“The government should formulate national policy reconciling local and other interest groups to sustain the remaining forests. However, without good governance those policies may not work unless laws are enacted to safeguard the forest and its people,” said Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud at a roundtable discussion titled, “Modhupur Sal Forest: Its Demise, Demographic Changes and Customary Land Rights” organized jointly by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) and Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC). The roundtable discussion was held on 29 July 2019 at Ban Bhaban in Agargaon.

Prof. Mahmud, chief guest of the discussion also said, “The country’s interest depends on the preservation of the forest resources even though the land and forest resources in our country are scarce. However, forest resources are decreasing in the country, particularly in Modhupur. Now, we are in a situation where blaming each other is fruitless. The government, with comprehensive plan, can save what remains of the forest and solve complex land issues in Modhupur.”

On his reflection on the land issue, Prof. Mahmud said, “Because the land is a valuable asset, we must ensure legitimate interest of original inhabitants of Modhupur through discussion.”
In his keynote presentation, Philip Gain, Director of SEHD and team leader, shared the key findings of a household survey in 44 forest villages in Modhupur sal forest area. “The key objectives of the survey were to expose factors that underlie the dramatic changes in the Modhupur forest and forest villages and generate baseline data on the demographic changes and socio-economic conditions of forest people,” said Gain. “The Garo and Koch, once exclusive occupants of Modhupur sal forest are nowadays far outnumbered by the Bangalees. Among the 11,048 households surveyed in five unions (Kuragachha, Fulbagchala, Beribaid, Sholakuri and Aronkhola), 64.61% are Bangalees and 35.39% are Garos.”

“Land possession and ownership is one of the most critical issues in Modhupur forest villages. Only 13% Bangalee and 4.19% Garo households have title deeds (CS or RoR) for their homestead land in the forest villages. This means majority of households have homesteads on customary land. Besides, smaller percentage of households has title deeds for other types of land (high land and low land),” reported Gain. “Social forestry has, in fact, been a major source of forest cases and tension among the local people. In the 44 forest villages surveyed, the number of forest cases found is 3,029, of which 2,157 are against the Bangalees and 872 against the Garos. It is necessary to take proper initiative to save the forests and settle the false forest cases.”

Yunus Ali, former Chief Conservator of Forests (CCF) of the Forest Department denied the allegation against Forest Department and social forestry projects for the destruction of forests in Modhupur. “Destruction of forest has been going on since long before the introduction of social forestry. It is not right to blame social forestry alone for the destruction of forests. Besides, social forestry has been successful all over the country except in Modhupur,” explained Ali. “The destruction of forest of our country is linked to the pattern of land use. With the demise of forest land, agricultural lands have increased.”

Theophil Nokrek, a Garo writer, demanded for customary land rights of the Garos and settle the false forest cases. He suggested that dialogues be arranged between the Forest Department
and the people who live in the forest to settle the existing land disputes and tension among the forest villagers. He also urged the government to recognize customary land rights of the Garos and others in accordance with the ILO convention 107, which Bangladesh has ratified.

Eugin Nokrek, president, Joyenshahi Adivasi Samaj Kallyan Shangstha was critical on the intervention of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and World Bank in the Modhupur sal forest. “The social forestry project initiated by ADB was a mistake. The project was implemented clearing the natural forest,” Nokrek asserted. Nokrek demanded for the Sulekha Mrong, executive director of Achik Michik Society called for saving the sal forest. “We need mental orientation to save the forest. Without it, Modhupur forest will not survive,” said Mrong.

Dr. Tanzimuddin Khan, associate professor, Department of International Relations of University of Dhaka was critical in his reflection on the Forest Department, the multinational corporations and lucrative development projects in the country. He said, “We shall isolate the forest people if we see them through the lens of zamindari ideology in the Mughal era. The development projects financed by the donor agencies and multinational corporations strategically ignore the issue of forest conservation. The Forest Department must think critically and examine the adverse effects before implementing forestry projects.”

Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, the chair of the roundtable discussion and executive chairman of Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) in his concluding remarks called for affirmative discussions and reconciliation of different interests between the Forest Department and forest people in Modhupur. “We find three interests regarding the Modhupur forest—forest conservation, agriculture and the demands of the people living there. Modhupur
forest will not survive without the coordination of these interests. We have to understand these interests first and then move to a sustainable solution through discussion,” explained Rahman.

In his reflection on the customary land right of the ethnic people in Modhupur, Dr. Rahman said, “The majority of the ethnic people living in Modhupur sal forest area do not have title deeds for their land. If the land issues cannot be solved by means of title deeds, it can be solved from the perspective of Sustainable Development Goals agenda.” He advised the Forest Department to solve compoundable forest cases through discussion and scale up the Garo representation among the community forest workers (CFWs) to save the forest from extinction. He suggested for a tripartite survey on land possession among the Forest Department, Garos and Bangalees.

Others who spoke at the discussion are Dr. Mohammed Zahirul Haque, Assistant Chief Conservator of Forest (ACCF), Forest Department; Harun-Ur-Rashid, Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), Tangail Forest Division; Ajoy A. Mree, president, Adivasi Cultural Development Forum; Bikson Nokrek, UP member, Sholakuri Union; Abdul Majid Mallick, development consultant; Farid Uddin Ahmed, executive director, Arannayk Foundation; Akter Hossen, chairman, Sholakuri Union Parishad; and Md. Abdur Rahim, chairman, Aronkhola Union Parishad. Report by Rabiullah and James Sujit Malo