



From the MixCache.com library

SAMPLE COPY

Sultans on the Delta: Islamicate Bengal under the Bengal Sultanate

MixCache.com

SAMPLE COPY

Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1:** Landscapes of the Delta: Environment and Society
- **Chapter 2:** From Frontier to Sultanate: Political Foundations of Islamicate Bengal
- **Chapter 3:** Capitals on the Move: Pandua, Gaur, and the Urban Imagination
- **Chapter 4:** Courts and Chronicles: Writing Power in Persian and Bengali
- **Chapter 5:** The Architecture of Authority: Mosques, Minbars, and Monuments
- **Chapter 6:** Bricks, Stone, and Glaze: Materials, Craft, and Aesthetics
- **Chapter 7:** Inscriptions and Epigraphy: Reading Public Texts
- **Chapter 8:** Administration and the Circle of Justice: Sultanate Governance
- **Chapter 9:** Law, Custom, and the Qazi: Negotiating Norms
- **Chapter 10:** Agrarian Frontiers: Land, Labor, and Water Control
- **Chapter 11:** Rivers, Ports, and Emporiums: Trade along the Bay of Bengal
- **Chapter 12:** Coinage and Fiscal Regimes: Monetization and Markets
- **Chapter 13:** Sufis, Scholars, and Shrines: Networks of Devotion and Learning
- **Chapter 14:** Plural Cities: Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and Jains in the Sultanate
- **Chapter 15:** Households and Gender: Lives within the Delta
- **Chapter 16:** Artisans and Workshops: Terracotta, Textile, and Metal
- **Chapter 17:** Literature and Language: Persianate Cosmopolis and Vernacular Flourishing
- **Chapter 18:** Diplomacy and War: Bengal and Its Neighbors
- **Chapter 19:** Maritime Worlds: Arakan, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asian Connections
- **Chapter 20:** Foodways and Everyday Piety: The Texture of Urban Life
- **Chapter 21:** Monumental Quarters: Urban Morphology, Bazaars, and Caravanserais
- **Chapter 22:** Sacred Geographies: Rivers, Dargahs, and Temples
- **Chapter 23:** Catastrophe and Resilience: Floods, Famine, and Rebuilding
- **Chapter 24:** The Late Sultanate: Innovation under the Husain Shahi
- **Chapter 25:** Legacies and Afterlives: From Sultanate to Mughal Bengal

Introduction

This book asks how a delta became a polity and how a polity made a culture. Set in the centuries before Mughal rule, *Sultans on the Delta* explores the rise of Islamicate Bengal as a distinct historical formation—one that both participated in broader Persianate and Indian Ocean worlds and articulated a recognizably Bengali Muslim culture at home. Rather than treating the Sultanate as a transitory bridge between “classical Hindu” and “early modern Mughal” eras, the chapters that follow argue for its originality: in the ways it governed water and land, patronized artisans and scholars, and transformed provincial towns into ambitious urban centers.

Our method is deliberately composite. Architectural surveys anchor the narrative in stone, brick, timber, and tile; court chronicles provide language for power, legitimacy, and memory; and economic records—coins, revenue notes, and merchant correspondence—trace the movements of people, commodities, and ideas. Where a chronicler claims triumph, an inscription may reveal negotiation; where a façade signals imperial aspiration, a workshop ledger discloses the labor that made it possible. By reading buildings against books and balancing textual with material archives, we recover voices and practices that rarely appear center stage in dynastic histories.

The delta itself is a protagonist. Bengal’s braided rivers nourished fields and markets, but they also shifted courses, silted ports, and forced rulers to move capitals and rethink infrastructure. Hydraulic management, embankments, ferries, and bridges were not simply technical matters; they were instruments of sovereignty and engines of cultural exchange. Urban transformation—visible in monumental quarters, market streets, and sacred precincts—was inseparable from environmental pragmatism, as patrons and planners adapted familiar Islamicate forms to humid climates, abundant clay, and the logics of riverine trade.

Pluralism here is not an anachronistic ideal but a lived arrangement. Mosques rose near temples and monastic remains; Sufi hospices neighbored bazaars; jurists and village elders negotiated between shar’i principles and local custom. The Sultanate’s court Persian coexisted with evolving Bengali prose and poetry, even as inscriptions and coins broadcast sovereignty in formulae comprehensible across regions. By following these interwoven scripts and spaces, the book demonstrates how Islamicate norms were localized without being diminished, and how vernacular creativity thrived within imperial grammars.

Trade connected Bengal to places far beyond the delta. Ports like Satgaon, Chittagong, and Sonargaon linked inland producers to merchants plying the Bay of Bengal,

carrying textiles, rice, metals, and ideas to and from Gujarat, the Deccan, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. Maritime corridors brought new artisans, devotional idioms, and technologies of measurement and finance. The Sultanate's fiscal experiments—seen in coinage, market regulation, and adjudication—helped monetize everyday life while leaving room for older systems of credit and reciprocity.

Architecture provides some of our most eloquent evidence. Brick mosques with terracotta ornament, stone spolia framed by new arches, glazed tiles shimmering in humid light—these are not derivative echoes of distant capitals but confident translations into deltaic materials and aesthetics. Monumental design coexisted with intimate spaces of piety and learning, and both responded to social needs as much as to doctrinal prescriptions. Reading façades, plans, and inscriptions together, we discern how authority was staged and how communities claimed belonging.

The chapters are organized to move from setting to structure, from institutions to intimacies, and from Bengal's heartlands to its maritime horizons. We begin with environment and political formation before turning to capitals, chronicles, and the architecture of authority. Midway, we examine governance, law, agrarian change, trade, coinage, and networks of devotion and learning. Subsequent chapters foreground plural urbanism, gendered lives, artisanal production, and literary worlds, followed by diplomacy and warfare, maritime linkages, everyday practices, sacred geographies, and experiences of crisis and recovery. We conclude with the late Sultanate's innovations and the legacies that shaped Mughal Bengal.

By combining multiple archives and perspectives, *Sultans on the Delta* offers a fresh account of how rule, belief, and craft coalesced in a watery world. It invites readers to see medieval Bengal not as a periphery that awaited "integration," but as a center that generated its own forms—administrative, artistic, and ethical. In tracing these forms across buildings, markets, and manuscripts, the book restores the Sultanate to a history of South and Southeast Asia that is as plural as the delta that made it possible.

CHAPTER ONE: Landscapes of the Delta: Environment and Society

To understand Bengal is to understand its delta. This vast, watery expanse, shaped by the mighty Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers, has always been a land of flux, where land and water are in a perpetual dance of creation and re-creation. This dynamic environment is not merely a backdrop to history but an active participant, influencing everything from settlement patterns and agricultural practices to political structures and cultural identities. The Bengal Delta, the largest river delta in the world, is an arc-shaped lowland covering over 105,000 square kilometers, predominantly within modern-day Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. This fertile region, often called the "Green Delta," is sustained by an intricate network of rivers that drain the Himalayas, carrying an immense sediment load that constantly reshapes the landscape.

The very act of living in the delta has always been about adaptation. The rivers, while providing life-giving water and fertile soil, are also sources of profound challenge. Their shifting courses, the annual monsoon floods, and the threat of cyclones from the Bay of Bengal have long dictated the rhythms of life and demanded constant resilience from its inhabitants. Yet, it is precisely this fluidity and abundance that fostered a unique society, one deeply intertwined with its natural surroundings. This chapter delves into the physical environment of the Bengal Delta and the early societies that thrived within its embrace, laying the groundwork for the Islamicate Sultanate that would later emerge.

The delta's geology is a fascinating story of tectonic plates colliding and rivers refilling basins with sediment. Situated at the junction of the Indian, Eurasian, and Burma plates, the Bengal Basin is an area of sinking land, naturally attracting the flow of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. These rivers, originating in the Himalayas, carry over a billion tons of sediment annually, much of which is deposited during the four monsoon months. This continuous deposition has led to the delta's progradation, expanding its landmass into the Bay of Bengal at a remarkable rate, even as other deltas worldwide face sediment starvation. This dynamic process of land creation and erosion has shaped not only the physical landscape but also human settlements and their interactions with the environment.

The river systems of Bengal are its lifeblood. The Ganges, known as the Padma in Bangladesh, and the Brahmaputra, known as the Jamuna, are the primary contributors to the delta's formation. They converge with the Meghna River before emptying into the Bay of Bengal, forming a vast estuary. Beyond these giants, a multitude of smaller

rivers, distributaries, and canals crisscross the land, forming a complex hydrological network. These waterways have historically served as crucial transportation routes, facilitating trade and communication within the delta and connecting it to the wider world. They also provide an inexhaustible resource for fishing, a staple of the Bengali diet.

The climate of the Bengal Delta is predominantly tropical wet, characterized by hot, dry summers and cool, dry winters, with significant rainfall during the monsoon season. The western part of the delta receives between 1,500 to 2,000 mm of rainfall annually, while the eastern part can receive up to 3,000 mm. The monsoon, a seasonal wind bringing heavy rainfall from the Bay of Bengal, is a defining feature of Bengal's climate, crucial for agriculture but also a source of devastating floods and cyclones. These intense weather events have shaped the environmental history of the delta, causing immense loss and destruction, but also fostering a culture of resilience and adaptation.

Early human habitation in Bengal dates back over 20,000 years, with evidence of Stone Age tools found in the region. By the second millennium BCE, rice-cultivating communities were settled in the delta, living in systematically aligned housing and producing pottery. These early agricultural communities, primarily Chalcolithic farmers, first developed agriculture around 1500 BCE in the southwestern part of Bengal, along rivers such as the Mayurakshi, Ajay, and Damodar. Paddy cultivation, introduced by Austric-speaking peoples, became a hallmark of Bengal's agricultural economy. The fertile alluvial soils deposited by the rivers made the region ideal for growing staple crops like rice, along with cash crops such as jute, sugarcane, and cotton.

The delta's natural abundance supported a robust agricultural base, with most people living in villages and relying on farming for their sustenance. This agrarian foundation was deeply intertwined with social customs and festivals, many of which reflected the cycles of cultivation and harvest. While agriculture was paramount, cottage industries like weaving and metalworking also thrived, and ancient Bengal engaged in international trade, exporting goods to other parts of India and beyond. The earliest coins from ancient cities in Bengal were even stamped with images of boats, underscoring the importance of riverine and maritime trade.

Settlement patterns in the delta were largely influenced by its fluid landscape. Unlike the nucleated villages found in North India, homesteads in Bengal were often strung out along riverbanks or dispersed in amorphous clusters across the countryside. The presence of dense forests and river systems often created natural divisions, leading to the development of independent kingdoms and settlements. Early settlements were particularly concentrated in areas of higher elevation, as much of the low-lying plains were initially marshy and heavily forested, infested with wildlife. Over time, as land was reclaimed and managed, human settlements expanded, often following navigable

river channels.

The interaction between environment and society in pre-Sultanate Bengal was a continuous negotiation. The dynamism of the delta meant that land was not a fixed entity; rivers frequently shifted course, eroding existing banks and creating new islands. This constant flux necessitated a flexible approach to land ownership and resource management. While early agricultural communities were initially concentrated in specific regions, the lure of fertile land and the opportunities for trade encouraged eastward and southward expansion into previously forested and marshy areas. This ongoing process of land formation and settlement expansion would continue to shape the delta's human geography through the Sultanate period and beyond.

The inherent challenges of the delta, such as floods and the need for hydraulic management, were not simply obstacles but also catalysts for innovation and communal effort. Controlling and channeling water, building embankments, and establishing transport networks were collective endeavors that fostered social cohesion and the development of local governance structures. The ability to manage these watery landscapes was a key factor in the prosperity and resilience of early Bengali societies. This intricate relationship between the environment and its inhabitants laid the groundwork for the complex cultural and administrative systems that would characterize the Bengal Sultanate, transforming a challenging delta into a vibrant and distinct polity.

This is a sample preview. Purchase the book to read the full content.

Visit MixCache.com to purchase the complete book.

SAMPLE COPY