

Article

The Bangladeshi Diaspora in the United States: History and Portrait

Morsheda Akhter ^{1,*} and Philip Q. Yang ^{2,*}¹ Ministry of Education, Bangladesh Secretariat, Dhaka 1000, Bangladesh² Department of Social Sciences and Historical Studies, Texas Woman's University (TWU), Denton, TX 76204, USA

* Correspondence: makter@twu.edu (M.A.); pyang@twu.edu (P.Q.Y.)

Abstract: Despite the rapid growth of the Bangladeshi diaspora in the USA, knowledge about this new diasporic community remains very limited. This study argues and demonstrates that the Bangladeshi diaspora in the USA is a fast-growing and sizable diasporic community that requires systematic research and better understanding. It delineates the history of the Bangladeshi diaspora to the USA in four periods and documents the phenomenal growth of the Bangladeshi diasporic community in the USA since 1981, using data from the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS). By taking into account the legal Bangladeshi immigration as well as the emigration and mortality rates of immigrants and undocumented Bangladeshi immigration, it estimates the current size of the Bangladeshi diasporic community in the USA at about 500,000 instead of a range of low-to-mid 200,000s normally cited. Additionally, using the pooled samples of the 2001–2019 American Community Surveys (ACS) and other ACS data, as well as the DHS data, this paper provides a demographic and socioeconomic portrait of the Bangladeshi diasporic community in the USA. The findings are generalizable to the population and fill some important gaps in the literature.

Keywords: Bangladeshi diaspora; USA; migration; history; profile



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1. Introduction

Although the trickle of migration from present-day Bangladesh to the United States of America (USA) can be traced back to the nineteenth century and continued until the 1970s, the Bangladeshi diaspora to the USA in large volume is a relatively new phenomenon that has transpired in the last several decades. However, as we argue and demonstrate in this article, the Bangladeshi community in the USA has been rapidly growing since the 1980s and has reached a critical mass. Based on the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS), the [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2020\)](#) estimated the number of Bangladeshis in the USA at 213,372. Bangladesh government officials with first-hand experience of the Bangladeshi immigrant population estimated that the number of Bangladeshis in the USA is in the neighborhood of 500,000 ([Felts 2020](#); [Sultana 2005](#)). The International Organization for Migration also put the estimated number of long-term Bangladeshi migrants in the USA in 2004 at 500,000 ([ILO 2014](#)). Nonetheless, these estimates have not been confirmed by the US data. In contrast to their rapid growth, the knowledge of the Bangladeshi diaspora to the USA is strikingly very limited. Many questions entreat answers. How has the Bangladeshi diaspora to the USA evolved over time? In particular, how have the volumes and patterns of the Bangladeshi diaspora to the USA changed over time? What forces have driven the Bangladeshis' cross-border movements to the USA? Under what conditions or programs did Bangladeshis migrate to the USA recently? What is the size of the Bangladeshi diasporic community? What are the basic demographic compositions of the Bangladeshi diasporic community? What is the spatial pattern of the Bangladeshi diasporic community? How well does the Bangladeshi diasporic community fare socioeconomically? We do not have very good answers to many of these questions. The available information is

largely fragmentary and preliminary. Some information based on qualitative sources lacks generalizability. We need to better understand the migration history of Bangladeshis to the USA and the Bangladeshi diasporic community in America so we can better serve this booming community and guide its healthy development in the future.

This paper seeks to provide a history of the Bangladeshi diaspora to the USA and a demographic and socioeconomic portrait of the Bangladeshi diasporic community in the USA based on verifiable data from government agencies. The overarching research questions of this study are as follows: (1) What is the historical development of the Bangladeshi diaspora to the USA? (2) What is the current status, especially demographic and socioeconomic status, of the Bangladeshi diasporic community? The specific questions posed in the preceding paragraph can fit very well under these two overarching questions. The literature is replete with various definitions of “diaspora”, from the original meaning of the displacement of Jews out of their homeland in the classical and pre-modern times to the dispersion of Greeks, Armenians, and Africans later and to the transnational movement of people from their home country to other countries and their communities formed in modern times (see, for example, [Cohen 1996](#); [Clifford 1994](#); [Rouse 1991](#); [Safran 1991](#); [Tölölian 1991](#)). Despite different opinions regarding what conditions must be met to define a diaspora and what the term connotes, most scholars tend to agree on at least two things. First, diaspora involves migration out of one’s homeland (e.g., [Cohen 1996](#); [Clifford 1994](#)). Second, in addition to the process of migration to other lands, the communities formed by emigration can also be called diasporas (e.g., [Cohen 1996](#); [Rouse 1991](#); [Safran 1991](#); [Tölölian 1991](#)). Hence, this paper uses the term “Bangladeshi diaspora” to refer to one of two things: (1) the migration of Bangladeshis out of their homeland and (2) the Bangladeshi diasporic community. The remainder of this paper first briefly describes the data and method used for this analysis. Then, the bulk of the paper presents the results of the analysis. The results contain two main sections. The first section examines the migration of the Bangladeshis to the USA. The second section analyzes the demographics of the Bangladeshi diasporic community in America. The Conclusion section summarizes the findings and discusses the implications of the findings.

2. Materials and Methods

The data for this study come from two main sources. One is the Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) of the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, including its predecessor US Immigration and Naturalization Service (US INS), now within the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS). *Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service* and *Statistical Yearbook of Immigration and Naturalization Service* published annually by US INS and *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* produced by the OIS annually provide information on the numbers and types of Bangladeshi immigrants. The second source is the pooled samples of the 2001–2019 ACS collected by the US Bureau of the Census supplemented by other ACS data. We used multiple years of the ACS data to ensure the trustworthiness of the estimates based on large sample sizes. The ACS data cover various demographic compositions, socioeconomic characteristics, and geographic concentrations of Bangladeshi immigrants. Only descriptive statistics were utilized in this study.

3. History of the Bangladeshi Diaspora to the USA

The Bangladeshi diaspora to the USA is one of the Bangladeshi diasporas around the world. The largest Bangladeshi diasporas are to Saudi Arabia (over 2.4 million) and United Arab Emirates (over 2.2 million) ([ILO 2014](#)). Sizable Bangladeshi diasporas can also be found in a number of Asian countries such as Malaysia, Oman, Singapore, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar, and in some European countries, especially the United Kingdom, as well as Italy and Greece ([ILO 2014](#)). There are also significant Bangladeshi diasporas in Canada, Australia, Japan, and South Africa. The USA is the largest Bangladeshi diaspora in the Americas. Although the migration of Bangladeshis to the USA is more than a century old, the first Bangladeshi immigrants to the United States were not officially classified until

1971, when Bangladesh became an independent nation ([Anam 2019](#)). Previously, arrivals from this region were classified as Indians or Pakistanis. Bangladesh became independent in 1971 as a result of the Bangladesh Liberation War; however, the country's cultural and historical roots run far deeper since Bangladesh's recorded history extends over 1500 years ([Jones 2008](#)). The history of the region is intertwined with India's and Bengal's. After the partitioning of British India, the province presently known as Bangladesh was called East Pakistan. After attaining independence, the culture of the country started to flourish more gradually ([Ahmed 2004](#)). Although this has never been done before, after analyzing the data and literature, we roughly divide the Bangladeshi diaspora to the USA into four periods: (1) early Bengali immigration (the first wave of Bangladeshi immigration), 1881–1947; (2) the interlude of Bangladeshi immigration, 1948–1960; (3) the second wave of Bangladeshi immigration, 1961–1980; and (4) the third wave of Bangladeshi immigration after 1980. Each of the four periods is elaborated below.

3.1. Early Bangladeshi Immigration (or the First Wave), 1881–1947

The onset of Bangladeshi immigration to the United States dates back to the late nineteenth century from the Bengal region of India, or what is now Bangladesh ([Bald 2013](#)). Until recently, these early Bangladeshi immigrants remained largely unknown in the literature on South Asian migration to the United States, and the narrative of this early immigration had been largely neglected ([Bald 2007](#); [Leonard 1997](#)). The challenge for the data on the early Bangladeshi immigration is that the precise number of Bangladeshi immigrants is indeterminable because Bangladesh was not an independent country, so Bengali immigrants were lumped together with Indian immigrants in the official immigration statistics from the OIS of the DHS. Table 1 shows that, from 1881 to 1950, a total of 11,275 immigrants from India were admitted to the USA, but only a portion of this number was Bengali immigrants. We can only conjecture that about a few thousand Bengalis immigrated to the USA during this era. This number was not huge but still significant. Hence, we label this early Bangladeshi immigration as the first wave. We chose 1947 as the closing year of this period because 1947 was the year of the partition of British India.

Table 1. Numbers of Bangladeshi immigrants to the US, 1881–2020.

Year	Number of Immigrants
1881–1920	7132 ^a
1921–1950	4143 ^a
1951–1960	534 ^b
1961–1970	2698 ^b
1971–1980	3854 ^c
1981–1990	15,191
1991–2000	65,997
2001–2010	106,740
2011–2020	145,307

^a Immigrants from India including Bengalis. ^b Immigrants from Pakistan including Bengalis. ^c This number does not include the numbers for 1971 and 1972, which are not available from the Statistical Yearbooks of the INS but probably totaled around 300 based on the numbers in 1973 and 1974. Sources: [U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service \(1941–1986\)](#), [U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service \(1978–2001\)](#), [U.S. Department of Homeland Security \(2020, 2023\)](#).

This Bengali migration movement was linked to Bangladesh's colonial history. During this period, several batches of Bengalis immigrated to the USA. As [Bald \(2013, 2015\)](#) documented, as early as around 1885, small numbers of Bengalis from the Hooghly District of West Bengal in India arrived in port cities such as New York and Baltimore every year to sell such silk goods as shawls, handkerchiefs, bedspreads, tablecloths, and pillow covers. They were called by Americans as “chikondards” or “chikandards” because what they sold were chikons or chikans. Over time, these peddlers expanded their trading places to New Jersey and New Orleans; they established their households ([Bald 2013](#)). Their trading networks spread to other places like Charleston, Memphis, Chattanooga, Galveston, Dallas,

Birmingham, Atlanta, and Jacksonville. These trades lasted until around 1935 (Bald 2013; Paul 2008).

Starting in about 1910, another batch of Bengalis from East Bengal (Chittagong, Noakhali, and Sylhet) arrived in the United States as lascars or Khalasis (Bald 2013). These were low-level seamen or dockyard laborers who deserted British ships due to aberrant and intolerable working conditions (Anam 2019; Bald 2013). After arriving in New York or San Francisco, they jumped ship to get out of poverty, and they may have lacked expertise at sea (Jones 2008; Sikder 2008). The USA was only one of the countries they landed in (Carey and Shukur 1985). They tended to be uneducated or illiterate and poor. These ship-jumpers found work in shipyards, steel plants, automotive assembly lines, munitions factories, and so on. Moreover, unlike the chikondars, who migrated from the region of Bengal, which is now India, these Khalasis can be called the Bangladeshi pioneers in the annals of Bangladeshis in the United States (Anam 2019). The Bangladeshi immigrants (together with Punjabi Muslim and Hindu immigrants) came to meet the cheap labor demands of the rail, agricultural, and timber sectors in California, Oregon, and Washington, just like the East Asians (Paul 2008).

During the colonial era, in addition to traders and lascars, there were other groups of Bangladeshi migrants. For example, indentured servants regularly traveled to the United States on commerce ships. The British dispatched Indian sepoy (soldiers) on international expeditions (Bharucha 2016). Following the partition of Bengal in 1905 at the hands of British viceroy George Lord Curzon, some immigrants also included dissident Hindu and Muslim student activists who fled to the United States (Anam 2019; Bald 2013). Early settlers' main occupations included mariners, seamstresses, tailors, jewelers, locksmiths, painters, and glaziers; some were engineers, lawyers, accountants, clerks, physicians, etc. Almost all of the early settlers were Muslims. The majority of them were men. The highest concentration of Bengali immigrants was in New York, California, Texas, Illinois, Florida, New Jersey, Michigan, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Ohio (U.S. Bureau of Immigration 1914).

The lives of the early Bengali immigrants were not easy. They were compelled to work for exceptionally long hours and were exposed to harsh working conditions and labor violations (Anam 2019; Bald 2013). Moreover, they faced anti-Asian racist attitudes and discrimination (Anam 2019). Like other South Asian immigrants, they were barred from owning land, obtaining US citizenship, bringing their family members to the United States, and even marrying local white women (Ahmad 2011; Leonard 1997; Purkayastha 2005). Their rights for naturalization were not granted until the Luce–Celler Act in 1946 (Leonard 2000). Because of anti-miscegenation laws prohibiting them from marrying white women, the initial wave of Bengali male immigrants married largely Mexican, black, Puerto Rican, or mixed-race women (Jones 2008).

3.2. *The Interlude of Bangladeshi Immigration, 1948–1960*

The partition of India began shortly after India gained independence from British rule in 1947, as two independent countries were formed: India and Pakistan (Bhattacharya and Schoppelrey 2004). The majority of Indians were Hindus, while the majority of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis were Muslims. The Bengal region was also partitioned. West Bengal stayed in India. East Bengal remained in Pakistan and was renamed East Pakistan. Between 1948 and 1960, Bangladeshi immigration to the USA essentially came to a hiatus. As Table 1 makes clear, only 534 immigrants from Pakistan, including some Bengalis, were admitted as immigrants to the United States during this period of time as a result of the partition and political turmoil. Note that not all of them were Bengalis. Who were these small numbers of Bengali immigrants? As most of the dockworkers from East Pakistan came to work in Kidderpore, the largest port in undivided Bengal in the city of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), they were suddenly fired due to nationality problems since they were not Indians (Anam 2019). For that reason, they sought work elsewhere in the world, particularly in the United States, where they arrived as seafarers and dock laborers. Also, Bengalis with higher education began to migrate to the United States as students, physicians, engineers, scientists,

professors, accountants, and so on (Anam 2019; Bald 2013). Under the National Origins Act of 1924, each independent Asian country was allocated an annual immigration quota of 100. Before the partition of India, Indians constituted the majority of the 100 quota. After 1947, as an independent country, Pakistan also received a quota of 100. Some Bangladeshis immigrated from East Pakistan, but they were lumped together with Pakistanis in the US immigration reports then.

3.3. *The Second Wave of Bangladeshi Immigration, 1961–1980*

Table 1 also shows the continuous growth of Bangladeshi immigrants to the United States between 1961 and 1980, with a total of several thousand immigrants in the two decades, a relatively small but significant flow. More Bangladeshi immigrants began arriving in the United States in the 1960s, marking the start of the second wave of Bangladeshi immigration. Many East Bengalis came to the United States in the 1960s, right before Bangladesh's independence, to flee political persecution or, in the case of religious minorities, religious prejudice (Zhao 2014). The Immigrant and Nationality Act of 1965 signed by President Lyndon Johnson restarted the second Bangladeshi immigration surge (Leonard 1997; Sandhu and Madathil 2008). This act took effect in 1968, the most significant year in US immigration history for South Asian countries and most other Asian countries. With employment-based preferences, this new immigration law gave priority to highly trained individuals, such as scientists, physicians, and engineers (Bhattacharya and Schoppelrey 2004; Purkayastha 2005). As a result, many Indians and Pakistanis, including some Bangladeshis from East Pakistan, took advantage of the growing opportunities for working and residing in the United States (Ahmad 2011). College-educated, professional, and middle-class affluent people constituted the majority of the second wave of immigrants (Paul 2008). As these immigrants acquired US citizenship, they sent for their families to join them in the USA. There was also a consistent stream of Indian and Bangladeshi students in US universities and colleges; many gained permanent resident status after graduation. More than half of all Indian immigrants (including Bangladeshis) who changed their status to resident aliens in the 1950s and 1960s did so as students (Leonard 1997).

In 1971, East Pakistan was partitioned from Pakistan to become an independent country. As a result, immigration records of Bangladeshis began to be kept separately from those of Indians and Pakistanis. Beginning in 1971, the number of immigrants to the USA from Bangladesh rose slowly during the decade, from 154 in 1973 to 147 in 1974, 404 in 1975, and 590 in 1976. As can be calculated from Table 1, the total number of Bangladeshi immigrants from 1971 to 1980 was around 4154, or an average of 415 per year. Overpopulation and poverty in the region were the primary causes of Bangladeshi emigration (Ahmad 2011). Bangladeshi immigrants settled in every state, with a concentration in the metropolitan areas of New York, New Jersey, and California. About a third of these immigrants were professionals, with the remaining two thirds being white-collar employees (Paul 2008). The majority of these immigrants were young males, while Bangladesh was still undergoing a difficult economic and political situation (Paul 2008). These educated people seeking a better life in America compounded Bangladesh's challenges to build itself. Around half of the immigrants were already married at the time of arrival, and they had to wait for other family members to join them. They established civic organizations and clubs in their areas and decided to remain with their ethnic and religious groups (Ahmad 2011; Jones 2008; Kibria 2013).

3.4. *The Third Wave of Bangladeshi Immigration, 1981 Onwards*

Table 1 demonstrates further the third or latest wave of Bangladeshi immigration to the United States since 1981. As evidenced in the table, since 1981, the number of Bangladeshi immigrants has steadily skyrocketed from 15,191 in 1981–1990, to 65,997 in 1991–2000, 106,740 in 2001–2010, and 145,307 in 2011–2020. The total number of admitted Bangladeshi immigrants from 1981 to 2020 was 333,235.

Why has Bangladeshi immigration increased so dramatically during this latest wave of immigration? The demand for immigration from Bangladesh has been very strong. Many Bangladeshis seek a better life for themselves and especially for their children and families. The Immigration Act of 1990 has also had a great impact on this wave of Bangladeshi immigration. Two programs under this act particularly benefitted Bangladeshis. The first was the Diversity Visa (DV) Program. The purpose of this program is to diversify the sources of immigration through the lottery process (Yang 2011). Only countries that have sent fewer than 50,000 immigrants in the previous five years were eligible to participate. Bangladesh certainly met the eligibility requirement. According to the data from the DHS presented by Yang (2011), a total of 34,040 Bangladeshis were admitted as diversity immigrants from 1992 to 2009. The DV Program admitted 6768 Bangladeshis as diversity immigrants from 2010 to 2013. The DV Program has clearly played an essential role in building migratory networks for groups like Bangladeshis who do not have a long history of migration to the United States. Another program was the H-1B visa program or the temporary foreign workers in highly skilled “specialty occupations” such as computer systems analysts and programmers, physicians, professors, engineers, managers, and accountants (Ahmad 2011; Clark et al. 2007; Yang 2011). Note that H-1B visa holders are not immigrants or green card holders. They can stay for up to three years initially and extend for another three years. Nevertheless, they can adjust their immigration status to permanent residents. A significant number of Bangladeshis entered the United States through this program and adjusted their status to permanent residency. Recent immigrants from Bangladesh also include tribes of the Hill Peoples of Chittagong, who are culturally distinct from Bangladesh’s Bengalis. There are Bangladeshis who came to America through a backdoor, moving to the Middle East, Australia, or Africa for employment before coming to the United States (Jones 2008).

The influx of a large number of Bangladeshis since the 1980s has diversified the Bangladeshi diasporic community. The professionals and students who settled in the early 1980s continued to bring their family members, a subset of immigrants who were less educated and less proficient in English than their forefathers, to the US through family reunification. According to data from the US Immigration and Naturalization Service, family sponsorship accounted for 57.4 percent of Bangladeshi legal arrivals between 1996 and 2001. Employment-based admissions, such as the H-1B visa program, accounted for 10 percent of Bangladeshi admissions, while the DV Program, often known as the Green Card Lottery, accounted for 30.5 percent (Kibria 2013). New Bangladeshis are less educated than their forefathers and have settled in New York, Boston, Dallas, Houston, and other major cities. The Bangladeshi diaspora predominantly comprises young men (75 percent are between the ages of 15 years and 40 years), and the majority are self-employed or work in service industries such as small businesses and cab driving (Siddiqui 2004). These people resided in ethnic enclaves in cities and worked in largely blue-collar occupations as taxi drivers, store clerks, or small hotel owners, or they started their own enterprises (Bhattacharya and Schoppelrey 2004; Rahman and Paik 2017).

4. The Bangladeshi Diasporic Community at a Glance

What is the current status of the Bangladeshi diasporic community in the United States? This seemingly all-encompassing question may require a lengthy answer beyond this article. Because of the space constraint, this section will focus on the population size, basic demographic compositions, geographic distribution, types of admission, and socioeconomic profile of the Bangladeshi diasporic community.

4.1. The Size of the Bangladeshi Diasporic Community

The very first question is: What is the size of the Bangladeshi diasporic community, or how many Bangladeshis are there in the USA? We believe that the estimate of the US Bureau of the Census based on the 2018 ACS (i.e., 213,372) severely underestimates the size of the Bangladeshi diasporic community for a couple of reasons. First, this estimated

number is much smaller than the actual number of admitted Bangladeshi immigrants since 1971 recorded by the DHS. As shown in Table 1, the total number of Bangladeshi immigrants from 1971 to 2020 was 336,763. We know that some immigrants may return home or move elsewhere. The typical emigration rates of US immigrants were between 0.9 percent and 1.5 percent, and Asian immigrants have lower than average emigration rates (Borjas and Bratsberg 1996; Hollmann et al. 2000; Schwabish 2009; Warren and Peck 1980). The emigration of Bangladeshi immigrants should be even lower given the unfavorable conditions in their homeland. Thus, an emigration rate of 1 percent for Bangladeshi immigrants is more than reasonable. We also know that some immigrants die of old age, diseases, accidents, etc., but immigrants tend to have a lower mortality rate and probability of dying than US-born individuals (Kestenbaum 1986; Singh and Miller 2003). Based on the 1980–1994 data from the existing studies (Kestenbaum 1986; Singh and Miller 2003), the average death rate of US immigrants was about 7.2 per 1000 population (or 0.72 percent). The calculation using the mortality rate of 0.72 percent and emigration rate of 1 percent leads to the loss of 5792 Bangladeshi immigrants out of 336,763 total Bangladeshi admissions for the period 1971–2020. Taking this estimated loss and adding an estimated new admissions for 2021, 2022, and the first half of 2023 (about 36,328 based on the annual average number of Bangladeshi immigrants for the decade of 2011–2020), the number of Bangladeshi immigrants should be 367,299. Second, there are undoubtedly many undocumented Bangladeshi immigrants in the United States. Some of them infiltrated from a third country such as Mexico and some Caribbean nations, and many came here on temporary visitor visas and never returned (Harris 1997). Although exact figures are hard to confirm, some estimates put the number of undocumented Bangladeshis at 150,000 nationwide, with more than 50,000 in New York City alone (Jones 2008; Paul 2008; Zhao 2014). As a result, the real number of Bangladeshis living in the United States now will be larger than that recorded by the DHS (Ahmad 2011). The undocumented Bangladeshi population may not be captured by the ACS. Thus, taking into account legal admissions and undocumented immigrants, the Bangladeshi immigrant population in the USA should be 517,299, or around 500,000 to be conservative. This number is congruent with the estimates of ILO (2014) and the Bangladesh government.

4.2. Basic Demographic Compositions

Calculated using the pooled samples of ACS 2001–2019, we found that somewhat less than half of the Bangladeshi immigrants were female (46.4 percent), and 53.6 percent were male. The sex ratio was 115, or 115 males for every 100 females. For Bangladeshi immigrants, the mean age was 40.6 years old. The median age was 39 years old, meaning that half of them were below 39, and half of them were above 39. Only 5.3 percent were 65 or older or not in the labor force. The majority of Bangladeshi immigrants were married (73.6 percent) with a spouse present (66.7 percent) or absent (6.9 percent); 19.8 percent were never married; and the remaining 6.6 percent were divorced (2.2 percent), separated (0.9 percent), and widowed (3.5 percent). Approximately 62 percent of Bangladeshi immigrants had children, but on average, they had only 1.2 children. On average, Bangladeshi immigrants had been in the USA for 13.6 years.

4.3. Geographic Concentration

Historically, Bangladeshis settled in every state of the country, with a concentration in New York, New Jersey, and California's metropolitan regions. New arrivals after 2000 mostly moved to New York City, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, and Detroit (Mehdipanah et al. 2019). Significant numbers of them also settled in some southern states such as Florida, Texas, and Georgia. Like other migrants, they prefer to settle in locations where their coethnics have already established enclaves (Ahmad 2011).

Using data from the 2015–2019 ACS, Table 2 displays the top ten states with the largest concentration of foreign-born Bangladeshi population: New York, California, Michigan, Texas, New Jersey, Virginia, Florida, Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Maryland. These top

ten states constituted 86.8 percent of the total foreign-born Bangladeshi population in the United States. Table 2 also shows that out of these 10 states, 59.2 percent or 140,511 were located in the Northeast, with 14.2 percent or 33,591 in the South, about 6.7 percent or 15,968 in the West, and 6.7 percent or 15,892 in the Midwest. New York was the state with the largest concentration of Bangladeshi immigrants (42.4 percent).

Table 2. Ten states with the largest foreign-born Bangladeshi population, 2015–2019.

Area	N	Percent
United States	237,291	100.00
New York	100,514	42.35
California	15,968	6.72
Michigan	15,892	6.70
Texas	15,695	6.61
New Jersey	15,037	6.33
Virginia	11,186	4.71
Florida	10,606	4.47
Pennsylvania	8394	3.53
Georgia	7290	3.07
Maryland	5380	2.26

Source: [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2020\)](#), American Community Survey 2015–2019 5-Year Estimates.

4.4. Types of Immigrants

The Bangladeshis immigrated to the US through different channels, including family-sponsored immigrants, immediate relatives of US citizens, employment-sponsored immigrants, refugees and asylees, and diversity immigrants. Table 3 presents the percentage distributions of Bangladeshi immigrants by type of admission for the fiscal years 2010–2022.

Table 3. Numbers and percentages for classes of admission of immigrants from Bangladesh, 2010–2022.

Year	Family-Sponsored Preferences	Employment-Based Preferences	Immediate Relatives of US Citizens	Diversity Visa	Refugees and Asylees	Total
2010	6006 (40.5%)	827 (5.6%)	4935 (33.3%)	2800 (18.9%)	171 (1.1%)	14,819 (100%)
2011	7821 (46.8%)	648 (3.8%)	4988 (29.8%)	3049 (18.2%)	117 (0.70%)	16,707 (100%)
2012	7357 (50.0%)	549 (3.7%)	5758 (39.1%)	827 (5.6%)	149 (1.0%)	14,705 (100%)
2013	6272 (51.8%)	740 (6.1%)	4701 (38.8%)	92 (0.76%)	245 (2.0%)	12,099 (100%)
2014	8709 (59.4%)	560 (3.8%)	5194 (35.4%)	D (0%)	114 (0.77%)	14,645 (100%)
2015	7044 (52.0%)	653 (4.8%)	5667 (41.7%)	D (0%)	167 (1.2%)	13,570 (100%)
2016	9899 (52.8%)	653 (3.4%)	7841 (41.8%)	D (0%)	289 (1.5%)	18,723 (100%)
2017	7711 (52.4%)	752 (5.1%)	6089 (41.4%)	D (0%)	114 (0.77%)	14,693 (100%)
2018	7229 (46.0%)	865 (5.5%)	7374 (46.9%)	D (0%)	211 (1.3%)	15,717 (100%)
2019	7660 (51.4%)	1030 (6.9%)	6041 (40.5%)	D (0%)	134 (0.9%)	14,894 (100%)
2020	4884 (52.7%)	1367 (14.7%)	2892 (31.2%)	D (0%)	105 (1.1%)	9272 (100%)
2021	1238 (19.3%)	1229 (19.2%)	3735 (58.3%)	- (0%)	173 (2.7%)	6405 (100%)
2022	2373 (21.9%)	2038 (18.8%)	5668 (52.2%)	D (0%)	752 (6.9%)	10,858 (100%)
Total	84,203 (47.54%)	11,911 (6.73%)	70,883 (40.02%)	6768 (4.23%)	2741 (1.55%)	177,107 (100%)

D, data withheld to limit disclosure; - represents zero. Source: [U.S. Department of Homeland Security \(2023\)](#).

Family-sponsored immigrants: The most popular avenue for attaining “lawful permanent residency” in the US is through family reunification. Family reunification accounts for the majority of new immigrants each year. The program is extremely important for immigrants from specific nations. Reuniting with family is the most popular motivation for migration to the United States ([Pyke 2004](#)). This category of admission includes family-sponsored preferences and immediate relatives of US citizens ([Yang 2011](#)). Table 3 reveals that family-sponsored preferences provide the main path of immigration for Bangladeshis. In the period of 2010–2022, about 48 percent of Bangladeshi immigrants entered the US

through family-sponsored preferences. In 2010, only 40.5 percent were family-sponsored immigrants, but the percentage increased with fluctuations over time to 52.7 percent in 2020 before drastic declines in 2021–2022. The second most prevalent category was immediate relatives of US citizens. Approximately 40 percent of Bangladeshi immigrants were admitted in this category for the period of 2010–2022, with variations over time (Table 3). In 2021–2022, immediate relatives of US citizens replaced family-sponsored preferences as the primary revenues of Bangladeshi immigration. Family reunification has aided the increase in socioeconomic diversity among Bangladeshi migrants to the United States as the members of the family, especially extended families, may not have the same socioeconomic status as the sponsoring Bangladeshi immigrants did.

Employment-based immigrants: Another way for Bangladeshis to come to the United States is through employment preferences, which include five subcategories: priority workers, professionals with advanced degrees, skilled workers, professionals without advanced degrees or needed unskilled workers, special immigrants, and investors (Yang 2011). As seen in Table 3, employment-based preferences only accounted for 6.7 percent of Bangladeshi immigrants for the period of 2010–2022, but they gained more weight in 2021–2022, accounting for about 19 percent each year.

Refugees and asylees: A small number of Bangladeshi refugees and asylees entered the United States because of political upheaval at home, minority status in Bangladesh, or perceived threats. Requests for asylum are frequently processed outside of the INS's customary authority (Ahmad 2011; U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2020). An asylum applicant in the United States who is not facing deportation submits an I-589, or asylum application form, to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Defensive asylum petitions are filed when a foreign individual is facing deportation and raises a claim for asylum as a defense against his or her deportation (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2020). Refugees and asylees are those who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin or nationality due to persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution. Refugees and asylees are entitled to protection based on their race, religion, nationality, social group membership, and political beliefs, among other things (Kerwin 2012). In accordance with Table 3, only about 1.6 percent of Bangladeshis were admitted as refugees or asylees in the period of 2010–2022.

Diversity immigrants: As mentioned earlier, many Bangladeshi immigrants were admitted under the DV Program as a result of the Immigration Act of 1990. The DV Program permitted many less-educated and low-skilled Bangladeshis to gain entry to the US (Jones 2008; Zhao 2014). However, as shown in Table 3, in the period of 2010–2022, the proportion of diversity immigrants diminished from 2800 in 2010 to very tiny numbers ineligible for disclosure since 2014 after the DV Program played a large role in the admission of Bangladeshi immigrants in the 1990s and the 2000s (Kibria 2008; Yang 2011) to the point that Bangladesh became essentially ineligible for the Green Card Lottery.

4.5. Socioeconomic Profile

Also relying on the pooled samples of ACS 2001–2019, we generated a socioeconomic profile of the Bangladeshi diaspora community. On average, Bangladeshi immigrants were well educated, with close to 14 years of schooling. Nearly 35 percent of Bangladeshi immigrants held professional or managerial occupations. Almost two thirds (65.6 percent) of Bangladeshi immigrants were white-collar workers including professional or managerial occupations. Nearly 12 percent of Bangladeshi immigrants were self-employed. However, their average income was very low. The average personal income of Bangladeshi immigrants was USD 27,833, with a standard deviation of USD 47,991. Bangladeshi immigrants fared worse in both mean income and median income than all major Asian immigrant groups and the average US population. More than one fifth (21.4 percent) lived under poverty. Our data based on a large pooled sample of ACS 2001–2019 revealed a mixed socioeconomic profile of the Bangladeshi immigrant community with decent educational attainment and occupational status but very low income and a very high poverty rate. Our generalizable findings confirm

the results of some studies using data from earlier periods (e.g., [Jones 2008](#); [Kibria 2006](#); [MPI 2014](#)) but challenge the claim that Bangladeshis in the US have relatively low socioeconomic status ([Zhao 2014](#)) and the result that Bangladeshis in the US fare well in income ([MPI 2014](#)).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study argues and evinces that the Bangladeshi diasporic community in the USA is a fast-growing and sizable population through an analysis of the historical developments and current profile of this diasporic community. In analyzing the history of the Bangladeshi diaspora in the USA, we pioneer to delineate the history of the Bangladeshi diaspora to the USA into four periods. With the latest statistical data from the DHS, we demonstrate that although the Bangladeshi diaspora to the United States is more than a century old, for nearly 100 years, the Bangladeshi migration flow was relatively small; however, since the 1980s, Bangladeshi immigration has accelerated, leading to a rapidly growing and sizable Bangladeshi diasporic community.

For the current portrait, based on the total number of Bangladeshi immigrants admitted by the DHS since 1971 and their mortality and emigration rates as well as the undocumented Bangladeshi immigrant population, it is our estimate that the current size of the Bangladeshi diasporic community in the United States stands at about 500,000 instead of a range of low-to-mid 200,000s normally cited. Additionally, using the pooled samples of the 2001–2019 ACS and other ACS data as well as the DHS data, this paper provides a demographic and socioeconomic portrait of the Bangladeshi diasporic community in the USA. Specifically, the sex ratio is relatively balanced, with slightly more men than women among Bangladeshi immigrants. Half of them are under 39 years old. A large majority of them are currently married, and more than 60 percent have children. Bangladeshi immigrants are concentrated in the states of New York (highest), California, Michigan, Texas, New Jersey, Virginia, and Florida. Most new Bangladeshi immigrants entered the United States through family-sponsored preferences or as immediate relatives of US citizens, and small proportions of them came through employment preferences or as refugees or asylees. Significant numbers of them immigrated under the DV Program from 1990 to 2012, but that route has essentially been closed after 2012. Bangladeshi immigrants are well educated and include a significant proportion of professional and managerial workers, but their average income is very low, and their poverty rate is very high. This mixed socioeconomic profile validates the findings of some studies using data from earlier periods (e.g., [Jones 2008](#); [Kibria 2006](#); [MPI 2014](#)) but contests the claims of Bangladeshis in the US as a population with a relatively low socioeconomic status ([Zhao 2014](#)) and as a population faring well in income ([MPI 2014](#)).

The findings of this study have significant implications for research on the Bangladeshi diaspora in particular and diaspora studies in general, as well as for practice. First, our findings suggest that the Bangladeshi diaspora has unique experiences, challenges, and opportunities. For example, the pre-1971 Bangladeshi diaspora was part of the Indian and Pakistani diasporas and therefore is difficult to separate and research. The crucial role of the DV Program in the rapid growth of the Bangladeshi diaspora is different from the role of the program in the Indian diaspora. The mixed socioeconomic profile of the Bangladeshi diaspora also differs from the socioeconomic success image of the Indian diaspora. Second, our findings about the distinct Bangladeshi diaspora experience help shed light on the nuances of diaspora experiences, moving from broad generalizations to recognizing the specific dynamics that shape the journey of the Bangladeshi diaspora to the USA and beyond. It should be emphasized that every diaspora is distinctive. The Bangladeshi diaspora is just a case in point. Our exploration of the unique historical, social, and cultural experiences in the Bangladeshi diaspora can significantly enrich an understanding of diaspora communities around the globe. Third, the incompatibility between the rapid growth and size of the Bangladeshi diasporic community and the meager knowledge of it calls for systematic research on this community. More trustworthy data on, and detailed analysis of, the history and current status of this community are still needed. Fourth, our findings

and analysis also intimate that an interdisciplinary approach is essential in researching the Bangladeshi diaspora. To fully capture the rich Bangladeshi diaspora experiences in a more holistic and nuanced manner, in addition to the sociological and demographic analyses presented in this study, we also need anthropological, historical, cultural, political, and geographical analyses. Multiple perspectives from various disciplines can help uncover the multifaceted aspects of the Bangladeshi diaspora from the past to the present, to the future. Finally, the rapid growth and mixed socioeconomic performance of the Bangladeshi diaspora also require the attention of community leaders and policymakers in order to serve the needs of the Bangladeshi diasporic community and help its healthy development.

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, it lays out, for the first time, four periods of Bangladeshi migration to the USA based on data and documents the *rapid growth* of the Bangladeshi diasporic community since 1981 using the latest statistical data we compiled from official government sources. Second, by analyzing the data on the admission of legal Bangladeshi immigrants from the DHS taking into account their emigration rate and mortality rate and undocumented Bangladeshi immigration, we have established the size of the Bangladeshi diasporic community at around 500,000 rather than in the range of low to mid 200,000s often cited. Third, our data based on a large pooled sample of ACS 2001–2019 reveal the latest generalizable findings that are seldom available from existing studies and confirm some existing results but challenge other findings. One example is the mixed socioeconomic profile of the Bangladeshi immigrant community with decent educational attainment and occupational status but very low income and a very high poverty rate we uncovered. Finally, by focusing on the Bangladeshi diaspora, our study highlights the diversity of Asian diaspora experiences and challenges the tendencies of homogenizing experiences of heterogeneous groups with similar ancestries (e.g., South Asians). In so doing, this study also contributes to diaspora studies in general.

The Bangladeshi diaspora around the world has longevity and has continued unabated. On the other hand, notwithstanding its long history, the sizable Bangladeshi diaspora to the USA has been a new phenomenon in approximately the last four decades. The pace of its growth is very rapid and is expected to continue in the near future because of the effect of chain migration. Bangladesh could become a top supplier of immigrants to the USA in the years ahead (Yang 2011). Bangladeshi Americans may join the largest Asian diasporas in the USA decades from now. All of these call for a better understanding of this Bangladeshi diaspora. This article is an initial step toward this goal. Because of the space limitations, this article only covers the migration history of Bangladeshis and the profile of the Bangladeshi diasporic community. Future research ought to examine the cultural retention, socioeconomic adaptation, structural adaptation, and political adaptation of the Bangladeshi diasporic community. Future research may also compare this diasporic community with other Asian diasporic communities and non-Asian diasporic communities. Finally, future research should take an interdisciplinary approach toward a fuller understanding of the Bangladeshi diaspora.

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