



This low land, running west to east from the Dokhola Range office in Tangail's Modhupur, has been cultivated by the indigenous people of the area for generations. Known as "Baid" in the local dialect, the land is set to be turned into an artificial lake by the Forest Department.

'ENTERTAINMENT' at the cost of cropland

Plan for artificial lake in Madhupur forest raises objection from local indigenous community

“The Forest Department planned to dig the artificial lake on the three-crop land of the ethnic minority people ‘just for the entertainment’ of tourists, without realising that it would threaten their livelihoods and culture.”

MIRZA SHAKIL

The Forest Department is set to excavate an artificial lake at Amtali in Madhupur National Park to attract tourists, despite objections from the local ethnic minorities who fear this would damage their livelihoods and culture.

The 800 feet by 200 feet lake will be dug on 12 bighas of land near a two-storey rest house, which is under construction, next to Dokhola Rest House, according to the Forest Department.

The department is also planning to build walkways and seating arrangements around the lake, to be excavated under a project called "Eco-tourism development and sustainable management in Madhupur National Park with the help of local and ethnic people".

The local ethnic minority inhabitants have been opposing the plan since the start. On March 10, they held a press conference at Dhaka Reporters' Unity under the banner of Bangladesh Adivasi Sangram Parishad.

They demanded immediate cancellation of the plan to dig the lake on farmland that they have been cultivating for long.

In a written statement, they said more than 25,000 people of indigenous communities, including Mandi, Koch and Bormon, have been protecting the Madhupur forest and its biodiversity for ages. But the Forest Department, in the name of protecting the forest, takes up projects that harm the forest and environment.

its environment as well as the traditional way of life of the ethnic minority people there.

Given the potential consequences, they urged the forest department to shift the project elsewhere.

THE PLAN IS SET

Md Sazzaduzzaman, divisional forest officer in Tangail, acknowledged that the locals grow crops on the land selected for the lake, but said the land was government property.

He said the matter was discussed at length at a meeting at Madhupur Upazila Parishad on March 19, where local lawmaker and agriculture minister, the deputy commissioner, the superintendent of police,

opinions against the excavation plan, he added.

Eugin Nokrek, president of Joyenshahi Adivasi Unnayan Parishad, said Joshitina Nokrek, female vice-chairman of Madhupur Upazila Parishad, placed a proposal at the meeting on behalf of the local administration that the affected people will be provided with plots for social afforestation.

She also assured the local communities of constructing a drainage system near the lake to address the potential waterlogging problem on the cropland.

However, the locals turned down both proposals, he added.



The construction of a two-storey rest house is underway on another land adjacent to where the artificial lake is supposed to be dug.

Earlier on November 11 last year, the indigenous community leaders held a press conference at the Joyenshahi Adivasi Unnayan Parishad Office at Jalchhatra to protest the plan.

Speakers at the press conference called on the government to abandon the plan, and vowed to resist the bid.

They also said the Forest Department planned to dig the artificial lake on the three-crop land of the ethnic minority people "just for the entertainment" of tourists, without realising that it would threaten their livelihoods and culture.

They also warned of a lasting impact on whatever is left of the Madhupur forest and



'We cannot let that happen'

Bipin Nokrek, a Mandi man from Pirgachha village, said his family members cultivate two paddies and mustard on seven bighas on the low-lying land inside the forest.

"We have been growing crops on this land since the British era. Now, if a lake is dug on the land, what will we eat? We do not want them to dig any lake here," he said.

Kaushala Nokrek, a Mandi woman from the same village, said they grew crops on two bighas of land where the Forest Department wants to dig the lake.

"I got this land from my mother. My mother got it from her mother. I

don't understand why they want to dig a lake inside the forest when there is so much space elsewhere. If they dig a lake for outsiders today, they will surely do many more such things in future to entertain outsiders. We don't want any of these here," she said, sounding disappointed.

According to Polan Chiran of Pegamari village, the lake will badly affect 47 acres of cropland; not just the land cultivated and inhabited by the ethnic minority communities.

"We cannot let that happen. Why can't they dig the lake in some other places?" he said.

forest officials, and community members, including those from the ethnic minority communities, were present.

Dr Ataul Gani, the DC, said at the meeting they assured the local communities who grow crops there of giving Tk 5 lakh on humanitarian ground.

"The honourable minister also assured them of providing other support as well to address their grievances," he said.

Alik Mre, general secretary of Bangladesh Adivasi Chhatra Sangram Parishad, said they held a separate meeting with representatives from different ethnic minority communities on March 26.

At the meeting, they all expressed their

Ajoy-A-Mre, a veteran Mandi leader in Madhupur and former president of Joyenshahi Adivasi Unnayan Parishad, said they think the plan to dig up a lake there was part of the process to evict them from the land.

"The community people want the government to resolve their long-pending land issues permanently by forming a separate land commission for it," he added.

The agriculture minister was scheduled to inaugurate the excavation work on April 1, but the inauguration did not take place as the local administration could not reach an agreement with the affected communities, according to the forest department sources.

'Re-excavate natural waterbodies'

Environmentalist Asit Ranjan Paul, who served as the divisional forest officer in Tangail from 2010 to 2013, says waterbodies are blessings for all. But before digging any new waterbody near or in the localities, locals should be discussed.

Talking to The Daily Star recently, Asit also said there was a shortage of water bodies in Madhupur Sal forest.

"The authorities should re-excavate the natural water bodies in the Madhupur forest area. It will be good for the environment as well as wild lives," he said.

Goutam Chandra Chanda, divisional coordinator of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela) in Tangail, said

"The authorities should re-excavate the natural water bodies in the Madhupur forest area. It will be good for the environment as well as wild lives."

digging an artificial lake near the indigenous peoples' villages will hamper their daily lives and livelihood.

Movement of tourists in and near the villages will not only invade privacy of the indigenous community but also pose threat to the security of the women and children.

Moreover, digging the artificial lake on the Baid (free space at forests) will destroy the biodiversity of the traditional forest. "So Bela thinks that the Forest Department should cancel the project of artificial lake," he said.

Never-ending tensions

Madhupur has a history of conflict and tension between the foresters and forest dwellers, especially the indigenous people.

Piren Slan, a Mandi youth, was killed when forest guards and police opened fire on a procession brought out in Jalabada area on January 3, 2004.

The procession was organised to protest the Forest Department's attempt to construct a boundary wall inside the forest under the Echo Park project.

About 30 others were injured in the firing. Chalesh Richhil, a local Mandi leader, was killed in the custody of law enforcers during the Caretaker Government on 2007.

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Tensions were created between the foresters and indigenous communities on several occasions later over different issues.

One such occasion was when the Ministry of Environment and Forests on February 15, 2016 declared 9,145-acre land at Arankhola mouza in the upazila as a reserve forest under Section 20 of the Forest Act of 1927.

The foresters said the locals want no foresters in the forest at all. It is not possible to protect the forest with people in the forest area, they add.

On the other hand, the forest dwellers say around 25,000 indigenous people, including those from Mandi, Koch and Bormon communities, live in the Madhupur forest areas. And the forest exists only where they reside.