

The Daily Star

Published: Monday, May 13, 2013

Jhum continues to denude hills of flora and fauna

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Jhum (slash and burn) cultivation wreaks havoc on vegetation and biodiversity of the forest, including rare species of flora and fauna, in Chittagong Hill Tracts region. This photo was taken from Panchmile area under Khagrachhari Sadar upazila recently. Photo: Star

As in other years, the month of April sees large-scale burning of trees and shrubs on slopes of hills in Khagrachhari, Rangamati and Bandarban districts of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region, as many locals prepare for traditional jhum (slash-and-burn) cultivation.

Such farming in the CHT region requires clearing of the forest areas to sow seeds of different agriculture items after the first considerable rainfall during April-May.

The practice wreaks havoc to vegetation and biodiversity of the forest, including rare species of flora and fauna, in the vast hill region.

Decrease of trees in the forest areas leads to massive soil erosion, gradually filling up the local water bodies.

Jhum farmers remain vulnerable to accidents when they set fire to forest. Six farmers were roasted alive while burning the forest to clear up land for the cultivation in Bandarban district last year.

However, the government's initiative to minimise jhum cultivation to save environment and ecology in the CHT has seen a very little success as the traditional cultivation, which is a part of local culture, also serves as the primary source of livelihood for a large number of indigenous people in the region.

They usually grow different crops and vegetables including rice, chilli, cowpea, cucumber,

pumpkin, maize, yams, and sweet potatoes in the cleared up forest lands.

According to the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) in Rangamati, at least 50 thousand people of CHT are involved in jhum cultivation and 14,619 hectares of land in hill areas, including 8,447 hectares in Bandarban, 4,760 hectares in Rangamati and 1,785 in Khagrachhari district, are being used for the purpose.

Harinath Tripura, a jhum farmer of Bhoirafa area under Dighinala upazila of Khagrachhari district, recently burnt down trees on about five acres of land on a hill in the area.

“It is our family tradition and only source of livelihood. Around 45-50 farmers from my village are also doing the same,” said Harinath, who seemed totally unaware, when asked about the bad impact of jhum cultivation on environment.

“It’s really difficult for me to leave jhum farming that helps me to earn money from several crops every year. Cultivation of fruits or timber trees needs a lot of investment. Besides, who will support me during the long period needed to reap the benefit?” said Surendra Chakma of Janglitila area under Khagrachhari Sadar upazila.

Contacted, Dr Mohabbat Ullah, chief scientific officer of Khagrachhari office of Bangladesh Agriculture Research Institute, said they are trying to popularise cultivation of high yielding hybrid varieties of fruits, crops, vegetables, and timber producing trees in the hill districts to minimise jhum cultivation there.

Uday Sankar Mandal, additional director of the Department of Agriculture Extension in Rangamati, said their awareness campaigns aimed at motivating the jhum farmers to switch over to other profitable cultivation methods sees very slow response.

The educated, wise and modern leaders of the local communities should come forward to make their people aware about the harmful effects of jhum cultivation, said Abdul Awal Sarker, divisional forest officer (Jhum Control), Rangamati.

The government authorities including the forest, environment and agriculture departments should take strong and coordinated initiative to create awareness among the people concerned to prevent deforestation and environmental degradation in CHT region, said Abu Daud, network member of Bangladesh Environment Lawyers Association.

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