

Bringing the forests back to life

PATRICK DURST

OVER-exploitation and mismanagement of Asia-Pacific's forests have left nearly 400 million hectares of land cleared of trees or heavily degraded, according to a new report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). To put this into perspective, that's a total land area nearly as big as the entire Indian Subcontinent. Southeast Asia alone has more than 65 million hectares of degraded lands in need of restoration.

The Asia-Pacific region has paid a heavy price for the destruction and damage inflicted on its forests. Not only has their productive potential been lost, but stripping the protective functions of forests has led to massive soil erosion, deadly landslides, siltation of reservoirs and depletion of biodiversity. Reckless clearing and burning of trees has resulted in choking haze and release of huge quantities of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

There are countless reasons why a reversal of these patterns should be a high priority. But can countries afford the intimidating price tag for restoring the region's degraded forest lands?

Using a typical expenditure of US\$1,000 per hectare, for reforesting regional land with conventional approaches, it's easy to see a rapidly escalating bill upwards of US\$400 billion.

But the challenges may not be as insurmountable as many have thought. The reasons for optimism centre on the convergence of a number of positive factors.

We are witnessing a new era when awareness and appreciation of the benefits gained from healthy forests has never been greater, such as the unique ability of trees to soak up carbon dioxide. The Paris climate change agreement, concluded under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in late 2015, included national commitments by many countries in the Asia-Pacific region to expand forest cover and manage existing forests better.



The universal pledge to combat climate change in Paris is generating unprecedented levels of funding for forestry from governments, donor organisations, bilateral aid agencies, development banks and investment from the private sector. There are also encouraging prospects for substantial increases in funding under the Green Climate Fund and the Global Environment Facility.

Real action in restoring forests, of course, has to take place in countries and on the ground at local levels. National financing and commitment are therefore critically important for success.

Here too, there are very promising opportunities. Economic growth has meant many countries of this region have substantial capacity to direct public expenditures for forest restoration should it be made a national

priority. And some have been demonstrating that commitment for years.

The Republic of Korea has already demonstrated the potential for massive forest restoration, increasing the density of once-decimated forests more than 12-fold between 1960 and 2010, largely using its own budgetary funds.

China has boosted forest cover by more than 31 million hectares between 2000 and 2015.

The Philippines is on track to plant 1.5 billion trees over a five-year programme, increasing forest cover by more than a quarter of a million hectares per year. The country's National Greening Programme benefits from strong political and public support, backed by funds from the country's own treasury.

Simply by clarifying tenure over forest

lands, cutting red tape that previously constrained the harvesting and transport of timber grown by farmers, and providing access to credit, Vietnam spurred a wave of tree planting that increased forest cover from 38 percent to 48 percent of total land in just 15 years. Clearly, when people gain tangible benefits from trees and forests, they eagerly plant, grow and protect them.

Foresters are also becoming smarter in their approaches. Experience in the Philippines and elsewhere with "assisted natural regeneration," relying on protecting the growth of naturally occurring seedlings, has cut the costs of reforestation by half in many areas, while resulting in biologically rich forest stands of native tree species well adapted to local growing conditions.

Back in 2007, twenty one APEC economies

set a target of increasing forest cover in Asia-Pacific by 20 million hectares by 2020. In 2015, FAO conducted a progress review and concluded that the target would almost surely be met.

This week, more than 1,000 forestry and natural resources officials and practitioners are meeting in the Philippines, participating in the third Asia-Pacific Forestry Week where a focused consultation of the highest forestry

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officials and international partners are considering strategies and options for an action plan to accelerate the region's forest restoration.

With all the positive forces aligning in support of forest restoration, now is the time for Asia-Pacific countries to set a far more ambitious target for forest recovery. A target of at least 100 million hectares of restoring degraded lands by 2030 is fully achievable with strong and sustained commitment, political will, judicious funding and smart technologies.

The region's degraded lands can be restored to healthy ecosystems. Now is the time to get on with it. It's now time to truly see the forests for the trees!

The writer is senior forestry officer with the FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok, Thailand.

17TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY OF DR. AHMED SHARIF

A non-compromising, courageous scholar

DR. NEHAL KARIM

A misunderstood personality in the socio-cultural arena of our time, Dr. Ahmed Sharif was a towering scholar, researcher of Bangla literature and a forerunner of free thought movements in Bangladesh. A man with a deep sense of dignity who was a true nonconformist, the former Chairman and Professor of the Bangla Department of University of Dhaka was born in February 1921, and died on February 24, 1999. The colorful life of Dr. Ahmed Sharif can be divided into two broad lines, one is his literary and intellectual side, and the other is his socio-cultural and philosophical side. Before describing these two sides, I am tempted to give a brief life sketch of Dr. Sharif.

On December 18, 1950, he joined the Bangla Department of University of Dhaka as research assistant, and retired as chairman and professor in 1983. During his teaching life in the university, he was elected a member of the senate, the syndicate, the President and Teachers Associations and the University Teachers Club. Even today, Dr. Sharif is the only person to be elected the Dean of the Faculty of Arts for three consecutive terms. After his retirement from Dhaka University, he was given the offer to join the University of Chittagong as the first Kazi Nazrul Islam Professor; he served there for two years from 1984 to 1986.

He was the recipient of many honours and awards for his outstanding contributions in the field of medieval Bangla literature and contemporary socio-cultural-political essays. These include: the Bangla Academy Literary Award (1968), Daud Literary Award (from Pakistan: - 1969), Bangladesh Women Writers Association Literary Award (1980), Alakta Literary Council Award (1989) and the Ekushe



Dr. Ahmed Sharif

Padak in 1991. A major recognition came from the Rabindra Bharati University of India which conferred upon him a doctorate in literature in 1995 for his outstanding contribution to Bangla literature.

In his lifetime, he was the lone authority on ancient and medieval Bangla literature, as he enriched discussions with several original contributions. He was the author of more than 100-research publications and edited 46 manuscripts of ancient and medieval Bangla literature. The two volumes of his *Bangali O Bangia Shahitya* (Men and Literature of Bengal) published between 1978 to 1983 are

considered masterpieces by litterateurs in the subcontinent. Despite widespread recognition, he didn't really care much for publicity for his massive scholarly works.

During his lifetime, a large section of so-called liberal democrats and secular intellectuals of the country continuously denied his scholarly contributions, trying to suppress his thoughts; even after his death, some of them continue to do the same, but no one has ever questioned his intellectual honesty.

The late scholar was universally regarded for his ability to say "no" to various material temptations; his

dignity and self respect never permitted him to be submissive to powerful forces. Among his Dhaka University colleagues, he was often considered to be an impractical man, a cynic seized with radical ideas who was never "clever" enough to work for his own mundane interests, as he never took any undue advantage of his scholarship position and influence to become wealthy, famous and powerful. The educated but ignorant people of Bangladesh are unaware of this misunderstood and controversial person who played a vital role to provoke our thoughts, to make us conscious of our conscience.

He played an instrumental role in the liberation movement of Bangladesh.

Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman had once written that on October 1, 1965, Dr. Ahmed Sharif wrote a secret document for *Apurba Sangsad* (*Asthaee Purga Bangia Sarker* - Temporary Government of East Bengal) and the document titled *Itihashe Dharay Bangaiee* (Historical Trends of Bengalees) was known as the third manifesto of the *Sangsad*. Here he wrote about the ways to attain an "independent Bangladesh"; he also suggested ways for socio-economic, political and cultural freedom for the Bangalis. Here he proposed the name of the then East Pakistan as "Bangladesh" and chose Rabindranath Tagore's "Sonar Bangla" as the national anthem of the yet to be formed country (*Prothom Alo*, February 4, 2000; also for detail see: Abdul Aziz Bagmar: *Swadhinatar Swapna: Unmesh - 0 - Orjan* (Dream of Independence: Inception and Achievement, December 1999, Dhaka). His role in demanding the liberation of East Pakistan was further established when on March 5, 1971, cultural activists and intellectuals went to the *Shahid Minar* and took an oath

under his leadership, stating that "Even at the cost of our life we will continue our struggle for the rights of East Bengal (Pakistan) and through our writings we will inspire the struggling people. For the success of the movement, our writings will act as bayonet and bullet. Forgetting the differences of the past, we will be united with the general mass and proceed forward for the success of the struggle" (*Rafiqul Islam: Ekatorer Oshohoj Andolon-O-Buddijibira*, 1982)

As Dr. Tajul Islam Hashmi wrote, Dr. Sharif had the chance to become the VC of different universities "both during pre- and post-Bangladesh periods" or could at least have been nominated as a National professor for his "knowledge and rich contributions to the field of Bangla literature." Alas, this was not to be. Others with far less education qualifications and talent were chosen for these important positions, while Dr. Sharif had to retire in 1983. Neither the Bangla Department nor Dhaka University took any serious initiative to continue his service and take advantage of his scholarship to serve national interest, stated Dr. Hashmi. "He probably knew the art of antagonising the powerful people and different government agencies," Dr. Hashmi wrote. Moreover, his strong sense of dignity and self-respect did not permit him to be submissive to power.

In these days of political and social turmoil, it would serve us best to remember Dr. Ahmed Sharif words: "Any individual can be happy and successful in his life, if he can apply his knowledge with intelligence, strength with courage and initiative with determination; the success of the person who applies these in their personal, family and soci-political life will be inevitable."

The writer is Professor of Sociology, University of Dhaka. E-mail: nehal.karim@yahoo.com.

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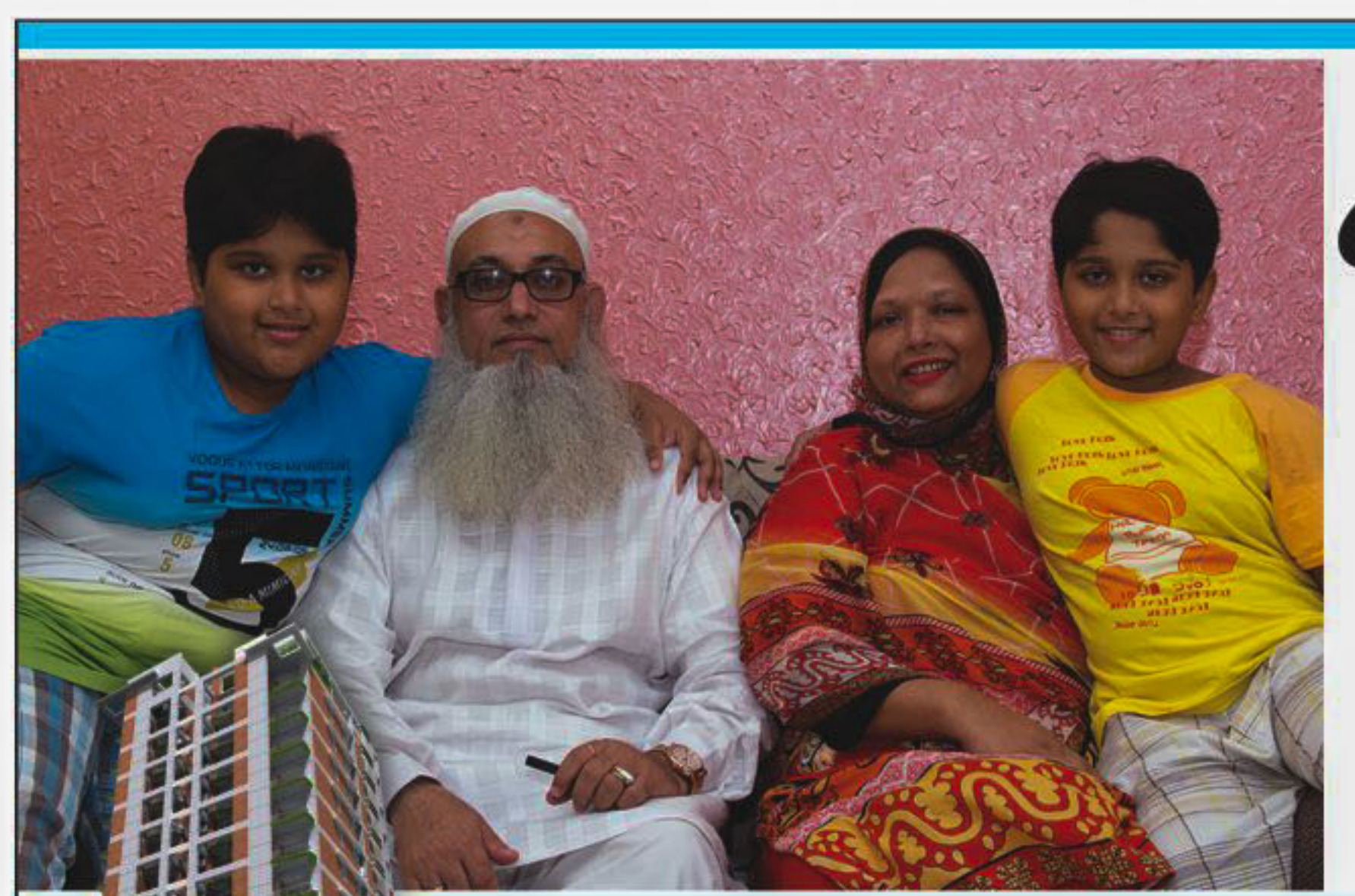
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