
Beyond Climate Reductionism

Insights from an Extraordinary Ethnography Set in Bangladesh

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Climate change is a “spice,” argues Camelia Dewan in her book titled *Misreading the Bengal Delta: Climate Change, Development and Livelihoods in Coastal Bangladesh*. What does she mean by this? Dewan’s extraordinary ethnography, set on the south-west coast of Bangladesh, reveals how the development industry simplifies the ecological, agrarian, and social history of the delta by attributing many of the ongoing crises to climate change. Bangladesh, as it happens, is one of the top recipients of development aid earmarked for climate change adaptation.

Dewan shows, however, that adaptation projects, promoted and funded by international organisations, rarely address local needs and concerns. Furthermore, projects are funded if they include the term “climate change” even if they have little to do with it. Some projects are indeed meaningful and address people’s needs such as the excavation of dead canals, and providing better sanitation and access to clean drinking water, but we learn that in order to obtain funds, these initiatives are often framed as being a part of the challenge of climate change even as they pertain to much longer-term structural inequalities. Depending on who they are speaking to and in order to obtain international funds, development consultants in Bangladesh feel the need to code-switch, often attributing unrelated issues to climate change (Chapter 2).

In this sense, it is a “spice” or masala added to all development projects. Climate change is undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges of the 21st century, but Dewan’s book cautions against a climate-reductive lens. She writes,

Development projects not only simplify complex environmental processes by misreading

BOOK REVIEWS

Misreading the Bengal Delta: Climate Change, Development and Livelihoods in Coastal Bangladesh by Camelia Dewan, *Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022; pp 254, \$105.*

the coastal landscape, they also misread coastal vulnerabilities in ways that do not always match the livelihood concerns of those they seek to help. (p 17)

Each chapter of the book provides a detailed example of climate reductionism. We learn how several of the climate adaptation projects, being rolled out, are, in fact, detrimental to lands and livelihoods and are causing further immiseration. The book reminds us of the definitive work on famines in undivided Bengal, which Drèze and Sen argued, were a result of human mismanagement. In a similar vein, immiseration and ecological degradation in Bangladesh is, in large part, due to human interventions. For instance, the Bay of Bengal delta has been endemic to cyclones, storm surges, and floods long before the current climate emergency. The region has always witnessed heavy rainfall with protracted monsoons. Floods, especially, have been a long-standing occurrence in the region and have provided vitality to cultivators and paddy crops. International non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and development experts view all floods as caused solely by climate change. In contrast, and with keen attention to the longer ecological history of the delta, its seasons and changing levels of salinity, the book shows the nuances of floods, the fact that not all floods are bad and reveals the productivity of some types of flooding. It reveals an ecological knowledge that is

lived and understood from the perspective of those who live it.

Another very powerful instantiation of how international organisations and donors such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as a range of Dutch, German, British consultants, “experts” and “scientists” misunderstand the history and ecology of the delta can be seen in the construction of embankments (Chapter 1). There is an assumption that bigger and taller embankments lead to protection against the sea-level rise. For several decades, the building of embankments has been a part of the World Bank’s climate adaptation project. Through a meticulous social and agrarian history of the region, Dewan shows how embankments are exacerbating the problem instead of alleviating it. The rivers of the Bengal delta bring 1.4 billion tonnes of silt. Embankments obstruct this colossal sediment deposition in the delta and in turn have caused many of Bangladesh’s rivers, tributaries, and canals to silt up. The repercussions are, once again, detrimental both at a social and ecological level: canals have dried out due to embankments and the processes of siltation. In large part, the unsuitability of the embankments is because they are modelled after Dutch dikes in the Rhine delta which sees 1% of the sediment load as compared to that of the Ganga–Brahmaputra–Meghna delta. Once again, funds for climate adaptation are being spent not on solutions to the climate crisis but towards mega infrastructural projects that are exacerbating, instead of alleviating the problem.

Chapter 3 provides yet another example of a form of climate adaption which is, in fact, deeply entangled in exacerbating environmental degradation and poverty. This is the cultivation of prawn seeds. The logic is that sea levels will rise, salinity will increase and so villagers should convert paddy fields to cultivate shrimp. While the World Bank promotes embracing salinity as an adaptation strategy, it is precisely the cultivation of tiger prawns that has led to mangrove grabbing, the cutting down of trees and the conversion of paddy fields into salt

water aquaculture under the guise of poverty reduction. Salt water leads to irreversible changes in land use and destroys the possibility of fresh water cultivation. Shrimp is an export commodity that adds to the foreign exchange of Bangladesh but not to the nutritional intake of the residents of these coastlines. Most strikingly, the immiseration being caused by salt and the burden of salinity is borne by the poorest (p 90).

In what is a brilliant example of a multispecies ethnography, Chapter 4, “Entangling Rice, Soil and Strength in a Freshwater Village” traces how, historically, Bangladesh, in the throes of poverty, was required to cultivate more paddy to feed a growing populace. As a result, high-yielding rice was promoted, and agriculture was expanded through the use of fertilisers and pesticides. More tube wells were dug which further depleted groundwater. Due to a host of reasons, in the aftermath of the “green revolution,” including the weak enforcement of pesticide laws, with multinational companies selling hazardous pesticides and fertilisers to poorer countries like Bangladesh, the country witnessed a slew of problems that ranged from arsenic poisoning, food that had toxins, and rice grown through synthetic nitrogen with high content of urea. Instead of employing traditional agricultural practices like *aushtomashi* bands, the only way forward was seen through pesticides and fertilisers. The effect has been the proliferation of impure food (*bhejal*). Dewan argues how the increase of *bhejal* food, the interconnectedness of the soil to that of the food and to what humans consume, is thought of as a problem not just of adulterated food but also a waning or loss of *shakti* or life force.

Ecological Variations Instead of Sweeping Generalisations

What is perhaps most valuable and refreshing about Dewan’s scholarship is that *Misreading the Bengal Delta* is not a book that solely presents critiques but also simultaneously parses out different solutions, the majority of which have been a part of the scientific and ecological knowledge of communities living in these coastlines. For example, we learn that

there is a big difference between depolderisation and tidal river management. Tidal river management started as a bottom-up solution that came from people’s everyday interactions with the river, known as *jowar bhatar khelano* and required an attunement to the low and high tides and proved to be effective in managing the delta’s silt problem. Alternatives exist but are being wilfully ignored for the “expertise” of the World Bank. From Dewan’s book, we learn about the ecological variations that ought to be taken into consideration in what is an overwhelmingly large delta and the differences in, for example, the southern West Bengal Sundarbans and Bangladesh’s south-west coastal zone. Furthermore, when taking two different villages in the coastlines of Bangladesh—Dhanmarti and Nodi—we learn not only about the differences in the region but also within the region, even in relation to political power and social movements.

The title of the book is inspired perhaps in part by *Misreading the African Landscape*, a classic in anthropology, written by James Fairhead and Melissa Leach, that turned “received wisdom” on its head regarding Kissidougou’s forests. Policy orthodoxy believed that forests were disappearing under human pressure, but Leach and Fairhead’s research showed that forests were associated with humans and, in fact, emerged, flourished, and came and went with human settlements. Their book shows

that instead of degrading forests, people in fact converted fallow land into woody forest islands around their villages. Humans were not harmful to the forests, but forests flourished as a result of human presence. Dewan’s *Misreading the Bengal Delta*, written clearly and in prose that is accessible to both undergraduate students and to development professionals, also moves away from climate-reductive narratives that misread the landscape and instead proposes a more grounded understanding of the history—social, ecological, and agrarian—in order to intervene in solutions that reflect the lived realities and challenges of coastal communities. With meticulous ethnography and archival research, like its namesake, *Misreading the Bengal Delta* will certainly be considered a classic too, an essential read for all those interested in critically engaging with the ongoing climate emergency. This is a book that will be a part of my syllabus, and that of many others too I hope, for a long time to come!

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REFERENCE

Fairhead, J and M Leach (1996): *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savanna Mosaic* (No 90), Cambridge University Press.

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