

# **Community Power: Bangladesh's Path to a Greener Tomorrow**

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Forests are like the Earth's lungs, helping to keep everything in balance and supporting many different types of life. They do a special job by taking in carbon dioxide, a gas that can cause problems in the air, and they give out oxygen, which we need to breathe. Forests also help control the weather and make it not too extreme. They even help lessen the effects of climate change. Forests are homes for many plants and animals, making them important places for biodiversity. Apart from all the good things they do for the environment, forests also give us things that help us make money and have jobs. They give us things like wood and other resources we can use. They also help people who live nearby by providing jobs and ways to make a living.

At present, Bangladesh's forest coverage stands at just 15.58 percent, below the recommended 25 percent advised by experts. This highlights a need for collaborative efforts from the government, local communities, and all environmental advocates. By working together, forested areas are expanding in Bangladesh, ultimately bringing the benefit for both our nation and the global environment.

Many countries around the world have come up with new ideas to take care of forests. One of these new ideas is Social Forestry program of Bangladesh. This special program does more than just stopping the cutting down of trees. It also helps people who are not as fortunate, makes sure we can keep growing in a way that doesn't hurt the Earth, and makes nature stronger against challenges. This program is a great step toward making things better for everyone and the planet.

In the early 1980s, Bangladesh faced shrinking forests and challenges for rural residents, including landless individuals and those in difficult circumstances. Then, a positive development occurred when the Social Forestry program emerged, addressing both environmental and socio-economic issues. The start of the Social Forestry program goes back to the years 1981-82 when Community Forestry Scheme began in North Bengal. This scheme was meant to involve the people who lived there and help them take care of the forests. The forests were important for the people's lives. This program wanted to make the people feel like the forests belonged to them, and they should look after them. By giving power to the local community, the program brought about big changes. It encouraged them to join activities like planting trees, taking care of the ones already there, and looking after the forests in a way that didn't hurt them. This way of looking at things didn't just fix the problem of having fewer forests; it also made the people feel like it's their job to make sure the forests stay healthy and useful.

The Government of Bangladesh wants to make sure the Social Forestry program has strong support and a clear plan. So, in the year 2000, the Government changed the Forest Act 1927, to include social forestry in the legal framework. This is a significant change because it demonstrates the government's desire for community involvement in forest management. This change is a big step away from how things were usually done, where decisions came from the top. Instead, it is now about everyone working together.

In 2011, amendments were introduced to update and enhance the effectiveness of the country's Social Forestry Rules, 2004. The rules make sure that people from the community could join in and do things in the forests. The revisions have opened up opportunities for local communities to participate in afforestation efforts on government-owned forest lands. These rules helped build a strong relationship between the government and the people, working side by side to take care of the forests.

The Social Forestry program in Bangladesh has made a really big difference over the years. From the time it started in 1981-82 until 2022-23, the program helped make One lac six thousand and one hundred forty eight hectares of woodlots and block forests, and also 80,141 kilometers of strip forests. What's even more amazing is that 7 lac 67 thousand and 263 people got benefits from it. By selling wood from the forests, Department of Forest has so far earned BDT 1948 crore 60 lacs and 12 thousand. They shared BDT 478 crore 20 lacs 73 thousand among 2 lac 43 thousand people who participated in the program. This shows how the Social Forestry program really made a difference in the lives of people who were not as fortunate.

In addition to expanding social forestry, the government of Bangladesh started many projects and programs to make more forests grow. These were implemented from the year 2009-2010 to 2021-2022. The projects were able to add a big piece of land, about 193,453 hectares, to the forests, including mangroves. The government also made 28,518 kilometers of strip gardens and distributed 10 crore 86 lacs seedlings to the people. All of these things together show that as people the country keep moving forward, the environment also stays safe and protected.

To protect the forests, the Department of Forest also arranges special events. The Department of Forest holds an annual month-long National Tree Fair in Dhaka, along with organizing fairs at the district, upazilla, and union levels each year. They also actively conduct programs aimed at promoting awareness and environmental conservation, as well as the protection of forests and wildlife among the public.

Bangladesh's experience with social forestry serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration for other nations grappling with environmental challenges and the quest for fairness. It illustrates that positive outcomes can emerge when local communities come together to nurture the environment. This initiative not only provides assistance to those in need but also contributes to the overall well-being of the planet. Consequently, it benefits the global community by addressing issues such as climate change and ecological restoration. The Social Forestry program emphasizes the strength of collective action and the significance of involving local communities in environmental stewardship. It underscores that solutions to complex problems often originate from the actions we take in our own communities, demonstrating our capacity to effect positive change.

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