

A bizarre mission to restore the Madhupur Sal forest



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The interim government set an ambitious goal to restore the Madhupur Sal forest in Tangail. Once a legendary habitat of tigers, elephants, peacocks, bears, golden langurs, hundreds of bird species, and rich biodiversity, the forest today bears little resemblance to its past. Vast stretches have been converted into commercial plantations of exotic acacia, pineapple, banana, and spices. Only fragments of the original Sal forest remain.

The principal cause of this ecological devastation—both in Madhupur and in other Sal forest patches in Tangail, Gazipur and Mymensingh—is the social forestry programme introduced in 1989, along with the rubber plantation initiated in 1986. Industrial establishments, roads, highways, and expanding settlements have further accelerated forest loss.

The most recent Sal forest restoration drive by the government was ceremonially launched on October 18 last year. Acacia saplings were felled at the social forestry plot of Md Aminul in the Dhorung Par Tilental area of the Dokhla Range. Some indigenous fruit and medicinal tree saplings were planted in their place. “When the trees mature, they will be auctioned in accordance with the social forestry rules. A valuation will be fixed, but the trees will not be cut. Only the valuation will be determined, and dividends will be distributed under the social forestry framework. The Forest Department will inform us what percentage will be allocated from carbon trading,” said Md Aminul, secretary of the Forest Co-Management Committee of the Dokhla Range, at that time.

When I visited Aminul’s 2.5-acre plot again on January 16 this year, it was densely covered with acacia and pineapple. Of the native saplings planted in October, only two

or three were visible, covered in dust. In an adjoining area, a vast tract of land was cleared of acacia at the end of its third rotation of plantation. Acacia logs were still being loaded onto a truck. One corner of the large plot was covered with mustard plants in yellow bloom, while pineapple saplings had just been planted in some sections. Elsewhere, acacia stumps had recently been uprooted, and the land was tilled with tractors—an activity prohibited on forest land.

If the Forest Department were genuinely committed to restoring natural forests, it could have easily stopped such practices. Instead, it allows the destruction to continue. Official statistics show that social forestry covers about 4,551 acres in the Madhupur Sal forest area, according to the 2025 Restoration Plan of the Madhupur Sal Forest (2025-26 to 2027-28) of the Forest Department. The department now acknowledges that plantations of exotic species have had profound, destructive impacts. In response, the environment ministry issued a gazette notification on May 15, 2025 banning the plantation, extraction, and sale of eucalyptus and acacia seedlings.

According to the ministry plans, about 3,401 acres of land under social forestry in Madhupur are to be restored as Sal forest. An additional 3,210 acres of illegally occupied land are to be planted with Sal and Sal-compatible species. Together with surviving forest patches, these efforts aim to expand Sal forest to nearly 20,000 acres by 2028, according to the restoration plan.

Yet, official rhetoric clashes with reality. In Jhatarbaid of South Jangalia under Beribaidd mouza, a Forest Department signboard reads that five hectares have been planted with native species. In fact, the area is scattered

across three locations several kilometres apart. In one such plot, the Forest Department abruptly cut down some 30 self-regenerating (*apanjala*) acacia trees and planted native saplings without consulting the landholders, some of whom were not participants in any social forestry programme.

Md Munaf Munna, who jointly owns 2.4 acres of the land, has lived there for decades. I visited his plot on December 16,

in Uttar Jangalia and Gubudia, forest officials planted native saplings inside banana and pineapple plantations without consultation, leaving landowners confused about how such actions could restore the natural forest.

Former Chief Conservator of Forests Md Yunus Ali has also said, unequivocally, that restoring the Sal forest in this manner is impossible. Pineapple cultivation, he explains, makes the soil highly acidic, preventing Sal

acacia, raising serious questions about fund misuse under the Tk 14-crore Madhupur Sal Forest Regeneration Project.

During recent visits, I found that most saplings planted in the name of restoring natural forest, particularly Sal, have died. Although project guidelines stipulate that 70 percent of plantings should be Sal, very few Sal saplings remain. By contrast, wherever social forestry continues, vast plantations of acacia, pineapple, banana, papaya, turmeric, and spices dominate the landscape.

In 2007, during the emergency rule, Sal saplings were planted across several hundred acres under the leadership of the then adviser CS Karim. During that phase, with the support of the joint forces, the Forest Department cut down banana plants on roughly 5,000 acres of forest land as part of an operation to reclaim encroached areas. However, they failed to recover the forest land.

It is still too soon to say if the restoration of the forest will fail again. However, what has been done so far in the name of restoring can only be described as bizarre. By destroying some acacia saplings, the Forest Department’s efforts to bring back the Sal forest amount to little more than putting up signboards and empty fanfare. Moreover, there appear to be no restrictions on cultivating pineapple, banana, papaya, and spices.

Restoring the Madhupur Sal forest is a commendable goal. But success will require genuine consultation with local communities, transparency, and trust. Powerful vested interests profit from forest land. Without confronting these interests, restoration will remain illusory. A possible way forward would be an independent legal body to develop a shared framework, review former donor-funded projects, and ensure accountability without becoming another bureaucratic burden.

Turning the Madhupur Sal forest back from its current state will be extraordinarily difficult. Only integrity, long-term commitment, and the meaningful participation of local communities can yield positive outcomes, even if limited. We hope that the current government, which emerged after a long struggle for democracy, will pay careful attention to the Madhupur Sal forest, the third-largest one in the country.



A vast pineapple plantation in the Tilental area, which was once home to a dense Sal forest.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

2025 and found piles of pineapple saplings. When I returned on January 16 this year, pineapple plants covered the entire area. His wife, Shirina Begum, said their family had farmed the land since before 1971, growing rice, ginger, pineapple, turmeric, wheat, and mustard. “When people cleared the forest and built homes, the Forest Department said nothing,” she said. “Now they plant trees without informing us.”

Another local, Md Ruhul Amin, fears losing land for which his father once paid tax. Although invasive acacia trees dominate the site, most are self-generated. Elsewhere

saplings from surviving. Restoration requires preparatory species, soil conditioning, and careful sequencing. “Madhupur is an extremely sensitive area,” he notes. “Its challenges are social and political. You cannot act without considering local interests.”

Further evidence of recklessness can be seen in roadside social forestry plots in the Gachhabari Beat, where two participants in social forestry were pressured to plant thousands of saplings during the peak of winter. Most saplings died within weeks. Meanwhile, participants have yet to receive their full share of proceeds from harvested

Club Epstein and crimes against humanity



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With a sex trafficking, flesh-peddling empire of favours, logistics and the good times to be had by the powerful, the gigantic scale of Jeffrey Epstein’s criminal network continues to disturb. The least savoury digital library on the planet, available through the offices of the US Department of Justice as the Epstein Library, is being combed through with its 3.5 million items comprising 180,000 images, 2,000 videos, emails and text correspondence, not to mention an assortment of miscellaneous material.

The combing process has displaced the sheer gravity of Epstein’s dehumanising enterprise. Like a gold mine of ill-repute, slime and crime, researchers, journalists, political hacks and the purely voyeuristic individuals are fossicking for material about the next public figure to be tainted. Agendas abound. The central agenda—ruined lives and the despoiled innocence of young women and girls, and their retraumatisation with shockingly redacted files—has been eclipsed.

On February 16, a panel of United Nations

experts appointed by the Human Rights Council issued a sharp statement on the Epstein files urging a return to a focus on the victims. The members include, among others, Reem Absalem, special rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, George Katrougalos, independent expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order, and Ana Brian Nougères, special rapporteur on the right to privacy.

The documents revealed, according to the statement, “disturbing and credible evidence of systematic and large-scale sexual abuse, trafficking and exploitation of women and girls.” The panel members took note of crimes “committed against the backdrop of supremacist beliefs, racism, corruption, extreme misogyny, and the commodification and dehumanisation of women and girls from different parts of the world.” A “global criminal enterprise” had “raised terrifying implications of the level of impunity for such crimes.”

The panel further proposed that the severe nature of the crimes required stern reclassification. “So grave is the scale, nature, systematic character, and transnational reach of these atrocities against women and girls, that a number of them may reasonably meet the legal threshold of crimes against humanity.” Acts such as sexual slavery, rape, enforced prostitution, trafficking, persecution, torture, or murder can fall within such a determination, and if so, would deserve prosecution in international and domestic courts.

Unfortunately, the Department of Justice shows little interest in pursuing any of those named in the files, let alone conducting genuinely impartial investigations. Deputy US Attorney General Todd Blanche, in dismissive remarks made early this month, observed that, “There’s a lot of correspondence. There’s a lot of emails. There’s a lot of photographs. But that doesn’t allow us necessarily to prosecute somebody.” Just because the victims wanted “to be made whole” did not “mean we can just create evidence or that we can just kind of come up with a case that isn’t there.”

The bountiful nature of the Epstein files would suggest no evidence of any sort needs to be created, with the late financier and convicted paedophile most prolific in communicating with various associates on meetings, rendezvous, and logistical matters. And there is that troubling failure to disclose the remaining three million files or so that remain sealed.

The panel experts relevantly insist that the allegations were so “egregious in nature” as to require “independent, thorough, and impartial investigation, as well as inquiries to determine how such crimes could have taken place for so long.” States were under an obligation to prevent, investigate and punish instances of violence against women and girls, including inflicted by private perpetrators.

Strong words were also reserved for the slipshod process of disclosure that left unredacted the identities and details of a multitude of victims while sparing the powerful, participating members of Club Epstein. “The grave errors in the release process underscore the urgent need for victim-centered standard operating procedures for disclosure and redaction, so that no victim suffers further harm.” That ship sailed well before, given the utter lack of interest shown by the DOJ in involving victims in the process. Six survivors in a September 2025 interview confirmed that fact.

In the view of the panel, failing “to safeguard [the victims’] privacy puts them at risk of retaliation and stigma. The reluctance to fully disclose information or broaden investigations, has left many survivors feeling retraumatised and subjected to what they describe as ‘institutional gaslighting.’”

To date, promised investigations, such as those into former UK Ambassador to the US Lord Peter Mandelson, focus less on the victims than commercially and politically sensitive information he allegedly disclosed

to Epstein when occupying public office. The standard formula used by those trapped in the web has been the fool’s defence, the implausible bliss of ignorance. There have been resignations aplenty, and cataracts of apology.

The UN panel had harsh words for such woeful responses, insisting on a few courses of action. Lift the statute of limitations preventing the prosecution for grave crimes linked to the Epstein enterprise. Provide full remedies and reparations for the victims. Government failures to “effectively investigate, and prosecute those responsible for these crimes, including by complicity or acquiescence, where jurisdiction exists, risks undermining legal frameworks aimed at preventing and responding to violence against women and girls.”

The Trump era of crude, vulgar might as the sole indicator of worth does not augur well for human rights advocates demanding investigations and prosecutions into the victims of Epstein’s predation. Even before President Donald Trump got the keys to the White House, there was impunity, complicity and permissiveness in the depravities of Club Epstein, a state of affairs tolerated, even encouraged by a ruling class bankrupt and soiled. If you were not in it, as the reprehensible socialite Lady Victoria Hervey scorned, you were a “loser.”

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CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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ACROSS

- 1 New cadet
- 6 Wine barrel
- 10 Gets up
- 11 Use the tub
- 12 Machu Picchu people
- 13 City-based
- 14 Ham or lamb
- 15 Gazelle's cousin
- 16 Young seal
- 17 Music category
- 18 Top rating
- 19 Explores caves
- 22 Appear
- 23 Greek vowel
- 26 Dentist's request
- 29 Bit of ointment
- 32 Ring wins, for short
- 33 Road goo
- 34 Source
- 36 One of a bear trio
- 37 Eggs buy
- 38 Harangues
- 39 Portents
- 40 Select group
- 41 Fill completely
- 42 Home design

DOWN

- 1 Grooms
- fastidiously
- 2 Rosters
- 3 Manhunt target
- 4 Trounce
- 5 Twisty turn
- 6 Complain
- 7 Ready to hit
- 8 Sedimentary rock
- 9 Thompson of "SNL"
- 11 Yokels
- 15 Charged bit
- 17 Fall decorations
- 20 Zodiac cat
- 21 Boar's mate
- 24 Doomed liner
- 25 Get comfortable with
- 27 Long, long time
- 28 Pencil end
- 29 Extinct birds
- 30 Bakery come-on
- 31 "Carmen" composer
- 35 Heredity unit
- 36 Blanched
- 38 Bright hue

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