

CAMELIA DEWAN. *MISREADING THE BENGAL DELTA: CLIMATE CHANGE, DEVELOPMENT, AND LIVELIHOODS IN COSTAL BANGLADESH.* SEATTLE: UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS 2022, 245 P. ISBN: 9780295749617

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Camelia Dewan's first book, *Misreading the Bengal Delta: climate change, development, and livelihoods in coastal Bangladesh*, is an ethnographic critique of development policies enforced by international bodies and governments. It highlights the complexities of the local ecology and describes the precarities of the everyday life of those living in coastal Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is located in the largest delta of the world and frequently faces cyclones, leading to flooding and loss of life. International aid is thus often directed towards controlling the flooding by building embankments. In the first chapter, Dewan traces out a historical relationship between society, colonialism, and the climate. The constructing of embankments was long in practice, but these embankments caused more waterlogging and suffered frequent breaches. During imperial rule there was an attempt to introduce Western scientific knowledge in Bengal and embankments eventually led to the growth of railways and roads. However, today, international bodies overlook these complex histories, which Dewan (drawing from Hulme 2011: 245-266) terms as 'climate reductionism'.

The second chapter then shows how, in today's day and age, embankments are seen as crucial protective infrastructure by international agencies. Dewan argues how development is performative and a collaborative meaning-making practice. She highlights how official narratives of development projects, when conveyed in English, reemphasise the internationally accepted narrative. However, when spoken in Bangla, there are often more meaningful and critical conversations which counter the international narrative. By using climate change as a 'spice', development brokers are often successful in attracting funding which is more aligned to Western discourse.

The third and fourth chapters highlight how these policies are affecting the people in the coastal region of the country. The third chapter focuses on tiger prawn cultivation and its impact on the people living there, detailing incidents of human rights violations, the lack of freshwater fish due to salinity, and rampant deforestation and encroachment of mangrove forests. The fourth chapter discusses the Green Revolution and the introduction of high-yield variety rice, which requires toxic fertilisers and pesticides. Dewan highlights how traditional agriculture is seen to be inefficient and unsustainable, when in reality, the people believe the grown food would give them strength (*shakti*) and not be *bhejal* (impure, adulterated). The fifth chapter focuses on the everyday vulnerabilities and precarities of people living in this area. Dewan draws on larger themes about social issues like dowry, health, unemployment, and education in Bangladesh, which highlights the lack of involvement of the state.

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Dewan's climate ethnography is able to deliver what it aims to address, giving a deep insight into the policy and development sector in coastal Bangladesh and highlighting the difficulties of local citizens. In particular, Dewan's grasp over the Bengali language, and the accurate translation and transliteration of Bangla words elicits praise. Her deep knowledge of the functioning and scientific understanding of the embankments and siltation, and the three kinds of floods (*borsha*, *bonna* and *jalaboddho*) gives the ethnography an insight to local understandings of climate and climate change.

Throughout the ethnography, Dewan is able to build a stark contrast between the aid-workers in Dhaka who disburse funds and discuss policy, with the local people of Nodi and the real life impact these policies have on them. Another point of praise is her inclusion of colonial data in the first chapter, which gives a *longue durée* approach to the relationship shared between Western science and technology, indigenous understandings, and climate change. Most importantly, this book delivers on the aim to critically discuss Western policy and understand local knowledge, which has essentially turned into a decolonialisation project. It concludes by highlighting the role of engaged anthropologists and the importance of qualitative research, which is a stark contrast to quantitative research endorsed by funding bodies.

Two points of critique came up while reading the book. First, Dewan, while highlighting different facets, does not focus on any citizen-led organisations or groups which resist the policies of international funding bodies. These discussions of resistance could have given the book another dimension. Second, while there is a rich usage of photographs throughout the book, there could be more maps comparing colonial and present-day representations of the coastal area. This inclusion would highlight how far the colonial state 'developed' the region compared to the progress made by the postcolonial state.

Misreading the Bengal Delta: climate change, development, and livelihoods in coastal Bangladesh highlights how the ecologically sensitive area has been, and is currently being, 'misread' by international bodies on multiple accounts. It also highlights the ways people negotiate their everyday lives amidst this precarity. It is a must-read for any scholar who seeks insight into how aid distribution and policy making works in a postcolonial and neoliberal state and wishes to delve into the politics of the region.

Bibliography

Hulme, Mike 2011. Reducing the future to climate: a story of climate determinism and reductionism, *Osiris* 1, 245-266.

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