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 SCHEDEL served as Professor of Modern Asian History at the University of Amsterdam.
A HISTORY
OF
BANGLADESH

SECOND EDITION
WILLEM VAN SCHENDEL
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Preface to Second Edition

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

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

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

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


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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. 40,000 BCE</td>
<td>Earliest stone tools found in western hills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-1,500 BCE</td>
<td>Cultivation of irrigated rice and domestication of animals. Fossilwood industries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth century BCE</td>
<td>Urban centres, long-distance maritime trade, first sizeable states.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third century BCE</td>
<td>Mahasthan Brahmi inscription.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 640 CE</td>
<td>Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (‘Hiuen Tsiang’) describes eastern Bengal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eighth–twelfth centuries</td>
<td>First Muslim influence in coastal areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninth century</td>
<td>Construction of Paharpur in northwestern Bangladesh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenth century</td>
<td>Bengali language develops; earliest surviving poems known as <em>Charyapada</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twelfth century</td>
<td>Lakhnauti-Gaur is capital of Sena state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thirteenth century</td>
<td>Islam reaches Bengal delta via the land route.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1346</td>
<td>Muhammad Bakhtiyar establishes a Muslim-ruled state, the first of many dominated by non-Bengalis, including Turks, North Indians, Afghans, Arakanese and Ethiopians.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ibn Battutah visits Shah Jalal in Sylhet.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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. 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. Mughal rule over much of the Bengal delta.

1612  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 de facto 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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>English replaces Persian as the state language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830–60s</td>
<td>Rural revolts inspired by Islamic ‘purification’ movements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>Dhaka’s population reaches its lowest point, 50,000.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850s</td>
<td>Railways spread through Bengal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>Revolt (‘the Mutiny’) has little impact on the Bengal delta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>East India Company abolished and British crown assumes direct control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>British annex the last part of Bengal, the Chittagong Hill Tracts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>Earthquake with a magnitude of 8.7 hits Bengal and Assam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1900</td>
<td>Water hyacinth begins to spread in Bengal’s waterways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>Territory of future Bangladesh has 30 million inhabitants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905–11</td>
<td>Separate province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Dhaka is its capital. Swadeshi movement. Muslim and Hindu become political categories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain writes <em>Sultana’s Dream</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>All-India Muslim League founded in Dhaka.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>Varendra Research Museum established in Rajshahi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>University of Dhaka established.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Muslim League adopts Pakistan (or Lahore) Resolution: demand for independent states for Indian Muslims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943–4</td>
<td>Great Bengal Famine causes about 3.5 million deaths.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>Muslim–Hindu riots in Noakhali, Kolkata and Bihar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>Elections return the Muslim League as the largest party.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946–7</td>
<td>Tebhaga movement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Timeline

1947 14 August: British rule ends and British India is partitioned. The Bengal delta becomes part of the new state of Pakistan under the name ‘East Bengal’. Dhaka is the provincial capital.

1947–8 About 800,000 migrants arrive in East Pakistan from India; about 1,000,000 migrants leave East Pakistan for India. Cross-border migration will continue for years.

1948–56 (Bengali) language movement in protest against imposition of Urdu as official language of Pakistan.

1949 Awami Muslim League (renamed Awami League in 1955) founded by Maulana Bhashani.

1950 East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act eliminates the superior rights that zamindars (landlords/tax-collectors) had enjoyed under the permanent settlement.

1950 Muslim–Hindu riots in East Pakistan and West Bengal (India).

1951 Territory of future Bangladesh has 44 million inhabitants.

1952 21 February (Ekushe): killing of ‘language martyrs’; first Shohid Minar (Martyrs’ Memorial) erected.

1952 Passport and visa system introduced.

1953 V-AID community development programme initiated.


1954–62 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>The first commercially useful gas field discovered in Haripur (Sylhet).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>‘East Bengal’ renamed ‘East Pakistan’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Maulana Bhashani and others establish the National Awami Party (NAP).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>World Bank’s Aid-to-Pakistan consortium.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Kaptai hydroelectric project completed. Lake Kaptai forms in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, forcing the ‘Great Exodus’ of displaced people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Chhayanot celebrates Bengali New Year publicly for the first time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>India–Pakistan War. Train connections with India not resumed afterwards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Awami League launches Six-Point Programme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Cyclone kills 350,000–500,000 people in the Bengal delta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>25 March: beginning of Bangladesh Liberation War.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>16 December: end of war. East Pakistan becomes independent state of Bangladesh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Bangladesh declares itself a people’s republic and introduces a constitution asserting that ‘nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism’ are its guiding principles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>First issue of weekly <em>Bichitra</em> (1972–97).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Establishment of the JSS (United People’s Party) and Shanti Bahini in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Bangladesh’s first general elections. Constitution and parliamentary system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Bangladesh has 71 million inhabitants.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Famine causes excess mortality of some 1.5 million.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975–77</td>
<td>Chittagong Hill Tracts war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1975–90</td>
<td>Green Revolution technology begins to push up agricultural yields.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami allowed to return from exile in Pakistan and resume political activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>Ready-made clothing industry takes off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>National Monument for the Martyrs in Savar is completed.</td>
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<td>1983</td>
<td>Bangladesh parliament buildings are completed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>National Archives and National Library opened.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Major floods cover 60 per cent of Bangladesh for fifteen to twenty days.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council formed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Cyclone kills 140,000 people in southeastern Bangladesh.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Nirmul Committee stages Gono Adalot (people’s court).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Fatwa against Taslima Nasrin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Groundwater arsenic poisoning discovered.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Liberation War Museum opened.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Thirty-year agreement with India over division of Ganges waters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>December: peace agreement with JSS in Chittagong Hill Tracts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Major floods cover 60 per cent of Bangladesh for sixty-five days.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Jamuna Bridge opened.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>Four-fifths of the population survives on less than US$2 a day and one-third on less than US$1 a day.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Bangladesh produces a surplus of food grains for the first time in its modern history.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Bangladesh Indigenous People’s Forum formed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Nobel Prize for Grameen Bank and Muhammad Yunus.</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>Protests against Phulbari coal-mining.</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>Ready-made garments make up three-quarters of Bangladesh’s exports.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>General elections postponed and military-backed interim government installed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Cyclone hits southwestern coast, killing thousands and devastating the Sundarbans wetlands.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Bangladesh Rifles mutiny.</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>Five former army officers executed for assassinating Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Bangladesh co-hosts Cricket World Cup.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>War Crimes Tribunal and Shahbag movement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Rana Plaza garments factory collapses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Bangladesh recognises third gender.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Timeline

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 (Ḍhākā) in the 1980s. Similarly, ‘Calcutta’ became Kolkata (Kalkātā) in 2001. Rather than confuse the reader with changing names, I use Dhaka and Kolkata throughout.