

#PERSPECTIVE

What Bangladesh's Forgotten Trees Tell Us About Nature's Fragility

For Swedish-American designer Jacob Thomas, Bangladesh has been home for decades. It has been long enough for the country's landscapes, monsoons, and forests to shape the rhythm of his life. Although widely known for his work in graphic design and Bangla typeface development for major brands, Jacob's most unexpected contribution is something entirely different: a vast, accessible field guide titled "Plants of Bangladesh."

His relationship with nature began early. Growing up in Ishwardi, Kushtia, and other towns outside Dhaka, Thomas was surrounded by open fields, dense trees, and unplanned greenery. Years later, when his son developed a passion for birding, their travels across forests and wetlands reawakened that early familiarity.

While his son scanned the skies and surroundings for any of Thomas's attention shifted to the undergrowth, to leaves he could not name, flowers he wanted to identify, and patterns he could not quite decode.

Looking for a beginner-friendly plant guide, he discovered a glaring gap. "There are scholarly works, certainly, but nothing that helped ordinary people recognise what they were seeing," explains Thomas, "So I decided to create what I could not find."

As a designer, the idea immediately resonated with him. Visual communication, his everyday craft, seemed like the perfect bridge between scientific information and general readers. He wanted something simple, direct, and usable. "The aim," he states simply, "was twofold: helping people identify what grows around them, and reminding them that recognition is the first step toward conservation."

Fieldwork

across Bangladesh offered Thomas far more than photographs. It exposed him to both the beauty and the vulnerability of the country's ecosystems.

During the height of the Rohingya crisis, he visited an area he had heard was lush with wildlife. Instead, Thomas arrived to find the forest gone; cleared entirely to make way for the refugee camps.

The shock of that moment stayed with him; the disappearance of something so large, so alive, revealed how quickly natural heritage can vanish.

There were lighter challenges, too.

"Wandering through unfamiliar villages while taking close-up photographs of plants often invited confusion," Thomas adds with a laugh, "People would stop, curious about my intentions, occasionally suspicious. However, once they understood my purpose, the interactions almost always unfolded with friendliness."

Some species are very difficult to distinguish, and Thomas humbly admits to the possibility of mistakes in his book. However, he also explains that conversations with locals sometimes offered insights that textbooks did not, reinforcing the importance of human knowledge in plant identification.

Jacob's years of travel across Bangladesh also shaped how he thinks about his own personality. Having lived between cultures, he experiences introversion and extroversion differently depending on where he is.



"In the West," he reflects, "people generally prefer more individual time. By comparison, I feel like an extrovert there because I want more time with people."

Bangladesh, however, operates on the opposite rhythm: social and constantly intersecting.

"Here, I feel more introverted," he says, "I need more time alone. And I love to have alone time out in nature whenever possible."

Although Bangladesh has rich documentation of its flora, most existing resources lean heavily on taxonomy, medicinal properties, and scientific classification. These are invaluable but not accessible to someone simply trying to identify a shrub on the roadside.

Jacob Thomas needed something practical — a tool that focused on what the eye sees first.

He was aware of the temptation to turn the guide into another academic

text, but he resisted.

"Identification, I believe, has to come before deeper study," he stresses. That meant clear photographs, clean layouts, and straightforward captions.

He spoke to people, cross-checked with experts, and approached the project not as a botanist, but as a communicator.

The result is a sweeping visual guide featuring nearly 4,000 vascular plants of Bangladesh, with photographs of over 1,500 species documented in recent years. It is comprehensive without being overwhelming, and scientific without being inaccessible.

At its heart, Thomas's project is about shaping a culture of appreciation. His message is simple: learn about the plants around you, enjoy them and pass that appreciation to the next generation.

"People will not conserve what they do not know," he says, "it is only through connecting with nature that we can expect our future generation to have a stronger voice for conservation of it."

By Nusrath Jahan
Photo: Courtesy

