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978-1-107-10728-1 - Living with Disasters: Communities and Development in the
Indian Sundarbans
Amites Mukhopadhyay
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Living with Disasters

This book is a critical account of the disconnected nature of governance, conservation and livelihood initiatives in the Indian Sundarbans, an active delta that spreads over 25,500 sq. km across India and Bangladesh and lies in the Bay of Bengal. It draws a holistic picture of the disaster-prone delta in eastern India, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and also one of the largest tracts of mangrove forests in the world. The author juxtaposes the vulnerable lives and frequently displaced existence of the islanders against the dominant strategies of conservation and development followed by the state.

The book contends that the dominant portrayal of the region as a natural wilderness is not a natural fact but a constructed image. It traces the ecological transformation of the Sundarbans to the early colonial history of reclamation when people settled in that region and huge mud embankments were subsequently built to turn forested wetlands into paddy fields. Much later, with the promulgation of the colonial Forest Act, the imperative of reclamation lost sheen and that of conservation gained ascendancy. Against this specific history of the region, the book provides an account of state interventions around embankment, disaster and displacement in recent times. It explores the islanders' encounter with frequent embankment erosion and disaster over a period of four decades, from mid-1970s to the cyclone Aila in 2009 and its aftermath.

Amites Mukhopadhyay teaches at the Department of Sociology, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. He specializes in environment, development and livelihood issues in India, coastal wetlands in particular and has published in academic journals and edited volumes. His research interests include landscape, ecology and governance, identity politics and institutional histories of science and knowledge making in South Asia.

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To my parents
and
the Sundarbans
islanders for their
warmth, courage
and resilience

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Glossary

<i>aal</i>	Earthen mounds that separate agricultural lands from one another.
<i>adivasi</i>	Literally means original inhabitant. The word is used to refer to tribes more specifically Scheduled Tribes.
<i>alaghar</i>	Huts built next to a prawn fishery. The huts are meant for the staff employed by the fishery owner to keep a watch over the fishery at night. They are also meant for storing fishing repertoire.
<i>auto</i>	Motor driven three wheeler meant for ferrying people.
<i>bagda</i>	Tiger prawn.
<i>banchbar upay</i>	Ways and means to survive.
<i>bastu</i>	Homestead.
<i>bauley</i>	Tiger charmer and woodcutter.
<i>beldar</i>	Irrigation Department's staff charged with the maintenance of embankments. Beldars are recruited mostly from the adivasi population of the Sundarbans.
<i>bhatbhati</i>	Mechanised boats that connect islands, carrying people and goods.
<i>bheri</i>	Fishery where seeds are grown.
<i>Bidhobapara</i>	Locality where widows live.
<i>bidi</i>	Tobacco rolled in dry leaves for smoking. Bidi is cheaper compared to cigarettes and hence preferred by the poor. In Bengal, use of Bidi has a cultural connotation, for it is associated with the way of life of the so-called subaltern.

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GLOSSARY

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<i>bigba</i>	Local unit of measurement, roughly equal to a third of an acre.
<i>bilan</i>	Marshy land where paddy is grown.
<i>Bonbibi</i>	Goddess of forests protecting those who enter the forests in the Sundarbans.
<i>Bonbibi-r Joburanama</i>	The text read out in honour of Bonbibi during Bonbibi puja. The text looks more like prose but reads like verse. The pages of the book open to the right as in Arabic and read from back to front.
<i>bund</i>	Embankments separating land from water, marking the boundary of the fishery and also marking the boundary of one's land.
<i>Catla mach</i>	Indian carp.
<i>char</i>	Sandbars or land formed as a result of silt deposit at the bed of the river.
<i>chouko</i>	Square holes dug on land bordering rivers for adding earth to embankments.
<i>dafadar</i>	Labour supervisor hired by the irrigation department.
<i>Dakshin Roy</i>	Refers to a greedy man-eating half Brahmin sage and half tiger-demon. According to villagers, Bonbibi was sent by god to protect the foresters against Dakshin Roy.
<i>dalal</i>	Broker or middleman benefitting from deals between parties.
<i>diara</i>	Land formed as a result of silt deposit in the Kosi River in the Gangetic delta where settlement started during colonial rule.
<i>down er lok</i>	Literally meaning people from lower echelons of society. Here it is meant to refer to people who live in the southern most islands lying closer to the forests away from places closer to the city.
<i>ghog</i>	Hidden holes in embankments.
<i>jami</i>	Land where paddy grows.
<i>jele</i>	Fisher.
<i>jongol kore</i>	Literally meaning doing jungle. In the Sundarbans it refers to people who go to forests for honey, fish and crab or wood.

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GLOSSARY

<i>jotedar</i>	Refers to big landholder against whom the Naxalites revolted in their land grabbing movements.
<i>kamot</i>	Sharks.
<i>khalashi</i>	An employee belonging to the lowest rung of bureaucracy meant largely for running errands.
<i>kharif</i>	Crop grown during monsoon.
<i>khoti</i>	Little shacks built adjacent to a fishery or on embankments along the river banks where prawn seed transactions take place during the day.
<i>Ma Bonbibi</i>	Literally meaning mother Bonbibi. Goddess is often addressed as mother, the protector against evil force.
<i>mantra</i>	Hymns chanted in honour of the Gods/Goddesses.
<i>mouley</i>	Honey collector who visits the forests.
<i>pabitra mone</i>	Literally meaning ‘in pure heart and soul’.
<i>paikar</i>	Traders who buy tiger prawns from fishery owners and sell them to Kolkata-based business people.
<i>panchayat</i>	Three-tier rural self-government instituted by the left government in West Bengal, functioning at village, block and district levels.
<i>pankaj</i>	A particular type of paddy which is a little salt resistant.
<i>patan</i>	Fish trap used in a fishery.
<i>rabi</i>	Crop grown in winter.
<i>raiyat/rayat</i>	Peasants.
<i>sahab</i>	Earlier the term was used to refer to white colonial masters. Now it is used to address one’s superior. It is used to refer to white collar government officials, particularly the ones occupying higher positions in bureaucracy.
<i>sajuni</i>	One who readies boat during forest expedition.
<i>sangathan</i>	Literally meaning organization.
<i>Sardar</i>	Tribals or adivasis are referred to as Sardars. Sardar is also used as a suffix to their first name.
<i>Sardarpara</i>	Refers to the locality where Sardars live.

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<i>sarkari baboos</i>	A colonial archetype referring to clerks in offices. Used mostly in a pejorative way to refer to people who are not educated gentle baboos but have become one.
<i>up er lok</i>	Literally meaning people from upper echelons of society. In the eyes of the Sundarbans islanders the term refers to people living closer to the city.

Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BSF	Border Security Force
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI-M	Communist Party of India-Marxist
DPD	Development and Planning Department
EIC	East India Company
FB	Forward Bloc
IDPs	Internally Displaced Peoples
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IWW	Irrigation and Waterways
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
NABARD	National Agricultural Bank for Rural Development
NGO	Non-government Organization
PHE	Public Health and Engineering
PWD	Public Works Department
RIDF	Rural Infrastructure Development Fund
RRI	River Research Institute
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party
SAD	Sundarban Affairs Department
SC	Scheduled Caste

ACRONYMS

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SDB	Sundarban Development Board
SDO	Sub-Divisional Officer
SO	Section Officer
ST	Scheduled Tribe
SUCI	Socialist Unity Centre of India
TMC	Trinamul Congress
UK	United Kingdom
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USA	United States of America
WBSPB	West Bengal State Planning Board
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

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Finally, I dedicate the book to my parents who desperately wanted to see the book, but for them the wait proved far too long.

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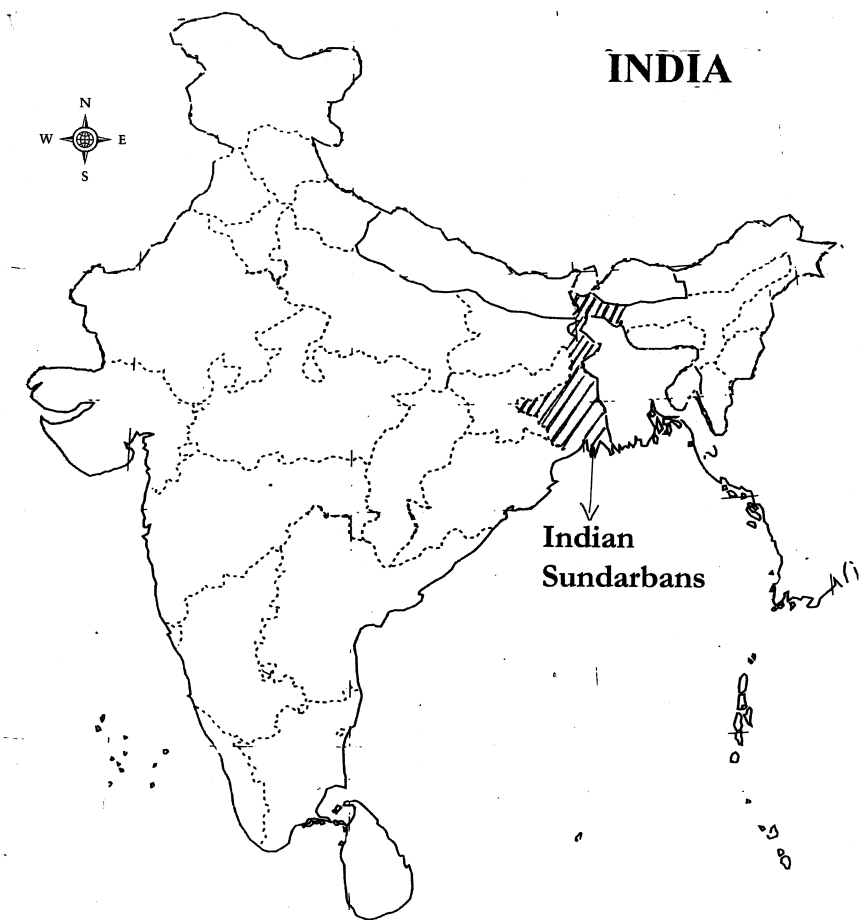
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Note on Transliteration

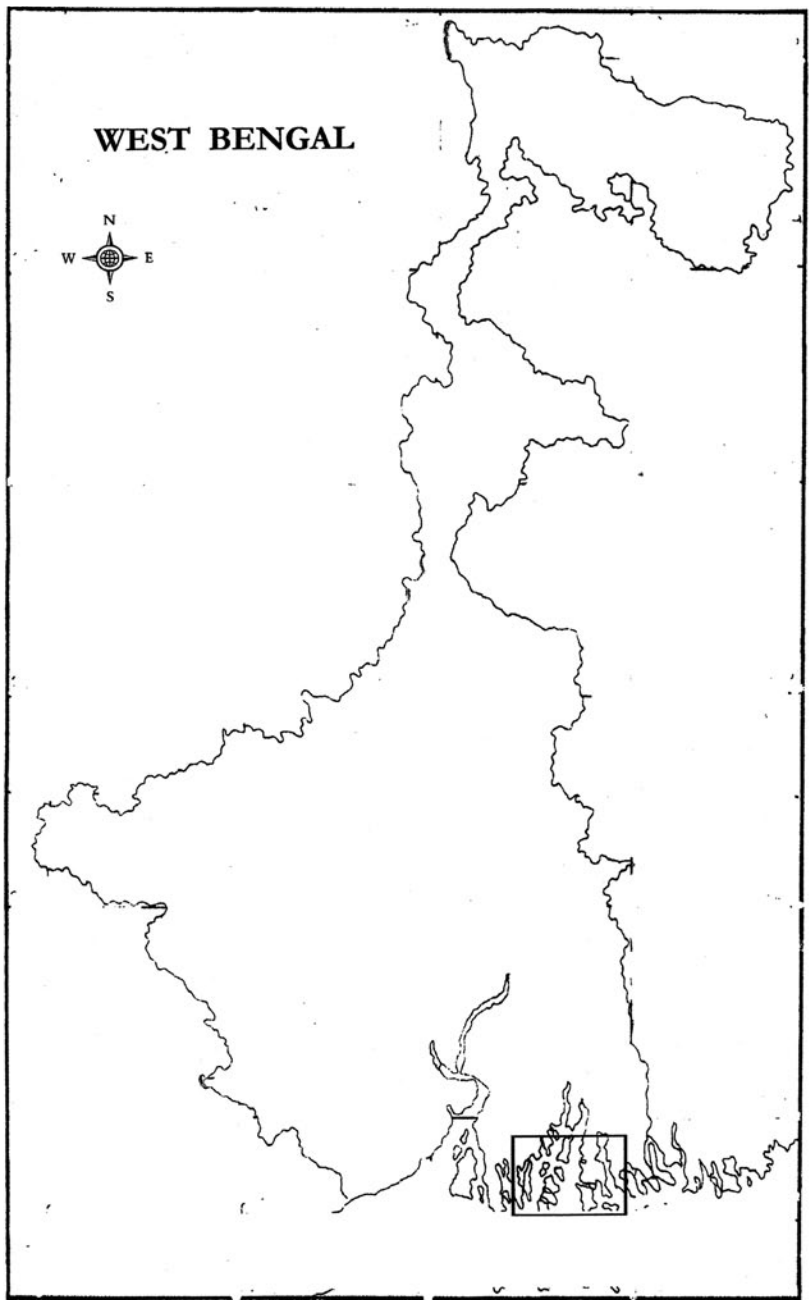
The language spoken in the Sundarbans is Bengali. Like a majority of the North Indian languages, Bengali is derived from Sanskrit and is written in a version of the Devanagari script. Hindi, derived from Devanagari, tends to transliterate into English the vowel 'a' whose sound in Bengali is, in most cases, closer to 'o'. Thus, in Bengali, the terms such as 'panchayat', 'zamindar' or 'dafadar' are generally pronounced as 'ponchayet', 'jomidar' or 'dofadar'. However, convention suggests that these terms be written both in Hindi and Bengali using 'a' instead of 'o'. Hence, I have also followed the conventional practice of spelling these terms with an 'a'.

However, for other local terms such as mouja, chouko, jotedar, jongol and moule, I have used the 'o'. In the case of words like 'jongol', I have also given its English variant 'jungle' as in 'jongol kore' (doing jungle). Although I have mentioned local terms, I have preferred using local terms and their English versions interchangeably throughout the book, for example 'bheri' – 'fishery' or 'bagda' – 'tiger prawn'. However, this rule has not been followed in the case of terms such as 'dafadar' or 'beldar' because their English meanings are long and elaborate. The English meanings of the above terms have been mentioned when the terms are used for the first time in the chapters. I have written all local terms in lower case except for proper nouns. I have avoided italicising local terms. However, the glossary of the book presents the local terms in italics to primarily distinguish these terms from their meanings. I have used all terms without diacritical marks in the text and have added an English 's' to denote the plural. For example, words such as panchayat, bigha or bheri have been used in the plural (i.e., panchayats, bighas or bheris).

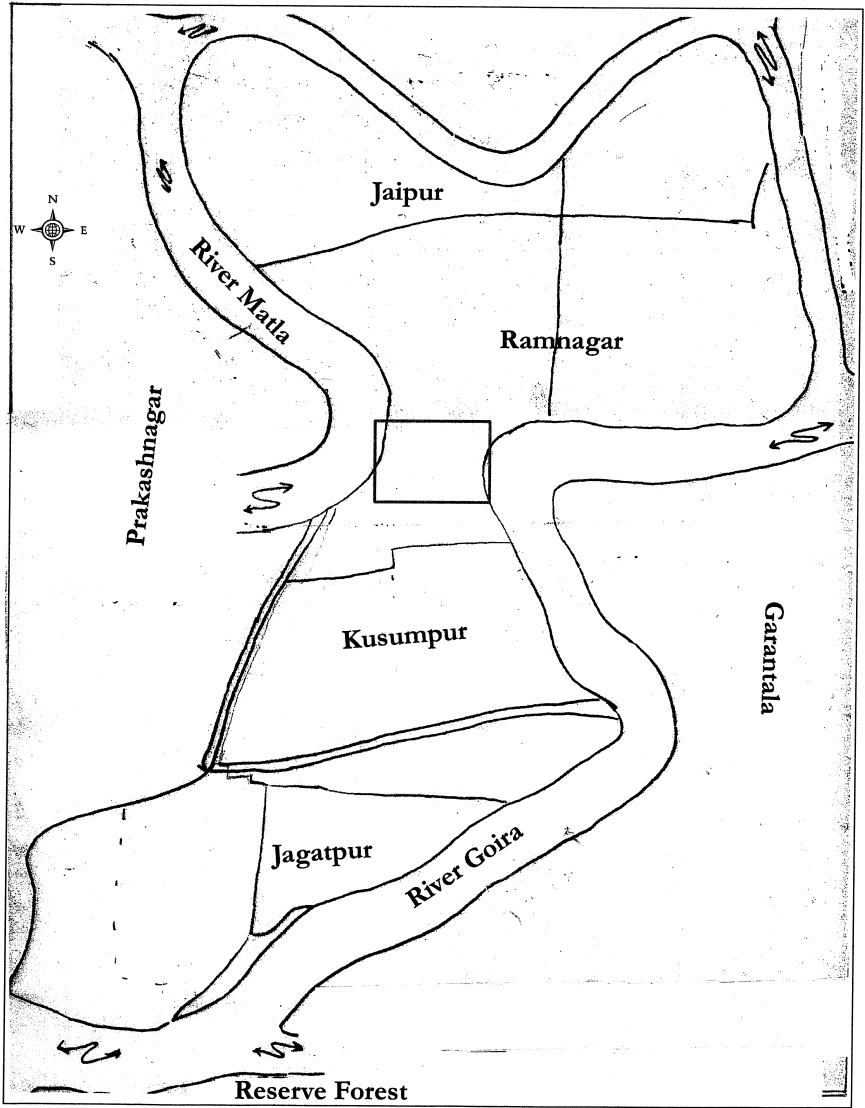
Maps



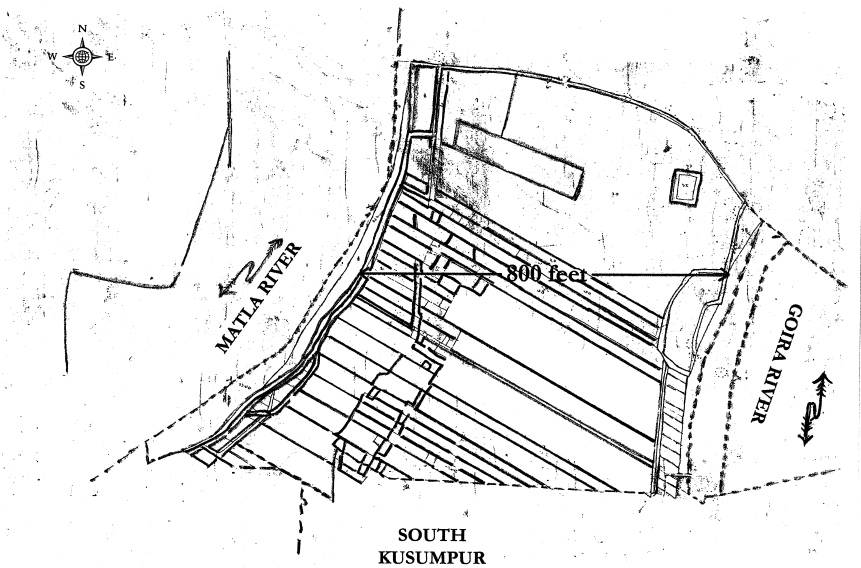
Map 1: Map of India showing West Bengal and the Indian Sundarbans located at the southernmost part of West Bengal.



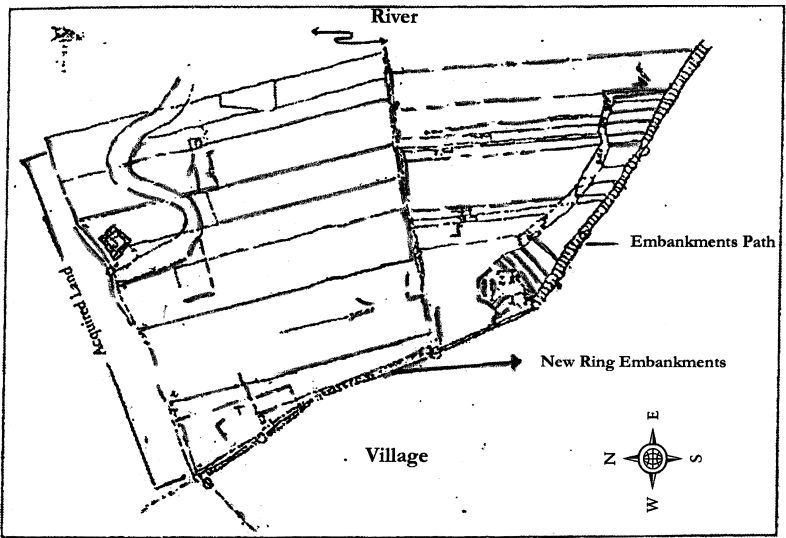
Map 2: The Indian Sundarbans and the area in rectangle denotes the site of fieldwork.



Map 3: Kusumpur island and the area in rectangle shows erosion-prone north Kusumpur.



Map 4: Erosion-prone north Kusumpur showing width of the land between the rivers.



Map 5: The 1,500 feet ring embankment of Garantala and the adjacent 36 acres of land acquired for the purpose of building the new embankment.

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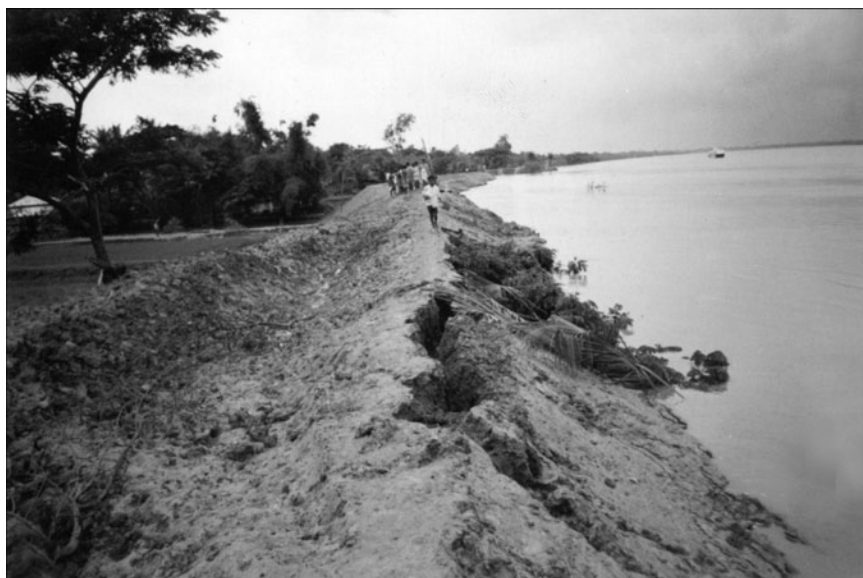
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Illustrations



1: Erosion-prone embankment

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ILLUSTRATIONS



2: Villagers lined up on a collapsed embankment and the village inundated



3: Women catching tiger prawn seeds along the river bank

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4: Prawn seeds being counted before the buyers or paikars



5: Prawn fishery with the alaghar being located on the earthen mound of the fishery

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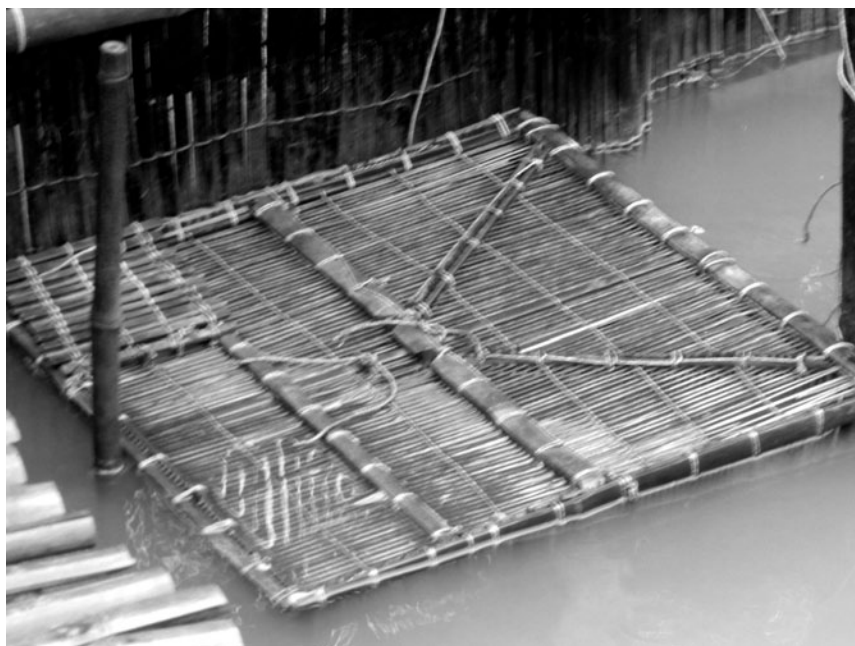
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6: Fishery with submerged fish trap at the sluice gate

Charts

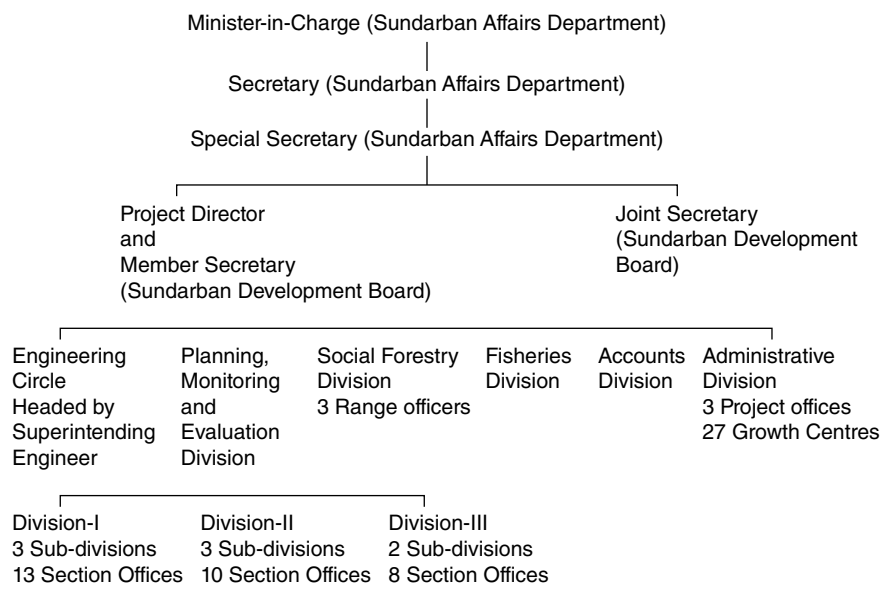


Chart 1: Organization Structure of the Sundarban Affairs Department

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CHARTS

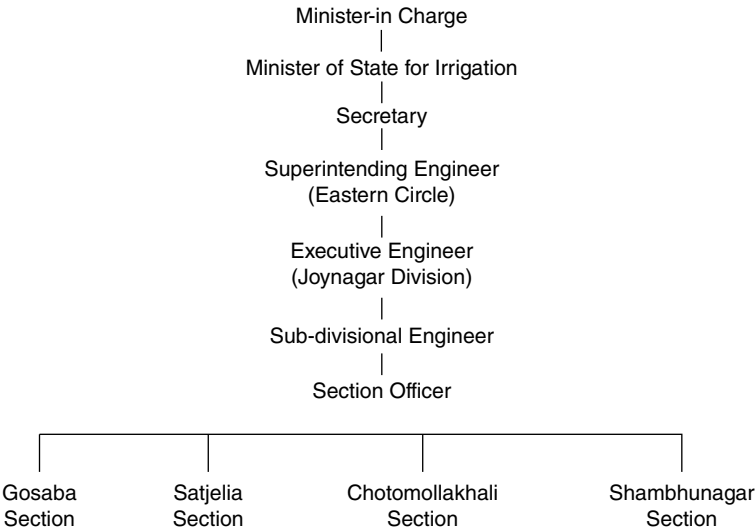


Chart 2: Organization Structure of the Irrigation and Waterways Department