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Damodar, a Riverscape
Visuals & Visage by Bhaskar
Chronicle by Apratim

Damodar, a Riverscape:
Landscape photo-documentary &
fragmented chronicle of a little-known river

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Unlike many famous rivers, Damodar has hardly been documented pictorially. Both the culture and the landscape that evolved around the banks of this river have also largely remained beneath the radar of mainstream media. However, there is a kaleidoscope of great stories around Damodar where great floods, intriguing legends, eons of geological evolution, and human civilization merge together. From this cauldron, over the course of time, the river has woven out its own stories. Stories that are nested within its geographical and natural contours and yet stories that eventually spin beyond their origins. This book is a visual narrative of how these diverse, fragmented, and often unexplored stories have evolved over time, metamorphosed, and eventually created a chronicle of the river.

A River's Rhythm

Colette Copeland in conversation with the author

"Nature promotes mutualism. The flower nourishes the bee. The river waters quench the thirst of all living beings. And trees provide a welcoming home to so many birds and animals. There is a rhythm to this togetherness."

Ram Nath Kovind

CC: How did you become interested in this project about the Damodar river?

BM: Damodar is a seemingly insignificant addition to the myriad rivers of eastern India. When one thinks of rivers in India, the first thing that usually comes to mind is the river Ganges, which has been an integral part of Indian civilization since prehistoric times. In fact, many chapters of Indian civilization evolved along the banks of the Ganges. Damodar has no such nobility or personality.

He (Damodar is a male river, unlike most of other rivers in India) is very much like us - ordinary people, who society and civilization use for their needs. Damodar's influence hasn't changed the nature or the society around its course but adopted to the conditions in a neutral and indifferent manner.

Perhaps that's why the moderate journey of this river is so diverse.



CC: I wasn't aware that rivers were gendered. How does a river receive a gender designation? What characteristics make Damodar male?

BM: Yes, this is an interesting fact. Though most rivers are considered female (referred as Nadi in local language), a few of them are considered male (Nad in local language). The most prominent example may be the river Brahmaputra, which is among the top ten greatest rivers of the world. Apart from Damodar there are a few smaller rivers which are also considered male, like the Sone River. They are commonly named after a male God, like Damodar is another name for Lord Krishna. It is commonly believed that this is after the name of the rope with which his mother used to tie him up with, during his naughty childhood days.

The practical reason could be the inherent character of these rivers and its influence on the surrounding society. The rivers display strength in their character and occasionally cause destruction through massive flooding.



CC: Back to how your project originated.

BM: Because this river is relatively unknown and undocumented, I was interested in exploring the natural flow of the river as well as the diverse life and civilization along its course. My acquaintance and friendship with this river is linked with my childhood days. Long before I took up the camera in my hand, I smeared the sand and mud of this river with both hands, many times. The idea formed a few years ago and I've been working on this project for the past three years, discovering and re-discovering the river's wonders along the 592-kilometer journey.

However, this series is by no means an informative or scientific presentation about the river. It is a personal and sensitive account of the course of a common river, which presents a miniature fragment of present-day Indian society.



CC: *"A river seems a magic thing. A magic, moving, living part of the very earth itself."*

I found this quote by Laura Gilpin to be a beautiful description of what draws us to rivers and seas. What part of the river and its surrounding villages was most magical to you and why?

BM: To me, the entire stretch of this river is magical and alive. However, the early part of the river, near its source in the Khamarpath hills of the Chotanagpur plateau is closest to my heart. In fact, finding the source of the Damodar River was almost the equivalent of an inaccessible expedition. Chula Pani is the place in Khamarpath hills where the sub-soil water takes the form of an enchanting mountain spring and flows down to Boda village. Far away from the advanced civilization of the present time, it is a wonderfully smooth indigenous-inhabited locality. Leaving the pitch road in the distance, the red dirt path winds its way up the hill, through some paddy fields and bushes scattered on both sides.

There is also a lone railway line, waiting, if ever a train is seen. Beyond that, along the slope of the hill, a couple of mud houses are scattered here and there, with bamboo bushes all around--the leaves of which are blown by the autumn wind. At certain times of the year, the air becomes heavy with the intoxicating scent of the Mahua tree. Locals fill their cane baskets with the Mahua fruit, fermenting it into the popular local wine. A sip or two of the Mahua magic to forget the hard life struggle for survival, at least momentarily.

Daily struggle continues in the middle of nature's glorious bounty.



CC: I found myself very interested in the legends about the river, especially Chinnamasta--the headless Goddess. What was the most surprising legend or story that you discovered about the river?

BM: India is a land of unusual cultures, traditions, and rituals. Stories abound in this ancient place. There is a temple dedicated to Goddess Chinnamasta, the headless deity who is a form of Goddess Durga, one of the 51 Shakti Peeth temples in the country. Chinnamasta is a goddess of contradictions. She represents death, temporality, and destruction as well as life, immortality, and recreation. The environment of this very ancient temple is somewhat compatible with Tantric's culture and goes well with this tribal region. This is a famous place not only for the locals, but also for people from neighboring states. Animal sacrifice is still practiced here. On Saturdays and special occasions, the river in front literally turns red with the blood of animal sacrifices.

It is not known whether it quenches the mother deity's thirst, but there is no doubt that it provides solace for some people. The place and the temple have a special significance for the tribal people in the context of post-death rituals of their family members. On one's final journey, it is believed that this is the final resting place for the departed soul. This belief system extends to not only indigenous peoples, but outsiders. At times, people in luxury cars arrive, standing outside the temple premises or in the air-conditioned guest house next door witnessing the offerings of worship with the sacrificial animals.

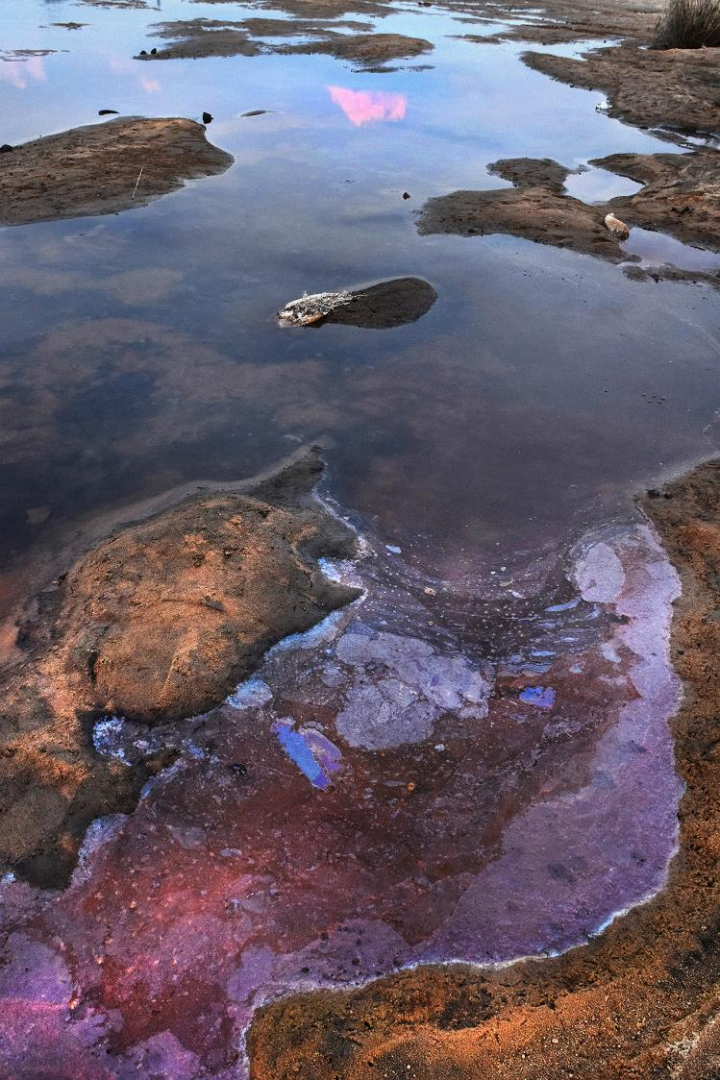
This is a practice of atonement to wash away the burden of sin.



CC: I'm fascinated with the contradictory characteristics of Chinnamasta and how she simultaneously symbolizes life and immortality, as well as death and destruction. How does one reconcile her opposing nature? I find correlations between the Goddess's nature and the ever-changing nature of the river.

BM: This is probably the greatest beauty of ancient Indian mythology; the myths are always multidimensional, rather than prescriptive. More than religious, they are philosophical, and essentially linked with the learnings from nature. Both spiritual powers and natural forces offer humankind much needed affection and support. At the same time, considering the situation, they destroy the sin and punish severely. But even behind those punishments, there is a sublime flow of overarching kindness.

The river exhibits this character very categorically. He unconditionally provides everything that a human society needs. Then, occasionally massive flooding happens. Yet, with the flooding water comes extremely fertile silt, which feeds the vast stretch of land on the river basin. This ensures excellent crop production for few years, bringing prosperity to the region.



CC: From the photographs, it is clear that industrialization has negatively impacted some of the beauty of the landscape. How has industrialization adversely affected the ecology of the river and the people living in the surrounding villages? What are the environmental concerns going forward?

BM: The central part of the Damodar valley is rich in various minerals and ores including limestone, bauxite, mica, baryte and coal. The coal reserve here is so massive, that it alone accounts for almost 46% of India's coal reserves. Naturally, the area covering Bokaro, Burnpur, Asansol, Ranigunj, and Durgapur together is a heavily industrialized zone and hosts some of the biggest industrial establishments of the country. Damodar's water is one of the important raw materials for these industries. The resulting industrial processes have polluted the water. Faulty mining practices, outdated processing practices and lack of proper maintenance compound the problem, in addition to corruption, inadequate pollution control legislation and practices, as well as lack of awareness by the people. Another major cause of concern is the uncontrolled and often illegal sand mining on the banks of the river. This not only pollutes the river water, but also destroys the delicate ecological balance of the basin and eventually increases the probability and intensity of flooding. All of these are part of a much larger nexus between the people in power, industrial corporations and local influential people, just like any other developing countries of the world. Today nature is paying the price, but tomorrow, we must return it and restore it back with full interest. Despite the ravaging of his water, the ever-forgiving river decorates his wounded body, in the hope that one day eternal beauty will triumph over all defilement.



CC: "We must begin thinking like a river if we are to leave a legacy of beauty and life for future generations."

What do you think David Brower means by "thinking like a river"? How does this apply to the Damodar and its people?

BM: To me rivers are very much like a noble person, in their thoughts and actions. The rivers are full of life force. The river holds in its heart the diversity of the world, and nurtures it prudently for the future. It promotes inclusiveness and mutualism. At the same time, it engrosses innumerable blows with infinite endurance. Yet when the collective sin crosses the line, it becomes a defendant, and sweeps everything away with its mighty force.

Damodar as a river is exactly like that.

Two types of people exist on the Damodar. Those whose lives are built around embracing this river. They love, respect, and try to protect this river as much as possible. There are also those who use this river only for their material needs, dumping their leftovers back in this river when the need is over. Unfortunately, their kind exists in plenty.

I am genuinely hopeful that with the recent rise of consciousness about protecting the environment and natural resources around us, overall equation between human civilization and rivers like Damodar will improve. And I also strongly believe the younger generation will take the key role in rebuilding that relationship.



Colette Copeland

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Colette Copeland is a multi-media visual artist, arts educator, social activist and cultural critic/writer whose work examines issues surrounding gender, death and contemporary culture. Sourcing personal narratives and popular media, she utilizes video, photography, performance and sculptural installation to question societal roles and the pervasive influence of media, and technology on our communal enculturation.

For the past 10 years, she has lived in Dallas, Texas where she teaches art appreciation, contemporary studio practices, foundations of art and digital photography at Collin College, and University of Texas at Dallas. She is the recipient of a Leeway Foundation Award for Art & Change and 2020 Kevin Mullins Memorial Award.

Over the past 27 years, her work has been exhibited in 25 solo exhibitions and 143 group exhibitions/festivals spanning 35 countries.

For the past 9 years, Copeland has volunteered with Traffick911, an organization helping sex trafficked youth. She also volunteers in juvenile detention facilities teaching Nia dance therapy to incarcerated teen girls.

Copeland writes cultural and arts criticism for Glasstire, Arteidolia, and Eutopia Contemporary Art Reviews. She has also written for The Photo Review, Afterimage Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism, Ceramics: Art and Perception, and Exposure Journal. She is a member of AICA--International Association of Art Critics.

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Bhaskar is a landscape photo artist, deeply influenced by the mysteries of nature, and a profound believer of life's goodness. He is the founder of Srishtisandhan – an online treasure-trove of contemporary Bengali parallel literature, Srishtisandhan Academy – a voluntary organization dedicated towards the education and cultural upliftment of underprivileged children and Lightscribes – a Photography institution promoting visual literacy through the language of photography.

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