

ABSTRACT

**Flood, Avulsion and Governance: The Ganga river in the  
Nineteenth Century**

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Alluvial rivers such as the Ganga (Ganges) have the tendency to overflow and can show unpredictable channel changes. Therefore, the societies living along the river corridor have learnt to live with the flood. The very nature of the flow divides the Ganga into three sections – upper, middle and lower. It is largely in the middle part that many rivers coming from the Himalayas and the Deccan Plateau join the Ganga. This allows the river to maintain a good amount of flow throughout the year unlike its upper part. At the same time the very confluence of different rivers also cause deposition of huge amount of silt and sand in the entire region during annual flooding. This in turn leads to frequent avulsion and formation of *diara*. For centuries, the local communities in the mid-Ganga section wholly depended on the rivers for irrigation, fisheries and communication. The cultivators rather than perceiving inundation as flood actually believed in flood utilization and dependence on it for agricultural production. They evolved a cropping pattern that was in tune with the annual occurrence of flood.

The early modern regimes followed a less interventionist approach in a flood dependent agrarian society, despite the fact that their growing power was mainly based on generating huge revenue resources similar to the later colonial regime. It did not interfere much in the frequently avulsed territories. After the dreaded 1770 famine the colonial government claimed that there had been a huge amount of revenue loss both in terms of collection and relief work. Therefore, by the early nineteenth century the state began to plan widening the base of land revenue. The colonial government went on to pass the Alluvion and Diluvion Regulation of 1825 in order to bring newly formed land under Permanent Settlement and thus tried to protect itself from such huge loss of revenue. But the temporary nature of the newly formed *diara* land and frequent changes in river-courses posed an ecological challenge. It led to many disputes and lawsuits related to land and fishing rights. The state came up with new Canal, Embankment and Fisheries Acts and tried to govern the rivers. All these modern laws not only reduced its status as common property resource, but also transformed the entire mid-Ganga region as flood-disaster prone. This paper aims to highlight: (1) the morphological dynamics of the Ganga together with floods and alluvium soil deposition in the early modern times; (2) the inception of various modern acts with the intent to govern the rivers; (3) the question of *diara* settlements, and (4) the main actors in the transformation of the Ganga.

*Keywords: Avulsion; Diara; Fisheries; Irrigation; Colonial interest; Canal Act; Embankment Act.*

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