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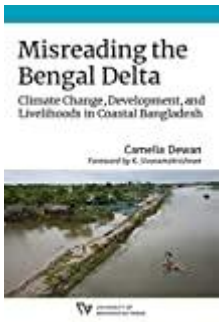

Camelia Dewan. *Misreading the Bengal Delta: Climate Change, Development, and Livelihoods in Coastal Bangladesh.* Culture, Place, and Nature Series. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021. Illustrations, maps, tables. 254 pp. $30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-295-74961-7.

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Frequent headlines emanating from South Asia on extreme weather events are now unmissable, for example, Pakistan's devastating floods, with some sources estimating a third of the country as being submerged. Camelia Dewan's timely book, *Misreading the Bengal Delta*, engages with another South Asian nation, Bangladesh, grappling with the effects of climate change. Located in the slippery, muddy land-water regions across the confluence of the Brahmaputra and the Sunderbans, Bangladesh has become, in many ways, emblematic of the climate crisis. The standard narrative on Bangladesh is that it is the "epicenter of climate change," and as sea levels rise and ice caps melt, Bangladesh will slowly drown. While not denying the effects of climate in any way, Dewan asks a more complex and troubling question: do development efforts exacerbate the problem of climate change? And does the definition of "climate change" suffice to understand and intervene in this complex ecological and sociological landscape?

Dewan answers these questions by turning to both history and anthropology. In a methodologically innovative and rigorous work, Dewan uses archives; a wide qualitative interview base, including fieldwork in two villages (Nodi and Dhanmatri) and interviews with development aid workers in Dhaka; and ethnographic research to demonstrate the contradictory outcomes of the development industry. *Misreading the Bengal Delta* makes two powerful and compelling arguments. First, Dewan shows how colonial ideas and practice of embankments produced the Bengal as a flood vulnerable region. Second, Dewan critically interrogates the language that development aid deploys. Aid agencies, which often deploy the ideas of precarity and place-based vulnerability, ignore both the knowledge and agency that people in Dewan's research region demonstrate and the structural conditions imposed by the very same agencies.

Chapter 1 shows how embankments became an embedded idea from colonial governance to present-day World Bank intervention. The slow

deforestation of the Sunderbans landscape was a result of a flawed embankment policy; incentives were given by the British state to zamindars to tame the mangrove forests of the Sunderbans into arable lands. Without the forest to protect erosion and incursion of the sea, the cultivators and the colonial state turned to ***bandhs***, or bunds, to protect crops from salinity. These flimsy structures gave way to firmer and more reslient water-tight bunds; embankments stop flood and silt deposits on the flood plains. Rather, the embankments began creating new kinds of flooding. Dewan traces how the logic of embankments was embedded in the postcolonial era, when the absence of a colonial irrigation bureaucracy and a weak state led to the emergence of an international aid regime. This regime, which is also the focus of Dewan's broader analysis, imprinted the embankment as a centralized tool of improvement, exacerbating flooding and salinity in Bangladesh.

Chapter 2 follows Dewan's interactions with development professionals in Bangladesh. The chapter shows that Bangladesh is framed as "climate vulnerable." Local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), donors, and even researchers have felt compelled to add "climate resilience" as a catchphrase to attract donor funding rather than rely on other kinds of knowledge. In this way, the embankment, embedded as the solution to Bangladesh's climate change, has caused problems. Chapter 3 delves into Dewan's fieldwork in the villages of Nodi and Dhanmatri, and follows the story of the tiger prawn. Development professionals, simultaneously masquerading as capitalist developers, have positioned climate change in Bangladesh as singular: Bangladesh will sink further as sea levels rise, and salinity is an inevitability. Why not then rethink land use and shift from easily importable rice cultivation to shellfish, such as prawn and shrimp? As Dewan shows, this view of transformation ignores the seasonality of salinity in different parts of Bangladesh. However, uncontrolled expansion of tiger prawn cultivation has far-reaching consequences, including the loss of food sovereignty, ways of life that relied on the local environment, and indeed the desertification of landscape and its emotional consequences. In a rich and riveting chapter, Dewan further argues that saltwater-based tiger prawn cultivation is not inevitable and shows how organized farmers movements have stopped it and even reversed its effects. The chapter follows saltwater geographies, which are seldom understood in the South Asian context, owing to either their rapid disappearance (salt pans) or equally quick emergence (saltwater fish farms). Dewan shows with great skill and care how saltwater environments are rarely constant and lead to capitalist development in some regions, while rejected by others.

Chapter 4 turns its attention to soil, specifically agricultural practices that the Green Revolution in Bangladesh encouraged. The Green Revolution and its multiple fallouts, Dewan argues, robbed the soil of its ***shakti***, or strength. Cultivators further employed the term ***shakti*** to also denote nutrients in the crop, which was eventually to be consumed. The continuation of the decrease of shakti of the crop, especially through increasing use of fertilizers, led to the consumption of ***bhejal*** (or poisoned) foods by people. Chapter 5 examines in detail the matrix of inequalities that characterize Dewan's fieldwork region: health care, education, debt, and employment, among other concerns. Combining ethnographic narrative, storytelling, and detailed analysis of the incapacitated state, Dewan powerfully suggests that coastal climatic vulnerabilities not merely are tied to shifting tides and monsoons but also penetrate to everyday concerns of low-income cultivators.

An interested reader would have liked more on the following issues. First, Dewan, in my view, does not sufficiently engage or critically examine literature from the historical or anthropological cannon. While the literature is present, she builds on rather than seeks to fundamentally rethink any recent scholarship. In many ways, this is refreshing, as it does not resort to building a straw man to

break down. Rather, the archives, ethnographies, and interviews build for the reader a complex understanding of Bangladesh. Yet it leads to the reduction of the more complex scholarship with regional specificity with tremendous relevance to this work. Second, I was left with a question about the role of the postcolonial state. Dewan suggests that the state is incapacitated by structural adjustment and left dependent on aid, making it a side actor in defining and acting on climate change. If this is indeed the case, further understanding how the state processes this role (perhaps a different book) would have been useful.

That said, the book is a sophisticated engagement with Marxist, postcolonial, and nonhuman theories, blending and opposing them in creative and specific ways. The clarity the book offers in identifying the problems around the multiple framings of climate change makes it essential reading for scholars, development practitioners, government policymakers, and general readers interested in climate change and development, Bangladesh, or both.