

Lori Lee Oates and Sritama Chatterjee Speak with Camelia Dewan

Camelia Dewan is an environmental anthropologist who focuses on the anthropology of development. She is currently an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Uppsala University in Sweden. Dr. Dewan is the author of *Misreading the Bengal Delta: Climate Change, Development, and Livelihoods in Coastal Bangladesh* (2021; University of Washington Press).

Lori Lee Oates: Thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. Let's start with what brought you to researching environmental justice in Bangladesh.

Camelia Dewan: I started working on development in Bangladesh in 2008. I was born and raised in Sweden but my parents are from Bangladesh. My grandmother lived with us in Sweden and practically raised me but then returned to Bangladesh. As a university student I wanted to go back to Bangladesh to see her and applied for an unpaid summer internship at BRAC Development Institute. My next work experience in Bangladesh happened after graduating from the London School of Economics with a MSc in Development Studies in 2010–11 and after a role as a Programme Officer in Sweden. I was hired as a research consultant for a one-year project where I led the qualitative survey on water governance and infrastructure in the coastal zone of Bangladesh.

Before this work, I did not know what a polder or an embankment was. It took going to Bangladesh to understand what they really are. I got interested in the work of BELA (the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association) and their work regulating illegal and environmentally harmful practices conducted by tiger-prawn business actors in the southwest coastal zone of Bangladesh. The conflicts between shrimp farmers and rice farmers were a main theme from that qualitative survey and the second issue was how the canals and water bodies were dying due to the embankments.

For my PhD proposal, I wanted to look at land use conflicts, siltation of water bodies, and the maintenance of these embankments. At the time, the scale of climate change was quite small. It was not a big development priority, but it was emerging slowly. One of my Bangladeshi colleagues, who was internationally well connected, told me to add climate change to my proposal because that would get me funding. And he was right. It made me wonder what happened if everyone used climate change as a buzzword to get funding. I wanted to talk about siltation and political conflicts of land use. That's how I got into the terrain of environmental justice more broadly.

LLO: That's interesting because I did my PhD on 19th century British and Imperial history and the history of religion. It was hard for me to get funding to study it; I got a PhD funding, but I could never get any funding beyond that. As soon as I started looking into oil and the transition away from oil, I started getting funding.

CD: As academics, we sometimes must use masalas, I think. But it is one thing to do it for funding applications and another to reproduce that discourse in academic research. I try not to use climate as a spice in my academic writing, you know, because then I already have the funding. Why do we need to produce that discourse in academic research? I think that's something we need to push against.

Chatterjee Sritama: As a follow up to that, we tend to use climate change as a shorthand for a lot of serious environmental problems that are afflicting various regions. One of your essays that I personally appreciate is on women not being able to migrate from islands. I find this an important insight about not slotting women into either “climate victims” or “climate survivors.”

You have spent so many years working in the developmental sectors. I'm curious if there are specific moments from your field work that were epiphanic in terms of bringing this shift in your thinking: from what constitutes climate change to what constitutes environmental change. How would you look at the positionality of women within that framework?

CD: That's a great question. The epiphany was the importance of matri-focal kinship relations. Because in these climate and development discourses it's always about [Bangladeshi Muslim] women being constrained by a religious, conservative, patriarchal society, and very little about their agency and ability to maintain emotional relations that sustain livelihoods. I was not trained in anthropology during my undergraduate or master's degrees and I came from a very development-studies mindset when I started my PhD. So, I thought that shrimp farming results in saltwater intrusion and that it destroys the land and people's livelihoods. I assumed there was a connection between the relationships between shrimp farming and the trafficking of women, particularly among female-headed households who are portrayed as the most vulnerable and poorest in rural Bangladesh. The privilege of doing a PhD in Anthropology is that you can change your entire research topic while doing fieldwork and reconsider what you find. I realized that these female-headed households are not so female headed, nor are they isolated entities. They are embedded in these wider kinship relations, and they have men around them.

Then when I started this research, I realized that one of the best approaches is to not assume everything is about climate change. The first translator with whom I had worked in the water governance project would ask how the environment had changed in Bangla. When you ask that broad question, the women talk about the siltation, when the embankments were constructed, and what happened afterwards in the waterlogging. They talk about the Green Revolution. In Bangladesh, this didn't happen in the '70s. In the '80s and '90s there were structural adjustment policies and the use of agrochemicals. The new seeds destroyed the soil and the earthworms.

I've not used the term environmental justice in my work but it's all about justice in a way, because it's all about these past economics and extractive modes of production. Those changed the environment in ways that negatively affected everyday rural livelihoods.

The biggest issue in terms of environmental justice is obviously the shrimp cultivation, the salinity, and the embodied and affective dimensions. It's not just that you get more money for selling shrimp. It's all the biodiversity you lose, the chores you can't do properly because there's no fresh water. I really appreciated that I could do anthropological PhD field work for a year and let my interlocutors frame their everyday livelihood problems themselves. That's how you find out various things—even a lot of things I didn't end up writing about.

The book would not have been complete without the last chapter on structural violence because it's not about a climate adaptation project. I really felt, after spending a year with these amazing people, that to not share their most pressing livelihood concerns would be unethical. So, that last chapter is for them because what do coastal vulnerabilities mean from a bottom-up perspective?

CS: I really appreciate hearing who the book was for and who you were writing about. You also mentioned that you came to your PhD in anthropological studies from a developmental studies background. What was this shift like for you? What was the training? What were the challenges? What was the potential that you saw in this work?

CD: Oh, that's such a tough one. I mean, anthropology is all about unpacking everything. One of my classmates or cohort members said, “What is development? What do you mean?” and then we went through the exercise of unpacking development. I think anthropology is a great tool for complexity and reflecting on your own positionality

and biases. It just makes you reflect critically on your own biases. I really value the fact that I did get anthropological training from one of the people in academia that I admire the most, David Mosse. His book *Cultivating Development* is what got me interested in anthropology.

CS: Yes, that's a nice segue into my next question. Who has been your inspiration? How would you locate your own work in relation to the scholars—and people outside academia—who have inspired you?

CD: There are so many people that I don't really know where to start. Working with all these Bangladeshi NGOs and researchers in Bangladesh, and seeing the importance of applied research, was extremely eye-opening to me because that's research done in the real world, rather than theoretical research. I had three supervisors in total during my PhD.

David Mosse was one supervisor. Sunil Amrith was the environmental historian who was my co-supervisor and Penny Vera Sanzo was from the field of gender and development. Sunil's work was so inspiring in terms of showing the importance of history.

With Birkbeck and SOAS [the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London] and being in the history department, I had to do two vivas because it was so complicated. I did my archival research in my first year of my PhD and looked at embankments through colonial history. That's when I saw the resonances and importance of understanding the past to understand the present.

So, without Sunil, I wouldn't have had that really rich historical context; he also helped me so much with the archival research. I was a Research Assistant for his project doing archival work in Bangladesh. He's the one who recommended Frederick Cooper's book for how it critically spoke about modernity. Because that's also a term we just take for granted, as something positive, right? So, my supervisors meant quite a lot. Then I was teaching at Stockholm Anthropology, and I was part of an Environmental Anthropology reading group. I was a postdoc in Oslo for five years and Environmental Anthropology is really strong there. My most recent article is on ship-breaking and is part of a special issue on re-figuring the future commons.

These conversations with colleagues about current publications and research have been really inspirational for me, as well as conferences. There are so many academics whose research I look up to. I don't think I do justice by mentioning just a few of them here.

CS: There will always be historians holding us accountable for our usage of terms, which I think is so important.

LLO: That leads nicely into our next question. I got interested in climate change when I started to see the colonial roots of climate change. A major theme of this special section on Gender and Climate Justice is the coloniality of climate change. Certainly, your work has gone a long way towards exposing this coloniality. Why do you think it took us so long to see the colonial, political, and economic patterns that have contributed to ongoing climate change?

CD: That is a good question and linked to the fact that, in academia, we have our disciplines, right? So, maybe environmental history has for a long time been its own niche rather than a resource and a methodology for other disciplines to contextualize their research. When I was an undergraduate exchange student at University of Pennsylvania, I chose to take a PhD course in historical sociology with Professor Rudra Sil. Even from that I realized how important history is.

I've always also had an easy time with the natural sciences and STEM subjects. For me, it is not that hard to grasp the main arguments in natural science publications. I think my book has not received any award in anthropology; it's quite interdisciplinary in that sense. You need to be interdisciplinary to understand time and also the material physical impacts on the political, social, and economic, and to have an understanding of power relations. We have been seeing for the past decade a lot of PhDs focusing more on these types of linkages.

SC: One of the primary arguments in your book is that there is often no causal relationship between sea-level rise and the local non-climatic factors. The fact that there are so many different kinds of floods in Bangladesh that are often overlooked leads to a series of misreadings regarding climate change in Bangladesh. There is often little focus on what people actually need.

This also extends to academics who universalize things. I'm curious how you arrived at that conclusion of misreading, especially at a time when we are trying to read many things in relation to climate change. Misreading itself emerges as a very key concept, not just in the book, but in some very implicit ways in what you have published since then.

CD: A great question. One of my biggest academic debts is to James Fairhead and Melissa Leach for writing the book *Misreading the African Landscape*. That's my inspiration and actually the title I wanted for my own book. It's reading climate change backwards. So, for instance, when you assume that Bangladeshi rural women are powerless victims of Islamic conservative patriarchy, you don't give them any scope for agency and their romantic choices. Bengali women are fierce. What they can do is mind-blowing. I'm so inspired by my interlocutors.

I guess my positionality also helped because the Bangladeshi context is very white supremacist in that you "should" be fair and not dark skinned. Now it's winter in Sweden and I don't have a tan but when I'm in Bangladesh I'm quite tan. I look like my interlocutors. So, when looking at images of me with my interlocutors, we look like sisters. But it bothered me when they thanked me at one point. I think some upper-middle class NGO workers that are Bangladeshi believe they're superior to these landless rural women. Also, it is a Muslim country. There are a lot of Brahminical Puritan things going on, you know, like not wanting to share food.

LLO: We want to talk about why you decided to publish your book as open access and if you have any advice for other scholars, particularly early career scholars who are also interested in publishing open access material.

CD: I must admit, it wasn't my idea. My publisher asked me if I had funding for open access and I said no. And then she looked around and found the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's program called the Sustainable Histories Monograph Pilot.

Because my book is about history and environment, it was selected for the pilot. There's a big but here: If you're selected for this pilot, you cannot choose your covers. You can get a really ugly cover or a good cover. Personally, I find the cover of my book quite ugly, but I thought it was worth it if the book was open access and my interlocutors in Bangladesh could read it. It has been so crazy to hear that colleagues are using my book for teaching and kind enough to give me feedback.

I also realize that undergraduates can read my book because I did write it in a way that wouldn't be too complex. I used my lectures as templates for the book. I don't know about the US but in Scandinavia, if you're at a university, everything you publish in journals ends up being open access. I should also share that I've been invited to hold the 2026 Lewis Henry Morgan lecture for my second book tentatively called *Living With Toxic Development*.

LLO: We're really interested in your work about the shipbreaking industry in Bangladesh and toxicity. I'm here in Newfoundland and Labrador, which is a coastal area as well and an area that has historically depended heavily on the fishery. Could you talk about what brought you to this work and what lies ahead for you?

CD: Shipping, the global industry, may result in the end of the life cycle of shipbreaking of ships, or not. Parts of the ship that are broken down are recycled. My project was supposed to be about maritime working worlds and especially labour. For me to make the project my own, it was important to also have the environmental aspect in the proposal so that, when I spoke to workers, it was the working conditions—toxic working conditions and pollution—that would come out.

Once I was at the research site, I found I didn't want to talk only to shipbreaking workers. I wanted to talk to the people in the entire area, including the fishermen and communities living in between the yards. So, it was a bit that life brought me to work in shipbreaking and now it's hard to stop working in the sector. Once you enter the maritime industry and have a lot of colleagues working on different aspects of ethnography in the maritime industry.

CS: We have almost reached the end of this conversation. One of the primary readers of *Atlantis* are early career scholars and graduate students. What advice do you have for navigating interdisciplinary spaces?

CD: I've become more and more disciplined over time. It's hard to be interdisciplinary. If you notice my publications, they all strategically target anthropology journals. I did that to qualify for an anthropology job. So, it depends on what kind of job you would like, what kind of workplace you're interested in. It really matters where you publish. I know that's kind of a buzzkill. When I think about it, all my collaborations have been with anthropologists. I don't know how interdisciplinary that is.

I also think you have to communicate in the right way to get funding. I got external funding and a medical researcher from another department did not. And this researcher told me that he does not understand what I am doing because my research is all subjective.

You have to teach the collaborators. In terms of water and Bangladesh, my interlocutors, for a long time, were water engineers and natural scientists. They really appreciated the environmental history and the development critique in my book. So, they've invited me to collaborate when they want that perspective. I'm talking to another colleague, who is a natural scientist, about sedimentation. He wants an anthropological perspective. I can only speak from that disciplinary perspective of, you know, ethnography, but maybe historians can say this is what I can contribute to an interdisciplinary collaboration. As a last point, I suggest writing grant applications with interdisciplinary colleagues.

LLO: Finally, why do you think is it important to study gender and climate justice right now?

CD: I'm wary about how gender and climate justice can also become development buzzwords. It is important to be specific about what we mean by climate justice versus environmental justice. What do we mean by gender? The contexts vary.

I think in developmental contexts, unfortunately, gender is still usually equated with women. However, in the face of backlash against LGBTQI+ communities right now, it is important to queer any environmental movement. It is really important to fight the status quo because the status quo is unequal, not only socioeconomically, but also in terms of people who can't be who they are. Can you feel safe being queer? Probably not.

There is still a lot to do to make sure people can be themselves everywhere. In terms of social structures, what does gender and climate justice even mean? In what context and whose rights are made visible? Those are the questions for the future.

Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice would like to thank Camilia Dewan for her insights. Views expressed by the interviewee and interviewers are exclusively their own.