International Journal of Global Research Innovations & Technology (IJGRIT)
An International Multidisciplinary Quarterly Double Blind Open Access Peer Reviewed Refereed Journal
ISSN : 2583-8717(Online), Impact Factor: (Cosmos:6.972 & I2OR: 5.002), Volume 04, No. 03, July-September, 2026, pp 120-124

The Structural Limits of River Embankments: A Socio-Economic and Hydro-Geomorphic Analysis of Flood Control Infrastructure

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Citation: Goyal, U. & Goyal, P. (2026). The Structural Limits of River Embankments: A Socio-Economic and Hydro-Geomorphic Analysis of Flood Control Infrastructure. International Journal of Global Research Innovations & Technology, 04(03), 120–124.

ABSTRACT

River embankments are one of the oldest and most widely used structural measures for flood control in South Asia, credited with protecting lives, crops, and infrastructure across flood-prone river basins in India. This paper examines the dual character of embankments: their demonstrated socio-economic value in stabilising agriculture, infrastructure, and settlement patterns along rivers such as the Ghaggar, Yamuna, and Kosi, set against a growing body of hydro-geomorphic evidence, most notably the 2008 Kosi embankment breach in Bihar, showing that embankments can, over time, convert manageable flood risk into infrequent but catastrophic risk. The paper then moves from this qualitative case-based critique to a quantitative treatment of how and why embankments physically fail during overtopping, presenting the shear-stress-based erosion model used to predict soil and road-surface erosion rates, including the empirically derived erosion-rate equations for cohesive and noncohesive soils. Read together, the socio-economic case for embankments and the engineering case for their eventual failure point toward the same conclusion: embankments are not a permanent structural fix, but an infrastructure class whose value depends on active monitoring, material selection, and reinforcement over their operational life.

***Keywords**: River Embankments, Flood Control, Kosi River, Riverbed Aggradation, Embankment Breach, Sediment Transport, Shear Stress, Erosion Rate Modelling, Critical Shear Stress, Cohesive Soil, Overtopping, Flood Risk Management.*

Introduction

India is a riverine country with 40 million hectares of flood-prone area. Almost every monsoon, rivers overflow and cause loss of life and property. According to the National Disaster Management Authority, floods in India submerge roughly 75 lakh hectares of land annually, claim close to 1,600 lives, and cause losses of approximately ₹1,805 crores to crops, homes, and public infrastructure each year. To control this, embankments or levees are constructed parallel to rivers; according to the Central Water Commission, India has over 35,000 km of such embankments.

Despite this scale of investment, flood destruction persists with striking regularity. This paper treats that persistence not as evidence that embankments don't work, but as a prompt to examine *how* they work, over what time horizon, and under what conditions they fail, bringing together a socio-economic account of embankment benefits with a hydro-geomorphic account of embankment risk, and a quantitative model of the physical mechanics of embankment erosion during flood overtopping.

What is a River Embankment?

An embankment is a raised wall made of earth, sand, clay, and sometimes concrete boulders, built on both sides of a river. Its main function is to confine river water within the channel and increase its water-carrying capacity.

Socio-Economic Benefits of Embankments

- **Flood Control and Protection of Life:** The most direct benefit is flood protection. During 2023, the Ghaggar river embankment saved large parts of Sirsa, Fatehabad, and Sangrur from severe flooding, preventing sudden inundation of villages and giving time for evacuation.
- **Agricultural Security:** In Punjab and Haryana, agriculture is the backbone of the economy. Embankments prevent submergence of standing crops such as paddy and cotton, sand-casting on fertile alluvial soil, and erosion from fast river currents, ensuring stable farmer income and contributing to national food security.
- **Protection of Critical Infrastructure:** Roads, railway lines, schools, health centres, power substations, and water supply lines are often sited within floodplains. Embankments protect this infrastructure and save crores of rupees in annual repair costs. Although, as Section 5 details, the roads sitting on or near embankments remain physically vulnerable once overtopping begins, and how vulnerable depends heavily on soil composition and surface treatment.
- **Regulation of River Morphology:** Rivers in alluvial plains are dynamic and tend to meander. Embankments stabilise the river course and prevent riverbank erosion in the short term, checking the loss of agricultural land that gave Bihar's Kosi region its historical name, the "Sorrow of Bihar." Section 4 complicates this picture considerably.
- **Facilitation of Irrigation and Water Resource Management:** Embankments help divert floodwater into canals and storage areas, later used for irrigation in the Rabi season, converting a disaster into a resource.
- **Strategic and Social Utility:** In rural areas, the top of an embankment functions as an elevated road for people and cattle during floods, a temporary shelter zone, and an access path for NDRF and army relief operations.
- **Economic and Social Stability:** When floods are controlled, migration falls, schooling is less disrupted, and water-borne disease outbreaks decline, producing broader social well-being and psychological security. Section 4 argues that this same sense of security is part of what makes eventual embankment failure so costly.

The Hydro-Geomorphic Case Against Embankments

- **The False-Security Effect:** Embankments change human behaviour as much as they change river behaviour. Once a stretch of river is embanked, floodplain land previously left open or used only seasonally begins to look permanently safe for settlement. In the Koshi basin in Nepal, this dynamic encouraged settlement close to the embanked channel, land that had earlier functioned as part of the river's natural floodway. When an embankment eventually fails, the population and property exposed is consequently far larger than it would have been without the embankment at all.
- **Sediment Trapping and Riverbed Aggradation:** Embankments confine a river to a narrower channel, which increases flow velocity and the shear stress the water exerts on the bed and banks. Confinement also traps sediment inside the embanked channel rather than allowing it to disperse across the floodplain. Over years, this raises the riverbed, a process known as aggradation. The Yellow River in China illustrates this in extreme form: silt trapped by its embankments has raised the riverbed several metres above the surrounding land in places. As the bed rises, embankments must be built progressively higher just to contain the same flow volume, increasing overtopping risk even where the embankment structure itself remains intact.
- **Erosion and structural fatigue:** Higher velocities from channel confinement also erode embankments and riverbanks directly, requiring repeated reconstruction. The Brahmaputra Right Embankment in Bangladesh, for example, has needed reconstruction close to ten times over roughly fifty years because of erosion (Oberhagemann et al., 2020). This is the macro-scale expression of the same shear-stress-versus-resistance relationship quantified at road-embankment scale in Section 5. Once the force the water exerts exceeds what the material can withstand, erosion proceeds, and how fast depends on what the structure is made of.
- **The 2008 Kosi Breach as a Case Study:** The Kosi River's 2008 embankment breach in Bihar illustrates how these mechanisms compound. Before the embankment, the river migrated naturally westward across its floodplain. Engineered barrages and embankments altered sediment deposition patterns, and a greater concentration of barrage gates on the eastern side

reinforced an eastward shift. When the eastern embankment breached, the river shifted course abruptly, by hundreds of kilometres eastward, flooding agricultural land and settlements considered protected for decades and displacing millions across Bihar and Nepal. This scale of disaster was possible precisely because the embankment had, for years beforehand, created an impression of permanent safety, the false-security effect described in 4(a), realised at catastrophic scale.

Quantifying Embankment Failure: Erosion Mechanics During Overtopping

Where Section 4 establishes *that* embankments fail and *why* this matters socially, this section presents the quantitative model developed through combined field observation and controlled flume experiments for predicting *how much* material an embankment or overtopped road will lose, and *how fast*.

- **Determinants of Erosion Rate**

Three variables jointly determine how quickly an embanked structure erodes once water overtops it

Soil Cohesion

Soil "stickiness" is the primary predictor of erosion speed.

- Highly cohesive soils (clay) resist erosion well and are relatively insensitive to increases in water velocity. Low-cohesive soils (sandy clay, with roughly 20% more sand than the clay case) erode markedly faster under identical flood conditions.
- Noncohesive soils (sand/gravel) erode fastest of all, and their erosion rate is extremely sensitive to velocity. A small increase in water speed produces a disproportionately large increase in material lost.

Surface Type

- Bare soil erodes primarily at the top and downstream shoulder of the embankment, the far edge from the oncoming water. Erosion typically begins at this downstream break point, where accelerating water carves a "nick point" that works backward toward the upstream side until the structure breaches.
- Paved surfaces reduce erosion by roughly 50% under moderate flooding and hold firm in shallow water (up to ~2 feet), but fail catastrophically beyond that: at around 4 feet of water depth, water begins eroding the soil beneath the pavement (undermining), and once support is lost, the pavement breaks and lifts away, producing total failure within roughly four hours.

Protective Treatment

Among tested protective measures:

- Soil cement, a compacted 1-foot protective layer applied to the embankment top and downstream slope, performed best, showing no measurable erosion even after ten hours of severe testing.
- Gabion mattresses, a rock-filled wire baskets over filter fabric, performed very well, holding their position and preventing soil loss even as individual rocks shifted at high velocities.
- Enkamat, a nylon turf-reinforcement mat, performed adequately only in shallow water below 1 foot, tearing or stretching in deeper, faster flow, with its metal anchoring stakes actually inducing turbulence that accelerated erosion.
- Grass gave inconsistent protection, adequate in shallow flooding but prone to tearing out in "pockets" during deeper flow, with the resulting bald patches becoming new erosion entry points.
- Geoweb, a plastic honeycomb grid filled with small rock, performed the worst of all tested measures, typically failing within an hour as water flushed the rock fill out of the grid cells.

- **Calculating the Erosive Force: Shear Stress (τ)**

The force floodwater exerts on an embanked or road surface, its shear stress, is derived by modelling the water's speed and depth at each point across the structure using a momentum-balance approach, then combining water velocity, water density, and a surface-specific friction factor (which differs for bare dirt, pavement, or grass) to yield the applied shear stress, τ.

- **Calculating the Resistance Threshold: Critical Shear Stress (τc)**

Critical shear stress, τc, is the threshold force a given soil can withstand before erosion begins, and its calculation differs by soil class:

  - For cohesive soils (clay), τc is derived from the Plasticity Index: a measure of how moldable and "stretchy" the soil is. Higher plasticity corresponds to a higher critical shear stress.
  - For noncohesive soils (sand/gravel), τc is derived from the mean grain or particle size; larger particles require a proportionately greater force to dislodge.

- **The Erosion-Rate Equation**

Once τ and τc are known, erosion is predicted to occur whenever the applied shear stress exceeds the critical shear stress ($\tau > \tau c$), with the erosion rate given by:

$$\mathbf{E = K(\tau - \tau c)^a}$$

where:

  - *E* = erosion rate (rate at which soil is detached and carried away)
  - *τ* = applied shear stress (the force the water exerts on the surface)
  - *τc* = critical shear stress (the threshold force the soil can resist before eroding)
  - *K, a* = empirically fitted soil-specific coefficients describing how sensitive that soil type is to excess shear stress

Three soil-specific versions of this equation have been empirically derived, differentiated by plasticity:

  - **Highly cohesive (clay) soil:** $E = 0.000086(\tau - \tau c)^{0.91}$
  - **Low-cohesive (sandy clay) soil:** $E = 0.00022(\tau - \tau c)^{0.43}$
  - **Noncohesive (sand/gravel) soil:** $E = 0.00324(\tau - \tau c)^{1.30}$

The differing exponents are instructive: the noncohesive case's exponent of 1.30 (versus 0.91 for clay) confirms quantitatively what Section 5.1 describes qualitatively, noncohesive soils are disproportionately more sensitive to increases in applied shear stress than cohesive soils are, so a given rise in flood velocity produces a much steeper erosion response in sandy or gravelly embankments than in clay ones.

- **Estimating total Material Loss**

To translate an instantaneous erosion rate into the total volume of embankment or road material lost over the course of a flood event, a second equation incorporates flood duration and structure geometry:

$$\mathbf{Vs = K1 \times K2 \times Ea \times T}$$

where:

  - Vs = total volume of material lost (cubic yards)
  - K1 = an adjustment factor for flood duration (erosion typically slows over time as the most vulnerable material is removed first)
  - K2 = an adjustment factor for structure height (taller embankments/roads tend to erode faster)
  - Ea = the base erosion rate from Section 5.4
  - T = total flood duration (hours)

- **Engineering Implications**

This framework, comparing applied shear stress against a soil or surface specific critical threshold, then integrating the resulting erosion rate over flood duration, converts embankment failure from an unpredictable event into a modellable one. Applied at the scale of an individual road or embankment segment, it identifies which stretches are highest-risk before a flood occurs (e.g., noncohesive soil with bare-dirt surfacing at a low embankment height is the worst-case combination) and quantifies how much protective treatments such as soil cement or gabion mattresses reduce expected material loss. Applied conceptually at river-basin scale, it offers a physical explanation for the erosion-driven reconstruction cycles documented in Section 4(c): the Brahmaputra Right Embankment's repeated failures are, in this framework, the observable outcome of applied shear stress from confined, accelerated flow repeatedly exceeding the embankment material's critical shear stress over successive flood seasons.

Synthesis: Toward Evidence-Based Embankment Design and Maintenance

Read together, Sections 3 through 5 point toward a consistent conclusion. Embankments deliver real, measurable socio-economic value, in flood protection, agricultural stability, infrastructure preservation, and social security, but that value is time-limited and conditional rather than permanent. Section 4 shows the macro scale, decades long failure pathway: sediment trapping raises riverbeds, confinement accelerates erosion, and the resulting sense of security draws settlement into land that is not permanently protected, a dynamic that produced catastrophic outcomes at the Kosi in 2008. Section 5 supplies the physical mechanics underlying that pathway at a resolution fine enough to act on: erosion is not a mysterious or unpredictable process but a function of quantifiable soil resistance, applied hydraulic force, and flood duration, all of which can be measured, modelled, and critically modified through material and design choices before a flood occurs.

The practical implication is that "maintenance" should mean something specific and evidence-based: monitoring riverbed elevation and channel morphology over time (including through remote sensing), calculating critical shear stress for the actual soil composition of a given embankment stretch rather than treating all embankments as structurally equivalent, and prioritising high performance reinforcement, soil cement and gabion mattresses over grass or geoweb, at the locations the shear-stress model identifies as highest-risk.

Conclusion

River embankments remain a necessary line of defense between rivers and human settlements, and for a developing country like India they continue to underpin agricultural sustainability, economic stability, and social security in the short and medium term. But the Kosi breach, the Yellow River's aggradation history, and the Brahmaputra's repeated reconstructions all demonstrate that embankments are not a self-sustaining structural fix. If left unmonitored, they can quietly convert a manageable flood risk into an infrequent but catastrophic one. The shear-stress erosion model developed in Section 5 offers a way out of this bind: by making embankment vulnerability quantifiable rather than assumed, it allows planners to target reinforcement where it is actually needed, rather than treating all embankments as equally protected or equally at risk. The future of embankment policy, on this account, lies not in choosing between building and removing embankments, but in pairing them with continuous, quantitative monitoring, sediment and erosion management and flood forecasting. In places where floodplain settlement has already occurred, adaptive spatial planning that treats coexistence with the river must become the underlying goal.

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