



Stolen Forests বিপন্ন বন

Drik Gallery

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Stolen Forests

The forest landscapes of Bangladesh have dramatically changed. Outside the Sundarbans, the single largest mangrove patch on earth, the public forests have been devastated. The hills in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) are bare today. The traditional *sal* forest has become history in most parts. The monoculture plantations of exotic and invasive species in place of hundreds of species of the native forests are not forests at all.

The photography exhibition "Stolen Forests" by Philip Gain and Ronald Halder is about this perilous condition of our forests and what Bangladesh has lost from its unique forest patches.

Both photographers have been through the forests in hills, coast and plains at different times for about two decades. This exhibition reflects their predilection for images of forests; and to them forests are not just trees and the wildlife they support but also the communities that live in the forests, their knowledge, education, history, traditions, technology, culture and lots more.

Both photographers made their first trip to Modhupur *sal* forest almost at the same time. There was no bear or tiger left in Modhupur when they stepped into this unique forest in the early 1980s. Still it was a fascinating experience for both of them. While Ronald Halder was out to look for birds and other wildlife that were still found in good numbers, Philip Gain roamed around with friends, sticks in hands. Flocks of monkeys, long-tailed hanumans (*langur*) that still survived with the towering *sal* thrilled them.

What attracted the young mind of Philip Gain most was the matrilineal Garos or Mandis of the forest villages. He found them to be a very special people compared to the majority community of Bangladesh. The Mandis of Modhupur are truly forest people.





above left: Hanuman [Langur]. Still seen in the Modhupur *sal* forest, this threatened mammal is numbered in Bangladesh. The prime factor behind the drastically reduced numbers of this long-tailed primate is habitat loss.

above right: Flower of turnip Arum photographed in Remkri in Thanchi in Bandarban Hill District. Arum is an edible tuber found in good quantity throughout the hill forests. It's an important source of carbohydrate for the indigenous peoples in the CHT.

left: Modhupur National Park seen from a tower at Dokhola.

The hospitality that he was offered by the Mandis was unforgettable. Ronald Halder was thrilled by the magnificent and towering *sal* forests and the wildlife it supported.

Both Gain and Halder went back to Modhupur time and again ever since. Their frequent visits to the Modhupur forest, and happy moments with the Mandis and Nature eventually led them to other forests and to know so many wonderful people from diverse forest communities and wonderful Nature with fascinating wildlife. The photographers' journey throughout the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) has been saddening in many instances. However, they have not missed the riches in Nature and the ethnic communities in this once mega-diversity region. Like in Modhupur what they enjoyed most in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is time with the forest communities such as Mru, Khyang, Chakma, Tripura, Marma, Chak, and Bawm. Meals served in their bamboo houses in the truly forest villages in the mountains have always come as a surprise to them.



left above: Banana cultivation in the Modhupur sal forest. Adjacent to Sainamari village, this place had sal cover even some years back. The banana has erased for ever the tradition of sal forests here.

left center: Acacia plantation in Gazipur, the graveyard of the native forest that was.

left bottom: A massive ant-hill located in the sal forest in Dinajpur. Created by white-ants, earthen mounds of this size are rarely found in the disappearing forest.

right: Web of branches, creepers and greenery in the canopy of a native forest that is absent in the so-called 'planted forest'.

Their journey through the Khasi villages in the Northeast of Bangladesh has always been refreshing. Although most of the forests in the Northeastern region have vanished, a traditional Khasi village, surrounded by betel leaf cultivation, demonstrates a culture deeply entangled with the forest. Their work on Lawachhara National Park, Satchhari National Park and Rema-Kalenga Wildlife Reserve show how this Northeastern part of Bangladesh once had unique forest patches.

As the photographers and Nature lovers have frequented Modhupur and other forests and spent wonderful times with diverse forest people of different times and ages, they realize why and how peoples, indigenous to the forests, are part of them. That the Khasis in Sylhet, Mandis in Modhupur, and jumias in the CHT are really intertwined with the native forests is manifested in their cultures and life styles.

It is a matter of great regret that the forest and its children are placed in horrible circumstances today. The photographers have witnessed how the Modhupur *sal* forest has been stripped of its traditions. The decay of forests is not unique in Bangladesh. But the introduction of plantations—monoculture of teak, rubber, eucalyptus and acacia—has horrendous consequences on these native forests. In Modhupur, invasive species have made their way into the forestland under the guise of 'social forestry' that is plantation in essence. Here 'social forestry' that was initiated in 1989-'90 was preceded by rubber monoculture that destroyed a significant part of the *sal* forest. The so-called 'social forestry' funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has caused immense ruin to the *sal* forest, not only in Modhupur, but also in other *sal* forest patches up to the northern tip of Bangladesh as well.

The promotion of plantation economy is indeed at the core of the destruction of the unique forests in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Chittagong, and the Cox's Bazar belt. It was in this region that the first plantation of exotic or invasive species took place in 1872. However, except for the Sundarbans, monoculture plantations have rapidly expanded in recent times in all forest regions of Bangladesh. This has happened in the setting of rapid expansion of 'simple plantation forestry' around the globe. This is a serious concern because plantation forestry has been the foremost factor for the destruction of native forests. We have very disturbing statistics here—the country's official 18 per cent public forestland has shrunk to approximately six per cent that includes the mangrove forests and the plantation of more than 400,000 ha, raised since 1872.





above left: Hill woman smokes her bamboo pipe majestically in a public place.

above right: A towering tree in the Sangu Reserve Forest in Bandaran Hill District. Such massive trees are numbered in the CHT.

right: Vanishing *sal* forest in Modhupur Garh. This sparse column of remaining *sal* trees photographed some years back has disappeared now (2005).

below: An eye-catching dragon fly photographed in one of the numerous streams that feed the River Sangu.



The photographers are convinced out of their experience that the plantations are not forests at all. In Bangladesh monoculture plantations of teak, rubber, eucalyptus, acacia, pine and other exotics that we see on the public forestland are mainly 'simple plantation forestry' that requires clear felling of native vegetation at the time of its establishment. Clear felling at harvest time is also a basic feature of simple plantation. This leads to catastrophic effects on the environment in public forests as we see in the case of Bangladesh. With the loss of the forests the forest-dwelling communities lose their commons.

In many countries including Bangladesh 'degraded' 'denuded' and 'less productive' forestlands are targeted for plantations. However, what is often branded as 'less productive' or 'degraded' is actually native forest that has immense social, cultural, traditional, educational, medicinal and environmental value. In Bangladesh while the plantation projects are implemented by the government, they are financed mostly by the international financial institutions (IFIs)—the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank. The promotion of plantation economy, officially-sanctioned logging, reservation, settlement of Bengalis in the CHT, etc. are some of the major factors that underlie the destruction of the forests and the misery of the forest-dwelling ethnic communities.

While Ronald Halder contributes his photos of unique forest landscapes and the lifeforms they support, Philip Gain shares his photos primarily on how the forests of Bangladesh have been robbed of their native species and traditions.

What is common to both photographers is that they have made images out of their passion and attraction to the beauty and suffering of Nature and people. They have learned how wrongfully the ill-fated forest-dwelling communities and their practices are frequently blamed for the ruin of the forests. In this exhibition they contribute images of the beauty of our forests together with beautiful faces that we see in the forests and those of the underlying factors for destruction that are veiled by the authorities.

The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) has given Philip Gain an outstanding opportunity to study the fate of our forests and the ethnic communities who are an integral part thereof. Ronald Halder, a passionate ornithologist and a documentary film maker, remains close to Nature out of his love for it. His individual efforts to save the forests and the life they support including the human communities have inspired a great number of people and groups in this country and abroad to come forward to learn about and protect forest and its culture.





Organized by

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