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BOOK REVIEW

Climate Change Adaptation and Neoliberalism in Bangladesh: A Review of Two Monographs

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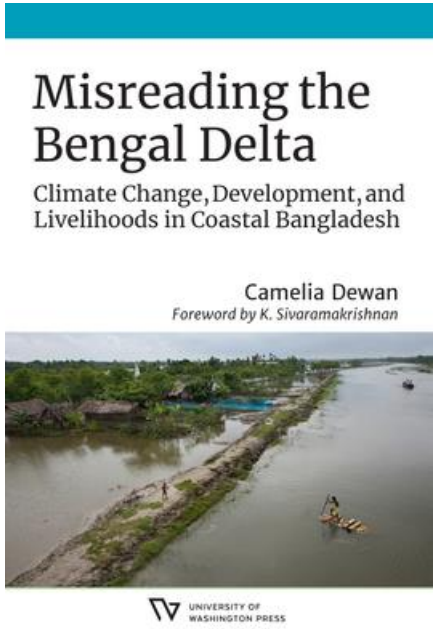
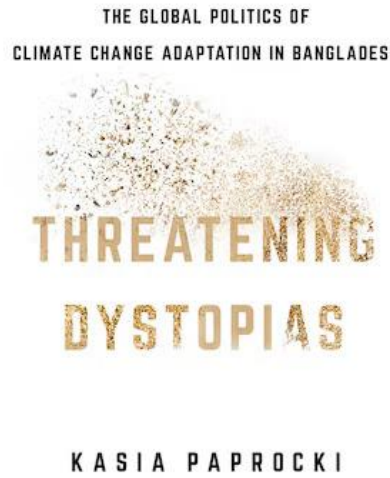
Dewan, Camelia. 2021. *Misreading the Bengal Delta: Climate Change, Development, and Livelihoods in Coastal Bangladesh*. Seattle: University of Washington Press

Paprocki, Kasia. 2021. *Threatening Dystopias: The Global Politics of Climate Change Adaptation in Bangladesh*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press





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The extraordinary attention paid to Bangladesh's vulnerability to climate change is puzzling, especially when compared to other countries situated along the South Asian coastal littoral. Even the neighbouring Indian state of West Bengal and Myanmar receive far less alarmist reviews than Bangladesh, which is overwhelmingly singled out as the poster child of climate doom. It is as if climate change has picked a personal feud with the people of Bangladesh. Why is that so? Two recent books, one authored by Camelia Dewan and the other by Kasia Paprocki, should be read as directly addressing this discursive slant, by offering insightful research and compelling ethnography.

Both monographs focus on the coastal regions that lie in the southwest of Bangladesh. Their aim, at heart, is to link global discourses of climate change with national development narratives through the trope of "adaptation". By carefully studying and analysing several development-oriented projects—such as embankment construction, shrimp aquaculture, and commercial agriculture—Dewan shows how each of these initiatives tends to be shaped by the spectre of climate change. Dewan explains that a group of "brokers", including NGOs, consultants, and government agencies—who are often funded by specific climate donors—get the high science of climate change translated into an alarmist discourse. The inevitable outcome of these "climate reductive translations" (p. 16) is the systematic establishment of an "adaptation regime", which emphasizes that embankments must be in place to check rising water and salinity levels; shrimp cultivation must be increased to make the most of the higher level of salinity; and commercial agriculture should be promoted because subsistence agriculture is considered inadequate to increase the real income of the poor. Dewan chronicles the environmental implications and the social and political consequences of these adaptation practices: waterlogging, displacement, disease, consumption of contaminated food, and enhanced inequality, among other ills.

Paprocki's monograph adopts the same critical lens, scrutinizing neoliberal strategies that have been pushed by the World Bank and other international agencies. In particular, she offers a detailed critique of the shrimp farming industry, which is being widely advocated as part of an adaptation regime. She focuses on the way the "naturalization of crisis" (p. 79) of climate change has become part of the knowledge system of adaptaion. Despite her fairly searing critique, Paprocki offers an optimistic view in exploring instances of successful agrarian resistance against the adaptation protocol and thus presents a nuanced understanding of the fragilities inherent in the neoliberal discourse. Her comparison of the two neighbouring areas (around polder 22 and polder 23) shows how the suffering of the people of

polder 22 contrasts with the relative respite of those of polder 23—which was achieved through collective resistance. With an insightful note on the people's insistence on "agrarian" as opposed to "political" climate justice, Paprocki demonstrates that successful resistance is possible under neoliberal conditions.

While there is little to disagree with in the findings of the books, some of the ethnographic data on which their findings have been based could be traced to similar events and contexts from as far back as the 1980s. For example, the displacement, violence, and even the killing of cultivators by commercial shrimp producers and speculators became a recurring feature when Bangladesh's export income from shrimp cultivation soared from $19 million in 1978 to $170 million in 1992–1993. Moreover, in the same period, the area under shrimp cultivation increased from 20,000 to 120,000 hectares (Haggart 1994, 66–67). Put differently, since an overt nexus between neoliberalism and climate discourse had not yet crystallized in the 1980s, there must be other factors beyond neoliberalism that explain the ecological and social vulnerabilities in coastal Bangladesh.

It is not coincidental that the 1980s was also the starting point for the expansion of shrimp cultivation, following the Indian government's construction of the Farakka Barrage upstream on the Ganga river. Bangladesh has long maintained that the building of Farakka has led to a decline of the deltaic sweet water regime and an increase in salinity levels in the region. Besides, there is also considerable documentation showing an aggravation in the intensity of flooding and the severity of land erosion and an associated shrinkage of livelihood options for subsistence fishers and cultivators. Other current and planned infrastructures along many of the 54 rivers that Bangladesh shares with India are expected to further exacerbate the already stressed environmental and economic situation in wide swathes of the delta, including the study area covered by these two books (Iqbal 2019, 26–31; 2022, 107–117).

By marginalizing the extensive upstream interventions that have ecologically stressed the wider deltaic systems, ethnographers sometimes run the risk of buying into the narrative of many international funders. In a recent World Bank report on Bangladesh's coastal resilience in the context of climate change, terms like "adaptation" and "shrimp" abound, but there is no mention of the ecological impacts of the Farakka barrage or the Teesta dams (Kazi *et al.* 2022). In failing to adequately acknowledge the impacts of these large-scale hydraulic interventions on the Ganga, both the

monographs reveal a disconnect between their richly textured ethnographies and the region's geopolitics.

This quibble aside, both the books deserve high commendation—particularly as critiques of climate change adaptation strategies that have re-envisioned neoliberalism. The adaptation regime has become a discursive signifier of neoliberalism's appropriation of climate change as a hegemonic tool. The intimate stories of the coastal people in Bangladesh that Dewan and Paprocki explore add to a genre of scholarship that draws sharper links between the historical and environmental ethnographies of the region (Jalais 2021; Bhattacharya 2018; Cons 2020). These monographs may inspire similar studies that investigate how neoliberal development projects aim to appropriate climate disourse to legitimize its continued presence.

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