

# Anthropology Book Forum

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**DEWAN, CAMELIA.** 2021. *Misreading the Bengal Delta: Climate Change, Development, and Livelihoods in Coastal Bangladesh*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

“Climate change is a fact” (p. 74). So begins anthropologist Camelia Dewan’s conversation with a western development professional called Mr. Jones, who works for a prominent aquaculture organization in coastal Bangladesh. Mr. Jones goes on, presenting his views on how Bangladeshis can best adapt. He explains that farmers should shift from cultivating rice – a cherished staple – to producing commodities for global export, like prawns. Dewan reports feeling stunned by this vision. Her own research with fishers and farmers in Bangladesh revealed myriad social, ecological, and embodied harms wrought by export-oriented saline aquaculture. She had become acquainted with grassroots activists, who were working to limit the expansion of prawn cultivation. Mr. Jones dismissed such concerns. In his view, the shift to saline aquaculture is “inevitable” (p. 74).

Ethnography is arguably at its best when it challenges entrenched senses of inevitability and creates openings toward other ways of seeing and acting in the world. *Misreading the Bengal Delta* accomplishes this feat admirably. Dewan’s account is a rich and nuanced portrayal of how climate change and development practitioners like Mr. Jones translate climate change into practice, and the effects that these translations have on local communities. She convincingly argues that in their search for climate adaptation solutions donors and practitioners undertake “climate reductive translations” (p. 15), which simplify and de-politicize the complex social, political, and natural ecologies of deltaic Bangladesh. In doing so, many of the climate change adaptation initiatives they promote may in fact exacerbate climate-related vulnerability.

In stark contrast to such simplifications, Dewan’s account is thick with historical, sociocultural, political, and environmental context. Adopting a decolonial approach, she links her critique of present-day climate adaptation to longer genealogies of colonial and capitalist extraction from land, water, and people in Bangladesh. In this way, the ethnography provides an

altogether different vision of what it means to encounter and respond to socio-ecological change in Bangladesh.

Chapter 1, which explores histories of embankment construction, builds an informative foundation for the book as a whole. Dewan traces continuities between colonial and national land reclamation schemes, embankment-building, and present-day climate and development initiatives. Large tracts of the delta were first reclaimed by the East India Company in their efforts to expand arable, taxable land. At that time, some forms of flooding were still considered beneficial for farming. Monsoon floods, for example, bring vital fresh water and rich deposits of silt to fields and thus increase the fertility of the soil. For this reason, embankments were usually temporary. Over time, however, floods became portrayed as damaging, and the British Raj erected permanent, impenetrable embankments. After independence and partition, the shift to permanent embankments continued. In the 1960s, Dutch-style “polders” were introduced as a part of the USAID and World Bank-funded Coastal Embankment Project. Such infrastructures were ill-suited to the flow of water and sedimentary dynamics in the delta. Over time, these infrastructures led to the siltation of water bodies and raised the water level outside embanked areas, resulting in waterlogging. Despite the deleterious effects of these embankments, similar infrastructures are today advanced as effective means of climate adaptation.

In Chapter 2, Dewan presents a fascinating account of heterogenous “development assemblages” comprised of NGOs, donors, state units, and other non-state actors. Dewan finds that development practitioners generally follow an official script about climate change when undertaking projects, even though informal “hidden transcripts” (p. 62) reveal more critical opinions. These critical views rarely find expression in international and Anglophone circles, partly because they tend to be voiced in Bangla rather than in English. Apart from this, critiques can lead to loss of employment and even blacklisting. Again, however, Dewan deftly displays that there is nothing “inevitable” about how climate change and adaptation unfolds in Bangladesh; rather, “[i]t is the composition of brokers and donors in these assemblages, their various institutional agendas and mandates, that shape whether the final interventions fit the needs of the populations they are seeking to assist” (73). Indeed, some local development practitioners creatively draw on what one interlocutor calls the “spice” of climate change (55) to access funding for drinking water projects, latrines, and the excavation of channels that have silted up. Such

projects appear to be more effective because they address the situated concerns of coastal communities.

Chapters 3 and 4 develop intimate portraits of socio-ecological change in the delta. As described above, Chapter 3 explores the effects of saline aquaculture. Many foreign development practitioners laud saline aquaculture as a climate solution, but Dewan's account shows how export-oriented aquaculture has emerged out of dynamics of agrarian dispossession and the privatization of commonly held water bodies. As a result, saline aquaculture often leads to a loss of food sovereignty and profound emotional suffering for poor and landless communities.

Chapter 4 is noteworthy for its original approach to agrarian ecologies. In this chapter, Dewan employs a multispecies approach that is attentive to the entanglements of people, rice, and soil, as well as earthworms, cows, manure, microbes, and micronutrients. She explores the ambivalence that farmers feel about the introduction of capital-intensive agricultural technologies, such as high-yield varieties of rice and agrochemicals such as pesticide and fertilizer. While these post-Green Revolution technologies have led to greater outputs, farmers mourn what they refer to as a loss of *shakti* in their food and soil. *Shakti* refers to life force, strength, soil fertility, and energy (pp. 100-108). While indigenous varieties of rice are said to possess abundant *shakti*, high-yield varieties lack *shakti*, and agrochemical fertilizers are said to "suck the earth dry" (p. 109). Dewan reads *shakti* in material terms, positing that its loss may be equivalent to a loss of micronutrients in the soil and food.

This approach is intriguing and marks a departure from most accounts of *shakti*, which emphasize its symbolic importance, especially in Hindu contexts. As Dewan mentions in an endnote, *shakti* also refers to primordial cosmic energy and is worshipped by many Hindus as the mother goddess (p. 175). Dewan's work mostly focuses on secular meanings of the term *shakti*, but her discussion of spirituality in this chapter points to the fact that coastal Bangladeshi worlds are not just inhabited by multiple species; they also involve engagements with divine and spiritual agencies. Like so much of everyday life in the delta, these dynamics are elided by contemporary climate change and development discourse and practice.

*Misreading the Bengal Delta* is a brilliant and urgent ethnography. Dewan is a sensitive ethnographer, whose care and dedication to the people and ecologies of Bangladesh come across strongly in the text. The book will be of interest to scholars and practitioners alike, especially those whose work relates to environmental and/or climate justice. Though the regional focus is South

Asia, the book's conceptual and theoretical contributions are of much broader relevance, and the text would also make a valuable addition to graduate and undergraduate courses in anthropology, environmental studies, and development studies.

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