INDIGENOUSDAYSPECIAL

Very little of Modhupur *sal* forest survives today. What remains are coppices like what we see here. PHOTO: **PHILIP GAIN**

How to co-opt a forest and its people

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The Modhupur *sal* forest exists on the map of northern Bangladesh as a small blob of green in what is otherwise a sea of grey. Being designated the colour green on a map is special—it means that patch of land is an unruly, wild force where man is a guest. But as the Garo and Koch communities who have lived in the forests for centuries know very well, that has not been the case for almost three decades.

A huge pineapple garden of a Bangali on social forestry plots leased from Garos. PHOTO: **PHILIP GAIN**

Social forestry introduced during 1989 in the zone has replaced much of the naturally occurring *sal* forest with a selection of irresponsibly curated vegetation using afforestation practices. But the afforestation technique did not consider the fragile ecological balance between man and nature. The patch of land still looks green on the map, but it is an international donor-funded and manicured forest.

Localised studies have shown time and again that for the Garo and Koch community, the man-made forest serves none of the purposes that the original woodlands did. In fact, a population census by the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), inaugurated in the city last week, shows that replacing the original forest has directly impacted two types of human movements: the displacement of the indigenous Garo community, and influx of majoritarian Bangalis.

The census surveyed all the households of 44 chosen villages from five unions of Modhupur upazila (the upazila has 11 unions in total). It found that Garo and Koch communities, who used to be predominant residents of the forest areas, are now vastly outnumbered by Bangalis. Ethnic Bangalis constitute 61.11 percent of the population, while Garos make up 33.67 percent. The Koch community, who had historically been a minority even in comparison to the Garos, form 5.42 percent of the population.

The survey also found that it was not always like this—they questioned both Garos and Bangalis about their number of years in residence, and found that Garos are twice as likely to have been residing in the Modhupur *sal* forest for 50 years or more. Only 28.98 percent of the Bangalis had been living on the land for over 50 years. More Bangalis were found to have settled there within the last one generation.

The dwindling number of Garo residents and the increasing number of Bangali settlers has a strong correlation with how the forest land is being used, the survey concludes.

"When social forestry started in 1989, the idea was to have a forest that caters to the local demand for firewood. So international donors suggested dividing up portions of the forest into hectare-sized plots and allotting them to the poor among the Garo community," said Philip Gain, the lead researcher behind the survey and director of SEHD.

"They would then plant eucalyptus and two species of acacia: acacia mangium and acacia auriculiformis. The trees would be cut down after every 10 years, allowing the locals to harvest wood," explained Gain. The selection of the species was done completely by the Forest Department and participants could not choose what they wanted to plant.

Gain said while the tree saplings grew, the Garo community could harvest bananas, papayas, pineapples, ginger and turmeric. "They could continue to harvest pineapple even after the trees grew, because pineapples can grow at the base of the trees," said Gain.

Modhupur *sal* forest is currently in its third round of social forestry, meaning the forest plots have been razed twice already. But the survey team found the plan for harvesting the forest did not play out as envisioned.

For one, most of the Garo community could not harvest the forest plots themselves, they concluded.

"In 44 villages, the villagers have leased out 3593.05 acres of land for production of banana, pineapple, ginger, turmeric etc. and low land for production of paddy," states the SEHD survey report.

Of this land, 84.09 percent belong to the Garo community. "There is hardly any land particularly of the Garo that is empty and not leased out to traders, if they are not cultivating it themselves," it adds.

The survey team found that a lack of capital was the main reason behind this.

"Among the people who were given the plots, many did not have the capital to farm these plots. So, they gave the plots over to Bangalis. The Garo community did not traditionally engage in mass-scale agriculture," says Gain.

The report published the accounts of two Bangali farmers, Julhasuddin Khan and Hafizur Khondokar, who built their fortunes on land leased from Garo owners in the villages of Joynagachha and Beduria. Neither were from those villages themselves. Julhasuddin made his farm by leasing land from 55 Garo individuals in total, and his entire farm contains 30 acres of social forestry plots. Hafizur, on the other hand, leased 22.5 acres of social forestry plots from nine Garo individuals. Each had to invest Tk 50 lakh and Tk 20 lakh, respectively.

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