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A HISTORY OF Bangladesh

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University of Amsterdam



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Timeline

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 c. 640 CE

Mahasthan Brahmi inscription. Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang ('Hiuen Tsiang') describes eastern Bengal. First Muslim influence in coastal areas.

Construction of Paharpur in north-

Eighth-twelfth centuries Ninth century

western Bangladesh.

Tenth century

Bengali language develops; earliest surviving poems known as Charyapada. Lakhnauti-Gaur is capital of Sena state.

Twelfth century 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 Sixteenth century Ibn Battutah visits Shah Jalal in Sylhet. Rice from the Bengal delta exported to many destinations, from the Moluccas in eastern Indonesia to the Maldives and to

Goa in western India.

xviii	Timeline
	Large textile industry, cotton and silk
	exports.
152OS	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	Rise of Islam as a popular religion in the
centuries	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. Portuguese and Arakanese relinquish
1666	Chittagong to the Mughals.
1600	Calcutta (today Kolkata) established by
1690	British.
c. 1713	Bengal becomes an independent polity
5.	under Murshid Quli Khan. The capital is
	moved to Murshidabad.
1757	Battle of Polashi (Plassey); after further
	clashes, notably the battle at Buxar in
	1764, the British East India Company
	establishes itself as <i>de facto</i> ruler of Bengal.
	Kolkata (Calcutta) is the capital of
1757–1911	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).

1950s.

New system of land taxation

('permanent settlement') introduced. Codified in 1793, it will persist till the

1790

1782-7	Earthquake and floods force the
	Brahmaputra river into a new channel
	and lead to food scarcities.
1830s	English replaces Persian as the state
-9200 (00	language.
1830s-60s	Rural revolts inspired by Islamic 'purification' movements.
1840	Dhaka's population reaches its lowest
1040	point, 50,000.
1850s	Railways spread through Bengal.
1857	Revolt ('the Mutiny') has little impact on
10)/	the Bengal delta.
1858	East India Company abolished and
	British crown assumes direct control.
1860	British annex last the 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
7005	political categories.
1905	Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain writes Sultana's Dream.
1906	All-India Muslim League founded in
1900	Dhaka.
1910	Varendra Research Museum established
7	in Rajshahi.
1921	University of Dhaka established.
1940	Muslim League adopts Pakistan (or
s /	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.

Timeline

XX	1 imeline
1946	Elections return the Muslim League as
1940	the largest party.
1946–7	Tebhaga movement.
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. About 800,000 migrants arrive in East
1947–8	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. Awami Muslim League (renamed Awami
1949	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). Territory of future Bangladesh has 44
1951	million inhabitants. 21 February (<i>Ekushe</i>): killing of 'language
1952	martyrs'; first Shohid Minar (Martyrs' Memorial) erected. Passport and visa system introduced.
1952	V-AID community development
1953	programme. Provincial elections in East Pakistan.
1954	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.
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.

xxii	Timeline
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
1)/2	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 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 south-
	eastern Bangladesh.
1992	Nirmul Committee stages Gono Adalot
	(people's court).
1993	Fatwa against Taslima Nasrin.
1993	Groundwater arsenic poisoning
	discovered.
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 \$2 a day and one third on less
	than \$1 a day.

xxiv	Timeline
2000	Bangladesh produces a surplus of food grains for the first time in its modern
2001	history. 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	Ready-made garments make up three-
2007	January: general elections postponed and military-backed interim government
2007	installed. November: cyclone hits south-western coast, killing thousands and devastating the Sundarbans wetlands.
2007	Bangladesh has 150 million inhabitants. Dhaka has 14 million inhabitants.

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, and Bangladesh is the seventh 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 and geographical conditions 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

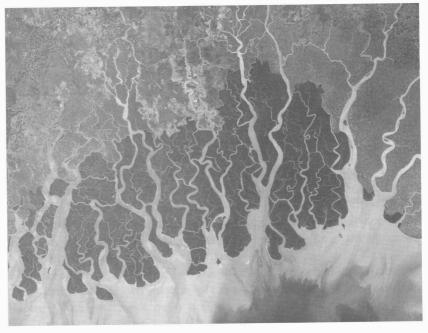
(1947-71) and then independent Bangladesh.

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 $b\bar{a}ml\bar{a}$. 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 Plassey/Polashi, Barisal/Borishal 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.

The long view



Part I Aerial view of the Sundarbans wetlands.

CHAPTER I

A land of water and silt

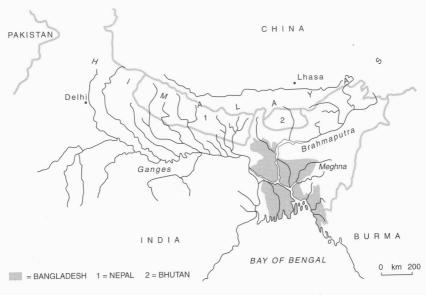
Imagine yourself high in the air over the Himalayas. Look down and you see a forbidding landscape of snow-capped mountains and harsh vegetation. But now look to the south-east and discover an immense flood-plain stretching between the mountains and the sea. That shimmering

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.

The delta is huge because almost all water running off the Himalayas, the highest mountain range on earth, has to pass through it (Map I.I). 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. 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 north-eastern corner of India. It then flows west till 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 eight kilometres wide and the Brahmaputra spreads to the improbable width of eighteen kilometres.

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,



Map 1.1. The catchment area of the Bengal delta.

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 one of the largest river deltas 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. The Bengal delta is surrounded by higher land and hills to the east, north and west; it acts as the narrow end of a funnel through which an area more than ten times its size annually discharges a mind-boggling 650,000,000,000,000 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



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

and seawater. Each year in June, as the rivers are swelling rapidly, the skies over 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 till 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 north-eastern 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 II metres of rain fall here; the maximum rainfall ever recorded during a 24-hour period was over I metre.

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 three metres 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 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.2

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.3

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

made early and successful agriculture possible. But 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 south-eastern coast of Bangladesh at Chittagong. Huge waves travelling 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.4

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.⁵

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 risky deltaic environment. Today, with over 1,000 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 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).



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

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 Burma and north-east 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 north-west and Madhupur in central Bangladesh) and depressions (hāor or bil) that turn into immense seasonal lakes. 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. 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. 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 $(p\bar{a}r\bar{a})$ perched on slightly elevated plots that become islands when moderate floods occur. Few 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. The intervals between severe floods are shortening (according to some, largely owing to deforestation in the Himalayas⁷) and experts on climate change predict that Bangladesh will be one of the countries most severely affected by rising sea levels resulting from global warming. 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.

CHAPTER 2

Jungle, fields, cities and states

For hundreds of thousands of years, the fertile Bengal delta was covered by dense rainforests and wetlands, an environment of high biodiversity. Much of it survived well into historical times. In the last few centuries, however, what had been one of the richest wildlife areas of the world went into sharp decline. Many species of plants and animals disappeared from Bangladesh – among the larger animals: rhinoceros, wild buffalo, banteng, gaur, nilgai, various species of deer, wolf, marsh crocodile, pinkheaded duck and peafowl. Others, such as elephant, tiger and leopard, became very rare (see box 'Spotting a shishu').

The decline of the Bengalian rainforest was directly related to the success of one of its denizens: man. Human beings have been roaming the forests and rivers of Bangladesh, making use of their rich resources, from very early times. However, few early remains have been found, and experts do not agree on when humans first made their appearance. According to some, they entered the region from the north-east, crossing the mountains from China some 60,000 years ago. Others suggest, however, that a discrete regional culture developed in Bengal well before 100,000 BCE.

The basis for any claims about prehistoric humans in Bengal is slim. On the one hand, there is the environment of the floodplains with their frequent inundations and a humid tropical climate, both particularly unkind to material remains of human settlement not made of the sturdiest material. Since stone does not occur naturally in the Bengal delta, early humans are likely to have relied on materials such as wood, bamboo and mud that have not survived. On the other hand, the prehistoric record of Bangladesh is also limited because archaeologists of South Asia have long treated the region with indifference, training their sights on other parts of the Indian subcontinent. And those archaeologists who did work on the Bengal delta were, until recently, mainly interested in more recent times.

Spotting a shishu

If you are lucky you may have a rare encounter in Bangladesh. As your boat glides through the muddy water of one of the country's myriad rivers, a slick body suddenly shoots up from the depths, breaking the water for a moment. You will just have time to notice a narrow snout, a curved grey back and a broad tail - and it is gone again below the murky surface. Congratulations: you have met your first shishu.

What is a shishu? It is a freshwater dolphin that is indigenous in the Ganges and Brahmaputra river systems. The creature is known officially as the Ganges River dolphin (Platanista gangetica gangetica; Plate 2.1) and in Bangladesh as shishu or shushuk (śiśu; śuśuk). A powerful swimmer up to 2.5 metres in length, it eats fish and shrimps. It forages by swimming on one side, its flipper trailing the river bed and its long snout stirring the muddy bottom. Shishu have very poor eyesight. They navigate by emitting sounds and mapping their environment by the echoes that travel back through the water.

Dolphins used to be abundant. In 1781 a famous biologist of Bengal, William Roxburgh, reported that they 'are found in great numbers in the Ganges [and] seem to delight most in the slow moving labyrinth of rivers and creeks which intersect the delta of that river to the south and east of Calcutta'. Over the years, their numbers have dwindled. Today there may be several thousands left (including those found in India and Nepal) and their survival

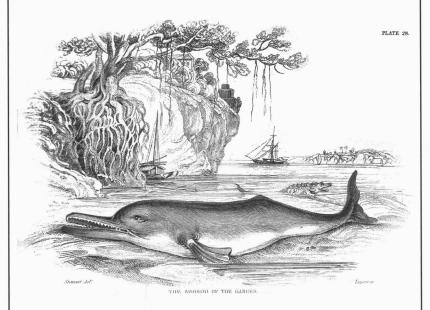
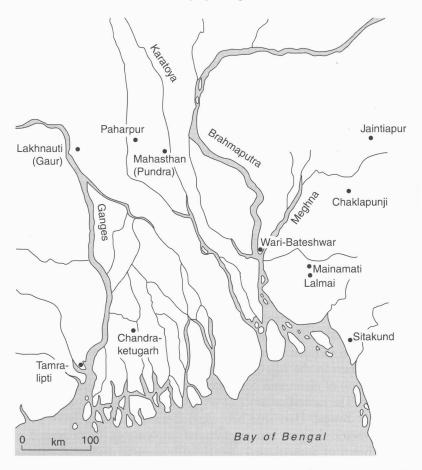


Plate 2.1. An early portrait of the shishu.

is now threatened. Dams and embankments separate breeding populations and impede seasonal migration. Dredging and river development degrade their habitat and water pollution shortens their lives. Many shishu drown when they get entangled in fishing nets – being mammals they need to come to the water surface to breathe air. Protection methods are only slowly being put in place.

The prehistoric discoveries that have been made so far are almost exclusively from higher terrain surrounding the floodplains. Today the eastern hills of Bangladesh and the western plateaux (now in West Bengal, India) give the best clues to the early inhabitants of the region. Here stone, pebbles and petrified wood (fossilwood) were available. Fossilwood industries producing hand axes, blades and scrapers have been found in Lalmai, a small range of hills in Comilla district, Sitakund (Chittagong district) and Chaklapunji (Sylhet district). Archaeologists have linked these with similar tools from West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa (India) and the Irrawaddy delta (Burma). The makers of these early tools may have survived by hunting animals and gathering plants. In Jaintiapur in northeastern Bangladesh huge stones (menhirs and dolmens) were erected, some of them thought to be prehistoric; such stones have been found in larger numbers in the adjoining hills of India.²

Cultivation of plants and domestication of animals occurred well before 1,500 BCE. The earliest evidence of settled agricultural communities comes from West Bengal. Here sites have yielded stone and bone tools, pottery with geometric designs, iron agricultural implements, domesticated rice and the bones of domesticated animals such as goats, cattle and buffaloes. On the basis of these findings it seems likely that the subsistence base for people living on the poorer plateau soils was a combination of agriculture, animal husbandry and hunting, but that those living on the more fertile alluvial soils of the delta depended heavily on agriculture and fishing. In this zone a crucial shift occurred when agriculture evolved from shifting cultivation to irrigated rice cultivation on permanent fields. This type of agriculture became so productive that populations expanded, settlements grew and various crafts flourished. Ever since, rice has shaped the history of Bangladesh. The assured production of irrigated rice became the foundation for all societies and states in the delta down to the present. Producing rice became the inhabitants' main occupation and rice was their staple food. The miracle of sustained rice cultivation over millennia is perhaps the greatest feat of Bangladesh history.



Map 2.1. Ancient sites. River courses are approximate. Note that the main channels of the Ganges and Brahmaputra differ from their current channels.

Originally a swamp plant, rice is extremely well suited to the ecology of Bangladesh, where it is known as dhan $(dh\bar{a}n = paddy)$ when on the field or unhusked, chaul $(c\bar{a}ul \text{ or } c\bar{a}l)$ when husked and bhat $(bh\bar{a}t)$ when boiled. There are many different words to describe rice in other forms: parboiled, flattened, ground or puffed. Generations of cultivators selected and adapted rice to suit their needs, especially with regard to resistance to disease, growing season and taste. In this way, they developed thousands of varieties (cultivars) to suit a multitude of local agro-ecological conditions.³ In the deltaic environment special cultivars

were developed for different levels of flooding. Perhaps the most unusual is 'floating rice' (*jalidhān*), grown on low-lying land. With the onset of flooding these plants elongate with astonishing rapidity till their stems reach a length of 5–6 metres. This allows them to survive by floating in very deep water.

Early on a pattern of land use developed in which the highest delta lands were reserved for homesteads and orchards (mango, jackfruit, coconut and betel nut). Slightly lower grounds were used to grow rice seedlings and vegetables, and middling and low lands took rice. On middling lands there were usually two rice crops: spring rice (āuś, March to August), followed by autumn rice (āman, June to December). On low lands with annual flooding the main crop was autumn rice followed by winter rice (boro, February to April). The countryside became dotted with clumps of homesteads built around man-made ponds (pukur) that were used for drinking-water, washing and fish-breeding. Over time, cropping patterns would change as new crops arrived from other parts of the world (such as potatoes, tomatoes, chillies and tobacco from the Americas) and as some crops became commercially important (indigo, sugarcane, jute).

THE EMERGENCE OF URBAN LIFE

The success of rice-based deltaic agriculture provided the basis for sedentary lifestyles, which, by about the fifth century BCE, led to urban centres, long-distance maritime trade and Bengal's first sizeable states. At Wari-Bateshwar (Narsingdi) in eastern Bangladesh archaeologists have begun to excavate an important port city that traded with south-east Asia and the Roman world. So far they have discovered a fortified citadel, silver punch-marked coins, many iron and pottery artefacts and a road made of potsherds and crushed bricks. These discoveries indicate that Wari-Bateshwar was a major administrative centre on the banks of the Brahmaputra river (which has since moved far away) and that it boasted iron-smelting as well as semi-precious-stone bead industries. There is abundant evidence here of the use of clay, a locally available material. In an environment with very little stone, walls were made of clay or bricks and the art of pottery was important.⁴ Artists and artisans in Bangladesh have used clay ever since to express their imagination, most significantly in the form of terracotta (burnt clay). 5 It is the terracotta work of early artists that provides us with the liveliest information about everyday life in Bangladesh down the ages (Plate 2.2).



Plate 2.2. Harvesting. Fragment of a terracotta plaque, Chandraketugarh, c. first century BCE. 6

By the third century BCE complex urban centres were well established in the Bengal floodplains, for example Tamralipti (now Tamluk) in the south-west, Mahasthan in the north and Mainamati in the east. The earliest written record in Bangladesh is an inscription on a piece of stone that was discovered at Mahasthan in the district of Bogra. It shows that this city (then known as Pudanagala or Pundranagara) was an important urban centre when the Maurya empire dominated North India. It has been suggested that Mahasthan may have been a provincial capital of that empire. The inscription is in Prakrit, a language from which the Bengali language would develop in the tenth century CE, and it appears to be an order to fill up a storehouse with rice, oil, trees and coins against any



Plate 2.3. The Mahasthan Brahmi Inscription, third century BCE.

emergency caused by water, fire or a devastation of the crops by parrots. The text is in the Brahmi script and hence this important discovery is known as the Mahasthan Brahmi Inscription (See Plate 2.3).

Mahasthan (or Mahasthangarh) was inhabited before this period and has been continuously inhabited ever since. So far eighteen building levels have been discovered in this large site enclosed by 6-metre-high rampart walls.

Early terracotta plaques demonstrate the use of clay as a sophisticated expression of urban culture. The best known are magnificent plaques from an area in the south-western delta that archaeologists refer to as Chandraketugarh, now just across Bangladesh's western border with India (plate 2.4).⁷ These plaques show deities and power holders, copulating couples, scenes of nature and impressions of everyday life.

Who were the inhabitants of these early villages and towns of the Bengal delta? The various communities of cultivators, fishing and craft persons, religious specialists, traders and rulers certainly were not Bengalis in the modern sense. Place-names in Bangladesh, as well as words in various dialects of the Bengali language, suggest that most people spoke languages belonging to entirely different language families: Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian. Languages of the Indo-European family (to which Bengali belongs) began to spread only from about the fourth century BCE, possibly as languages of rule. Speakers of these languages referred to the languages they encountered in Bengal as 'vile' (āsura). In modern Bengali



Plate 2.4. 'Royal family.' Terracotta plaque, Chandraketugarh, c. first century BCE.

many common words relating to water, land, nature, agriculture, fishing and settlement are thought to derive from these earlier languages, for instance low land (bil), high land $(d\bar{a}ng\bar{a})$, open land $(khol\bar{a})$, mud-made $(k\bar{a}c\bar{a})$, waterhole $(dob\bar{a})$, homestead $(bhit\bar{a})$, village (patti), plough $(l\bar{a}ngal, h\bar{a}l)$, fishing net $(j\bar{a}l)$ and forest (jangal). Today these older language families are still represented in Bangladesh but in terms of numbers of speakers they have been dwarfed by Bengali. Among the Tibeto-Burman languages are Khasi, Garo (Abeng), Koch, Arakanese (Rahkain), Mru and Marma; among the Austro-Asiatic languages are Santal, Munda and Malo; the Dravidian languages are represented by Kurukh (Oraon).

The linguistic history of Bangladesh explains why archaeologists have long avoided the prehistoric period. Our understanding of South Asian archaeology is intimately related to the extensive early literature in Indo-European languages, notably Sanskrit and Prakrit. Writers in these languages were from more western parts of the Ganges valley and they had little knowledge of the area now covered by Bangladesh. In the most ancient epics the Bengal delta appears as a distant land of barbarians, beyond the pale of Sanskritic culture, and anyone returning from there had to undergo expiatory rites. Over time writers in Sanskrit revised their opinion somewhat. As their centres of cultural production shifted eastwards from the upper to the middle Ganges delta, they became more knowledgeable about western Bengal, which they still saw as inhabited by rude peoples but nevertheless an important area for conquest, plunder and tribute. Eastern Bengal would remain largely unknown to them for much longer. Getting to know this region was a slow process. By the seventh century - perhaps a thousand years after they had reached the western edge of the delta - they described Sylhet in eastern Bengal as 'outside the pale of human habitation, where there is no distinction between natural and artificial, infested with wild animals and poisonous reptiles, and covered with forest out-growths'. In fact, Sanskritic learning may not have begun to spread widely in Bengal till towards the end of the eleventh century.11

To Sanskrit writers, Bengal was not a clearly defined region. They had a range of designations for areas and groups in what we now know as Bengal, and these vary between texts. Today scholars are often not quite sure where these areas and groups were located. Rarh (*Rārḥa*) is a term for a region in western Bengal and Pundra (*Pundra*), Varendri (*Varendri*) and Gaur (*Gaura*) for regions in northern Bengal. Vanga (*Vanga*) is thought to have been located in central Bengal and Samatata (*Samataṭa*) and Harikela (*Harikela*) in eastern Bengal. Sanskrit texts also speak of Pundra, Vanga and Rarh as peoples who occupied areas now probably in Bangladesh.¹²

The rich literature in Sanskrit has focused scholarly attention on the regions that were best known to writers in that language. Bengal was clearly not one of these regions, and since there are no written records of Bengal before the arrival of speakers of Indo-European languages, archaeologists of early South Asia have tended to neglect Bengal. Archaeologists of Bengal, on the other hand, have often been motivated by a desire to show that Bengal was not an uncivilised place. For this reason they have concentrated on monumental relics of proven 'high culture' at later times.

But to understand early Bangladesh we need more than the 'Sanskritic gaze' or a self-congratulatory search for past glory. From the fifth century BCE, when Sanskritic culture first reached the Bengal delta from the west, Bangladesh has been a frontier zone where Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic worldviews met, clashed and intermingled. This interaction has been the very stuff of Bangladesh history, and to tell the story from only one side of the divide is to diminish it. The frontier was cultural as much as it was territorial, influencing the identities of communities and individuals all over the Bengal delta. Since Sanskritic culture first made itself felt here, it moved slowly eastwards during the first millennium CE, being altered in the process by numerous non-Sanskritic elements. And the frontier never disappeared. Even today the clash between Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic can be observed in Bangladesh's culture, and even territorially in eastern Bangladesh.

New approaches to archaeology can be very important in filling in this picture of Bangladesh as a meeting ground of Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic worldviews over millennia. Fortunately, these new approaches are now being introduced in Bangladesh for the first time. Scientific excavations with detailed attention to archaeological strata and to everyday life in the early Bengal delta are already showing that there is still a world to discover here.¹³

THE RISE AND FALL OF STATES

The Bengal delta's productive agriculture made it possible for socially stratified and economically diversified societies to develop from early times. As we have seen, the archaeological record indicates that urban centres came up as early as the fifth century BCE. During the following centuries large towns would develop along major rivers rather than on the exposed sea coast. The fortunes of these towns were linked to the whims of the deltaic rivers: whenever a river moved course and the port silted up, the town would decline. An early victim was Tamralipti, one of India's largest ports and possibly 'the chief trade emporium of the wide area between China and Alexandria' (Map 2.1). Famous for a thousand years, its fortunes reversed in the eighth century CE as the delta expanded southwards and its port silted up. Today it is a land-bound district town known as Tamluk.

The case of Lakhnauti-Gaur also demonstrates the vicissitudes of riverside urbanisation. It is not known when this busy port in the northwestern delta at the junction of three channels of the Ganges was

established but it clearly went through many cycles of development and decay (Map 2.1). In the twelfth century CE it was the capital of the Sena dynasty and the Moroccan traveller Ibn Battutah visited it 150 years later. In the fifteenth century it was one of the largest cities of South Asia. In 1521 a Portuguese visitor found that the streets were broad and straight and yet so thronged with traffic and people that it was difficult to move. The houses were one-storyed and had courtyards and gardens. Many had walls and floors covered with ornamental blue and gold tiles that may have been Chinese imports. The city is thought to have had a population of 200,000 (although one estimate at the time put it at 1.2 million).

Like all riverside cities in the history of Bangladesh, Gaur felt the power of the river to give prosperity or to take it away. During its heyday (early 1200s to 1575), Gaur was settled and abandoned several times, depending on the Ganges moving westwards and back again. When the river moved away, it was not only an economic disaster (even though feeder canals were made, ships could no longer reach the port), but also a health disaster, as swamps formed and malaria and other fevers broke out. In 1575 a severe epidemic sounded the death-knell for Gaur: the river had moved away once more and this time a combination of political instability and problems in trade with South-east Asia sealed its fate. Today, the river flows about fifteen kilometres from Gaur's ruins, which stretch over an area thirty by six kilometres and include monumental gates, fortifications, palaces, mosques, bridges, causeways, canals, loading platforms and underground sewers (Plate 2.5). Part of the ruins lie in Bangladesh and part across the border in India.

The rise and fall of Gaur was just one episode in the delta's long history of flexible urbanisation. Like the rivers and the villages of deltaic Bengal, centres of urban power and commerce have always been remarkably mobile and so have their inhabitants and the trade routes they served. The same holds for the political organisations and states ruling the delta.

The early history of state formation in the Bengal delta can be described as a continual emergence and decline of local and regional polities that only occasionally became integrated into large realms. It is often unclear how firm such integration was, how it affected local power holders and what it meant for the population at large. Many scholars suggest that the Maurya (c. 324–187 BCE) and Gupta (c. 320–570 CE) spheres of influence covered most of the delta. The evidence is fragmentary, however, and it would appear that the western delta (now West Bengal (India) and western Bangladesh) was more often part of large states than the eastern delta. This pattern of states in the Indian heartland extending their influence eastwards

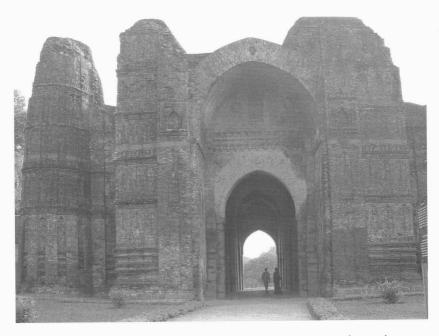


Plate 2.5. Ruins of the northern gateway to the fort of Gaur, constructed around 1425 CE.

was only occasionally reversed when a regional state in Bengal expanded to the west. This may have happened in the seventh century CE, when Sasanka, the ruler of the north Bengal state of Gaur (Gauda), ventured into north India, and the Pala rulers repeated it with more success in the eighth and ninth centuries. The eastern delta and the southern region of Chittagong saw a succession of local states and episodic integration into states whose centres of power lay in Tripura, to the east, and Arakan, to the south.

Most of the time, however, Bengal polities appear to have been relatively small and transient, a situation that an early source aptly describes as 'fish-eat-fish' (*mātsyanyāyam*). In such periods of political fragmentation, 'every Ksatriya, grandee, Brahman and merchant was a king in his own house... and there was no king ruling over the country.' 16

The actual power of the rulers over the agricultural population is difficult to assess. According to Sheena Panja, the impressive monuments that rulers such as the Pala dynasty constructed in the floodplains were actually signs of weakness. These towering brick constructions (for example Paharpur, c. 800 CE, see Plate 2.6) were attempts to inscribe the

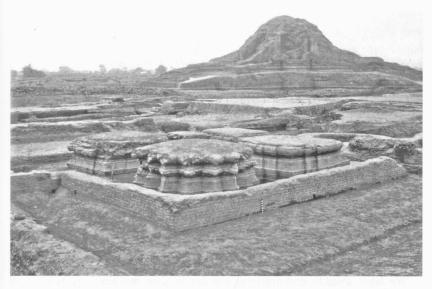


Plate 2.6. The ruins of Paharpur in north-western Bangladesh.

permanence of their authority in the shifting landscape of the floodplain, but the local population, whose lives were attuned to impermanence, probably set little store by them.¹⁷

Fragmented though the archaeological record for the Bengal delta is, it shows a pattern that runs through the entire history of the region: the delta's socio-economic and political development rarely conformed to an all-South-Asia or even a north-Indian model. Although there were all kinds of economic and political links between the delta and surrounding areas, the region followed its own course, and attempts to integrate it into larger political entities were often unsuccessful.

CHAPTER 3

A region of multiple frontiers

The history of Bangladesh is a history of frontiers. From the earliest times the Bengal delta has been a meeting ground of opposites, and it is these encounters, clashes and accommodations that have given Bangladesh its distinct character. In this chapter I expand on Richard Eaton's idea of thinking about Bangladesh history as predicated upon a series of moving frontiers.¹

We have already encountered the land-water frontier – moving primarily from north to south – and the Sanskritic frontier – moving from west to east. Both are ancient and both are still very much part of contemporary Bangladesh. In this chapter we encounter four more frontiers, all of them historically moving in an easterly direction.

THE AGRARIAN FRONTIER

This frontier divides cultivators of irrigated fields from shifting cultivators and the forest. In the delta, embanked fields irrigated by monsoon rainwater and worked by ploughs appeared at least 2,500 years ago. Since then this form of crop production has been expanding gradually across the lowlands at the expense of an older system of hoe cultivation on temporary plots. Today the latter system is still found in Bangladesh, but is restricted to hill terrain where irrigated fields cannot be maintained.²

The spread of irrigated agriculture was slow and uneven because establishing it requires much labour. Cultivators had to clear the forest, level the ground and construct field embankments and irrigation channels. Even more labour was needed to keep irrigated agriculture running. If successful, however, it was capable of permanently supporting dense populations. The urban centres of early Bangladesh could develop only after irrigated agriculture had established itself and had begun producing sufficient food not only for the cultivators themselves but also for emerging classes of non-cultivating consumers.

The eastward march of the agrarian frontier went hand in hand with the gradual destruction of the luxuriant Bengalian rainforest. By the late nineteenth century this process had converted most forests into farmland. The disappearance of the forests precipitated an agrarian crisis. Bangladesh's agrarian system had been based on an expansionary dynamic; the moving frontier was necessary to support a gradually growing population. With the disappearance of the forest, delta agriculture ran into a brick wall. Bangladeshi cultivators, unable to reclaim new fields, sought to combat looming stagnation by means of two strategies. The first was a process known as 'agrarian involution'.3 They used more labour to intensify cultivation and increase production, they raised two or three crops on the same field during the year and they introduced more market crops. A second strategy was self-rescue by migration. Cultivators from the delta sought to keep the frontier moving by bringing into cultivation areas that were previously thought to be too dangerous (such as islands in the big rivers or out in the Bay of Bengal) or too far away. It is from this period that settlers began to move in considerable numbers into regions beyond the eastern boundaries of the Bengal delta, especially Assam and Tripura (now in India) and Arakan (now in Burma). In this way they introduced a new element into the history of Bangladesh. Moving into regions occupied by other ethnic groups, they initiated a political dynamic that took on ethnic overtones. In the twentieth century, in Assam, Tripura and Arakan alike, popular movements and state regimes would turn against Bangladeshi immigrants.

THE STATE FRONTIER

A second frontier in the Bengal delta was that between states and other forms of rule. We have seen that states first emerged in the south and west and gradually spread to cover most of the delta. But this form of territorial organisation was not the only one. Other forms of rule prevailed in parts of the delta and in the hills surrounding it, including small-scale and often unstable alliances of village leaders. For much of the delta's history, it was such alliances that dominated the scene, occasionally punctuated by the emergence of large states. Sometimes such large states were able to incorporate small statelets and chiefdoms but they were unable to 'climb the hills'. The state frontier did not close till well after the establishment of the colonial state, largely as a result of the British fighting their way into the hills and annexing them to their colony.

The last part of Bangladesh to come under state rule was the mountainous region in the south-east, invaded by the British in 1860 and dubbed the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Today the forms of state rule here continue to differ from those in the plains. In a sense, the frontier still lives on in the administrative arrangements of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where the Bangladesh state continues to uphold regional regulations and political forms originating in the colonial period. Among these are vestiges of indirect rule (the office of three Chiefs or Rajas), a regional system of taxation and land rights and forms of representation (for example a 'Regional Council') that differ from the rest of Bangladesh.⁵

THE RELIGIOUS FRONTIER

A third frontier was the one separating inhabitants with different religious visions. The early history of religious identities in Bangladesh is still poorly understood. Archaeologists have unearthed many images of female and male figures that they interpret as representations of powerful goddesses and gods, but we know little about the community religions that gave these images meaning. The picture becomes clearer when, over 2,000 years ago, deities came to exhibit iconographical characteristics that place them within broader religious traditions found in other parts of South and South-east Asia. In the Bengal delta, these traditions – now known as Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism – appear to have coexisted for centuries as part of the eastward expansion of Sanskritic culture. Early Chinese pilgrims described cities in Bangladesh as places of religious learning. For example, Xuanzang – also known as Hiuen Tsiang – visited Samatata in eastern Bangladesh in around 640 CE. In his words:

The land lies low and is rich. The capital is about 13 km round. It is regularly cultivated and is rich in crops. The climate is soft and the habits of the people agreeable. The men are hardy by nature, small of stature, and of black complexion; they are fond of learning...There are thirty or so monasteries with about 2,000 priests. They are all of the Theravada Buddhist [= Sthavira] school. There are some hundred Brahmanical [= Deva] temples...The naked ascetics called Jains [= Nirgrantha] are most numerous.

Although religious specialists such as Xuanzang clearly distinguished between traditions, we do not know to what extent ordinary believers in Bangladesh understood these religious forms as separate or as an amalgamated whole. Neither do we know how these forms interacted with pre-existing religions or to what extent they spread beyond urban centres.

It is clear, however, that very gradually many local deities became incorporated into the Sanskritic religions, giving these a particular regional flavour. One distinct regional feature is the persisting popularity of powerful female deities: Monosha (*manasā*), who protects worshippers against snakebites, Chondi (*candā*), the goddess of forest life and hunting, Shitola (*śātalā*), who guards against smallpox, and the fierce and vengeful Kali (*kāli*).⁷

Evidence of the overlapping of various frontiers – Sanskritic, agrarian, state and religious – is provided by early Bengali literature. Narrative poems in honour of deities (*mangalkābya*) describe a struggle between adherents of different gods that took place around 1300–1500 CE. The main god of the early farming people was known as Shiva (*śib*):

a benevolent, kindly deity, who shares only a name with that majestic being who churned the ocean and drank down its tide of poison. To his people, he is *gosāi*, the owner of the herd, and *prabhu*, master, simple terms for the simple deity of men who lived by the soil. His emblem is the plough, not the trident.⁸

His adherents struggled with those of two goddesses. One of these, Monosha, may have started out as a domestic goddess associated with women, herdsmen and fisherfolk. Another, Chondi, was associated with hunters and the forest. Both are thought to have been indigenous pre-Sanskritic deities linked with non-plough cultivation. Neither was associated with professional priests. And yet their worship gradually became very popular among Bengali-speaking wet-rice producers who were coming under the influence of a state-supported religion today known as Brahmanical Hinduism. In this way, these deities crossed not only the Sanskritic frontier but also the agrarian, state and religious frontiers.

It was in this complex world of multiple and transforming religious identities that a new creed, Islam, entered in two separate waves. It first reached coastal Bangladesh as a by-product of seaborne trade between the eighth and twelfth centuries. By this time, Arab and Persian travellers and traders were Muslims. Many of them settled along the south-eastern coast, where Arab sources mention a port city, Samandar, possibly an early name for contemporary Chittagong. In the early thirteenth century Islam also reached Bangladesh by the land route, this time as the religion of powerful invaders. This is how Richard Eaton describes the event:

Sometime in 1243–44, residents of Lakhnauti, a city in northwestern Bengal, told a visiting historian of the dramatic events that had taken place there forty years earlier. At that time, the visitor was informed, a band of several hundred Turkish cavalry had ridden swiftly down the Gangetic Plain in the direction of the Bengal delta. Led by a daring officer named Muhammad Bakhtiyar, the men overran

venerable Buddhist monasteries in neighboring Bihar before turning their attention to the northwestern portion of the delta, then ruled by a mild and generous Hindu monarch. Disguising themselves as horse dealers, Bakhtiyar and his men slipped into the royal city of Nudiya [probably in what is now Rajshahi district]. Once inside, they rode straight to the king's palace, where they confronted the guards with brandished weapons. Utterly overwhelmed, for he had just sat town to dine, the Hindu monarch hastily departed through the back door and fled with many of his retainers to the forest hinterland of eastern Bengal, abandoning his capital altogether.¹²

The arrival of these newcomers turned out to be momentous because it marked the beginning of an era in which Islam was the creed of those who ruled most of Bengal (and, indeed, most of the Indian subcontinent). This era lasted some five centuries and is usually referred to as the Sultanate period (up to the sixteenth century¹³), followed by the Mughal period; it ended only when the British conquered Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century. What made the establishment of Muslim rule in Bengal particularly significant was that it initiated a process here that did not occur in other parts of India: in Bengal, the majority of the population gradually adopted Islam as their religion (see box 'Shah Jalal the saint'). At the time no one could have imagined that this would one day have a fateful effect on state formation. Without a majority of Muslims in the population of Bengal, there would never have been a twenty-first-century state named Bangladesh.

Shah Jalal the saint

It must have been a memorable visit back in 1346 CE, when two adventurers from the Mediterranean met in the Bengal delta. The host was Turkish. He had settled in a remote corner of the delta some thirty years previously. The visitor was from Morocco. He had been travelling around Asia for over twenty years and found his way to Bengal after having been shipwrecked in the Indian Ocean on his way to China. The host, Shah Jalal, was already famous and his guest, Ibn Battutah, was destined for fame through his account of his travels.

Shah Jalal had arrived overland from his native Konya (Turkey*) in Sylhet (north-east Bangladesh), when the army of a neighbouring principality conquered this region. He may have fought in the army but that is not what made him legendary. Soon after he settled in Sylhet stories about his unusual spiritual powers and miraculous acts began to circulate. Shah Jalal was a highly successful Muslim preacher.

^{*} Shah Jalal's birthplace is disputed. Here I follow Karim (2003), who bases himself on an inscription found in Sylhet.

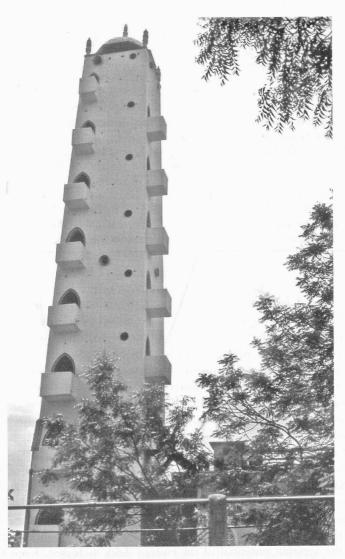


Plate 3.1. Shah Jalal's shrine in Sylhet.

To find a Turkish missionary in fourteenth-century Bengal is not as exceptional as it may appear. Shah Jalal was a Sufi, a member of the Islamic sect which seeks to establish a direct relationship with Allah through meditation, asceticism and preaching. Sufis were active in spreading Islam all over South Asia. The first had arrived in Bengal some 150 years before Shah Jalal,

and Sufi preachers would continue to trickle into the region for centuries. Most came from Central Asia, Arabia, Iran and Turkey.

It was Shah Jalal's reputation as a powerful Sufi saint that prompted Ibn Battutah to take the long boat trip up the rivers of Bengal. Ibn Battutah describes the old man as tall, lean and with a thin beard. After three days in Sylhet, Ibn Battutah travelled to nearby Habiganj – now an insignificant country town but then, according to this eyewitness, 'one of the biggest and most beautiful cities' – and from there to Sonargaon (near Dhaka), a fifteenday trip down the 'Blue River', possibly the Meghna. Ibn Battutah was impressed by the abundance of rice in Bengal. ¹⁴

Shah Jalal died the following year, and his tomb became a place where followers would gather to pray for his blessing (Plate 3.1). Although turning the grave of a spiritual guide into an object of veneration is frowned upon in more orthodox, scriptural interpretations of Islam, it is encouraged in Sufism and remains exceedingly popular in the Bengal delta. Shah Jalal's shrine is one of the largest and most venerated. It draws thousands of devotees, not only from all over Bangladesh but also from other parts of South Asia.

How could Islam emerge as the majority religion in this region far from the Middle East and surrounded on all sides by areas where Islam never had such an impact? How did it become the majority faith among the rural population, whereas elsewhere in South Asia it was chiefly an urban creed? What did conversion to Islam actually mean? And why was Islam far more successful in eastern Bengal than in western Bengal? Richard Eaton, who has examined these questions in detail, suggests that the answers lie in the fact that eastern Bengal was a zone where the agrarian, state and religious frontiers moved together during a crucial period in the region's history.

In the sixteenth century, when the Mughal state ruled most of what is now Bangladesh, the agrarian frontier began to move decisively into the eastern delta. State officials rode the crest of an ecological change: the Ganges shifted its channel to the east (the current Padma) as the Bengal Basin slowly tilted eastwards, a movement that is still continuing. As a result the agrarian potential of the eastern delta increased. Keen to augment their tax base, Mughal officials encouraged the clearing of forests and the establishment of wet-rice plough cultivation. To this end they issued permits and grants to enterprising colonists who undertook to reclaim land in the eastern delta and pay taxes in return for land rights. Colonists needed to mobilise labour and this gave the edge to 'charismatic pioneers', men with a reputation for religious power and piety. They

would enlist followers to build a shrine, a requirement under the state grant, and settle them around it. The shrine-orientated organisation (usually known as shomaz (samāj) among Muslims) provided social order. The newly established community – usually made up largely of immigrants from western and northern Bengal, now less fertile than before – would clear the forest and create rice fields. The local population of shifting cultivators and fisherfolk would either join them or choose to move deeper into the forest or swamps, placing themselves out of reach of the state but maintaining trade relations with the sedentary rice growers.

The Mughal state did not have a policy of promoting Islam in Bengal and many charismatic pioneers who received state patronage were Hindus. The majority, however, were Muslims, many of them known as spiritual guides $(p\bar{\imath}r)$. Thus, Eaton suggests, in the eastern delta – inhabited by 'communities lightly touched, if touched at all, by Hindu civilization' -Islam came to be associated with state-recognised control of reclaimed land, the expansion of wet-rice cultivation and literacy. ¹⁵ The agrarian, religious and state frontiers fused as Islam evolved into an ideology of taming the forest and promoting settled agriculture. In a process of creative adaptation and translation, the religious traditions of eastern Bengal and the rituals associated with the new village mosques and shrines began to coalesce, creating a completely new blend of Bengali and Islamic worldviews.¹⁶ Islam's success in the Bengal delta was predicated upon its domestication. Islamic superhuman beings were first added to the existing pantheon, then they were identified with powerful local deities, and ultimately they rose to such prominence that they succeeded in appropriating Bengali culture – or in being appropriated by it. In short, 'when figures like Adam, Eve, and Abraham became identified with central leitmotifs of Bengali history and civilization, Islam had become established as profoundly and authentically Bengali."7

Importantly, Islamic Bengali identity remained strongly rooted in the eastern deltaic milieu. In a sense, it is a lowland identity that points west, to the Sanskritic and Islamic heartlands. It never managed to climb the hills or enter the forest. The people living in the hills and mountains surrounding the Bengal delta never adopted either Bengali or Islamic identities. Some parts of these hills are now included in Bangladesh, notably the Chittagong Hill Tracts. When you enter these hills from the plains, you realise immediately that you have crossed a cultural frontier. In the hills architecture, food, gender relations and many other elements point east, towards South-east Asia. The religions are diverse: community religions among the Mru, Khumi and Khyeng; local forms of Buddhism

among the Marma, Chakma, Taungchangya and Sak; local forms of Hinduism among the Tripura and Riang/Brong; and, from the beginning of the twentieth century, various forms of Christianity among the Bawm, Pangkhua, Khyeng, Mru and Lushai. None of these groups identify themselves as Bengalis. With the exception of the Chakma language, none of the languages they speak are related to Bengali. 19

Similarly, the Islamic Bengali identity did not succeed in areas of the delta that remained forest-clad till recent times. Here many non-Islamic, non-Bengali identities persisted, for example Garo in the central delta; Khasi, Garo and Hajong in the north-east; Santal, Oraon, Koch, Malo and many others in the north-west; and Rahkain (Arakanese) on the southern and south-eastern coasts. ²⁰ When the present borders of Bangladesh were drawn, all these very different groups of people came to be placed in a single category: that of ethnic minorities facing the dominant ethnic identity in the country, Islamic Bengali.

THE LANGUAGE FRONTIER

The state/agricultural/religious frontier was also linked to language change. Today the country is often equated with the Bengali (or Bangla, $b\bar{a}ml\bar{a}$) language – 'Bangladesh' means 'country of Bengalis' – and this reflects the political significance that the Bengali language assumed in the second half of the twentieth century. But historically the emergence of Bengali as the region's dominant language was a slow process. In terms of language the history of Bangladesh is clearly one of multilingualism. For centuries other languages, now often seen as marginal or 'hill' languages, were widely spoken in the plains: Garo in central Bangladesh (Dhaka and Mymensingh), Khasi in the north-east (Sylhet), Arakanese in the south (Chittagong and Patuakhali) and Koch in the north (Rangpur and Dinajpur).

The language we now recognise as Bengali evolved from regional forms of Prakrit whose speakers had first arrived in Bengal in the last few centuries BCE. The use of these languages gradually spread eastwards and it is thought that by 500 CE they were fairly widely spoken in the delta. The first writings in Bengali appear by 1000 CE, so Bangladesh's national language is usually assumed to have originated some ten centuries ago. Its subsequent history is well known because it was the language of elites who produced a particularly abundant and varied written literature. Nevertheless a translator's lament of over forty years ago remains largely true today: 'The literary tradition is unbroken, from the ninth or tenth century Buddhist

esoteric texts...to the present. It is somewhat surprising that little is known in the West about a literature so old and so rich."22

The spread of Bengali as a dominant language of the region took centuries. This was not only because of the existence of other vibrant linguistic communities, however. Equally important was the fact that Bengali was not always the language of rule, ritual or trade. Over the centuries state power in the Bengal delta has been held by a truly remarkable array of non-Bengalis, including Afghans, Turks, North Indians, Arakanese and Ethiopians. These elites would conduct their business in Turkish, Persian and Hindustani rather than in Bengali. The dominant ritual languages of the region were Sanskrit, Pali and Arabic. And Arabic, Portuguese and English were important languages of maritime trade. Thus there was a remarkable linguistic diversity, and many residents of Bangladesh must have been multilingual. The emergence of Bengali as a lingua franca and then as a mother tongue was very uneven. For example, in south-eastern Bangladesh, Arakanese retained its position as the link language till the turn of the nineteenth century, and many communities never accepted Bengali as their mother tongue.²³ Even today, among certain communities in Bangladesh (for instance Mru), not everybody speaks or understands Bengali.

As new speakers adopted Bengali, the language developed distinct dialects by which Bangladeshis today easily recognise each other's regional roots. In three cases these dialects are incomprehensible to speakers of standard Bengali and they should be considered as separate languages. The first is Sylheti, spoken by about 10 million people in north-eastern Bangladesh and across the border in adjacent districts of Assam (India) – as well as by a large community of Sylheti settlers in the United Kingdom. The second is Chittagonian, spoken by some 10 million people in south-eastern Bangladesh and adjacent areas of Arakan (Burma). And the third is Chakma, spoken by several hundreds of thousands in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and adjacent parts of Mizoram (India). The Chakmas are known previously to have spoken a Tibeto-Burman language; they developed their current language in the eighteenth century. Chakma is related to Chittagonian in structure but it has a distinct vocabulary and pronunciation.

MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

The long-term interplay of these different frontiers has given contemporary Bangladesh culture a particularly multilayered structure. Very

often surface meanings hide inner understandings that are quite different and can be diametrically opposed. It is essential to understand this complexity when analysing Bangladesh culture. Let me give two examples.

First, gender relations in contemporary Bangladesh are routinely described in terms of stark power differences between men and women. There is much evidence to support the view that many women live very choice-restricted lives but this is not the entire story. The common representation of Bangladeshi women as powerless victims of patriarchy fails to acknowledge that they have access to cultural traditions with which to challenge prevailing gender roles. We have seen that powerful goddesses have featured in the Bengal delta's religions from the earliest times and that several of them remain part of the cultural repertoire. More importantly, the region's literature has produced a number of female characters who are far from downtrodden:

These heroines don armor to fight *dacoits* [robbers], slay raging rhinos (and naturally cut off their horns in wonderfully Freudian fashion), harness flying horses to rescue their lovers, transform ignorant men into billy goats to serve as breeding stock for their passions...and generally instruct the kings and princes of the world in the ways of statecraft.²⁴

Such women who take charge – Behula and Lalmon are famous examples in Bangladesh – provide popular cultural resources that challenge current gender relations and contradict dominant practices of patriarchal control.²⁵ And as we will see in the following chapters, there have been many influential women in the delta's history – especially in politics, education, advocacy and the arts. Anyone analysing changing gender relations in Bangladesh needs to go beyond the stereotypes and assess the power of such role models.

My second example concerns the religious frontier, which is usually presented as a clear contrast between monotheistic Islam and polytheistic Hinduism. The domestication of Islam to the pre-existing worldviews of the inhabitants of the Bengal delta makes such a simple juxtaposition untenable. For most Bangladeshis who consider themselves Muslims the distinction is far less straightforward. They combine a belief in the god of scriptural Islam, Allah, with a belief in other superhuman protectors. For example, inhabitants of southern Bangladesh fear to enter the Sundarban marshlands without praying to Bonbibi (ban(a)bibi), a benevolent 'Muslim' forest goddess, who, like her male counterpart Gazi Pir (gāji pīr; Plate 3.2), can protect them from tigers and crocodiles. Travellers on large rivers in eastern Bangladesh



Plate 3.2. Scene from the legend of Gazi Pir, showing the pir riding a tiger. Scroll painting, early 1800s.

invoke the deity Bodor (*badar*) to ensure a safe journey. Bodor's Islamic identity is emphasised by sometimes referring to him as Bodor Pir (*badar pīr*), suggesting that he is seen as the deified form of some legendary pir or Islamic spiritual guide. In this way Bangladeshi Muslims have pragmatically incorporated worship of many deities, some in animal or bird form, into their religious practices. ²⁷ Many of these are worshipped by Hindus and Muslims alike. Bonbibi and Bodor are joined by a host of other popular gods – such as Panch Pir (*pāch pīr*;



Plate 3.3. Female pilgrim laying flowers at the shrine of Panch Pir (Five Saints), Mograpara (Narayanganj district, central Bangladesh).

Plate 3.3), Shotto Pir/Shotto Narain (satya pīr/nārāyan); the jungle deity Badshah (bādsāh) and the cholera goddess Olabibi/Oladebi (ōlābibi/devi) – who continue to cross the religious frontier.²⁸

What is true of deities is true of a range of other rituals and practices; followers of Islam and Hinduism in Bangladesh share many of them. For example, a boy growing up in the small town of Kishorganj around 1907 later described, 'the great fair of the Swing Festival of Krishna, held on the southern outskirts of the town':

It was held annually during September and October. To it came not only all the local traders, all the craftsmen of eastern Mymensingh, but also big merchants from Dacca and Narayanganj...The very first row to our left on entering the fair was formed by the stalls of book-binders. Whenever we went to the fair we found them busy. All the year's new purchases of the Koran and all the year's worn and damaged copies of the Koran were brought here for binding and rebinding and silver-tooling...The fair, though held on account of a Hindu festival, drew Hindu and Mussalman alike...[Another occasion] was the Id festival of the Mussalmans, which, although Hindu boys ourselves, we looked forward to with the keenest expectation...What we waited for...was the march of the common folk to the field of prayer, the passage of the elephant procession of the Muslim zamindar [landlord] family, a senior member of which

acted as the leader of the prayers, and the return of the ordinary people as well as of the elephants.²⁹

This sharing of religious practices is of particular significance in view of the fact that dominant understandings of contemporary Bangladesh hardly acknowledge its importance. In analysing Bangladesh society, writers overwhelmingly privilege 'Muslim' and 'Hindu' as mutually exclusive, oppositional and monolithic terms. It is crucial to recognise that there has always been strong cultural resistance in Bangladesh to such bipolar categorisation, not only with regard to social stereotyping but also at the most basic religious level. Insistence on spiritual unity rather than opposition is perhaps most vocally expressed in the devotional songs of a community known as the Baul (bāul), who refer to themselves as followers of the path of unorthodoxy (bartamān-panthi).30 They form a small community but their music is remarkably popular in Bangladesh. An annual festival is held in Kushtia, the home district of one of the most famous Baul composers, Lalon Shah or Lalon Fokir (lālan śāh/phakir), who was born in 1774. His songs (lālan-gīti) are an established genre of Bengali popular music. Another eighteenth-century composer, Modon Baul (madan bāul), expressed the sense of a Bengali religious unity underneath the separation forged by Islam and Hinduism as follows:

The path that leads to you is cluttered with temples and mosques.

O Lord! I have heard your call but I cannot proceed:

Hindu and Muslim teachers block my way...

There are many locks to your door: the Puranas, the Koran, and recitations. Alas Lord! What a terrible torment this is, cries Modon in despair.³¹

Although the Baul themselves are a marginal group in Bangladeshi society, the broad appeal of their poetry shows how the devotional traditions on which they draw (notably Tantric, Vaisnava and Sufi) continue to reverberate with Bangladeshis of various religious persuasions today.

A REGIONAL CULTURE

Gradually, diverse and often opposing cultural strains produced a recognisable regional culture in the eastern Bengal delta. Partly fostered by the various states that rose and fell over time, partly resulting from life in deltaic agrarian communities and the integrating effect of moving frontiers, it came to cluster around two main identities. Unlike the surrounding populations, most inhabitants of the active delta came to define

themselves as both Muslims and Bengalis. To be sure, this process was never homogeneous and there was continual transformation of what it meant to be a Muslim Bengali or a Bengali Muslim. There were considerable differences in the meaning of these identities, partly spatial and partly temporal. For example, Islamic identities in eastern Bangladesh tended more towards the puritanical than in western Bangladesh. Inclusion in Bengali identity came late for large communities in the north-west who would identify themselves as, for example, Rajbongshi till well into the nineteenth century. And even today, there are many people in Bangladesh who subscribe to only one of the two identities or to neither. Thus there are many millions of Bengalis in Bangladesh who are not Muslims but who identify themselves as Bengali Hindus, Christians or Buddhists. There are also Muslims who do not identify themselves as Bengalis, for example several groups of Urdu-speaking Muslims. And there are numerous groups who identify themselves as neither Bengali nor Muslim - for example Chakma and Garo.

None the less, a crucial hyphenation of Bengali and Muslim did occur in the region and it became the leitmotiv of the delta's modern history. A perpetual creative reworking of what it meant to be a Bengali Muslim or a Muslim Bengali energised cultural expression, political mobilisation and social organisation. The inherent instability of this identity proved highly productive of a sense of regional belonging: nowhere but in what is now Bangladesh did Bengaliness and Islam become domesticated as they merged. As we shall see, it was successive ruling elites' failure to gauge the centrality of this merged identity among the majority of the population that would actually increase its salience. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries various emancipation movements insisted upon it. Their struggles with state elites contributed to a tortuous course of state formation and the emergence of the state that we know as Bangladesh.

CHAPTER 4

The delta as a crossroads

The population of the Bengal delta has always been remarkably mobile. This has often led to tensions between the territorial rights of sedentary people and the rights of mobile others. These tensions revealed themselves in multiple moving frontiers and a dynamic economy. The Bengal delta was never an isolated place. On the contrary, one of its basic features was its openness to both the immense expanse of the Indian Ocean and an enormous hinterland. For as far back as we can reconstruct, it was integrated into networks of long-distance trade, pilgrimage, political alliance, cultural exchange and travel. It served as a gateway to the wider world for people and goods from the landlocked Ganges plains in the west, from Tibet and Nepal in the north and from the Brahmaputra valley in the east. Conversely, traders, Buddhist pilgrims, political emissaries and adventurers who wanted to visit these regions had to pass through Bengal. It was in the coastal waterways of Bengal that South-east Asians, North Indians, Sri Lankans, Chinese, Arabs, Central Asians, Persians, Ethiopians and Tibetans met from very early times. The geographical reach of this traffic hub was enormous, as can be illustrated by Ibn Battutah's visit in 1346 CE. When this Moroccan traveller left the Maldive Islands south of India, he followed the trade routes via Sri Lanka to the Bengal delta. After spending some time there, he decided to leave and boarded a Chinese junk bound for Java.1

The inhabitants of the Bengal delta played host to many visitors but they themselves were also important actors in long-distance trade, travel and maritime warfare.2 Seaborne trade, wealth and boats were closely associated. Tellingly, the earliest coins from ancient cities such as Chandraketugarh and Wari-Bateshwar were stamped with pictures of boats.3 In an early legend we find the description of a trading fleet from Bengal headed by the merchant Chando (cando), who sets out on a voyage to Sri Lanka with a fleet of seven to fourteen ships led by his

flagship, Honeybee.4

In the delta, water transport was far more important than transport over land. Bengal was a country of boats and waterways. Early inscriptions frequently defined land boundaries with reference to river harbours and landing-places for boats (ghāt), important functionaries were entrusted with security and tolls along the river Ganges and the main cities were always built on the banks of navigable rivers. Boats are also a recurring theme in the earliest surviving poems in Bengali, the tenth-century Charyapada (caryāpada). These poems refer to an old occupation in the delta: ferrying people across its many streams. Row on, Domni, row on', one poet urges a woman, and it is clear that customers paid in cowries (small shells) to be ferried across.

This reference to cowrie shells illustrates the openness of the delta's economy and its early use of currency. Cowries were not found locally; they had to be imported from the Maldive Islands, some 2,000 km away. This trade had ancient roots: the third-century BCE Mahasthan Brahmi inscription (Plate 2.3) mentions payment in *gandakas*, a term probably referring to cowries. Cowries continued to be used as currency in parts of rural Bangladesh up to the end of the nineteenth century.

The location of the Bengal delta allowed its urban centres to become nodes in far-flung trade networks that thrived on the resources of their hinterland, maritime links and local produce. For example, ancient connections with Greece are attested by a silver drachma (coin) of about 300 BCE, found near Dhaka,⁷ and this is how the Bengal coast is described in a Greek text of the first century CE:

sailing with the ocean to the right and the shore remaining beyond to the left, Ganges comes into view, and near it the very last land toward the east, Chryse. There is a river near it called the Ganges, and it rises and falls in the same way as the Nile. On its bank is a market-town which has the same name as the river, Ganges.* Through this place are brought malabathrum [cassia[†]] and Gangetic spikenard[‡] and pearls, and muslins of the finest sorts, which are called Gangetic. It is said that there are gold-mines near these places, and there is a gold coin which is called caltis. And just opposite this river there is an island in the ocean, the last part of the inhabited world toward the east, under the rising sun itself; it

Usually identified with Chandraketugarh (see chapter 2).

* Spikenard (or nard, or muskroot) is a plant that grows in the Himalayan region. Its roots contain an intensely aromatic essential oil that was used as perfume and incense in ancient Egypt, West Asia

(it found mention in the Bible) and Rome.

[†] Cassia, a plant with leaves whose taste is reminiscent of cinnamon, was sought after in ancient Greece and Rome to flavour wine, to use in cooking and for its oil. It is still commonly used in Bangladeshi cuisine, where it is known as tezpata (tejpātā).

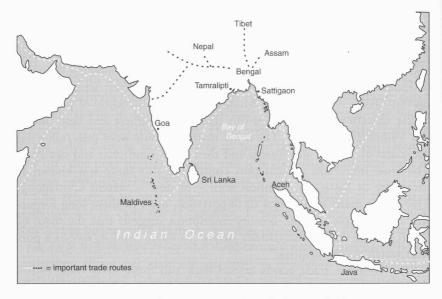
is called Chryse; and it has the best tortoise-shell of all the places on the Erythraean Sea [Indian Ocean].

The route described here was one of two major ones that coastal vessels could use safely. From the Bengal delta it steered west, following the coast of India to Sri Lanka, and from there to the Maldives, western India, eastern Africa, Arabia and the Mediterranean. A succession of port cities in the western delta controlled this trade – the earliest and best known was Tamralipti (Map 4.1). The other maritime route went east, following the coasts of Arakan and Burma and then on to south-east and east Asia. The most important ancient port controlling this route was known as Samandar or Sattigaon, identical with – or near – present Chittagong. There were many other ports of importance, most of them long forgotten. For example, a tenth-century inscription suggests that the town of Savar, now in central Bangladesh, derives its name from its role as a port with warehousing facilities.⁹

Over time the trade goods carried back and forth along these routes changed. The most ancient maritime exports from Bengal appear to have been cassia and spikenard (from the Himalayas), aloe wood and rhinoceros horn (from Assam), silk fabrics, yarn and floss (overland from China), war horses (from north India) and – from the delta region itself – river pearls and cotton fabrics, especially finely woven muslin cloth. Agricultural products, notably paddy, betel nut and betel leaf, may also have been exported in ancient times. By the fourteenth century, Bangladesh paddy was exported to the Maldives in exchange for cowries, and sixteenth-century sources show that rice from the delta fed people in a swathe of land extending from the Moluccas in eastern Indonesia to Goa in western India. 10 At this time, other important exports from the delta were fine and coarse cotton cloth, sugar, clarified butter, oil and silk yarn and fabrics. Most of the trade with South-east Asia, Sri Lanka and the Maldives was in the hands of merchants and officials from Bengal. These included Muslims, Hindus and Armenians, II

Early maritime imports were cowries, conch shells (to make bangles) and silver. ¹² These imports were for use in the delta as well as for trading to the hinterland together with merchandise from Bengal, which included textiles and slaves, especially eunuchs. ¹³ In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Chinese traders brought gold, silver, porcelain, satin and silks, and Burmese

[§] The island of Chryse may refer to any of the islands in the Bay of Bengal. Today sea turtles still nest on several of these, for example Narikel Jinjira (St Martin's Island) in south-eastern Bangladesh. Historians have sometimes assumed that Chryse referred to Arakan or Burma.



Map 4.1. Trade routes passing through the Bengal delta.

merchants were said to bring only 'silver and gold, and no other merchandise' to Bengal. 14 With these precious metals they bought what Bengal had to offer them: primarily rice and textiles. By then, Bengal's export manufactures had a venerable history and a high reputation throughout the Old World. According to North Indian, Greek and Roman sources, the region had traded fine cotton and silk textiles across Asia, both over land and by sea, as early as the third to first centuries BCE. Bengal's textile industry was based on cotton cultivation and silkworm rearing in different parts of the region. The textile industry was scattered throughout the rural areas because water routes made it cheap to transport the finished product from weaving villages to the urban markets where it was sold for export.¹⁵ Some of the largest centres of cotton manufacture were located around Dhaka. In 1586, a European visitor judged the fine cotton fabrics made in Sonargaon, near Dhaka, to be the best in the whole of India. 16 These luxury cotton and silk textiles - which were relatively cheap because of Bengal's abundant and highly skilled labour - were traded to elite markets overseas as well as to South and Central Asia.

The delta's wealth attracted foreign traders and, conversely, Bengali traders settled in centres of commerce abroad, for example in Aceh in

northern Sumatra. The cities of Bengal were cosmopolitan places where goods and money changed hands and where ideas from all over the known world intermingled. After 1500, however, an important change took place: the known world expanded considerably because newcomers from the far north-west began to appear on the scene. Following longestablished routes around Africa, Portuguese traders entered the maritime trade networks of the Indian Ocean. By the 1520s they were beginning to settle in Bengal, notably in Gaur (then the capital of Bengal), Chittagong and the island of Sandvip.¹⁷ These Portuguese newcomers became known dismissively as Firingi (phiringi, Franks). They were a motley and uncoordinated crowd comprising state-sponsored and private merchants as well as adventurers and pirates. They were interested in tapping into Asian trade flows but also in establishing power bases. To this end they engaged in slave trading, hired themselves out as freebooters to various kings and became involved in political struggles in the region. They established control over Chittagong in south-eastern Bengal and built a custom-house there in 1537. Chittagong was then Bengal's major port and an important centre of shipbuilding, using timber from the nearby hills. The town had long been a bone of contention between kings in Arakan, Tripura and Bengal. Thirty years after the Portuguese took over Chittagong - which they called 'the Great Port' - a visitor counted eighteen Portuguese ships anchored there.

The Portuguese turned out to be the first of a long list of traders from different parts of Europe who were attracted by the opportunities of the Bengal delta. The rulers of the region generally welcomed them because trade augmented their revenue from customs duties, because the traders imported precious metals on which the monetary system increasingly depended and because their trade contributed to an expansion in real income and output in the Bengal economy. 18 European trading posts began to appear along the major rivers. Most of these were in the western delta, but there were important settlements in what is now Bangladesh as well. Dhaka saw the Portuguese establish a textile trading post in the 1580s, the Dutch (who referred to prolific Bengal as 'the fat meadow') followed in the 1650s, the English in the 1660s and the French in the 1680s. There were many smaller settlements ('factories'). Some of these buildings can still be seen, for example the Dutch silk factory at Sardah on the Padma (now the Bangladesh Police Academy) and another one in Rajshahi city. Goods from Bengal (notably raw silk, textiles, opium and saltpetre) became essential to the Europeans in both intra-Asian trade and the export trade to Europe. Thus by the 1660s almost half of the cargo



Plate 4.1. Clara the rhinoceros. This engraving was made when she was on show in Mannheim (Germany) in 1747.

that the Dutch sent to Japan consisted of goods from Bengal, and by the early 1700s about two-fifths of the total Dutch exports from Asia to Europe were procured in Bengal. ¹⁹ What the Europeans brought to Bengal was overwhelmingly precious metals – gold from Japan, Sumatra and Timor, silver from Japan, Burma and Persia and silver coins from Mexico and Spain – but also copper, tin and a variety of spices such as pepper, cloves, nutmeg and cinnamon.

Goods from Bengal supported new lifestyles in Europe and began to educate Europeans about this part of the world. That education also included the marvels of Bengal's natural wealth. Perhaps the most famous of these was Clara, a rhinoceros born in north-eastern Bangladesh or Assam in 1738 (Plate 4.1). She arrived in Europe in 1741 and made her owner a small fortune as he showed her around Europe's royal courts and to crowds who paid to see her. At the time very few Europeans had ever seen a rhino and many doubted the animal's very existence. As a result Clara became a celebrity.²⁰

The inhabitants of the delta observed the European traders carefully and, whenever possible, used them to their own advantage. Sometimes the newcomers appeared as dangerous and predatory (the old Bengali term for the Dutch, olandaj, also means pirate) and sometimes as convenient partners in trade. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries Europeans became more prominent in the Indian Ocean trade and their relationship with local traders varied from co-operation to conflict. Individual South Asian, Armenian and European traders collaborated in financing voyages to and from various Asian ports, and occasionally South Asian traders would charter a European ship and crew for freighting goods. 21 On the whole, however, the relationship was one of conflict because of European attempts to regulate shipping on the high seas by means of a passport system. The newcomers tried to deny South Asian traders the right to trade freely in Asian waters and sought to enforce monopolies in particular commodities and branches of Asian trade. Introduced by the Portuguese, this passport system was taken over by the Dutch and English. Today, bands of pirates, operating off the coast of Bangladesh and in the mouth of the river Meghna, have introduced a remarkably similar system of passports for vessels passing through waters that they control.²²

Despite these attempts at regulation, 'the distorting effect of this system on the operations of the Indian maritime merchants was quite small and confined to specific and limited time periods and branches of trade."23 Indian maritime trade on some routes, for example South-east Asia, did decline from the late seventeenth century but this was not related to European competition or interference; rather, it was a result of political and economic changes in South Asia. At the same time trade from Bengal to other destinations, such as the Maldives, increased. The bulk of trade from the Bengal delta remained in the hands of local merchants, who had lower overhead costs and a more intimate understanding of the Asian markets.²⁴ In other words, the Europeans' impact on the pre-colonial economy should not be exaggerated. Very likely European trade formed a net addition to the region's growing maritime trade. Bengal had a highly diversified society, and market exchange and cash transactions existed at various levels well before the upsurge in maritime trade.²⁵ Trade and manufacture formed a much smaller sector of the economy than agriculture, and the European trade companies were involved in only certain branches of maritime trade. They were mere 'minor partners' even in silk, the commodity they prized most highly. They were unable to control the silk market, unlike South Asian merchants who based their supremacy on exports of silk by both sea and land routes.²⁶

The impact of European activities in the Bengal delta was not merely economic and political. When sailors from a shipwrecked Dutch vessel were washed ashore in Noakhali (eastern Bangladesh) in 1661, they found that fishermen and villagers spoke to them in Portuguese. There were also Portuguese-speaking Africans who served as soldiers in various armies in the Bengal delta at the time. The Portuguese had many small settlements in the districts of Barisal, Patuakhali, Noakhali, Chittagong and Dhaka in which missionaries actively promoted Christianity and not without success. Here inhabitants were developing Christian identities at the same time as Islamic identities were taking shape in other parts of the delta.

In short, openness was an essential feature of the delta, adding a constant stream of goods to the economy and acting as a boon to local industries. Bengal's population was mobile and participated in overseas trade in various roles: as merchants, as sailors and as producers of export products such as rice, textiles and ships. Last but not least, the openness of the delta also exposed the population to many different cultural influ-

ences and new ideas.