengali communities are found in at least 40 countries around the world, with significant populations in almost every Middle East country, where many work in construction and as manual laborers.

Identity: Bengali is not the name of a specific ethnic group; rather, it is a regional language spoken as the first language by approximately 380 different people groups and as a second language by another 770 groups.² Although the number of Bengali people in Myanmar has increased from 65,211 at the time of the 1931 census,³ they have never been granted citizenship, although they are permitted to hold ID cards for verification purposes. In the wake of the genocide launched against Rohingya Muslims in recent decades, Bengali Muslims

have worn armbands to show they are different from the Rohingya, while Bengali Hindu women wear bindis (dots on their foreheads) to show they are not Muslims. These actions have been necessitated by the Myanmar authorities' insistence on applying the term "Bengalis" to the hated Rohingya people. To protect themselves, many Bengalis have begun calling themselves "Burmese Hindus."

Language: Bengali is part of the easternmost arm of the Indo-European language family (which includes English), the largest linguistic affiliation in the world, spreading from western Europe across the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent to Southeast Asia.

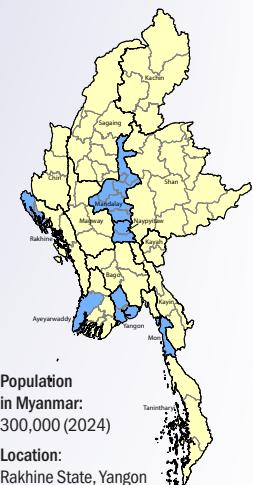
History: The first Bengali people were brought to Myanmar by the leaders of the Mrauk-U kingdom, which flourished from 1430-1785.⁴ Brahmins from Bengal were brought to serve as astrologers to the royal family, and the Dom caste was employed to clean the hundreds of temples and pagodas in Mrauk-U. During the British colonial era, large numbers of Bengali Hindus came to Myanmar to serve in various capacities, but ethnic tensions in the 1930s and 1960s caused thousands of Bengali families to flee the country. Since that time, Bengali people in Myanmar have had a deeply troubled existence.⁵

Customs: In Myanmar, it seems the Bengali were grudgingly accepted by local groups until tensions

exploded when "Muslims from Bengal began to marry Burmese women, exploiting the simple traditions of the Burmese. Since Islamic law permitted polygamy, intermarriages became a common practice among the Indian Muslims. What added fuel to the fire was that many of them deserted their wives when they returned to their native villages."⁶ While Bengalis are mostly classified by their language, "their culture remains very diversified. The Bengalis are a proud people, highly ambitious, and always striving for excellence.... They remain very proud of their cultural heritage."⁷

Religion: Approximately 70 percent of Bengali people in Myanmar today are Muslims and just under 30 percent are Hindus. In Yangon City, the Durga Bari Hindu Temple was built by Bengalis 130 years ago and still serves their community today.

Christianity: The Bengali are one of the least-reached people groups in Myanmar, with just one in every 200 people estimated to be followers of Jesus Christ. Despite their having been in the country for two centuries, almost no sources mention any Christian work targeting the Bengali people. The Bengali Bible has been in print since 1809 and other Christian resources like the Jesus film exist, but little to no outreach takes place among this group, which remains firmly entrenched between the two pillars of Islam and Hinduism.



Population in Myanmar:
300,000 (2024)

Location:
Rakhine State, Yangon Region, Mandalay Region, Ayeyarwady Region, Mon State

Language Family:
Indo-European

Main Religion:
Islam (70.0%)

Christians:
1,400 (0.5%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
300,000 in Myanmar (2024 Asia Harvest)
286,000 (2017 J. Leclerc)
65,211 (1931 census)

Other Countries:
164 million in Bangladesh
107 million in India
2,116,192 in Saudi Arabia
1,089,917 in United Arab Emirates
900,000 in United Kingdom
800,000 in Malaysia¹

Other Names: Bangala, Bangalee, Bangali, Bangla, Bangladeshi, Bangla-Bhasa

Location: Rakhine State; Sittwe and Maungdaw districts; Yangon Region; Mandalay Region; Ayeyarwady Region; Pathein District; Mon State: Mawlamyine District

Language: Bengali [ben]

Dialects: 0

Scripture: Bible 1809
New Testament 1801
Portions 1800

Jesus film: Bengali

Global Recordings:
Bengali #172

People ID: 10790

