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# A History of Dhaka

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## Introduction

Dhaka, the vibrant and teeming heart of Bangladesh, has long stood as a city of contrasts and convergence—where history and modernity, tradition and progress, are woven together through more than a thousand years of transformation. Positioned on the banks of the Buriganga River, Dhaka's story is not merely the chronicle of a city's geographic expansion, but the unfolding narrative of peoples, empires, cultures, and struggles that have shaped the destiny of the Bengal delta. It is a tale that traverses ancient settlements, majestic empires, colonial enterprise, and the fervor of national rebirth—all culminating in the status Dhaka enjoys today as a dynamic global metropolis and the proud capital of Bangladesh.

The earliest traces of urban life in the Dhaka area reach far back, with archaeological evidence uncovering settlements that speak to the region's strategic significance at the crossroads of trade routes. Over centuries, successive empires—the Guptas, Palas, and Senas, among others—left their imprint on the land. The legendary Dhakeshwari Temple and the many stories attached to the city's name, whether from local flora, religious figures, or the beat of the ceremonial drum, are emblematic of Dhaka's deep roots in South Asian civilization.

With the arrival of Muslim dynasties and later the Mughal Empire, Dhaka experienced one of its most dramatic epochs. As Jahangirnagar, the city blossomed into a vibrant provincial capital, famed for its architectural marvels and its unparalleled muslin, sought by traders across continents. The interplay of merchants and officials from distant lands—Armenian, Portuguese, Dutch, French, British—turned Dhaka into a meeting point of cultures and commerce. The architectural landscape, from Lalbagh Fort to the Husayni Dalan, narrates stories of ambition and artistry that continue to mesmerize historians and visitors alike.

The city's fortunes would rise and fall with shifting empires. The decline of Mughal power and the incursion of the British East India Company heralded profound changes in urban identity and socio-economic life. Factories and mosques gave way, in part, to municipal structures and colonial repertoires, while Dhaka's fabric withstood upheavals—political, economic, social—that would pave the way for new forms of resilience and aspiration. The tumultuous episodes surrounding the partitions of Bengal and then India, and the community's repeated campaigns for political and linguistic rights, underscored Dhaka's role as both witness and crucible for historic change.

It was in Dhaka's streets, institutions, and neighborhoods that the stirring cry for Bangladeshi independence took root and flourished. The city became the epicenter of

resistance, sacrifice, and ultimately, liberation—etched indelibly into the national memory by the tragedy and triumphs of 1971. The decades since independence have been no less eventful, as Dhaka has expanded into a sprawling megacity, grappling with both the promise and challenges of demographic boom, economic development, urbanization, and environmental strain. Its landscape today—where the domes of Mughal mosques rise above the bustle of markets and the silhouette of the National Parliament building—attests to the ongoing dialogue between past and future.

This book seeks to present a comprehensive chronicle of Dhaka's history, from the earliest days of settlement through the labyrinths of conquest and colonization, to its current position as the heart of a vibrant and resilient nation. Throughout, we will explore not just the political and architectural milestones, but also the lives of its inhabitants, the evolution of its social fabric, and the enduring legacy of its cultural achievements. In tracing the journey of Dhaka, we glimpse not only the city's richly layered history, but also the wider currents that have swept the subcontinent and shaped its destiny.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Early Settlements: Prehistoric Dhaka

Before the mosques and the markets, before the subahdars and the soldiers, before the very name Dhaka resonated with the echoes of empire, the land upon which this sprawling metropolis now stands was simply a part of the vast, fertile delta shaped by the mighty Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. This was a landscape in constant flux, molded by the rhythm of the monsoons, the annual floods, and the meandering dance of waterways that provided both life and challenge to its earliest inhabitants. To uncover the beginnings of Dhaka, we must peel back the layers of centuries, delving into a time shrouded in the mists of prehistory, where the evidence of human presence is subtle, unearthed through the patient work of archaeologists.

The idea of a city, as we understand it today – a dense collection of buildings, a hub of commerce and administration – seems a far cry from the likely reality of the first human footprints in this region. Yet, the geographical advantages of the area that would become Dhaka were undeniable. Situated slightly above the lowest floodplains, with access to numerous rivers and tributaries, it offered a relatively stable ground in a dynamic environment. These waterways were the highways of the ancient world, facilitating movement, trade, and communication long before roads were conceived. They provided sustenance in the form of fish and fertile silt deposited by the floods, making agriculture possible in the surrounding lands.

Evidence suggests that by the middle of the first millennium BCE, roughly between 500 and 200 BC, pockets of more organized human activity began to emerge in the general vicinity of present-day Dhaka. These weren't necessarily sprawling metropolises akin to those found in other ancient civilizations of the subcontinent, but archaeological findings hint at the existence of what have been described as "urbanized settlements." The term itself suggests a level of organization beyond simple villages – perhaps indicating a degree of planning, a concentration of population, and engagement in activities beyond mere subsistence farming.

What might these early urbanized settlements have looked like? Given the available technology of the time, construction materials would have been primarily organic – wood, bamboo, reeds, and mud. Structures were likely modest, perhaps clustering together near riverbanks for ease of access and transport. Life would have been closely tied to the cycles of nature, dictated by the planting and harvesting seasons, and the ebb and flow of the rivers. The inhabitants were likely skilled in navigating the waterways, using simple boats fashioned from local materials.

Their economy, while undoubtedly centered on agriculture, might have also involved some form of trade. The strategic location of the Dhaka area on riverine routes would

have made it a natural point for the exchange of goods. What they traded is a matter of speculation for this early period, but regional products like agricultural surplus, perhaps processed goods, or even resources gathered from the surrounding forests could have been exchanged with communities upstream or downstream. The concept of a "trading post," though perhaps rudimentary, fits with the idea of an "urbanized settlement" in such a strategically located area.

Survival in this deltaic environment required a deep understanding of the land and its moods. The annual floods, while depositing fertile silt, also posed a constant threat. The early inhabitants would have developed techniques to cope with these challenges, perhaps building their settlements on slightly elevated ground or utilizing stilt-like structures to protect against rising waters. Their connection to the natural world would have been profound, likely influencing their beliefs and social structures.

The people who inhabited these early settlements remain largely anonymous to history. We do not know their names, their language, or the specific details of their social organization. Yet, their presence, however dimly perceived through archaeological traces, is significant. They were the pioneers, the first to recognize the potential of this watery landscape and lay the groundwork, however unintentionally, for the urban future that would eventually unfold. They navigated the challenges, harnessed the resources, and established a human foothold in a region that would one day become the heart of a nation.

Imagine the scene thousands of years ago: small clusters of dwellings amidst a lush green landscape, crisscrossed by shimmering rivers. The air would have been filled with the sounds of nature – the calls of birds, the rustling of leaves, the gentle lapping of water against the shore. People would have moved with the rhythm of the sun, their lives dictated by the practicalities of survival and community. Perhaps they gathered for communal activities, shared resources, and passed down their knowledge of the land through oral traditions.

The discovery of evidence suggesting urbanized settlements from such an early period is crucial because it pushes back the known history of organized human habitation in the Dhaka region considerably. It tells us that the area was not merely a wild, unpopulated swamp before the arrival of later, more documented civilizations. It was a place where people were actively shaping their environment and forming communities, albeit on a scale far removed from the megacity of today.

Understanding this early period requires a degree of historical imagination, guided by the limited archaeological findings. We can infer that the inhabitants possessed skills in agriculture, fishing, and perhaps rudimentary crafts. Their tools would have been simple, likely made from stone, bone, or wood. The concept of a settled life, as opposed to a purely nomadic existence, suggests a degree of stability and perhaps an understanding of land ownership or communal territory.

The rivers were not just routes for trade and sources of food; they were also likely central to their spiritual beliefs. Water bodies often hold significant cultural and religious meaning in deltaic regions, and it is plausible that these early inhabitants revered the rivers that sustained them. Rituals and ceremonies might have been performed to appease river spirits or ensure bountiful harvests and safe passage on the water.

While specific archaeological sites from this precise 500-200 BC period within the immediate core of modern Dhaka might be challenging to definitively link and excavate due to subsequent centuries of dense urban development, evidence from the wider Bengal delta region provides context. Findings in nearby areas dating to similar or slightly later periods offer clues about the types of settlements, pottery, and tools that might have been present. These regional parallels help us piece together a hypothetical picture of life in the Dhaka area during this ancient epoch.

The term "prehistoric" in the context of Dhaka simply means before written historical records specific to the area. While later periods would be documented by chroniclers, travelers, and administrators, the story of these earliest settlements is told through the silent language of archaeology – pottery shards unearthed from the earth, the remains of ancient structures, or perhaps even burial sites. Each find, no matter how small, adds another brushstroke to the incomplete painting of Dhaka's origins.

It's important not to overlay our modern understanding of urban life onto these ancient settlements. They were not cities with paved streets, complex administrative buildings, or widespread literacy. They were likely more organic, fluid communities, perhaps seasonal in nature depending on the flood patterns, and deeply integrated with the surrounding environment. Their "urbanization" would have been relative to the scattered, purely agrarian communities that might have existed elsewhere in the delta at the time.

The fact that these settlements existed suggests a certain level of societal complexity was already developing in the region. It implies a capacity for communal labor, resource management, and perhaps some form of leadership structure, however informal. The ability to sustain a settled population, even a small one by modern standards, in a challenging environment speaks to the ingenuity and resilience of these early people.

The period between 500 and 200 BC was a dynamic time across the Indian subcontinent, witnessing the rise of early states and urban centers in other regions. While the Dhaka area was likely not at the forefront of these large-scale developments, its participation in the broader trends of settlement and organization is suggested by the archaeological evidence. It was part of a wider network of human activity unfolding across Bengal and beyond.

Considering the passage of time, it's remarkable that any trace of these early settlements has survived. The delta is a constantly changing landscape, with rivers shifting course and land being eroded and redeposited. Yet, somehow, remnants have persisted, waiting to be discovered by those who patiently seek to understand the deepest roots of this place. These fragments of the past are invaluable, providing a tangible link to the very beginnings of human habitation in the Dhaka area.

What motivated people to settle in this particular spot? Beyond the strategic riverine location, perhaps there were other factors at play. The fertility of the land, the availability of fresh water, and perhaps even natural defenses offered by the local topography could have made it an attractive location for early communities seeking stability and resources.

The absence of detailed historical records from this period means we must rely heavily on interpretation and inference. However, the archaeological evidence provides a crucial starting point. It confirms that organized human life existed here at a time when many other parts of the world were still sparsely populated. It highlights the long and continuous history of human interaction with this specific deltaic environment.

These early inhabitants were the unheralded founders of the Dhaka story. They laid the initial human groundwork, their lives and activities slowly shaping the landscape and setting the stage for the more prominent chapters of history that would follow. While we may not know their names, their legacy lies in the very existence of the city that stands here today.

The transition from these early settlements to the later, more recognizable historical periods was likely a gradual process, punctuated by the arrival of new groups of people and the rise and fall of regional powers. But the foundation was laid in these earliest times, a testament to the enduring human capacity to adapt, organize, and build communities even in challenging environments.

Future archaeological work in and around Dhaka may well uncover further evidence, shedding more light on the nature and extent of these prehistoric settlements. Each new discovery has the potential to refine our understanding and add more detail to the faint outline of this ancient period.

For now, we acknowledge the presence of these earliest inhabitants, recognizing that Dhaka's history does not begin with the grand pronouncements of emperors or the construction of monumental buildings, but with the quiet determination of people who chose to make their homes on the banks of the Buriganga thousands of years ago. They were the first chapter in a story that continues to be written.

Their daily lives were likely filled with the rhythms of nature – the rising and setting of

the sun, the changing seasons, the unpredictable moods of the rivers. They would have worked the land, fished the waters, and perhaps engaged in simple crafts to create the tools and objects necessary for survival. Community would have been essential, providing mutual support and protection in a potentially challenging environment.

The specific cultural practices and beliefs of these early groups are largely unknown, but one can speculate on the importance of animism or the reverence for natural forces in a deltaic region. The power of the rivers, the fertility of the land, and the abundance of nature would have likely played a significant role in their worldview.

The settlements themselves were probably not static entities. They might have grown, shrunk, or even shifted location over time, adapting to environmental changes or the dynamics of local populations. The waterways that connected them also exposed them to interactions with other groups in the wider region, potentially leading to cultural exchange or even conflict.

While the term "urbanized" is used, it's crucial to remember the scale. These were not sprawling cities of millions but likely compact communities, perhaps numbering in the hundreds or low thousands at most. Their 'urban' character likely stemmed from a denser population relative to the surrounding countryside, and a greater degree of non-agrarian activity, such as trade or craft specialization.

The legacy of these early inhabitants is not found in standing structures or written chronicles, but in the very land upon which Dhaka is built. Their presence, however faint, is a reminder that the history of this vibrant city stretches back into the deep past, far beyond the eras of empires and recorded history. They were the seed from which everything else grew.

As we move forward into later periods of Dhaka's history, marked by more definitive records and larger-scale developments, it is important to remember these humble beginnings. The resilience and adaptability that characterize Dhaka today have roots in the lives of these earliest settlers who first navigated the complexities of this deltaic landscape. They were the first custodians of this land, their simple lives laying the groundwork for the multifaceted history that was to come. Their story is a quiet prologue to the grand narrative of Dhaka, a reminder that even the largest cities have the most modest origins.

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