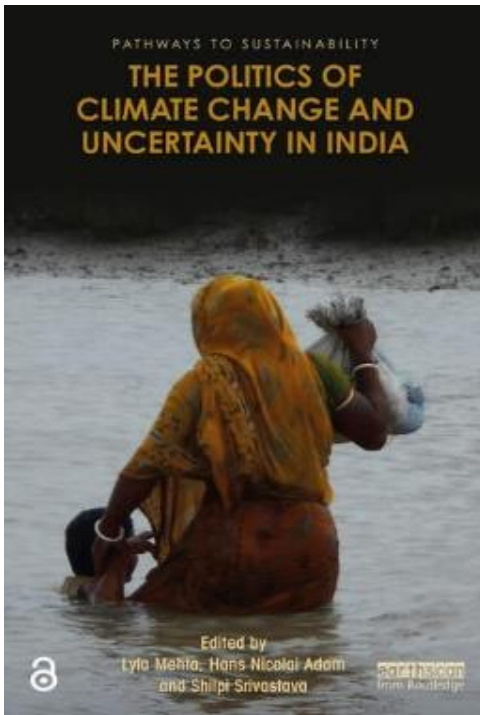


BOOK REVIEW

Uncertainty and Climate Change Policymaking in India

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Mehta, Lyla, Hans Nicolai Adam, and Shilpi Srivastava, eds. 2022. *The Politics of Climate Change and Uncertainty in India*. New York: Routledge.



Edited by Lyla Mehta, Hans Nicolai Adam, and Shilpi Srivastava, *The Politics of Climate Change and Uncertainty in India* is an important and timely contribution to the ever-expanding interest in climate change studies. The volume is an inter-disciplinary effort, with essays focused on addressing what the editors term the “science and politics of uncertainty”, which is often described as the “super wicked problem” that undermines effective policymaking. All the essays in the volume are informed by richly textured ethnographies, intensive fieldwork, ground-based surveys, and the study of archival sources. Lastly, the

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studies are mainly focused on three ecological zones in India: Kutch (western India), the Sundarbans (the deltaic segment of eastern India), and Mumbai (one of India's sprawling megacities on the west coast). As the editors inform us in the Introduction, these three distinct ecological locations are marked by their ecological contrasts: drylands, deltaic ecosystems, and rural–urban/peri-urban complexity.

The introductory chapter by Srivastava, *et al.* discusses how one specific strand of thinking about uncertainty dominates, which involves making abstract future projections and scenario-building through modelling exercises. However, such modelling efforts, as pointed out, often fail to incorporate different perspectives, especially those of disempowered and marginal communities and their livelihood strategies. In contrast, by documenting and engaging with the lived experiences of vulnerable populations, the authors aver that more meaningful and transformative policymaking can be achieved. In other words, we need to move away from having a singular focus on “scientific expertise” and instead also incorporate and engage with how climate change uncertainties and impacts play out at the popular level. In effect, for the authors, studies need to keep a conversation going between various levels of experiences, calculations, and realities: from the “above” (expert knowledge associated with science and policy), the “below” (lived experiences of the local people), and the “middle” (the knowledge brokers or intermediaries between the “above” and “below”). According to the authors, these new “hybrid perspectives” or “hybrid alliances” (13) could bridge the various gaps in knowledge on climate change impacts and could then potentially “facilitate processes that embrace rather than eliminate uncertainty” (3). This chapter also compellingly unpacks the three types of uncertainties: a) aleatoric or ecological uncertainties, b) knowledge or epistemic uncertainties, and c) uncertainties linked to larger political economy conditions.

The second chapter by Mehta, *et al.* focuses on how uncertainty is understood and represented by the “above”, which includes climate scientists and members of “high science” as well as policymakers at the national and sub-national levels. According to the authors, it is important to think about how climate change uncertainty is understood from “above”, as experts, policymakers, and scientists are those who frame climate change policy decisions and aid decision-making on funding priorities (29). This chapter, in essence, is a call for collaborative actions between members of the “above” and laypeople, by arguing that there is a pressing and urgent need to integrate local knowledges and micro-level information into policymaking. Methodologically, the chapter relies on rich qualitative interviews with various scientists and policymakers in India and abroad.

Chapter 3 discusses uncertainty by drawing upon and engaging with the field of environmental history. Through a careful study of archival records (1800 onwards), Damodaran, *et al.* track how the colonial government and local communities reacted to extreme weather events and environmental shocks in colonial Kutch (Gujarat) and the Sundarbans (West Bengal). The chapter is mainly aimed at comparing and contrasting the “above” (the colonial state and the postcolonial state) and the “below” (nomads and pastoralists from Kutch and Sundarbans), with regard to how uncertainty can be associated with “marginal environments” (extreme weather and natural events) and the “environmental normal” (typical seasonal weather patterns and relatively stable environments). Unlike the other essays, this chapter is exclusively based on the study of archival records and skilfully reveals how the colonial state often misjudged local adaptation strategies and entirely misread how inhabitants in the Kutch and the Sundarbans both coped and harnessed a range of opportunities within extreme environmental contexts.

The three remaining chapters (Chapters 4–6)—with their empirical focus on Kutch, the Sundarbans, and Mumbai—discuss how uncertainty can be conceptualized through various socio-ecological standpoints. The case studies, however, are mostly confined to exploring and documenting the diverse responses of those who comprise the “below”: the *Koli* community (fishing community) from Mumbai, the pastoralists from the Kutch region, and the islanders in the Sundarbans. By highlighting their perspectives and everyday adaptation strategies, the authors point out that these marginal and vulnerable communities need climate change policymaking to consider their specific and concrete anxieties about uncertainty, rather than only speaking to high science and model-building or calculations around probable scenarios. Overall, these empirically driven and field work-based chapters provide enough evidence to argue for the co-production of knowledge and the need for a “hybrid perspective” in climate change policymaking.

The concluding chapter builds on the important arguments of the previous chapters and paves the way for recommendations for future research around climate change-induced uncertainties. By building on various rounds of meetings and roundtable conversations with multiple stakeholders—that occurred at research sites as well as outside—the final chapter focuses on the importance of the “plurality of perspectives and how one can work towards bridging the gaps in understanding and perspectives” (179). In sum, the call is to revive the focus on everyday knowledges and the experiences of marginal and vulnerable communities for policymaking.

In a nutshell, this collection is a convincing effort and timely addition to the fast-growing interest in climate change literature. In my opinion, it will be extremely valuable for students, journalists, scientists, and policymakers, who are on the frontline of efforts aimed at understanding and documenting climate change impacts. Most importantly, as discussed prior, this edited volume adds to the critical discourse on climate change adaptation by emphasising the value of incorporating diverse perspectives for effective policymaking in India and beyond. In sum, *The Politics of Climate Change* makes a compelling case for restoring the centrality of “place-based” indigenous knowledge and experiences in the formulation of solutions to the gravest challenge of our times.

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