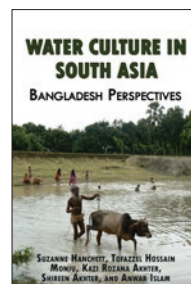


# Reviews

*Water Culture in South Asia: Bangladesh Perspectives*

by Suzanne Hanchett, Tofazzel Hossain Monju, Kazi Rozana Akhter, Shireen Akhter, and Anwar Islam

2014, Development Resources Press, 308 pages  
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Most of the time WASH professionals take a static view of water: we talk about access to improved or unimproved, safe or unsafe, sources. But Hanchett et al. remind us that such binary divisions are essentially false dichotomies. Water doesn't stand alone, it is interconnected. The authors' poignant portrayal of the waterscapes of Bangladesh – with its rivers, streams, canals, tubewells, ponds, lakes and wetlands, floods, chars, deltas, waterlogged landscapes – illustrates how water flows with – as well as against – the daily currents of social interactions. *Water Culture in South Asia* shows us how access to water is mediated by the relationships among individuals within groups, and among groups, connecting people and places.

This insightful and very readable book is a review of South Asia's water-related, traditions, mythology, and ethnographic and folkloric customs; methodologically it is solidly empirical with fieldwork in 18 different sub-districts or towns, in eight different districts of Bangladesh, conducted between 1997 and 2009, plus a visit to West Bengal in 2004. The authors collected qualitative data through interviews

and Participatory Rural Appraisal. The book is a model of how to present the results of rigorous social science research in an accessible fashion. It is organized into eight chapters: Chapter 2 reviews ethnographic studies of water-related traditions and folklore in South Asia. Chapter 3 presents Bengali myths, legends, and sayings relating to water. Chapter 4 reports perceptions of water qualities. Chapter 5 provides detailed information on management of domestic supply and uses of water in health and family rituals. Chapter 6 tracks how perceptions of arsenic have changed somewhat over the past 10–15 years and reports efforts to solve arsenic problems. Chapter 7 succinctly summarizes the complexity of the issues and presents principles of water culture.

Through case studies and 'water diaries', myths, stories, and sayings, the authors highlight the extent to which water frames people's lives and experiences in Bangladesh. They show the many complexities in the way people (and women in particular) use, value, and think about water. Their research demonstrates how people identify

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with – and through – water, exploring the social relationships that govern the use of water (and water-sharing) for drinking, cooking, bathing, hygiene, purification, life-cycle ceremonies (birth, marriage, and death rituals), healings, and mythology. In particular Hanchett et al. indicate how the experience of women is mediated through water with respect to fertility, menstruation, water collection, washing, and purity.

The main value of the book is in looking beyond the implementation of WASH programmes, to the relationships within which access is improved. Water is a resource that is drawn on by people to maintain or enhance the cultural and social positions they occupy in the community. People's identity, aspiration, ritual, heritage, norms, and beliefs are reflected in water and are constantly in flux. Practitioners and policy makers will find this book extremely useful for understanding how and why people use water in the ways they do, stimulating decision-makers to think in original ways about familiar problems. The experience from Bangladesh suggests this entails taking seriously how people themselves interpret their relationships with and through water.

People interested in Bangladesh (together with the Bengali-speaking communities in India) will find this book fascinating for a different set of reasons. Hanchett and colleagues provide a glimpse into everyday life and illustrate how people cope with extreme poverty in a vulnerable and

risky environment. The authors record colloquial Bengali terms and discuss how vocabulary reflects the common perception of water.

Apart from all else, this book provides an invaluable basis for understanding how to integrate cultural principles and social relationships into WASH programmes, for instance the CARE/ICDDR,B SAFER (Sanitation and Family Education Resource) programme. The authors show how programmes can fail if they are designed in isolation from the broader social network of rural life. With its challenge to the binaries that underpin conventional discussions of water, this book gives interdisciplinary direction to practice and policy responses by breaching the silos that 'scientifically oriented' development specialists seem to adhere to.

Millions around the globe continue to depend on unsafe and unsustainable sources of drinking water; this book should serve as a call to action for WASH professionals, environmental historians, cultural geographers, scientists, engineers, health specialists, and other development professionals working to create sustainable improvements in WASH services.

Indigenous and folk beliefs will be part of any effective solutions to the urgent water problems facing humanity. (p. 224)

You can order this book at the publisher's website: [www.devresbooks.com](http://www.devresbooks.com).

*Sue Cavill, freelance consultant*