stepped forward and asked for more time so that they could harvest banana that would mature in a few days or weeks. The FD said that these gardens were illegally established and now the forest land would be brought under social forestry programs.

The Forest Department tried to appease the Garo people by saying that they would be the participants in the social forestry programs that would take place and that they would be the beneficiaries of social forestry.

This does not satisfy the Garos. "The Forest Department wants to include us in social forestry programs. But we want our traditional rights to land recognized," says Garo leader Ajoy Mree.

The Garo people have many fears about social forestry programs. In Modhupur, "social forestry" began in 1989-90 through Asia Development Bank (ADB) funded Thana Afforestation and Nursery Development Project (TANDP). What people saw under the so-called "social forestry" -- woodlot for production of fuel-wood and agro-forestry -- were actually artificial forests or monoculture plantation.

When social forestry began, it came under criticism from Garos and environmentalists. People in Modhupur witnessed that the native forests were indiscriminately cut to establish plantation, sugarcoated as "social forestry." After the first rotation of plantation was harvested or pillaged by forest thieves, the second rotation occurred under the Asia Development Bank's Forestry Sector Project (FSP).

The destruction of hundreds of native species, the invasion of exotic species (acacia and eucalyptus), land remaining clear of plant species between rotations, etc., provided perfect ground to banana cultivators and land grabbers.

To the Garos, environmentalists, and residents of the area, plantations sugarcoated as social forestry brings no solution. That is why, when the FD speaks of social forestry, the Garos are not appeased. Another great fear is that if social forestry occurs they will lose their ancestral rights to their land. If this occurs, their traditional way of life will also be ruined.

After the first round of chopping, the Forest Department cut 650 acres of banana gardens on February 22. On this day, the targets were also Garo villages -- Jangalia, Getchua, Beribaid and Magontinagar. The order apparently came from a high-up of the government. Traumatized, the Garos appealed to the government authorities. In response, an order came from the government to stop chopping banana plants. The secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Forests visited Modhupur, had a meeting with the Garos and then gave them his word that no more banana trees would be cut. However, according to sources from the Garo community, the secretary cautioned that further expansion of banana plantations would not be allowed on forestland, and that after the mature bananas were harvested further banana cultivation would not be allowed.



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The Forest Department sources said that in its raid against banana cultivation on forestland, equally harmful banana gardens in social forestry plots were not targeted. Papaya gardens, also on large areas of forestland, were not targeted. These are controlled by the outsiders, the real marauders on the forestland. Many, thus, raise the question why the FD targeted the Garo villages and not the large banana and papaya plots illegally established on the forestland.

There are many questions regarding the quality of social forestry. Even some FD officials express their concern over the selection of species to be planted under social forestry. They admit that they do not want exotic species such as acacia and eucalyptus, and want to bring back the native species lost because of plantation. However, they also claim that banana cultivation has ruined the soil to such a great extent in a short period of time that they see no other better alternative but to plant rapidly growing tree species such as acacia.

There are also allegations that in its raid against illegal banana cultivation the Forest Department has cut banana plants in some recorded lands of the Garos. From the beginning of the raid against banana, the Garos have been appealing to the government requesting for time to harvest the crop.

After the latest raid, on March 7, the government has given them time. But the locals are obliged to voluntarily stop banana cultivation on the forestland after harvesting. In a meeting at Dokhola Range on March 9, forest and environment adviser to the caretaker government, Dr. C.S. Karim, formed a 12-member committee including the Garos, and sought suggestions from the committee as regards eco-park, protection of sal forest, land use practices, etc. He visited some Garo villages and assured them that no arbitrary action would be taken against them.

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