

The impact of development on our hills and forests

TASLIMA ISLAM and ZAKIA SULTANA

Taslina Islam
an advocate at the Supreme Court of Bangladesh and is the acting chief executive of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA).

Zakia Sultana
is a lawyer at Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA).

Bangladesh, a country with a rich natural heritage, faces significant challenges in balancing development with environmental sustainability. The country's development agenda has been anthropocentric, short-sighted, unregulated, and top-down, lacking public consultation and concern for ecological consequences. This has resulted in the severe degradation of nearly all its ecosystems and natural resources. Its forests and hills, vital to biodiversity, climate regulation, and the livelihoods of millions, are under immense pressure from rapid development. This pressure comes in the form of infrastructure expansion, agricultural encroachment, urbanisation, and industrial growth. The impact of these developments on Bangladesh's forests

and hills has been profound, leading to deforestation, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation. Addressing this complex issue requires a concerted effort, including legal reforms, stricter enforcement of existing laws, and a more sustainable approach to development.

THE STATE OF FORESTS AND HILLS IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh's forests are primarily concentrated in the southeastern and northeastern regions, with the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) serving as the country's ecological heart. These forests play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance, preventing soil erosion, protecting water sources, and providing habitats for diverse flora and fauna. The hills, particularly in the CHT, are not only home to unique biodiversity but also to indigenous communities whose livelihoods depend on



To address the mounting environmental challenges facing Bangladesh's forests and hills, a multi-pronged approach is needed.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

sustainable resource use.

Unchecked development has severely impacted forested areas, with forests frequently sacrificed for large-scale projects. Despite the Department of Forests (DoF) claiming that 17 percent of the country's land is forested, actual forest coverage stands at only 13.5 percent—far below the global recommendation of 25 percent. Bangladesh's deforestation rate of 2.6 percent is double the global average (FAO). In 2023 alone, the country lost 20.2 kilo hectares (kha) of natural forest, releasing 11.6 million tonnes (Mt) of CO₂ emissions. Between 2002 and 2023, Bangladesh lost 8.39 kha of humid primary forest, accounting for 3.5 percent of its total tree cover loss (Global Forest Watch). Over the past 17 years, 66 square kilometres of tropical rainforest have been destroyed. Additionally, 287,453 acres of forest land have been occupied, including 138,000 acres of reserved forest (DoF).

DEVELOPMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON FORESTS AND HILLS

Forest land in Bangladesh is increasingly

encroached upon in the name of development, despite a court ban on such conversions. The government aims to increase forest coverage to 20 percent, yet deforestation continues, particularly due to government projects. In 2019 alone, 160,000 acres of forest were allocated to various government agencies or used for development projects.

Notably, 22 major government projects, including the Chattogram-Cox's Bazar rail link, threaten coastal mangrove forests, which are crucial protective barriers against salinity intrusion and natural disasters. This railway project, spanning 101 km, cuts through Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary, Fasiakhali Wildlife Sanctuary, and Medhkachapia National Park, endangering species such as the Asian elephant.

In 2024, an elephant was killed by a train in Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary. The project has already led to the destruction of 720,000 trees and parts of 26 hills.

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- » Rapid infrastructure expansion, agricultural encroachment, and industrial growth have led to severe deforestation and biodiversity loss in Bangladesh, endangering ecosystems and livelihoods.
- » Despite the Department of Forests (DoF) claiming that 17 percent of the country's land is forested, actual forest coverage stands at only 13.5 percent—far below the global recommendation of 25 percent. Bangladesh's deforestation rate of 2.6 percent is double the global average (FAO).
- » Notably, 22 major government projects, including the Chattogram-Cox's Bazar rail link, pose a threat to coastal mangrove forests, which serve as vital protective barriers against salinity intrusion and natural disasters.
- » The outdated Forest Act of 1927, which prioritises revenue generation over conservation, along with the absence of a dedicated forest conservation law, has hindered effective preservation efforts.
- » A comprehensive approach—combining legal reforms, enhanced environmental assessments, community involvement, and technology-driven monitoring—is crucial for ensuring the long-term sustainability of Bangladesh's forests and hills.



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