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WEEKEND READ

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ONCE A FOREST now a landscape of loss

Illegal sand extraction deepens damage to depleted garjan forest

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About two and a half kilometres southeast of Dulahazara Bazar in Cox's Bazar's Chakaria upazila, along a winding rural road, lies Paglir Bil Road.

The land on both sides is still officially classified as forest, although some parts have already been occupied and settled.

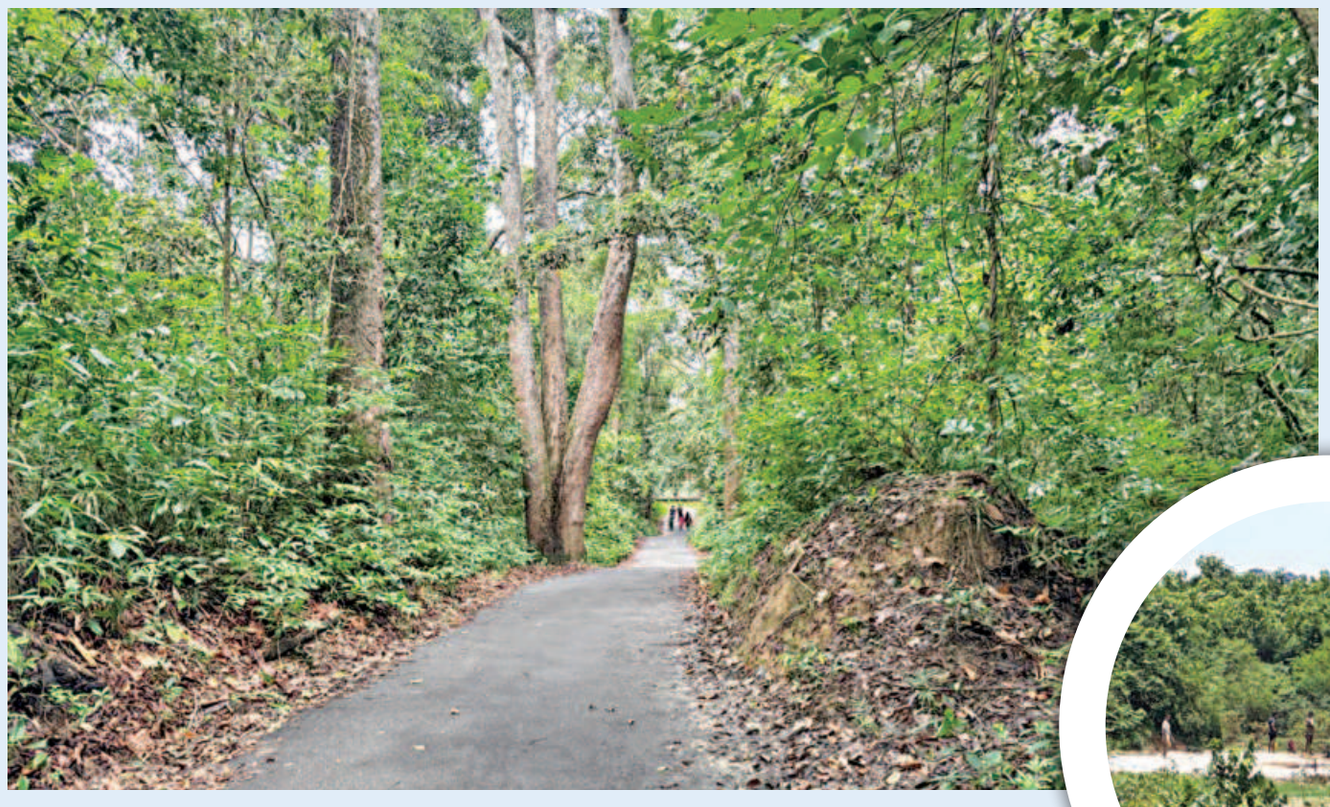
Large-scale encroachment has not yet taken place in the forest areas of Dulahazara and Khutakhali unions. But the forest itself is largely gone.

Where thousands of giant garjan trees once stood, there are now mostly wild shrubs and acacia trees, rarely more than five or six feet tall.

The Forest Department is now carrying out social forestry in the depleted forest. But locals said many of the trees planted under the programme were also cut down after August 5, 2024.

With the forest already destroyed, encroachment is gradually increasing, while sand extraction continues in the area.

Sand is mainly being extracted with machines from a water stream locally known as Pagli Chhara or Hargaja Chhara, which runs through the forest.



The once-dense garjan forests of Dulahazara and Khutakhali in Chakaria have largely disappeared, with only remnants remaining as encroachment and sand extraction continue to put pressure on the depleted forest. PHOTOS: STAR



Pagli Chhara, also known as Hargaja Chhara, runs through the forest, where sand is extracted with machines.



Locals collect firewood from the depleted forest.

Al Amin, a local, said around 30 to 40 truckloads of soil and sand are currently extracted from the area every day.

"After another month, the sand extraction season will begin. Then hundreds of truckloads of sand will be extracted every day and sent to Chattogram," he said.

Abdul Kader, an elderly local resident, recalled that people once feared entering the forest. Giant garjan trees were its defining feature. Today, he said, they exist only in memory.

According to him, a local group began cutting down large garjan trees and destroying the forest after 2005. The government later introduced social forestry in the area after 2012. But the trees planted under the programme were also cut down later.

"Now there are no trees more than five or six feet tall on either side of the road from Paglir Bil Road to Hargaja," he said.

Abdul Kader said he also has about two acres under the social forestry programme. But he no longer plants new trees because whenever they grow to a certain size, they are cut down.

He said sand extraction from the area began around 20 years ago and has continued ever since, warning that continued underground sand extraction could cause an environmental disaster in the future.

SAND EXTRACTION CONTINUES OPENLY

During a field visit, this correspondent saw sand being extracted openly from different points of Pagli Chhara.

Locals alleged that sand extraction has continued for years, yet no effective action has been taken against those involved.

There are also conflicting statements among government agencies over which department is responsible for the area.

Kamrul Hasan, assistant conservator of forests of Cox's Bazar North Forest Division's Fasiakhali Range, said the area from which sand is being extracted does not fall under their jurisdiction. According to him, it is under Lama Forest Division.

Asked about sand and timber being smuggled from the deep forests of Bandarban and transported through areas under his jurisdiction, he said there is a Forest Department check post in the area.

Mostafizur Rahman, divisional forest officer of Lama Forest Division, said the area in Hargaja where sand is being extracted falls under his jurisdiction. However, he said, there is no reserved forest there.

"Since there is no reserved forest, the Forest Department has no scope to take legal action even if sand is extracted there," he said.

Mohammad Moin Uddin, UNO of Lama, said he was aware of the sand extraction from the area.

However, he said the area is far from the upazila headquarters, and by the time officials reach the site to conduct a raid, the sand extractors receive warnings and leave the area.

"If sand is extracted from such an area, the Department of Environment has to file a prosecution. Based on that, the district administration takes action and conducts mobile courts. But as the DoE has not taken such steps, our scope for action has become limited," he said.

Noor Hossain Sajib, assistant director of the DoE in Bandarban, said the department had no scope to act under the new soil and sand management law in this case.

"We do not even have the authority to file a prosecution. We can take action in cases of hill cutting. In the case of sand extraction, the district or upazila administration has the jurisdiction," he said.



The forest area has been reduced to mostly shrubs and small trees, with sand extraction continuing nearby.

As for those involved in the sand extraction, several names emerged during conversations with locals.



A dirt road winds through the forest area around Paglir Bil Road in Dulahazara and Khutakhali.

They alleged that a section of local leaders, affiliated with whichever party is in power in the area, becomes involved in sand extraction.

Among those whose names emerged are Jamal, Bhutto, Abul Hossain and some others. Local sources claimed that they are involved in BNP politics. Jamal is also reportedly an accused in a case filed by the Forest Department.

Jamal, however, denied involvement in sand extraction, saying he only purchases sand and supplies it to Chattogram.

DESTRUCTION OF GARJAN FOREST

Regarding the destruction of the forest in the Paglir Bil area, locals mentioned the name of Yunus, alias Inu Dakait, alleging that he had considerable influence over the forest area for years and was involved in cutting and selling trees.

Police said Inu was killed in a gunfight between two groups of robbers in mid-July 2016. His family, however, claimed that members of law enforcement agencies had picked him up in a microbus and later presented his bullet-riddled body as the result of a reported gunfight.



Locals said they did not believe Inu had been involved in murder. However, they alleged that he played a major role in cutting down trees and selling timber from the forest.

Shahriar Amin, forest officer of Dulahazara Beat, said the forests on both sides of the road had been destroyed long ago.

"There are no large trees left on either side of Paglir Bil Road," he said.

"A plantation created under the social forestry programme had also been cut down recently. The area now needs to be reforested."

He also said the garjan forest could be restored if planned afforestation is carried out and strict security measures are ensured.

He said the region contains a large forest area, adding that the forest on both sides of Paglir Bil Road could cover approximately 3,000 to 4,000 acres.

He also said sand had recently been extracted from his beat's forest area. The extraction was stopped after the Forest Department filed a case and took legal action, he said.

During a field visit, this correspondent found signs of prolonged soil and sand extraction at various points along the stream, or hill watercourse, running through the forest.

Sand extractors are now moving deeper into the stream to extract sand, locals said.

Locals alleged that after destroying the forest, people are now exploiting the river, streams and underground sand resources as well.

They warned that unless effective measures are taken both to protect the forest and stop sand extraction, the area could face long-term environmental damage.



Sand extraction has severely altered the landscape around Pagli Chhara in Dulahazara, Cox's Bazar, leaving parts of the forest area barren and degraded.