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Deteriorating forestry and the tale of Adivasis in Bangladesh: whom to blame?

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Abstract

Considering Adivasi nexus to the forestry, this qualitative analyses bring multiple actors in account such as—government organs, ethnic Adivasis themselves and factors like—commercialization of forest resources, climatic degradation, and development projects etc in a quest to find out the real culprits behind the deterioration of ethnic-dwelling forestry in Bangladesh. This paper reviews how multiple actors and issues accelerate the deterioration process and increase suspicions and frustrations among ethnic groups living mostly in CHT—Chittagong Hill Tracts area. The paper finally stresses upon specific set of recommendations in forest management through number of strategies (inspiration, training, and monitoring programs etc) for preserving biodiversity and flourishing cultural diversity as well.

INTRODUCTION

Climatic degradation accelerates deforestation process across the world. Undoubtedly it consequences interlinked ecology affecting related elements of the environment. In Bangladesh, deforestation particularly constitutes substantial threats to the survival and cultural integrity of Adivasis or forest peoples living in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Saal and Tropical Mangrove forests etc.

Bangladesh Adivasi forum counts as much as 45 ethnic groups (approx. 2.5 million in number) and majority of the number directly and indirectly involve forests, which exists since tertiary era [1]. Compared to 300 million of affected global indigenous peoples, around one million of Adivasis mainly dwells in both plain and hill forests of Bangladesh [Fig. 1], [2]. Besides, Forestry involves generally three types of people—(A) people living inside forestry, (B) people living near forestry and finally (C) people having commercial connection to forest resources [3].

Forestry supplies oxygen, controls intensity of natural calamities, and thus also involves the rest 98 percent of the overwhelming majority of Bengali people meeting range of other necessities. While considering issues such as—habitat, medicine, food, fuel, wood, pulp, pole and, timber, then we saw that Adivasis just rely on forestry simply to survive.

Therefore, forestry and Adivasis issues require concerned authority to initiate collaborative management policies with a view to augmenting forest conservation and forest peoples.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper is largely categorized as review paper in a sense that it succinctly reviews recent development of the scenario of forest peoples, compared to past events and evidences. It incorporates primary literature to produce a relevant arguments on the stance.

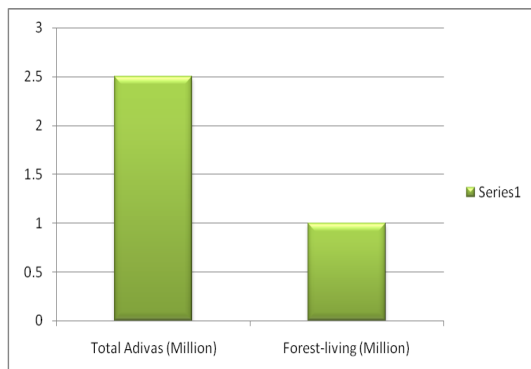


Fig. 1. Author-made comparison between world and Bangladeshi ethnic groups living in forests.
(Source Ref. 2: SEHD. 1993. *Indigenous Peoples of Bangladesh*)

However, the paper also involves both qualitative and quantitative analyses, especially in the introductory part to strengthen the reliability of the proposition. On the other hand, throughout the paper, qualitative analyses involve literature

texts, data observation sourced from documents—like press reports, newspaper articles, related government websites and academic discourses. Number of inferences and findings are used here as emerged out of observed data, even making table, figures and rest of the parts.

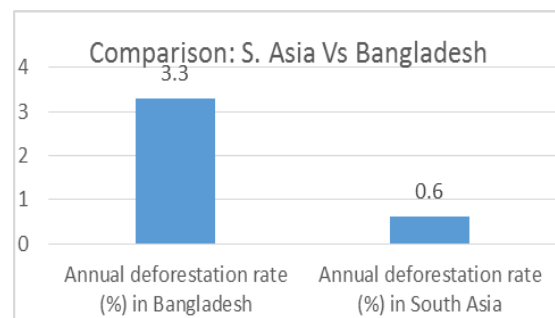


Fig. 2. Author-made comparison between Bangladesh & South Asia on deforestation rate
(Source Ref. 9: P Gain. [2007]. *Forest and Forest People of Bangladesh*.)

Table 1: Author—made forest statistics in Bangladesh
(Source Ref. 8: SEHD. 1998. *Bangladesh: Land, Forest and Forest*)

Total Forestland	Surface coverage	FMP* (Surface coverage)	Per capita forestland
24, 60, 000 h	16.85%	6%	0.022 h

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Interrelation of Adivasi and Forestry

Human being and forestry are closely interrelated, or humans survive upon the trees as biological architecture. This relationship shows a pattern of congenital intimacy, reciprocity and spirituality, even in a more intensified way when the relationship is judged in terms of ethnic groups. Birth to death and dawn to dusk, everyday lives and culture of Adivasis are accomplished round the forestlands. Their food cycle, medicine and residence-building materials, even whatever they require, are either found or collected from the forest resources. On the other hand, they do not control the forests rather they just abide by the principles of forest-goddess being her sons in the sense of spirituality and materiality. Here is the difference when urban people sometimes fail to observe or even maintain the unalienable human bondage with the nature, particularly to the forestry [4]. They come, see, measure and cut down trees for timbers, extract mines, minerals, and other resources and thus, pursue profit. They subconsciously contribute to the destruction process of 'indigenous' forestry and biodiversity [5]. However, not a single indigenous person does not (actually, they cannot) think the value proportions of forest resources. They do not utilize forestry as resource rather they think it as the 'reasons' as they are alive and perform their spiritual objectivities. Inherited knowledge, ripped through generations to Adivasi communities contributes to its preservation and helps maintain hills and forests, when vested quarters are absorbed in thinking only its consuming aspects as they categorize ethnic forestry as

'degraded, denuded and less productive' avoiding immense social, cultural, traditional, educational, medical and environmental values [6,7].

B. Totality of forestry

1993's Forestry Master Plan unveils uncoordinated outputs of some institution like Forest Department, Land Ministry and Individual's management of forestland in Bangladesh. Table 1 counts that governmental bodies and individual initiatives supervise approx. 24, 60, 000 hectares land that cover about 16.85% of the surface lands but the Forestry Master Plan disagrees it saying that the actual amount of forest would be up to 6 percent. Besides, per capita allotment of forestland counts as much as 0.022 hectares being one of the lowest in the world [8]. The annual deforestation rate in Bangladesh causes huge tensions to the environmentalists for its fastest diminishing rate (3.3%) compared to what [Fig. 2] shows about 0.6% in the South Asian forests [9].

C. Threats to ethnic-dwelling forestry

Wildlife and bio-diversity started disappearing at an alarming rate. Many species have already embraced extinction. Most importantly, the life, culture, traditions of Adivasis, related to the forestland, landscape, herbs, rivers and hills seriously suffer the treats of disappearance. Therefore, intensifying deforestation affects or displaces forest-dwelling indigenous communities in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) areas and elsewhere in other parts [10].

a) Development Policies

Development is the basement for every nation. But the NGO-oriented strategies without proper rehabilitation and compensation program along with government initiatives full of corruption and unaccountability bring about development aggression and thus, disparities widen and frustration spreads out generating degrees of conflicts (both structural and manifest) among Adivasis. Calculated and unwise settlement of people who have not achieved required orientation in forest cultures and traditions may intensify the suspicions and instabilities among Adivasis [11]. For instance, Kaptai-hydropower case (what displaced number of Adivasis residences and properties) should be brought into lessons about development initiation.

b) Commercial monoculture

Orientation of commercial monoculture of foreign items such as—eucalyptus, rubber etc. replaces local and indigenous trees. These foreign trees may make more profit at lower expenses within shortest possible time but ultimately, they spoil the quality of soils, adjacent environmental balance and also living patterns of local communities in the forestland. Through the loopholes of laws and practices, Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) and International Financial Institutions (IFIs) funded (such as Asian Development Bank, World bank etc.) to the monoculture of commercial plantations which have started replacing local plant species violating the Convention on Biological Diversity which Bangladesh also signed on June 5, 1992 at Rio de Janeiro and so, it requires Bangladesh to respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous (ethnic groups) and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles' [12-14]. As results, these commercial plantations intensify the miseries of forest-dwelling ethnic peoples [15].

c) Jum cultivation and economic status of Adivasi

Who is responsible? Only government? Or the development organizations? Here it spirals up a polarized debate on the alleged harmful Adivasi role posing threats to both forestry and Adivasi identities. Jum cultivation (tribal way of cultivation on the hill tracts) causes a level of deforestation and is responsible for eroding soil tops. Thus, this typical cultivation evacuates trees as Adivasis either cut or burn them making a plain cultivable land.

Since British colonial era, tribes were allowed to cultivate Jum on the hill tracts until natural forest was transferred to the forest department banning Jum cultivation.

In 2009, Jum cultivation included around 25,000 acres forestland as new areas in eight sub-districts of Khagrachari. 'They have already burned 2,069 acres Reserve Forest to the ashes at Baillachari area of Matiranga sub-district. At least 70 varieties of medicine plants is already enlisted to the lost category', said Muhammad Abu Daud, member of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (BELA) [16].

Environmentalists and local administration admitted that this inclusion of Jum cultivation will lose huge amount of forest revenue for the government and most severely, it posed survival challenges to about 120 types of wildlife losing their safe habitats.

Constant tilling on hilly slopes keeps the flow of soil erosion. No-flood-condition enables them continue this digging-and-earning process throughout the year as what they termed as their 'traditional rights'. Consequently a number of hill residents fall victim to slopes downing casualties in rainy season. Jum cultivation reduces many rare and valuable timber trees worthy of commercial profits and medical values.

It is also reality that Indigenous peoples are a bit forced either by their impoverished status having no alternative left to earn sufficient for maintaining minimal livelihoods and using these weakness, illegal business quarters use them in resource trade.

Marking Jum as major economic activity, Chakma Circle Chief Raja Devasish Roy evaluated, 'the time when cultivated Jume, forests existed and the time restrictions and ban imposed upon it, then forest is gone'. He also argued that the pattern of Jume cultivation has changed and they have started plating the saplings of local trees on Jume fields where Jume crops and indigenous trees can grow together [16].

Therefore, marginal Adivasis are last-resorted to cultivate Jume crops as they achieve no governmental and NGO incentives or financial assistance. Environmental experts suggest Jume farmers to replace with horticulture and other eco-agriculture.

d) Security forces

Security force deployment is one of the reasons of growing deforestation. Military forces clean-up forest trees for number of development projects such as—camp building, road connection, and other associated constructions because they prefer bare hills for lowest security threats to accelerate smooth movement and transportations. For instance, military destroyed local Mro people's orchards, residences, and shops to build Nilgiri Resort, Bandarban [17]. Moreover, they grant land leases and allow rubber cultivation even involve into timber trade [18]. International Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission (ICHTC) criticized law enforcers, i.e. BGB—Border Guard Bangladesh for the land grabbing in CHT areas [19].

e) Adivasi involvement in resource trade

When alleging Adivasi linkage to deforestation and other resource depletion, there comes a question regarding their role as custodians or as greedy-consumers (or even profit-makers) in the forestlands. It is very significant as Indigenous peoples dwell in certain forestlands for centuries. As stated earlier, they collect burning fuels, constructions materials for residence. Therefore, they are supposed to be quite conscious preserving the forestry as essential for their livelihoods. However, the dilemma is immoral businesspersons who engage local Adivasis to guide them accomplish indiscriminate timber trade and thus, tribes are alleged of making raw money instead of resource collection diminishing their spiritual liaison to the forestry [20].

f) Land disputes

Adivasis still have not significant land entitlement documents what they have is the documented property of

Forest Department [21].

More than 16 years later of the CHT Peace Accord, Pahari peoples' inaccessibility to their traditional homelands not only exclude traditional guides rather fuel ethnic tensions between Adivasi villagers and Bengali settlers as well. Most importantly it hampers ethnic engagement in forest management. Mob violence triggered by land disputes, internally displaced around 90,000 Pahari families. Having no formal documents in land ownership make them vulnerable standing against private dispossessions of the land. Undoubtedly Adivasis have the rights to their traditional forestlands under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the International Labor organization Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples No. 107. Pahari Villagers, Bengali settlers, political leaders, government and military officials identify the land issues as a central impediments towards resolution of many associated problems [22].

These are debating setbacks to Adivasi and forestry issues in Bangladesh.

RESULTS

As concerned about the deteriorating forestry and risk to Adivasi phenomena, the major findings of the review paper included very specific facts such as —Improper development policies, commercialization of the ethnic resources, unmanageable environmental degradation, and finally Adivasi peoples themselves (i.e. resource trade, Jum cultivation) cause major deforestation hampering ethnic lives in forestlands.

CONCLUSION

As a global phenomenon, deforestation appears as vilest rhinoceros in the country's environmental and social lives, especially for ethnic groups who still mostly depend upon Forestry. In a response, well-articulated forest policies are required to adopt safe-guiding ethnic rights of forestry. Related authority and institutions are necessarily required to take Adivasis' opinions on forestry and resources.

While settling them into 'suggested lands', it requires ensuring appropriate places to maintain their traditional lives. Finally addressing growing population pressure, government may orient settlement on mutual concessions and the non-Adivasi settlers must have required knowledge on forestry, as to avoid collateral damage.

Thus, both biodiversity and cultural diversity can be sustained and further flourished.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As part of solutions, first, it should strengthen institutional coordination and management (through forest and Adivasi related ministries and institutions). Secondly, government needs to increase people's Participation (preferably Adivasi) in Forest Management in the ethnic areas. While concerning commercial plantation, then, government and related body may pay due attention to the preservation of biodiversity issues and thereby associated ethnic rights. Fourthly, Inspiration and incentives programs are needed to accelerate social forestry and individual or community engagement in forest programs. Authority should initiate effective resource utilization which equally suits Adivasi interests too [23]. In this way, Adivasis would be able to entitle a tenural ownership on the planted trees and hence they would develop responsibilities to rather protect these resources. Moreover, expansion of agro-forestry instead of commercial fuel-wood plantation tends to reduce the ethnic tensions and deprivations and thus preserve the flora and fauna in each forestland. Government or concerned bodies should form its policy based on prior-informed consent or concessions of ethnic communities. The ethnic groups must ensure rational usage of forest resources. Concerning private bodies, they should develop exact rehabilitation and compensation programs for resettled Adivasis under development skins.

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