

A Brief History of Barisal, Bangladesh

1 Introduction

Barisal, a major city and division in southern Bangladesh, is renowned as the “Venice of Bengal” due to its intricate network of rivers and canals. Situated along the Kirtankhola River, Barisal has a rich history spanning ancient kingdoms, medieval trade, colonial rule, and modern development. This document provides a concise overview of Barisal’s historical evolution, drawing from archaeological records, colonial accounts, and modern documentation.

2 Ancient and Early Medieval Period

Barisal’s history dates back to ancient times, with the region part of the Vanga and Gangaridai empires. Archaeological evidence, such as a copper plate from Mehendiganj upazila, records a land grant by Keshab Sen of the Sena dynasty (11th–12th century), indicating early administrative practices. By the 10th century, the region, known as Chandradvipa, was a significant cultural and economic hub, as noted in epigraphical records.

3 Medieval Period: Muslim Rule and Chandradwip

In the 13th century, Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji brought Barisal under Muslim control, later consolidated by Muhammad bin Tughluq. Hindu chieftains established the semi-independent kingdom of Bakla-Chandradwip, with Bakla as its capital, founded by King Danujmardan in the 14th century. The name “Bakla,” derived from the Arabic for grain trader, reflects its role as a trading port, frequented by Arab and Persian merchants. English merchant Ralph Fitch, visiting in the 1580s, described Barisal (then Bacola) as a prosperous region producing rice, cotton, and silk. Mughal records, such as Abul Fazl’s *Ain-i-Akbari*, note a devastating 1584 stormwave that killed 200,000 in Chandradwip.

4 British Colonial Era

Barisal came under British control in the late 18th century, with Bakerganj district (later Barisal) established in 1797. Henry Beveridge’s 1876 book, *The District of Bakerganj - Its History and Statistics*, highlights the region’s Bengali character and its aristocracy, the “Bakla Samaj.” The British Bengal District Administration Report (1913–14) proposed a Barisal division, implemented in 1993. The region’s economy thrived on jute, rice, and fish trade, with its river port central to commerce.

5 Post-Independence and Modern Era

Following the 1947 partition, Barisal became part of East Pakistan. The 1971 Liberation War saw significant violence, with records documenting mass killings, such as 181 freedom fighters in Kalaskathi and 212 in Banaripara. Post-independence, Barisal was declared a division in 1993, with a population of 419,484 by 2022 and a literacy rate of 79.85%. Cultural records highlight festivals like the Barisal Boat Festival and folk traditions such as Dhamail. The

“Barisal guns,” a mysterious booming sound, noted in 19th-century British records, remains a unique phenomenon.

6 Conclusion

Barisal’s history reflects its resilience and cultural richness, from ancient Vanga to a modern Bangladeshi division. Key historical records, including Sena copper plates, Mughal accounts, and colonial documents, provide insight into its past. Today, Barisal remains a vital economic and cultural hub, celebrated for its waterways, heritage, and contributions to Bangladesh’s identity.