

# Modhupur

"Wherever the forest department is, there is no forest." Tasneem Khalil investigates

HERE goes an open invitation: come and see the game, visit one of the most attractive zoos in Bangladesh, spread over 478 square kilometers of land that is home to the largest sal forest in the world. On display: more than 25,000 Mandi and Koch adivasis.

Welcome to Modhupur, best described by an independent observer as: "An open laboratory where the adivasis are the guinea pigs suffering endless experimentations at the hands of the forest department, multinational corporations and their guardian institutions, the church, Bengali settlers, and the department of defense."

For us -- photographer Amirul Rajiv and me-- it was pretty much of a shock and awe experience to take endless motorbike rides deep



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through the sal forest. For two days and nights we raced from one village to another, documenting the lives of the people whose woe we were investigating, the extent of

their suffering, the ruthless oppression they have to endure, the mindless rape of their motherland -- which they so dearly refer to as ha.bima.

This is the story of how the Bangladesh state, through its forest department, is treating one of the most colourful ethnic minorities in the country as easily dispensable burdens. This is the story of how the Asian Development Bank and its evil twin the World Bank is financing projects of mass destruction in the name of development, destroying acre after acre of sal forest.

This is the story of how multinational chemical merchants like Syngenta, Bayer, and ACI are marketing deadly poisons to the unaware farmers. This is the story of how pastors and maulanas are leading a campaign of cultural invasion taking away the very

identity of the Mandi population. This is the story of how the Bangladesh Air Force is in a daily bombing spree in Modhupur, endangering the ecological life of the area.

And then, this is the story of resistance, how the Mandi adivasis, persecuted for hundreds of years at the hands of civilization are now resisting and trying to turn things back, to desperately make their voices heard by an uncaring country.

It all started with the forest department taking over "conservatory" duties in Modhupur in 1951. In 1955 the area was declared as "restricted forest." In 1962, declaration of a "national park" came in.

What exactly happens when the ownership of a sal forest is forcefully taken away (without any consultation) from the very people -- Mandi and Koch adivasis -- who worship it

as their motherland and is handed over to a union of corrupt guardians at the forest department? Reverend Eugene E. Homrich, pastor at Saint Paul's Church, Pirgacha, Modhupur has a quick answer: "Wherever the forest department is, there is no forest."

To date, officials of the forest department -- a wing under the Ministry of Environment -- religiously engaged themselves in illegal timber logging with absolute impunity. Acre after acre of sal forest -- our priceless ecological treasure -- was handed over through handsome under-the-table deals to timber merchants.

Within 50 years since the forest department took charge of Modhupur it made sure the forest has been cut to half of its original size. And 60 species of trees, 300 species of birds? Peacock, fowl,

leopard, wild pigs? Extinct. Bio-diversity, ecology? Destroyed.

And the people? Well, they became easy target practice for the forest guards and victims of a thousand false poaching cases every year. Indiscriminate shooting at Mandi people in Modhupur is a regular affair.

Ask Sicilia Snal who was collecting firewood on August 21, 2006. Without warning forest guards, five or six of them, opened fire on three Mandi women around 7.30 in the morning. Sicilia was injured with hundreds of shards of cartridge piercing her back.

Her kidneys were badly damaged. One of the worst victims of oppression in Modhupur, Sicilia cannot walk or move her hands properly to date. "Looks like the forest department is competing to win a gold medal in shooting," Pavel



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Partha, environmentalist and human rights activist best known for his authoritative work on Modhupur, commented to us.

And then, after destroying the forest, killing its bio-diversity and enforcing a regime of terror and oppression on the people, the forest department came up with an ingenious plan to erect a wall around 3,000 acres of Mandi land, in the name of "Modhupur National Park Development Project."

That, anti-wall activists cried out, would destroy the lives of thousands of Mandi families in the area. "They are talking about a zoo and we all will be caged inside the wall," one adivasi activist told us.

Tasneem Khalil is a writer and editor, Forum. To read the full version of this article please ask your hawkker for a copy of this month's Forum.

# From non-cooperation to People's Raj

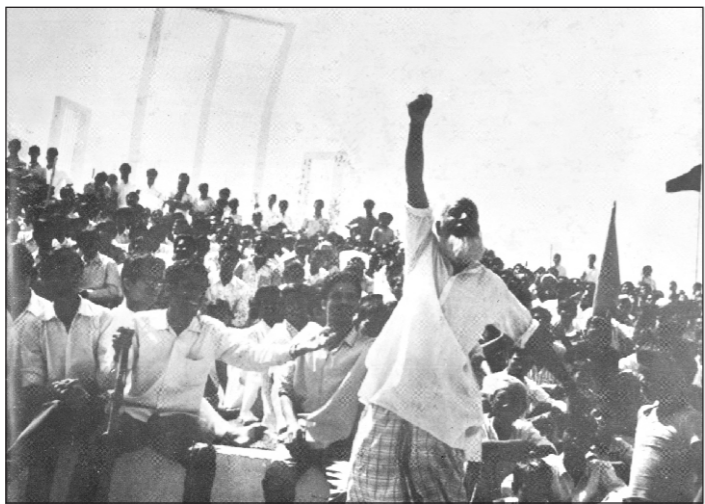
Reprinted from our archives: Rehman Sobhan's fascinating look at history unfolding from the March 13, 1971 issue

HERE are few precedents for what is going on in Bangla Desh today. In a matter of one week a *de facto* transfer of power from the Islamabad government to the people's representatives has been effected.

This has not been achieved by any spectacular victory on the battlefield or by foreign intervention, or a formal surrender of power by the rulers, but largely by peaceful means. One says this in spite of the massive death toll in the last week because these deaths were at the cost of the people of Bangla Desh and the forces of oppression.

The unique feature of this condition springs from the fact that peaceful non-cooperation has been taken a stage beyond to active cooperation with the people's representatives. In most freedom struggles non-cooperation was a vital element in the struggle. This was designed to paralyze the economy and administration and make life for the rulers untenable.

Such a move could not be sustained indefinitely because the ruling power could always depend on a class of collaborators from the ranks of the administration, business and property owning classes. These elements have made it possible for even the French to enforce their writ in Indo-China at the height of the resistance and



even the Germans and Japanese to keep the society functioning during the period of occupation in Europe and South East Asia.

In the freedom struggle in India, the civil service, judges and other elements, were always available to keep the show on the road and the police force was there to enforce law and order at all times. Only very rarely were troops required and this too in support, rather than in substitution, of the local administration.

What is therefore unprecedented for Bangla Desh is the fact that non-cooperation with the rulers in Islamabad is total. For the last week,

not a single element in the administration has been available to collaborate, from the chief justice of East Pakistan, to the chief secretary. This has never happened to my knowledge in any other country, in contemporary history.

In the extraordinary case of Radio Pakistan, when the military arbitrarily suspended the broadcast of Sheikh Mujib's speech at the Race Course, after having given prior permission, the staff simply closed shop and went home. This created a major crisis in the districts where the abrupt cancellation of an announced broadcast threatened to

create a law and order situation as people suspected that Mujib had been arrested.

When this prospect was intimated to the military authorities, along with the fact that no news at all would henceforth be broadcast from any radio station in Bangladesh, they agreed to let the news be broadcast on the 8th morning. On such terms did the Radio network here resume operations and continue to operate their own news bulletin from *Dacca Betar Kendra*, leaving Radio Laos from Karachi to tell us all about news in Laos and the Middle East -- anywhere but about Bangla Desh.

Non-cooperation was however only a first step. Even more remarkable has been the evolution from non-cooperation with Islamabad to cooperation with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Whilst the Eden Building remains a mausoleum for lost hopes, administration has come to life on Road 32, Dhanmondi, and the residence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Rehman Sobhan is Chairman, Editorial Board, Forum. To read the full version of this article please ask your hawkker for a copy of this month's Forum.

# May we have a pro-poor government?

Afsan Choudhury reflects on whether the poor have reason to celebrate the current situation

TWO examples have become permanent examples of the complete lack of concern towards the poor and the vulnerable when implementing reforms becomes the sole priority not what happens as a result of such implementation. We have two examples.

The shutting down of the Adamjee Jute Mills as a cure for a bleeding government-owned enterprise is one example people are less likely to forget. The World Bank's best friend, Saifur Rahman, was always aiding the wishes of the Bank. Neither Bangladesh Biman or any of the showcase projects were shut down, but the pathological dislike of the thought of poor workers eating up state funds in the form of measly wages seems to do something to western thinkers used to shutting factories to cut losses.

Pushed by them, the last government caused misery, denial, violation of child rights, and committed plain cruelty to the poor. Workers were not in charge of the mills but the government was -- and the complete disregard of their rights reminds people of ancient kings answerable to none.

The second example was the forced removal of rickshaws from the main streets of Dhaka. It was again another instance of making vehicular traffic flow easier and encouraging car culture at the cost



of livelihood of the very poor. If the Bangladesh government was unacceptably cynical and uncaring in deciding to ban rickshaws, the role of the Bank was inefficient and inhumane.

It seems nobody bothered about the complexity of suffering that poverty entails. The births of the rickshaw rehabilitation project only after generating a great deal of suffering for the poor makes the entire affair look even more foolish and scary.

It's in this tradition that the eviction of the street economy falls. In the last 35 years, every government

thinks that evicting the poor from the city is a great idea without caring about their lives, livelihood, and human rights. Recanting the decision is the proof that not enough thinking went behind the decision.

Many, if not most, probably would like this government to continue for long but they would like the core focus to widen a bit. It's great to have freedom from corruption, but protection of livelihood is not a bad priority either.

Like all ruling classes, those who lead extremely privileged lives are governing us. The members of the cabinet have no idea, like their local

and foreign friends, what street life is all about. They couldn't have taken this decision had they known about poverty from up close. Till we have a government which is pro-poor -- will we ever? -- could we ask for inclusion of a representative of the medium poor as a sort of a perspective provider to the present government on matters concerning the poor.

A neutral non-partisan poor representative may not be great for sound bites but he may just slip in a word or two that will not starve off the pauperization and starvation of thousands. And all as a result of good intentions.

It's just having a simple poor chap saying: "Excuse me, I agree foot-path markets look bad, but those who come to shop here can't afford Gulshan 2 shops and I can sleep on the pavements of Gulshan 1 free of charge, if need be." It might even make the poor a bit happy for a change.

I am sure this government can deliver some pro-poor activities.

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# Pictorial traditions in Bangladesh: Urban, folk and urban-folk

Syed Manzoorul Islam offers a provocative theory of the richness of Bangladeshi artistry that challenges the conventional distinction between high and low art

WHEN the partition of India took place in 1947, Dhaka, the capital of the eastern province of Pakistan, had no "educated" or "western" art tradition -- only craftsmen, artisans, and occasional portrait and commercial painters carrying out their respective activities. It was a "pre-modern" set up which did not see art as being separate from everyday life.

However, a small, educated group soon began to raise demands for institutional and educated art as was being practiced in various centres of art, such as Calcutta. This middle class had been the vanguard of all social and political movements, and came to see itself as arbiter of public taste.

Therefore, when an art institute was set up in Dhaka in 1948 by a group of Calcutta Art School edu-

cated artists, middle class patronage was assured, although not immediately as religious strictures were strong against representational art and sculpture. The middle class, by that time, had begun a movement against the discriminatory policies of the centre.

Culture became an important means of the resistance against the centre. By the mid- 1950s, the art scene was confident and productive. Art galleries were in place, and art exhibitions became part of the regular weekly calendar of culture. Support from individual and corporate clients also started to come. It was time for a push forward.

The works of the founding artists showed a predilection for western styles and trends, perhaps because of the artists' academic training in Calcutta. It was quite remarkable that, despite a vigorous application

of traditional, folk motifs and images in the works of Zainul Abedin and Qamrul Hasan, the leading trend was towards incorporating western styles, notably cubism and abstract expressionism.

The 1950s artists happily juxtaposed works of both local and western inclination. Zainul did occasionally dabble with western styles, but he and Qamrul Hasan strongly advocated for local contents and styles. Qamrul remained faithful to his *patua* tradition till the very end.

Younger artists, however, many of whom received training in western and Japanese art academies, were inclined towards western trends. This is not the place for a value judgement as to whether such western preoccupation was good or bad for the development of our art, but it cannot be denied that such a

preoccupation helped them gain a worldview and a degree of confidence, which would later push our art to newer limits.

It also marked out areas of encounter beyond the narrow insularity of the kind of art nationalists would like artists to pursue.

The 1960s was truly a remarkable time for the development of our art. It was a time of intense involvement with modern western art that helped to evolve a modern character in our art. It was also a time of intellectual and political aspirations that often took a global dimension.

The sixties inauguration of the phenomenon called "internationalism" (which morphed two decades later into globalisation) in which we had, willy nilly, to participate, helped us see ourselves not as inhabitants of a backwater province, but as a nation among many other nations of

the world.

Politically, it was a time for movement for autonomy, which, through various phases of development, led to the full-fledged war of liberation in 1971. The 1960s art incorporated a diverse range of social and political experiences -- as well as shocks, setbacks and successes -- in its broad canvas.

Folk forms and figures remained an important presence however, although the division between high and low art was still quite strong.

In the 1970s, after the country emerged as a free nation through much bloodshed, the liberation war became one of the persistent themes, necessitating a liberation of colour. Raw colours began to dominate the canvas. At about that time, figurative and representational art made a comeback (comeback -- because the figure has always been

an important presence in our traditional art). With these came other compulsions, e.g. the need to tell a story.

Later in the decade, myths and folklore became a new area of exploration. The liberation war had temporarily reversed migration patterns -- it brought droves of city people into villages as refugees. It helped both groups understand each other better. Artists in search of themes and styles didn't have to go far. A new respect for traditional art/artists/artisans developed, and, along with it, a new appreciation of their skill.

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AMIRUL RAJIV

# Is this a sea change?

Is the current dispensation something new and encouraging or have we been here before, asks Farid Bakht

ONE cannot say "never" but do you ever see Tarique Rahman as prime minister? I do not.

More importantly, if you do not, then that's it for the BNP. BNP without the Zias is just another Rehman Sobhan is Chairman, Editorial Board, Forum.... Liberal Democratic Party.

What about the venerable Awami League? Can you see US-based Joy as PM? Too young, too far. Mum is still around though she looks increasingly isolated and even out of touch. She would have been PM today had her party compromised about the voter list.

Doing it now is too little too late. The train has left the station. Withdrawing from that supreme folly of signing up with the regressive Islamic Khelafat movement is meaningless. The secular brand the venerable Awami League owned has been thrown away.

If she had sacked General Secretary Jalil and sacrificed some of the old shysters like VIP prisoner Nasim, she would have built up an unstoppable momentum. She was hoodwinked. She should be carry-

ing out an inquest into which saboteurs have been giving out suicidal advice over the last two years. She can then send the names to Rab.

The Liberal Democratic Party was meant to be the new secular standard bearer, offering a corruption-lite government. It thought it had avoided the mistakes in 1994 of the breakaway Awami League



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outfit, Gono Forum. That had noble intentions, ten years ahead of its time.

The new doctor, B. Chowdhury, brought in by Tarique Zia's dad to manage the BNP, also broke away. His BNP-minus-Tarique formula did not take off. The exodus from BNP did not take place except for a couple of disgruntled elder politicians.

We never understood what the LDP were going to do that was different. The only clear message after two years (in their previous guise of Bikalpa Dhara or "alternative" thinking) was that they had failed to articulate anything alternative. We guessed or hoped they would steal a lot less money than the bad BNP family.

Which leads to the retort: They would say that, wouldn't they?

We need to look at the latest "next big thing" in the context of the experiences of the previous two attempts.

Farid Bakht is a political analyst. To read the full version of this article please ask your hawkker for a copy of this month's Forum.

# Tingling spines

Yasmeen Murshed takes us on a trip through the heart-stopping and bone-chilling pleasures of the murder mystery

REX Stout's Nero Wolfe was a massively overweight, short tempered, agoraphobic and sedentary gourmet who virtually never left his Manhattan brownstone, which housed his huge orchid garden on the roof and boasted a personal elevator.

Wolfe was, in every sense, an armchair detective, therefore he required someone to collect his clues and generally do the active stuff. Enter investigator cum strong-arm man cum secretary -- the debonair Archie Goodwin.

Wolfe was a man of fixed habit and routine, which he refused to interrupt or change even on the direst of occasions. He arose late, and only descended to his study after spending an hour inspecting his orchids on the roof with the orchid keeper, Theodore Horstmann.

Temperamental and moody, Wolfe was unable to work without a steady supply of beer, or without planning the day's menus with his creative chef, Fritz Brenner. Their detailed discussions about the fresh produce available in the market and

how it might be used most creatively in a dish is quite fascinating, and the menus alone are worth reading the books for.

However, my favourite in the household, as I am sure he was for most people, was Archie Goodwin, a handsome but tough young man, a forerunner of the hard-boiled PIs of later American crime fiction.



Archie had a photographic memory and knew a pretty girl when he saw one. He also had a penchant for wisecracking that was the bane of more than a few policemen and pretentious officials who would have liked to see his mouth nailed shut permanently!

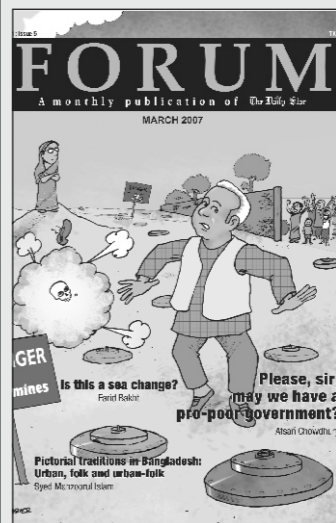
It is Archie, an excellent storyteller, who recounts the stories in the first person. Part of his job, as he saw it, was to goad the naturally indolent Wolfe into taking a case. Archie constantly worried at the lack of lucrative cases because paying the bills was his responsibility, and he was always extra persuasive when a profitable case came along.

Wolfe was more choosy -- he would bestir himself only when something struck his imagination or posed a challenge or, in a very few instances, when his chivalrous instincts were aroused.

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