

BOOK REVIEW

Now You See Me, and Now You Don't: How Three Partially Blindfolded Persons Feel and Respond to the Climate Elephant in the Room

Sagar Dhara *

Lyla Mehta, Hans Nicolai Adam, and Shilpi Srivastava, eds. 2022. *The Politics of Climate Change and Uncertainty in India*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis. 216. ISBN (ebook): 978-1003257585, ISBN (hard cover): 978-1032190785.

1. SUMMARY

The following quotes from the book reviewed here summarize its primary thrust:

“Climate change is a situation with deep uncertainty” (29)

“Mainstream science in India has tended to ignore uncertainty” (41)

“Impacts of climate change are largely felt locally and understandings of climate change and climate change–related uncertainties are shaped by local contexts and experiences” (162)

“Uncertainties cannot be eliminated, in either the short or most likely longer term, new approaches to deal with these uncertainties are needed” (29)

The book explores how uncertainties related to climate change play out in India. Unlike risk, where outcome probabilities are computed, uncertainty is characterized by indeterminates—for example, when, where, and in what magnitudes climate impacts will hit; how social actors will respond; and

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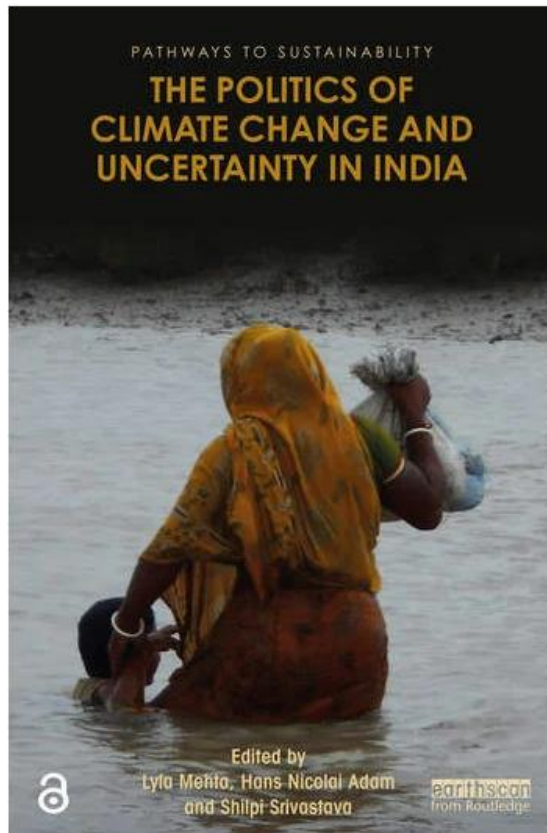
what the policy directions will be—so numerical computation is not possible.

Uncertainties in climate change are particularly high. This makes climate change a “super-wicked problem”, as there is uncertainty in the way it will pan out as well as wider uncertainty regarding how three critical sets of players will understand, communicate about, and respond to climate change and to one another’s actions. The book identifies the actors as climate scientists, who study the climate, and policymakers, who make policy decisions (termed the “above” in this volume); the people who experience the impacts of climate change in their everyday lives (the “below”); and the knowledge brokers and intermediates (e.g., non-governmental organizations) who mediate between the first two (the “middle”). Climate change presents uncertainties that can push local people to the limits of their capacity for coping and may even trigger maladaptation.

The book’s eight chapters are written by authors who are well qualified in this field. The editors have done a good job of ordering the chapters in a logical progression and ensuring consistency of language.

Chapter 1 introduces the key concept, “uncertainty from above, middle and below”, and explains how knowledge, power, and politics shape the framing of climate uncertainty. Chapter 2 examines how experts and policy actors perceive and attempt to govern uncertainty.

Chapters 3–6 present empirical case studies from across India. Chapter 3 offers a historical ecological context for two contrasting Indian regions—the dryland Kutch



in Gujarat and the Sundarbans Delta in West Bengal. Chapter 4 explains how dryland livelihoods and adaptation are mediated by both climate change and economic transformation. Chapter 5 describes how local communities understand and live with shifting environmental and climate-related hazards. Chapter 6 turns to the urban coastal city of Mumbai and shows how urban infrastructures, governance, elite versus marginal spaces, and climate uncertainty are interconnected.

Chapter 7 focuses on bridging the gaps between different knowledges of climate and uncertainty—linking the above, middle, and below—and argues for plural ways of knowing, socially just adaptation, and transformative change. Chapter 8 concludes by reflecting on what the empirical insights mean for theory and practice.

The book uses a variety of research methods—historical ecological analysis, ethnographic work, policy analysis, and interviews. It emphasizes that uncertainty is not just a scientific problem but a political one. The authors point out that local communities grapple with multiple layers of uncertainty: climate vagaries, understanding climate change impacts, climate policy variations, and political change. Additionally, they are exposed to natural disasters, such as floods and droughts, and have limited means to deal with them. Their handling of uncertainty—how to “get by” with shifting rainfall, salt intrusion, and coastal erosion—may differ significantly from experts’ understanding of risk and uncertainty.

The authors demonstrate how governance and policy are structured around assumptions of certainty (e.g., through plans and projections), when, in reality, uncertainty is pervasive. The excessive focus on techno-managerial solutions has had only limited success in addressing uncertainties, particularly in marginal environments. The book emphasizes the need to bring together different kinds of knowledge—scientific, local, and experiential—for engaging with the power dynamics between decision-makers and risk bearers, and to adopt transformative approaches instead of incremental adaptation.

2. REVIEW

This volume brings together rigorous empirical research from India that illuminates how uncertainty related to climate change is experienced, managed, and contested; it also examines the politics of uncertainty in climate change. Rather than considering uncertainty as something that can be reduced with better models, the authors regard it as embedded in social relations, power dynamics, and governance. This helps to reframe

adaptation policy as not just technical optimization but a political one that must deal with equity and power issues.

The use of multiple contexts (drylands, deltas, mega-cities) gives the book empirical richness. The contrasting geographies of Kutch, the Sundarbans, and Mumbai indicate that we cannot talk of climate uncertainty in India in a monolithic sense. The nature of uncertainty, institutional capacity, livelihood systems, social inequalities, and governance contexts differ. This diverse empirical base strengthens the theoretical argument.

The book's emphasis on bridging local and experiential knowledge and scientific and expert knowledge is another strength. It shows how local actors live with uncertainty and yet make everyday decisions related to climate adaptation, and how adaptation planning often fails to connect to these lived experiences.

That said, the book has some limitations, which are not omissions as such but areas it could have explored a little further. Because the volume covers multiple geographies in about 200 pages and has a wide thematic sweep, some chapters occasionally feel more descriptive than analytical. A deeper engagement with the political economy of adaptation would have enhanced the discussion. The authors could have offered a comparative analysis of how uncertainty plays out in the three geographical regions covered and the responses to it—suggesting what lessons can be drawn and transferred (or not) across the three contexts.

While there is no issue with the focus on adaptation, governance, and everyday uncertainty, the book's title specifically mentions the *politics* of climate change and uncertainty, which warrants some engagement with the uncertainty of mitigation politics (for example, energy transitions and land-use change). The absence of any discussion on this topic is somewhat disappointing.

Situating the book within the global literature on climate uncertainty would have helped indicate which findings are generalizable and which are India-specific. The coverage of uncertainties at the “above”, “middle”, and “below” levels, and the problems they create, is commendable. Some discussion on concrete next steps would have added value to the book.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A SEQUEL

Here are a few suggestions for issues to be covered in a sequel to this book:

- A chapter discussing the interlinkages between adaptation and mitigation uncertainties—for example, how energy transitions create uncertainty in livelihoods and governance
- A deeper study of the political economy of adaptation financing under uncertainty—for example, who funds what, how uncertainty affects investment decisions, and how risk is shared across actors
- A stronger cross-country comparative study of how local uncertainty is mediated differently in various Global South contexts
- More applied policy-oriented chapters that address how governance architecture (at the central, state, and local levels) might be restructured or made “uncertainty-adaptive”
- A focus on power politics and agency in high-uncertainty conditions: how marginalized groups make their voices heard, exercise agency, develop and implement self-help programmes, and make demands on the “above” under shifting climate regimes; how organizations that carry out adaptation strategies evolve; and which pathways should be avoided

4. CONCLUSION

The book makes a compelling argument that uncertainty is fundamentally a political and social phenomenon in India. The volume’s empirical diversity, conceptual clarity, and normative emphasis on social justice make it stand out among works on climate adaptation.

The book does not claim that easy answers are available. It argues that discussing the politics of uncertainty can help clarify how adaptation might become more inclusive, just, and contextually grounded. The chapters provide empirical insight and conceptual provocation while leaving open avenues for further research and policy innovation. The book is therefore highly recommended.

Ethics Statement: This study complies with requirements of ethical approvals from the institutional ethics committee for the conduct of this research.

Data Availability Statement: This is a book review, which does not have any original primary data included in the work.

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