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Willem Van Schendel  
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## A HISTORY OF BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is a new name for an old land whose history is little known to the wider world. A country chiefly known in the West through media images of poverty, underdevelopment and natural disasters, Bangladesh did not exist as an independent state until 1971. Willem van Schendel's history reveals the country's vibrant, colourful past and its diverse culture as it navigates the extraordinary twists and turns that have created modern Bangladesh. The story begins with the early geological history of the delta which has decisively shaped Bangladesh society. The narrative then moves chronologically through the era of colonial rule, the partition of Bengal, the war with Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh as an independent state. In so doing, it reveals the forces that have made Bangladesh what it is today. This is an eloquent introduction to a fascinating country and its resilient and inventive people.

WILLEM VAN SCHENDEL is Professor of Modern Asian History at the University of Amsterdam and Head of the Asia Department of the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. His previous publications include *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (2005) and *Global Blue: Indigo and Espionage in Colonial Bengal* (with Pierre-Paul Darrac, 2006).

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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.
Eighth–twelfth centuries Ninth century	First Muslim influence in coastal areas. Construction of Paharpur in north-western Bangladesh.
Tenth century	Bengali language develops; earliest surviving poems known as <i>Charyapada</i> .
Twelfth century Thirteenth century	Lakhnauti-Gaur is capital of Sena state. 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	<i>Timeline</i>
	Large textile industry, cotton and silk exports.
1520s	First Europeans (Portuguese) settle in the Bengal delta.
1580s	Portuguese open the first European trading post in Dhaka (Dutch follow in 1650s, English in 1660s, French in 1680s).
Sixteenth–seventeenth centuries	Rise of Islam as a popular religion in the Bengal delta.
1610	Mughal empire captures Dhaka, now renamed Jahangirnagar. It becomes the capital of Bengal.
1612	Mughal rule over much of the Bengal delta.
1650s	Bengali translator-poet Alaol active at the Arakan court.
1666	Portuguese and Arakanese relinquish Chittagong to the Mughals.
1690	Calcutta (today Kolkata) established by British.
c. 1713	Bengal becomes an independent polity under Murshid Quli Khan. The capital is moved to Murshidabad.
1757	Battle of Polashi (Plassey); after further clashes, notably the battle at Buxar in 1764, the British East India Company establishes itself as <i>de facto</i> ruler of Bengal.
1757–1911	Kolkata (Calcutta) is the capital of Bengal and British India.
1760s–90s	Fakir–Sannyasi resistance.
1769–70	Great Famine, which may have carried off one third of Bengal's population.
1774	Birth of mystic Baul poet Lalon Shah (Lalon Fakir).
1790	New system of land taxation ('permanent settlement') introduced. Codified in 1793, it will persist till the 1950s.

*Timeline*

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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 language.
1830s–60s	Rural revolts inspired by Islamic ‘purification’ movements.
1840	Dhaka’s population reaches its lowest point, 50,000.
1850s	Railways spread through Bengal.
1857	Revolt (‘the Mutiny’) has little impact on the Bengal delta.
1858	East India Company abolished and British crown assumes direct control.
1860	British annex 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 political categories.
1905	Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain writes <i>Sultana’s Dream</i> .
1906	All-India Muslim League founded in Dhaka.
1910	Varendra Research Museum established in Rajshahi.
1921	University of Dhaka established.
1940	Muslim League adopts Pakistan (or Lahore) resolution: demand for independent states for Indian Muslims.
1943–4	Great Bengal Famine causes about 3.5 million deaths.
1946	Muslim–Hindu riots in Noakhali, Kolkata and Bihar.

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*Timeline*

- 1946 Elections return the Muslim League as 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.
- 1947–8 About 800,000 migrants arrive in East Pakistan from India; about 1,000,000 migrants leave East Pakistan for India. Cross-border migration will continue for years.
- 1948–56 (Bengali) language movement in protest against imposition of Urdu as official language of Pakistan.
- 1949 Awami Muslim League (renamed Awami League in 1955) founded by Maulana Bhashani.
- 1950 East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act eliminates the superior rights that zamindars (landlords/tax-collectors) had enjoyed under the permanent settlement.
- 1950 Muslim–Hindu riots in East Pakistan and West Bengal (India).
- 1951 Territory of future Bangladesh has 44 million inhabitants.
- 1952 21 February (*Ekushe*): killing of ‘language martyrs’; first Shohid Minar (Martyrs’ Memorial) erected.
- 1952 Passport and visa system introduced.
- 1953 V-AID community development programme.
- 1954 Provincial elections in East Pakistan. Muslim League defeated. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman becomes junior cabinet member.

*Timeline*

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- 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	<i>Timeline</i>
1971	16 December: end of war. East Pakistan becomes independent state of Bangladesh.
1972	Sheikh Mujibur Rahman heads Awami League government.
1972	Bangladesh declares itself a people's republic and introduces a constitution asserting that 'nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism' are its guiding principles.
1972	First issue of weekly <i>Bichitra</i> (1972–97).
1972	Establishment of the JSS (United People's Party) and Shanti Bahini in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.
1973	Bangladesh's first general elections. Constitution and parliamentary system.
1974	Bangladesh has 71 million inhabitants.
1974	Famine causes excess mortality of some 1.5 million.
1975	January: constitutional coup and autocratic rule by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.
1975	August: army coup. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and family killed in Dhaka.
1975	November: two more army coups. Military regime headed by Ziaur Rahman (1975–81).
1975–97	Chittagong Hill Tracts war.
1975	National Museum opened.
c. 1975–90	Green Revolution technology begins to push up agricultural yields.
1976	Death of Maulana Bhashani (c. 1880–1976).
1978	Leaders of 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.

*Timeline*

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|-------|---|
| 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.       |

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*Timeline*

- 2000 Bangladesh produces a surplus of food grains for the first time in its modern history.
- 2001 General elections won by Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Khaleda Zia becomes prime minister (2001–6).
- 2001 Bangladesh Indigenous People's Forum formed.
- 2006 Nobel Prize for Grameen Bank and Muhammad Yunus.
- 2006 Ready-made garments make up three-quarters of Bangladesh's exports.
- 2007 January: general elections postponed and military-backed interim government installed.
- 2007 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 *bāṃlā*. 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.