

Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt

Biographical details:

Dr Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, Fellow, Resource Management in Asia Pacific Program, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University. Her talk "Dancing with the River: Land, Water and People in the River Islands of the Damodar River" is based on her on going research on the livelihoods of people in the Gangetic delta. She is the author of *Water First: Issues and Challenges for Nations and Communities*, (with Robert Wasson) Sage, 2008, *Doing Gender, Doing Geography: Emerging Research in India*, (with Sarswati Raju) Routledge, 2011 and *Gendering the Field: Towards Sustainable Livelihoods for Mining Communities*, ANU E Press, 2011.



Dancing with the River: Land, Water and People in the River Islands of the Damodar River

This paper is about *chars* and their peoples. *Chars* are part land, part water, sandy masses rising from the shallow riverbeds in the flat plains of lower Bengal. The Bengali term '*char*' or *charbhumi* means a small piece of low-lying land that is formed by fluvial deposits on river beds. There is no dearth of *char*lands in Bengal, a riverine land criss-crossed by innumerable rivers that built the land. In the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna plains of the Indian subcontinent, *chars* form as the roaring rivers, descending from the Himalayas during the monsoons, almost choke with the enormous load of sand and other sediments carried in their waters. The sandy alluvium creates uninhabitable, uncultivable, deserts called *dias* in north Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh flats, and more expansive and flatter bars and islands called *chars* farther down the plain in Bengal delta. Within a few years, the humid climate assists the growth of grass and reeds and a slow process of organic breakdown facilitates the refertilisation of the lands.



Unlike what would seem natural, *chars* are actually inhabited throughout the Lower Gangetic plains, giving rise to the densest settlements in Lower Bengal. This is unusual, because as places for human communities to live on, they would seem rather temporary in nature. During the monsoon months in the lower parts of the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin, the *chars* are all surrounded by water. Particularly heavy flows may even completely inundate the low-lying *chars*. In many seasonal rivers with braided channels, some island *chars* may comprise land that even in the dry season can only be accessed by crossing a river channel. The seasonality of flow in the tropical rivers of the Gangetic plains has great implications for the *chars* and *char*-dwellers. It means that whilst accretion gives rise to *chars*, they are also constantly eroded by the rivers which eat up their banks and shift their



courses frequently. Newly formed *chars* are naturally transitory and fragile, their shapes change frequently and their edges may start eroding any time due to the river current; a whole *char* may even disappear overnight. The ecological fragility of *chars* not only leads to environmental uncertainties, but also makes them 'non-land' in other ways. Most newly emerging *chars*, being on the borderlines of land and water, have no legal existence as legitimate and officially recognised pieces of land. This paper focuses on how men and women make a living in this unique environment. We see the *char*lands as special and distinctive habitus of a volatile nature, where people cope with changes and uncertainties with knowledges that develop from the experience of living.

