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A bend in the Buriganga choked by grabbers

Evict the encroachers and re-excavate the riverbed

AS far back as 2009, the High Court made a landmark judgement on saving the four rivers surrounding Dhaka by setting boundary pillars, evicting grabbers, dredging rivers and other steps. But these directives were totally disregarded resulting in indiscriminate filling of riverbeds with sand and earth to make way for construction of buildings. Finally in 2019 the HC declared rivers to be living beings with legal rights in case of harm. The High Court appointed the National River Protection Commission as the guardian of rivers and assigned it the responsibility of upholding the rights granted to rivers.

Yet even such a significant ruling has not stopped the slow killing of our rivers. The Buriganga, one of Dhaka’s main lifelines, has been the biggest target of this attack through unabated dumping of toxic waste from industries and the city dwellers as well as aggressive grabbing by encroachers. The dead, blackish, smelly water is testament of this neglect. While the authorities have been able to evict some of the grabbers, there are still areas occupied by encroachers causing irreparable damage to the river.

The latest report in this daily, on the consequences of this encroachment, reveals that a narrow V shaped bend in the Buriganga which was one of the main channels for river transport has become the reason for frequent accidents, sometimes leading to fatalities. The channel has become so narrow that vessels coming from opposite sides cannot be seen leading to collisions. With more and more vessels of water transport going through the river and many vessels anchoring at the channel and hundreds of sand-laden cargo vessels going through night and day, accidents in the narrowed river bend were bound to happen. So why has this crucial zone been allowed to be narrowed, jeopardising the lives of people? How could rampant riverbank grabbing continue despite the HC directive and in the wake of such obvious danger?

Despite the government’s and High Court’s effort to stop illegal grabbing, the onslaught continues on all the rivers of the country. With poor enforcement of the law, river grabbers have become more and more emboldened, especially those who have links with the powerful and influential. This cannot go on and the government must try harder to clear the rivers of encroachment and resuscitate them through different measures. For this particular bend, environmentalists and vessel operators have demanded that it is widened by excavating the riverbanks and evicting illegal structures.

The work for the government is clear as day. They must, with the help of the National River Protection Commission, continue the eviction drive and remove all structures that contribute to this narrowing of the bend. In addition it must re-excavate the riverbank to widen the channel on an urgent basis. Already too much time has been wasted at the cost of precious lives. There is no more time to procrastinate on such a crucial issue.

Trees face the guillotine in Suhrawardy Udyan

‘Development’ must not come at the cost of destroying nature

PEOPLE are protesting against the felling of trees at Dhaka’s Suhrawardy Udyan for the implementation of a mega project. The protests are coming from students, artists, writers, architects, educators, and more. The forms of protests have so far included demonstrations, a five-point demand from youth organisation Green Voice, educational street plays about the impacts of deforestation, planting saplings where old trees have already been felled, and “naming” trees after freedom fighters to stop them being cut down. Given the lack of open spaces in the city where nature can thrive, and also the historical importance of this Udyan, these protests are justified and laudable.

We also welcome Supreme Court lawyer Manzill Murshid’s move of serving three of the concerned government officials (the Liberation War Affairs Secretary, Chief Engineer at the Public Works Department, and Bangladesh’s Chief of Architects) a legal notice to stop cutting down the trees at Suhrawardy Udyan. He was joined by six rights organisations and an architect who collectively served a legal notice on the government demanding it to not cut down trees and damage the environment of the Udyan.

On July 7, 2019, a writ petition had prompted the HC to direct “the government to identify and preserve all important historic places related to the country’s Liberation War”. This doubtlessly includes Suhrawardy Udyan, where Bangabandhu’s immortal March 7, 1971 speech had taken place and where the Pakistani Army had also surrendered on December 16 of the same year. Needless to say, it is also one of the few places in the capital that is openly planned and where the public can enjoy nature.

The project (worth Tk 265.44 crore) was apparently undertaken to make Suhrawardy Udyan “greener”. One cannot help but wonder how the construction of “public toilets, walkways, food courts, artificial ponds, underground parking lots, underpasses, and mosques” is supposed to enrich the area’s natural environment. While we cannot deny the need for development, it must also be sustainable and must not destroy an environment that requires preservation. We would urge all authorities concerned to immediately cease any actions that could disrupt Suhrawardy Udyan’s natural environment, including the felling of age-old trees. Projects such as the “Shawdhinata Stambha Construction Project in Dhaka” must be undertaken with much forethought and heeding the advice of experts in the fields of environment, architecture, etc. Otherwise, we run the risk of developing only for the sake of developing, depriving our future generations of the green spaces they deserve and that are essential for the survival of the planet.

Your land is my land: Environmental injustice in Bandarban



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

LAND is the closest thing that we know. We cultivate it, build on it, transform it to meet our needs, commercialise it to maximise economic gain, and derive our identities from its widely varying geographic characters. We try to own as much land as possible because it enables us to exert power.

The banality of land’s ubiquity could also mislead us to believe that it is apolitical. It is not. The entire human history could be viewed as a multifaceted narrative of negotiations and conflicts between peoples, nations, societies, groups, and tribes because of their competing claims on land. In Discourse on Inequality (1755), Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that humans could have avoided “crimes, wars, murders... miseries and horrors” if they remembered how “the fruits of the earth belong to all and the earth to no one!” Rousseau’s enlightened view of the earth, belonging to “all,” was utopian. The dominant tribe has always proclaimed, this land is my land. The earth never belonged to all.

A hundred years before Rousseau, the English political theorist James Harrington explained that the shape of government depends on and reflects the way the earth is owned, because those who controlled the most land could sustain the largest number of soldiers. John Adams, the second President of the United States, encapsulated the politics of land ownership in this pithy statement: “Power follows property.” Colonialism has always been about conquering somebody else’s land. The East India Company’s territorial occupation that began in Bengal in 1757 reached all the way to the Mughal capital of Delhi in half a century. And the native Indians were forced to pay taxes to a foreign private company for simply living on their land.

The other day I was reading about the recent protest by the members of the Mru indigenous community. It was against the occupation of their ancestral land in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and the construction of a five-star resort and entertainment centre. This project, we are told, is a joint venture between the Army and Sikder Group, a private company. It was melancholic to see a handful of Mru members and their lonely protest on the streets of Dhaka, as if this complex’s deep penetration into the wilderness of the CHT is a minor environmental headache to the indigenous people. Their placards read:

“Do not desecrate nature,” “My homestead is not for business,” and “Our land our right.” The ownership of land in the CHT has remained a contentious political subject. A Chakma leader once stated that, “the land problem is the main problem.”

The resort project in Bandarban exemplifies an archetypal (and vastly asymmetrical) fight for land. It appears that the owners of the complex could not care less about the indigenous communities’ veneration of their land as sacred. Jum land is not just their main source of livelihood, but also the site of their spiritual and existential foundation. Unfortunately, in the wake of the resort project fiasco, the news media reduced the indigenous people’s grievance into a singular lament for the loss of livelihood.

is destroyed and the community dispersed, the mineral would be ready for extraction. Avatar is a celluloid indictment against the kind of environmental injustices that the Bandarban resort project exemplifies.

Why do we need a five-star hotel at the heart of the land that indigenous communities consider their spiritual home? Where is our national outrage at what appears to be no less an act of eco-devastation? The Co-owner and Sikder Group tried to placate the situation by arguing that they have signed a 40-year lease for a 20-acre plot on the hills of Bandarban. This land would be used to build a resort, located at least 2.5 km away from the nearest indigenous settlement. However, no third-party environmental impact assessment report has been

What we need are not more resorts, but national parks. People should be able to visit the CHT without disrupting the indigenous way of life. National parks, protected by environmental laws and supported by walking trails, bike paths, birdwatching, knowledge-based botanical paths, and respect for the rights of indigenous people, can create a sustainable model for eco-tourism. Indigenous community members can be hired as park support staff.

The controversial Bandarban resort project also reveals an alarming trend: increasing commercialisation of the state’s mission. This could create a dangerous precedent, compromising national security in times of territorial crisis. The last thing Bangladesh needs is disciplined institution’s foray into land business. On the other hand, a collaborative partnership between that institution and indigenous communities to establish protected national parks in the CHT could be a win-win proposition.

Bangladesh is a small country with a growing population. That means the demand on land will continuously rise. The power-wielding class will start occupying more and more land as the very source of its power. That is why we need a comprehensive regional plan for the entire country. The three districts of the CHT together cover 10 percent of the country’s landmass. How do we protect its unique geographical and environmental traits?

Land, as Leo Tolstoy’s parable, “How much land does a man need?” (1886), reminds us, has an uncanny power to punish humans for their greed. Tolstoy’s protagonist, a landowning peasant named Pakhom, wanted to buy as much land as possible from a distant community in the south of Russia. That community offered him a unique deal. He could buy the area he encircles, walking, in a day. He agreed and, growing greedy, kept on enlarging the arc of the circle. Alas, by the end of the day he had to run inhumanely to complete the circle. Exhausted, he fell where he began in the morning and died. In the end, he only needed a land six feet long and three feet wide. His grave.

A luxury hotel at the heart of lands that indigenous communities revere as their spiritual home presents all the optics of domination. It is a blatant case of environmental injustice. On the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh’s independence, the country’s national purpose must include a mission of justice for all.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

Members of the Mru community organised a “cultural showdown” urging the authorities to stop the construction of a hotel by Sikder Group, on November 8, 2020.

This reduction hurts their cause. What do they mean when they cry, “do not desecrate nature”? The moral root of their protest harkens back to the loss of their spiritual home: the land. The philosopher Glenn Albrecht calls this melancholic feeling “solastalgia”—a kind of eco-grief experienced by a community when it feels that its environmental umbilical cord has been severed.

The Bandarban resort project is a tragic real-life replay of James Cameron’s eco-conscious blockbuster, Avatar (2009). The story goes like this. To solve planet Earth’s energy crisis, an American mining corporation has established a private army camp on a distant planet to drive away its aboriginal people from their sacred land which sits atop a vast deposit of a rare new mineral. The marauding corporation figured that the only way to destroy the spiritual cohesion of this indigenous community would be to uproot the giant tree they consider sacrosanct. Once the tree

produced.

Would the environmental effects of a five-star hotel be contained within the “allotted” 20-acre site? Of course not. Its carbon footprint will have far-reaching ramifications for the area. The building heat will disrupt the ecological balance. Roads must be made for cars which will emit carbon monoxide. Vehicular roads will cut off the network of existing streams, rivulets, and creeks. To secure its own water source in a hilly terrain, the resort engineers will build dams on canals and streams, depriving at least 70 percent of indigenous people of natural water sources. Then, there will be tourists and their usual noise. The disruptions will dislodge the wildlife. If the proposed resort is “successful,” then others would be incentivised to follow suit. A steady gentrification of indigenous lands will slowly decimate the ecological continuum of the place. This is discrimination and colonisation by development.

Vaccinations won’t lead to vacations soon, unless we act now

MATTHIAS HELBLE and WON HEE CHO

VACCINATION programmes and travel bubbles are still in their infancy. They could help revive tourism in Asia and the Pacific but governments need to pave the way with the right policies.

Countries around the world are undertaking enormous efforts to vaccinate against Covid-19. The hope is that the vaccination will allow for a full return to economic activity and recovery. When it comes to international tourism, the prospects for a quick recovery remain very uncertain.

Regional or international agreements on vaccine passes are still lacking. Current travel bubbles between places with low Covid-19 risks are rare and fragile. Going forward, countries need to urgently come together to establish harmonised protocols that ease international travel. International travel is not only important for the tourism sector, but for international business and cooperation in general.

The introduction of Covid-19 vaccines in December 2020 raised hopes that vaccine passes could help accelerate the recovery of the travel and tourism sector. As long as vaccines would provide sufficient immunity and avoid transmission, it was expected that it would allow travellers to move across borders without lengthy quarantine and testing requirements.

To gauge the possible effect of vaccination on international travel in Asia, we conducted a simulation exercise. Under the assumption that vaccine passes would be implemented and allow vaccinated people to travel to the same extent as before the pandemic, the tourism sector is expected to recover by 2023, at the earliest. Furthermore, our research found that a six-month delay in the vaccination roll-out would postpone the recovery of the tourism sector by a full year.

The recovery is also expected to be uneven, both in terms of outbound and inbound travellers. People from economies with fast and successful vaccine roll-out will probably be the first to travel *en masse* again. Likewise, economies that have achieved a faster widespread vaccination would more likely be the first to open their borders for international tourism.

This is based on several assumptions,

most importantly, that vaccine passes would be immediately available and allow for international travel. However, intergovernmental efforts to introduce vaccine passes have not yet led to the introduction of vaccine passes in Asia, except for a few new cases. For example, the Immunitie health passport of Malaysia is recognised by Singapore. At the regional level, Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ leaders discussed the possibility of a common digital vaccine certificate in early March 2021.

Given this outlook, substantive additional efforts of bilateral and regional cooperation are urgently needed to facilitate travel across borders.

Even though advances in vaccination in the region are unequal, Asia needs to urgently come together to develop

expected to take years to finish, entry into a country should continue to be possible for unvaccinated travellers. To facilitate travel, quarantine protocols should be harmonised across the region. For example, the testing requirement prior the trip and during the quarantine vary widely across the region. Common standards would facilitate the planning of the trip and provide predictability for all actors in the sector.

We know from recent surveys that tourists are putting a higher priority on health issues and safety measures than before. For example, a recent survey by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) indicates that 88 percent of passengers are willing to undergo a Covid-19 test as part of the travel requirements and 84 percent think a Covid-19 test should be required of



PHOTO: COURTESY

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a common vaccine protocol for cross-border travel. A common travel pass should be easy to use, fraud resistant, and available digitally. Existing regional integration efforts, such as trade deals and technical agreements, could offer a platform for countries to negotiate. Apart from easing travel substantially, offering a common vaccine passport provides people with an additional incentive to become vaccinated.

As the vaccination programmes are

all travellers. Common health protocols should reflect this increased wish to have high health standards.

Contact tracing has been found to be highly effective in fighting the pandemic as experience in the Republic of Korea and the People’s Republic of China shows. Contact tracing should be made possible across borders. To reach this objective, it is crucial that governments adopt digital technologies that not only accurately track movement of people and meet data

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security and privacy standards, but that also allow an interface of exchange across countries.

In recent months, another form of international travel has emerged: travel bubbles between places that are largely Covid-19 free. This includes bubbles for Australia-New Zealand; Singapore-Hong Kong, China; Singapore-Malaysia; and Singapore-Australia. Governments need to coordinate how to integrate these bubbles with vaccine passes.

Harmonising standards on a global scale will take time. In the meantime, groups in Asia and the Pacific should work together to develop regional best practices and protocols. A unified stand and stringent guidelines on how to implement the digital vaccine passes and other Covid-19-related travel measures would contribute significantly towards the success of the tourism recovery plan. It will also ease international business travel, which enables faster recovery of international economic cooperation.

Vaccine rollouts will be a time-consuming process both regionally and across the globe, but there are actions that can be taken now that will make them more effective in opening up tourism and travel. That could speed the economic recovery from the pandemic that the region desperately needs.

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