



The Bengal Symposium
Archaeology, History and Heritage Beyond Colonial Divides
INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM
14–15th November 2025, 1st Edition | Online

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

EDITORS

Abu B. Siddiq and Sabikun Naher

ORGANIZED BY

CNRS UMR 7041 ArScAN – France

Department of Anthropology, Mardin Artuklu University – Türkiye

Department of Archaeology, Comilla University – Bangladesh

Department of Archaeology, Jahangirnagar University – Bangladesh

Department of History and Archaeology, Begum Rokeya University – Bangladesh



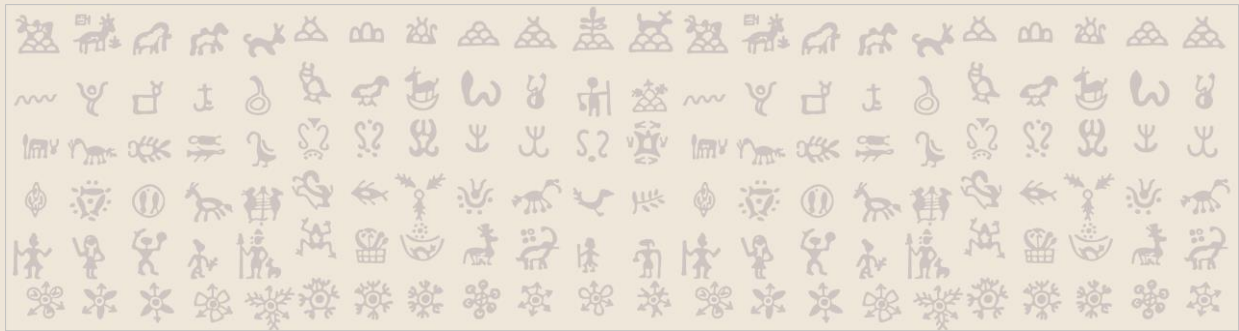


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The background features a selection of symbols drawn from punch-marked coins found across ancient Bengal and wider South Asia.

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The Bengal Symposium

47200 Artuklu, Mardin – Türkiye

Telephone: +90 482 213 4002 (Ext. 2081)

Website: www.artuklu.edu.tr/bengal

E-mail: bengalsymposium@gmail.com

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WELCOME SPEECH

The Bengal Symposium

1ST Edition

Archaeology, History, and Heritage *Beyond Colonial Divides*

14 – 15 November 2025 | Online

Dear colleagues and distinguished participants,

On behalf of the organizing committee, it is my great pleasure and honor to welcome you all to the first edition of the Bengal Symposium, held online on 14–15 November 2025.

The Bengal Symposium was conceived as a platform for scholars, researchers, and practitioners to engage in meaningful dialogue about the lived experiences, histories, and heritages of Bengal across time. Our goal is to foster an inclusive, decolonial space where new perspectives can emerge and transcend the long-standing political, cultural, and colonial divides that have often severely fragmented the narratives of Bengal's people.

This inaugural edition brings together contributors from diverse disciplines including archaeology, history, anthropology, and heritage studies to explore the complex layers of Bengal's past and its continuing relevance in the present. Through presentations, discussions, and dialogues, we hope to build bridges across disciplines, and generations of scholarship.

It is particularly inspiring to see so many early-career researchers participating alongside established scholars from Bengal (Bangladesh and West Bengal), Türkiye, Europe, and beyond. Their enthusiasm and fresh perspectives embody the very spirit of this symposium: to reimagine Bengal's story as a shared, evolving heritage that belongs to its entire people, transcending the political and psychological borders that remain as legacies of colonial rule.

The Bengal Symposium is not only an academic gathering; it is also a collective initiative, built on collaboration and community. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to our advisory and scientific committees, our dedicated organizing team, and all the participants who have contributed their time, ideas, and energy to make this first edition possible.

Although we meet in a virtual space, I hope that the conversations we begin here will extend well beyond these two days, inspiring new collaborations and perspectives on Bengal's archaeology, history, and heritage.

Thank you once again for joining us and for being part of this important beginning. I wish you all an engaging, thought-provoking, and rewarding symposium.

Bānlāy Su-Swāgatam!

Abu B. Siddiq
Coordinator
The Bengal Symposium

ABOUT THE SYMPOSIUM

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The Bengal Symposium is envisioned as an annual, transdisciplinary academic gathering that fosters meaningful scholarly exchange, transcending colonial legacies of division and marginalization, centering the lived experiences of common people across the historical landscapes of Bengal. It aims to provide a collaborative space where scholars and practitioners can engage in critical dialogue that transcends the epistemic boundaries imposed by colonial-era “divide and rule” policies, particularly those that have contributed to the political, cultural, and psychological fragmentations of Bengal and its neighboring regions.

The guiding purpose of the symposium is to reimagine and reconstruct the historical and cultural narratives of Bengal from the ground up. Rather than privileging dominant or state-centered discourses, the Bengal Symposium seeks to foreground subaltern voices, local knowledge systems, and alternative historiographies that speak to the deep entanglements with cultures, ethnicities, memory, shared-survival history, and shared human–environment dynamics in Bengal and its surrounding regions.

Bringing together archaeologists, historians, heritage scholars, anthropologists, oral historians, and cultural practitioners, and scholars from similar fields, the symposium will serve as a platform for rigorous, yet inclusive academic exchange. Through oral presentations and post-panel discussions and dialogues, we aim to facilitate the development of new critical frameworks for interpreting the deep history of Bengal, emphasizing continuity of common life, shared heritage, and resistance to both geographic and psychological borders that imposed by colonial divides.

Another important goal of this working group–like annual symposium is to foster critical dialogue and help bridge the relatively small archaeological community and heritage researchers in Bengal with broader global trends. As part of this effort, we will assemble a scientific committee of early- to mid-career international colleagues, whose visibility will serve as a point of inspiration for students and early-career researchers exploring diverse areas of tangible and intangible heritage of Bengal and its neighboring regions across temporal periods.

For its inaugural edition, the Bengal Symposium welcomes contributions from scholars at all career stages. We also would encourage early-career researchers and graduate students to join us in building this platform.

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Abu B. Siddiq

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CNRS UMR 7041 ArScAn – France

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Tom Maltas

University of Oxford – UK

Zeljko Rezek

Collège de France – France



PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Begum Rokeya University

Park Mor, Modern, Rangpur 5404
Bangladesh

Comilla University

Comilla University, Kotbari, Cumilla 3506
Bangladesh

Jahangirnagar University

Savar, Dhaka 1342
Bangladesh

Mardin Artuklu University

47200 Artuklu, Mardin
Türkiye

The ArScAn Research Unit

Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS)

200 avenue de la République 92000 Nanterre, Paris
France





EPIDEMIC DISEASE, ECOLOGY AND THE COLONIAL STATE IN THE BENGAL DELTA: AN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY APPROACH

Mohammad Hossain^{1*}

¹Ibn Haldun University, Türkiye

*Correspondence: mohot786@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The Bengal Delta is amongst the most populous regions of the earth and was the site of powerful pre-colonial Muslim polities. Despite its ecological, demographic, and historical importance, however, it has remained underrepresented in the socio-political and environmental histories of South Asia. A spate of recent environmental histories focusing on the fluid riverine landscape of the Ganges basin have highlighted the potential of environmental history in narrating alternate histories in the region, such as Rohan D'Souza's notion of 'colonial hydrology,' and Iftekhar Iqbal's historical work on the fluvial landscape of the Bengal Delta. This shift in scholarship opens up novel avenues for historical research in the deltaic landscape of Bengal. The study of epidemics in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century India, especially in Bengal, has been carried out by notable scholars of the colonial period. However, the ecological regime of the Indian riparian landscape as a dynamic and contributing factor in the high incidence of epidemics is often absent in such works. On the other hand, many instances of modern scholarship exploring history of disease have also failed in this aspect. Following a focused literature on the history of epidemic disease, it can be seen that barring a few, most studies exploring epidemic disease history in Bengal (cholera and malaria) often fail to establish a conclusive link between ecology and incidence of epidemic disease, mainly due to the failure to include deltaic ecology as an important factor into their broader framework of analysis. Following the above observations as part of a detailed literature review, this paper will then set on to propose an ecological framework for the study of epidemic disease in the Bengal Delta, keeping in mind that epidemic disease is an integral subset field of the discipline of environmental history. The paper will argue that the basis of this framework rests on the appreciation of two aspects: the dynamic natural processes of delta formation in Bengal, and the means to assess the impact of anthropogenic activity in the Bengal Delta. In this regard, the study will borrow from the idea of the Bengal Delta as a 'zone of anomaly' in terms of colonial administration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the region was hit by severe cholera epidemics.

KEYWORDS

Bengal Delta; Cholera; Environmental history; Epidemic disease