



Farhana Sultana

World of Water

For Farhana Sultana, the power of water is undeniable. It is a precious resource with the capability of both sustaining and destroying life. From her childhood days in Bangladesh to her work today as a geography professor at the Maxwell School, Sultana has immersed herself in the multitude of issues that flow from water. “I find water really fascinating,” she says. “Water is a lens through which I try to understand and explain what’s going on in the world. Water seeps across ecological, social, political, and economic issues. It binds us as a human society, but it can also splinter us.”

Foremost among Sultana’s concerns is the inequitable access to safe drinking water, an issue that puts the lives of nearly 1 billion people at risk, either from contamination or a lack of reliable sources. In her native Bangladesh, where monsoonal rains, floods, and cyclones are a familiar part of life, she is currently researching urban water governance in Dhaka’s informal settlements, or slums, exploring how the capital city’s poor cope with the daily challenges of acquiring water “off the grid”—and how the government and elite respond. “This forms a part of a wider project I’m working on to understand how to materialize more equitable water for the world’s poor,” she says. “I also have a deep-seated concern about ecological and environmental issues and have always been interested in how the natural world affects who we are as a people and how our actions affect what happens in the natural world. That nature-society connection is central to my research.”

Sultana began exploring the relationship between nature and society as a Princeton undergraduate, majoring in geology and environmental studies. She widened her exploration as a MacArthur Scholar at the University of Minnesota, where she earned graduate degrees in geography, combining her knowledge of natural sciences with social sciences and gender studies. In her research, she primarily focused on the issue of drinking water contaminated by naturally occurring arsenic in rural areas of Bangladesh, examining its impact on gender and class issues as well as water management policies. Before completing her doctorate, she managed a \$26 million environmental program for the United Nations

Development Programme for three years. In 2008, she joined the Maxwell School faculty after holding a fellowship at the University of Manchester and teaching at King's College London. Last year, she organized The Right to Water, an international conference that brought leading thinkers to campus to examine water governance and how to ensure the universal right to water. As a follow-up, Sultana produced *The Right to Water: Governance, Politics, and Social Struggles*, to be published this year by Earthscan. "This book will be one of the first of its kind to look at the conjunctural nature of the struggles over water and how it can lead to broader transformative politics, linking up with issues of democracy, citizenship, and social justice," she says. "It's about so much more than just water. There's a significant link between water and other social issues, and, as a geographer, I am interested in these connections."

Her interdisciplinary perspective and passion for water drive much of her research and teaching. In the classroom and the field, she seeks to instill rigorous and transformative knowledge in her students and inspire them to engage with the world. Last summer, for instance, she took a group of international relations graduate students to Dhaka for a capstone project on development. Sultana is also interested in climate change and how people are adapting to its consequences in the developing world. "We're all very much embedded in nature," she says. "If we continue to have this hubris of trying to tame nature without paying attention to the ways that nature and society interact, we're likely to have greater problems than the ones we're seeing now." —Jay Cox

Photo by John Dowling

Syracuse University Magazine
820 Comstock Avenue, Room 308
Syracuse, NY 13244-5040

- Email: jacox@syr.edu
- Phone: (315) 443-3390
- Fax: (315) 443-5425