

Why do we need an artificial lake in Modhupur forest?



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A beautiful baid may soon turn into a little artificial lake in Modhupur forest area. Baid is low land to grow rice and other crops in, between chala (high) land with sal stands. Baid and chala with reddish soil are special features of Modhupur Garh. In large parts of Modhupur forest, sal and hundreds of other native species have been replaced by the plantation of exotic acacia, pineapple, banana and spices. And thus, the beauty of baid and chala with sal stands has disappeared in most parts of Modhupur sal forest.

In one such baid, running west to east from Dokhola Range office, the Forest department is building a two-story guesthouse. It wants to dig a small lake (200 feet by 800 feet) on nearly four acres of this land to be used by the guests for recreational purposes. The wild animals will also come to quench their thirst at the lake, claims a top forest official.

A few Garo families owning this baid (on the basis of customary rights) are unwilling to give up the land that they have been using for generations. The Garos, indeed, have been living in this area since before the creation of

the Forest Department, who now claim jurisdiction over all gazetted land.

In September last year, I met some of the owners of the baid and they all stood strongly against the plan to dig a small artificial lake on the agricultural land they use. "The government's plan to dig a lake here does not indicate any good intentions," said Dipen Nokrek (65)



papaya, spices and lemon. Deforestation is not a new phenomenon. But what we have seen since the mid-1980s, with the advent of rubber plantation and then plantation of exotic species under the guise of social forestry, is rapid destruction of traditional sal forest patches in Modhupur and elsewhere. The so-called social forestry has also

not even spared the Charaljami Forest Research Centre. Not long ago, the 400-acre research centre had very good coverage of local and foreign species of trees. The research centre, established in 1967, has now been reduced to hardly 20 acres and it is difficult to determine if it is a forest research centre at all anymore.

The state of a medicinal garden (established in 2003) neighbouring Charaljami Forest Research Centre does not demonstrate meaningful practice, either. The plantation under SUFAL has also surprised the local people when the understory vegetation of the sal forest patches had been cleared and saplings of some local fruits and other species were planted. Common people are fed-up of all these while the traders and politically influential people have been making huge profits out of fruit and spice plantations on forest land.

They see the concept of an arboretum with a guest house and a tiny lake as a joke. Many question why a beautiful baid with a natural environment has to become a lake. Can't those staying in the guest house be satisfied with the existing natural environment around? If they want to see water, they can go to Gorgora lake near Lohoria Beat, which was dug in the 1980s. It is now abandoned and some infrastructure built around it has also eroded. Guests can also take a motorbike ride from Dokhola to Rasulpur and see the remaining sal forest patches. They can also trek through rubber plantations to see the "green desert".

The Dokhola Forest Range Office premises looked so much better with a few tin-shed cottages. Part of our constitution was written here in 1972. Our Father of the Nation spent a few days at the Dokhola Rest House in January 1971 as well. This is a glorious piece of history that everyone should know. But nowadays, a huge security gate has been constructed at the entrance of the premises. The beautiful landscape looks clumsy now. The air does not flow normally. A two-storey guest house with a couple of rooms and an artificial lake will further congest the environment and restrict general people's entrance to the area. A mud road that the Garos take through Dokhola Range office to Dokhola Bazar will probably be blocked. The people of Chunia, a pure Garo village, will be adversely affected.

The Garos of Modhupur in general are strong supporters of Bangladesh Awami League. They revere the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, from their hearts. Their participation in the War of Liberation in 1971 was noteworthy. Yet, they are being made to surrender around four acres of baid land when they have leased a large percentage of their chala land for commercial plantation of banana, pineapple, papaya and spices.

The Garos may surrender the land for the lake in the end, in exchange for some compensation, but it will not be done voluntarily. The Garos have many demands, foremost of them is recognition of their customary land rights, which the state denies. We can only hope the government will do justice to Modhupur and the peace-loving Garos in consideration of bitter experiences with forestry projects and the colossal damage, including ecocide, that these have caused.

Sal forest that has been turned into banana and pineapple orchards.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

caused massive loss of natural forest patches in the south-eastern districts of the country.

It is under the forestry projects funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) that so-called co-management of forests was introduced in Modhupur from the 1990s. While the ADB-funded forestry projects have been proven to have caused colossal damage resulting in it suspending all its operations in the forestry sector since 2005, social forestry practices continue. Currently, the Forest Department is implementing a World Bank-funded project worth USD 175 million called Sustainable Forests & Livelihoods (SUFAL). The World Bank-funded project is controversial in that it promotes collaborative forest management, a model close to co-management that has not brought the desired good to our forests. However, the forestry projects with concessional loans from the international financial institutions bring huge financial benefits to the project-mongers.

The guest house at Dokhola and the lake—or the pond, to be more accurate—are reported to be part of a purely government-funded project, titled, "Modhupur eco-tourism development and sustainable management with help of local people and tribals." The FD officials confirmed that the guest house and lake are part of an arboretum plantation on three hectares of land in the Sadar Beat of National Park Sadar Range.

While around half of Modhupur sal forest has been consumed by pineapple, banana and spices orchards, setting up a tiny kind of botanical garden brings no hope for the protection of trees. The people of Modhupur have witnessed how the so-called social forestry projects have caused ecocide. Social forestry eventually led to pineapple, banana, papaya, spice plantations and has

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who claims owning 2.4 acres of land in the baid. Belly Nokrek (27), another Garo who claims owning 71 decimals of land said with confidence, "I do not want a lake here. If the government wants to dig a lake here without our consent, we will stage protests."

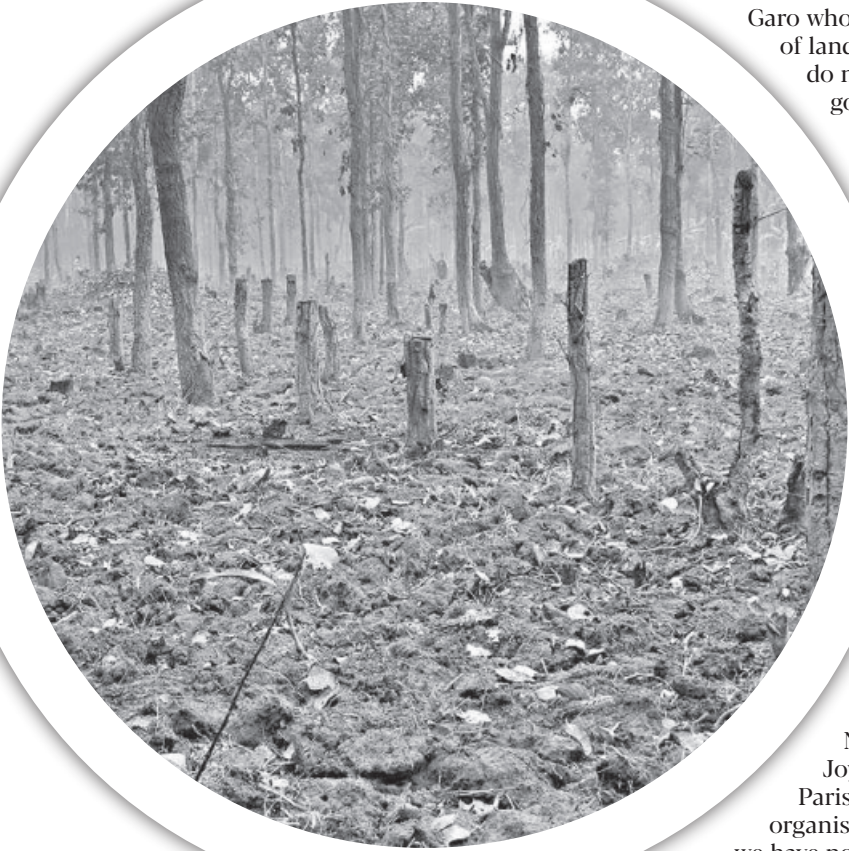
For months, a tug-of-war has been going on between the Garos and the Forest Department. The Garos are divided on the lake issue. Some are for it, but most are against it or are sceptical.

The FD, politicians and administrations are trying to convince the Garos to give up a bit of this baid for the lake. "They have promised some compensation for the land," says Eugin Nokrek, president of Joyenshahi Adivasi Unnayan Parisad, the premier Garo social organisation in Modhupur. "But we have not yet decided. If proper compensation is given and our other demands are met, we may give consent."

"In a meeting on March 19, attended by politicians and higher-ups in the local administrations and the forest department, the DC has offered a compensation of Taka five lacs, which is too small an amount," reports Nokrek, who attended the meeting. "We will discuss among ourselves and get back to them."

Why a tiny, artificial lake?

Modhupur is thoroughly despoiled. The sylvan aroma is gone. In most parts, there are orchards of banana, pineapple,



Recently encroached Sal forest.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

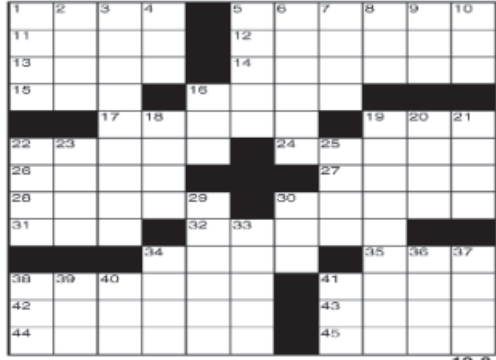
ACROSS

- 1 Parcel (out)
- 5 Rascals
- 11 Nerve impulse relay
- 12 Mauna Loa setting
- 13 Tater
- 14 Held forth
- 15 Greedy one
- 16 Young kangaroo
- 17 Tackle box items
- 19 Hold up
- 22 Cruller's kin
- 24 Milking seat
- 26 Musical work
- 27 Greek liqueur
- 28 Espresso order
- 30 Sire
- 31 Overhead trains
- 32 Suppress

DOWN

- 1 Use a pestle
- 2 Trade show
- 3 Difficult puzzles
- 4 Conclude
- 5 Trembled
- 6 Loving touch
- 7 Not at home
- 8 Welcome sight
- 9 Cobbler's cousin
- 10 Comic Caesar

- 16 Write hastily
- 18 Give the boot to
- 19 Unfinished movies
- 20 Seep
- 21 Inky smear
- 22 Distribute
- 23 October birthstone
- 25 Low digits
- 29 Compare
- 30 Inlet
- 33 Goats on
- 34 National symbol
- 36 In a frenzy
- 37 A lot
- 38 Spree
- 39 Longoria of TV
- 40 Pewter component
- 41 Red or Black



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

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