

Leave the forest alone!

Trees being felled in Bandarban village threatens livelihoods

It is unfortunate that despite all the warnings from environmentalists regarding the dangers of loss of forest cover in the context of our planet's existence, tree cutting even in protected areas continue unabated. This suicidal activity is highlighted by a report in this paper: residents of a remote village in Bandarban's Lama upazila, have appealed to the authorities to protect the nearby forest, where unnamed "criminals" are cutting trees indiscriminately and with apparent impunity. The forest is known as a Village Common Forest (VCF) which collectively benefits the communities living nearby who use the forest's natural resources as sources of food and water. The community benefits from the forest and the forest benefits by being preserved by the community.

Unfortunately such sustainable practices are often threatened by the greed of the influential and powerful. This particular case indicates that local administration officials have played a dubious role by turning a blind eye to those individuals engaged in this crime. Although the villagers have protested several times against this, the tree felling and bamboo cutting have gone on.

Written complaints have been given to the Union Parishad Chairman and Upazila chairman with no result. Already 6,000 bamboos and 40 big trees have been cut down. Why are the local officials so reluctant to take action against individuals who are violating the law and more importantly, threatening the livelihoods of families as well as causing irreparable harm to the common forest? Elephants used to fell the trees are destroying the water sources of these people. Why would local authorities allow the main source of water to be jeopardised?

The Kalu Mro Para incident is a microcosm of the unabated denuding of forest areas that continue all over the country. So far almost 1.6 lakh acres of forest land has been handed over to different government agencies and establishments, making recreation centres, guest houses, offices, cottages or used for development projects (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change). This contradicts with its SDG goal to stop deforestation by 2020 and have 20 percent of the landmass as forests by 2030.

According to the UP chairman the forest area where the trees and bamboo were felled is not part of the VCF and the felling is being done with permission of the person in charge of these affairs. It is the concerned ministry's responsibility to immediately investigate this incident and see if trees of the VCF were cut down. Even if they weren't part of the community forest, the felling of trees in this manner cannot be justified when we have already lost so much of our forest cover. The government must recognise the crucial need to conserve these precious natural resources and not allow them to be destroyed in the name of development or by criminals connected with the powerful. Our survival depends on the sincerity of such efforts.

Education and employment for the physically challenged

Potential remains large, but not opportunities

JAHANARA Akhter's story (published in this paper yesterday) is nothing short of exhilarating. A young girl born in an impoverished family in Ghatail upazila and with physical disability has managed to secure GPA 5 in her Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exams and is determined to continue with her studies. The odds against her were many. She and all of her family members, except her mother, have speech and hearing impairment. Jahanara's mother, a domestic help, could see the promising potential in her daughter since she was young and thus, devoted all her efforts in educating her. But now she worries how her daughter will continue her education after her SSC as it would mean relocating in order to attend college. She also worries about who would constantly assist Jahanara, as it is essential, especially during her studies. For individuals with disabilities, their dreams are often cut short because there are little or no provisions for them to get the assistance they need to pursue them.

Say Jahanara manages to finish her education which would be a formidable feat given the circumstances, what about getting a job? How hard would that be for a person with disability? Last year during this time of the year, visually impaired jobseekers went on hunger strike demanding special recruitment at government, autonomous, semi-autonomous offices, as well as an unemployment allowance, until they secure jobs after graduation. Likewise, this year too, they have pushed forward similar demands as they are facing hardships like never before in the face of the ongoing pandemic which has put our economy to a near halt. A council of job-seeking visually-impaired graduates recently wrote an open letter to the prime minister, stating their struggles to survive the jobless market. The letter further cited that it has been nine months since the PM gave certain directives to address their problems but the designated government agencies did not make any progress till now.

While it is assuring to learn from our report that the Ghatail Upazila Secondary Education Officer will assist Jahanara in her upcoming endeavours, including arranging a free scholarship to fulfill her dreams, the bigger question remains what will happen to her and other graduates with disability when comes to getting a job? Without any support in the current situation especially, these students are likely to fall into poverty and will lose all hope of overcoming the odds and be employed. The government's rescue packages and budget allocations must include them. To establish an inclusive society, the government as well as other organisations must come forward to employ people who are physically challenged. As the pandemic continues, we hope the government will not hesitate in providing the necessary support, especially to the underprivileged, physically challenged individuals who are among the most vulnerable groups under the current circumstances. With support and compassion, these individuals can pursue their academic and career dreams and be productive citizens of the country.

High stakes in the Himalayas

ALI AHMED ZIAUDDIN

BORDER clashes reflect shared suspicion at best and animosity at worst between neighbouring states. The Indo-China border clash is a classic example. India claims the McMahon Line drawn in 1914 including Arunachal Pradesh as its border with China in the north-east and the Johnson Line drawn in 1899 including Aksai Chin in the north. Since China never recognised either of these colonial maps the border remained contested ever since.

Neither has any clear policy on how to mark the border and where. In its absence, both insist its version of the LAC (line of actual control). This led both to clash over it several times. Although an unmarked border is a recipe for clashes, they nevertheless reflect tension on so many other issues of mutual interests, some in the open and some in the background. Though the frequency of the friction has increased in recent times, neither wants to escalate it to a full blown war even if there is no dearth of hostile jingoism on both sides. It seems the only visible policy is to continue with the claim and counterclaim until an accord is reached on multiple key but fuzzy issues in other areas. There is so much at stake. With this background it seems both are testing each other's resolve at the border.

Apart from the fact that there were fatalities on both sides the whole episode is shrouded in such rhetorical statements from both sides that it is very difficult to take an objective view of what really happened. However, two clear statements from the top seem intriguing. On May 14 after one of the off and on border skirmishes, Indian army chief blamed aggressive behaviour by both sides ("Army chief says LAC tensions being resolved along guidelines given after India-China summits", The Print). And on June 19, Prime Minister Modi said, "nobody has intruded into our border, neither is anybody there now, nor have our posts been captured" (The Wire). This is a clear indication that the brawl took place in China's side of the LAC, which India claims is theirs. The PM's office has not retracted this statement. Does it mean India is trying to change the status quo? If so then it's a repetition of India's "Forward

Policy" in the late fifties that among many other factors ultimately culminated in the 1962 war.

In the late fifties, India, believing the above mentioned lines to be its international border, started building outposts in the forward regions. Since China didn't recognise the lines right from the start it objected. After many rounds of talks at different levels right from the top down, China offered a compromise to give up claim on Arunachal Pradesh which it considers to be South Tibet; in exchange India should give up claim on Aksai Chin in the north.



It seems the only visible policy is to continue with the claim and counterclaim until an accord is reached on multiple key but fuzzy issues in other areas. PHOTO: AFP

India refused, and set a precondition of China giving up Aksai Chin for any further negotiation. (China's Decision for War with India in 1962, John D Garver in New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy). A deadlock ensued, and after a lot of jostling in the border region it came down to a war that ended very badly for India. For the next half a century the border dispute continued to remain calm but unresolved. In the past several years, however, dynamics have changed. India has grown stronger both militarily and economically compared to 1962, and it can now count on the support of the lone superpower of the day. So naturally India may feel confident to try to change the

status quo and if possible recover some of its lost ground. It will also regain some of its prestige lost in 1962 while at the same time tell China unless it attends to Indian concerns in several other areas it runs the risk of facing a hostile India and perhaps eventually a formidable frontline state of US's China containment policy.

In 1962, three key hazy issues played a vital role behind the scene in the hardening of position on the border issue in both states. China wrongly assumed India wanted to grab Tibet and that's why it was assisting the insurgency there, moreover, it was also concerned that India

dialogues but looms in the background, which each expect the other to understand. Differing perceptions on these become a source of tension in both states. If they are not amicably settled, conflict resolution on the border issue will be a far cry.

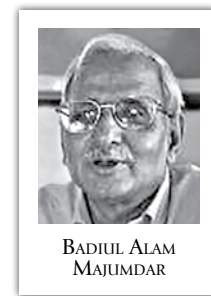
First, Kashmir being a highly sensitive issue for India; it expects China to have a hands off policy on how India deals with it, especially in its border regions. Second, India wants China to recognise the McMahon Line as the international border. Third, India's huge trade gap with China keeps widening each year; unlike the US it can't start a trade war but expects China to address it positively. Fourth, India is wary of China's strategic alliance with Pakistan and wants a freehand in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. These are India's wish lists. But it is also aware of China's economic strength and its dependence on it. On June 17, just a day after the brawl in the border, India received a credit of USD 750 million from the Chinese development bank. While China's sharp response is a way of telling India not to get too cosy with the US, it also needs India's vast market for investments as well as selling its products. Can either do without the other? Negotiations on the non-border areas are urgently needed.

Is India willing to become the frontline state of the US's imperial game plan of containing China that may not only ruin the entire subcontinent but well lead to an Asia wide destabilisation? The US has been goading India for some time to become just that, but India till now was unwilling to fall in line. On the other hand, is China seriously willing to push India into such an alliance with the US that may lead to facing the Quad in China's eastern seaboard while simultaneously facing a fearsome enemy to the south? If both India and China are unable to find some common ground, God help us all.

Taking sides in this battle of nerves between two giant neighbours is a luxury Bangladesh can't afford. Rather as a friend, a trading partner, a close neighbour to both, it can only wish that good sense will prevail and both sides find a solution in negotiations rather than in conflict.

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Why Kerala has succeeded in controlling coronavirus



BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

A recent headline in Prothom Alo (June 26, 2020) stated, "Amartya Sen and Noam Chomsky showered Kerala with praise for their successful containment of the coronavirus". Kerala's

advancement in education, primary healthcare and human development are generally considered the main reasons for such success. But there are other factors behind Kerala's stellar performance against the coronavirus, the most important of which is a strong and effective panchayat system, and the political commitment to make the best use of it by engaging and empowering the communities.

Through sustained efforts of many years—Rome was not built in a day—an effective three-tier system of local government was established in Kerala, whose dividends the state derived during the current coronavirus pandemic. At the rural level, Kerala now has 941 gram panchayats, 152 block panchayats and 14 district panchayats. In urban areas, there are 87 municipalities and 6 municipal corporations. The average population of a gram panchayat is 25,000. In Kerala, the average number of gram panchayat employees is 10-25, however, the 8-13 institutions working under them, including the primary healthcare institutions, have an average of 200 employees. It is to be noted that in Bangladesh at present there is only one employee of the Union Parishad and the amount of resources under its direct control is very small.

In Kerala, the gram panchayat members are elected directly from the ward level and the panchayat head and co-head are elected by ward members. Women from reserved seats for women are elected using a "rotational system" and they enjoy the same responsibilities and powers as those elected from regular seats. Elected panchayat representatives are accountable to the people and corruption is not a problem in Kerala.

On the other hand, our current local government representatives have come to power through extremely controversial elections. Most of them are victims of "nomination-trade"—buying party nominations with money. We are thus not surprised that during the current pandemic, about 100 local government representatives were punished for corruption. In addition, the prevailing structure of corruption and "partyarchy" that has developed at the local level makes it almost impossible for elected representatives to perform their duties without becoming corrupt.

One of the key contributors to Kerala's success was the People's Plan Campaign,

a statewide people's movement for local planning launched in 1998. As part of this campaign, 35 percent of the state's development budget was transferred to local government institutions. This movement was implemented through the state's Department of Local Self-Government and the State Planning Board, which resulted in deepening public engagement with the panchayat system in Kerala, magnifying the role of the panchayat in ensuring the overall welfare of the people.

As part of this role, each panchayat formulates plans to deal with disasters and climate change, which brings ordinary citizens and public servants to work together in emergencies under one command structure. The plan created "First Responder Teams" with people having deep knowledge of their communities. The formulation of the disaster plan requires assembling all relevant information about the community. This disaster plan was used to deal with the floods of 2018 and, in light of that experience, the plan was updated and made more effective.

At the onset of the coronavirus

community engagement to contain the coronavirus and mitigate it locally. For communication, they started a campaign to promote three Ws: washing hands, wearing masks and watching physical distance. As part of this campaign, Rapid Response Teams created websites as repositories from which citizens received relevant and accurate information. They also set up call centres, help desks, online counselling and WhatsApp groups.

Rapid Response Teams identified those who were infected and ensured their home and institutional quarantine. They carried out contact tracing to break the chain of infection. In addition, they set up mobile clinics in their communities to provide essential health services.

Rapid Response Teams arranged home delivery of medicines and other emergency items. They set up community kitchens to provide food to those in need. They also inspected grocery stores and fish markets to prevent the spread of the virus.

With the realisation that they were in it together, Rapid Response Teams ensured the safety of all, irrespective of race, religion and political identity, which



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pandemic, a "Rapid Response Team" was formed in each ward of the gram panchayat under the leadership of elected members. All health workers, panchayat workers and other volunteers became part of this team. Members of the Kudumbashree (women's self-help groups) and Angawanwadi (childcare centres), which are centrally sponsored schemes, and Resident Associations were included in these teams. In 2020, volunteer teams of 336,000 citizens were formed in Kerala for managing natural resources.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the members of the Rapid Response Team did, broadly speaking, three Cs: communication, coordination (including planning, managing and monitoring) and

has been a tradition in Kerala. At the same time, they made lists of the most vulnerable and provided special protection for them. They created GIS maps of migrant camps and provided support to the migrant workers.

Rapid Response Teams, formed at the ward level under the leadership of elected representatives, mobilised and brought together the whole community to stop the virus at its track. Their success was largely due to the trust, cooperation and involvement of every person of the community. The communities also set up check-posts in their respective boundaries to prevent the spread of the virus beyond their neighbourhoods. All the institutions of the state were involved in

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this work, although the elected panchayat representatives provided leadership in the field. The state also provided budgetary support and flexibility.

It should be noted that during the coronavirus pandemic, the political leadership of Kerala built a relationship of trust with the people. Every day the Chief Minister and his colleagues arranged briefing sessions to freely share all relevant information in order to take people into confidence. This created a relation of mutual trust and confidence between the leaders and the people, contributing to the successful containment of the coronavirus in Kerala.

The political commitment of the state government has also played a significant role in this regard. In an article in the Economic and Political Weekly (June 13, 2020), Kerala's Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said, "In times of pandemics like Covid-19, the relationship between the state and the people needs to be strong, trustworthy and organic. This will not be possible in a centralised system of governance, wherein even minor decisions are taken at the highest tier of the government, which is the farthest from the people... centralisation violates the principle of subsidiarity, which states that the tier closest to the people can discharge local functions more effectively. In our view, when you are faced with a contagious disease that could quickly attain the stage of community spread, the best strategy to contain it is a participatory mode of governance. The prime role in this is to be discharged by the local governments with community participation."

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