

Modhupur walls to protect wilderness or marauders?



Depletion of the sal forest in Modhupur has severely affected the life of the Garos and other forest dependent people. The majority of the estimated 20,000 Garos and Koch in Modhupur are concentrated in two unions -- Aronkhola and Sholakuri (distributed in some 40 villages). At one time they had full access to the forest and its resources. There were no Bengalis in the forest villages.

PHILIP GAIN

As we walk past Gaira, a forest village of primarily Garos, in the foggy morning of Friday (Feb 2), we come across a score of labourers busy cutting sal trees and digging square holes every few feet. They are men of contractor Mr. Mirja of Modhupur, one of the many contractors engaged by the Forest Department. They will soon erect concrete walls on the northern edge of Gaira village. The wall will cut the Garo village off from the core zone of 3,000 acres within the 21,800-acre Modhupur National Park. Gaira also falls within the National Park area.

Both the national park and Gaira have lost their characters that I first saw in 1980. The towering sal trees of that time are all gone now. A lone, huge Bahera stands as a witness of the past. The air of Gaira has also changed. The Garo houses look better than they did in the past, but the village has lost its beauty, devoid of the trees typical of a Garo village, thanks to banana cultivation.

The Garos of Gaira are enraged by the wall fiasco for good reasons. The wall will run over the mud road in the north that connects Gaira with other Garo villages. They fear that although there will be a gate to allow them through the wall, their mobility will be severely limited. They will also be deprived of the meager forest produces that they still collect. The Garos of Gaira also have 28 acres of cropland in the baid (low-land for growing rice) in the north of Gargaria lake in Lohoria Beat.

Sonendra Chiran is a 75 year old Garo of Gaira who possesses four acres of land in this baid. He is cultivating his baid land this year. "But I wonder if I will be able to cultivate my land next year after the walls are erected," says Sonendra with much fear.

The same fear is shared by Grishma Garib, another Garo of Gaira who owns 1.8 acres of land in the baid. Gaira, with 105 Garo, 6 Koch, and 12 Bengali families is a well-known village in Modhupur forest.

As we walk along the mile-long

baid, we are appalled. All the trees on the chala (high land that nourishes the sal patches -- a few feet above the baid) have been stolen. What remain are scanty sal coppices, some trees considered worthless, and the bushy understory vegetation. Even that comes to an end as we walk further north and take a left turn. We see huge banana plots, illegally established on the forestland. The ground is all clear. The delicate top-soil is flushed with chemical fertilizers. Shallow engines set in the deep hole are extracting ground-water, making a lot of

says a high forest official in Modhupur.

What these messy figures suggest is dismal. The traditional Modhupur sal forest has vanished in most part. Now, the Forest Department wants to protect the last bits! We saw the first walls emerge in 2000 along the Tangail-Mymensingh highway. The Forest Department, inspired by a World Bank funded study under the Forest Resources Management Project (FRSP), wanted to erect 66 thousand feet walls around 3,500 acres in the National Park that is marked as core area. The ambition

shots. The construction of the walls was suspended in the face of strong criticism and resistance. Since then the wall issue in Modhupur has been nationally and globally known.

Following the killing of Piren Snal, the walls came under fire. Of the approximately 20,000 feet of walls constructed, almost half was demolished, as has been confirmed by a high Forest Department official. As we revisited the spot where the shooting of January 3, 2004, took place, we see no sign of the walls and other infrastructure that were built.



noise.

This is the 63,000 acre Modhupur sal forests -- 46,000 acres in the Tangail part and 17,000 acres in the Mymensingh part -- today. According to an official estimate, in the Tangail part of the Modhupur forest, the Forest Department (FD) controlled only 9,000 acres of the forestland in 2004, and 25,000 acres had been encroached by then. Rubber monoculture replaces around 8,000 acres of the native forest. There is also a firing range of the Bangladesh Air Force on 1,000 acres. The condition in the Mymensingh part is even worse,

of the FD was to protect the wilderness that is critically threatened.

But the ground realities did not favour the FD. The Garos around the so-called core area stood strong against the walls. The movement against the walls eventually turned out to be a bloody business. During a demonstration on January 3, 2004, the FD guards and the police opened gunfire to stop the demonstrators. A Garo man Piren Snal was killed. Utpal Nokrek, another Garo youth of Beduria village, was severely wounded and has become paralyzed for the rest of his life. Many others were wounded from gun-

Instead, we see an 8-foot wide "Herring Bone Bond Road" under construction, which would run along the walls yet to be built. The FD hopes to complete 14,000 feet of walls shortly (within 2006-07 financial year).

It was not just the walls that had been ruined as an aftermath of the shooting on the Garo protestors. The stands that still survived had been drastically reduced. Organized gangs of wood smugglers took advantage of the trouble and cut whatever they could take away. The banana cultivators also fresh-cut hundreds of acres. The FD officials put the blame on the anti-wall movement for this situation. They complain that the forest guards had to stop patrolling in fear of the Garos, and watched the forest resources being pillaged. The Garos complain that the FD turned a blind eye to the situation to put the blame on them.

The ambition of the FD to save the vanishing wilderness with walls remained alive. In a meeting on September 11, 2006, at Dokhola Rest House, fresh pledges came about to start the wall construction again. The meeting was chaired by the DC of Tangail (Bashir Uddin Ahmed) who is also the president of Modhupur National Park Development Project Implantation Committee. In the meeting, the Forest Department put all the blame for the failure in erecting the walls on anti-wall "tribals". However, the meeting was informed that all other construction activities were



implemented in accordance with the amended plan. The meeting resolved to go ahead with constructing walls (14,000 feet in 2006-07 financial year) and other infrastructure, including an 8-foot wide road along the walls. According to the minutes of the meeting the authorities would talk with the anti-wall people. But the meeting cautioned to take legal measures if needed.

The DC is quoted in the minutes as saying: "Forests must be there to save the environment. Those who destroy forests destroy our existence. We have started our work. We will go ahead. We will discuss first and then take legal action. The Divisional Forest Officer of Tangail will take initiative in this regard."

The meeting has been followed by actual construction action during the emergency rule, and

to continue illegal banana cultivation."

The Garos who have given out most of the high land in their possession for banana cultivation agree that it is a serious problem for their environment, economy and society. "Banana cultivation is a big cash deal. So we rent our land out to the outsider Bengalis because we do not have the cash," says Eugene Nokrek of Gaira.

Invasion of banana on the forestland has a notorious background indeed. The banana traders have cashed in on plantation afforestation, under the cover of "social forestry," to grab forestland. After harvest, or plunder of the first rotation of the so-called "social forestry" that was initiated in 1989-90 with funds from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the

taking financial benefits from the marauders is not groundless. Collusion of the banana traders with the hormone and pesticide producing companies and their distributors made the illegal operations easy. Support from politically influential people added leverage.

Rubber plantation that preceded the ADB-funded plantation has also caused enormous damage to the Modhupur sal forest and the wilderness it nourishes. It started in 1987. Bangladesh Forest Industry Development Corporation (BFIDC) has established rubber gardens in almost 8,000 acres of forestland. Rubber plantation is a clear threat to forest and genetic resources. It is a single species monoculture that takes root in the forestland and wipes out all species from an area. A rubber plantation may look like a forest from a distance, but it is a

from marauders. "Banana plantation in the Modhupur sal forest is illegal. We are starting processes to evict illegal banana cultivation," said a high official at Rasulpur Range office.

It is to be seen how the Forest Department behaves in recovering the land illegally occupied by the banana and papaya cultivators. Even in this recovery attempt the Forest Department has initially targeted some Garos. In the meeting of September 11, 2006, setting the target for wall construction that has started now, three Garo names have been particularly mentioned. But what about hundreds of other heavy hands who are getting away with their high crimes? Ajoy Mree, a local Garo leader in the anti-wall movement complains: "Some members of the Modhupur National Park Development Implementation Committee are illegal banana cultivators. Will the Forest Department touch them?"

Depletion of the sal forest in Modhupur has severely affected the life of the Garos and other forest dependent people. The majority of the estimated 20,000 Garos and Koch in Modhupur are concentrated in two unions -- Aronkhola and Sholakuri (distributed in some 40 villages). At one time they had full access to the forest and its resources. There were no Bengalis in the forest villages. But actions such as a ban on slash-and-burn cultivation in the 1950s, establishment of national parks, promotion of plantation economy, aggression of massive scale banana plantation, construction of roads, and encroachments, have reduced the forest to a miserable size and have unsettled the traditional life of the Garos and the Koch.

The process of the destruction of the Modhupur sal forest has apparently gone beyond control. Many believe that the complete destruction of the Modhupur sal forest is only a matter of time. It is in this context that the Forest Department and other agencies protecting the forests, and the people need to behave right.

This piece is an SEHD report. SEHD is a non-profit Bangladeshi organization established in 1993. It is engaged in action-oriented research, investigative reporting, documentation, training, and advocacy.



puts the anti-wall movement in a difficult situation. Those who took to the streets against the walls have been advised by the leaders in Dhaka to stay quiet for now. However, they have reportedly sent an appeal to the chief of the caretaker government expressing their grievances. The people of Gaira, Jalabadha, Sadhupara, Kakraguni, Beduria, Joynagachha, Amliola, Joloi and Telki, who are close to the wall sites now watch the construction from a distance. They have the warning to not interfere with state affairs!

While the wall construction goes ahead to save the wilderness, many wonder why the FD, and other state agencies showing their skills, do not take immediate action against marauders on the forestland.

The walls involve approximately 3,000 of 63,000 acres of the Modhupur reserved forest. What has happened, and will happen, to the major share of the forest outside the walls? One traveling to any corner of the Modhupur forest will see huge banana, papaya and pineapple plots. These have replaced the forestland, and have caused wholesale destruction of the gene pools of the forests. "All banana cultivation on the forestland is illegal. There are heavy hands behind that put Garos in the front line," says a forest official in Rasulpur. "Banana cultivation is extremely damaging for the environment and soil. The Garos are used as a human shield

plantation sites had remained open for some years before the loan money for the second rotation of plantation flowed in from the same multilateral development bank (MDB). This situation turned out to be the perfect ground for the banana, pineapple and papaya traders to invade the vacant forestland. In a short period of time they also cleared thousands of acres of forestland and converted these to banana, pineapple and papaya gardens. All this happened openly with the Forest Department people watching passively. The allegation against the dishonest Forest Department officials of

desert for birds, insects and other animals. Rubber is a mono-crop that grows in beautiful rows, but does not support any life form. It is a green desert indeed. The government had a plan to further expand the rubber plantation with loan from ADB, but it was finally cancelled.

What stands out from these underlying factors for the destruction of Modhupur sal forests is that the Forest Department wants to escape from the ground realities. So it considers the wall issue to be the last resort. It, however, is meekly saying that it is taking actions to recover the forestland

