

A HISTORY OF BANGLADESH

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

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

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47369-9 — A History of Bangladesh
Willem van Schendel
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47369-9 — A History of Bangladesh
Willem van Schendel
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

A HISTORY
OF
BANGLADESH

SECOND EDITION
WILLEM VAN SCHENDEL
University of Amsterdam



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-47369-9 — A History of Bangladesh
 Willem van Schendel
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
 New Delhi – 110025, India
 79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108473699
 DOI: 10.1017/9781108684644

First edition © Cambridge University Press 2009
 Second edition © Willem van Schendel 2020

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2009
 3rd printing 2015
 Second edition 2020

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Schendel, Willem van, author.
 TITLE: A history of Bangladesh / Willem van Schendel, University of Amsterdam.
 DESCRIPTION: Second edition. | Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
 IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2020009196 | ISBN 9781108473699 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108684644 (ebook)
 SUBJECTS: LCSH: Bangladesh – History.
 CLASSIFICATION: LCC DS394.5 .S34 2020 | DDC 954.92–dc23
 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020009196>

ISBN 978-1-108-47369-9 Hardback
 ISBN 978-1-108-46246-4 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>List of Plates</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>List of Maps and Figures</i>	xv
<i>Preface to Second Edition</i>	xvii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xix
<i>Timeline</i>	xxi
<i>Introduction</i>	xxix
PART I THE LONG VIEW	I
1 A Land of Water and Silt	3
2 Jungle, Fields, Cities and States	11
3 A Region of Multiple Frontiers	24
4 The Delta as a Crossroads	43
PART II COLONIAL ENCOUNTERS	53
5 From the Mughal Empire to the British Empire	55
6 British Legacies	63
7 A Closing Agrarian Frontier	82
8 Colonial Conflicts	93
9 Towards Partition	104
10 Partition	112
11 Population Exchange	121

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
	PART III BECOMING EAST PAKISTAN	127
12	The Pakistan Experiment	129
13	Pakistan Falls Apart	144
14	East Pakistani Livelihoods	154
15	The Roots of Aid Dependence	166
16	A New Elite and Cultural Renewal	174
	PART IV WAR AND THE BIRTH OF BANGLADESH	181
17	Armed Conflict	183
18	A State Is Born	197
19	Imagining a New Nation	208
	PART V INDEPENDENT BANGLADESH	217
20	Shaping a Political System	219
21	The Triumph of Identity Politics	231
22	Transnational Linkages	256
23	Boom or Bust?	275
24	Gender Movements	300
25	A National Culture?	312
	Conclusion	333
	<i>Bangladesh District Maps</i>	335
	<i>Key Political Figures since 1947</i>	337
	<i>Glossary of Bengali Terms</i>	347
	<i>Notes</i>	352
	<i>Bibliography</i>	370
	<i>Index</i>	415

Plates^{*}

Part I	Aerial view of the Sundarbans wetlands. Courtesy of NASA.	<i>page</i> 2
1.1	'Knee-deep in water, whatever you do' (<i>bore-dore hatu jol</i>). An aerial view of central Bangladesh in the dry season.	5
1.2	'Be prepared for floods! Save your life and possessions by seeking a high shelter.' Educational poster, 1990s. Courtesy Heritage: Archives of Bangladesh History, Rajshahi.	8
2.1	An early portrait of the shishu. From: Jardine (1843), 254.	12
2.2	Harvesting. Fragment of a terracotta plaque, Chandraketugarh, c. first century BCE. Courtesy West Bengal State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata, and Centre for Archaeological Studies and Training, Eastern India, Kolkata.	16
2.3	The Mahasthan Brahmi Inscription, third century BCE. Courtesy <i>Banglapedia – The National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh</i> .	17
2.4	'Royal family.' Terracotta plaque, Chandraketugarh, c. first century BCE. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Florence and Herbert Irving Gift, 1992 (1992.129). Courtesy Metropolitan Museum, New York, © Photo SCALA, Florence.	18
2.5	Ruins of the northern gateway to the fort of Gaur, constructed around 1425 CE.	22
2.6	The ruins of Paharpur in northwestern Bangladesh. Courtesy Instituut Kern, Universiteit Leiden, P-040408.	23

^{*} Unless otherwise indicated, photographs are from the collection of the author. Every effort has been made to secure necessary permissions to reproduce copyright material in this work, though in some cases it has proved impossible to trace copyright holders. If any omissions are brought to our notice, we will be happy to include appropriate acknowledgements on reprinting.

viii	<i>List of Plates</i>	
3.1	Shah Jalal's shrine in Sylhet.	30
3.2	Scene from the legend of Gazi Pir, showing the spiritual guide riding a tiger. Courtesy British Museum, London.	37
3.3	Female pilgrims laying flowers at the shrine of Panch Pir (Five Saints), Mograpara (Narayanganj district, central Bangladesh).	38
3.4	Elephants lined up during the Janmashthami festival, celebrating the birth of the god Krishna, in Dhaka, c. 1905. From: Bradley-Birt (1906), facing 262.	39
3.5	Performing a devotional song at Lalon Fokir's shrine, Kumarkhali (Kushtia district), 2006.	40
4.1	The earliest European map of the Bengal delta, by João-Baptista de Lavanha, c. 1550. From: Barros (1777–88), 2:451.	48
4.2	The French trading post in Dhaka, 1780s. Courtesy Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France.	50
4.3	Clara the rhinoceros. Courtesy Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.	51
Part II	Statue of poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824–73) in Shagordari (Jessore district).	54
5.1	Arakanese raiders selling slaves from the Bengal delta to Dutch traders. From: Schouten (1775).	58
5.2	A fish seller. From: Solvyns, <i>Costume of Hindostan</i> .	61
5.3	A fisherman. From: Solvyns, <i>Costume of Hindostan</i> .	61
5.4	A woman of distinction. From: Solvyns, <i>Costume of Hindostan</i> .	61
5.5	A man of distinction. From: Solvyns, <i>Costume of Hindostan</i> .	61
6.1	Remains of a zamindari mansion in central Bangladesh.	68
6.2	Twenty-four enlightened ascetics. Stone sculpture from Dinajpur district. From: <i>Annual Report</i> (1934).	69
6.3	Producing indigo – a blue dyestuff – for export to Europe. From: <i>Rural Life in Bengal</i> (1860).	71
6.4	Children studying at a moktob, St. Martin's Island.	74
6.5	A sacred crocodile waiting for a ritual offering.	77
6.6	A view of Dhaka in 1823. Courtesy British Library, London.	80

© British Library Board. All rights reserved. Shelfmark X628(6).

List of Plates

	ix
7.1	Nozir amidst his sons, nephews and cousins during Id prayers. 85
7.2	Water hyacinth on a canal in Nator (western Bangladesh). 88
7.3	<i>Famine</i> . Drawing by Zainul Abedin. From: B. K. Jahangir, <i>The Quest of Zainul Abedin</i> . 91
8.1	Pritilata Waddadar. Courtesy Heritage: Archives of Bangladesh History, Rajshahi. 97
8.2	Curzon Hall, constructed as Dhaka's city hall, now part of Dhaka University. 98
8.3	Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Courtesy Heritage: Archives of Bangladesh History, Rajshahi. 101
9.1	Tebhaga activists with communist flags and bamboo clubs during collective harvesting. Courtesy Seagull Books, Kolkata. 106
9.2	Ila Mitra at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, 1954. Courtesy Heritage: Archives of Bangladesh History, Rajshahi. 108
10.1	People and border pillar in Nolgram, a Bangladeshi enclave surrounded by Indian territory. 114
10.2	On a Ganges river island, near the Indian border. 119
Part III	Students making a memorial for those who died in the defence of the Bengali language, February 1952. Photo by Rafiqul Islam, published in Reza (2004). 128
12.1	A sample of Bengali writing. 134
12.2	Students making a memorial for those who died in the defence of the Bengali language, February 1952. Photo by Rafiqul Islam, published in Reza (2004). 136
12.3	Central Martyrs' Memorial or Shohid Minar, Dhaka. 137
12.4	The National Assembly of Pakistan in session, Dhaka. Courtesy Heritage: Archives of Bangladesh History, Rajshahi. 140
12.5	The Bangladesh Parliament, originally conceived as Pakistan's National Assembly Building. 143
13.1	Sheikh Mujibur Rahman campaigning by train, 1970. From: Aftab Ahmad (1998), 47. 147
13.2	Newly installed Raja Tridiv Roy with his bride Arati in Rangamati, 1953. Courtesy Raja Tridiv Roy. From: Van Schendel et al. (2000), 267. 149

x	<i>List of Plates</i>	
13.3	‘Mujib: This Time It Is a Struggle for Independence.’ From: <i>Shongbad</i> (8 March 1971). Courtesy Rajshahi University Library.	151
13.4	‘Parade of the <i>Joy Bangla Bahini</i> (Victory to Bangladesh Troops).’ From: <i>Shongbad</i> (24 March 1971). Courtesy Rajshahi University Library.	152
14.1	A village market.	155
14.2	Pakistan International Airlines announces its first direct flights between East and West Pakistan. From: <i>Pakistan Times</i> (2 June 1955). Courtesy Rajshahi University Library.	159
14.3	‘After the honeymoon.’ Cartoon. From: Reaz Ahmed (2002), 26.	160
14.4	A woman labourer sewing jute bags for export in the Adamjee Jute Mill. Courtesy Heritage: Archives of Bangladesh History, Rajshahi.	162
14.5	Bamboo raft on Kaptai Lake, 1964–5. Photo by Keith Sandercock. From: Van Schendel et al. (2000), 139.	163
14.6	New commercial buildings appearing in Dhaka in the 1960s. From: <i>Pakistan Quarterly</i> (1966). Courtesy Rajshahi University Library.	164
15.1	Women attending a V-AID-funded embroidery class. Courtesy Heritage: Archives of Bangladesh History, Rajshahi.	168
15.2	The Kaptai dam. Photo by Keith Sandercock. From: Van Schendel et al. (2000), 199.	170
15.3	Hilltops sticking out of Kaptai Lake, 1965. Photo by Dick Recter. From: Van Schendel et al. (2000), 142.	172
16.1	The cover of the weekly <i>Begom</i> , 1969. Courtesy of Heritage: Archives of Bangladesh History, Rajshahi.	175
16.2	Hamidur Rahman’s artwork, <i>Thinker</i> . From: <i>Contemporary Arts in Pakistan</i> , 1:7 (1960). Courtesy Rajshahi University Library.	176
16.3	A theatre performance in Dhaka. From: <i>Pakistan Quarterly</i> (1962). Courtesy Rajshahi University Library.	177
16.4	Live broadcast of folk music on Radio Pakistan. From: <i>Contemporary Arts of Pakistan</i> , 2:1 (1961). Courtesy Rajshahi University Library.	178

<i>List of Plates</i>		xi
Part IV	Detail of a mural mosaic depicting the language movement of 1952. This street mural at Ramna, Dhaka, is entitled <i>From 1952 to 1971</i> ; it was made by S. R. Shamim in 1998.	182
17.1	Freedom fighters, 1971. From: Bari (c. 1996), 236.	190
17.2	In the middle of the war, supporters of Pakistan hold a procession. Photo by Mohammad Shafee. Courtesy International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.	192
17.3	War propaganda. From: <i>Sunday Pakistan Observer</i> (16 May 1971). Courtesy Rajshahi University Library.	193
17.4	Indian armoured vehicle on the way to Khulna. From: <i>Bangla Name Desh</i> (1972), 104.	194
17.5	Mukti Bahini (freedom fighters) marching into Dhaka. From: Bari (c. 1996), 186.	195
18.1	After the war, Bangladesh became covered in memorial sites.	199
18.2	'A New Sun Has Risen in the Sky.' From: <i>Purbodesh</i> (18 March 1972). Courtesy Rajshahi University Library.	201
19.1	'We Are All Bengalis.' Courtesy International Institute of Social History.	210
19.2	Cover of <i>Bichitra</i> , 1975. Courtesy Heritage: Archives of Bangladesh History, Rajshahi.	212
19.3	Cover of <i>Bichitra</i> , 1975. Courtesy Heritage: Archives of Bangladesh History, Rajshahi.	212
19.4	One-taka note (1974), showing a hand holding ripe paddy and the water-lily-shaped national emblem.	213
19.5	National Monument for the Martyrs in Savar.	214
Part V	Street scene at New Market, Dhaka, in the 1980s.	218
20.1	General Zia at a state ceremony.	222
20.2	'Martial Law enforced in the entire country.' From: <i>Doinik Ittefaq</i> (24 March 1982). Courtesy Heritage: Archives of Bangladesh History, Rajshahi.	223
20.3	'Set democracy free!' Photo by Pavel Rahman.	225
21.1	The Mausoleum of the Three Leaders in Dhaka.	235
21.2	'Joy Bangla!' Poster depicting Sheikh Hasina. Courtesy Heritage: Archives of Bangladesh History, Rajshahi.	236
21.3	'Bangladesh Zindabad!' The student wing of the BNP celebrated its twenty-seventh birthday in 2006.	237

xii	<i>List of Plates</i>	
21.4	Maulana Bhashani. Courtesy <i>Banglapedia – The National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh</i> .	238
21.5	‘Using religion in politics is unacceptable!’ Photo by Rahnuma Ahmed/DRIK.	239
21.6	Calendar featuring Osama bin Laden for sale in a shop in Rangamati, 2001.	241
21.7	‘Bin Laden is dead!’ Cartoon by Tanmoy, 2011. Courtesy Syed Rashad Imam Tanmoy.	242
21.8	‘This Eid and our spirit’. Cartoon by Mehedi Haque. Courtesy Mehedi Haque and the <i>Daily New Age</i> .	244
21.9	‘Death to the Razakars!’	245
21.10	Fighting the Bangladesh armed forces. Courtesy Organising Committee Chittagong Hill Tracts Campaign.	247
21.11	Kolpona Chakma speaks in public. Courtesy Organising Committee Chittagong Hill Tracts Campaign.	249
21.12	‘Indigenous peoples of the world, unite!’ Courtesy International Institute of Social History.	251
21.13	‘Don’t you recognise me, sir?’ From: <i>Doinik Ittefaq</i> (3 April 1981). Courtesy Rajshahi University Library.	253
21.14	‘Respect the ideals of the Liberation War.’ Courtesy International Institute of Social History.	254
21.15	Nirmul Committee poster announcing the people’s trial. Courtesy International Institute of Social History.	254
22.1	Bangladeshi official receiving bags of money. Cartoon by Nazrul from <i>Robbar</i> (July 1979). Courtesy Rajshahi University Library.	258
22.2	Buses crossing the Jamuna Bridge, 2003.	261
22.3	Bangladeshi contract labourer arriving at Kuala Lumpur airport, 2007.	263
22.4	‘Reception centre for returned migrant workers from Libya.’	264
22.5	This ‘Bangla Agency’ sported a façade in the bottle-green and red colours of the Bangladeshi flag.	265
22.6	The office of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in Athens.	266
22.7	‘Forming a bridge between tradition and the new generation abroad.’ From: www.fobana2007ks.com .	267

List of Plates

xiii

22.8	Deported migrants with an Indian border guard. Photo by Shib Shankar Chatterjee.	268
22.9	Bangladeshi soldiers leaving for a UN peacekeeping mission.	269
22.10	A Rohingya refugee stallholder selling Myanmar goods.	272
23.1	Inequality in twenty-first century Bangladesh. Courtesy Mehedi Haque and the <i>Daily New Age</i> .	277
23.2	Ploughing, Dhaka district, 1981.	278
23.3	Workers at the People's Jute Mill in Khulna.	280
23.4	Labourers at work in a shrimp enclosure, Bagerhat, 2006.	281
23.5	Day labourers with pushcarts waiting for custom, Gulshan, Dhaka, 1981.	282
23.6	Garbage collector in Dhaka, 2018.	283
23.7	Workers in a clothing factory in Savar, 2005. Photo by Jenneke Arens.	284
23.8	Young scrap-paper collectors waking up on the pavement, Dhaka, 1983.	285
23.9	The city is coming. High-rises of Dhaka's latest suburb, Boshundhara City.	286
23.10	'Beware of the dog!'	286
23.11	Tourists renting beach chairs at Kuakata.	287
23.12	Hundreds of hand pumps are stacked up in a supplier's courtyard in Dhaka.	288
23.13	The sea-turtle hatchery in Narikel Jinjira, 2001.	295
23.14	Deforestation in action.	296
23.15	Creek filling up with the incoming tide, Sundarbans, 2006.	297
23.16	'Our national prowess – save the tiger – stop hunting tiger.' Bangladesh stamps, 1974.	298
24.1	A poster informs Bangladeshi Muslim women about their legal rights in divorce.	303
24.2	A rooftop advertisement.	305
24.3	Hijra and companions in eastern Bengal, around 1860. © The British Library Board (Photo 124/(38)).	308
24.4	The Story of Dhee. Courtesy Boys of Bangladesh.	310
25.1	Film posters in a rural tea shop, 2001.	313
25.2	Participants at the Bissho Ijtema, Tongi, 2003.	316
25.3	Woman in a burka, old Dhaka, 1983.	317
25.4	Women visiting a new shopping mall in Dhaka, 2006.	318

25.5	Performing patriotic songs at Rajshahi University, 2018.	319
25.6	A family in festive letter-covered Language-Day outfits, 2019.	320
25.7	Welcoming the New Year in Dhaka, April 2007. Photo courtesy: Shakib Ahmed (ruman962@gmail.com).	321
25.8	Cover of <i>Baul Soul</i> , an album by popular singer Rinku, 2006. Courtesy of Gaanchil Media.	322
25.9	Bas-relief showing secular symbols on the campus of Jahangirnagar University in Savar.	323
25.10	Shishir Bhattacharjee cartoon of the prime minister, Sheikh Hasina. From: <i>Prothom Alo</i> (21 June 2000).	324
25.11	Sharing a meal during a picnic, a Bangladeshi institution. Nator, 2006.	326
25.12	Various brands of packaged flatbread for sale.	327
25.13	Professional mishti-maker draining bags of fresh curd in Nator, 2006.	328
25.14	Filling a gift box at a sweet shop in Rajshahi, 2018.	329
25.15	This colossal bat-wielding gorilla cheered on the national team during the 2011 Cricket World Cup.	331

Maps and Figures

Maps

1.1	The catchment area of the Bengal delta.	<i>page</i> 4
2.1	Ancient sites.	14
4.1	Trade routes passing through the Bengal delta.	45
5.1	Bengal in the Mughal period.	57
7.1	Areas of Bangladeshi out-migration from the nineteenth century.	84
8.1	The division of the province of Bengal in 1905.	95
10.1	The 201 parts of partitioned Bengal.	113
10.2	The Partition border and Muslim and non-Muslim majority areas in 1947.	116
10.3	Districts of East Pakistan, 1947–71.	117
12.1	The two wings of Pakistan, 1947–71.	130

Bangladesh District Maps

A	Bangladesh districts 1971–84.	<i>page</i> 335
B	Bangladesh districts since 1984.	336

Figures

7.1	Population of Bangladesh, 1872–2020.	87
8.1	Results of the Provincial Assembly elections in Bengal, 1937 and 1946.	103

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47369-9 — A History of Bangladesh
Willem van Schendel
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Preface to Second Edition

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

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

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

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

Acknowledgements

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

For their direct contributions to this book – in the form of advice, comments, support, permissions and hospitality – I am most grateful to Rahnuma Ahmed, Shahidul Alam, Md. Abdullah Al-Faruque, Kamran Ali, Jenneke Arens, Sanjib Baruah, Boys of Bangladesh, Ratnabali Chatterjee, Shib Shankar Chatterjee, Sadek Reza Chowdhury, Anima Das, Meghna Guhathakurta, Mehedi Haque, Dory Heilijgers, Lotte Hoek, Iftekhar Iqbal, Sadequl Islam, Naveen Kishore, Shahriar Kabir, Ruby Lal, Muntassir Mamoon, Nayanika Mookherjee, Munira Moshed Munni, Tahdina Nazneen Nipa, Gyanendra Pandey, Md. Mahbubar Rahman, Tapas Rudra, Ahmed Saleem, Samita Sen, Gautam Sengupta, Dina Mahnaz Siddiqi, Tony Stewart, Malini Sur, Syed Rashad Imam Tanmoy, Marcel van der Linden, Laura van Schendel, Tobias van Schendel and two anonymous readers.

I owe very special thanks to Sirajul Islam, Nienke Klompmaker and David Ludden, who read the entire manuscript with critical scrutiny and gave detailed and immensely helpful feedback. Needless to say, they bear no responsibility for the final product.

The International Institute of Social History and the Amsterdam School of Social Science Research generously contributed towards travel and research expenses in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and the United Kingdom. I would like to thank the Netherlands Organisation of

Acknowledgements

Scientific Research (NWO) for supporting the final stage of writing with a replacement subsidy and my colleagues Marjoleine Cornelissen, Mario Rutten, Rosanne Rutten, Sharika Thiranagama, Sanderien Verstappen and Sikko Visscher for making it possible for me to utilise this subsidy.

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

Timeline

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

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

Timeline

xxiii

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

- 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 initiated.
- 1954 Provincial elections in East Pakistan. Muslim League defeated. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman becomes junior cabinet member.
- 1954–62 Four new universities established in Rajshahi, Mymensingh, Chittagong and Dhaka.
- 1955 Adamjee Jute Mill goes into production in Narayanganj.
- 1955 Pakistan Academy for Rural Development established in Comilla.
- 1955 First direct passenger air connections between East and West Pakistan.
- 1955 Bangla Academy and Bulbul Academy for Fine Arts established in Dhaka.

Timeline

xxv

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

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

Timeline

xxvii

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

xxviii

Timeline

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

Bangladesh is a country in which history is palpably present. It is keenly debated and extensively researched. As a result, there is a huge historical literature. I have not even tried to summarise this body of knowledge because it would have led to information overload. Instead, I refer to selected readings that will provide a more nuanced and detailed understanding of the themes that I only touch on in passing. Wherever possible I have opted for publications in English, assuming that these will be the most easily accessible to the majority of readers. This book has also been informed by the vast and hugely important historical literature in Bangladesh's national language, Bengali, but I refer to it only sparingly. The notes and the bibliography show my debt to the many specialist researchers on whose shoulders I stand. Anyone writing on Bangladesh has to make decisions about names and transliterations. For two reasons it is not easy to render Bengali words in English. First, there are many sounds in Bengali that do not exist in English and that linguists mark with various dots and dashes. In this book I have used a simple version of local words, roughly as they are pronounced in Bangladesh, followed by a standard transliteration that goes back to the Sanskrit language, an early precursor of Bengali. Thus the word for the Bengali language is pronounced 'bangla' but its transliteration is *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 Polashi/Plassey, Borishal/Barisal and Sylhet/Shilet. In the absence of any consistent or official guideline, the choice is often a personal one. In two cases there has been an official change, however. The capital city of Bangladesh, which used to be written as 'Dacca' in English-language texts, took its more correct form of Dhaka (*Dhākā*) in the 1980s. Similarly, 'Calcutta' became Kolkata (*Kalkātā*) in 2001. Rather than confuse the reader with changing names, I use Dhaka and Kolkata throughout.