

Reclaiming lost forest resources

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As seen during disasters, a section of people always bide time to swing into their evil activity of manipulating the woes of man. These unscrupulous people are found during almost all kinds of human ordeals. Those range from famines to natural and other disasters like earthquakes, and cyclones. The incorrigibly greedy people, lacking the minimum level of conscience, hoard foodstuff and disrupt supply chains leading to protracted mass starvation and avoidable deaths. They get themselves engaged in acts like robbing storm or earthquake-battered people of their belongings when they are in need of succour.

A similar spectacle is being re-enacted in the present Bangladesh overwhelmed by a four-month-long pandemic. Thanks to the scourge's rising ferocity and mismanagement in tackling the situation, people continue to be attacked by the pandemic leading to the deaths of hundreds. With the authorities at different levels busy with battling the virus' spread, the crooks have started getting down to business. The general people are either engaged in cushioning the impacts of the epidemic's onslaught, or are busy desperately fighting for their lives. For the wicked elements, it is high time they began their plundering. Some major areas of their activities include land grabbing, river encroachment, hill levelling and, of course, tree felling. These veritable atrocities unleashed on nature coupled with naked grabbing have begun emerging as normal. People appear to have become inured to the crimes committed by the local influential people.

The criminals have been on the lookout for these opportunities. Take the case of tree felling. Although continuing unabated for long, this pervasive national malady has lately reached an alarming level. That this atrocious misdeed will appear in stark contrast with a national tree saving campaign is implied.

The prime minister has long realised the critical role trees play in all the aspects of people's life. As she inaugurated the National Tree Plantation Campaign 2020 last week, the PM repeatedly underscored the benefits the general people are set to get from this proven friend of man. In conformity with her observations, she inaugurated a special programme on July 16. As part of the programme, the government has undertaken a campaign of distribution and plantation of 10 million saplings across the country. The prime minister at that programme has once again emphasised

her government's plan to achieve the required 25 per cent forest coverage of the country. Her love for trees and her awareness of their role in the protection of environment points to a pertinent fact: Like many other noted personalities around the globe, she is unflinchingly committed to the preservation of the plant life.

Only 50-60 years ago, the present Bangladesh was considered among the tree-friendly countries. Apart from the large forests like the Sundarbans and the jungles of Modhupur and Bhawal, the country was dotted with dense local forests. Moreover, the Chattogram Hill Tracts and the greater Sylhet and Mymensingh regions continued to be rich with lush green forests till the 1970s. Thanks to the emergence of powerful loggers' syndicates, trees began vanishing fast in areas outside cities and towns. In this process, the role of a section of would-be industrialists and entrepreneurs can in no way be downplayed. They do not grab lands. Instead, in cases, they just respond to offers from successive governments to purchase industrial and housing plots in the large cities. In nearly two decades, massive tracts of forestland disappeared from the country. Repeated ventures of social forestry, many undertaken by individuals, failed to heal the damages done to the country's forest resources.

As observed by experts, Bangladesh once took pride in its thick coastal and mainland forests. In terms of coverage, the trees and different other plant species comprised an area more than 25 per cent of the country's total landmass. Those days are now lodged in the nostalgic segment of the elderly people's memory. Trees used to attract man since time immemorial. Perhaps out of this feeling of attachment, man used to grow forests close to settlements. Few societies could be imagined in the past without trees and plants nearby. Apart from giving shade, flowers and fruits, trees still provide man with cures for hundreds of ailments. Around 70 per cent of medicines, belonging to herbal, allopathic and homeopathic areas, come from bark, leaves, flowers and roots of certain trees. The early days of the modern civilisations witnessed a face-off of sorts between man and forests. As the world population continued to increase, humans felt the need for felling more and more trees and build settlements.

Due to their being mute, trees continued to surrender to the axes. As a proof of the insatiability of humans, the modern man felt that more forests were required to be cleared. The mindless felling of trees was prompted by this evil trend. Normally, timber and useful pieces wood and log come from forest interiors. But their nonstop use for centuries in a row without reforestation has long created a crisis leading to environmental degradation and biodiversity loss. Green activists are also becoming vocal. Hugging hundred years old trees by tree lovers in the face of their threatened felling is now a common spectacle. Compared to the powerful logging syndicates' onslaught on the Amazon and the other rainforests, Bangladesh is relatively free of these hazards. The problem lies elsewhere. This country has yet to meet the preliminary requirement of loving trees, and developing the ineffable bond with them.

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