



## Climate justice in and beyond South Asia

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## Climate justice in and beyond South Asia

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### ABSTRACT

This review article is part of a Book Forum discussion of Kasia Paprocki's book *Threatening Dystopias: the Global Politics of Climate Change Adaptation in Bangladesh* (Cornell University Press 2021). The Book Forum consists of individual commentaries on this text by four interested scholars, followed by a response from Kasia Paprocki. The article may be read individually or alongside the other contributions to the Forum. Together these contributions constitute a comprehensive discussion of the themes and arguments in *Threatening Dystopias*, which was the winner of the 2023 British Association of South Asian Studies Annual Book Prize.

I am honoured, excited, and slightly daunted about responding to this incredibly generous set of reviews by a group of scholars from whom I have learned a great deal about climate, development, and agrarian change. I am grateful especially for the ways that each of them has identified open questions that *Threatening Dystopias* has illuminated but has not finished answering. In what follows, I will explore some of these areas where I hope South Asianists can continue pushing the boundaries of this scholarship in new ways.

When I started conducting research for the project that eventually became this book, I was driven to Bangladesh's coastal region at the urging of Nijera Kori, Bangladesh's largest landless peasant movement, which I have been learning from and collaborating with for over 15 years. Nijera Kori wanted me to look at the social and ecological conditions wrought by commercial shrimp aquaculture, which the movement has actively opposed since the 1980s. Shrimp aquaculture has been ecologically devastating for the region, but perhaps more importantly to the movement, it has also been the cause of dramatic and widespread agrarian dispossession. The region has traditionally been an agricultural area, where farmers cultivate rice and vegetables. Rice agriculture requires somewhere between 10 and 100 times more labour than shrimp cultivation, so a transition from rice to shrimp means massive job loss and out-migration. This is the context of the agrarian political economy of the region.

As I started doing this research, I wanted to understand why so many development agencies continue to support the expansion of shrimp aquaculture, if the impacts on communities and ecologies have been so extreme. When I began to meet with these development agencies to ask about this, I heard again and again that shrimp cultivation was the only option for this region because of the threat of climate change. The logic was that the land is going underwater due to sea level rise, the soils are becoming saline, and that agriculture is no longer viable. This became the project of

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the book: investigating these tensions between how development agencies understand agrarian futures in the time of climate change, and how local communities understand them.

Unravelling these tensions illuminates how these development discourses about Bangladesh's dystopic climate future are deeply embedded in *global* discourses about climate crisis that suggest that some communities (like those in coastal Bangladesh) are doomed, while other communities are worth saving. These are *normative* ideas just as much as they are 'objectively scientific' ones – and they tell us bigger things about how climate futures are imagined, planned for, and pursued around the world.

The broader implication of this is that, as Nightingale writes, 'while climate change is a concern, its impacts can only be understood as part of a larger, more complex trajectory of entangled political, economic and ecological change.' Stories and scholarship on climate change must not end with it – they must always examine how the experience of climate change is mediated by broader politics and power dynamics that transcend it.

The real challenge for writing about climate change is in bringing together local and global scales. Ludden describes how *Threatening Dystopias* contributes to this through an 'analysis of the interwoven global and local scales of agrarian resource control.' Clearly, however a great deal more of this work is demanded. There is a massive amount of research being done on climate change in Bangladesh. Much of it is not informed by deep area studies knowledge that situates what is happening at multiple spatial and temporal scales. One thing that *Threatening Dystopias* demonstrates is that fine-grained historical and ethnographic detail informed by broader expertise in South Asian Studies is absolutely necessary to understanding the present and future of climate change in South Asia.

As Nightingale notes, there is much more to be said about the global dynamics of prediction and anticipation and how they inform (and are informed by) the adaptation regime locally. That is work that South Asianists must not leave to scholars interested in global climate policy who don't have the expertise to examine how these dynamics intersect with the political economy of development in specific communities in South Asia.

Mills-Novoa writes that *Threatening Dystopias* opens up questions about whether adaptation inherently requires dispossession. Writing the book has opened these same questions for me, and I believe they can't be answered in the abstract, only through careful research that does exactly this work of connecting scales described above.

So, for example, Karamchedu asks a series of critical questions about the political economy of agrarian change in South Asia, about the possibilities and limitations of agrarian futures in the context of neoliberal development and economic transformations. The limitations he describes will be significant in shaping the answers to these questions about whether adaptation can take place without dispossession. And answering his question about how the material challenges of agrarian life 'run up against creating progressive agrarian futures to contest the adaptation regime' is a question with which all scholars of development and agrarian change in South Asia should be concerned.

My argument is not that adaptation requires dispossession. It is that adaptation takes place in the context of a political economy of development that is characterised by dynamics of dispossession. Whether this is inevitable is a question about the political economy of development more than it is one about climate change itself. Indeed, these are inseparable. Contrary to the ways in which adaptation is often described in mainstream research, as Nightingale notes, it never occurs 'in isolation of wider political and economic change.'

Whereas much of the dominant research on climate change in Bangladesh is focused on social and ecological crisis, attention to local context and existing social and political movements points to much more hopeful alternative political imaginaries of climate change. For the landless collectives supported by Nijera Kori in rural Bangladesh, struggles for the redistribution of land and resources are foundational to their imaginaries of more hopeful climate futures. Scholars of South Asian studies have the opportunity and the responsibility to illuminate these struggles for alternative climate

futures for the sake of these communities, and others that are facing this kind of imposed and dystopic climate imaginary.

Doing this work is essential not only to understanding agrarian change in South Asia today, but also to forging a deeper vision of climate justice. As Mills-Novoa describes, 'Climate justice requires a reconfiguration of power, which means that dominant actors lose the ability to dictate what a liveable future under climate change looks like for others.' Such a reconfiguration of power will facilitate deeper connections between the climate justice movement and the everyday politics of peasant struggles globally. Ludden explains that for Nijera Kori and the peasants they support, 'The struggle is not to resist let alone overthrow capitalism. They are rather engaged in aspirational everyday nitty gritty collective struggles to alter power relations inside capitalism, locally, to benefit people at the bottom ranks of imperial modernity.' If scholarship on climate change must connect scales of analysis of the adaptation regime, it must also connect scales of alternative visions for climate justice. Those of us invested in the struggle for climate justice globally must work to articulate a vision for transformation that connects the crises of climate and capitalism directly with those nitty gritty collective struggles for survival in coastal Bangladesh and beyond.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### **Notes on contributor**

*Kasia Paprocki* is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Environment at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her work draws on and contributes to the political economy of development and agrarian change with a particular focus in Bangladesh.