



Members of indigenous community in Modhupur, Tangail take position outside the forest range office protesting the eviction of Basanti Rema.
PHOTO: STAR



The forest department cut down banana plants owned by Basanti Rema, a Garo indigenous forest-dweller of Pegamari village of Madhupur upazila, on September 14, 2020.
PHOTO: PROTHOM ALO



Very little of Modhupur sal forest survives today. What remains are coppices like what we see here.
PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

The cries of Modhupur Garh

SANJEEB DRONG, ROBAET FERDOUS, DIPAYAN KHISA, SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN, ZOBAIDA NASREEN KONA, FALGUNI TRIPURA AND AUDITY FALGUNI

"Leaf Storm" or *La Hojarasca* in Spanish, the debut novella by world renowned Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez, was first published in 1955. Largely applauded as the first appearance of *Macondo*, the imaginary village later made reputed in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Leaf Storm is a litmus test for a number of the themes and characters later to be crystallised in the book that earned the author the Noble Prize in literature.

The novella is a story that highlights Macondo, a small township that is distinguished by businessmen or traders and a booming population. The novel is based on the author's memoirs of his childhood in Aracataca. Most of the characters are based on real life, except for their names. In his debut novella, García Márquez depicts the establishment of the fictitious coastal town of Macondo in the late nineteenth century, its solvency during the 1910s, and its degeneration after 1918. This is the

in Arankhola Union of the Dokhla forest range, Modhupur. Thanks to modern-era "citizen journalism" made possible by smartphones and social networks, the savage destruction of the banana gardens on Basanti Rema's land by Forest Department officials was known to netizens of Bangladesh by 13th or 14th September.

"I am a poor day labourer. I have one adolescent son and one adolescent daughter. I have leased out around 3 acres of my land to a local Bengali person for banana plantation to meet my children's educational costs," Basanti Rema began narrating in her broken Bangla.

It was a rainy day and we reached Basanti's house after walking a long distance on the muddy, slippery, rain drenched roads of Dokhla Forest range, Modhupur.

"On the fateful morning, I got out to work as usual as a daily labourer but soon some well-wishers of mine came to me and informed me of the



Chalesh Richhil, a leader of the anti-eco park movement at Madhupur was killed brutally while in the custody of law enforcers on March 18, 2007.
PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

have been living in the forests for hundreds of years. The forest, acting as a natural boundary, kept them apart from the plain landers for a long time. This isolation and high dependency on forest resources for livelihood have resulted in the formation of their distinct societal structure and cultural practices (Soma Dey, Deforestation and the Garo Women of Modhupur Garh, Bangladesh).

How have the Garo indigenous people been deprived of their rights to the forest?

Although the gradual degeneration of the Modhupur forest commenced since the colonial period, the problem turned intense in 1956 after the official ban on jum cultivation (a form of shifting cultivation) placed by the then Pakistan government. Jum, the basic ingredient of Garo life cycle, was stringently forbidden by the then State of Pakistan and the hapless indigenous Garo community started to change their earlier lands for jum cultivation into crop fields like the Bengalis in the plains. Nowadays, "most of the forest

Apart from loss of collective rights of the indigenous people over forest resources, the gradual migration of the Bengalis from the plain lands and tyranny of forest officials in the Modhupur forest area had changed the distinct status of women in the Garo matrilineal society to a large extent. The particular matrilineal structure of the Garo society indicates the practice that "each person belongs to the kinship group of the mother, not to that of the father" (Bal, 1999). Garo children adopt the surname of the mother and the ownership of property cum inheritance goes to the wife's lineage. Sons are devoid of property rights according to the hereditary Garo law and daughters inherit the property from their maternal ancestresses. Generally, the youngest daughter (*nokna*) is the principal heiress and in the particular marriage style of the Garos, the bridegroom is permitted to come and stay with the bride's parent as soon as the marriage ceremony is completed. It is because of this core matrilineal practice that women do not have to wear any "veil" or practice seclusion in the society and they are free to move anywhere they wish. This matrilineal practice of the Garos had not changed even after large-scale conversion to Christianity in the last one century.

Impact of deforestation on Garo women of Modhupur forest

Large-scale forest depletion in the Modhupur *garh* is largely due to the influx of Bengalis from the plains, unauthorised wood extraction, change of forest tracts into arable lands, numerous development endeavours by the Christian Church missions and the government, as well as commercial tree plantation schemes under the pretext of forestry development projects sponsored by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank (WB). According to the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (2004), earlier the sal forests existed as a continuous belt from Comilla district of Bangladesh to Darjeeling of India.

indigenous women have to often roam in the forest to search for wild potatoes, medicinal plants, fodder and vegetables. They then become victims of harassment at the hands of the forest guards as the guards harass these women, extort from them, deport them to prison on the grounds of forest robbery, etc. There have also been some alleged incidents of sexual violence against Garo women by forest officials. The Garo women, however, mostly face false cases being lodged against the male members of their families. A report in *The Daily Star* revealed that about 3,700 cases had been filed by the Forest Department (FD) against Garo and Koch people of Modhupur *garh* and in most cases the real plunderers are the Bengalis who get assistance from the FD officials (Pinaki Roy, July 30, 2003).

A case study by Soma Dey, researcher and teacher at the Department of Women and Gender Studies, Dhaka University, revealed how Kajali Hadima, a 29-year-old woman of Telki village of Modhupur, had been looking after her family as the single guardian for the last 10 years. Her husband had been in Tangail prison for 10 years with 47 cases against him. Most of these cases were filed after her husband was put into prison. Kajali, burdened with two children and the responsibility of paying the litigation costs for her husband, had already sold almost all her property and now she works as a house maid and day labourer. This is the story of almost every indigenous woman in the Modhupur *garh*.

Rapid forest depletion and influx of the Bengalis are changing the land ownership patterns in the Modhupur *garh*. Although property generally passes on to female children in the Garo community, nowadays male children are also inheriting family property. Though women are the real title holders in Garo succession, they seldom take any stand against family decisions to sell landed property to outsiders. With accelerating rates of poverty within these indigenous communities, a trend to sell land property to Bengali settlers (for example, for banana or pineapple plantation) is growing within the Garos and in such cases generally the male members sell the property and the female members lose the right to property. Also, the minority Garos are being influenced by Bengali patriarchal lifestyles and Garo parents are passing property ownership to their sons too.

Large-scale forestry development projects like ADB-funded rubber plantation (1986) so far have transformed the ecology of around 80,000 acres of land in Modhupur and made many Garo women landless on a permanent basis. Soon after the rubber plantation project, ADB funded the Thana Afforestation and Nursery Development Project (TANDP) for which the Department of Forest had acquired huge acres of croplands and even homesteads of a number of indigenous families. The Forest Department had acquired over 40,000 acres of forest land through a Gazette Notification in 1984.

Adoption of a new farming system in the Garo community reduced women's active role and share compared to the earlier jum cultivation system. Also, the commercial pineapple and banana plantation schemes in Modhupur use high doses of chemicals and pesticides, often exposing the indigenous women and children to different sorts of health hazards.

The writers work in different rights-based organisations and universities.



A huge pineapple garden of a Bangali on social forestry plots leased from Garos.
PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

chronicle of the entry and exit of the Leaf Storm, the intruders or foreigners who descended on the Colombian coast when the region became rich thanks to the banana industry.

Strangely enough, Modhupur forest of Tangail, seems strikingly similar to Marquez's Leaf Storm: thriving fruit production (pineapples, bananas, etc.), a very fertile land and large tracts of forest, indigenous Garo population and the Bengali outsiders (particularly the Forest Department officials), new "commercial plantation schemes" in the hereditary, social forests of the indigenous people by ADB and Ministry of Forest, changing ownership patterns of the land and forests of Modhupur and gradual extinction of the Garo people from their lands... Marquez would have been very happy if he knew of such an ideal plot and canvass for storytelling! Here he would find all the ingredients to sketch a grand novel. But we, Bangladeshi fiction writers, have not the craftsmanship to portray Modhupur with all her possibilities and potent areas of conflict.

We visited the Modhupur forest on 27th September, 2020 with an activist group from Dhaka. The group comprised of university teachers, aid workers, human and indigenous rights activists and others to protest the destruction of the banana orchards on several acres of land belonging to some Basanti Rema of Pegamari village

atrocities. I came back home and then felt so hopeless seeing the entire banana orchard being razed to the ground so mercilessly!" Basanti Rema reminisced teary-eyed.

"Now I will have to compensate the man who has taken lease of my land. Where will I get the money from?" she gazed blankly at us.

It began raining again and some Garo adolescent girls came to us, visitors from Dhaka, with trays full of local pineapples with green chili, bananas and ginger tea containing lots of medicinal ingredients.

It is in the matrilineal Garo society that women carry most of the economic and domestic burden. Although women play a financial role in the Garo society by utilising ecological resources of the Modhupur forest, the gradual extinction of natural sal forest, particularly since the Liberation War of Bangladesh, has induced serious changes in the hereditary familial and social structure of the Garos in the Modhupur forest.

The Modhupur Garh, a part of Pleistocene terrace area of central Bangladesh, is situated over the uplands of Mymensingh and Tangail districts (Latif, 1983). The region is famous for the dry deciduous sal (*shorea robusta*) forests and forest-dwelling ethnic communities, especially the Garos. It is believed that Garos, who love to claim themselves as *Mandies*, meaning human beings,

land has been denuded, degraded and encroached upon or taken over for commercial or industrial plantation of rubber or fuel wood with exotic species" (Philip Gain, 2002). The forest was further proclaimed as a "reserved forest" in 1955 and some portion of the forest was marked as a "national park" by 1962 while implying ban on free movement of the forest dwellers. It resulted in the collapse of the centuries-old female-forest relationship in the Modhupur *garh*. In recent years, the greens of Modhupur forest were turned vermilion red in the bloodshed of Piren Slan against the government-induced Eco Park project or a slain Chalesh Richil during the army-backed caretaker government regime in 2007.

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