



From the MixCache.com library

SAMPLE COPY

A History of Bangladesh

MixCache.com

SAMPLE COPY

Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Prehistoric Bengal: Earliest Settlements and Peoples
- **Chapter 2** The Rise of Ancient Kingdoms: Vanga, Pundra, and Gauda
- **Chapter 3** Bengal on the World Stage: Trade, Greeks, and Romans
- **Chapter 4** Mauryan and Gupta Bengal: Empire and Integration
- **Chapter 5** Early Medieval Bengal: Shashanka and Emerging Regional Powers
- **Chapter 6** The Buddhist Palas: Dynasty, Faith, and Culture
- **Chapter 7** The Sena and Deva Dynasties: Shifts in Power
- **Chapter 8** The Coming of Islam: Traders, Sufis, and Early Contacts
- **Chapter 9** Turkish Conquest and the Fall of the Senas
- **Chapter 10** Bengal under the Delhi Sultanate: Administration and Rebellion
- **Chapter 11** The Bengal Sultanate: Independence and Cosmopolitanism
- **Chapter 12** Economy and Society of Medieval Bengal
- **Chapter 13** Mughal Conquest: Wars and Diplomacy
- **Chapter 14** The Mughal Province: Dhaka and Urban Life
- **Chapter 15** Nawabs of Bengal: Autonomy, Wealth, and Proto-Industrialization
- **Chapter 16** European Arrival: Trade, Rivalry, and Colonial Seeds
- **Chapter 17** The Battle of Plassey and the Advent of British Rule
- **Chapter 18** Bengal in the British Raj: Society, Famine, and Resistance
- **Chapter 19** The Rise of Nationalism: Partition, Language, and Identity
- **Chapter 20** Bengal's Role in India's Independence and Partition of 1947
- **Chapter 21** From East Bengal to East Pakistan: Political and Economic Struggles
- **Chapter 22** The Bengali Language Movement and Rise of Autonomy Movements
- **Chapter 23** The Road to Independence: 1960s Uprisings and Political Change
- **Chapter 24** The Liberation War of 1971: Genocide, Refugees, and Freedom
- **Chapter 25** Building Bangladesh: Challenges, Progress, and the Future

Introduction

The land that is modern-day Bangladesh sits at the crosscurrents of South and Southeast Asia, cradled in the fertile Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta and washed by the waters of the Bay of Bengal. From these riverine plains have emerged ancient civilizations, legendary kingdoms, and dynamic cultures that have shaped not just the destinies of its peoples, but have also rippled outward to influence neighboring regions and global networks of trade and exchange. The story of Bangladesh is thus not only the chronicle of a nation but also a mirror reflecting some of the grandest themes of human history: migration, conquest, resilience, and renewal.

Archaeological finds reveal that the Bengal region has been a cradle of human habitation for thousands of years, with Stone Age settlements predating the emergence of cities and kingdoms by millennia. As agriculture transformed the land and tribal groups gave way to organized chieftains, this lush region saw the rise of powerful states such as Vanga, Pundra, and Gauda. In the ancient world, Bengal's fame spread far beyond its deltaic boundaries—its formidable war elephants and its exquisite textiles found mention in the records of Greeks, Romans, Persians, and Arabs, attesting to its significance as a hub of commerce and culture.

Centuries of dynastic rule saw periods of prosperity and conflict as Buddhist and Hindu dynasties jockeyed for influence, followed by the dramatic advent of Islam and the founding of the Bengal Sultanate. This period was marked by a flow of new peoples, ideas, and art forms, resulting in a society renowned for its religious diversity, cultural synthesis, and economic dynamism. Bengal became one of the richest provinces of the Mughal Empire, known for its urban centers, proto-industrial textile production, and its connection to the world's trading routes.

However, this wealth and diversity also made Bengal a magnet for foreign ambitions. The arrival of European trading companies, and later the aggressive expansion of the British East India Company, irrevocably altered the region's trajectory. The British conquest—sealed on the fields of Plassey in 1757—reordered Bengal's economy, society, and polity. Under colonial rule, the people of Bengal endured famine, division, and exploitation, but also gave birth to powerful movements for social and political change that would echo through the modern era.

The partition of British India in 1947 formed the eastern half of Bengal into East Pakistan, setting the stage for decades of political injustice and economic neglect under distant rule from West Pakistan. These grievances, compounded by the denial of cultural and linguistic rights, ignited the passions of the Bengali people and ultimately culminated in the bloody struggle for liberation in 1971, an event that would reshape

the map of South Asia and give birth to the independent state of Bangladesh.

Over the last five decades, Bangladesh has struggled with—and often overcome—immense challenges: the devastation of war, cycles of political instability, military coups, environmental threats, and poverty. Each period of adversity has revealed new facets of the nation’s resilience and aspiration, as its people have rebuilt, adjusted, and pushed forward. This book aims to offer a comprehensive journey through more than four millennia of Bangladesh’s history, from its most ancient origins to the complex realities of the present day—capturing both the hardships endured and the achievements won, and seeking to understand how the past continues to inform the country’s enduring quest for progress, identity, and justice.

SAMPLE COPY

CHAPTER ONE: Prehistoric Bengal: Earliest Settlements and Peoples

The story of Bengal, like that of many ancient lands, begins not with kings and chronicles, but with the silent testimony of stone tools, forgotten settlements, and the very earth itself. Long before the first cities rose or the earliest inscriptions were carved, the fertile delta of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers cradled human life. To understand Bangladesh, we must first journey back thousands of years, to a time when the landscape was still taking shape and the first inhabitants were making their tentative marks upon it. This prehistoric era, stretching over vast millennia, laid the foundational layers upon which all subsequent history would be built.

Before humans even entered the scene, the land of Bengal was itself a work in progress. The relentless flow of the mighty rivers, carrying silt from the distant Himalayas, gradually built up the vast delta, one of the largest and most dynamic in the world. This process of land formation, ongoing for millions of years, created a unique environment: a low-lying plain crisscrossed by a labyrinth of rivers and streams, prone to flooding but also blessed with extraordinary fertility. It was into this ever-changing, water-rich landscape that the earliest human pioneers would eventually venture.

Archaeological discoveries, though often fragmented and challenging to interpret in a region subject to such active riverine processes, paint a picture of human presence stretching back at least 20,000 years, and possibly much further. These earliest Bengalis were hunter-gatherers, small, mobile groups of people who lived by foraging for edible plants, hunting wild animals, and fishing in the abundant waterways. Their world was vastly different from the Bengal we know today, perhaps wilder, more forested, and certainly less predictable.

The Paleolithic, or Old Stone Age, represents the earliest chapter of this human story in Bengal. While the heartlands of Paleolithic discovery often lie in drier, rockier terrains where preservation is better, evidence of these ancient toolmakers has been found scattered across the wider Bengal region, particularly in the upland fringes that border the delta, such as parts of West Bengal (India) like the Susunia and Ajodhya hills, and areas of Bihar and Odisha. These finds typically consist of crude stone implements: hand-axes, cleavers, and choppers, fashioned from pebbles and stone flakes.

These tools, though seemingly simple, were vital for survival. They were the Swiss Army knives of their day, used for everything from butchering animal carcasses and

processing plant foods to woodworking and defense. The people who made them likely belonged to early human species, perhaps *Homo erectus* or archaic forms of *Homo sapiens*, slowly adapting to the specific challenges and opportunities of the South Asian environment. Their lives were intimately tied to the rhythms of nature, following animal migrations and the seasonal availability of resources.

The Bengal delta during the Pleistocene epoch, the geological period largely coinciding with the Paleolithic, experienced significant climatic fluctuations. Periods of greater aridity might have made the upland, rocky areas more habitable or accessible, while periods of increased rainfall would have expanded the forests and wetlands within the delta proper. Tracing the movements and settlements of Paleolithic groups within the active delta is difficult, as millennia of river action and silt deposition have likely buried or obliterated many sites.

Following the Paleolithic, the Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age (roughly 10,000 to 6,000 BCE, though dates vary regionally) marks a period of transition. As the last Ice Age drew to a close, climates worldwide became warmer and wetter. In Bengal, this likely meant an expansion of forests and wetlands, a richer biodiversity, and new challenges for human adaptation. The characteristic tools of the Mesolithic are microliths – small, finely crafted stone blades and points that were often hafted onto bone or wooden handles to create composite tools like arrows, spears, and sickles.

Mesolithic peoples appear to have been highly adaptable, exploiting a broader range of food sources than their Paleolithic ancestors. Fishing, fowling, and the collection of wild grains, roots, and fruits became increasingly important. They may have lived in more settled, though still perhaps seasonal, encampments, taking advantage of the delta's rich aquatic resources. Evidence for Mesolithic sites in Bengal is still somewhat sparse, but finds from adjacent regions suggest a widespread, if thinly spread, population adapting to post-glacial environments. The very dynamism of the delta, which erodes and buries archaeological layers, makes finding well-preserved Mesolithic sites a particular challenge.

The next great transformation in human history, the Neolithic Revolution, began to unfold in Bengal perhaps around the 4th millennium BCE, though its precise timing and trajectory are still matters of research. This was not a sudden event but a gradual process of adopting agriculture – the cultivation of crops and the domestication of animals. This shift had profound consequences, leading to more sedentary lifestyles, the growth of villages, and eventually, the foundations for complex societies.

In Bengal, one of the key Neolithic developments was the cultivation of rice. The wild ancestors of rice are native to the broader region of South and Southeast Asia, and the warm, wet conditions of the Bengal delta provided an ideal environment for its domestication and cultivation. Early farmers would have cleared small patches of land, perhaps using slash-and-burn techniques, to plant their crops. The introduction of

agriculture, even on a small scale, began to fundamentally alter the relationship between people and the land.

Alongside plant cultivation, the domestication of animals such as cattle, goats, and pigs provided a more stable source of protein and other resources. Neolithic settlements were characterized by more permanent dwellings, perhaps made of wattle-and-daub or timber, reflecting a commitment to a particular location. The hallmark tools of the Neolithic include polished stone axes and adzes, essential for clearing forests and working wood, as well as grinding stones for processing grains.

Pottery also makes its appearance in the Neolithic period. The ability to create fired clay vessels was a significant technological advance, allowing for better storage of grains and liquids, and new ways of cooking food. Early Neolithic pottery in Bengal was often handmade and relatively simple, but it marks an important step in technological and cultural development. While specific Neolithic sites within modern Bangladesh are still being fully investigated and cataloged, evidence from the broader Bengal region, including parts of West Bengal, Bihar, and Assam, helps to piece together the picture of this transformative era. The fertile lands along the numerous rivers of the delta would have been prime locations for these early agricultural communities.

The transition from hunting and gathering to farming was not always a straightforward or complete one. For a long time, early agricultural communities likely supplemented their cultivated foods with hunting, fishing, and gathering, maintaining a mixed subsistence strategy. The shift towards full-blown agriculture was a process that unfolded over generations, driven by a complex interplay of environmental factors, population pressures, and cultural innovations.

Following the Neolithic, the Chalcolithic or Copper-Stone Age (roughly from the late 3rd millennium to the early 1st millennium BCE) marks another significant step in Bengal's prehistoric journey. As the name suggests, this period is characterized by the first appearance of metal – specifically copper and, later, bronze – alongside the continued use of stone tools. The introduction of metallurgy, even on a limited scale, indicates growing technological sophistication and the potential for new forms of craft specialization.

Early copper objects found in Chalcolithic contexts in the wider Bengal region include tools like axes and chisels, as well as ornaments like bangles and beads. The knowledge of smelting copper ore and casting objects was a complex skill, suggesting the emergence of specialized artisans. However, stone tools remained prevalent, indicating that metal was initially a scarce and perhaps prestigious material, not yet universally available or suitable for all tasks.

Chalcolithic settlements were generally larger and more permanent than their Neolithic predecessors. People lived in settled villages, often located near rivers, and

practiced agriculture, with rice likely being a staple crop. Evidence from sites like Pandu Rajar Dhibi in West Bengal points to circular or rectangular huts, often with plastered floors, and a material culture that includes a variety of pottery styles – black-and-red ware being particularly characteristic of many Chalcolithic cultures in eastern India. Some pottery shows incised or painted decorations, suggesting developing artistic traditions.

The Chalcolithic period also saw an increase in regional interaction and exchange. Raw materials like copper ore were not available everywhere, so their presence in archaeological sites implies networks of trade or exchange, however rudimentary. This period likely witnessed the beginnings of more complex social organization within communities, though evidence for significant social stratification is still limited. The foundations for the later, more complex societies of the Iron Age and early historic period were being laid during these centuries.

One of the most intriguing aspects of prehistoric Bengal is understanding who these early peoples were. The reference material available for this book notes that the indigenous population included tribes of Austric and Austro-Asiatic origin. Linguistic studies have long suggested that speakers of Austroasiatic languages (which include groups like the Santals, Mundas, and Khasis today) were among the earliest inhabitants of eastern India. These languages are distinct from the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian language families that are also prominent in South Asia.

It is hypothesized that Austroasiatic speakers migrated into the Indian subcontinent from Southeast Asia in deep antiquity, perhaps carrying with them early agricultural practices or adapting them as they spread. Over millennia, these groups would have diversified and adapted to various local environments, including the fertile Bengal delta. The genetic and linguistic tapestry of Bengal today is undoubtedly a product of these ancient migrations, as well as later arrivals and interactions.

Archaeological evidence, combined with linguistic and anthropological studies, allows us to paint a tentative picture of these early Bengali populations. They were likely small-statured, adapted to a warm, humid climate. Their belief systems would have been animistic, centered on the spirits of nature, ancestors, and the forces that governed their daily lives. The rich folklore and tribal traditions that persist in parts of Bengal and neighboring regions may hold faint echoes of these ancient worldviews.

Life in the prehistoric Bengal delta was profoundly shaped by its unique environment. The vast network of rivers provided water for drinking and irrigation, teemed with fish, and served as natural highways for movement and communication, even for people in simple dugout canoes. The annual floods, while potentially destructive, also deposited rich layers of alluvial silt, constantly renewing the fertility of the land and making sustained agriculture possible without the need for complex fertilization techniques in many areas.

However, this riverine environment also posed significant challenges. Floods could wipe out settlements and crops, and the shifting courses of rivers could render previously habitable areas unlivable or create new land elsewhere. The dense forests and marshlands would have harbored dangerous wildlife, and tropical diseases were likely a constant threat. Adapting to these conditions required resilience, ingenuity, and a deep understanding of the local ecosystem. Early settlers would have learned to build their homes on raised ground, develop flood-resistant crops, and manage water resources to the best of their abilities.

The prehistoric period in Bengal was not static. It was a time of slow but steady change, of migration, adaptation, and innovation. From the earliest Stone Age hunter-gatherers to the Chalcolithic farmers beginning to experiment with metal, each successive generation built upon the knowledge and experiences of those who came before. They learned to harness the resources of the delta, developed new tools and technologies, and created the social and cultural foundations for the future.

As the Chalcolithic period drew to a close, Bengal stood on the threshold of another major transformation: the Iron Age. The introduction of iron technology, more efficient and widespread than copper or bronze, would further accelerate agricultural production, support larger populations, and contribute to the emergence of more complex social and political structures. While the details of this transition and the rise of the earliest kingdoms and urban centers are the subject of subsequent chapters, it is important to recognize that these developments did not spring from a vacuum.

The thousands of years of prehistoric occupation, from the misty depths of the Paleolithic to the settled villages of the Chalcolithic, had shaped both the land and its people. The early Bengalis, whose names and individual stories are lost to time, were the true pioneers. They were the ones who first learned to survive and then thrive in the dynamic environment of the delta, forging a unique cultural heritage from the interplay of human ingenuity and natural forces. Their legacy is etched not in grand monuments or written texts, but in the very fabric of Bengal's ancient past, a past that continues to inform its present. The stage was being set for the emergence of distinct regional identities and the first stirrings of what ancient writers in distant lands would come to know as a land of wealth and wonder.

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

Visit MixCache.com to purchase the complete book.

SAMPLE COPY