

EARTH DAY 2022

Ending deforestation by 2030: An empty promise?



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PHILIP GAIN

BANGLADESH is amazingly green. Yet, historically, our natural forests have always been limited. In 2000, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics estimated our total forest area to be 2.6 million hectares. However, according to the Forest Department’s “National Forest and Tree Resources Assessment 2005-07” report, the extent of legal forest land is 1.4 million hectares, which is 9.8 percent of the total land area in the country. The UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) indicates a much worse condition of our forests: In 2009, the actual coverage of forest was merely 6.7 percent. The Forest Department identified 17.62 percent of the country’s land area as forest in 2016.

The Bangladesh side of the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world, is spread over Khulna, Bagerhat and Satkhira districts, covering 601,700 hectares. The largest area of forestry in the country, the Sundarbans is constantly hit with disasters both natural and man-made. Foremost among the natural disasters are storms and tidal surges. The biggest of the man-made disasters, on the other hand, is extensive tiger prawn (Bagda) farming. According to conservative estimates, more than 200,000 hectares of mangroves have been cut down along the coast line in different places of the forest to facilitate prawn farming.

The Chakaria mangrove forest in Cox’s Bazar has completely disappeared due to prawn farming. It is because of the demise of this unique mangrove patch that half of the people of Baddarkhali town on its northern edge lost their lives in the 1991 cyclone—one of the deadliest cyclones on record.

Our second biggest forest after the Sundarbans is located at the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), covering 322,331 hectares. This hill forest used to be home to 11 indigenous groups. Then, to their great dismay, the British crown promulgated Act VII in 1865, and the forest-dwelling people in the CHT and elsewhere in the county were stripped of their customary rights to the forest and land. During British rule, 24 percent of the CHT was declared as reserved

forest. Commercial afforestation began in the hills with cultivation of teak, an exotic species to Bangladesh. Later on, the Kaptai hydropower project, road construction, social forestry, Karnaphuli Paper Mills, militarisation, and the settlement of Bangalees contributed greatly to the drastic decline of CHT forest resources.

Monoculture plantations with exotic

PHOTO:
PHILIP GAIN



monoculture and pineapple, banana and spice orchards. In places, there are social forestry patches primarily grown with acacia.

The major factors behind the massive deforestation and precise ecocide we have seen in Modhupur and elsewhere over the last three decades are wrong strategies and plantation projects funded by our development partners.

Kaliakair upazila, you will see burnt sal trees on both sides of the newly expanded highway.

The Forest Department is helpless in the Modhupur and Attia sal forest areas. Allegations are widespread that those involved in the deforestation and abuse of the forest areas are primarily political leaders, businessmen and elected public representatives. Rubber monoculture, a big threat to forest ecology, is primarily an activity of the Forest Department. Corruption of dishonest forest employees and officials and their collusion with the forest despoilers are equally widespread.

In recent decades, the so-called social forestry and other plantation projects funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank have dramatically changed the forest landscapes. Everywhere in the forest areas, we see huge plots of exotic acacia and few other species, devoid of understorey vegetation of diverse plant species—which is typical of natural forest patches. The practice of social forestry requires harvest of planted trees every 10 years or so, and thus creates perfect conditions for the land grabbers to step in.

A ray of hope was briefly shone at the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow, Scotland last year, when the world leaders, including our prime minister, pledged to stop deforestation by 2030. The world leaders’ declaration came on November 2. However, Bangladesh endorsed it on November 4—an indication that our leaders at COP26 were not well-prepared!

Considering the recent trends of deforestation and their underlying factors, it is indeed hard to believe that deforestation will ever come under control, let alone end by 2030. Yet, we want to be optimistic, but not without concrete actions, particularly from our government. First of all, the government must show that it is determined to formulate appropriate forestry policies and strategic programmes to protect our forests. Thanks to the ADB, it has completely withdrawn from the forestry sector after the colossal damage its investment caused to our natural forest patches. The World Bank also slowed down with the forest projects, but came back with SUFAL, a big forestry project. Evidence abounds how forestry projects funded by these multilateral development banks (MDBs) and donors can cause irreparable damage to our forests and environment. Our failure to be bold in taking right policy decisions will prove that the world leaders, including ours, made empty promises at COP26.

Monoculture plantations with exotic species, sugar-coated as social forestry, have severely damaged our natural forests. Rubber and tobacco cultivation over the past few decades has proven to be another key factor for deforestation.

The plantation projects funded by the World Bank to create a green fence along the coast have been severely affected by prawn cultivation, promoted and funded by donor countries. Recently, the World Bank’s USD 175 million project, Sustainable Forest and Livelihoods (SUFAL), has also failed to show any improvement. The huge project, set to be completed next year, has followed the same models of forestry that have proven to be ineffective.

Apart from the sal forests in Modhupur and Muktagachha, there are patches of sal forest at Fulbaria upazila in Mymensingh, Kaliakair in Gazipur, and in Tangail. These patches of nearly 60,000 acres, known as the Attia Forest, are now in the grips of land grabbers. Industrial establishments, roads, human habitation, bazaars, schools, madrasas and many other constructions have spread in and around this forest. The waste from nearby cities are indiscriminately dumped and burned in many places inside the forest. If you go east from Chandra circle in

Choosing the Slow Lane



Milia Ali is a Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

MILIA ALI

RECENTLY, I have been reminiscing about my music guru, the late Kanika Banerjee (known to her intimate circle as Mohordi). My reflections are not only focused on music lessons, but on our long discussions during her later life. These meandered through a kaleidoscope of topics, not just Rabindrasangeet. Mohordi had achieved her status as a musical icon, but retreated from public life at a relatively early stage of her career. What intrigued me was that her voice, technique and rendition quality were still in good form, yet she made a dignified exit from the music world. There was no prolonged winding down of a luminous career, neither a sudden resurgence through a Television or stage appearance. She simply chose to shut the media out and fade into her own niche. When I asked why, she said, “I want my listeners to remember me at my best. Not as a wilting flower struggling to hold on to my fame. For an artist, it is important to know when to quit.”

My thoughts move on to another great singer, Lata Mangeshkar, who passed away recently at the age of 92. Unlike Mohordi, she chose to sing throughout her long and illustrious life, and preserved her iconic status until the very end. Lataji always strived to climb higher peaks and was never shy of trying out one more experiment, one more nuance, one more finale. She was financially secure, had won all the awards possible, but she moved her goalposts further and further. Her rare talent, monastic discipline and tremendous determination enabled her to test the limits of artistic excellence.

Many of us have crossed paths with

versions of the two types of personalities: those who aim for a certain threshold and are content in their achievement, and those who never stop even after their fortunes have crossed the uncountable. Both leave behind legacies of different kinds. While we may not know the right path to follow with exact certitude, we often wonder: where would our world be without maximisers, or people who exploit every opportunity to maximise their possibilities? For them the frontiers of abilities and aspirations are almost infinite.

The bioscientist couple who discovered the Covid vaccine springs to mind. They spent their honeymoon in a lab wrestling with the indomitable challenge of producing the drug that would save humanity. No doubt these people gift us with the best music, the best paintings, the best literature, the best scientific discoveries and technological inventions. However, a more intimate peep into their personal lives reveals that most of them have regrets and are dissatisfied with life for having failed to take one more leap into yet another accomplishment. They are usually haunted, burning with ambition, and squeeze the limits of their endurance to the utmost.

In contrast, people who give a voluntary pause to their aspirations and say “good enough”, yearn to spend more time nurturing their family or simply leading a peaceful life “far from the madding crowd”. Many consider them to be lacking in drive and motivation. But having observed Mohordi closely, I believe this is not true. It takes tremendous courage and self-control to quit the arena of fame and adulation while one’s potential is not fully actualised. It is a remarkable ability to set aside thoughts about how much better things could have been or how much more someone else has achieved. Some disappointed fans may consider such a choice to be a sign of weakness or lethargy. On the contrary, not succumbing to the temptation of “one more” entails discipline

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of the highest kind!

Readers may be curious as to why these reflections have been occupying my mind with such intensity. It may be because I have often been asked whether or not I nurture regrets about the fact that my musical journey did not reach its potential. It may be appropriate to answer the question in the context of my limited goals and abilities, since I am not in any way close to the luminaries I mention above in terms of talent and fame. The truth is that I have never been a maximiser. Call it a lack of motivation or a humble recognition of my own mediocrity... Or perhaps I did not wish to undermine my achievements by deviating

from the course that I believe satisfied my spiritual yearnings. My musical adventures have given me more than fame and material gains—they have helped me observe, feel and experience the world around me. Although I never received standing ovations, my singing touched my consciousness with beauty, tranquillity and humanity and left me with a sense of fulfilment.

Hence, I have no regrets that I have chosen to walk the slow lane. After all, not everyone is meant to play Hamlet on the world stage. We can also find contentment in the role of “an attendant lord... To swell a progress, start a scene or two...”

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

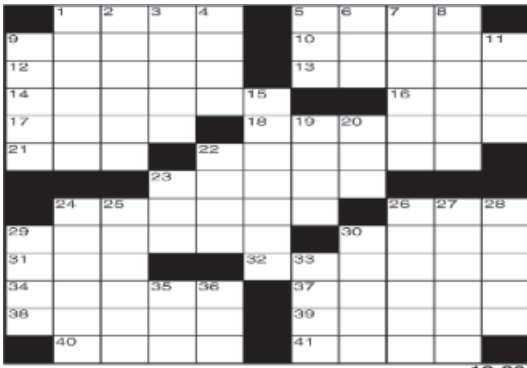
- 1 Head honcho
- 5 Lt.’s superior
- 9 Christmas Eve traveler
- 10 Medal, for example
- 12 Parcel out
- 13 Contradict
- 14 Pizza servings
- 16 Top card
- 17 Goose sound
- 18 One given to idle chatter
- 21 Had a meal
- 22 Moves smoothly
- 23 “...eight — a-milking...”
- 24 Royal heir
- 26 Gorilla, for one
- 29 Icebox, updated

DOWN

- 1 Voter’s page
- 2 One way to shop
- 3 Market buy
- 4 Fill completely
- 5 Taxi
- 6 Reverent wonder
- 7 Sense of taste
- 30 Pet pest
- 31 Equip
- 32 Fruitcake ingredients
- 34 Earthy pigment
- 37 “— Lucy”
- 38 Paris subway
- 39 North Pole workers
- 40 Put into piles
- 41 Future flower

- 8 Brief times
- 9 Daughter of Barack and Michelle
- 11 Sleigh pullers
- 15 Joins together
- 19 Carnival attraction
- 20 Spots on TV
- 22 Work crew
- 23 Central
- 24 Catalog info
- 25 “Yes indeedly!”
- 26 Statue setting
- 27 Irritated
- 28 Moves carefully
- 29 Gift tag word
- 30 French girl
- 33 Diner desserts
- 35 Make mistakes
- 36 Turn bad

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

