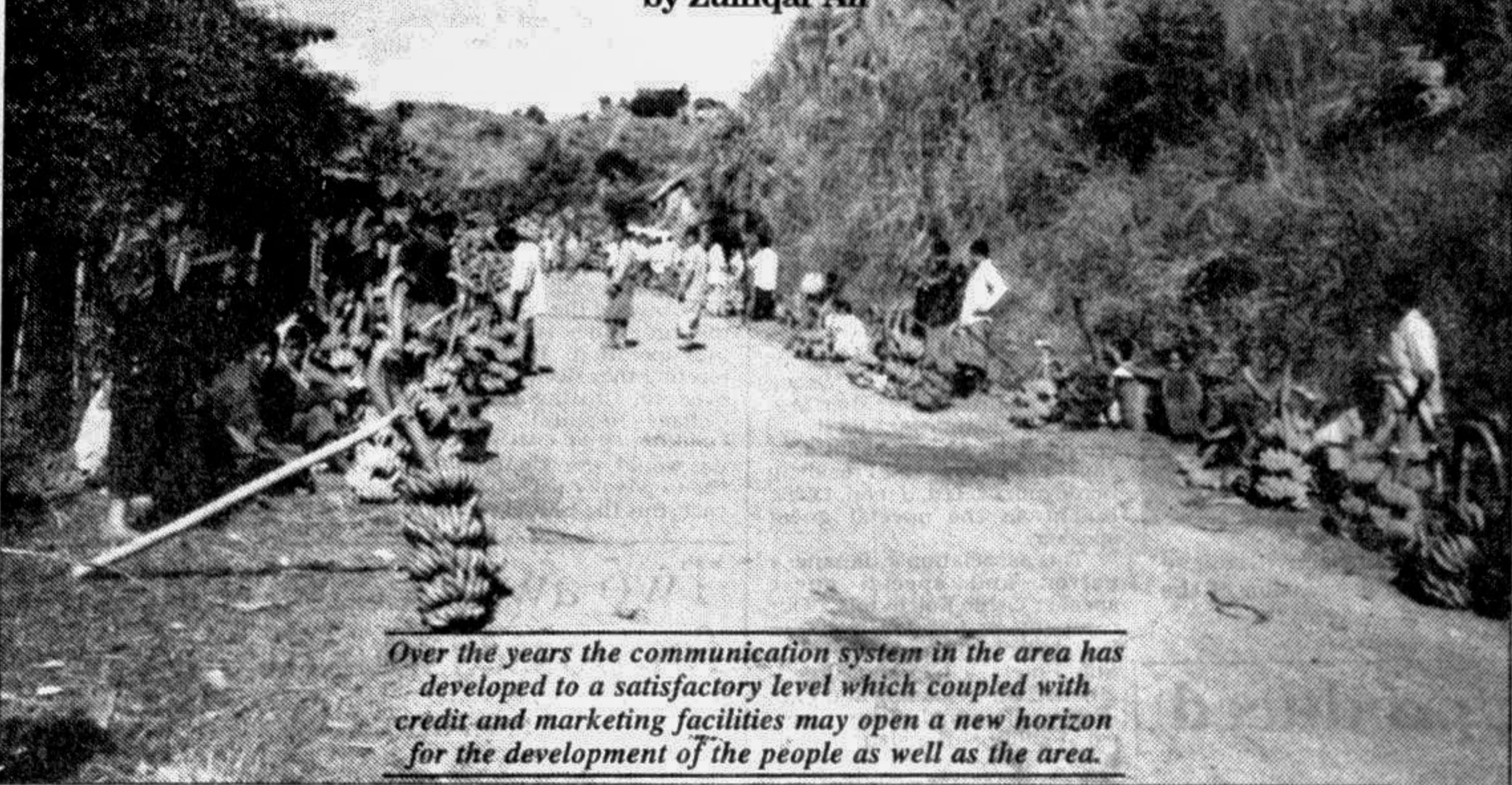


CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS

Seeking Options for Better Land Use

by Zulfiqar Ali



Over the years the communication system in the area has developed to a satisfactory level which coupled with credit and marketing facilities may open a new horizon for the development of the people as well as the area.

THE area of Chittagong Hill Tracts, comprising the three hill districts — Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban — is 13181 sq. kilometres. The area is composed of hills, valleys, ravines and cliffs. The land is uneven.

In the year 1961 the then government of Pakistan engaged a Canadian company — Forestal International — to survey the soil and topography of Chittagong Hill Tracts. The survey conducted by them revealed that most of the soil of the area is very poor. The Forestal report had graded only 3.2 per cent of the land as category A — suitable for cultivation. It may be mentioned here that currently, only 2,90,000 acres are under cultivation in the three hill districts.

The B grade land accounted for 2.9 per cent as suitable for terraced agriculture. They graded 15.5 per cent of land as category C which were found to be suitable mostly for horticulture and partially for afforestation. The next category C-D accounted for only 1.4 per cent. Finally category D which was about 7 per cent of the area and might be used only for afforestation.

Many of the educated people of the country think that in CHT vast cultivable land is lying vacant and kept fallow unnecessarily. This reflects their ignorance about the area. From the above information one may conclude that the arable land is scarce. The scarcity of land, when taxed by the settlement of plainlanders during late 70s and early 80s, became more acute. Scarcity of land was thus

the basic cause of conflict which continued in Chittagong Hill Tracts for more than two decades.

Jhum cultivation is an integral part of the way of life and culture of the tribal people. Because of the land pattern there is no other alternative than to adopt Jhum cultivation in most of the areas in Chittagong Hill Tracts, though there are also constraints of Jhum cultivation. Apart from soil erosion, the same land cannot be cultivated twice in succession without a normal cycle of 5 to 10 years. The increase in population has increased the pressure on land thereby reducing the Jhum cycle from 5-10 years to 2-3 years, which aggravates the situation with the decrease in fertility of soil.

By the end of last century, the then British government had started encouraging plough cultivation. To this end the government provided loans to the plough cultivators. The initiative was partially successful. A portion of the flat land came under plough cultivation, though the cultivators were the plainlanders from the neighbouring Chittagong. But it failed to make any headway at that time in the way of life of the tribal people because of their love for a free style sort of life. The plough cultivation had aimed at settling the tribals at a particular place to facilitate collection of revenue. The hill men are not nomadic in the true sense of the term. They generally move within the mouza they use to reside in.

The survey conducted by Forestal International, among others, had recommended to

undertake orchard plantation in Chittagong Hill Tracts. The government initiative to develop horticulture during late 60s was successful as far as fruit gardens were concerned, but the government efforts ultimately did not succeed due to bad communication system, lack of credit, storage and marketing facilities. Over the years the communication system in the area has developed to a satisfactory level which coupled with credit and marketing facilities may open a new horizon for the development of the people as well as the area. As the arable land available is very scarce, for the best use of the land large scale afforestation and orchard may be undertaken. But before doing that arboreal survey may be conducted in the area.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulations of 1900 and the rules made under Regulation 18 were and still are the guiding principles relating to land administration and land revenue. The three circle chiefs and the mouza headmen are the main instruments in the field of land management in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The question of conducting cadastral survey of the area did not arise earlier because of its status as a non regulation district and the existence of a different pattern of life style of the hill people. Due to the system prevailing there the hill people, in general, were not required to take lease of land by name. According to the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900 and the rules framed there under it, the hill people used to enjoy a kind of customary and community right on land, although

the land belongs to the state. A hillman can settle to a place of his choice within the mouza he used to reside with an intimation to the mouza headman. The mouza headman keeps record of land settled in favour of a person. So most of the hill people did not require documents relating to settlement or ownership of land. Certain amendments, relating to land management incorporated in the regulation, made during the British, Pakistan and post independence period, as the hill men feel, have infringed the customary and community right on land. The increase in population has increased the pressure on land which has since not only changed the relationship between the hillmen and the non-hillmen but also indirectly curtailed their customary right on land.

The three circle chiefs — the Chakma chief, the Bohmong chief and the Mong chief — used to collect land revenue on behalf of the government from the mouza headmen appointed by the Deputy Commissioner in consultation with the respective circle chief. The mouza headmen used to collect land revenue from within his mouza and maintain records of land, land settled and transferred. There are no Tahsildars in the three hill districts. The two traditional offices in Chittagong Hill Tracts — the circle chief and mouza headman — may be strengthened for the purpose of land administration and collection of land revenue. The headmen with the basic training on land matters, may efficiently perform the functions of Tahsildar.

Oil and Gas  
The Labyrinth Must End

by Md. Shah Jahan

Government should allow BAPEX to work freely and to try to arrange its own funds by floating shares in national and international markets.

AT the end of the dark tunnel of our national life, Asst. independence, we sighted a flicker of hope when we were told that our country was "floating on oil and gas." We had thought our dark nights of poverty were over. We dreamed of a bright morning which would give real meaning to our independence. But what we see and hear now all around is totally disheartening. It is alleged that deep conspiracies are underway to grab our natural resources through lobbying by the local agents, which was totally prohibited in the 70s.

In the absence of transparency in awarding Production Sharing Contracts to foreign companies and dealing with the bidding process there exists a total chaos and confusion. Baseless, motivated and contriving figures of gas reserve have been doled out by the multinational companies. Goaded by these figures our former Energy Minister remarked that Bangladesh had a gas reserve of 80 TCF to 100 TCF. But national experts say our gas reserve is 10.5 TCF. The

potentiality of gas reserve in our country said Dr. Badrul Inam, Chairman of the Geology Department, Dhaka University, can be around 25 TCF.

It is alleged that the Government has no regard for the 1995 Energy Policy and also did not formulate a clear national strategy identifying national priorities to optimise the benefit from gas for present and future generations. It is pursuing an aimless policy in the energy sector. People are in the labyrinth of numerous questions: What is the extent of exact gas reserve we have in the country? Should we lease out all the blocks at a time to foreign companies? If we do so what will be the consequences? Do we have enough expertise to supervise activities of foreign companies? How best we can use our gas reserve? What potentiality we have for alternative energy in case of exhaustion of our gas reserves?

Though Petrobangla, directly and through its subsidiaries like BAPEX, Titas, Bakhrabad Gas and others, has

made significant contributions in discovery of oil and gas, in developing technological expertise in exploration, production and distribution and management of oil and gas sector, but today it has been cornered and many of its senior experts have left it, causing serious vacuum in Petrobangla.

Since 1989 BAPEX alone made five exploratory wells out of which four were discovery well and one was dry wells in addition to its having done development and appraisal work, and work-overs of many producing wells. But it is alleged that systematically this national organisation is made crippled with the pretext of lack of fund — BAPEX is not being awarded contract and has rather been kept in the process of total elimination.

As a national petroleum organisation BAPEX should be properly equipped so that it can play important role in developing and harnessing natural resources and also can transcend national boundary and earn money for the country. Under

the Production Sharing Contracts all costs in the name of development are recoverable by the contractor. It is alleged that contractors are recovering expenditure even for the "drinks consumed by their men" under cost recovery heading. BAPEX should be entrusted with the responsibilities of supervising activities of multinational companies operating under PSCs in various blocks.

To strengthen BAPEX the lucrative blocks 9.10 and 11 should be kept reserved for it instead of putting forward motivated arguments of lack of fund. It can be argued that if we could provide fund while our economy was still under the rubbles of war in 1974 then why we cannot provide such funds today? BAPEX is made disable at the very labour room by assigning to it only the responsibilities of exploration which means it will only incur costs but no profit. Government should allow BAPEX to work freely and to try to arrange its own funds by floating shares in national and international markets.

'Criminal' Tribes to Finally Get Social Justice

Lalit K. Jha writes from New Delhi

Through three separate legislations in 1871, 1911 and 1924, the British rulers identified about 135 communities in various parts of India as criminal tribes.

A century after being unfairly branded as "criminal tribes" by India's then British rulers, members of several indigenous communities continue to be persecuted by the police and suspicious citizens.

Members of these tribes are routinely picked up by the police for any crime ranging from petty theft to murders and hounded out of their makeshift dwellings every few days by hostile local residents.

Originally traders carrying foodgrains, salt and forest produce from one part of the country to another when modes of communications were still primitive, most of them became jobless with the construction of road and rail networks.

Driven by poverty, some of them started plundering and looting. Some tribal communities also rebelled against the colonial powers.

Through three separate legislations in 1871, 1911 and 1924, the British rulers identified about 135 communities in various parts of India as criminal tribes.

Since then there has been little respite for these communities, comprising 20 million people, and the stigma of being "habitual offenders" and "criminal tribes" has stuck till today. Thanks to the intervention

of India's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), these communities can now hope for a more humane treatment from people, the police in particular.

Acting on a petition by a non-governmental organisation (NGO), the NHRC has appointed a seven-member advisory group to examine the matter and advise the commission on remedial measures.

The group, whose activists are currently touring various parts of the country collecting similar data, is expected to submit its report in a few weeks.

The petition was filed in May last by the Densified and Nomadic Tribal Rights Action Group, an NGO which includes renowned writer and Magsaysay award winner Mahasweta Devi, Marathi writer Laxman Gaikwad, Malayalam writer P. Sachidanandan and filmmaker Ananya Chatterjee.

In the petition, it was alleged that every year members of such communities were mobbed, killed by the police, or even forced by the lawkeepers to engage in criminal activities.

Members of the Pardihi, Bawariya or Sansi tribes, some of whom have been staying in shantytowns in and around New Delhi, live with the constant fear of being hauled by the police.

The Kheri Sabar and Lodha communities, in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, cannot stay at one place for long, sometimes not even for a few days, as they are driven away by the residents.

"The plight of these communities has worsened over the decades, even though the Indian government withdrew the British legislations (Criminal Tribals Act) soon after Independence," says Sharma, who is also chairman of the People's Movement of India, an NGO which mainly works amongst the tribes. With the repeal of the act in 1952, these "criminal tribes" came to be known as denotified tribes or DNTs.

"Even today the police as well as the general public continue to treat most of these unfortunate communities as born criminals and habitual criminals," says Sharma.

"Every day in different parts of the country there are instances of mob-lynching, arson and police atrocity directed to innocent and helpless DNTs," he says.

According to Mahasweta Devi, in just five years, 1977 to 1982, as many as 42 Lodha tribals of West Bengal had been branded criminals and killed. "People cut off their heads," Sachidanandan says quoting Mahasweta Devi, "and the police

never took action."

The police are still trained to consider them as compulsive offenders.

"A majority of the members of these tribes indulge in criminal activities and thus they are our first suspicion," says Delhi's Additional Deputy Commissioner of Police (Crime Branch) Alok Kumar, indicating the mindset of the lawkeepers. "In fact, their modus operandi has certain peculiar features, like opening the door with rod and killing the victims by striking on his head."

Unwittingly affirming stereotypical images, Kumar says, "Whenever the crimes have these features, we arrest members of these tribes on the basis of suspicion."

It's this kind of attitude that the Rights Action Group is fighting against.

The communities have lost in other social privileges too. While the literacy level among the communities is almost negligible, "their names do not figure in the voting list of the election commission nor are they properly accounted for in the census," says Sachidanandan.

However, some of the communities like the Mina tribe, of the central Indian state of Rajasthan, have come up well and the literacy level among them is much higher.

Cropland Agro-forestry  
Potential Area for Intervention

by Arifa S Sharmin

Many farmers in different geographical locations in Bangladesh are practising the tree-crop cultivation. The implication of the programme is more pronounced across the western parts of the country.

ONE of the major challenges facing all countries of the South Asian Region is to find means of producing enough food to feed rapidly increasing population and, at the same time, combat poverty and increasing rate of deterioration of their natural resources. Forestry is one of such important sectors where the rate of deforestation has reached an alarming position.

In Bangladesh, forest lands constitute only 15 per cent of the total land area and the actual green coverage is hardly 6 per cent. On the other hand, the current annual rate of deforestation is about 3 per cent, against a much lower deforestation rate in South Asia (0.6 per cent) as a whole during 1981-1993 (FMP, 1993).

As a result of increasing population, demand for tree products like timber, fuel wood, fodder, fruit etc. is increasing, whereas supply of such products is decreasing as a result of declining supply sources.

Different studies revealed that, present demand for wood is estimated at 476.75 million cubic feet per annum. Forest Department of the Bangladesh Government could only meet 24 per cent of the demand and village forestry sources meet 70 per cent of the increasing demand for timber. Besides, 90 per cent fuel wood and bamboo supply come from village forestry.

With this in mind, in 1987, Village and Farm Forestry Pro-

gramme (VFFP) of Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC) intervened as an innovative pilot research project in the north western district of Bangladesh. Considering the scope and reality, VFFP try to introduce tree in the existing crop field and woodlot in the degraded land and intensify homestead tree plantation in a way that will restore many of the benefits of the villagers along with solving problems of land degradation and storage of fuel wood, poles and fodder.

In the primary stage, VFFP concentrated its work under some selected areas of the northern districts of Bangladesh. The main focus of the programme is to promote private planting on private land. VFFP concentrated to introduce tree in the existing crop field and woodlot, in the marginal land and intensify homestead tree plantation with view to solve problems of timber, fuel wood, fodder and fruits which will ultimately contribute towards mitigating the increasing cash problem of villagers.

The positive responses during the first two phases (1987-91) created opportunity to ex-

pand the programme in 12 more districts of Bangladesh. At present 20 local NGOs are implementing VFFP in four VFFP regions i.e. Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Bogra, Jessore. VFFP NGO partners, with financial and technical assistance from VFFP, try to establish village based private nurseries, which are privately owned and commercially run. These nurseries consider local demand in planning their seedling production and out of their entrepreneurial interest, motivate fellow villagers to plant trees. VFFP has established four Regional Service Centres in its working areas to render tree related services to any organisation or individual.

The potential niches for tree plantation are homestead and crop land. Planting tree in homestead is a traditional practice. But planting trees in homestead has its spatial limit. What about planting trees in crop land? One may be taken aback. But cropland tree-planting does not mean sacrificing crops for tree. It means planting trees in combination with crops. Will it not negatively affect crop yield? VFFP research proved that if proper manage-

ment practices like branch pruning, root pruning etc. are followed then shade effect, competition for soil nutrient can be minimised.

VFFP research findings reveal that crop loss under the canopy of sissoo, mahogany, goda neem is 4 per cent-25 per cent (Quddus, 1997). Let's take an example, if you plant three different species of trees such as, sissoo, mahogany, and goda neem, in one acre land, with 8m x 8m spacing, which accommodates 54 trees, you will get return of Tk. 11000, 13000 and 1100 respectively for each tree after 20 years, 25 years and 10 years with your regular crop. Against the above extra financial benefit, the crop loss due to the presence of the tree in the crop field is for sissoo — 91 taka for 20 years, mahogany — 300 taka for 25 years and for goda neem — 58 taka for 10 years. So, you could easily count the loss and benefit of crop land tree planting.

Now the choice is yours. Many farmers in different geographical locations in Bangladesh are practising the tree-crop cultivation. The implication of the programme is more pronounced across the western parts of the country. Cropland plantation could be one potential area for larger intervention for solution of ever increasing demand for fuel wood, timber and problems of decreasing soil fertility.

The writer is a development worker

Compensation to Rape Victim Lauded

Rupa Chatterjee writes from New Delhi

THE one million rupees (\$23,800) awarded in damages to a Bangladeshi woman who was gangraped in Calcutta is being hailed as a landmark departure from the meagre compensation usually granted in India.

Under Indian laws dealing with rape, the accused, if convicted, is sentenced to a prison term of at least seven years and has to pay a nominal fine. The one million rupee compensation that the Calcutta High Court has ordered to be paid to the victim is unprecedented in India's judicial history for rape cases.

The woman, Khatun, was raped at an inn run by the Indian Railways where she was staying on the night of February 26-27. A native of Bangladesh's Comilla district, she was spending the night in Calcutta before making her way to the Muslim pilgrim town of Ajmer in central India the following day.

The criminal case against the accused, five of whom are

railway employees, is yet to be heard. The men have been suspended from the railways and are in judicial custody.

The Times of India newspaper said in its legal column that the Calcutta High Court judgement is a step forward as it comes out of the judicial conventions. The paper said, "If the Indian Penal Code was adhered to, perhaps this exemplary compensation would not have been possible."

Well known advocate Meera Bhatia told IANS: "It's a step forward. It's a good decision because commonly rape victims (in India) are not granted compensation."

She said that while "no amount can compensate the loss (of a rape victim), this would go a long way to rehabilitate her." The rape, pointed out, "is something she (the victim) will never forget... it is like degrading a woman in her own eyes."

Jyotsna Chatterji of the

Joint Women's Programme said the judgement was "a kind of example for emulation in any kind of compensation case, useful in 'preventing' such cases, she said, describing the judgement as "unprecedented."

Ranjana Kumari of the Mahila Dakshata Samiti (Women's Empowerment Council) told IANS the compensation was welcome because "if there is no one to look after the victim, at least she can provide for herself or become gainfully employed."

The judges who ordered the compensation observed: "The crime was heinous and the railway did not ensure her safety. She suffered deep scars and life will never be the same for her. Moreover, she came to this country as a visitor and she should have been treated with respect."

The judges were acting on a petition from a lawyer, Chandrima Das, who sought compensation for Khatun from the

Indian Railways and a probe into the incident by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

Kumari however cautioned that this particular case had international ramifications as the victim was a Bangladesh national. She asked, "What happens to the hundreds of Indian girls and women who are raped?"

"If this becomes a norm, we welcome it," otherwise compensation would be "ridiculous" if the guilty were not given harsh punishment, she said. The compensation, she however hoped, would be a "deterrent."

Chatterji pointed out it was difficult to prove rape cases and often victims or their families refused even to lodge a complaint with the police for fear of social ostracism. At times, she claimed, police was also reluctant to take on rape cases. Therefore, she felt, the precedent set by the Calcutta court was laudable as it might encourage victims to report sexual abuse.

— IANS

Bidi Sells Good in LA!

Lisa Tsering writes from Los Angeles

P RABHJIT Singh Bajwa, owner of New India Sweets and Spices here, is amused. "Why do you want to write about bidis?" he asks.

His store, in a predominantly African-American neighbourhood of Los Angeles, has been selling the hand-rolled leaf cigarettes, called bidis in the subcontinent, for years. But these days, business is growing.

A study released recently shows a disturbing trend in the popularity of bidis in the minority and youth communities. According to Ebone Smith, project coordinator for the Booker T. Washington Community Centre in San Francisco, 56 per cent of students surveyed at four San Francisco high schools admitted to trying bidis

at least once. Of them 40 per cent had been smoking them for over a year.

"In the lower income areas, they're much more popular and easier to buy," Smith told the California newspaper *India West*. "In upscale neighbourhoods, the merchants haven't even heard of them."

Bidis, considered in India to be the "poor man's smoke," cost around Rs. 5 a pack (about 13 cents) in India while here they cost \$1.25 (Rs. 52).

Smith, with a research team of seven local teens, compiled the data for the Tobacco Free project, an organisation funded by the city's department of public health.

The most popular brand was

found to be Mangalore Ganesh 501 Pinks, with a market share of 82 per cent. Although the plain variety is the most popular, flavoured varieties including mango, clove, chocolate, vanilla and strawberry are gaining popularity as well. Smith said. She released her findings in a formal complaint registered with the Federal Trade Commission.

Over a span of ten months, the team surveyed young bidi smokers, the majority of whom were between 17 and 18 years old. Latino immigrants from South America were found most likely to smoke bidis (36.9 per cent), followed by blacks (27.7 per cent). Despite being under the legal age of 18

years, 24 per cent of youths surveyed said they had no trouble purchasing them.

The ease with which they're available combined with a price tag as low as \$1.25 per pack compared with an average \$2.50 per pack of cigarettes, has been key to their popularity, she said.

Also notable was the range of popular misconceptions about bidis. Alarming, nearly half of the respondents (49 per cent) believed that bidis wouldn't give them cancer, even though the San Francisco Department of Public Health asserts that each bidi contains seven to eight per cent nicotine, compared to one to two per cent as found in American cigarettes.

— India Abroad News Service

