

Once a forest, now salt fields

SIFAYET ULLAH

“Due to the destruction of the forest, the ecological balance of the area will be disturbed and the wild animals who were living in the area will lose their habitat and become displaced.”

—Mohammad Kamal Hossain
Former professor of Chittagong University

Thirty-five hectares of mangrove forest in Eastern Char Dhurung village under Cox's Bazar's Kutubdia upazila have been turned into salt fields. Thousands of trees were felled in the process, at a cost of the area's biodiversity and environmental balance.

According to forest officials, the mangrove forest, which contained at least 70,000 saplings, was established in 2019-20 as part of a forest department project on Khas land under the jurisdiction of the deputy commissioner.

Shamim Reza, ranger of the Kutubdia coastal forest office, admitted that encroachers have destroyed the forest to make salt fields. “We reported the matter in writing to our higher authorities.”

“We could not take legal action against the encroachers as the land is under the DC,” he added.

During a recent visit, this correspondent found that most of the trees in the forest have been cut down by the encroachers. Labourers were seen working in the salt fields that were created by massive deforestation.

Mohammed Malek, a worker, told The Daily Star that they have been working there for the last 6 months on daily wages.

“I'm working here according to the instructions of the owner,” he added.

Local and forest officials said Mohammed Sujan and Abdul Mazed, two locals, have taken over most of the forest and turned it into salt fields.

However, Mohammed Sujan claimed that the forest department planted trees in the lands after it emerged as a Char.

“But these lands were our ancestral property, which we lost to river erosion. Now we are producing salt in the land,” he said.

When asked about the tree felling, he said they were just “clearing” the land for salt production.



PHOTO: STAR

According to data from the Chattogram coastal forest division, the Kutubdia range has 867 hectares of land. However, there is forestry in it only on 200 hectares of land.

Abdur Rahman, divisional forest officer (DFO) of the Chattogram coastal forest division, claimed that they did not take any legal action against anyone as the 35 hectares of mangrove forest were destroyed due to natural causes.

“We have already sent a detailed report about the matter to the higher authorities of the forest department,” he added.

Contacted, Cox's Bazar DC Mohammad Shahin Imran said, “As per law, any land that re-emerges as a Char after being eroded is government property. I will look into the issue of encroachment and take action accordingly.”

However, Kutubdia UNO Dipankar Tanchangya told The Daily Star that the forest department should have informed

them about the encroachment but did not.

“We will promptly investigate the encroachment of government land and uprooting of trees and take legal action against those involved,” he added.

Experts said the mangrove forest protected the area from the most dangerous gusts. The complicated branches and leaves of mangrove trees serve as a natural barrier, lowering the height of storm surges.

Mohammad Kamal Hossain, former professor of Institute of Forestry and Environmental Science at Chittagong University, said mangrove forests not only maintain the balance of the environment but also provide effective soil protection against erosion.

“Due to the destruction of the forest, the ecological balance of the area will be disturbed and the wild animals who were living in the area will lose their habitat and become displaced,” he added.



A new hope for Dhaka-Ctg route passengers

Railway plans to launch new train after 7 years

SIFAYET ULLAH

After seven years, Bangladesh Railways is planning to launch a new intercity train on the Dhaka-Chattogram route, aiming to provide a quick and hassle-free journey to passengers on this busy route.

“The ministry gave us a demand letter for running a new non-stop train on the Dhaka-Chattogram route last month. Following this, we have already prepared a proposal with a new schedule of currently running trains. We will send it to the railways ministry for final approval soon,” said Jahangir Hossain, general manager of the BR (east).

Besides, the schedule of currently running trains on this route will change as a new train is planned to run with the existing engine-coach of other trains plying this route, said an official of the BR.

According to BR officials, the last intercity train on this route – Sonar Bangla Express – was added in 2016.

Around 11,000-12,000 passengers travel on the route every day, said Chattogram Railway Station sources.

For them, currently, there are eight passenger trains running daily on the route. Of these, six intercity trains are Subarna Express, Mahanagar Express, Mahanagar Godhuli, Sonar Bangla Express, Chattala Express and Turna Express.

The total number of seats in these trains is 5,235.

Besides, two mail trains – Dhaka Mail and Karnaphuli Express – are running every day on this route.

Billah Hossain, a regular passenger on this route, told The Daily Star that travelling on this route and to get train tickets is always a hassle. “We hope the sufferings will reduce with the new train on this route,” he said.

Ratan Kumar Chowdhury, manager of Chattogram Railway Station, said the ticket crisis will be solved and passengers will benefit once the new non-stop train is introduced.

According to BR, after witnessing a massive shortfall in revenue due to the pandemic and lockdown, the BR eastern zone has improved its position on this front in the 2021-22 fiscal year and has earned a total revenue of Tk 493 crore 75 lakh in 2021-22 against the Tk 318 crore 22 lakh during the previous fiscal year, thus registering a 55 percent rise.

Mohammed Nazmul Islam, chief commercial manager of BR Eastern Region, said, “Dhaka-Chattogram is a profitable route for us. The revenue of the railway will increase as a new train will be introduced on this route.”

However, Bangladesh Railways continues to make huge losses from its operations allegedly due to poor services, corruption, and a lack of proper management of assets. The state-run agency posted a Tk 1,384 crore loss for the 2020-21 fiscal year, shows a railways ministry document.

Boi Mela gaining momentum

ARUN BIKASH DEY

The 21-day long Amar Ekushey Boi Mela Chattogram 2023 kicked off at the MA Aziz Stadium Gymnasium premises of Chattogram on Wednesday.

The fair is gradually gaining momentum as bookworms from different parts of the port city are swarming into the fair everyday, specially on weekends.

Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) Mayor Rezaul Karim Chowdhury inaugurated the fair.

A total of 108 publishers from Chattogram and Dhaka have been participating in the fair displaying books in 140 stalls, said Nisar Uddin Ahmed Manju, a councillor of CCC and convener of this year's edition.

Creative Publishers Council is assisting CCC to organise the fair.

Visiting the book fair on Friday afternoon, it was seen that a good number of book lovers came to the fair. They were seen selecting their

favourite books at different stalls.

Readers were flocking to the stalls, including Baatighar Publication, Adorn Publication and Kothaprokash Publication.

Eighth grader Rafi came to the fair with his father. He said he liked books of Muhammad Zafar Iqbal and so he came to the fair to purchase some new books of the writer.

Eleventh grader Tanima Chowdhury came with her friends. They were all looking for books at the Baatighar publication's stall. Tanima said she came to buy books on history. Besides, she was looking for a new novel by writer Asif Nazrul.

Bablu Chowdhury, a salesman at Baatighar Publication, said books on politics and novels were in high demand.

“There is also a great demand for children's literature,” he added.

The fair will remain open between 3:00pm and 9:00pm every day and between 10:00am and 9:00pm on holidays.



PHOTO: RAJIB RATHAN

From dropout to role model in five years

How a Bandarban youth found success in farming

MONG SING HAI MARMA

He was a youngster with big dreams, hailing from Tangpru Para of Bandarban. Thoai Sing Hla Marma came to Dhaka in 2014, to pursue his goal of becoming a civil engineer, and got admitted to the National Polytechnic Institute.

But life in Dhaka is not always easy for youths coming all the way from the Chattogram Hill Tracts. When he was in the eighth semester, he had to drop out and return to his village home due to financial trouble.

“I fell into depression during that time,” Thoai told The Daily Star during a recent conversation.

“When I returned home in 2018, I had to work as a day labourer on other people's land for Tk 500 per day. As the eldest child, I had no choice but to bear the burden of my family,” he added.

However, being the dreamer that Thoai is, he did not give up that easily. He decided to become an agricultural entrepreneur and saved Tk 20,000 by working relentlessly for two years.

His misfortunes continued to haunt him. After the advent of the pandemic, Thoai lost all avenues to earn money, and his savings depleted quickly.

Thoai did not lose his resilience. When the lockdown eased in 2021, he took a Tk 50,000 loan from the “My house, My farm” (Aamr Bari Amar Khamar) project of the government and started



cultivating papaya.

A year later, he repaid the loan with his earnings, obtained another Tk 1 lakh loan from the same project, and planted 1,000 papaya saplings on an acre of hillside land.

The wheels of his fortune started turning, finally.

“I earned Tk 2 lakh the next season by selling papayas. After repaying the loan, I planted mango seedlings and took lease of a pond with the rest of the money. I began raising fish in the pond and also set

up a chicken farm,” Thoai said.

Contacted, Mongsanu Marma, a public representative of the area, said, “Thoai had a difficult life. Despite dropping out of college due to the economic crisis, he did not stray. He worked very hard to become self-reliant.”

He added that Thoai has become a role model for the youth in the village. “The nation will benefit if educated youth engage in farming rather than seeking jobs.”