



Garo women returning home with their collection of firewood.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

After page 7

"The ones who take the lease of the land are outsiders with money, who come and go," says Gain.

But what happens during this process of handing Garo land over to the Bangalis is that the cultivation of the forest is not done diligently. "The Garo community were made caretakers of the forest. They were supposed to rear the tree saplings, until they grew into large trees ready for harvest," said Gain. After the harvest, more saplings would be planted so that the cycle could go on.

However, they would not get the full profit of selling the trees. "When the trees were cut down and sold, 45 percent of the proceeds were given to the plot owners, 45 percent to the government and 10 percent to the Tree Plantation Fund which would fund the next cycle of saplings," explains Gain.

Only 3.57 percent of the Garo community cited social forestry as an income source, thus dispelling the myth that forests are being planted, reared and harvested.

Besides, the form of agriculture the Garo community was instructed to engage in is pesticide-intensive and ruins the soil thus impeding the growth of the forest, the survey concludes.

Meanwhile, the forest is getting replaced with banana trees and pineapple groves. "To give an example of how widespread banana cultivation in Modhupur Upazila is, it can be noted that of 183,615 metric tons of ripe banana produced in Dhaka Division in 2016-2017, 92,888 metric tons were produced in Tangail district, and it is needless to say that Modhupur upazila in [the] district, specifically the forest villages, are prime locations for production of banana," states SEHD's survey report. That means one district alone catered over half

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of an entire division's banana production. The survey report cites similar figures for pineapple produced over that same year.

Another way to show the prominence of agricultural work in Modhupur sal forest is to calculate the percentage of people involved in agricultural work. While nationally, 40.67 percent of the labour force belong to the agricultural sectors, in the villages surveyed, that number was a bit higher. Around 50 percent of the Garo community were found to be involved in agricultural labour.

The agricultural boom was used as a scapegoat for the forests disappearing by representatives of the forest department at a roundtable held in the capital last week.

"The destruction of the forest has been going on long before the introduction of social forestry. It is not right to blame social forestry alone for the destruction of forests. Besides, social forestry has been successful all over the country except in Modhupur. The destruction of forest of

our country is linked to the pattern of land use. With the demise of forest land, agricultural lands have increased," Yunus Ali said, former Chief Conservator of Forests (CCF) of the Forest Department at the roundtable conference titled "Modhupur Sal Forest: Its Demise, Demographic Changes and Customary Land Rights", held in the department's office.

As more and more forest land keeps getting converted to agricultural plots, Bangalis continue moving in to work as labour. "You will especially find people who have lost their homes to river erosion moving to these places," Gain said.

Meanwhile, after leasing the land, the Garo community has been looking towards urban areas for employment, the survey found. Around 20 percent of all the Garo households surveyed had at least one female member who works in a beauty parlour in towns and cities. Compared to that, only 4.6 percent of the Bangali households had a member working in the city (in garments industries for example).

The damning findings of the survey point out that the health of the Modhupur sal forest is dependent on its inhabitants, just as much as its inhabitants are dependent on the forest. Interventions taken three decades back have had unforeseen consequences leading to an entire indigenous community's customary rights and livelihoods being stripped from them.

Not only have the rights of those who subsisted on this land been stripped off, the forest land as we know it has also been ravaged thanks to monoculture plantations that deeply compromise the fertility of the soil. A decision made by the forest department nearly three decades back kickstarted a domino effect that is still unravelling to this day.

Now that the Bangladesh Forest Department has accepted that social forestry did not work in Modhupur, will they take steps to reverse the change or be complicit in this crime?

INDIGENOUS DAY SPECIAL

It was January 3, 2004. I was only 18. I joined a rally to protest the construction of the so-called eco-park within the Modhupur National Park—built on what we considered our ancestral land.

We assembled at Jalabadha-Rajhat in the south of our village, Beduria. This is where the Forest Department was constructing walls that would block our free movement. From there, we were supposed to march to Gaira in the Modhupur National Park, another Garo village in the south. But before we could go any further, our rally was blocked by Forest Department officials, forest guards, and armed police.

The law enforcers fired rubber bullets, at first. Then, as we were running away, they fired real bullets at us from behind. Piren Snal, 28-year-old Garo youth from Joynagachha village next to Beduria, was shot dead on the spot.

I fell to the ground. For a brief moment, I saw others running. Then I blacked out. When



Utpal Nokrek on wheelchair.

guard and policeman sitting on a bench, the van began to move towards Tangail or Dhaka.

It was such a painful journey on the bumpy road that I thought I would die. I wished I would die. I felt an excruciating pain in my back and chest. It was January, the coldest time of the year. I was shaking uncontrollably. It was somewhere near Modhupur that they gathered some straw from the ground and threw it over me.

Finally, we reached the Tangail Sadar Hos-

# Utpal Nokrek tells his story from the wheelchair

Looking back at the Garo protestors who opposed the government's decision to take away their ancestral land in Modhupur Forest to build a commercial eco-park



Piren Snal's mother (left) and wife (right) in tears at a gathering after his killing.

PHOTOS: PHILIP GAIN

I regained consciousness, I found myself in a van—whether it belonged to the police or the forest guards, I do not know. I was soaked in blood. I could not move my body. Piren Snal, dead and covered in blood, was lying on my side, a bullet lodged in his chest.

"One has died and one is alive," I heard the forest guards saying.

I lay there for hours—it was as if I was left to die. It was late afternoon when they finally removed Piren's dead body from the van. With me lying face down on the floor, and a forest

pital. There, doctors located the bullet inside me but could not take it out. They concealed the bullet hole with a bandage and sent me to Dhaka.

I was lucky to be taken in an ambulance from Tangail to Dhaka. I was still in much pain. I was taken to National Institute of Diseases of the Chest and Hospital in Dhaka. Our ambulance arrived at the hospital in the dead of night. There was no surgeon at that time, so we were told to wait till morning.

I was screaming in pain. In the meantime,

Dr Abdur Razzaque, the MP from our constituency, arrived. It was under his influence that the surgeon and his team assembled and the hospital got ready for an operation. The bullet was taken out at around 3am. It was not easy. The bullet had gotten stuck in my flesh and bones. The surgeon crudely cut the hole, without anaesthesia.

The next morning, the then forests and environment minister, Shajahan Siraj, came to see me. "You have nothing to worry about. You will get your treatment," the minister tried to console me.

I did not have any feeling in the lower part of my body. A nurse brought a pin; she poked my leg. I felt nothing.

After a second surgery, this time with anaesthesia, the doctors concluded that my spinal cord was permanently damaged. I was paralysed for life.

MY LIFE ON WHEELCHAIR

From Dhaka Medical College I was taken to the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP) in Savar. My life on a wheelchair began.

While at Dhaka Medical and CRP, I was always guarded by the police or forest guards until I took bail in a forest case, which was filed against me after I was shot. Apparently, I was accused of causing hindrance to the FD's work!

People at the Forest Department started pressuring me and my family to take bail. While I was still at CRP, they took me to Tangail Forest court in a microbus and asked me to sign some papers that would ensure my bail. I refused because there was no one from my side—neither my parents nor a lawyer. My refusal angered the people at the Forest Department. They sent me to Tangail jail for a night and day. You can imagine what an experience it was—in jail, in a wheelchair that I was only just beginning to learn to manoeuvre.

My parents came to court the next day, secured my bail, and took me back to CRP.

All these years later, the forest case is still active. The police visited a few times to remind me that I am not appearing before the Forest Court in Tangail. Every time they came, they made me pay for the octane of their motor cycles.

Thirteen years have passed since I was shot, but I have not been able to file a case yet. No one from the Forest Department has ever come to see me and I have received no support from the government. All the assistance I received—a one-room building to set up a grocery shop and some cash—came from NGOs. My parents now run the shop.

Every day, I follow the same routine. I get up at 6am in the morning. I need about three hours to complete my morning rituals—go to the toilet, brush my teeth and bathe. I cannot do things like other people. I use a catheter every time I urinate. I have to guess when I have to urinate because my bladder no longer functions properly. I eat twice a day—breakfast at 10am and dinner at 7pm. I normally do not eat anything in between.

Once I realised I am permanently settled on a wheel chair, I lost interest in continuing my studies. I am unable to work. My parents and siblings take good care of me. We do not have much land, but we manage.

What has been done to me cannot be undone. All I want now is peace in our ancestral land.

As told to Philip Gain, researcher and director of Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD)



Harvest time of social forestry at Amlitala, 2012. The area had good sal forest before the advent of social forestry with exotic tree species.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN