"Blood Forest: A Prayer to Restore the Glory"

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THE beautiful Modhupur Forest is on the threshold of destruction. The forest which was once known for its rich biodiversity, now quarters timber thieves, banana, pineapple and rubber plantations, dacoits, a shooting range and so on. What remains today is incomparable to what was there just two decades back and seems to be treading towards its demise.

The thick jungle on both sides of the road at the Dhaka-Tangail highway seems to paint a picture of lush green vegetation possessed by the Modhupur Forest. Vans headed to different market places, carrying a bunch of bananas, all make for a lovely countryside image.

However, the image of abundance, anticipation and hope all lies in the imagination. The unique habitat for flora and fauna has reduced down to a mere 8000 acres from 45,000 leaving hundreds of hectares of barren land. Dead roots, commercially planted bananas and pineapples and woods of alien species have replaced the age-old exotic trees and scores of medicinal plants.

Corrupted and illegal foresters are stripping the forest of its ecological balance by planting trees in the name of social forestry, which causes soil erosion and eventually deforestation. A large variety of the wildlife including the Royal Bengal Tiger, bear, pea fowls and deer that roamed in the Modhupur forest just a few decades ago can no longer be seen. Furthermore, a firing range in the middle of the forest creates noise pollution, hampering the environment of the forest and the breeding ground of wild animals.

The government also does not pay attention to the wooden furniture shops, sawmills, pesticides and brick kilns growing on the encroached forestland. Not only does Modhupur Sal Forest and National Park face is in the threat of extinction due to encroachment and tree felling, they are also menaced by the alarming rate of crime. As a result, tree fellers can easily continue with their tree felling as local people and conservators are scared to wander through the woods after daylight due to the fear of muggers and murderers. They say that dacoits come from the forest and even stop local buses and tourist vehicles to loot and kill.

Assistant conservator of Forest in Modhupur, Mr. Sharfuddin Ahmed, claimed that although tree felling occurs, it does not occur at an alarming rate and isn't the sole reason behind removal of thousands of hectares of forest land. Due to the lack of a survey estimating how much forest land was used for farming and how much remained for property owners in the 1950s, a conflict arose. The land was supposed to be distributed for scientific purposes whereas the government gave them away for wholesale acquisition. He also added, "With the increase of Mandi and Bengali families, there is more demand for firewood due to the lack of gas or kerosene for cooking. They acquire the firewood from the forests and that puts stress on the forest. Policies are there but mere laws can't preserve forests. The government should look for subsidies to reduce the pressure on the forest land."

Rubber monoculture, which began in the late 1980s is also one of the primary causes of the forest's destruction. Such monoculture, does not contribute to the flora or fauna of the forest. It took up 4000 acres of the forest increasing the pace of demolition. According to Md. Abdul Halim Sarkar, Current Charge of Bangladesh Forest Industries Development Corporation, rubber monoculture is an extremely profitable venture. The rubber tree has an economic life of 30 years, which is highly cost-effective bringing in lucrative foreign exchange. However, although such monoculture does cause biodiversity problems, at least the trees provide oxygen to the atmosphere.

In order to sustain the remaining patches of the Modhupur Forest, immediate action needs to be taken. The government needs to instill transparency within the Forest Department and abolish corruption. Locals need to be more aware about forest conservation and effects of climate change. There should be a strong law enforcement agency and immediate forest protection strategies. Native people should also be given their rights of livelihood.

The Modhupur Forest may be well on its way to be written off but with serious consideration and proper measures, it can be conserved. Our future generations can enjoy a rich heritage endowed by their country. Perhaps then as they have the opportunity to hike through the forest, they can hear birds chirp, insects whistle, apes brachiating, see snakes entwined in trees and the footprints of exotic cats like panthers rather than the barren land, a bunch of dead roots and ill fed monkeys struggling to survive.