

## **The Marginal Men in the ‘Charlands’ of Lower Gangetic Basin and Lower Damodar Basin**

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This paper attempts to study the ecological history of 'chars' in the four districts of West Bengal namely Malda, Murshidabad, Bankura and Burdwan. Among the mentioned districts the first two are the part of Lower Gangetic Basin (LGB) and the last two are the part of Lower Damodar Basin (LDB). A char lands have its own environmental history and chars were isolated, inaccessible and full of jungle for long time. Ecologically char lands of Lower Damodar basin was rich in flora and fauna before 1947 but numerous animals, bird species, rare species of plants has already been extinct due to tremendous expansion of agriculture in the particular study area which was done by the refugee and some other outsiders. Therefore, patches/ wastelands of LGB and LDB are directly linked with effect of the partition of India. Socio- economic life styles of the charuas (inhabitants of the charlands) are more different than the mainstreams people and charuas community is lived in the surface of earth but those are borderless in the accepted sense of geographical point of view. This community made their settlement in the charlands. Chars are risky territory throughout the year especially in the monsoon period because natural disaster like flood, erosion of river of the Bhagirathi and also Damodar is common phenomenon. Their food habits, life style, thinking, faith, belief, production, social conduct and custom are really different and they have different life of episodes. They have to adapt with people of Bihari and other vagabond people and made new social concept. They do not enjoy the government facilities like medical service, education, communication, ration facility etc. Besides this, inhabitant of the charlands in every moment has to face a lot of difficulties like administrative problem, international border dilemma, and internal border problem. They dance with the natural disaster and every day they let start as new experimental day. That is why; there marginality has crossed the limit. As per example Adivasi and other backward class people like Bagdi, Namasudra lived at South Vashapur Mana char in the Galshi block at Burdwan district who are landless and every moment they are faced aforesaid problem. The erosion victims in chars of LDB and LGB live a life beyond redemption. Question may arise why do they still prefer to stay in these uncertain alluvial and sandy accretions? As we have already seen, people have moved between 4 to 16 times in the last 15 years in some of these chars in the lower Gangetic basin and same scenario is not found in charlands of LDB. Even the condition of people of Lower Damodar basin is over dangerous because they did not get option to change another charlands like Malda and Murshidabad due to scarcity of new chars. Truth is that they have only singular choice and to understand the grievous socio-economic condition of the vulnerable people. The original political history and identity of the marginal men in the charlands has been trapped by treachery of some Indian leader and they have placed beyond pathetic history. Therefore the whole community was ruined through few men's treacherousness and the erroneous state's policy of the colonial government. The marginal men are the burning emblem of that pathetic incident. But truth is that Charuas were the own identity and recognition of the state of East Pakistan before 1947. The inhabitants of the Chars are the intrinsic part of the Indian state but they have not enjoyed the facilities of the government as well as them yet not being recognized as a citizen of India. So, they are still now suffering for identity crisis. Social and economical life of the

inhabitants of the charlands is absolutely dependent on the high potentiality of the charlands. What historical sense we make of this highly fluid and river based territory of Bengal characterized by extensive span of silty lower Damodar and alluvial land forms? All though the dynamic nature of the ecological regime of lower Damodar and lower Gangetic Basin make it a potentially important case study in environmental history, it has fail to attract the attention of environmental historian.

‘Chars’ are sandy shoals that emerge as an aftermath of river bank erosion that engulf one part of the land and give rise to another territory on its other side. The shifting of the Ganges is a long-term-phenomenon that is, constantly shaping and reshaping the territory of LGB (Lower Gangetic Basin) and LDB (Lower Damodar Basin) which is evident from historical records. Erosion and land reallocation are age-old-problem along the bank of the Ganges.

The erosion of vast stretches of lands and subsequent emergence of 'chars' has been in progress for the last two hundred years or so. But with the construction of the Farakka barrage in 1975, the entire processes of erosion / sedimentation have augmented leading to the rise of existing or running chars in the study area and due to the mentioned phenomenon several large chars have come up in the last few decades along with the opening up of deep channels which have in turn affected the liner path of the river. Besides this, same scenario is found in the vast territory of LDB owing to the hand-made-rock embankment and construction of DVC in 1948. “People of the ‘chars’ of LDB had actually come from East Pakistan as a result of 1947- partition and ‘Chars’ of LDB was singular choice for uprooted people of East Pakistan.”<sup>1</sup> The construction of the Farakka barrage has caused huge sedimentation, increasing flood intensity and aggravating tendency of bank failure in the two districts. The ecological patches are emblem of dance of death, uncertainty, poverty, vulnerability, border dispute between the state and countries; - and, lack of governance leading to the exercise of different form and criminality.

#### **What do you mean by ‘Chars’ and ‘Diaras’?**

"Diaras and Chars often first appear as thin silver of sand. On this is deposited layers of silt still a low bank is consolidated. Tamarisk bushes, a spiny grass, establish a foot-hold and accretion as soon as the river recedes in winter; the river flows being considerably seasonal. For several years the Diaras and Char may be cultivable only in winter, till with a fresh flood either the level is raised above the normal flood level or the accretion is diluvated completely <sup>1</sup> ( Harun er Rashid , Geography of Bangladesh (Dhaka, 1991, p. 18) There are some basic differences in quality between the charlands of Lower Gangetic Basin and Lower Damodar Basin. All chars and diaras of LGB is alluvial accretion and Chars of LDB is completely sand bar both were formed as result of riverbank erosion but upper layer of the charlands of LDB is covered with alluvial/mud. Near their mouths, many rivers do not follow the same course for more than a couple of decades, and areas that are continually subject to water logging turn into a maze moribund channels crises-crossing each other as the delta-building moves on. The rivers in such situations constantly create charlands. The charlands (called diara in the upper reaches of the Gangetic plains) are virgin, low-lying river islands and sand bars occurring in the plains, particularly the deltaic parts, of rivers. They are exposed and repeatedly affected by frequent floods, shifting river channels and riverbank erosion. Consequently they may get washed away overnight by the changing river currents. To live in this hostile environment, people are obliged to take risks and have to develop their livelihoods in such

ways as to be able to cope with the river's moods, a process evocatively described as 'dancing with the rivers'.

### **Historical origins of the Charlands**

Chars are also the products of history, not just the results of natural, physical processes in floodplains. More specifically, the history of land and water management in deltaic Bengal played a crucial role in the formation of chars. The East India Company took the *dewani* of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa from the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam in 1765, and took over the role of direct management and control in 1772, that is, within this short period of twelve years, the East India Company became "the permanent rulers" of one of the richest tracts in the world"<sup>2</sup> (Pal, 1929: 2). The colonial rulers brought with them modernist views of what land and water ideally are and what they should be, and how they need to be controlled, leading to unprecedented changes in the landscapes of South Asia. The capricious tropical rivers of the Indian subcontinent, flowing only seasonally and shifting their courses at their whim, seemed not just utterly strange to them but also as ferocious natural elements that are in need of control. "Writing about the major changes brought about by the British Empire; consider it as an exceptional global ecological moment for its "relentless transformation of environments and landscapes" in faraway lands."<sup>3</sup>

### **Colonial alienation of land from rivers**

When the colonial British took over the task of reigning the country, to them the rivers (and the muddy lands) of Bengal appeared strange because of their frequently shifting courses, property ownership complicated, and the ancient Hindu laws quite incomprehensible. "Modern European environmental and agrarian imagination carried in their heads required them to split soils and fluids into discrete domains"<sup>4</sup> (Cosgrove and Petts 1990). This began an exorcism of water from land, D'Souza (2009: 3) believes, primarily meant to turn the lands into useful property that could then become socioeconomic-legal objects owned by individuals. This perception of land was rooted in Adam Smith's view of what an economy should be like, and on conceptions of the environment based upon rural England. Therefore, Bengal, the colonial British reinvented land and bounded the rivers to separate them from the land. This historical legacy makes the chars unique.

The first priority in establishing an absolute and irrefutable authority on the land was to prove beyond doubt that the state owned all the land according to ancient Indian systems. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 gave land away to zamindars in perpetuity to reduce the complexities of revenue collection and to prevent defaulters in the payments of rent. A series of actions and measures followed the permanent settlement of land, the most significant being the initiation of surveys of rivers and lands." The East India Company assigned its surveyor and engineer, James Rennell, to conduct a survey of the river systems in Bengal and to prepare detailed maps of these rivers. From 1763 to 1773, Rennell compiled a set of maps of Bengal for the British Government, published in 1779 as the *Bengal Atlas*, which became the most authentic and legitimate source of information on the rivers of Bengal and was regarded as vitally important for commercial, military, and administrative purposes."<sup>5</sup>

An ongoing task, accomplished along with fixing the rivers on maps, was that of fixing them on the land by the construction of embankments. “The heightened importance of revenue-yielding land was propagated by a perceived need to protect it from the invading rivers. Consequently, more embankments were constructed and the heights of the older *pulbandi bandhs* that had allowed the annual inundation of rice fields were raised.”<sup>6</sup> The meaning of the embankments also changed; as the river was unable to spill over its banks, the administration began to imagine that the embankments were meant solely for flood protection.

### **Colonial government’s attitude towards the developing charlands**

During three decades of nineteenth century the intense debate on the modalities of the permanent settlement, its framers, including John Shore, attached importance to the waste lands in two different ways. First, the zaminders were incentivized to cultivate waste lands that fell within their permanently settled estates. Second, it was agreed that those wastelands that were not included in the permanent settlement in 1793 be observed as crown land and as a source of income in future.<sup>7</sup> The general point is that the boundary of estate was so vague in 1793 that the East India Company very quickly decided on re-assessment and resettlement of the wastelands. The emphasis on keeping the wastelands under government control for securing future income for the state became all the more necessary when the much advertised perfect of a healthy revenue income through the permanent settlement gave way to what James Mill termed a permanent deficit in company’s revenue. By 1797 rapid accumulation of company’s debt exceeded all former examples. “The emergence in critique of the settlement as a limiting force on the state’s revenue earning was further informed by the larger loss due to inflation. As a last resort, by the turn of the nineteenth century, company policymakers were convinced that the Bengal permanent system was defective; thus began to look for an alternative revenue settlement which the practical inconvenience of the permanent settlement could be avoided, its ‘mistakes’, ‘evils’, and ‘injustice’ eliminated.”<sup>8</sup>

The continuous process of land formation kept the local administration alive to the prospect of its utilization, which fitted the government’s general policy of shifting away from the permanent settlement. “In 1811, the collector of Cumilla district, for instance, remained the Board of revenue of the existence of fine rice producing chars that were being formed in the district daily, as being fit for immediate cultivation. He advised the board to take control of all unclaimed char lands with view to putting in farm lease immediately.”<sup>9</sup> “Under regulation XI of 1825, the government was brought all such lands under its possession as a khas mahals.”<sup>10</sup> It was estimated by Baden-Powell in 1892 that 15.2 per cent of the land of greater Bengal remained outside the boundary of the permanent settled areas. This estimate does not seem to be reliable since it was based on the amount of revenue, the rate of which varied from estate and even from plot. The original source of this estimate was annual reports of the revenue administration of the lower provinces, which record revenue returns with specific reference to permanently settled and non permanent settled areas. But the reports do not specify of the extent of areas under the different systems of revenue administration, though the number of estates is provided.<sup>11</sup> Even if we accept that 15 per cent of all revenue paying land in the greater Bengal lay outside the jurisdiction of the permanent settlement, the percentage would be far larger in Eastern Bengal which possessed comparatively more waste lands in the form of cultivable forests and existing and continually emerging chars

and Diaras. At the same time there were lands which were permanently settled – but not in Cornwallis’s sense- in the settlers were non-Zaminders, ranging from Talukdars to raiyats, who were attached to permanently settled land; but under the authority of the government.<sup>12</sup> By turn of the century, it had become clear that amounts of rent from khas mahal areas were proportionately larger than those from permanently settled areas.<sup>13</sup> In 1900, a fourth of the land revenue of Bengal came from non- permanently settled areas. Since such khas mahal predominated in East Bengal and some part of West Bengal, the ratio here would have been much more strongly in favour of the non-permanently settled areas. “Considering the extend of the non permanent settled areas, we may assume that at least 50 percent of the territories of the eastern Bengal and some part of Western Bengal remained beyond the direct jurisdiction of the permanent settlement.”<sup>14</sup>

### **The Construction of the Farakka Barrage and its Causes and impact on human life**

The Farakka barrage was constructed to serve the need of preservation and maintenance of the Calcutta port by improving the regime and navigability of the Bhagirathi – Hooghly river system. As the Calcutta port was located 120 km. north of the delta, it was never an ideal port for the movement of big vessels. Before the construction of the Calcutta port, the Bagirathi lost its connection from the main channel of the Ganges. From 17<sup>th</sup> century account of Jean – Baptist Tavernier we find that at Suit the main source of the Ganges was filled up with sand and sediment.<sup>15</sup> “Between 1768 - 1777 the Bhagirathi almost remained dry in the winter months. Jalagi and Mathabangha were the alternative channel route for the movement of streamers’ But these two channels also lost their importance in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>16</sup>

From the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century the British became anxious about the future of the Calcutta port and started thinking about the feasibility of an alternative port construction. In a report to the British Government, the secretary of the Bengal chamber of commerce wrote "I am directed by the committee of the British chamber of commerce, to solicit the favour of your bringing to the notice of the most noble governor of Bengal, the difficult and dangerous state of the navigation of the river Hooghly, which threatens, at no distant period, to render access to the port of Calcutta altogether impracticable for any vessel but those of smallest tonnage"<sup>3</sup> "Port canning was constructed between 1865 and 1866. But due to the problem of sediment accumulation, this port also had a limited lifeline till 1871 only."<sup>17</sup>

Several methods to bring more water into the Bhagirathi river failed as well as Calcutta port was extremely important. That ‘s why the plan for the construction of a barrage on Ganges near Rajmahal and the creation of a feeder canal to bring the surplus water from the Ganges to the Bhagirathi river first surfaced in the opinion of Sir Atherton in 1853. In the post independence period, the question of the revival of Calcutta port seemed to be vital issue. In 1957, the internationally renowned river expert Dr. Walter Henson was invited in India to provide technical solution to the problem. After investigation, Henson reflected, “the best and technical solution of the problem is the construction of barrage across the Ganges at Farakka with which the upland discharge into the Bagirathi – Hooghly can be regulated as a planned and with which the long term deterioration in the Hooghly can be stopped and possibly converted into a gradual improvement...”<sup>18</sup> the tidal reach will be improved and the frequency and intensity of bores will be decreased.

### **Human Life on Charland:**

“In Malda district total eroded land between 1797 and 2004 had been 4247 hectares. More than 200km. of fertile land had been swept away till 2004.”<sup>19</sup> " The dimension of loss of livelihoods can be seen in the loss of 61.10 sq. agricultural land, 25sq.km. Orchard, 85 sq. km. settled land 7sq. km wetland and 13 sq.km. other lands totaling 191.10sq. km. in the last one decade.”<sup>20</sup> In 2001 itself, 2,500 approx families in malda were displaced. Since the last three to four decades five community development blocks are being more or less affected by erosion. : Manikchak, Kaliachak -1, Kaliachak -2, Kaliachak -3, Ratua. According to the report of the commission setup by planning commission (1996) nearly 4.5 lakhs people had lost their homes due to left bank erosion and 22 mouzas have gone in the river. Over last three decades 500sq. km. of land and about 2 million people , from about 40 village panchayet in Manikchak, Kaliachak-1 and Kaliachak -2, and English Bazaar block have been affected by the flood and erosion.

So far as the district of Murshidabad is concern the rotational bank failures between the Farakka barrage and Jalangi, a stretch of about 100km. has been harsh. The human impact of this has been massive. While about one million people are displaced every year by the flood and erosion in Bangladesh; it is no less than 10,000 people who are evicted every year from their home lands by erosion in Murshidabad district." In mid -1970 in Dhulian and its adjoining areas about 50,000 became homeless. The encroaching river wiped out of 50 mouzas and engulfed about 10,000 hectares of fertile land.”<sup>21</sup> A large part of interfluves, lying between the Bhagirathi and Padma with an area of about 77sq. km. between Nayansukh and Giria, disappeared forever between 1925 – 1974. Thus, the map of this area has been changed beyond recognition. “This is evident when we compare the old toposheet published by Survey of India in 1925 and recent satellite images.”<sup>22</sup> Farakka, Samsanganj, Suti-1, Suti-2, Raghunathgang-II, Ialgila, Bhagobangola I, Raninagar-I, Raninagar II, Bharathpur I, Bhrathpur II, Burwan , Khargram and Jalangi face the problem of river bank erosion massively year after year .

### **The Chars in the Malda and Murshidabad: Addressing the issue of human vulnerability**

The human impact of continuous bank erosion and sedimentation in Malda and Murshidabad has been tremendous leading to displacement, eviction, loss of land and property, making the areas vulnerability prone. Vulnerabilities to natural hazards are not equally distributed and exposure to risk and vulnerability depends on certain factors such as unstable global, patterns of settlements, resource management, social organization, political economy etc.the construction of Farakka barrage has disturbed the apparent equilibrium condition and river started to adjust this huge human interference by aggradations and degradation of its bed and channel pattern by the erosion and siltation. The post barrage condition, the normal sedimentation transport system has been intercepted due to control operation of the barrage gates and the river bed on upstream started aggrading with the change of deposition pattern of river bed and bank. As result the new chars have come up gradually with general rise in the river bed level and formation of deep narrow thalwegs on the left side. The normal flood level has increased with reduction in channel capacity. This has increased the flood intensity on upstream at lesser discharge in post barrage situation which could be noticed in Malda district in during the last two decades.

The following table provides a comprehensive picture of land loss and population displacement during 1988 -1994 in MSD district:

**Table: 2.land loss and population Displacement during 1988-1994**

year	Erode in Sq. km.	Families Affected	Population Displacement
1988	4.35	872	4360
1989	107.00	8875	44475
1990	7.50	612	3060
1991	8.90	763	3815
1992	34.00	1197	5985
1993	19.00	1099	5495
1994	25.85	818	1200
1995	206.60	14236	79,190

**Source: Kalyan Rudra ibid .p 32**

The erosion of vast stretches of land and subsequent emergence of Chars have been in progress for last two hundred years or so. Major Henry Thomas (On the courses of Ganges through Bengal) described the devastation cause by river in Murshidabad district .He rightly expressed that “the quantity of the land, which has been destroyed by the river in the course of few years, will amount upon most moderate calculation, to 40 sq. mile or 25,600 acres. in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century , W.W Hunter observed that an acres of land was engulf by Padma within half an hour.”<sup>23</sup>W. Sherrill wrote that about the ‘chars’ and ‘Diaras’. He also mentioned “island become inhabited, cleared and cultivated; population increased, large village set up, large revenue is collected for ten or twelve years; then fabric will disappear within one rainy season.”<sup>24</sup>

Farakka barrage situation played a massive role in the rise of the new running chars in two districts and brought vagaries to the life of erosion victim living in this land patches. It is important to understand the different types of chars in this study area were formed which are named dead, mature and running. The dead char which has not faced any significant change due to fluvial action for the last few decades. Mature chars has not faced any change due to fluvial action for the last 10 -15 years and running chars are those land patches which face regular changes due the action of river and continuously emerge and submerge , this process being known as **Sikasti and payasti**.

Many chars has been come up in Malda district in the last few decades such as the Gadai and Dakatia chars along with opening up deep channels which has in turn affected the liner path of the river. The Hamidpur char and Nirmal char and Jalangi charlands has rose in Malda and Murshidabad district due to aftermath of river bank erosion. The appearance, disappearance and reappearance of char lands in the panchanandapur in Malda district have become a regular

phenomenon. In Murshidabad also same process has been active leading to the Nirmal char and jalangi charlands. People have moved between four to 16 times in the last 15 years. Thus, human vulnerability takes an added dimension in the existing charlands and the erosion victim get afflicted with a special and added form of erosion and flood induced actually. The people who migrate and settle in the newly emerged char lands lead a life under the shadow of poverty and insecurity. The erosion and resultant homelessness cause an oversupply of agriculture labour in the fertile chars engaging the labourers at a wage lower than the minimum fixed by the government. In the Malda chars, the average daily wage of adults working in the Malda chars are even less than Rs. 60.

There are no hospital in the chars, an expecting women has to be taken 8-10 km. away by boat to the mainland. Charuas or people in chars died due to lack of medical service. Most children suffer from malnutrition. Even scheme like pulse polio are a far cry in most chars. Fifteen to twenty children die on an average of malnutrition every year in the chars of the Malda district.

There are border problem in the chars lands in the two districts of Malda and Murshidabad which have developed towards Bangladesh. As per official estimate, till 1992-94 more than 10000 hectares of chars have come up at places which have become inaccessible from the Indian side but there can be reached easily from Bangladesh. Akheriganj which literally means the last settlement virtually disappeared from the map when the 1989 – 1990 erosion struck it.

“The devastated erosion engulfs 2,766 houses and left 23,394 persons homeless.” Many erosion victims migrated to the newly emerged Nirmal char along the opposite side.<sup>25</sup> “A population of 20000 lives in area of 50sq. km in Nirmal char. From here Rajshai town of Bangladesh can be reached within 45 minutes on road, whereas to come to the mainland of India one has to cross the mightily Padma which will take more than three hours.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the basic infrastructure provided here is far too poor and the people’s plight is further heightened by negligence of mainland administration. Since there is no primary health centre, people have to go to Rajshai for treatment. The discipline of international border is very much flexible for sake of char lands people.

Instances of fighting for harvesting with Bangladeshi cultivators have been reported again and again apart from the usual problem of allotting created land to the rightful owners. Once again the question of Bangladesh infiltrators, the recent fiasco over ISI agent s has increased in this district due to these char’s areas. The few Jalangi chars have been cultivated by Bangladeshi nationals in spite of strong protest by the Indian government. “In April 1993, a joint survey was conducted to ascertain the boundary on the chars, but Bangladesh subsequently declined to accept this newly identified boundary.”<sup>27</sup> On the other side, Bangladesh has better access to the chars and it is also often difficult for the district authorities of Murshidabad to provide proper security to the new settlers’ there.<sup>26</sup>

The cross border conflict not only has interred dimension, but it also has intra level of complexities. In Malda, chars have created problem with the adjoining state of Bihar. Mouzas in the charlands like piarpore, Pranpur, Plashghata, Kanchi, Jadpur, Srighar, Begamganj, Dogachi, Daskthia, Nityanandapur, Hosenabad, Hakimbad, Jituagar inhabited by one and half lakh people, can be accessed from paglar Ghat in two hours by boat, it does not have a single health centre or no primary school. And administrations there is Bihar, yet for registration of land one has to come



to Malda since the land belong to Malda officially. In the census handbook these place are shown to be a part of Malda.<sup>28</sup> A strange kind of dual state ship prevails there. The people suffer from the irony of dual citizenship. Even the village headman of hamidpur char, Pulls has received a voter card from Jharkhand and ration card from West Bengal. Again though Jharkhand government has issued voter's ID card, job applications made to Jharkahand state are rejected as they are considered outsider.

Human life on chars lack facilities of sanitation, education, medical, market and even dirking water. Article 21 of the Indian constitution has ensured right to life for every citizen the supreme court of the country has stated in a landmark judgment that “ the right to life under article 21 means something more than survival or human existence..... ”<sup>29</sup> But erosion victims of Malda and Murshidabad chars are denied of this right. They are compelled to live in sub-human condition.

### **Child labour and Charlands**

Women are worst sufferers in these fragile landscapes. Landlessness has forced women to take up the additional burden of providing financial support to the family apart from adjusting with extreme domestic hardship. Numerous people of these chars are engaged in Bidi industry of both Malda and Murshidabad district due to lack facilities of work. Chars are the actual source of child labour who are really helpless in the accepted sense of term, because child have to migrate from the running/ existing charlands for survive in the neighbouring districts of W.B and other states of India. Indian government has taken many projects for the recovery/ abolishes of child labour, but still now most of charuas (inhabitants of Chars) did not enjoy the govt. facilities or advantages. That's why chars are source of child labour . So, same scenario is found in the all charlands of W.B as well as sexual harassment and lacks of security in chars are vital problem. Marginal men of the charlands have to migrate in the neighbouring districts of West Bengal and other states of India due to uncertainty of existing chars. Every chars of Malda and Murshidabad are fertile and there a produced lot of crops but chars have not lasting more than 10 years. For natural phenomenon of the river of Bhagirathi, percentage of migrating labour is increasing in the charland of the aforesaid districts according to the report of NGOs. Labour department is found in every block in the districts but they did not get actual statistics of the migrating labour in the charlands. Registration is compulsory method if any person wants go abroad for working as labour through the agencies. Besides this, address of those working labour, type of job, amount of labour charge etc. should be informed to the administration. But all method is avoiding in this charlands and precious little interest of government towards the marginal men is vita problem to get the proper statistic of migrating labour in charland. On the other side, vulnerable inhabitant of the charlands did not know what is the tangible strength of migrating labour in and around West Bengal? The whole development of the charlands is ruined /failed every year through one's river (Damador river in the district of Bankura and Burdwan) treachery as well as same grievous situation is found in the other charlands of Malda and Murshidabad during the monsoon.

### **Govt. strategies to mitigate the crisis**

Government was implemented national policy for flood mitigation of people in charlands in 1954." All the remedial measures that have been implemented to mitigate crisis such as construction of 30

km. embankment, 27 spurs and revetments etc. proved to be ineffective owing to the gradual shifting of the Ganges towards the left bank upstream of Farakka barrage .”<sup>30</sup> Major portion of the seven retired embankment and spurs have been washed out. All the measures of the govt. have achieved to fail. Therefore, problem of charlands is being continued. In 2000; seven soil embankments had been constructed in the south Bhashapur char due to mitigate the flood and erosion control but all govt. measures ahs failed to achieve the garget. Similar scenario is found in the all charlands in lower Damador River.

### **The Lower Damodar and History of its Charlands**

The Damodar is an important river of the Bengal delta that affects the wellbeing of a sizeable fraction of the Indian population." It flows through the eastern Indian states of Bihar and West Bengal, across the coal and steel belt, its basin comprising nearly 25,000 square kilometres.”<sup>31</sup> “The 540 kilometer-long river eventually meets the Hooghly, a distributary of the Ganga River, near Falta point in Howrah district.”<sup>32</sup> The river has been notorious for changing courses and has created an inland delta of sorts through its innumerable distributaries. The upper and lower reaches of the Damodar have contrasting ecological characteristics. The upper valley has a rugged relief with high slopes covered with forests and scrub jungles, and terraced, cultivated fields. The lower valley on the other hand is nearly flat, even bowl-like. Mukherjee in his 1938 work on the Bengal delta noted that this particular deltaic stretch had an unusual concentration of small farmers and settlements. This feature has been enhanced in the recent decades. The physical environment of the Damodar delta has undergone considerable changes since late colonial times when imported civil engineering techniques began to replace traditional irrigation. The first phase saw the construction in 1881 of Anderson Weir at Rhondia (located some distance west of Burdwan), and the Eden Canal to carry its water to the lower agricultural fields. Later, the Maharaja of Burdwan built embankments along the course of the river to contain its floods, and then in the early 1950s the Damodar Valley Corporation or DVC constructed dams and brought its canals through the region.<sup>45</sup> The DVC dams were only partially successful in reducing the frequency of floods and providing irrigation water through the canal network to agricultural fields. However, the intervention brought several changes in the physical environment to the lower reaches of the valley. The clearing of extensive natural forests in the upper catchments areas for the construction of the reservoirs resulted in increased siltation rates and the formation of more permanent chars on the riverbed. And while flooding in the lower reaches of the Damodar’s valley has been reduced, low-intensity floods have become longer in duration. Moreover, when they do occur in the Lower Damodar Valley, floods now dump coarse sand, destroying the fertility of cultivated lands. Also, the behaviour of the river has become more unpredictable: large chunks of fertile agricultural land are eroded by its currents every year. The current physical character of the Damodar chars, therefore, is somewhat different from other chars located in the active delta areas of the Ganga–Padma and other rivers in deltaic Bengal. Being more permanent in nature, Damodar chars do not experience the regular and annual flooding characteristic of the active delta chars of Bangladesh. However more devastating and longer-duration floods can and do occur—such as in 1978 and 2000. As the nature of floods have become variable in the Lower Damodar Valley, the ways in which local people have traditionally dealt with them, too, have become ineffective and have had to be modified.

Related closely to the history of river control is the story of how the Damodar chars came to be occupied. This process began in the late nineteenth century when groups of Muslim fishermen migrated from Bihar to these riverine locations. Bihari Muslims were initially employed as village watchmen and gatekeepers by the Burdwan rajas and were allotted land in the chars by way of payment. Besides fishing, they reared some cattle. Yet, unused to farming, they did not try to cultivate the chars which at that time were mostly covered by bush, plum trees and tall bena grass. Small amounts of Mesta (a variety of jute which is red in colour and grows without much water and nourishment), maize (corn) and pulses were the only crops. Population remained sparse, and floods were a regular visitor during the monsoons.

### **Names of 'Chars' and People's vulnerability**

Several Chars were formed in lower Damodar basin due to river bank erosion such as Chhoto Mana, Bara Mana, Majher mana. Kasba Mana, Panchpara Mana, Lakshmipur, Kashpur, Bikrampur char, Char Gobindapur, Banamalipur, Gopalpur mana, Patash pur, karimpur, Bhaglui, Rangamati, Gurbhanga, Velua, Deulpara, Raikha, Raghunathbati, Fakirdamgha, salkhara, Shikarpur, South Bhashapur, Telipukur. Kumirkhola, Tashuli, Gopalnager, Maya Bager, Asish Nagar etc. These sand bar or charlands are found in between Durgapur barrage to Sadar Ghat Bridge. According to my field survey there are lived near about 20000 people in the Charlands. Seven chars like Ashish Nagar, Bara Mana, Majher Mana, Salkhara Mana, South Bhasha pur, Shikarpur and Gaitan char are situated in the middle portion of the lower Damodar river and they have no direct communication with the mainland and viewed only isolated landscape. They have to cross the river every day due to geographical location of that charlands. One side is water covered channel and other side is covered with the sand dunes. Some chars like Panchpara, Char Gobindapur, Majumdarpara at Patrasayer block, somiti Mana, Karimpur at Sonamukhi block in the District of Bankura, Gopal nagar, at Khandhoghosh block, Simi-Simi Kashpur, Bikrampur, Vashapur, Lakshmi at Galshi block in the district of Burdwan are affected by Damodar during monsoon. Before the construction of the D.V.C barrage most of charland were vast stretches but during the period of four decades approximately 40% of charlands engulfed due to river bank erosion. As a result huge numbers of marginal men once again have to uproot to another land and remaining vulnerable inhabitants in the chars always facing lots of problem throughout the year especially during the monsoon when river over recharged and lower patches remained water covered. Why they are faced difficulties? Because, some Charlands are situated in the middle portion and other are remained in the left and right bank of the Damodar River. According to the district gazetteers dangerous flood happened in 1878 and 2000, as a result huge animal, lives, houses were died in the charlands. Due to the construction of DVC barrage the lower Damodar remained-



**A spectacle of agricultural land erosion and half eroded soil embankment at Munui and South Bhashapur Mana at Sonamukhi and Golshi block respectively** draught up throughout the year except rainy season but land erosion is continuing. That's why river bed rise up owing to huge silt deposition in comparison to pre- barrage condition which has been increased river bank erosion of Sonamukhi Block and Patrasayer at Bankura district and Khandaghosh and Galsi block at Burdwan district.

Geologist rightly expressed that Damodar is an exceptional river in West Bengal in comparison to the other distributaries of the Bhagirathi river because this river has not found any delta in the confluence of river. But it has made inner-delta among the vast territory of Durgapur to Sadarghat which was disrupted by the construction of D.V.C barrage. In the recent past, thousand and thousand new agricultural land formed in lower Damodar basin which lands are already cultivating with economic risk by inhabitant of Charlands .This new agricultural tendency in the running chars of lower Damodar basin has increased. As a result, the normal currents of river are obstructed and water of Damodar is being massively polluted. Dr.KumKum Bhattacharyya, in her Ph.D. dissertation titled "Applied Geomorphological Study in a Controlled Tropical River - the case of the Damodar between Panchet Reservoir and Falta", has made a very elaborate study of settlements that has come up over the year in post dam condition in the lower Damodar river i.e. below Durgapur Barrage to Rhondia. In that study she has drawn some interesting conclusions."<sup>33</sup> One such conclusion is about land use planning in riverbed. Bara Mana, according to her, is the largest alluvial sand bar sited below Durgapur barrage. Settlements are sited on the highest elevation and individual houses as usual have been constructed on higher plinth above usual inundation level. She has noted that the settlers have in their own way fortified the fragile tract to reduce vulnerability of these sand bars from inundation natural or artificial. people living in flood plains particularly of tropical rivers are aware of the risks and dangers and they have a definite plan of action which they adopt at the time of need and (2) the tropical river beds are gradually being legally encroached

### **Internal border dispute in lower Damodar basin**

In this context I want to express heart breaking incident in the charlands of Lower Damodar basin. Charuas ( inhabitants of Chars) are helpless not only in natural aspect but also administrative point of view such as, Kashba Mana located in the left bank of the Damodar river in Burdwan district

but their ration card and voter card registered in Sonamukhi block which is situated in right bank of Damodar at Bankura district. For that reasons, they cross Damador river twice of a week within more than two hour whereas they can be reached neighboring panchayet within 10 minutes. That's why, 215 families of Kasba Mana could not enjoy their ration facilities. Though, they have informed several times to the local administration and their MLA about the susceptible condition of the marginal men. So, problem of the charlands yet is not being solved by the government.

### **The Changing course of Ganga - Padma and border dispute**

“In recent year's possession of some *Charlands* have become an issue of controversy in Indo-Bangladesh relationship (Rudra and Rudra, 1990). ”<sup>35</sup>When India was liberated in 1947, the course of the Ganga was accepted as the international boundary between Rajshahi District of East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) and Murshidabad District of West Bengal (India). Subsequently, when the Ganga continued to encroach towards Indian territory and eroded extensive areas, *Charland* of almost equal areal extent emerged along the opposite bank. These *Charlands*, being attached with the mainland of Bangladesh, are difficult to approach from India. The erosion wiped away boundary posts at many places, where the border is now merely an imagination. The matter was raised in the <sup>Parliament</sup> and the members expressed their serious concern over the issue. The Minister concerned assured the house that the boundary was fixed on the map and the erosion of Ganga would hardly affect it. (The Hindustan Times, 1986) Whatever be the assurance from the Ministry, the infiltration and illegal occupance on *Charlands* by Bangladeshi nationals have very often been experienced. “The *Charlands* of opposite, Jalangi, has been cultivated by the Bangladeshi nationals in spite of strong protest by our Government. In April 1993, a joint survey was conducted to ascertain the boundary on the *Charlands*, but Bangladesh subsequently declined to accept this newly identified boundary.”<sup>36</sup> Certainly, Bangladesh has a better access to the *Charlands*, and also it is often difficult for the district authorities of Murshidabad to provide proper security to the new settlers there.

### **CONCLUSION**

There are hardly any official records regarding the number of people living on the *Charlands* at present in Malda & Murshidabad. “But even at a very modest estimate it is no less than 50,000 and the number is increasing every year. The erosion-victims migrate to *Chars* losing everything into the river.”<sup>37</sup> The skill and experience of the displaced population in agriculture help force to start a new struggle for existence. Evidently, the neo refugees lead their life under the shadow of poverty and insecurity. The erosion and resultant homelessness cause an oversupply of agricultural labour. The labourers are often engaged at a wage lower than the minimum fixed by the Government. The newly developed settlement is found at Nirmalchar. Unfortunately, even after the six decades of independence, there has been no master plan to reduce the distress of the afflicted community living far away from the main crowd of the city of Calcutta. The neo refugees survive on the *Chars* with their improvised strategies. When the *chars* first emerge above the water level of the Padma, it is sandy, and not habitable. With the passage of time, the finer sediments of silt and clay are deposited and make the land fertile and cultivable. The conflict over the possession of land is a

common feature in the social life on *Chars*. Paddy, pulses, vegetables, water- melons etc. are the main agricultural products. The natural pastures help to rear cattle and goats.

The displaced persons rebuild their huts with corrugated tin sheets, bamboos and mud, and thatch the roof with straw. These materials, being light and not very costly, are brought from the mainland. The country boats are the main mode of conveyance, while on land bicycles and bullock-carts are used. The human life on *chars* lacks facilities of sanitation, education, medical, market, and even drinking water. The residents prefer to go to Bangladesh for treatment or marketing to avoid the trouble of crossing the Padma. Thus they virtually enjoy dual citizenship.

Major Colebrooke, in his paper 'On the courses of the Ganges through Bangal' (1801), described the devastation caused by the Ganga in the Murshidabad district. He noted: "*The quantity of land, which has been destroyed by the river in course of a few years, will amount, upon most moderate calculation, to 40 square miles, or 25,600 acres: but this is counter-balanced, in a great measure, by alluviation which has taken place on the opposite shore.*"<sup>39</sup> In the late 19th century, Hunter (1876) observed that an acre of land was engulfed by the gnawing Padma within half an hour. Captain Sherwill (1858) witnessed the emergence of *Charlands* which became inhabited, cleared and cultivated, the population increased, large village started up, land revenue was collected for ten or twelve years, and then the whole fabric disappeared within one rainy season'.

Ecologically char lands of Lower Damodar basin was rich in flora and fauna before 1947. The vast stretches of char lands in Damaodar basin were uncultivated, isolated and inaccessible for the long time. Charlands of Lower Damadoer came into under cultivation in 1954-55, before it these lands were waste and that waste lands used by local people as only pasture land. But fact is that charlands in Gangetic basin inhabited and cultivated during the colonial period. But bio-diversity of char lands in lower Damador was being survived before 1947, after that it is dwindled due to unexpected pressure of refugee. So, the impact of the partition of India is responsible for extinction of the many birds' species and flora and fauna in the chars land. In the earlier, refugee took the shelter in chars and started cultivation and rapidly population is increasing there. Therefore, sudden urbanization process started in the char lands which was played pessimistic role the major factors in decline of ecology. They were hunted by miscalculation of the some leaders and colonial government's treacherousness was more responsible for that. Charuas (inhabitants of char) are still now depriving from the all kind of government facilities (sanitation, health centre, junior high school) due to government's lack interest. They are the poorest, the most toiling masses in the most uncertain eco-system, they are the marginal men with no right to speak freely or voice, hence no choice.

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