Fortunately, religion is not an issue when it comes to who is a Bangladeshi. Religious diversity is one of the reasons why Bangladesh is a moderate nation. When a child grows up with children belonging to other religions, his outlooks broadens, because other religions are not mere abstractions anymore - there are human faces to go with it. Bangladesh is a richer nation because it is multi-religious.

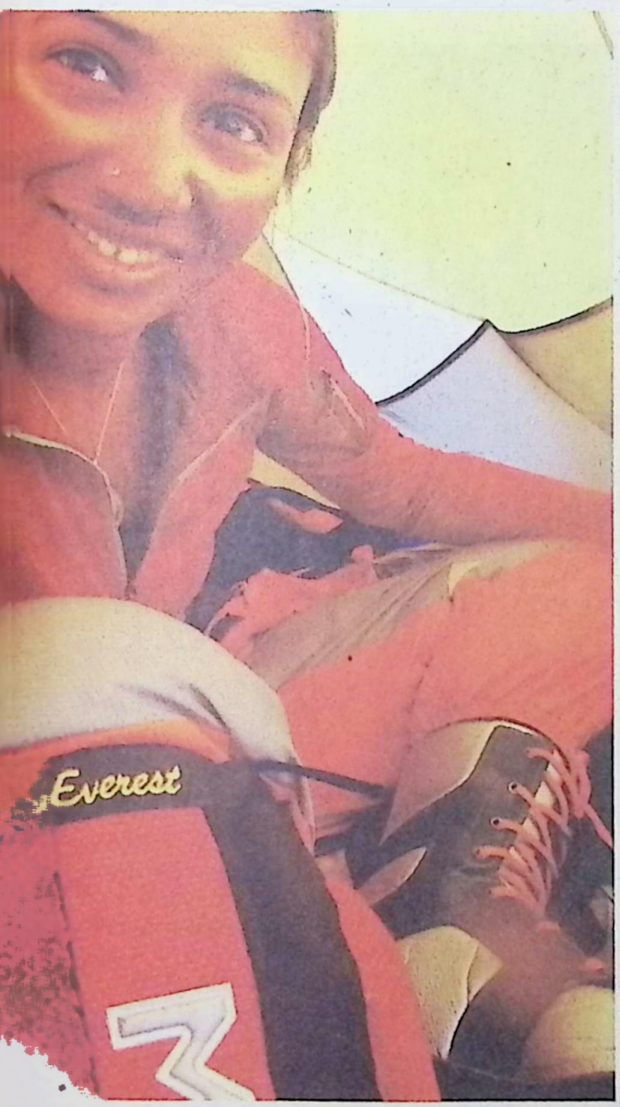


PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

Wasfia Nazreen

What about the immigrants? This is a no brainer. Most immigrants to Bangladesh are from the surrounding Indian states, mostly West Bengal. Ethnically, culturally and gastronomically they wholeheartedly subscribe to the larger Bangali culture, and therefore, seamlessly integrate into the Bangladeshi society.

What about those who have forsaken Bangladesh – the expatriates? It is possible to take a Bangladeshi out of Bangladesh, but, it is not possible to take Bangladesh out of a Bangladeshi! Wherever they may be, the expatriates speak Bangla at home, eat Deshi food, listen to Bangla songs, and watch Bangla movies. Whatever passport a person born and brought up in Bangladesh may hold, at heart he/she remains a Bangladeshi. It may be hard for those living inside Bangladesh to believe, but, in my experience expatriate Bangladeshis are more patriotic, and are more ready to serve their motherland. They remain steadfastly focused on events at home, especially politics.

They are tormented by the political impasse, sectarian violence and the never-ending hartals that impede Bangladesh's economic progress. Expatriate Bangladeshis are proud that their homeland is a democracy, but are adamant that all the major political parties must participate in a general election for the results to be valid.

Expatriate Bangladeshis celebrated Dr Muhammad Yunus's Nobel Peace Prize and Sir Fazle Hasan Abed's knighthood with gusto. They exult and anguish at the fortunes of Bangladesh cricket team. They were over the moon when Nishat Majumder and Wasfia Nazreen scaled Mount Everest. They remain immensely proud that two ladies – Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia – have led Bangladesh for the last 23 years.

Bangladeshis are simple people well known for their generosity and legendary hospitality. They happily subsist on rice, dal, bhaji and fish, with an occasional Rosgolla for dessert. They are cerebral, with a sense of humour, and culture-oriented with love for literature, especially poetry, and songs. They are tolerant, with the credo, "live and let live." They may have a short fuse, but are enterprising and resilient. They quickly recover from devastating floods and cyclones. With apologies to Sir Noel Coward, hard-working Bangladeshis do move about, and like "Mad dog and Englishmen go out in the midday sun!"

The turmoil in Pakistan can be traced to the fact that it is actually four nations – Punjabi, Sindhi, Baluchi and Pathan. Sri Lanka suffered 30 years of conflict because the Sinhalese and the Tamils were at loggerheads. Four distinct major ethnicities – Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek – and many smaller ones, make it hard for Afghanistan to function as a unified nation.

Homogeneity is Bangladesh's greatest strength. Most Bangladeshis are of the same racial stock, are non-communal, speak some version of the Bengali language, eat the same kind of simple food, and love the arts. Homogeneity should propel Bangladesh to sprint ahead of other nations in the subcontinent.

Still aren't sure who a Bangladeshi is? It is someone who subscribes to the Bangladeshi culture, who calls himself/herself a Bangladeshi, and who has Bangladesh's interest at heart. ■