



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Can our mangroves survive the impulse to industrialise?

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On August 24, 2017, the High Court directed the Bangladesh government not to approve any industry activity within 10 kilometres of the Sundarbans area. The directive was based on a gazette notification published on August 30, 1999, by the then-Ministry of Environment and Forest, which declared the 10-kilometre area surrounding the Sundarbans an ecologically critical area (ECA).

Two years later, on August 27, 2019, the High Court went back on their decision, giving permission to establish LPG bottling factories within the ECA. Three organisations—TMSS, Baraka Limited and Delta LPG Limited—were not given environmental clearance certificates by the Department of Environment (DOE) when they wanted to establish LPG bottling factories within five kilometres of the forest. Challenging the DOE's decision,

these three companies appealed to the High Court, who ultimately gave them the go-ahead.

However, with the verdict, the court also stated that it is the government who will decide the number of factories allowed in the ECA. Dubbing the Sundarbans the "lung of Bangladesh" and highlighting the importance of its conservation, the court further stated that this verdict would not be an impediment if the government wants to stop building factories near the forest in the future.

Unfortunately, the government seems to have no such intention. Very recently, the government allowed five cement factories to be built within six kilometres of the Sundarbans. The cement industry, to be clear, is one of the largest producers of greenhouse gases and concrete dust that severely pollutes air, water and topsoil of nearby areas.

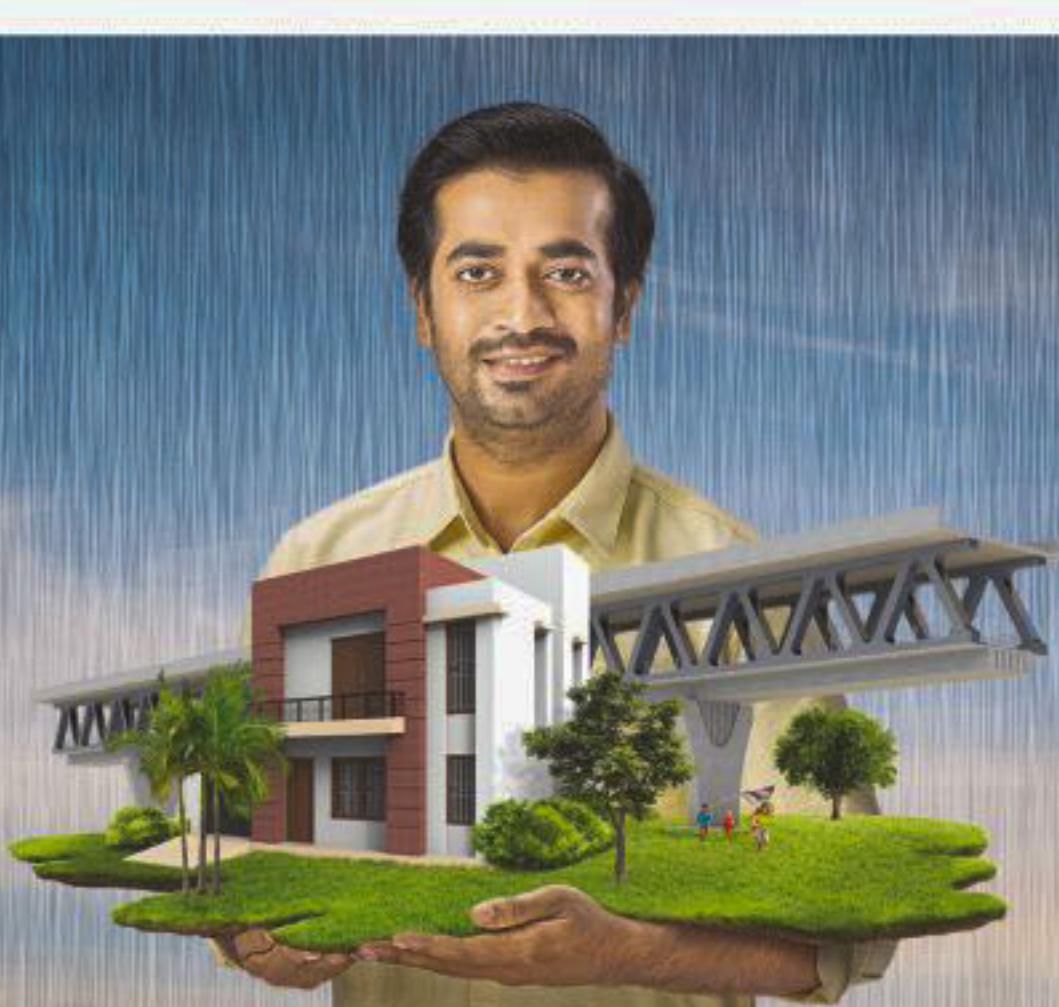
In fact, according to a list prepared by the DOE in April 2018, 190 factories and commercial establishments have been built within the 10-kilometre buffer zone of the forest—with 24 of these factories having been included in the "red list", which means they have been severely polluting the environment. Of the remaining factories, 103 have been marked "Orange A" and 63 of them have been marked "Orange B", which mean that they have also been threatening the forest ecosystem by emitting pollutants. These factories include oil refineries, cement factories, ship breaking and building yards, salt refineries, LPG bottling plants and brick fields.

On several occasions, DOE and the environment minister argued that none of these factories are located within the first five kilometres of the buffer zone. "Most of these factories are located at the

Mongla industrial area, in different places of Bagerhat. And not all factories are harmful for the forest. For instance, LPG bottling factories have been marked as a "green industry", said Md Shahabuddin, Minister for Forest, Environment and Climate Change, in reply to a question asked in parliament on June 29, 2019. Interestingly, LPG processing and bottling plants were included in the red list of industries until recently because any leak in the gas cylinders or processing plant can cause severe air or water pollution and slight ignition of the leaked gases can cause explosions and wildfire.

Despite these risks, the government changed the status of LPG bottling plants to a green industry. This move was even criticised by the High Court bench which gave the permission to the above-mentioned LPG bottling factories.

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