
Bangladesh: A forest stolen for cash

Plantation of exotics --rubber, acacia and eucalyptus in particular-- is one major factor that has changed the Modhupur sal forest (*Shorea robusta*) for ever, with severe consequences for the ethnic communities --Garos and Koch-- who have lived in the forest for centuries.

With loan money from the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank in particular, the government has actually established plantations of alien species all over the public forestland. Except for the Sundarban, only fragments of native forests remain in Bangladesh.

Pineapple and banana plantations have also expanded in the Modhupur sal forest in the recent times, with too much use of pesticides, including DDT and imported hormone to make the fruit bigger and ripen quicker, posing a serious concern. Now both pineapple and banana production and trade are controlled by the Bangalee traders.

In Bangladesh “social” forestry on public forest land means big cash deal with loans coming from international financial institutions. The practice of “simple plantation” forestry has been passed for “social”, “community” or “participatory” forestry. The land belongs to the Forest Department (FD); loan money comes from the Asian Development Bank (ADB); and the FD establishes the plantations on public forestland, cutting native forests and bushes with the argument that the local species are less productive and grow slow. The locals and often outsiders are drawn into it as the so-called participants or beneficiaries who have no say about the selection of species, while the production and trade are controlled .

According to some appalling statistics about the state of the Modhupur forest given by the Tangail Forest Office, out of 46,000 acres in the Tangail part of the Modhupur forest, 7,800 acres have been given out for rubber cultivation, 1,000 acres to the Air Force, 25,000 acres have gone into illegal possession and the Forest Department controls only 9,000 acres.

In Modhupur, once abundant with medicinal plants, one can hardly find native species such as Gandhi Gazari, Ajuli (*Dillenia pentagyna*), Dud Kuruj, Sonalu (*Cassia fistula*) (Golden shower), Sesra, Jiga, Jogini Chakra (*Gmelina arborea*), Kaika, Sidha, Sajna, Amloki (*Emblic myrobalan*), and Gadila.

Currently, the Forest Department is implementing the second rotation of fuelwood plantation throughout the country with loans for the Forestry Sector Project from the ADB. The controversy, debate and protest that the first rotation of plantation (beginning in 1989-90) generated are still alive. The Forest Department continues to ignore all these protests and controversies around plantations.

Article extracted from: “Modhupur. A stolen forest, robbed Adivasis”, by Philip Gain, Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), sent by the author, e-mail: sehd@citechco.net

