Bangladesh: The role of the ADB and World Bank in the destruction of the "forest of the fallen leaves"

The last remnants of forests in Bangladesh are disappearing and much of the blame goes to local peoples' "slash and burn" agriculture. The government –supported with loans and funds from multilateral and bilateral financial institutions- is actively promoting the plantation of trees and would thus appear to be trying to revert the situation.

However, the opposite is true. While indigenous peoples' traditional shifting cultivation (*jum*) has historically proven to ensure the survival of the forest, government/IFI-sponsored "reforestation" is destroying the last remnants of true forests.

The "*sal* forest" is but one of several examples of the above, as the following excerpts from Philip Gain's "Stolen Forests" clearly show:

"The traditional *sal [Shorea robusta tree]* forest used to extend over the Modhupur Tract as well as over the districts of Dhaka, Rangpur, Dinajpur and Rajshahi. However, today the remnants of the *sal* forest do not represent its tradition. Most of the *sal* forestland has been denuded and encroached upon or taken over for commercial or industrial plantation of exotic species and agricultural use. A small part of the *sal* forest has also been converted to rubber plantation."

"There are unique characteristics of the *sal* forest that is also known as the forest of the fallen leaves. Its one unique feature is that it regenerates with little care. The patches of the *sal* forest that still survive are the ideal habitat for hundreds of native species. Although *sal* is the dominant species (up to 70 per cent of the stands) in this forest, there are countless other species of plants including medicinal plants, fruit trees, uncultivated vegetables, herbs, creepers, and thousands of other life forms. Not long ago, the *sal* forest used to be the safe sanctuary for wildlife such as the tiger, bear, monkey, langur, and birds. The *sal* forest of unique genetic and wildlife resources has now become history. It is now bereft of its traditions."

"At one time *jum* agriculture used to be practiced in the *sal* forest areas… The*zamindars* [big landlords] permitted the Garos of the Modhupur forest to carry out *jum* cultivation on the condition that they maintained the forest. The maximum period for such cultivation in a plot in the Modhupur forest was three years. After that *sal* and other local species had to be planted to regenerate the forests. The Garos would take the responsibility to create and tend such forests. *Jum* cultivation was allowed in the Modhupur forest throughout the British period. But the natural *sal* forest remained intact and the forest people lived in peace. After the forest was transferred to the Forest Department, *jum* cultivation was banned in Modhupur."

That measure not only deprived local peoples of their means of livelihoods but led directly to the destruction of the *sal* forest. Philip Gain summarises the situation as follows:

"What is uniquely common in the *sal* forest patches in recent times is monoculture plantation of exotic species, acacia and eucalyptus being the dominant ones. One traveling from Dhaka to North Bengal

along the *sal* forest belt will come across these plantations almost everywhere. These two exotic species growing in rows and devoid of understory vegetation is a common picture in the *sal* forest. In most cases the monoculture plantation replaces the degraded *sal* forest that could have been regenerated into the *sal* forest again. In disagreement with the Forest Department, environmentalists and professional foresters believe that monoculture plantation in the *sal* forest is a disaster that could have been avoided. What is 'planted forest' to the government agencies and the IFIs, is actually monoculture plantations that has no traditional and educational value."

In his introduction, Gain explains that "over the past one and a half decades I have learned how wrongfully the ill-fated forest-dwelling communities and their practices are frequently blamed for the ruin of the forests."

However, that is far from being the case and the blame lies squarely on ADB and World Bank-sponsored plantation projects:

"I have witnessed how the Modhupur *sal* forest has been stripped of its traditions. Decay of forests is not unique in Bangladesh. But the introduction of plantations –monoculture of teak, rubber, eucalyptus and acacia- has horrendous consequences on these native forests. In Modhupur, invasive species have made their way into the forestland under the guise so-called 'social forestry' that is plantation in essence. Here 'social forestry' that was initiated in 1989-90 was preceded by rubber monoculture that destroyed a significant part of the *sal* forest. The so-called 'social forestry' funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has caused immense ruin to the *sal* forest, not only in Modhupur, but also in other *sal* forest patches up to the northern tip of Bangladesh as well." "In Bangladesh while the plantation projects are implemented by the government, they are financed mostly by the international financial institutions (IFIs)-Asian Development Bank and the World Bank."

Gain stresses that not only "plantations are not forests at all", but that they are one "of the major factors that underlie the destruction of the forests and the misery of the forest-dwelling ethnic communities."

Four years after the publication of his book, Philip has informed us that he met a top official of ADB in January 2010, who "confirmed that the Bank has completely withdrawn from the forestry sector in Bangladesh and elsewhere in Asia since 2007. She also conveyed that ADB confesses it did not perform satisfactorily with forestry projects. The World Bank has also stopped funding forestry projects in Bangladesh. This is a victory for us who have been telling the two IFIs that they were ruining the forests by funding forestry projects."

Article based on excerpts from Gain, Philip (2006).- Stolen Forests, Bangladesh, SEHD and on a message sent by the author to WRM on 16 February 2010. E-mail: sehd@citech.net