CHAPTER ONE

An Introduction to Geography of ‘Bengal’

‘Bengal’ as a Unit of Geographical Study: Historically, the land of ‘Bengal’ has had its own distinct ‘regional entity’. The geographers also consider ‘Bengal’ as a definite ‘geographical region’ in the entire subcontinent with distinct geographical features. The region-specific geographical features which has been shaped by its geographical location, geological settings and climatic conditions, are interesting. It will not be an exaggeration to state that this entire geographical situation has played a significant role in the construction of the distinct ‘identity’ of Bengal as such – the distinct socio-cultural attitudes, her traditions and continuities, diverse religious life, art and architectural distinctiveness, her

vibrant trade and commercial linkages, economic life in relation to the delta, and above all, formation of Bengal’s regional ‘individuality’.

For the analysis of the geographical factors in cultural and economic trends of early Bengal, it is necessary to include here a short resume of the principal geographic features of the delta. ‘Bengal’ has been succinctly described as ‘new mud, old mud, and marsh’\(^2\) – and if we take in all the areas of generally deltaic aspect, including the Surma valley, it is the largest delta in the world. To simplify the matter, the entire discussion of the geographical specificities and features of ‘Bengal’ could be arranged as following:

i) structural evolution/ outlines; ii) geological settings; iii) geographical location; iv) the rivers of Bengal; v) climatic conditions/ monsoon wind system; and vi) distinctive geo-features at a glance.

II

**Structural Evolution/ Outlines:** The present understanding is that India, Australia and the Indian Ocean constitute a plate – the Indian Plate – which presses against the African Plate on the west and the Eurasian Plate on the north. The friction between the plates, with a ‘convergent’ motion on one side balanced by a ‘divergent’ one on other, has constantly changed land-forms by

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pushing up or pressing down land along the fault-lines.\(^3\) As under these various impulses both land-forms and sea-limits have constantly changed, it would be difficult for scholars to establish the time when one could have recognised 'Bengal' by its present physical features even roughly on this globe. However, certain information's as to this are being derived from the intensive researches and studies conducted by the geologists.

In the Himalayas and the salt range, rocks containing fossils of marine life go back to the Cambrian period\(^4\), which shows that these rocks have developed out of sea sediments, and that where the Himalayas situated now, was once a sea, named Tethys Sea. From the beginning of the Tertiary period\(^5\), and especially in the Eocene epoch\(^6\), the Himalayas began to rise out of the severe folding caused by the pressures (orogeny movements) of the Indian Plate against the Eurasian Plate, and continued into Miocene period\(^7\). The tectonic movement and upheavals continued to persist throughout the entire 'Oligocene-Mayo-Pleistocene'\(^8\) epoch. These tectonic movements and geological upheavals continued to shape the world's geographical transformations and geological

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\(^4\) up to 570 million years ago.

\(^5\) about 65 million years ago.

\(^6\) The second geological epoch of the Tertiary period, 58 to 37 million years ago.

\(^7\) 25 to 5 million years ago; Irfan Habib, *Prehistory*, p. 6.

\(^8\) Generally, this term is being used to denote the period from 10 thousand to 250 million years ago.
contours for millions of years. In this process, the Pleistocene epoch, ushered in. During the Miocene epoch the earliest apes appeared on the earth. The ultimate transition phase from anthropoid to human being \textit{(Homo habilis or Homo erectus)} had occurred in the Pliocene epoch. Some specimens have been found to prove the existence of not only the anthropoids, but also of human beings in the Indian subcontinent and 'Bengal' also.

'Bengal' has had a long submerged existence under the ocean for millions of years. As the course of this immense water began to shift gradually southwards, there emerged the extensive fertile alluvial land tract. Varendra, Madhupur, Lalmai-Mainamati, Burdwan, Bankura, Murshidabad and the other laterite lands of 'Bengal' have also emerged through this process. Abu Bakar opines that the highlands of Varendrabhumi, Madhupur, and Lalmai belong to the old alluvium. Over a period of time, as he assumes, they were separated by the river Jamuna. He also stated that at the beginning of the Pleistocene epoch the northern tract of 'Bengal' was a delta, and the sea lay 200 miles further north. The hilly tracts of Rajmahal, Garo, Khasi, Jayantiya emerged long before and distributed extensive salt range and rocks. M. Harunur Rashid has stated it explicitly that the

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9 1.8 million to 10,000 years ago. The term Pleistocene age denotes the period from 10 thousands to 1 million years ago. The Pleistocene age, termed by Gordon Childe, is called by Anthropologist Morgan as 'stage of savagery', by Archaeologist as 'Palaeolithic age', and by Historians and Sociologist as 'the earliest stage of human society'. The Pleistocene age is thus very significant in the history of world civilisation and man kind.

10 The term Pliocene age denotes the time from 1 million to 2.5 million years ago. However, this is not unanimously accepted.

Rajmahal hill in west Bengal is 'an outcrop of this entire system' of the creation and emergence of the Himalayas. In the section entitled 'Structural History' in an article, he mentions India as a delta, and says, '...this peninsular block formed by a complex of very ancient gneisses and granites represents perhaps the oldest mountain system on the earth's surface. The Rajmahal hills on the western border are an outcrop of this system'.

On the other hand, the Saontal Parganas in the south and the hilly tracts of Chhota Nagpur are the virtual eastward expansion of the Vindhya Range.

It is, therefore, to be said as a conclusion on the basis of the present understanding that most of the landscape of 'Bengal' was created in the Pliocene age, while in Pleistocene age the region became opulent in its flora and fauna so as to become naturally suitable for human habitation and settlement. It is generally acknowledged fact that Ganga and Brahmaputra created Bengal basin. However, it is preposterous to assume that the entire process of the geological formation of the basin of Bengal was completed in the Pleistocene era itself: this process was much more prolonged, temporally expanding over centuries and to certain extent, this geological formation is still active in the present era.

It needs to be pointed out in this context that the southern delta of 'Bengal' is a comparatively recent formation. M.I. Chowdhury, while determining the age of this delta, states that the coastal areas in southern Bengal are in no way older


14 Ajay Roy, 'Bhukhanda, Bangladesh, Janajati', p. 5.
Map 5: Geological Settings of the Bengal Delta

BAY OF BENGAL

- **Highlands (Tertiary or Older)**
- **Pleistocene Terraces**
- **Tippera Surface**
- **Recent Flood Plain**

than 50 thousand years. Many even go to the extent of arguing that the exact age of this delta does not go beyond 10 thousand years, and the argument is that copper plates refer implicitly to the fact that Kotalipara of Faridpur district was lying near the sea.

Hence, an analysis of the structural evolution of ‘Bengal’ illustrates that this region achieved a very distinct geographical feature due to various tectonic movements since the time when the region declared its existence for the first time. Hills surrounding the three sides, numerous rivers, and sporadic presence of old alluvial lands, extensive plains, and the sea and the coastal areas in the south of Bengal impart a substantial degree of uniqueness to the geo-features of ‘Bengal’.

III

Geological Settings/Outlines: There is a good deal of physiographic variety within the general pattern of geological setting of the ‘Bengal Delta’. The entire geological structure of the region was being fixed through the continuous process of evolution and devolution due to the tectonic and orogeny movements.

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16 Faridpur Copperplate 1 by Dharmāditya, Regnal Year 3 (c. 540-60 AD), issued from Varakamandala, referred to the Eastern Sea.
Some relevant facts need to be mentioned here in the context of the entire geological outline of the region, viz., the extensive and well-defined old alluvial land tracts, older rock of the surrounding hills, jungles, the comparatively new alluvial land, rivers and most importantly the deltas.

The Old Alluvium Land Tracts: Though most of the tracts of ‘Bengal’ are comparatively of recent origin and new lands, there is a large area of old alluvial land in the middle, eastern, northern and western parts of ‘Bengal’. In west, the old alluvial tract extends from the south of Rajmahal almost to the sea. The deep forests and the mountainous regions of the Rajmahal, the Saontal Parganas, Manbhum-Singbhum-Dhalbhum comprise this old alluvial land. East of it are the higher red lands of the western parts of the districts of Murshidabad, Birbhum, Burdwan, Bankura and Medinipur. This plateau is quite hilly, woody, dry and infertile. There are still deep teak forests here, as well as mountain quarries and coal mines. This plateau and highland covered much of ancient northern Rāḍha, the western part of southern Rāḍha and the part of the state of Tāmrālipīti.17 Karnaśuvarṇa18, the capital of Śāśāṅka, has been located in the south of the present Murshidabad and a seal found on which the word Raktamṛttikā (red soil) is being inscribed. From this, it is not difficult to assume that the soil of this region was red even in the 7th century AD (In this context, incidentally, we could

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also mention the Rangamati area of the hilly region of Chittagong, the Lalmai hills near Comilla)\(^{19}\). Some parts of Raniganj and Asansol, Medinipur, and the Susuniya hills area of Bankura are the lower parts of this old land tract. A particular tract of this old land crosses the Ganga, north of Rajmahal and extends up to the north Bengal. This belt of red soil and older rock cuts through the area of Maldah-Rajshahi-Dinajpur-Rangpur across Brahmaputra and extends up to the hilly areas of Assam. This seems like a barren belt that engirdled the fertile land of the Bengal basin. In northern Bengal one part of this old alluvial tract is slightly higher in dimension than the other. The comparatively high lands of Bogura, northern portion of Rajshahi, eastern part of Dinajpur and western tracts of Rangpur were the historical epicentre of Varendra/Varendrī/Varendrabhūmi, sometimes 'Bārind' by the medieval historians.\(^{20}\) Madhupurgarh, north of Dhaka, also belong to this old alluvium which is lacerated from the northern alluvial tract of Varendra by the Brahmaputra. As Barrie M. Morrison comments, "These ancient alluvial deposits (Madhupur jungle and the Varendra or Barind) are readily distinguished by the deep red of their oxidized ferruginous soils, by their drainage pattern and by the types of vegetation cover. The Madhupur jungle lies north of Dhaka city in the middle of a rough triangle formed by the covering streams of the Brahmaputra.

\(^{19}\) Lāl means 'red' and rang means 'colour'.

on the West and the Meghna on the East, with the low-laying lands of the Sylhet basin on the North.  

Though Varendrabhumi, Madhupurgarh, Bhawalgarh and the highlands of Comilla-Mainamati-Lalmai have been claimed to be not more than 10-12 feet higher than the general alluvial land by Syed Majharul Haq, many parts of the highland of Lalmai are higher than hundred feet as has been mentioned later by him. The northern laterite (red) hilly tracts of Narsingdi are also very old in the geological context. Very recently important discoveries were made and some significant Archaeological artefacts, objects, beads and punch marked coins have been found from the newly discovered archaeological site of Wari and Bateshwar in Narshingdi district. Habibullah Pathan guessed the Wari-Bateshwar identical with that of ‘Gangaridai’ and Dilip Kumar Chakrabarti predicted the area, on the basis of some significant findings, with Ptolemy's  

21 B.M. Morrison, Political Centers, p. 9.  
Sounagoura port in the 2nd century AD. This port was earlier identified with modern Sonargaon by Schwartzberg’s historical atlas of South Asia.26

The Comparatively New Alluvium: ‘Bengal’ is bounded, geologically, by the red and older land tract which beginning from the western side of Bengal encircles the northern areas and extends till the southern frontier of eastern Bengal. The rest of the areas (barring Chittagong and hilly areas of Tripura) constitute the geologically defined new alluvium land. This new alluvium is deeply drenched by the water of Ganga, Brahmaputra, Meghna and their tributaries and rich in their abundant alluvial soil.27 The rivers of Bengal have played very significant role in the formation of this immensely fertile plain.

In the west of Bengal, most of the rivers, as for example, the Mayurakshi, Ajay, Rupnarayan, Kansai and different tributaries of the Ganga have cut across the barren red soil belt. The plain land adjacent to the old alluvium has got fertility from the water of these rivers, and the flood plain has been formed by the alluvial soil. Likewise in north also this red soil belt is being surrounded by the adjacent fertile lands created by water and alluvial soil of the river of Atrai, Mahananda and Karotoya. Most portion of the eastern part of Bengal was practically constituted by the alluvial soil, watery flood plains covered everywhere by lowland marshes and webbed with streams and cannels.28 It is

27 Ajay Roy, Bangladesher Bhutattvik Itihas, p. 2.
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popularly known as the new alluvium land tract – barring the eastern parts of Śrīhaṭṭa, hilly areas of Mymensingh, Bhawalgarh, mountainous Tripura, and the hilly range of Chittagong. As Abul Momen comments, the old alluvium tract was formed by the Pleistocene alluvium and that the entire flood plains of Bengal, especially in the central and southern Bengal, were formed by the comparatively new alluvial soil.

There is no old land in south or central Vañga, where the soil is entirely the product of the Padma-Bhagirathi-Madhumati, comprising the new alluvial land of Bengal. Several parts of Nadiya, Jessore, Khulna and 24-Parganas belong to this region, and the names Khārimāṇḍal, Vyāghrataṭi and Samatata are worthy of note. Hsuan Tsang described Samatata as a coastal country whose land was moist and flat. We have also pointed out earlier that in the 6th century AD the Kotalipara area of Faridpur was new alluvial land and that its name was Navyāvakāśikā. The Nāvyā area of Barishal-Bakharganj was a much later

29 Ajay Roy, Bangla o Bangali, p. 5.
33 Faridpur Copperplate of Gopachandra, Regnal Year 18 (c. 525-40 AD) and Faridpur Copperplate of Dharmāditya (c. 540-60 AD) mentions Navyāvakāśika as a significant administrative centre. Navyāvakāśika literally means a new opening or channel (navya = new, avakāśa = opening, canal).
34 Literally ‘Navigable’.
development and very new alluvium land (*vaṅge-nāvye*). It had the main stream
of the Meghna as its eastern limit.\(^{35}\)

**The Delta:** The entire area of ‘Bengal’ – as we mentioned earlier – is, in a popular
sense, deltaic – it has been succinctly described as ‘new mud, old mud, and
marsh’ and probably the largest delta in the world.\(^{36}\) Though there is hardly any
divergence of opinions in the academia as to the characteristic feature of
‘Bengal’ of being the largest delta, there is little substantial convergence as to the
entire process of geological formation of this deltaic region. In fact the delta of
Bengal can also be characterised as an agglomeration of some sub-deltas.\(^{37}\) Many
even opine that the old alluvium land in northern Bengal is actually the
moribund delta of Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers. This, at a later stage,
created the Varendra-Madhupur terrace, which was separated by the river
Yamuna as an epiphenomenon of the prolonged tectonic movements. However,
the entire newly-created land in Bengal, in the light of geology, is being duly

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35 N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal* (Containing Inscriptions of the Candras, the
Varmans and the Senas, and Isvaraghosa and Damodara), Kolkata: Sanskrit Pustak
Bhandar, New Edition 2003 (First published from Rajshahi: Varendra Research Society,
1929, p. 141.

36 The estimated areas of the deltas of the Ganga, Mississippi and Nile are 25,12 and 9
thousand sq. miles respectively; the area of the Yangtze or Hoang-Ho delta is not known,
but so far as could be judged from maps, it is certainly not larger than the Ganga delta. R.K.
Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1935, p. 120;
Chapter 19: The Bengal Delta (Region XII)*, London: Methuen and Co Ltd., third edition
revised and completely reset, 1967, p. 571.

recognised as the delta of rivers. Generally it is being the prevalent notion that, the expansive/vast land tract that extends till Padma in the North, Bhagirathi in the West, Meghna in the East, and the Bay of Bengal in the South constitutes the main floodplain land and the delta of Ganga-Brahmaputra. According to Bagchi, apart from Ganga, no other river has played a pivotal role in the formation of deltaic Bengal. Without entering into any academic debate, it can be mentioned at this juncture that the entire Gangetic delta is divided into three distinct parts – i) the moribund delta (the districts of Murshidabad, Nadiya, 24 Parganas in the state of West Bengal, India and Khulna and Jessore, Bangladesh); ii) the matured delta (Portions of 24 Paraganas of West Bengal, India and Khulna-Jessore of Bangladesh); and iii) the active delta (Sunderbans, Barishal, Patuakhali, southern Faridpur, Noakhali, Sandeep and the coastal areas). Hence, it is to be noted that the process of formation of the deltaic Bengal is still on the way which continues to shape and re-shape the geological settings of Bengal. It is also now scientifically established fact that this delta, which is the largest delta

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38 Amitabha Bhattacharyya, *Historical Geography of Ancient and Early Medieval Bengal*, pp. 11-12.
Map 6: Bengal – The largest Delta of the World

in the world, is the combined creation of the sediment, sand, alluvial soil and mud of the river flows over a prolonged period of time.\textsuperscript{42}

The geological settings of Bengal, - the old and new alluvium land tract of this region - can be precisely summed up as follows: the south-western Rāḍha, Gauḍa, adjacent to Rajmahal, Puṇḍra of north Bengal, Śrīhaṭṭa of north-eastern Bengal and some areas of eastern and south-eastern Bengal belong to the old alluvium land. On a closer examination, it becomes apparent that this old alluvium land exists as a belt guarding three sides of ‘Bengal’. On the other hand, leaving this old alluvium belt aside, the entire ‘Bengal’ is the formation of new alluvium in the light of geology, excluding some hilly tracts. And this new alluvium, which is comparatively a recent formation, constitutes the foremost characteristic feature of the entire region – the delta.

\textbf{IV}

\textbf{Geographical Location}: The geographical location of ‘Bengal’ is determined by the structural history/evolution of the region. It is a fact that ‘Bengal’ curved out a distinct geographical location for itself in the eastern frontier of the Indian subcontinent as early as in the Pleistocene age. Deep forests, highlands and mountains of east, west and north, and the Bay of Bengal of south – ‘Bengal’ is being surrounded by this natural girdle. As Niharranjan Ray puts it, ‘... at one

extreme are the very high mountains, at the other the sea, and on both sides the hard hilly country; within, all the land is a plain. Such is the geographical fortune of the Bengali people'.

It is imperative to elaborate a little more on the geographical location of 'Bengal'. The total area of the region of 'Bengal' is approximately 80,000 sq. Miles (207,000 km). Nafis Ahmed and M. Harunur Rashid claimed precisely 84,832 square miles (30,691 square miles in West Bengal, and 54,141 square miles had originally belonged to the present Bangladesh). On the other hand, B.M. Morrison and Abdul Momin Chowdhury have mentioned about 80,000 square miles on the basis of Spate, Bagchi and Strickland. Since the exact geographical boundaries of 'Bengal' have not yet been precisely verified, it is not needed to take this numerical figure in its literal sense.

The northern border of Bengal is Sikkim and the snow-capped Himalayas, Kanchanjungha which constitutes the most significant geographical as well as geo-political barrier; in the lower valleys in the north of Bengal are the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri which lies in the lap of the foothill of the Himalayas. To the west of these two districts is Nepal, to the east the border of Bhutan. In

the northeast the natural border of Rangpur and Cooch Behar extends as far as
the river Brahmaputra.\textsuperscript{46}

The eastern border of Bengal is constituted by Brahmaputra in the north, and in
between them lie the Garo-Khasiya-Jaintiya hills; to the south are the Lusai-
Chaṭṭagram and Arakan ranges. The chain of mountains of Tripura and
Chittagong have geographically separated ‘Bengal’ from Myanmar and Lusai – at
the same time separating Śrihaṭṭa from Tripura and Chittagong.\textsuperscript{47} However,
despite these distinct geographical and natural mountainous barriers in south-
eastern part, Bengal’s overland communication with Myanmar was not too
difficult which will be discussed in the relevant chapter.

The western frontiers of Bengal are deeply embedded in the dense forests and
are encircled by long chains of mountains. The geographical significance of this
border area is implied by the fact that the artery of ‘Bengal’ - the Ganga - has
penetrated into the land by flowing to the south-eastern direction. It is
mentioned in the \textit{Bhaviśya Purāṇa} that the arid (\textit{ajala}), salty wasteland (\textit{uṣara}),
and dense forest lands are situated in the south of Rajmahal and Ganga on the
western front of Bengal. In the 7th century AD Hsuan Tsang entered into Bengal
from this area\textsuperscript{48} and in the copper plate of the king Bhabadevabhaṭṭa (11th

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\textsuperscript{46} Niharranjan Ray, \textit{History of the Bengali People}, p. 51.

\textsuperscript{47} Niharranjan Ray, \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{48} Thomas Watters, \textit{On Yuan Chwang’s Travels in India}, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal
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It is being described as arid, wasteland and ‘jungle-land’. Undoubtedly, this area was a part of Raḍha. Apart from this, it would seem that the natural western boundaries of Bengal stretch from Rajmahal to the low hills and ochre-coloured mountainous range in the south, touching Mayurbhanj-Baleshvar and Keonjar, extending to the sea.50 This hilly tract and the ochre-coloured plateau is the mountainous high lands with dense forests of the Saontal Parganas, Chhota Nagpur, Manbhum and Singhbhum, the natural western boundary of Bengal.

The Bay of Bengal on the south is the significant physical expression of a natural geographical border. The coast of the Bay of Bengal is surrounded by the southern portion of Medinipur, 24 Parganas, Khulna, Bagerhat, Barishal, Patuakhali, and the green forested land carpeted with lush and abundant grass of the Samatata sub-region of the southern area of Tripura, Chittagong and Noakhali.51 While examining Bengal’s geographical location, Barrie M. Morrison makes the significant comment on the geographical condition of the southern area. He opines that ‘Bengal’ is a vast plain land and formed by the river-flown alluvial soil. This vast fertile land seems to be like a saucer. To quote him, ‘...the delta lies like an immense saucer of alluvial deposit between the Tippera hills on the east, the Shillong plateau and Nepal Terai on the north and the highlands of the Rajmahal and Chhota Nagpur on the west. The southern lip of the saucer is

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50 Niharranjan Ray, History of the Bengali People, pp. 52-53.
51 Niharranjan Ray, History of the Bengali People, p. 53.
tilted downward where the alluvium is carried out to sea by the combined streams of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers. This combined convergence of the three rivers towards the sea has been termed by Morrison as the ‘complex multiple stream’ and he also mentioned about a dense jungle. According to him, behind the jungles near the estuary lies the delta formed by the prolonged tectonic movements and geological upheavals.

If the geographical location of ‘Bengal’ is to be identified at a glance, the vivid portrayal drawn by Niharranjan Ray is most apt. The Himalayas surrounding Nepal, Sikim and Bhutan in the north; the Brahmaputra river and valley in the north-east; the northern parallel plain land of Bhagirathi in the north-west till Darbhanga; Garo-Khasiya-Jaintiya-Tripura-Chittagong hilly tracts in the east extending up to the sea on the south; the mountainous highland and forest-laden plateau of Rajmahal-Saontal Parganas, Chhota Nagpur-Manbhum-Dhalbhum-Keonjar-Mayurbhanj in the west; and the Bay of Bengal in the south. The territory enclosed by these natural boundaries were ancient Bengal’s settlements of Gauḍa-Pundra-Varendra-Râdha-Sumha-Tâmralipti-Samatâta-Vânga-Vângâla-Harikela – the janapadas, together with the Bhagirathi-Karotoya-Brahmaputra-Meghna-Padma and the countless other rivers and streams that ran through the villages, towns, plains, forests, and by the hills of Bengal. In historical times this tract of land has given rise to the accomplishments of the

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Sincere thanks to Pritam Datta, PhD scholar of CSRD/SSS/JNU, for helping me out to prepare this electronic version of the map.
inhabitants and has been the source of their religion, their work and their pleasure.\textsuperscript{54}

\section*{V}

\textbf{Rivers of Bengal}: It will not be an exaggeration to state that Bengal's geography is conditioned by its river system which forms the most characteristic physical feature of the land. Satish Chandra Mitra made a very precise comment that as we have veins and arteries in our bodies, 'Bengal' is vivified by numerous rivers.\textsuperscript{55} We can also mention here a very significant comments made by Niharranjan Ray, "Bengal's history is founded on its numerous and diverse rivers and streams. These waterways – the life of the land – have nurtured Bengal through the ages and have determined its appearance and its nature, as they continue to do still".\textsuperscript{56} These waterways are the blessing of 'Bengal', but sometimes they are its curse. They have played very important role in the formation of the deltaic land and in moulding the nature and character of the people of the same through centuries.

\textsuperscript{54} Niharranjan Ray, \textit{History of the Bengali People}, p. 53.


\textsuperscript{56} Niharranjan Ray, \textit{History of the Bengali People}, p. 53.
Amongst all the rivers that drench the region, Brahmaputra (Lauhitya) is the greatest stream which drains the northern slope of the Himalayas under the name of the Tsangpo. It stretches for over 1,800 miles. Rises in the Mansarovar in Tibet and then running eastward it takes a vicious turn into Assam. It enters ‘Bengal’ through the borders of Rangpur and Cooch Behar. Like the Padma and Bhagirathi, the Brahmaputra has also changed its course a number of times. There are at least three full or partial courses of this river: (1) the present main course through the Jamuna; (2) the course through the Mymensingh districts; and (3) the old bed of the Brahmaputra in Rennel's atlas. Amitabha Bhattacharyya writes, ‘... In early medieval time, the Brahmaputra flowed through the Jamuna channel. Some time later it flowed at least partially through the old bed referred to in Rennel's map. By Rennel's time the river had begun to flow through the Mymensingh area. Ultimately, its main volume of water began to flow again through the Jamuna channel’. According to Spate, the main Brahmaputra outlet was the Jamuna and the immense volume of water and silt

57 The river Brahmaputra is also known as Lauhitya which is a Sanskrit derivation of the Indo-Mongoloid word Luhit. In the Purāṇas, the commentary on the Kāmasutra by Yaśodhara (13th century AD), and in some inscriptions the river Lauhitya is also mentioned to denote the Brahmaputra.

58 B.M. Morrison, Political Centres and Cultural Regions of Early Bengal, p. 10.


60 Amitabha Bhattacharyya, Historical Geography of Ancient and Early Medieval Bengal, pp. 31-32.

61 Amitabha Bhattacharyya, Historical Geography, p. 33.
brought down to the Padma near Goalanda. But the old course of the Brahmaputra was very different: after tracing a curve round the Garo Hills on the west it took a south-eastern course near Dewanganj, and passing by Jamalpur, Mymensingh, it flowed through the eastern part of Dhaka, and having thrown off a branch, called Lakshmya, passed by Nangalband to the southwest of Sonargaon and fell into the Dhaleshwari. Among the tributaries of the Brahmaputra, the Dhaleshwari-Buriganga, on the bank of which stands the modern capital of Bangladesh (Dhaka), as also once stood its ancient capitals, Vikramapura (Munshiganj) and Suvarṇāgṛām (Sonargaon).

The Ganga, the second greatest river of the Delta, is over 1200 miles long and in many of the early Indian literary texts and epigraphic records it has been variously described. The Ganga is referred to in the accounts of Megasthenes, the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and in the Geography of Ptolemy. A large number of inscriptions like Dubi Copperplate of Bhāskaravarmāṇa (7th century AD), Jalilpara Copperplate inscription of Gopāla II (948 AD), Bangarh Grant of

64 M. Harunur Rashid, 'The Geographical Background to the History and Archaeology of South-East Bengal', p. 165.
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Mahīpāla-I (988-1036 AD)\(^{70}\), Amgachhi Copperplate of Vigrahapāla-III (11\(^{th}\) century AD)\(^{71}\) etc., stated about the great river Ganga and most scrupulously upheld its religious sanctity. Not only that, even in certain inscriptions like the Ganjam Plates of Śašānka, the Ganga has been called as the river of Gods, and the story of its origins has also been related.\(^{72}\) In many verses of the Rāmācharitam, the Ganga has been referred to as a sacred river.\(^{73}\) The Ganga is indeed the very life-stream of 'Bengal' that enters into the land leaving the narrow ravine of Teliagarh and Sikrigali and approaching the Rajmahal. Ganga, after entering into the plains of 'Bengal' has bifurcated herself into two main channels, one running south-east called the Padma and the other following straight southward called the Bhagirathi (the modern river Hugli).

Bagchi opine on the basis of hydrography that 'Bhagirathi is the main and original stream' of the Ganga.\(^{74}\) In the Pavanadūta of Dhoyi\(^{75}\) the Bhagirathi of the Triveni confluence is called Ganga. It is learnt from Nidhanpur Copperplate inscription (mid-7\(^{th}\) century AD) that Bhāskarāvarmaṇa, the king of Kamarupa,


\(^{72}\) 'Ganjam Copperplate of Šašānkarājā', *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol-6, pp. 140-146.


\(^{75}\) *Pavanadūta of Dhoiy*, ed. by C. Chakravarti, Calcutta: Sanskrit Sahitya Parishat, 1926.
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proceeded with a large navy through the Bhagirathi and pitched up a military camp on its bank at Karṇasuvarṇa.\textsuperscript{76} The river Bhagirathi and her navigability have been specifically referred to as 'Sa-khalu Bhāgirathī-patha pravartamāna nānāvidha nauvāṭaka sampādita' in several inscriptions like the Khalimpur Copperplate of Dharmapāla (802 AD)\textsuperscript{77}, the Monghyr Copperplate of Devapāla (mid-9\textsuperscript{th} century AD)\textsuperscript{78}, Bangarh Copperplate of Mahīpāla-I (988-1036 AD)\textsuperscript{79}, and Bhagalpur plate of Nārāyaṇapāla (around 10\textsuperscript{th} century AD)\textsuperscript{80}, etc. Tirumalai inscription of the Chola Dynasty\textsuperscript{81} also contains the same about Bhagirathi in the 11\textsuperscript{th} century AD.

Some other scholars, on the basis of the maps drawn by Van Den Brouck (1660 AD) or Rennell (1764-76 AD)\textsuperscript{82}, declared Padmā as the main stream or the original course of the Ganga.\textsuperscript{83} The account of the origins of the river Padma are

\textsuperscript{76} 'Nidhanpur Copperplate of Bhāskaravarmanā', \textit{Epigraphia Indica}, Vol-12, pp. 65-79; Vol-19, pp. 115-125, 245-250.
\textsuperscript{77} 'Khalimpur Copperplate of Dharmapāladeva', \textit{Epigraphia Indica}, Vol-4, No-34, pp. 243-254.
\textsuperscript{78} 'The Mungir Plate of Devapāladeva: Samvat 33', \textit{Epigraphia Indica}, Vol- XVIII, No. 30, 1925-26, pp. 304-07.
\textsuperscript{79} 'Bangarh Copperplate Inscription of Mahīpāla-I', Year 9, \textit{Epigraphia Indica}, Vol-14, pp. 324-330.
\textsuperscript{81} 'Tirumalai Inscription of Rājendra Chola', \textit{Epigraphia Indica}, Vol-9, pp. 229-233.
\textsuperscript{82} Rennel writes: 'the proper name of this river (the Ganges) in the language of Hindoostan (or Indostan) is Padda. It is also called Bara gang or the great river'. \textit{Memoirs of a Map of Hindoostan}, London: M. Brown, 1783, p. 255.
\textsuperscript{83} Md. Abdur Rob, 'Ganges-Padma River System', entry published in \textit{Banglapedia (National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh)}, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2003; Abdul Momin
Map 8: Origin, Routes and the Confluence of the River Ganga and the Brahmaputra

Sincere thanks to Pritam Datta, PhD scholar of CSRD/SSS/JNU, for helping me out to prepare this electronic version of the map.
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to be found in the *Mahābhāgavata-purāṇa*84, the *Brhadhṛṣṭi-purāṇa*85 and the Kṛttivāsa’s *Rāmāyaṇa*. It is stated in the text *Rāmāyaṇa* that Varendri is bounded by the Ganga86 from the south. By crossing this river Rāmapāla entered into Varendri. Idilpur Copperplate of Śrīchandra87 (11th century AD) and Sobharampur plate of Dāmodaradeva (1236 AD)88 makes a specific reference to the Padma. De Barros’ map of Bengal (c. 1550 AD) shows the Padma as the main channel of the Ganga.89 Without entering into the academic debate it can be said that both (Bhagirathi and Padma) are very significant streams of the Ganga.

Though most important, the Brahmaputra, the Bhagirathi and the Padma are, however, not the only significant rivers of 'Bengal'. Meghna, one of the major rivers in eastern Bengal (present Bangladesh), especially famous for its great estuary that discharges the flows of the Ganga-Padma, the Brahmaputra-Jamuna and the Meghna itself. This river emanates from the Khasiya-Jayantia mountain

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86 The topography of Bengal demands that the Ganga of *Rāmāyaṇa* should be identified with the river known at present as the Padma. *Rāmāyaṇa* of Sandhyākaranandī, *Rāmāyaṇa* of *Sandhyākaranandī*, edited by R.C. Majumdar, R.G. Basak, and N.G. Banerji, introduction, v. III-10, II-11.
87 'Idilpur Copperplate Inscription of Śrīchandra', *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol-17, pp. 189-190 (abstract).
range, and carrying the entire water of the plateau of Shilong and the entire area of Sylhet, flows into the sea. Its northern stream is popularly known by the early name Surma, primarily fed by rain-water. The presence of a number of large alluvial lakes locally known as haors along the course of the Meghna tends to make the flow more uniform than that of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra.

Though smaller in comparison to Ganga, Padma or Brahmaputra, the vibrant flow of this river is worth mentioning in early Bengal. This river was the natural boundary between Dāmodaradeva’s territory and the domain of Vaṅga as is recorded in the Mehar copperplate inscription of Dāmodaradeva of the year 4, dated 1156 Śaka (1234 AD).

Among the important rivers in the deltaic Bengal lying between the Bhagirathi-Hughli and the Padma mention may be made of the Ichhamati, the Mathabhanga and the Garai, the Betna, the Rupsa etc. Besides, the Kumar and the Bhairab are also supposed to be very old rivers in Central Delta. When the silting of the Bhagirathi was complete, the Bhairab became the main outlet for the waters of the Ganga. With the decline of the Bhairab, the Mathabhanga became prominent.

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90 Abdul Momin Chowdhury, 'Banglar Bhaugolik Parichay', p. 12.
The Kumar was the first re-distributor of the Mathabhanga. The Garai and Madhumati are another two important rivers in Central Delta.\textsuperscript{93}

Apart from Sarasvati in western Bengal, all the other rivers, especially Ajay, Damodar, Kansai or Kapisa, Dvarakeshvar, and Rupnarayan, originate from the Chhota Nagpur plateau and Manbhum and bear the characteristics of hill streams.\textsuperscript{94} These are being termed as the lower streams of Ganga-Bhagirathi. In Rennel's map the course of the Rupnarayan is shown as corresponding to its present bed. In early ages, the river Rupnarayan united with the Ganga a little above Tāmraliptī or Tamluk.\textsuperscript{95} The \textit{Raghuvamśa} by Kālidāsa\textsuperscript{96}, and \textit{Mārkandeya Purāṇa} refer to the river Kansai (Kopisā?) which now flows through the district of Bankura and Medinipur and then runs parallel to the Rupnarayan up to the sea. In the \textit{Raghuvamśa}, it is stated that Raghu crossed over the river Kopisa to Utkala. The implication is that Kopisa served as the eastern boundary of Utkala.\textsuperscript{97}

Damodar, the sacred river of the primitive Saontals, rises in the Chhota Nagpur-watershed and enters 'Bengal' at Barakar and flows southeast past Raniganj, Andal and Vardhamān.\textsuperscript{98} In the Van Den Broucke's map of Bengal dated 1660

\textsuperscript{93} For the detail discussions on these small rivers see Syed Mazharul Huq, \textit{Bangladeshr Nadi} (in Bangla), Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1985; 'Bangdesher Bartoman o Atit Nad-Nadi Samuha' (in Bangla), \textit{Bangla Academy Biggyan Patrika}, 8-2, Dhaka, 1982.
\textsuperscript{94} Niharranjan Ray, \textit{History of the Bengali People}, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{95} Amitabha Bhattacharyya, \textit{Historical Geography}, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{97} Amitabha Bhattacharyya, \textit{Historical Geography}, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{98} Amitabha Bhattacharyya, \textit{Historical Geography}, p. 34.
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AD, this river or at least a major branch of it flowed south-easterly direction and fell into the Hughli near Kalna.\(^9\) Jayarampur copperplate inscription of Gopachandra (525-40 AD)\(^{10}\) also refer to the river Damodar.

The river Ajay flowing by the side of the town of Kantadupa (may be identified with Katwa) fell into the Bhagirathi by the north of Navadvipa. Rājendra Chola appears to have crossed the Ganga (Bhagirathi) near the river Ajay as described in the Tirumalai inscription.\(^{101}\) Shaktipur copperplate inscription of Lakṣmaṇasena (1185 AD)\(^{102}\) and the Dubi plate of Bhāskaravarmanā (7th century AD)\(^{103}\) also mentioned some important information relating to this river.

The northern Bengal, a substantial part of which constitutes what is geologically termed as the old alluvium land (which has been already discussed before), is drenched and invigorated by numerous rivers worth mentioning. Foremost important of these rivers is Tista. Emerging from the Himalayas Tista enters 'Bengal' from the border of Bhutan in the north, into the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri. The river has three distinct and main courses flowing southwards: Karotoya (eastern stream), Atrai (middle stream) and Punarbhava (western stream). The river is also popularly called 'Trisrota Tista' probably

\(^{10}\) 'Jayarampur CPI of Gopachandra, Year 1', Epigraphia Indica, Vol-39, pp. 141-148.
\(^{102}\) 'Shaktipur Copperplate Inscription of Lakṣmaṇasena, Year 6', Epigraphia Indica, Vol-21, pp. 211-219.
because of its three distinct courses through which it flowed.\textsuperscript{104} Karotoya, a river whose history is very old and which is very famous as a place of pilgrimage, was the most important stream of Tista. The vivacious presence of this river was being mentioned in the travelling accounts of Hsuan Tsang\textsuperscript{105}, the \textit{Rāmācharitam}\textsuperscript{106}, \textit{Bahirastan-i-ghyabi} by Mirza Nathan, and the Rennels map. Another important literary source \textit{Karotoyā Māhātmya}\textsuperscript{107} and the \textit{Mahābhārata} too, boldly proclaimed the immense flow of Karotoya and emblazoned its spiritual significance. In recent days, however, it is almost a dead river like Atrai and Punarbhava.\textsuperscript{108} Another famous river of northern Bengal was the Koshiki (the modern Koshi). In the ancient and medieval river systems of Bengal the Koshi was a great wonder because of its amazing change of course completely from easterly to westerly direction.\textsuperscript{109}

Hence, the conclusion might be drawn from the preceding discussion that Ganga, Bhagirathi, Padma, Meghna-Surma, Karotoya, Lauhitya-Brahmaputra (Jamuna) were the main rivers of this Delta. The eminence that is being readily associated

\textsuperscript{104} Niharranjan Ray, \textit{History of the Bengali People}, p. 65; R.C. Majumdar, \textit{History of Ancient Bengal}, p. 4.


\textsuperscript{109} The river Koshi once flowed eastwards towards the Brahmaputra, and for centuries it gradually moved over all of northern Vanga. Niharranjan Ray, \textit{History of the Bengali People}, p. 66.
with the Ganga and the Bhagirathi also draws within its fold others like Ajay, Damodar, Sarasvati etc. The river Kopiśā or Kansai is also ancient in its origin. And so is Padma. The vibrant flow of Karotoya has been evidenced by many sources. Hydrographically it has also been documented the ancient origin of the flow of Koshi and Mahananda. And it will perhaps not be an overstatement that the water flow in these rivers was much greater in ancient times. However, as Niharranjan Ray has commented, these rivers repeatedly changed their courses over centuries, particularly the lower streams of the Ganga and the Padma, spreading over the entire region of lower Vaṅga as well as its north and east. This destruction and reconstruction process is still active.¹¹⁰ According to M.H. Rashid, ‘in fact it is these rivers – the Ganga, Brahmaputra, Meghna and their innumerable branches – and the peculiar mosaic of islands created by their silt-deposits and framed in their tangled network, that constitute this geographical entity’.¹¹¹

It is quite clear from the above discussion that the hydrography of Bengal has frequently changed in different ages. It would not be an exaggerate statement that this hydrographical change was probably due to the shifting of the rivers. Reference can be made to the emergence of the Tāmralipti and Saptagram as a glorious, vibrant port, and their importance diminished with the ultimate drying up and the shifting of the courses of the Sarasvati-Bhagirathi respectively. Amitabha Bhattacharyya has also underscored that shifting of river courses

¹¹⁰ Niharranjan Ray, History of the Bengali People, p. 66.
¹¹¹ M. Harunur Rashid, ‘The Geographical Background to the History and Archaeology of South-East Bengal’, p. 164.
were responsible, more often than not, for the gradual decay and downfall of some trade and commercial centres.\textsuperscript{112}

At the same time it is needed to be mentioned that the geographical specificity of the region of Bengal is not merely constituted by the rivers but also distinct water bodies, peculiar to Bengal region, called \textit{haor} and \textit{bil}. As Dilip Kumar Chakrabarti comments, ‘...if one is asked to single out the most important geographical element of Bangladesh, the choice would no doubt fall on its rivers. It is the rivers and the associate vast sheets of water in the innumerable depressions known as \textit{haors} and \textit{bils} which give it a geographical character not matched elsewhere in the subcontinent’.\textsuperscript{113}

These peculiarly distinct water bodies have, alongside the rivers, influenced the rural life pattern of Bengal. Hence, these rivers, canals, streams, \textit{bils}, \textit{haors} are significant constituent elements of the historical geography of Bengal.

\textsuperscript{112} Amitabha Bhattacharyya, \textit{Historical Geography}, p.8.

VI

Climatic Condition/Monsoon Wind System: The geographical location of 'Bengal' dictates its distinct climatic idiosyncrasies. This has influenced and continues to influence, to no inconsiderable extent, the evolution of the demographic history and behavioural pattern of the people of this deltaic land.

'Bengal' is predominantly a land of tropical monsoon climate which may be broadly described as moderately warm, equable, and humid. It is influenced by three factors: the mountain wall of the Himalayas in the north and northeast, the Tropic of Cancer passing through the middle of the region, and the Bay of Bengal in the south. The monsoonal wind causes heavy rainfall; the atmosphere is highly humid with water vapour. The natural calamities in the region are frequently caused by the cyclones, flood, high tide, kalbaishakhi, and windstorm. Ahmad Hasan Dani has characterised the cyclone as being a distinctly mentionable climatic feature of 'Bengal'. The pre-monsoon storms

114 M. Harunur Rashid, 'The Geographical Background to the History and Archaeology of South-East Bengal', p. 167.
115 Syed Amirul Islam, Bangla Anchaler Itihas, Notun Drstikone ekti Samiksha, in Bangla, Dhaka: Papyrus, 1996, p. 18. Thunderstorm that generally blows over Bangladesh usually in April-May from a northwesterly direction, locally known as Kal-baishakhi. Nor’wester thunderstorm coincides with the setting in of the summer season. It grows when the atmosphere becomes sufficiently unstable because of localised surface heating or other causes. Mesbahus Saleheen, 'Nor’wester (Kal-Baishakhi)', Banglapedia, http://www.banglapedia.org/htdocs/HT/N_0208.HTM.
in late spring are a regular feature, but the occasional post-monsoon cyclones in autumn are destructive and disastrous, especially in the coastal area and in the estuary islands.

The deep impact that monsoonal wind exerts on the region is because of Bengal’s geographical location: juxtaposition to the Bay of Bengal, and the lie of the surrounding highlands. At the inception of the month of June the warm and dry south-western monsoonal wind that originates from the Bay of Bengal find a natural obstruction of the mountains in eastern and northern portion of Bengal and cause heavy rainfall. The monsoonal winds that originate in the Indian Ocean are checked by the Himalayas, Garo, Khasi and Jaintiya hills, and all of eastern and northern Bengal is flooded by the sustained downpour. Frequent depressions and the whirlwind along with this heavy rainfall and the peculiar phenomenon of kalbaishakhi mark the onset of the monsoon in ‘Bengal’ at this time. In general rainfall is at least adequate, although on the western margins, with about 55 inches; West Bengal gets between 60 and 60 inches; and most of East Bengal between 60 and 95 inches. The annual average rainfall in ‘Bengal’, by Kamrunnesa Islam, is being measured as 75 inches. Dilip Kumar Chakrabarti estimates annual rainfall is between 60 inches in the western parts

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and about 200 inches in the north of Sylhet.121 The heavy annual rainfall, combined with the warm temperatures throughout most of the year, produces a vegetational cover that can be termed "tropical semi-evergreen".122 The monsoon generally expands from June to October. Temperature variations are more marked in the drier western parts where, in winter, it occasionally comes down to 5 or 4 degrees Celsius but, in summer, it is frequently above 40 degrees Celsius.123

The climate and the seasonal variegations of ancient Bengal is being portrayed in the accounts of Hsuan Tsang, the Râmacharitam by Sandyākaranandi, the Saduktikarnāmrta of Śrīdharadāsa, Pavanadūta by Dhoyi, Gita Govinda by Jayadeva, and Abul Fazl. In the Tirumalai inscription of the Chola dynasty, it is being unequivocally stated that, 'Vanagaladesa where the rain water never stopped'.124 The works of poet Yogesvara also contain picturesque descriptions of Bengal's monsoonal rainfall. The south wind of the month of February is metaphorically represented in Dhoyi's Pavanadūta in which there are very clear indications of the spring breezes of Bengal.125 In the anthology of Śrīdharadāsa, the Saduktikarnāmrta, there are a few naturally descriptive verses of the

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122 B.M. Morrison, Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal, p. 12.
123 Dilip Kumar Chakrabarti, Ancient Bangladesh, pp. 175-76.
winds. The Rāmcharitam refers to large and swiftly moving clouds in Varendra and relates to the raining showers which certainly speak of abundant rainfall in Varendra. With the advent of monsoon in 'Bengal', the sky becomes overcast with clouds, a picturesque account depicted by Jayadeva in the first verse of his famous work Gītā Govinda. A more vivid account of the heavy rainfall in Bengal has been given by Abul Fazal in his Ain-i-Akbari. Though of a later date, the account certainly represents the condition prevailing in ancient times.

Not only in the literary texts, have even the epigraphic records also contained a few references to rainy season and also to heavy and continuous rainfall. The Bangarh copperplate inscription of Mahipāla, Khalimpur copperplate of Dharmapāla, Monghyr copperplate inscription of Devapāla bears testimony for abundant and heavy rainfall.

126 Saduktikārṇāṁṛta of Śridharadāsa compiled in 1206 AD, edited by Pandit Ramavtara Sharma, with a critical introduction in English by Har Dutt Sharma, Lahore: Motilal Banarsidass, the Punjab Sanskrit Book Depot, 1933, 2/84/3.


130 Particularly in the Kṛṣiparāśara of the 11th century AD.


Hence, to sum up, the influence of climate in early Bengal was not meagre. Due to the geographical location rainy climate is prevalent here. Especially, the rivers of 'Bengal' are under direct influence of the climatic conditions. The temperate climate and the heavy rainfall in the rainy season constitute the foremost salient climatic features of the eastern, southern and north-eastern Bengal. In the words of Ahmad Hasan Dani, 'Bengal is a definite geographic region in the South-Asian subcontinent, consisting of Gangeto-Brahmaputra delta. Climatically, it is a warm monsoonal zone where river floods play havoc in the rainy season and during the late spring the cyclonic winds forewarn the people of the coming dangers from heavy monsoons'.

VII

Distinctive Geo-features at a Glance: Analysing the hitherto mentioned empirical data and documents pertaining to the introduction to geography of 'Bengal', it is necessary to delve into the geographical specificities of the region from inside out. In this context, it will also be elaborated as to what extent these distinct geographical features of regional Bengal exerted their influence on the entire socio-economic, religious, cultural, architectural scenario of early Bengal in its entirety. 'Bengal' is a definite 'region' naturally bounded by deep forests.

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and hills from three sides and sea from another side. The very distinct geo-
features of 'Bengal' are as below:

Firstly, from the view-point of the structural evolution, Bengal's existence or
location has been determined in the eastern frontier of the South Asian
subcontinent.

Secondly, geologically, 'Bengal' as a 'region' is a composite structure consisting
of old and new alluvium.

Thirdly, 'Bengal' has become the largest delta of the world.

Fourthly, 'Bengal' has an open sea-door of her own in the southern frontier.

Fifthly, climatically 'Bengal' is a monsoonal zone with heavy rainfall.

Sixthly, the entire region is intersected and drenched by innumerable rivers
which constitute a distinctly rare geo-feature of 'Bengal'.

Seventhly, as a 'region' Bengal has its own contacts and communication system
particularly for its location and geographical situation that we will discuss in the
fourth chapter.
Map 9: Historical Geographical Sub-units/Sub-regions of Early Bengal