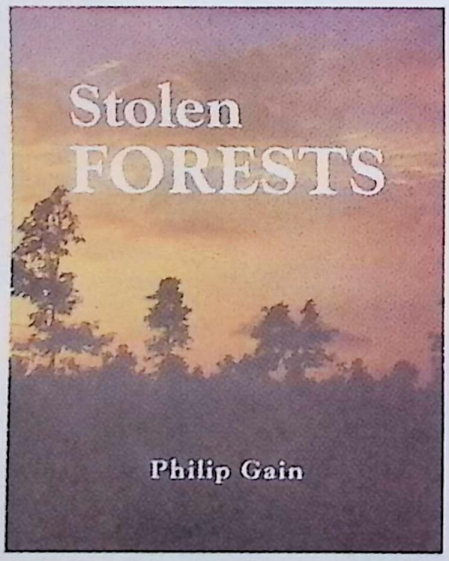
Moans of a Dying Forest

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"We do not inherit the land from our ancestors...we borrow it from our children."

-- Native American Proverb

PHILIP Gain, a journalist and writer, has strong feelings when it comes to trees and forests. He currently runs the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) which keeps up a continual struggle to bring into the spotlight issues related to the forest and those that inhabit it. In his recent book, "Stolen Forest," he explores how we are losing one of our precious natural resources.



Government bodies and international agencies point their finger at forest dependent communities and the poor people whose lives are entwined with the forest for the massive destruction and the erosion of our forests. In his book, Gain argues that it is the state agencies and the investment strategies of the international financial institutes (IFIs) who are to blame. Gain divides the book into some broad categories, namely the Forest, Depletion, Threats, Effects of Plantation and Survival.

His Introduction, written in the first person narrative, which reads a little like a memoir to the events: "My first visit to any forest occurred in when I spent three months in the Modhupur sal forest... What attracted me most was the matrilineal Garo or Mandis of the forest villages." These people are the true forest people. From that time on, Gain has had an acute fascination with those people whose lives revolved around the forest. Overall the book is written in the third person but Gain often quotes himself and brings in his own feelings and views into perspective to give his readers first hand knowledge about being in the forest and with its people.

The book also provides concrete facts, figures and numbers. "Officially the forest department of Bangladesh is supposed to manage around 2.6 million hectares or 18 percent of the land surface of the country...it now controls only 10.3 percent of the land surface," according to the Forest Department records of 2001. He gives detailed descriptions of how much of the forest areas are still standing in Bangladesh, where they are located and what type of forest they are. Graphical maps highlight the remaining forests and their density.

From the outer periphery of the forest he homes in to the centre, to the people who live there, "the children of the forest." We get a wonderful look into one of the few remaining matrilineal societies in the world. Gain highlights items of interest and then goes on to discuss it in more detail. For example, in one section he talks of jum and jumia and goes on to describe how swidden or jum is cultivated and the process in which the community or jumia cultivates it. He describes the life-span of the jum plant and the time it takes for the soil to reach its fertility again. There are colourful pictures with detailed captions to follow.

In the Threats section of "Stolen Forests," Gain analyses the different ways that the forests are being destroyed. In addition to the familiar ones of population boom, migration of landless people into the forestland, conversion of forestland to agriculture, he adds a few more that he considers major factors in aiding the destruction. These factors include, "reservation, monoculture plantations (industrial or commercial with exotics in particular), lies about plantation, tea plantation...encroachment for setting industries, mining, exploration of gas and oil, etc." many of these reasons are eye openers and important revelations for anyone interested in saving the environment.

In this chapter, Gain also talks about how organisations like the World Bank have played a major role in industrial plantation in Bangladesh. Its involvement in industrial plantation has taken form in mainly two projects: the Second Forestry Project and the Forest Resource Management Project. The projects resulted in "massive deforestation and replaced natural forests with