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INHABITED ISLANDS OF THE HUGLI ESTUARY, WEST BENGAL: EVOLUTION, PEOPLING AND ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT

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Contains nine chapters in xi+215 pages that include 38 Tables, 66 Figures, 18 Plates, 137 References and 15 Appendices.

Abstract

The study area of the present thesis covers both permanently and seasonally inhabited islands of the Hugli estuary, West Bengal (21°33′–22°02′N, 88°01′–88°12′E) — namely, Sagar, Ghoramara, Nayachar, Jambu and Chuksar. The work attempts to make a holistic study of the ways in which the natural processes affected island evolution, what efforts people have taken to make the islands liveable and the strategies taken to manage their environment. The chapters include: • Introduction, • Forcings shaping the islands, • Island evolution and landforms, • Reclamation and peopling of Sagar and Ghoramara islands, • Reclamation and peopling of Nayachar island, • Reclamation and peopling of Jambu island, • Reclamation and peopling of Chuksar Island, • Environmental management schemes and people’s responses and • Conclusions.

METHODS: The present work is based on both quantitative and qualitative methods of research. To trace island evolution and peopling history, three Police Station maps, four Survey of India topographical maps of various survey years and multitudated satellite images apart from a river survey chart were used for the period between 1904-05 and 2009 after georeferencing and digitisation in an RS/GIS environment. Standard statistical techniques were applied of the analysis of peopling characteristics. Perception study was carried out on the basis of semi-structured questionnaires.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS: The evolution of islands in the Hugli estuarine environment are found to be cyclic and natural phenomenon. These are evolved by bio-tidal accretion processes, active in a flood-dominated macrotidal estuary. Major environmental hazards that affect the islands include storm surges, coastal erosion and sand encroachment. Premature reclamation that had started since early 19th century cleared mangroves from most parts of Sagar and Ghoramara islands—both of which are now fully settled. Partially-reclaimed islands like Nayachar and Jambu have journeyed through a transient peopling history and turmoil associated with the government intervention into the islands. The islands of the Hugli estuary are ecologically sensitive and therefore, need to be protected with a concrete government strategy that is at once sensitive to the fragile environment and is conscious of the plight and unique problems of the inhabitants displaced by island erosion.