

Willem van Schendel



'This is a very important and unique contribution to the study of the history of Bangladesh.'

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'This eagerly awaited second edition of *A History of Bangladesh* is an updated, revised and expanded version of the single most useful historical study that we have to explain the complex changing environmental, political, cultural, social and economic conditions that shape everyday experience and future possibilities for the people of Bangladesh.'

David Ludden, New York University

'Mindful of the silences and occlusions built into telling national stories, the author brings a fresh, global perspective to bear on enduring nationalist questions. Most significantly, this second edition takes on topics usually relegated to the margins, if addressed at all, in standard histories. Questions of gender, kinship and sexuality are woven skilfully into the body of the text rather than added on in a token gesture. This alone makes it an exceptional – and exemplary – resource for the study of Bangladesh.'

Dina M. Siddiqi, New York University

Cover illustration: front cover – commemorating the killing of intellectuals at the end of the Bangladesh War of Independence, Rajshahi, 2010. Photograph by the author. Back cover – boat with artwork and the slogan 'Education is the Backbone of the Nation' on a river near Dhaka, 2014. Photograph by the author.

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A History of
BANGLADESH

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A History of BANGLADESH

Second Edition



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A HISTORY OF BANGLADESH

Bangladesh did not exist as an independent state until 1971. Willem van Schendel's state-of-the-art history navigates the extraordinary twists and turns that created modern Bangladesh through ecological disaster, colonialism, partition, a war of independence and cultural renewal. In this revised and updated edition, Van Schendel offers a fascinating and highly readable account of life in Bangladesh over the last two millennia. Based on the latest academic research and covering the numerous historical developments of the 2010s, he provides an eloquent introduction to a fascinating country and its resilient and inventive people. A perfect survey for travellers, expats, students and scholars alike.

WILLEM VAN SCHENDEL served as Professor of Modern Asian History at the University of Amsterdam.

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Preface to Second Edition

The first edition of this book was published in 2009. Since then, three developments have prompted this thoroughly revised and updated second edition. First, there is a growing awareness of the global significance of events in Bangladesh. Examples are environmental degradation and climate change, Islamic identity politics, exploited labour in the export-oriented garments industry and precipitous urbanisation. Pressing global issues take shape – and sometimes originate – in Bangladesh, and there is an urgent need to understand them in both their worldwide and local historical contexts. This can help in the wider search for ways to ‘de-Europeanise’ concepts of modernity and global agency.

Second, the 2010s brought turbulent change to Bangladesh. There was vigorous cultural innovation – including new gender movements and novel interpretations of spirituality. Unprecedented political confrontations erupted over the dispensation of justice and the resurgence of authoritarianism. And economic growth showed remarkable acceleration amid severe inequalities and deep concerns about its environmental costs. All these changes need to be explained by unravelling their historical origins.

And third, there has been an extraordinary blossoming of new scholarship on Bangladesh. This necessitates a reassessment of how we understand the country’s past and present. For example, we now know more about the deep history of human settlement in the region; how ecology shaped state formation and local Islam; the histories of international trade and the Bengali diaspora; identity politics that connect the Partition of 1947, the war of 1971 and current political turmoil; histories of sexuality; and the transmutation of Bangladesh’s worldwide linkages. Incorporating scholarly insights from many recent studies has been an important endeavour in shaping this new edition.

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Preface to Second Edition

This is a book that aims at providing an outline of the history of Bangladesh. Its format does not allow for detailed discussion, but I have made every effort to point you to key literature that will introduce the most prominent current debates. Needless to say, many other excellent contributions simply could not be included in what has already become a voluminous bibliography.

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It is impossible to do justice to all those, in Bangladesh and beyond, who have influenced the writing of this book and guided me over many years. Perhaps the best way to thank them all – friends, colleagues and acquaintances – is by thanking just one of them. Md. Moyenuddin of Goborgari village in Rangpur district acted as my mentor when, as a student, I first tried to make sense of Bangladeshi society. His lessons have always stayed with me and I owe him an enormous debt of gratitude.

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Finally, I am grateful to Marigold Acland for commissioning this book, and to Lucy Rhymer for initiating the second edition.

Timeline

c. 40,000 BCE	Earliest stone tools found in western hills.
Pre-1,500 BCE	Cultivation of irrigated rice and domestication of animals. Fossilwood industries.
Fifth century BCE	Urban centres, long-distance maritime trade, first sizeable states. Indo-European languages and Sanskritic culture begin to spread from the west. Regions and peoples of Bengal identified as Rarh, Pundra, Varendri, Gaur, Vanga, Samatata and Harikela.
Third century BCE	Mahasthan Brahmi inscription.
c. 640 CE	Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang ('Hiuen Tsiang') describes eastern Bengal.
Eighth–twelfth centuries	First Muslim influence in coastal areas.
Ninth century	Construction of Paharpur in northwestern Bangladesh.
Tenth century	Bengali language develops; earliest surviving poems known as <i>Charyapada</i> .
Twelfth century	Lakhnauti-Gaur is capital of Sena state.
Thirteenth century	Islam reaches Bengal delta via the land route. Muhammad Bakhtiyar establishes a Muslim-ruled state, the first of many dominated by non-Bengalis, including Turks, North Indians, Afghans, Arakanese and Ethiopians.
1346	Ibn Battutah visits Shah Jalal in Sylhet.

Sixteenth century	Rice from the Bengal delta exported to many destinations, from the Moluccas in eastern Indonesia to the Maldives and to Goa in western India.
1520s	Large textile industry, cotton and silk exports. First Europeans (Portuguese) settle in the Bengal delta.
1580s	Portuguese open the first European trading post in Dhaka (Dutch follow in 1650s, English in 1660s, French in 1680s).
Sixteenth–seventeenth centuries	Rise of Islam as a popular religion in the Bengal delta.
1610	Mughal empire captures Dhaka, now renamed Jahangirnagar. It becomes the capital of Bengal.
1612	Mughal rule over much of the Bengal delta.
1650s	Bengali translator-poet Alaol active at the Arakan court.
1666	Portuguese and Arakanese relinquish Chittagong to the Mughals.
1690	Kolkata (Calcutta) established by the British.
c. 1713	Bengal becomes an independent polity under Murshid Quli Khan. The capital is moved to Murshidabad.
1757	Battle of Polashi (Plassey); after further clashes, notably the battle at Baksar (Buxar) in 1764, the British East India Company establishes itself as <i>de facto</i> ruler of Bengal.
1757–1911	Kolkata is the capital of Bengal and British India.
1760s–90s	Fakir–Sannyasi resistance.
1769–70	Great Famine, which may have carried off one-third of Bengal's population.
1774	Birth of mystic Baul poet Lalon Shah (Lalon Fakir, Lalon Shai).
1782–7	Earthquake and floods force the Brahmaputra river into a new channel and lead to food scarcities.
1790	New system of land taxation ('permanent settlement') introduced. Codified in 1793, it will persist until the 1950s.

Timeline

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1830s	English replaces Persian as the state language.
1830–60s	Rural revolts inspired by Islamic ‘purification’ movements.
1840	Dhaka’s population reaches its lowest point, 50,000.
1850s	Railways spread through Bengal.
1857	Revolt (‘the Mutiny’) has little impact on the Bengal delta.
1858	East India Company abolished and British crown assumes direct control.
1860	British annex the last part of Bengal, the Chittagong Hill Tracts.
1897	Earthquake with a magnitude of 8.7 hits Bengal and Assam.
c. 1900	Water hyacinth begins to spread in Bengal’s waterways.
1901	Territory of future Bangladesh has 30 million inhabitants.
1905–11	Separate province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Dhaka is its capital. Swadeshi movement. Muslim and Hindu become political categories.
1905	Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain writes <i>Sultana’s Dream</i> .
1906	All-India Muslim League founded in Dhaka.
1910	Varendra Research Museum established in Rajshahi.
1921	University of Dhaka established.
1940	Muslim League adopts Pakistan (or Lahore) Resolution: demand for independent states for Indian Muslims.
1943–4	Great Bengal Famine causes about 3.5 million deaths.
1946	Muslim–Hindu riots in Noakhali, Kolkata and Bihar.
1946	Elections return the Muslim League as the largest party.
1946–7	Tebhaga movement.

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Timeline

1947	14 August: British rule ends and British India is partitioned. The Bengal delta becomes part of the new state of Pakistan under the name ‘East Bengal’. Dhaka is the provincial capital.
1947–8	About 800,000 migrants arrive in East Pakistan from India; about 1,000,000 migrants leave East Pakistan for India. Cross-border migration will continue for years.
1948–56	(Bengali) language movement in protest against imposition of Urdu as official language of Pakistan.
1949	Awami Muslim League (renamed Awami League in 1955) founded by Maulana Bhashani.
1950	East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act eliminates the superior rights that zamindars (landlords/tax-collectors) had enjoyed under the permanent settlement.
1950	Muslim–Hindu riots in East Pakistan and West Bengal (India).
1951	Territory of future Bangladesh has 44 million inhabitants.
1952	21 February (<i>Ekushe</i>): killing of ‘language martyrs’; first Shohid Minar (Martyrs’ Memorial) erected.
1952	Passport and visa system introduced.
1953	V-AID community development programme initiated.
1954	Provincial elections in East Pakistan. Muslim League defeated. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman becomes junior cabinet member.
1954–62	Four new universities established in Rajshahi, Mymensingh, Chittagong and Dhaka.
1955	Adamjee Jute Mill goes into production in Narayanganj.
1955	Pakistan Academy for Rural Development established in Comilla.
1955	First direct passenger air connections between East and West Pakistan.
1955	Bangla Academy and Bulbul Academy for Fine Arts established in Dhaka.

Timeline

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1955	The first commercially useful gas field discovered in Haripur (Sylhet).
1956	‘East Bengal’ renamed ‘East Pakistan’.
1957	Maulana Bhashani and others establish the National Awami Party (NAP).
1958	Army coup. Military regime in Pakistan headed by Ayub Khan (1958–69).
1960	World Bank’s Aid-to-Pakistan consortium.
1961	Kaptai hydroelectric project completed. Lake Kaptai forms in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, forcing the ‘Great Exodus’ of displaced people.
1963	Chhayanot celebrates Bengali New Year publicly for the first time.
1965	India–Pakistan War. Train connections with India not resumed afterwards.
1966	Awami League launches Six-Point Programme.
1968–9	Popular uprising against Ayub Khan. The military replace him with Yahya Khan (1969–71).
1970	Cyclone kills 350,000–500,000 people in the Bengal delta.
1970	First national general elections in Pakistan. Awami League wins majority.
1971	25 March: beginning of Bangladesh Liberation War.
1971	16 December: end of war. East Pakistan becomes independent state of Bangladesh.
1972	Sheikh Mujibur Rahman heads Awami League government.
1972	Bangladesh declares itself a people’s republic and introduces a constitution asserting that ‘nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism’ are its guiding principles.
1972	First issue of weekly <i>Bichitra</i> (1972–97).
1972	Establishment of the JSS (United People’s Party) and Shanti Bahini in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.
1973	Bangladesh’s first general elections. Constitution and parliamentary system.
1974	Bangladesh has 71 million inhabitants.

1974	Famine causes excess mortality of some 1.5 million.
1975	January: constitutional coup and autocratic rule by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.
1975	August: army coup. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and family killed in Dhaka.
1975	November: two more army coups. Military regime headed by Ziaur Rahman (1975–81).
1975–97	Chittagong Hill Tracts war.
1975	National Museum opened.
c. 1975–90	Green Revolution technology begins to push up agricultural yields.
1976	Death of Maulana Bhashani (c. 1880–1976).
1978	Leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami allowed to return from exile in Pakistan and resume political activities.
1980s	Ready-made clothing industry takes off.
1981	Ziaur Rahman assassinated in Chittagong.
1982	General H. M. Ershad takes over as dictator (1982–90).
1982	National Monument for the Martyrs in Savar is completed.
1983	Bangladesh parliament buildings are completed.
1985	National Archives and National Library opened.
1988	Major floods cover 60 per cent of Bangladesh for fifteen to twenty days.
1988	Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council formed.
1990	Popular uprising. Ershad forced out of power. Return to parliamentary democracy.
1991	General elections won by Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Khaleda Zia becomes prime minister (1991–6).
1991	Cyclone kills 140,000 people in southeastern Bangladesh.
1992	Nirmul Committee stages Gono Adalot (people's court).
1993	Fatwa against Taslima Nasrin.
1993	Groundwater arsenic poisoning discovered.

Timeline

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1996	General elections won by Awami League. Sheikh Hasina becomes prime minister (1996–2001).
1996	Liberation War Museum opened.
1996	Kolpona Chakma disappears.
1996	Thirty-year agreement with India over division of Ganges waters.
1997	December: peace agreement with JSS in Chittagong Hill Tracts.
1998	Major floods cover 60 per cent of Bangladesh for sixty-five days.
1998	Jamuna Bridge opened.
2000s	Four-fifths of the population survives on less than US\$2 a day and one-third on less than US\$1 a day.
2000	Bangladesh produces a surplus of food grains for the first time in its modern history.
2001	General elections won by Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Khaleda Zia becomes prime minister (2001–6).
2001	Bangladesh Indigenous People's Forum formed.
2006	Nobel Prize for Grameen Bank and Muhammad Yunus.
2006	Protests against Phulbari coal-mining.
2006	Ready-made garments make up three-quarters of Bangladesh's exports.
2007	General elections postponed and military-backed interim government installed.
2007	Cyclone hits southwestern coast, killing thousands and devastating the Sundarbans wetlands.
2008	Postponed general elections won by the Awami League. Sheikh Hasina becomes prime minister (2009–14).
2009	Bangladesh Rifles mutiny.
2010	Five former army officers executed for assassinating Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.
2011	Bangladesh co-hosts Cricket World Cup.
2013	War Crimes Tribunal and Shahbag movement.
2013	Rana Plaza garments factory collapses.
2013	Bangladesh recognises third gender.

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Timeline

2014	General elections won by Awami League. Sheikh Hasina remains as prime minister (2014–18).
2015	Land Boundary Agreement with India.
2016	Jihadist attack on Dhaka café.
2016	Bangladesh cancels deep-sea port agreement with China.
2017	Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees arrive from Myanmar (Burma).
2018	Government launches ‘Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100’.
2018	General elections won by Awami League.
2019	Sheikh Hasina remains as prime minister (2019–).

Introduction

This is a book about the amazing twists and turns that have produced contemporary Bangladeshi society. It is intended for general readers and for students who are beginning to study the subject. Those who are familiar with the story will find my account highly selective. My aim has been to present an overview and to help readers get a sense of how Bangladesh came to be what it is today.

How to write a history of Bangladesh? At first glance, the country does not seem to have much of a history. In 1930 not even the boldest visionary could have imagined it, and by 1950 it was merely a gleam in the eyes of a few activists. Only in the 1970s did Bangladesh emerge as a state and a nation. There was nothing preordained about this emergence – in fact, it took most people by surprise.

Even so, you cannot make sense of contemporary Bangladesh unless you understand its history long before those last few decades. How have long-term processes shaped the society that we know as Bangladesh today? It is a complicated and spectacular tale even if you follow only a few main threads, as I have done. I have greatly compressed the story. To give you an idea: each page of this book stands for about a million people who have historically lived in what is now Bangladesh. This is, by any standard, a huge society folded into a small area. More people live here than in Russia or Japan. Bangladesh is the eighth most populous country on earth.

I have chosen to distinguish three types of historical process that still play a principal role in Bangladesh. Part I looks at very long-term ones. It explains how, over millennia, forces of nature, geographical conditions, and the interplay of local and larger events have shaped Bangladeshi society. I speak of the ‘Bengal delta’ to describe the region that roughly coincides with modern Bangladesh, and I argue that it developed a very distinct regional identity quite early on. Part II describes how, over the last few centuries, these age-old trends encountered middle-range ones, especially foreign rule and its lasting effects. Parts III to V conclude the book,

and they examine the most recent developments. These chapters explain what happened in the Bengal delta over the last several decades as it first became part of Pakistan (1947–71) and then independent Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is a country in which history is palpably present. It is keenly debated and extensively researched. As a result, there is a huge historical literature. I have not even tried to summarise this body of knowledge because it would have led to information overload. Instead, I refer to selected readings that will provide a more nuanced and detailed understanding of the themes that I only touch on in passing. Wherever possible I have opted for publications in English, assuming that these will be the most easily accessible to the majority of readers. This book has also been informed by the vast and hugely important historical literature in Bangladesh's national language, Bengali, but I refer to it only sparingly. The notes and the bibliography show my debt to the many specialist researchers on whose shoulders I stand. Anyone writing on Bangladesh has to make decisions about names and transliterations. For two reasons it is not easy to render Bengali words in English. First, there are many sounds in Bengali that do not exist in English and that linguists mark with various dots and dashes. In this book I have used a simple version of local words, roughly as they are pronounced in Bangladesh, followed by a standard transliteration that goes back to the Sanskrit language, an early precursor of Bengali. Thus the word for the Bengali language is pronounced 'bangla' but its transliteration is *bāṇlā*. A glossary at the end of the book provides the different versions.

A second reason why it is difficult to write Bengali words correctly in English is that many have several forms. Often one is the historically familiar form and another is the more correct one. This is especially true for place names. Thus we have Polashi/Plassey, Borishal/Barisal and Sylhet/Shilet. In the absence of any consistent or official guideline, the choice is often a personal one. In two cases there has been an official change, however. The capital city of Bangladesh, which used to be written as 'Dacca' in English-language texts, took its more correct form of Dhaka (*Dhākā*) in the 1980s. Similarly, 'Calcutta' became Kolkata (*Kalkātā*) in 2001. Rather than confuse the reader with changing names, I use Dhaka and Kolkata throughout.

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PART I

The Long View



Part I Aerial view of the Sundarbans wetlands.

CHAPTER I

A Land of Water and Silt

Imagine yourself high in the air over the Himalayas. Look down and you see a forbidding landscape of snow-capped mountains and harsh vegetation. But now look to the southeast and discover an immense floodplain stretching between the mountains and the sea. That shimmering green expanse is Bangladesh.

You may well wonder why a book about Bangladesh should begin with the Himalayas. There is a good reason: without the Himalayas, Bangladesh would not exist. In a sense, Bangladesh *is* the Himalayas, flattened out. Every spring the mountain snow melts and the icy water sweeps along particles of soil, forming into rivers that rush to the sea. As these rivers reach the lowlands, they slow down and deposit those particles, building up a delta. This age-old process has created the territory that we now know as Bangladesh – a territory that pushes back the sea a little further with every annual deposit of new silt.¹

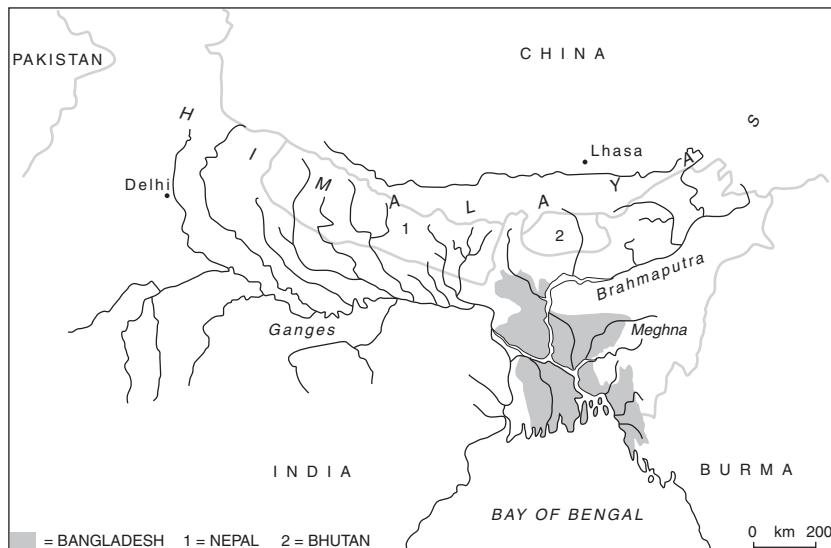
The delta is huge because almost all water running off the Himalayas, the highest mountain range on earth, has to pass through it (Map 1.1). On the southern side numerous rivulets and rivers run together to form the mighty Ganges that flows eastwards through India for hundreds of kilometres before it enters western Bangladesh, where it is also known as the Padma.² On the northern side of the Himalayas an equally majestic river, the Brahmaputra (or Tsangpo), forms in Tibet. It too flows east, past the capital, Lhasa, and then makes a sharp turn, breaking through the mountains into the far northeastern corner of India. It then flows west until it enters northern Bangladesh, where it is known as the Jamuna. It joins the Ganges in central Bangladesh and together they empty into the sea. Both rivers are truly gigantic: the Ganges is up to 8 km wide and the Brahmaputra spreads to the improbable width of 18 km.

This is the big picture. When you look closely you will notice that many more rivers criss-cross Bangladesh. A third giant is the Meghna, which enters Bangladesh from the east, and over fifty other rivers flow from India across

the border into Bangladesh. They join, split and join again in a crazy pattern of channels, marshes and lakes (Plate 1.1). In historical times there has been a tendency for the water to be discharged through more easterly channels and for the western reaches of the delta (now in India) to become drier. Together these many rivers have deposited very thick layers of fertile silt that now form the largest river delta on earth. Not all the silt ends up in Bangladesh, though. Every year, over a billion metric tons are delivered to the Indian Ocean, building up the world's largest underwater delta, the Bengal Fan, which has a maximum thickness of more than 16 km and extends over 3,000 km south on the ocean floor, well beyond Sri Lanka.³

Surrounded by higher land and hills to the east, north and west, the Bengal delta acts as the narrow end of a funnel through which an area more than ten times its size annually discharges a mind-boggling 650,000,000,000 m³ of water. And almost all this silt-laden water flows through the delta between May and October, when the rivers are in spate.

These huge forces have shaped the natural environment of Bangladesh, and they continue to exert an enormous influence on human life today. But majestic rivers are not the only source of water. There are two other forms in which water has always played a vital role in Bangladesh: rain and seawater. Each year in June, as the rivers are swelling rapidly, the skies over



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Bangladesh begin to change. In winter they are blue and hardly any rain falls, but in late May or early June, as temperatures shoot up, immense clouds form in the south. As they float in from the sea they release torrential downpours that continue off and on until late September. The wet monsoon has arrived, and in this part of tropical Asia it is truly spectacular. Not only may rains continue for days on end, turning the soft soil into a knee-deep muddy slush, but the sheer amount of water being discharged over Bangladesh is impressive. It is rain that has made Cherrapunji a household word among meteorologists the world over. This little village just across the border between northeastern Bangladesh and India claims to be the world's wettest place. Here the monsoon clouds hit the hills of Meghalaya in a downpour that continues for months. Annually a staggering 11 m of rain falls here; the maximum rainfall ever recorded during a 24-hour period was over 1 m.

Seawater is a third companion of life in Bangladesh. During the dry season (October to May), saline water from the Bay of Bengal penetrates watercourses up to 100 km inland and the lower delta becomes brackish. In addition, the lower delta is very flat: its elevations are less than 3 m above sea level. As a result, it is subject to tidal bores from tropical cyclones that make landfall here about once a year. These are particularly hard on the



Plate 1.1 'Knee-deep in water, whatever you do' (*hore-dore batu jol*). An aerial view of central Bangladesh in the dry season.

many islands and silt flats that fringe the coast of Bangladesh. Some protection is provided by the Sundarbans, a mangrove forest that used to cover the coastal delta but has been shrinking since the eighteenth century as a result of human activity. This largest mangrove forest in the world is not impervious to the power of tropical storms, however. In 2007 it took a direct hit when a cyclone raged over it, destroying much vegetation.

These three forms of water – river, rain and sea – give Bangladesh a natural Janus face. In winter, the rivers shrink in their beds, the skies are quietly blue, and saline water gently trickles in. Nature appears to be benign and nurturing. In summer, however, nature is out of control and Bangladesh turns into an amphibious land. Rivers widen, rains pour down and storms at sea may hamper the discharge of all this water. The result is flooding.⁴

Summer floods are a way of life. About 20 per cent of the country is inundated every summer, mainly as a result of rainfall. Rivers may cause floods as well. Usually the big rivers reach their peak flows at different times, but if they peak together, they will breach their banks and inundate the floodplain. It is in this way that rivers forge new courses in what is known as an active delta. As a river flows through its channel for many years, it becomes shallower because of silt deposits. It slows down and may even get choked. On both sides silt banks may build up to keep it flowing through the same course even though its bed may be raised to the level of the surrounding floodplain, or even above it. But when an exceptionally large amount of water pushes its way through, the banks are eroded and the river will breach them, seeking a new, lower channel. The old channel may survive as an oxbow lake or it may be covered in vegetation. The Bangladesh landscape is dotted with such reminders of wandering rivers. Although most floods are caused by rainfall and inundation in deltaic rivers, they may also result from flash floods after heavy rain in the hills, pushing their way through the delta, or by tidal storm surges.⁵

This combination of rainfall, river inundation, flash floods and storm surges has made it impossible to control summer flooding in Bangladesh. Even today, the timing, location and extent of flooding are very difficult to predict, let alone control, and floods vary considerably from year to year. Every few years big floods occur and occasionally, during extreme floods, over 70 per cent of the country is covered by water.

From the viewpoint of human life, flooding has had both positive and negative effects. Annual floods constantly replenish some of the most fertile soils on earth. Rich silt has always allowed luxuriant natural vegetation and it made early and successful agriculture possible.⁶ But

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the uncontrolled nature of floods, and the certainty of severe inundation every ten years or so, have played havoc with human life as well. It is not the amount of water that determines the harmful effects of flooding, however. As we shall see, human life in Bangladesh has long been adapted to cope with regular inundation. What makes some floods more harmful than others is the force with which the water pushes through (damaging life and goods) and the number of days it stays on the land (killing the crops). Thus a flash flood or storm surge can be very destructive, even though the amount of water or the area affected is not very large. In 1991 a cyclone hit the southeastern coast of Bangladesh at Chittagong. Huge waves travelling inland through water channels and across islands had a devastating effect. Despite early warnings and the evacuation of 3 million people, up to 70 per cent of the population in coastal villages was wiped out. According to official estimates, nearly 140,000 Bangladeshis perished. Casualties had been far worse in 1970, before a national system of cyclone warning had been developed. A cyclone made landfall at the Noakhali coast, and its storm surge is thought to have killed at least 325,000 people.⁷

In contrast to these very destructive cyclone floods, a rain or river flood can spread over a much larger area and yet do little harm if it lasts only a few days. In fact, such a flood is typically followed by a bumper harvest. But long-term inundation does pose a serious problem: the floods of 1988, which covered 60 per cent of Bangladesh for fifteen to twenty days, caused enormous damage to crops, property, fish stocks and other resources, in addition to claiming human lives. Ten years later another flood again inundated 60 per cent of the country and, because this time it lasted for sixty-five days, its effects were even more damaging.⁸

Living in this environment means living on a perennially moving frontier between land and water, and it is this moving frontier that dominates the *longue durée* of Bangladesh history. Despite regular setbacks, humans have been extraordinarily successful in using the resources of this hazardous, water-soaked deltaic environment. Today, with over 1,200 people per km², Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Such pressure on the land ensures that the ancient environmental frontier remains of everyday significance. Encounters at the water's edge have become more crucial over time as Bangladeshis are forced to push the margins of their sodden environment as never before, settling on low-lying land, coastal areas and islands exposed to storms and floods. In this way, some Bangladeshis are forced continually to put themselves dangerously in water's way (Plate 1.2).



রংপুর দিনাজপুর পল্লী সংস্থা RDRS/ECHO Bangladesh

ডেভেলপমেন্ট এন্ড চার্টার্ড সুস্থিতি এবং মানবিক উন্নয়ন

Plate 1.2 ‘Be prepared for floods! Save your life and possessions by seeking a high shelter.’ Educational poster, 1990s.

A Land of Water and Silt

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Floodplains dominate life in Bangladesh – they cover about 80 per cent of the country – but not all of Bangladesh is flat. On the eastern fringes some steep hills surrounding the delta have been included in the national territory and they provide an altogether different terrain. These hills (in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Sylhet) point to geological processes occurring far below the smooth surface of Bangladesh. Here tectonic plates collide: both the Himalayas and the Bangladesh hills (and beyond these the mountains of Myanmar (Burma) and northeastern India) are fold belts resulting from these collisions. The faults running underneath Bangladesh also push up or draw down parts of the delta, creating slightly uplifted terraces that look like islands in the floodplain (notably the Barind in the northwest and Modhupur in central Bangladesh) and depressions (*hāor* or *bil*)^{*} that turn into immense seasonal lakes. Tectonic movement is also tilting the entire delta, forcing rivers towards the east. The unstable geological structures underlying Bangladesh generate frequent earthquakes, most of them light but some strong enough to cause widespread destruction.

In Bangladesh the natural environment has never been a mere backdrop against which human history unfolded. On the contrary, time and again natural forces have acted as protagonists in that history, upsetting social arrangements and toppling rulers. For example, in the 1780s an earthquake and floods forced the Brahmaputra river into a new channel, wiping out villages in its course and causing trade centres along its old channel to collapse. More recently, in 1970, the mishandling of cyclone damage robbed the government of its legitimacy and precipitated a war of independence.⁹ And floods in 1988 cost Bangladesh more than that year's entire national development budget.

Managing the natural environment has been a central concern for all societies and states that have occupied the Bengal delta. The people of Bangladesh have never been able to lull themselves into a false belief that they controlled nature. They live in an environment where land and water meet and where the boundaries between these elements are in constant flux. As a result, settlement patterns have always been flexible and often transient. Bangladeshi villages have been described as elusive.¹⁰ They are not clustered around a central square, protected by defensive walls or united in the maintenance of joint irrigation works. Instead they consist of scattered homesteads and small hamlets known as para (*pārā*), perched on slightly elevated plots that become islands when moderate floods occur.

* Bengali terms are explained and transliterated in the Glossary at the end of this book.

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The Long View

Few rural dwellings are built to last, and traditional irrigation requires hardly any joint organisation because it is largely rain-fed. As the lie of the land changes in the active delta, villagers are often forced to relocate and rebuild their houses. Thus nature's changing topography acts as a social and economic resource, and the mobile and fragmented nature of settlement has shaped rural politics. Bangladeshi villages are not tightly organised communities under a single village head. Instead, they are dominated by continually shifting alliances of family and hamlet leaders. States seeking to control the rural population have always had to find ways of dealing with this flexible pattern of power sharing adapted to life on the frontier of land and water.

Predictions for the future point towards a renewed need for flexibility. It is expected that deforestation, soil erosion and melting glaciers in the Himalayas will lead to more silt and water in the rivers during the peak season. Experts on climate change are convinced that Bangladesh will be one of the countries most severely affected by rising sea levels resulting from global warming. But available evidence does not support popular assumptions that global warming has already seriously enhanced Bangladesh's current susceptibility to floods, tropical cyclones and drought.¹¹ On the other hand, in a world increasingly concerned about water scarcities, Bangladesh's abundance of fresh water could be turned into a critical resource. It is clear that Bangladesh will continue to balance precariously on the frontier between land and three forms of water: river, rain and sea.

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