

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA THURSDAY FEBRUARY 11, 2021, MAGH 28, 1427 BS

Five-year investigation into Bangladesh Bank heist

Authorities must come up with lasting solutions to ensure this doesn't happen again

WE all remember the sensational USD 81 million heist from Bangladesh Bank reserves with the New York Fed that occurred five years ago. According to a report by this daily, investigations have revealed that criminals from at least six countries, including Bangladesh, were involved in what is now known as the biggest-ever cyber heist in history.

An anonymous CID source has identified the people who directly took part in the heist as being from the Philippines, China, Sri Lanka and Japan, along with the involvement of Bangladeshi and Indian nationals working at financial institutions. According to the Bangladesh police, while the probe into the theft is at its final stage, the lawsuit over recovery of the stolen money is still pending with a US court.

While we are pleased to hear that the investigation is coming to a close, we are also aware that this is only the beginning—the charge sheet in the case of Bangladesh will be submitted after the US settlement. The amount that has been stolen is no small matter, especially for a developing country like Bangladesh, and we hope the funds will be returned to us soon.

It is now absolutely crucial that the authorities do everything they can to apprehend the Bangladeshis involved with this heist. CID sources have said that six to seven officials of Bangladesh Bank will be named in the charge sheet. It is hugely embarrassing, but also not wholly unexpected, to see the potential involvement of our government officials with a crime of this scale. How can the country's financial institutions function properly and transparently if our central bank is so obviously vulnerable to being robbed, that too with the help of its own corrupt officials?

The government must ensure that proportionate punishment is meted out to those involved, including the top-level officials who clearly failed to fulfil their responsibilities at the time by allowing such a crime to be committed under their watch. The authorities must also implement systems of accountability to ensure that such crimes are not repeated. Our nation's finances should not be in the hands of people in whom we cannot place our trust. Additionally, there is an urgent need to update the security of Bangladesh Bank to ensure that such breaches do not occur again.

Why is it taking so long to complete Osmani Udyan's renovation work?

Open the park for public use as early as possible

IT is frustrating to learn about the slow progress of the renovation work of Osmani Udyan, one of the major parks of the city. Reportedly, Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) started its renovation work in January 2018, and it was supposed to be completed within 10 months. However, as their renovation plans changed several times, the deadline also had to be extended repeatedly. And with the repeated extension of deadlines, the project cost also increased. Although as per the new deadline, the work should be finished by June this year, we are not sure how they will do so because they still could not start the physical work of the underground parking space. And as the project drags on for years, the city residents are being deprived of an important breathing space.

While we understand the need to renovate the park with modern facilities, we also think that the custodian of the park (in this case, DSCC) must have consulted with urban experts and city planners before starting the work. We also think that they should have done the work with more professionalism. As per their current plan, there will be several structures inside the park that will occupy a lot of space, which goes against our planning rules and regulations, as experts have pointed out. City planners have also raised questions about the need for building the underground parking space which will further shrink the space of the park. Needless to say, for making space for the parking, a large number of age-old trees have to be cut down. Already, many trees have vanished from the park and we cannot afford to lose more.

Since most of the structures have already been built except for the parking space, we think the DSCC authorities should consult with our city planners and take a wise decision regarding its construction. The authorities must remember that it is the greenery and the open spaces that are most important in a park, not modern structures that shrink the open spaces. So they must plant more trees under the project. The greenery of the park must remain intact after the renovation work is complete. Osmani Udyan is among the few open spaces left in the city, and we cannot allow it to be lost to unplanned development work. We hope the authorities will take every decision judiciously and open the park for public use as soon as possible.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Expedite recruitment process

Over the past year, due to the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, many government recruitment processes have been halted. And few recruitment processes have been completed by this time. Also consider the fact that even in normal times, it usually takes a long time for such a process to complete, sometimes extending to years. This extremely slow pace is frustrating. The recruitment process should be accelerated and the sooner we do it, the better.

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A huge pineapple orchard in place of what was once part of the Modhupur sal forest.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

Modhupur forest: The sylvan aroma is gone



PHILIP GAIN

ONCE a pure jungle, Modhupur sal forest is now, for the most part, a motley assortment of vast banana, pineapple and spice orchards. It was once filled with Bengal tiger, elephant, peacock, bear, langur, monkey, about 300 species of birds, countless other animal species and unprecedented stocks of medicinal plants. But almost all of these have been stolen for cash over the last few decades.

The Garo villages, not so long ago, would spread the aroma of local varieties of fruit plants and natural vegetation. But today, you go to any Garo or Koch village in Modhupur, and you will find that the sylvan aroma is gone. Even the banana and pineapple plants and spices have crept onto the courtyards of most households. And the smell of killer chemicals flows everywhere—in the air, on the soil, water and human body.

It is so tragic that the original residents of the forest villages (Garo and Koch) find themselves living in awe and dread surrounded by the Bengalis.

The Garo and Koch still possess land, but most of them without title deeds. According to a recent household survey conducted in 44 core forest villages by the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), only 13 percent of Bengalis and 4.19 percent of Garos of 11,048 households in these villages have title deeds (CS or RoR) for their homestead land. A smaller percentage of households have title deeds for other types of land (highland and lowland). This means that an overwhelming majority of the households have only customary rights over their land.

The land ownership issue sets a ripe ground for conflicts between the Forest Department and the forest villagers, both of whom have claims over the same land. Lately, protest rallies held against the Forest Department on January 25 and 31 in Modhupur have shed some light on the ongoing conflict.

Recent newspaper reports that the Forest Department is flexing its muscles to recover forest land that it lost have sparked the protests. A top official at the Forest Department confirmed reports that 88,215 individuals had been listed for having illegally taken possession of 138,613.06 acres out of the 3,310,907.52 acres of the reserved forest. The total forest land in the country amounts to 4,646,700.01 acres. Of the illegally occupied forest land, 820.34 acres are used for industrial structures, 14,149.17 for haat-bazaar and educational institutions, and 123,643.55 for human habitation and agriculture.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change reportedly would have started an eviction drive by the end of January to recover the illegally occupied forest land. Of all the departments of this ministry, the Forest Department is the *de facto* guardian of the forest land. It is the Forest Department that has the power in this regard. Generally, the Forest Department spearheads the eviction drives and it is the officials and employees of this department who have a love-and-hate relationship with the local communities. People living on the "forest land" primarily encounter the FD officials and staff—the policymakers and planners stay out of their sight and reach. In addition to the high command at the bureaucratic and

political levels, there are also supranational factors and game-planners that determine their fate, namely the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank, among others.

Reaction in Modhupur and the factors behind

After reading newspaper reports that the government was out to evict the encroachers of the forest land from the end of January, the people of Modhupur forest villages became restless. Initially, the Garo and Koch organised a huge rally in Modhupur Pourashava on January 25 and submitted a memorandum addressed to the prime minister through the UNO. Then, on January 31, a few thousand people from the Garo, Bengali and Koch communities assembled at the Jalchhata School premises to express their fear and determination to resist any government attempt to evict them from their land.

The size of the Modhupur sal forest (in Tangail district) is 45,565.18 acres, of which 11,671.21 acres are reserved forest while 33,893.97 acres are announced forest under sections 4 and 6 of the forest act. Of the reserved forest, 9,145.07 acres in Aronkhola Mouza were declared as "reserved" through a gazette notification on February 15, 2016. Of the 13 villages within this freshly reserved forest, all but two (Gachhabarin and Amlitola) are pure Garo and Koch villages.

In the past, all of the forest land of

"customary".

While the forest villagers had run into conflicts since the forest was transferred to the Forest Department, the so-called "social forestry" and "co-management" systems introduced under two projects—Thana Afforestation and Nursery Development Project (TANDP) starting in 1989 and the Forestry Sector Project, both funded from Asian Development Fund (ADF), the soft loan window of ADB—have caused colossal damage to the natural forest. People witnessed with great shock how natural forest areas were cleared in preparation for plantation with acacia and eucalyptus. Within three decades, a large part of the natural forest was replaced by planted forest under the guise of "social forestry", which has proven to be unsustainable, at least in Modhupur.

The clearing of natural forest spaces happened under the auspices of the Forest Department, an allegation that it denies. It is during the implementation of the social forestry projects and in their aftermath that the traders benefiting from most of the banana, pineapple and spice plantations made their way into the forest villages. The villagers unwittingly handed their land to these traders in exchange for cash.

ADB sensed its mistake in funding forestry projects in Bangladesh and Asia and quietly backed out from the forestry sector in 2007. But the damage was already done. And the Forest Department, which implemented the plantation projects, was

The land ownership issue sets a ripe ground for conflicts between the Forest Department and the forest villagers, both of whom have claims over the same land. Lately, protest rallies held against the Forest Department on January 25 and 31 in Modhupur have shed some light on the ongoing conflict.

Modhupur was under Aronkhola Union in Modhupur Upazila which is now split into five unions. The population of Modhupur upazila is 296,729 (2011 census)—of them Garo 17,327 (SEHD survey 2018) and Koch and Barmon 3,427 (SEHD survey 2012).

Before the British government took control of the forest in Tangail and Mymensingh districts in 1928, the forest in these two districts including the Modhupur had been under private ownership. In the seventeenth century, the Mughal emperor trusted (by way of jaigir) the Atia Forest (in Tangail and Mymensingh districts) with the Panni family of Karatia. The Maharaja of Natore bought Atia and *At Ani Estate* under the Sunset Law introduced by the British. The zamindars controlled the forest till 1950. The Garo and others paid land taxes to the zamindars. But after the end of the zamindari system, they failed to secure ownership of the land under the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950. In a few years, since 1951, the forests of Tangail and Mymensingh were transferred to the Forest Department. Thus, the forest-dwelling Garo and others lost their legitimate rights over land in the forest they lived in.

However, they want to keep their hope alive that one day the state will recognise their rights over the land they live on and cultivate. But for now, we term their right over land in their possession as

caught as a scapegoat in the middle of the ignominious failure of so-called social forestry.

"We all know how social forestry and its multiplier effects have put us in such an appalling condition," says Eugin Nokrek, president of Joyenshahi Adibashi Unnayan Parishad, who has been seen at the forefront of the protest against probable eviction by the Forest Department in Modhupur. "We are fearful and want the state to protect us and give us back our legitimate land right."

A top official (preferring anonymity) of the FD told me on January 3 that "it is true that our priority at this moment is to recover the forest land that we have lost. The decision comes from the government which we execute. We do not have any specific target. The recovery drive will be shaped according to the local situation. The case of Modhupur will be handled by the DFO of Tangail. We are not going to bulldoze any village even though it is on land belonging to the reserved forest. The DFO and other local forest officials, in consultation with the local administration, DC and community leaders, will explore a solution. They will also consider all local conditions in resolving the conflict." This is a very diplomatic response from the FD that also wants to recover the ecosystem.

The FD is indeed implementing a project of USD 175 million (around

Tk 1,400 crore) flowing from the International Development Association (IDA) of the World Bank. The key objective of the project, titled Sustainable Forests & Livelihoods (SUFAL), is to help improve and expand forest cover through a collaborative forest management approach involving local communities. "The project will support increasing income through alternative income generation activities for about 40,000 households in the coastal, hill and central districts of the country," reads a press release of the World Bank.

This is a very high-sounding and ambitious goal. The forestry projects funded by ADB also had a similar goal. In reality, such projects have contributed to the massive loss of natural forests in Bangladesh. People do not have enough faith in collaborative forest management. Modhupur is one of the locations for SUFAL.

The FD recognises that severe damage has been done to the ecosystem. "We now want to introduce mixed forestry on completely degraded forest as well as enrichment plantation on partially damaged forest," says a top FD official. "We also want to take indigenous knowledge into practice and choose site-specific plants (SSP) when we do plantation."

"What the FD wants to achieve and what really happens in Modhupur do not match," says Zoynal Abedin, a local journalist who is pessimistic about the progress of SUFAL. "In many places, I have seen that bushes and plants have been cleared, which is damaging to the ecosystem, and in some places, saplings have been planted under the shade of trees. This is not a good choice," he added.

What becomes obvious from speaking to the local people is that there is no serious discussion on the use of indigenous knowledge in Modhupur. "The damage has reached such an extent that there seems to have no natural fix," cautions Abedin, who has been witnessing and reporting on the gradual demise of Modhupur forest for more than four decades. "What I see is that the Modhupur forest is on the verge of a complete demise."

Way forward

Under the circumstances, there is nothing more important for the people of the Modhupur forest villages than to press for their right to land. "Now, we are in a situation where blaming each other is fruitless. The government, armed with a comprehensive plan, can save what remains of the forest and solve complex land issues in Modhupur," said Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud, an eminent economist, in a roundtable discussion titled "Modhupur Sal Forest: Its Demise, Demographic Changes and Customary Land Rights", organised jointly by SEHD and Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) on July 29, 2019.

"We find three interests regarding the Modhupur forest—forest conservation, agriculture and the demands of the people living there. Modhupur forest will not survive without the coordination of these interests. We have to understand these interests first and then move to a sustainable solution through discussion," explained Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, another well-known economist and social thinker, who also participated in the event. The FD officials, community and elected leaders from Modhupur, academics and environmentalists—all agreed to carry the dialogue forward.

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