Chapter VII

SEQUENCE OF OCCUPANCE ON THE LOWER DAMODAR RIVER-BED

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Voluntary migration including labour migration and its socio-economic significance has received much attention from social scientists all over the world. Compared to that involuntary migration has failed to draw similar attention though involuntary migrations or refugee problem have become acute since Second World War.

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

At the very beginning of this chapter a question may be raised, how problems of migration particularly refugee problems become issues in applied geomorphological research? In the study area the river-bed of the Lower Damodar is mostly occupied by Bengalee refugees. In the next chapter it has been explored how and to what extent geomorphological knowledge has been applied by these refugees to assess resource potentialities and hazard risks of the river-bed in between control structures. Facts to be noted here is that decolonization of India necessitated the fuller utilization of the river resources to solve socio economic problems of an emergent independent nation; at the same time partition of India initiated large scale migration particularly Hindus from both West Pakistan and East Pakistan. Of all the refugee-receiving states in India, West Bengal had the maximum number of refugees and this problem aggravated just after the Bangladesh War of 1970 when there was a fresh influx of Bengalee refugees from independent Bangladesh to West Bengal. In both phases a significant number of Bengalee Hindu refugees selected the river beds of West Bengal rivers as their second home. The Lower Damodar bed is one of such river-beds which has been permanently occupied by these Bengalee refugees. Thus, the river-bed of the controlled Damodar has now become a major resource base of the Bengalee refugees. The problem of resettlement of refugees has become an applied geomorphological issue because of this functional relationship between refugees and river-beds.

7.2 OBJECTIVE

Objective of this chapter is to trace:

i. the phases of colonisation in the river-bed of the Lower Damodar.

ii. causes behind colonisation.

iii. socio-economic background of the colonizers.
7.3 METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES AND DATA BASE
Method is ideographic. Structure of argument is inductive. Spatial scale is the river bed. Time span extends from 1854 to 1996. There is a paucity of data on river-bed population as most of the settlements were designated as forcibly occupied settlements till recently. The only alternative was to collect primary data from field survey. But, besides socio-economic significance refugee problems are sensitive political issues. This posed a serious problem during field survey. Sensitive questions on religion, caste, income etc. had to be avoided, therefore qualified data used in this chapter should be taken as indicators and not absolute.

7.4 BACKGROUND OF REFUGEE INFLUX
Decolonisation, partition of India in 1947, and unfortunate riots in different times are the causes of diaspora of Bengalee Hindu refugees in West Bengal. The first phase of Bengalee evacuation probably started after the Noakhali riots in 1946 (Chakravarti, 1990). The second phase, the most significant phase started just after partition of India in 1947. In between 1947 and 1952 millions of Bengalees with a sizable member of non-Bengalees had migrated to erstwhile East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) in connection with labour migration. The number of migrants swelled up till 1958.

In order to trace the phase of refugee influx, the policy adoption by the West Bengal government needs to be mentioned here. The refugees were classified as 'old migrant' if they had come in between 1946 and 1958; 'inbetween migrants' if they had migrated between 1958 and 1963 and 'new migrants' if they had crossed the border after that period. 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 (Chakrabarty, 1990). This policy was adopted to discourage large number of migration but the problem is difficult to be solved and this problem has taken a new dimension since the Bangladesh War of 1970.

At all phases people mostly came from the farm sector. Though they were provided with accommodation and food in government sponsored refugee camps and colonies not only in West Bengal but also in other states like Orissa, M.P. etc., but 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 were in search for self sought settlements where they could enjoy social, economic and a kind of political independence. Searching for a new ‘niche’ was the beginning of the river bed colonization in West Bengal.

7.5 PHASES OF COLONIZATION IN THE LOWER DAMODAR RIVER BED
7.5.1 The First Phase of Colonization
Most of the river-bcd settlements in the Lower Damodar are refugee settlements, but colonization started much before 1946-47. The studied section is a part of the Ranigunj 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 Barddhaman district as early as 1774 but commercial mining activity probably started around 1777. By 1820 open pit mining started in the Ranigunj coalfield and from 1830 onwards several collieries were opened (Hunter, 1877).
Opening of coal mines initiated a phase of voluntary labour migration from the Chhotanagpur plateau to this part of Bengal. It merits mention here that labour migration from Bihar in the colonial era was very common. Unskilled, but sturdy and trustworthy Bihari labourers were required to clear forests, to remove over burdens in collieries and to work as helpers for construction of buildings, roads and railways and as labourer in factories etc. They used to be appointed as gate keepers and village polices as well, by local landlords and kings. Thus, through out undivided Bengal, Biharis including Bihari tribes were significant constituents of population composition. 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 till 1958. From the statements provided by the settlers, it may be assumed that colonization probably started in the latter part of the 19th Century and the present Biharis belong to the third generation.

Gaitanpur, a riverine alluvial bar near Barddhaman town has a sizable number of Biharis. They were used to work under the Barddhaman Raj, later with the cessation of Raj they were granted lands in Gaitanpur.

So, the first phase of colonization in the river bed of the Lower Damodar was initiated by inland labour migration from Bihar. They can be referred to as ‘economic evacuees’ also.

Paikpara, just above the Amta Channel was a part of the Damodar riparian tract but not a part of the river-bed itself. With of the opening the Muchi-Begua hanas 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. This settlement dates back to 1854 pre-dating India’s independence. Harogobindapur and some other settlements have attained the status of river-bed settlements after the construction of the Left bank embankments. Like Paikpara they are colonized by local Bengalees. All these settlements mentioned above belong the first phase of colonization of the Damodar river bed.

7.5.2 The Second Phase of Colonization

Significant colonization of the river-beds 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 Bengalee Hindus though, 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 practises. River-retreat land use was common among locals in some parts of the Lower Damodar but colonization in the river-bed was initiated by the refugees.

The tract which was selected first, was the stretch in between Durgapur barrage and Jujuti sluice. A wide river-bed with less mobile alluvial bars covered with grass jungles was the primary factor behind colonization in the river-bed. Second, unwarranted flood risks have been reduced due to water retention behind the Durgapur barrage and the Panchet reservoir (Fig.-2.1), third, controlled release of water with prior warning and fourth release of water through definite channels were other controlling factors. There
was a noteworthy socio-political factor also. 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 stream of influx, so that they could remain unidentified. They opted for a location away from main transport routes and urban centres. The very locational dis-advantage was one of the factors why the refugee settled sand bars are away from Barddhaman town. The most prosperous settlement, the Bara Mana is located in this part. Gradually other parts of the Lower Damodar bed was occupied by the Bengalee and Bihari Hindu refugees.

7.5.3 The Third Phase of Colonization

A riot in erstwhile East Pakistan initiated a fresh flood of Bengalee refugees in West Bengal but this phase is not well recorded in government reports. Actual third phase of immigration and consequent river-bed colonization started during Bangladesh war and liberation of Bangladesh as a sovereign state in 1972. As the eastern border is neither well defined nor well guarded millions again crossed the border though apparently India and Bangladesh had a friendly cordial political relation at that time. The established refugee clusters in the Damodar river-bed colonies were extended.

The stretch 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 started after 1958 though there were scattered hamlets before. Bara Mana, Rangamatia Mana etc. are located in this section. Colonisation started rather late above Durgapur barrage. Telenda Mana, Damodar Char Mohana etc. are rather new entrants in the colonization history of the Lower Damodar river-bed.

7.5.4 The Fourth Phase of Colonization

The September flood of 1978 initiated a desperate immigration of locals from the flood affected areas of Medinipur and Hugli districts to the adjacent riverine bars. They purchased land from the refugees and have set up new colonies in Rangamatia, Fatehpur and Kasba Mana. Flood-distress generated local migration from nearby flood-prone districts is still to be experienced. Thus, river-bed population is numerically increasing.

7.6 SUMMARY

i. The first phase of river bed colonization started with inland voluntary labour migration from the Chhotanagpur plateau to the Ranigunj collieries.

ii. The second phase was initiated by decolonization, 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 immigration from flood affected areas.

v. In India the Bengalee evacuees were majority-identified or political refugees, in the self sought settlements they can be designated as self-alienated refugees after Kuper and Kuper (1995).

These phases of colonization and self alienation in the self-sought settlements have explicit influences on the river-bed land utilization in the Lower Damodar.