

Chapter 5

Colonization Processes on the Lower Damodar Riverbed

Abstract The Damodar riverbed has been colonized in different phases since 1947, mostly by Bangladeshi refugees. They are self-alienated refugees who have rejected the dole-sustained existence in government-sponsored refugee camps and opted, instead, for life on the controlled riverbed. After India achieved independence in 1947, fuller utilization of the river resources was needed to solve socio-economic problems. At the same time, the partition of India initiated large scale migration, particularly of Hindus from both West and East Pakistan (Present Bangladesh). Of all the refugee-receiving states in India, West Bengal had the maximum number of refugees, a problem that was aggravated after the Bangladesh War of 1970 when there was a fresh influx of refugees from independent Bangladesh. In both phases, a significant number of Bangladeshi refugees selected the riverbeds of West Bengal as their second home. The Lower Damodar bed is one such riverbed. It has been permanently occupied by these Bangladeshi refugees and has become a major resource base for them. The flood of September 1978 also initiated a desperate migration of locals from the flood-affected areas of Medinipur and Hooghly districts to the adjacent riverine sandbars. Control structures on the river have brought many changes to the riverbed environment and the refugees are constantly struggling with this changed environment for their survival.

Keywords Bangladeshi refugees · Control structures · Decolonization · Resource base · Riverbed environment · Self-alienated

5.1 History of Colonization

Voluntary migration, including labor migration and its socio-economic significance, has received much attention from social scientists all over the world. In comparison, involuntary migration has failed to draw similar notice, although involuntary or refugee migrations have greatly increased in magnitude since the Second World War.

Europe had to deal with refugees after the Second World War; the Third World has faced refugee problems from the early post-World War II years (Rogge 1987). In the developing countries, e.g., in India, the problem of refugees started mainly with the process of decolonization. Decolonization and the partitioning of India in 1947 unleashed a refugee problem that has yet to be solved.

In the area under study, the Lower Damodar riverbed is occupied mostly by Bangladeshi refugees (Plates 5.1a, b and 5.2a–c). In the next section we will gauge to what extent these refugees have applied geomorphological knowledge to assess resource potentialities and hazard risks of the riverbed between control structures. What is noteworthy here is that the decolonization of India necessitated the fuller utilization of the river resources to solve the socio-economic problems of an emergent independent nation; at the same time, the partition of India initiated large scale migration, particularly that of Hindus from both West and East Pakistan (the present Bangladesh). Of all the refugee-receiving states in India, West Bengal had the maximum number of refugees and this problem was aggravated just after the Bangladesh War of 1970 when there was a fresh influx of refugees from independent Bangladesh. In both phases, a significant number of Bangladeshi Hindu refugees selected the riverbeds of West Bengal Rivers as their second home. Thus, the riverbed of the controlled Lower Damodar has been occupied by Bangladeshi refugees since 1947 and has become a major resource base for them. The problem of resettlement of refugees has become an applied geomorphological issue because of this functional relationship between refugees and riverbeds.

The objectives of this section are to trace: (i) the phases of colonization in the riverbed of the Lower Damodar, (ii) the causes of colonization, (iii) the socio-economic background of the colonizers. The method is ideographic and the structure of argument is inductive. The spatial scale is the riverbed and the time span extends from 1854 to 2008. There is a paucity of data on the riverbed population as most of the settlements were designated as forcibly occupied settlements until recently. The only alternative was to collect primary data from field survey through repeated field visits. Apart from their socio-economic significance, refugee concerns are sensitive political issues. This posed a serious problem during the earlier period of field survey.

5.2 Background of Refugee Influx

Decolonization, the partition of India in 1947, and unfortunate riots at different times are the origins of the diaspora of Bengali Hindu refugees in West Bengal. The first phase of Bengali evacuation probably started after the Noakhali riots in 1946 (Chakrabarti 1990). The second and most significant phase started just after the partition of India in 1947. Between 1947 and 1952, millions of Bengalis, along with a sizable number of non-Bengalis, migrated from the erstwhile East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) looking for work. The number of migrants swelled until 1958 (Bhattacharyya 1998).

In order to trace the phases of refugee influx, the policy adopted by the West Bengal government must be mentioned here. Refugees were classified as “old migrant” if they had come between 1946 and 1958, “in-between migrants” if they had migrated between 1958 and 1963, and “new migrants” if they had crossed the border after 1963. Unlike “old migrants” the “in-between migrants” were not eligible for any assistance for rehabilitation. The “new migrants” were eligible for rehabilitation benefits if they had opted for resettlement outside the state of West Bengal (Chakrabarti 1990). This policy was adopted to discourage large numbers of immigrants but the problem is difficult to solve and has taken on a new dimension since the Bangladesh War of 1970.

At all phases of migration people came mostly from the farm sector. Although they were provided with accommodation and food in government-sponsored refugee camps and colonies in West Bengal as well as in other states such as Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, the job opportunities were extremely limited as the farm sector of West Bengal was already saturated. A sizable number of refugees rejected this dole-sustained existence and went in search of self-sought settlements where they could enjoy social, economic and a kind of political independence. Searching for a new “niche” was the beginning of riverbed colonization in West Bengal (Fig. 5.1).

5.3 Phases of Colonization in the Lower Damodar Riverbed

5.3.1 *The First Phase of Colonization*

Most of the riverbed settlements in the Lower Damodar are refugee settlements, but colonization started long before 1946–1947. The studied section is a part of the Raniganj coalfield above Durgapur and coal seams are exposed along river courses. Hunter’s report (1877) states that coal was known to exist in this part of present Bardhaman district as early as 1774 but commercial mining activity probably started around 1777. By 1820 open pit mining started in the Raniganj coalfield and from 1830 onwards several collieries were opened (Hunter 1877). Opening of coalmines initiated a phase of voluntary labor migration from the Chhotanagpur plateau to this part of Bengal. It merits mention here that labor migration from Bihar in the colonial era was very common. Unskilled but sturdy and trustworthy Bihari laborers were required to clear forests, to remove over-burdens in collieries, and to work as helpers for the construction of buildings, roads, and railways, and as laborer in factories. They were also appointed as gatekeepers and village policemen by local landlords and kings. Thus, Biharis, including Bihari tribes, were significant constituents of the population of undivided Bengal. This population characteristic has not lost its relevance in independent India.

Colonization in Gangtikali, the first Bihari-settled riverine bar, is closely linked with erstwhile collieries (though abandoned now), which existed until 1958. From the statements provided by the settlers, it may be assumed that colonization probably started in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the present Biharis belong to

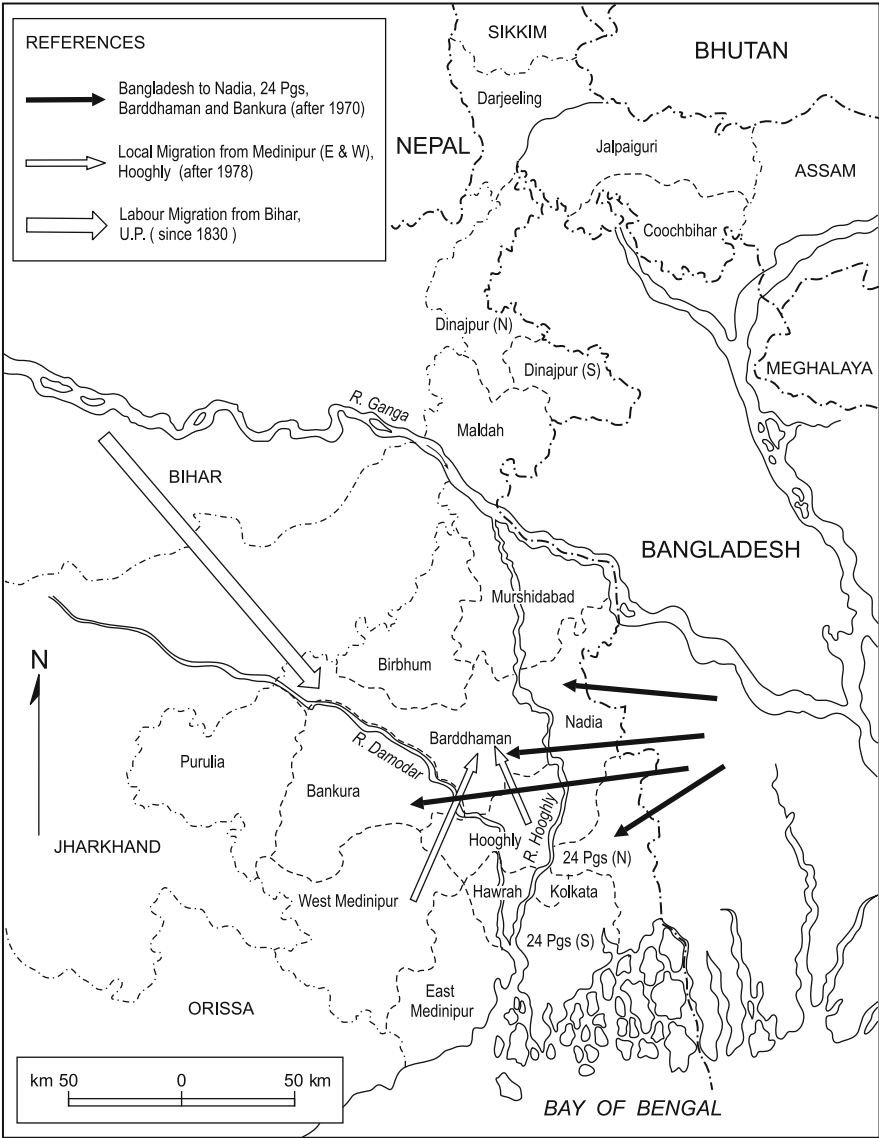


Fig. 5.1 Migration route to lower Damodar river bed

the third generation (Fig. 5.2). Gaitanpur, a riverine alluvial bar near Barddhaman, has a sizable number of Biharis. They used to work under the Barddhaman Raj; later, with the cessation of the Raj, they were granted lands in Gaitanpur. Thus the first phase of colonization in the riverbed of the Lower Damodar was initiated by inland labor migration from Bihar. They may also be referred to as “economic evacuees”.

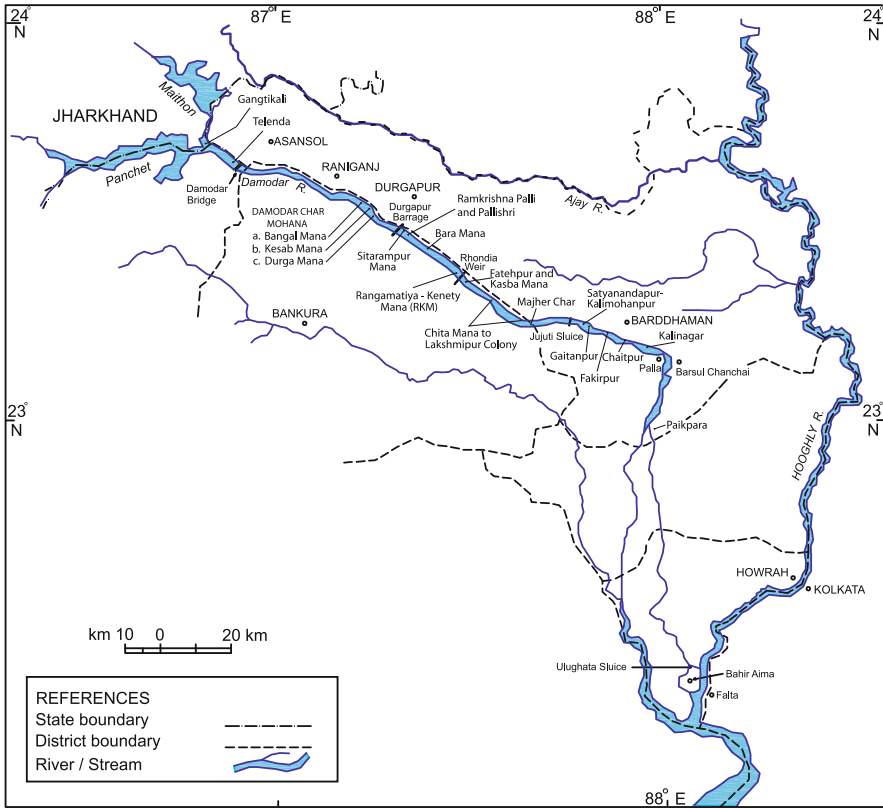


Fig. 5.2 Distribution of Damodar sandbars or char lands

Paikpara, just above the Amta Channel, was a part of the Damodar riparian tract but not a part of the riverbed itself. With the opening of the Muchi-Begua hasas, since 1865 it appears to be an alluvial mid-channel bar. In the map of Dickens (1854), Paikpara (previous Panchpara) has been mentioned as an old settlement (Fig. 3.8). This settlement dates back to 1854 pre-dating India’s independence. Harogobindapur and some other settlements have attained the status of riverbed settlements after the construction of the left bank embankments. Like Paikpara, they are colonized by local Bengalis. All the settlements mentioned above belong to the first phase of colonization of the Damodar riverbed (Bhattacharyya 1998, 1999).

5.3.2 The Second Phase of Colonization

Significant colonization of the riverbeds of West Bengal from north to south and from west to east started just after the partition of India. This is the beginning of involuntary migration of political refugees. Most of them are Bengali Hindus,

although Biharis who were economic evacuees in undivided Bengal also came to India with the refugee influx and started occupying the riverine bars. Their number in the Lower Damodar bed may be small but Bihari culture has left its imprint on the landscape emerging out of specific land use practices. River-retreat land use was common among locals in some parts of the Lower Damodar but colonization in the riverbed was initiated by the refugees.

The first tract selected for settlement was the reach between Durgapur barrage and Jujuti sluice. A wide riverbed with less mobile alluvial bars covered with grass jungles was seen as a favorable location for colonization in the riverbed. Also, unwarranted flood risks have been reduced due to water retention behind the Durgapur barrage and the Panchet reservoir. Thirdly, controlled release of water with prior warning and release of water through definite channels were other favorable factors. There was also a noteworthy socio-political factor. The refugees who fled from government-sponsored camps and colonies and those who were in the category of “in-between migrants” or “new migrants” preferred to stay away from the main influx stream and remain unidentified. They opted for a location away from main transport routes and urban centers. The very locational disadvantage was one of the factors as to why the refugee-settled sandbars are away from Bardhaman. The most prosperous settlement, the Bara Mana is so located (Bhattacharyya 1998, 1999–2000b). Gradually other parts of the Lower Damodar bed were occupied by the Bengali and Bihari Hindu refugees (Fig. 5.2).

5.3.3 The Third Phase of Colonization

A riot in erstwhile East Pakistan initiated a fresh flood of Bengali refugees to West Bengal but this phase is not well-recorded in government reports. The actual third phase of immigration and consequent riverbed colonization began during the Bangladesh war and the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. As the eastern border is neither well-defined nor well-guarded, millions again crossed the border. The established refugee clusters in the Damodar riverbed colonies were extended.

The reach between Rhondia weir and Jujuti sluice was settled first. Majher Char, Lakshmipur, Fatehpur and Kasba Mana are located in this section. The second phase was initiated by the Durgapur barrage, where below-barrage colonization began after 1958 although there were scattered hamlets before, such as Bara Mana, Rangamatia, Kenety Mana, Ramkrishna Palli, Pallishri, and Sitarampur Mana. Colonization began rather late above the Durgapur barrage. Telenda Mana and Damodar Char Mohana are rather new entrants in the colonization history of the Lower Damodar riverbed (Fig. 5.2).

5.3.4 The Fourth Phase of Colonization

The September flood of 1978 initiated a desperate migration of locals from the flood-affected areas of Medinipur and Hooghly districts to the adjacent riverine bars. The local people purchased land from the refugees and have set up new colonies in

Rangamatia, Fatehpur and Kasba Mana. Flood-distress, generating local migration from nearby flood-prone districts, is an ongoing phenomenon. Thus the riverbed population is constantly on the rise.

5.4 Summary

- i. The first phase of riverbed colonization started with inland voluntary labor migration from the Chhotanagpur plateau to the Raniganj collieries
- ii. The second phase was initiated by decolonization, the partition of India in 1947, and post-partition riots
- iii. The third phase is marked by the Bangladesh War of 1970
- iv. The September flood of 1978 initiated the fourth phase of in-migration from flood-affected areas
- v. In India, the Bengali evacuees were majority-identified or political refugees, while in the self-sought settlements they can be seen as self-alienated refugees (Kuper and Kuper 1995; Bhattacharyya 1998).

These phases of colonization and self-alienation in the self-sought settlements have explicitly influenced riverbed land utilization and flood plain zoning in the Lower Damodar River. Between Maithon/Panchet reservoirs and the Falta outfall, there are approximately 23 mid-channel sandbars or char lands and a series of point bars. Alternate point bars with a narrow channel are the primary characteristics of the riverbed below Barsul-Chanchai. Intensive field work has been done in these sandbars. A detailed perception study has been carried out to get a better view of the human role in changing fluvial system and of human perception, adaptability, and resource evaluation in the river bed.

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