

# A HISTORY OF BANGLADESH

WILLEM  
VAN SCHENDEL



CAMBRIDGE



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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.

	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.

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.

- 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.

- 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 Chhayanoṭ 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 <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.



- 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 Adalat (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.

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.

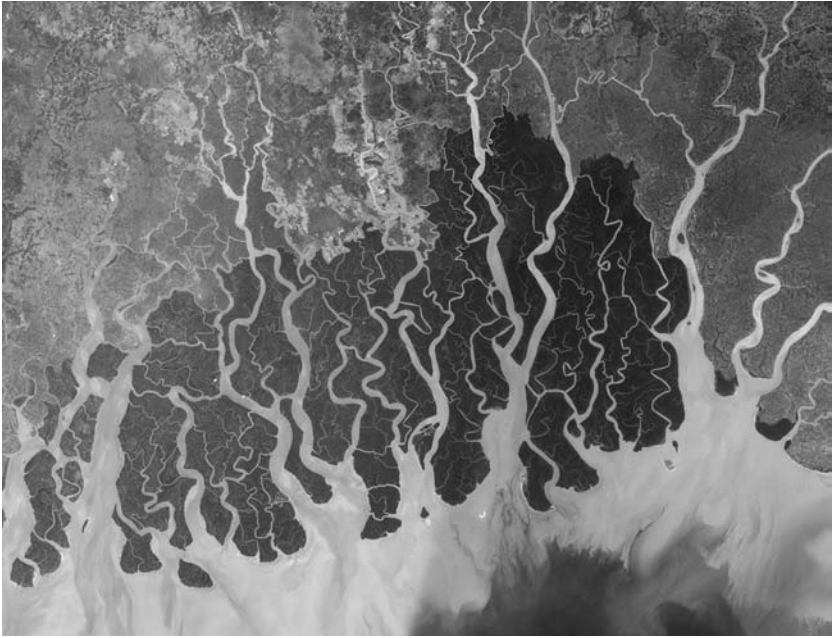
Bangladesh is a country in which history is palpably present. It is keenly debated and extensively researched. As a result, there is a huge historical literature. I have not even tried to summarise this body of knowledge because it would have led to information overload. Instead, I refer to selected 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.

PART I

*The long view*



Part 1 Aerial view of the Sundarbans wetlands.

## CHAPTER I

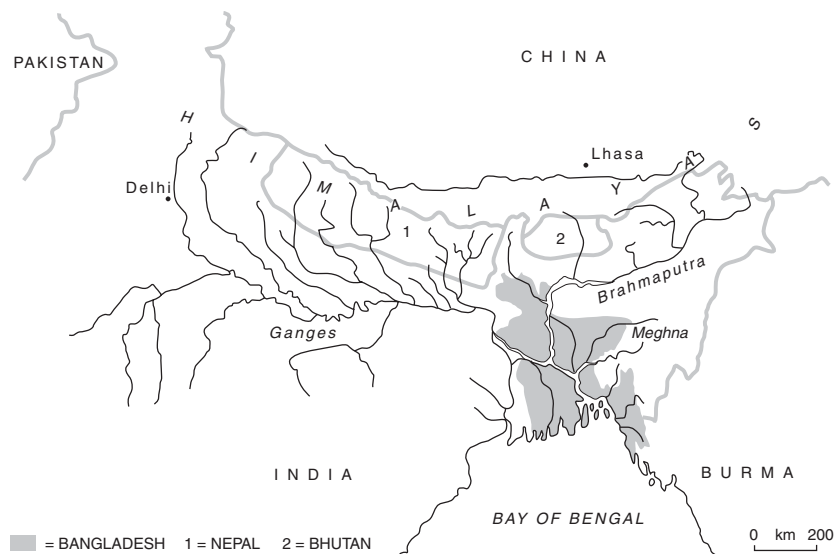
### *A land of water and silt*

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 1.1). 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.<sup>1</sup> 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  $650,000,000,000 \text{ m}^3$  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 1.1. '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 11 metres of rain fall here; the maximum rainfall ever recorded during a 24-hour period was over 1 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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 km<sup>2</sup>, 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 (*pārā*) 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 Himalayas<sup>7</sup>) 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.