

# FOCUS

## A 'Shrinking' Nation and its Wonderful Leaders

WHAT does malnutrition have to do with democracy? Nothing according to our traditional way of thinking. But quite a lot, according to some recent findings about the state of health of our common people. Prolonged and chronic malnutrition is eating away at the very core of our nation's health. By producing more and more people with less and less IQ we are threatening the future of our democracy. We need a healthy, intelligent and creative people to build democracy and face the challenges of a highly competitive world. With an ill-fed and illiterate people neither democracy nor economic prosperity will come our way.

Begum Zia has been unwavering in her stand to "uphold" the Constitution (nothing outside its purview can be accepted). Sheikh Hasina, for her part, has devoted almost all of last two years of her politics on "ensuring a free and fair election. These are worthy goals. However, the problem is, that while these two leaders of ours have been working so hard to ensure the sanctity of our Constitutional system and that of our right to vote freely and fairly, we THE VOTERS, have been suffering from chronic malnutrition, and as a people have, actually, lost a inch of our average height. Notwithstanding our intellectual decay, our moral bankruptcy, political intolerance, and failure to ensure a minimum of safety and security of both urban and rural people, we now have the instance of physical diminution of our people to deal with.

The last time I wrote about it, I was quoting a UN document. But today, I have it from no less an authority than the honourable health minister himself. While the minister's forthrightness needs to be commended, yet I cannot help feel that this was uttered as one more of the many statistics that we dish out when we make public pronouncements.

Do we understand what it really means when the average height of a people starts to decrease? Do we understand the implication of a biological entity, like the human body, in the process of decline? The average height of human beings have been on the rise ever since enough food and nutrition became available to the masses. This is still the case all over. Nowhere else in the world,

including the disintegrating state of Somalia and Afghanistan, is the average height of a nation on the way down except in our case.

Very simply put, when the human body begins to shrink (that is what growing shorter in height actually means), all its component parts become smaller. This means that our arms, legs, hands, feet, and other body parts grow proportionately smaller. It also means that our people are less strong, less resilient, less capable of resisting diseases, less energetic, and as such less capable of work. If this is not enough, loss of height means loss in the growth of the brain. This obviously causes loss of IQ. While the minister did not

process of prioritisation occurs within it. As a result, the more fundamental functions of the brain - such as hunger, aggression, self preservation, survival etc. overtake the more sophisticated functions such as logic, imagination, creativity, compassion, patience, forgiveness, love and the whole process of understanding the abstract. And it is the latter group of functions that makes for a modern society. The whole process of civilisation has been one of moving away from aggression, and towards accommodation - from individual to social living.

Given loss of IQ, and the general lowering of other brain functions, people become easy targets for manip-

so insidious that it is often invisible, even to the eye of an expert.

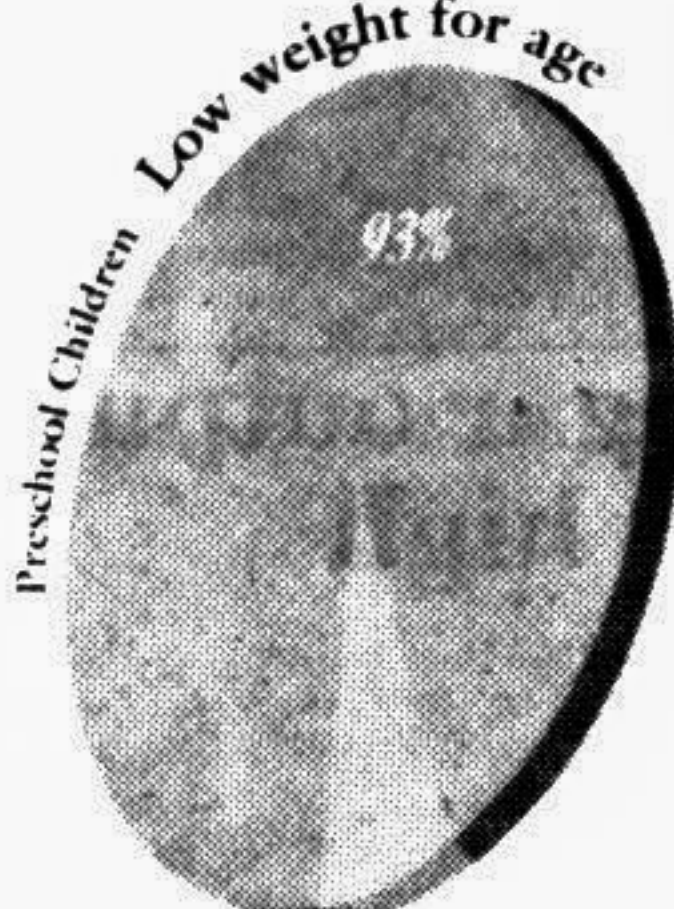
The message of the publication is not to overwhelm us with the enormity of the problem, but to bring home the point that our malnutrition problem CAN BE SOLVED, even while our general level of poverty remains as it is. This is an important message because many of us think that our children are doomed to be malnourished till we can break out of our poverty cycle. The study shows that 60 per cent of households with malnutrition actually have enough food. The fault is in the lack of knowledge as to what to do, when to do and how to do. As is obvious, the world of

likely outcome. As we have said earlier, 60 per cent of households where malnutrition exists have enough food to prevent this from happening. So where is the problem. It is in the absence of a POLITICAL WILL. We can say with certainty, that at least in those 60 per cent households, malnutrition can be prevented immediately, if the government WILLS IT - meaning, gives it the attention and thrust that it needs. And for this, it does not need any additional resources. Just sincerity and a WILL to do the job.

Isn't there a role for the opposition political parties in all this? We definitely think there is. To start with, political parties can try and

been affected by chronic malnutrition since their childhood. What will democracy or the Constitutional niceties or a free and fair election mean to them? How will a population suffering from some sort of mental retardation and physical frailty, especially in terms of resistance to everyday diseases, deal with choosing one set of policy options compared to others? What sort of political and social issue will appeal to such an electorate?

We may not be thinking about it, but there is likely to be a significant impact of malnutrition, with its implications on physical and mental growth, on the future of our politics. The multi-layered, complex and intricate



ulation of religious, social and political forces. Deliberately distorted religious strictures, distorted political slogans, and catchy and hateful panacea of deep rooted social problems find easy takers in a people whose critical faculties become impaired.

There is another, and very worrying aspect of the malnutrition problem. Its most vulnerable prey are the children. Readers kindly note and note with extreme concern - that the brain damage caused due to chronic malnutrition by the age of two can NEVER be corrected no matter how nutritious the diet is in later life. This means that while a child needs a balanced diet all along, the need is particularly critical during the first two years to prevent irreparable damage to the child's brain. The first years in a human life are the most precious.

A recent World Bank and UNICEF publication ("Kalindi" named after the Bangladeshi village where they have carried out an innovative malnutrition control project) reveals that presently 93 per cent of pre-school children in our country are malnourished, of which 30,000 go blind and 20,000 are mentally impaired annually. The report says "Malnutrition is the last stage of a process of physical and mental growth retardation that starts very early in life and most of the damage is done before children are two years old. The process of becoming malnourished is so gradual and

### The Third View by Mahfuz Anam

the Information Age, of that of the 21st Century, will be one where "Brain Power" will count for much more than "Brawn Power". We will be entering that Age with a huge population. Will that population be a "wealth" or a "burden" depends on what we do now. For a modern economy of today we need a healthy, intelligent and educated population. For the economy of the "Information Age" (many feel, that it has already arrived) such features of a population will be absolutely critical. Can we be a part of that economy with a population that is growing shorter, with people whose IQ is going down, and who become more and more prone to all sorts of common diseases?

This brings us back to the issue that we started from. While one leader is "protecting" the Constitution, and the other "ensuring" a free and fair election, what is becoming of us? While we do all of our politics in the name of the people, the truth is we do not care a damn about them. Otherwise how can there be so little attention paid to the fact that a dwarfing process has set in. Where is the evidence of our concern? Why isn't the government spreading this information through all media, and launching a massive campaign to prevent this process? Yes, we have heard about the launching of new national nutrition project. But as projects go, we know the



spread, to their own poor and village based supporters, the type of messages which will prevent malnutrition. They can set up their own educational programmes and campaigns. Political parties like the Awami League, who aspire to, and could very well go to power, should develop their own expertise on all development issues. In fact, preventing malnutrition through public education can be a very good way of gaining public support and can be a good means of recruiting new party followers - recruiting through constructive development work, rather than through promises of power and the consequent 'privileges'.

I end with a plea to all, and especially to our political leaders, to think about the nature of our politics in future with a people who have

decisions that modern societies need to constantly take, the highly sophisticated challenges that we may have to face in the future, and the intense competition that we will need to face to be a part of the future world, may prove too much for our future electorate to handle. A politics of cheap slogans, simplistic world views, sweeping generalisations, all purpose panacea, religious and sectarian bigotry and unquestioned following of an ideology or a populist leader, may replace the democratic system that we are now trying to build.

Thus while we allow what is essentially a personality clash to masquerade as a political crisis, the very foundation of our democracy is being corroded through the tragic and devastating phenomenon of mass chronic malnutrition.

## Deep-sea Policy in Deep Water

by Mukul Sharma

ALREADY enmeshed in a net of problems, deep-sea fishing off the Indian coast is heading for deeper conflicts. The government's new policy encourages investments on a massive scale in India's 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and local fishing families are feeling threatened.

All along the coastline, traditional fishworkers, small-scale mechanised fishing boat operators, fish traders and processors have buried old rivalries to unite against the policy. They formed the National Fisheries Action Committee. Against Joint Ventures and last year organized a national fisheries bandh (shutdown). Not one fishing boat, artisanal or mechanised, went to sea in any of the coastal states.

In another action later in the year, traditional fishworkers blocked all foreign fishing vessels coming to the EEZ for fishing.

Says committee convener Thomas Kocherry: "We demand that the government cancel all licences issued to joint ventures and stop issuing licences for deep-sea fishing."

The Action Committee alleges that the government has issued 190 licences to joint ventures which include large foreign companies such as Mitsubishi of Japan, Kallis of Australia and A M Produkte of Germany.

Forced to take note of the agitation, in January New Delhi announced a review of the policy. But the authorities decided to continue with the licences. So attempts to block foreign fishing vessels in Indian seas continue.

The controversy stems from a 1991 government working group which suggested that "the unexploited and under-exploited resources beyond 50m depth are the main target for the future development strategy." Even for limited exploitation, it said, 2,630 vessels would be required, each capable of harvesting 120 to 2,000 tonnes.

As a result, the government offered incentives for joint ventures, foreign vessels and transnationals in the deep seas. Companies have been allowed to do test fishing with foreign collaborators to facilitate pre-investment studies, and foreign crews are permitted for joint ventures.

But S L Kapur, Secretary of the Ministry of Food Processing Industries, and Joint Secretary C K Basu, still insist that India's fishing resources are grossly underutilised. In the current environment, domestic and foreign corporate investments are being encouraged, both for inland farming and for marine fishing. Large Indian and multinational corporations have been setting up shrimp culture, deep-sea

fishing and seafood processing projects. Most of these projects are being set up with the export market in mind.

They also accept that many leading industrial houses now have a presence in the deep seas of India's EEZ.

With a coastline of 7,500 kilometres and an EEZ of 2.02 million square kilometres, government estimates put India's a marine catch potential at 4 million tonnes. The catch, which includes prawn, shrimp, tuna, squid, octopus, red snapper, ribbon fish, mackerel, lobster and cat fish, was 1.09 million tonnes in 1970-71 and 2.57 million tonnes in 1992-93. Exports have risen from 99,700 tonnes in 1989-90 to 224,000 tonnes in 1993-94.

But the traditional boats' share of the market has declined. The average amount of fish consumed by Indians is also static - a mere 3.5 kg per head per year, against a world average of 12 kg.

P V Kokhar, secretary of the Shree Porbander Machhmar Boat Association in Gujarat state, complains: "Foreign vessels are supposed to operate 24 nautical miles away. But many often come very near the inshore area and violate the rules. They often damage the nets and gear of the small fishermen. This has been reported to the Coast Guard many times, but before their arrival the vessels pull out."

T R Thankappari Achari of the Fisheries Research Cell in Kerala fears that after exhausting the valuable species, which form about 15 per cent of India's total deep-sea potential, the new entrants will go in for the cheap varieties used in the manufacture of products such as fishmeal, for which there is a good market in the West.

Meanwhile, coastal state governments are worried that the agitation may cost them electoral support. Under India's federal system, the deep seas are central government territory while all other aspects of fishing, including coastal marine, are the responsibility of the states.

The Gujarat, west Bengal and Orissa governments have strongly protested against the new deep-sea policy.

The National Fishworkers Federation, a major constituent of the Action Committee, is also seeking a new policy approach. The Federation emphasises that fishworkers are not against a policy aimed at the sustainable development of the sector, with traditional fishworkers sharing the benefits. The policy, it says, should ensure that small-scale fishermen are able to expand their operations into deeper waters.

Mukul Sharma is a special correspondent of Nav Bharat Times in New Delhi.

HE was there, in the steep green mountain of Banderban, dressed in her best red. Staring timidly up at the blue sky but all the time beckoning the passerby with her gorgeous look.

She is as wildly exotic as her surroundings, and as rare as that single drop of water shimmering like a diamond on an arum leaf. She is no other than the wild banana flower.

The above description might be a bit too dramatic a start, but then again drama is the basic mood of wild flowers. Growing all by themselves unattended and uncared for, these priceless beauties are a source of boundless resource, not to forget the pleasure they give to starved minds like ours, city people.

In this last growing cosmopolitan life we have no time for those Go Green things in reality (except maybe for the sake of fashion or of course seminars, lectures etc). We buy flowers from florist shops to appease our need and those with whatever lawns they have may keep a gardener to prune the garden (if they have time enough for such frolics). But wild flowers have no chance to steal minds.

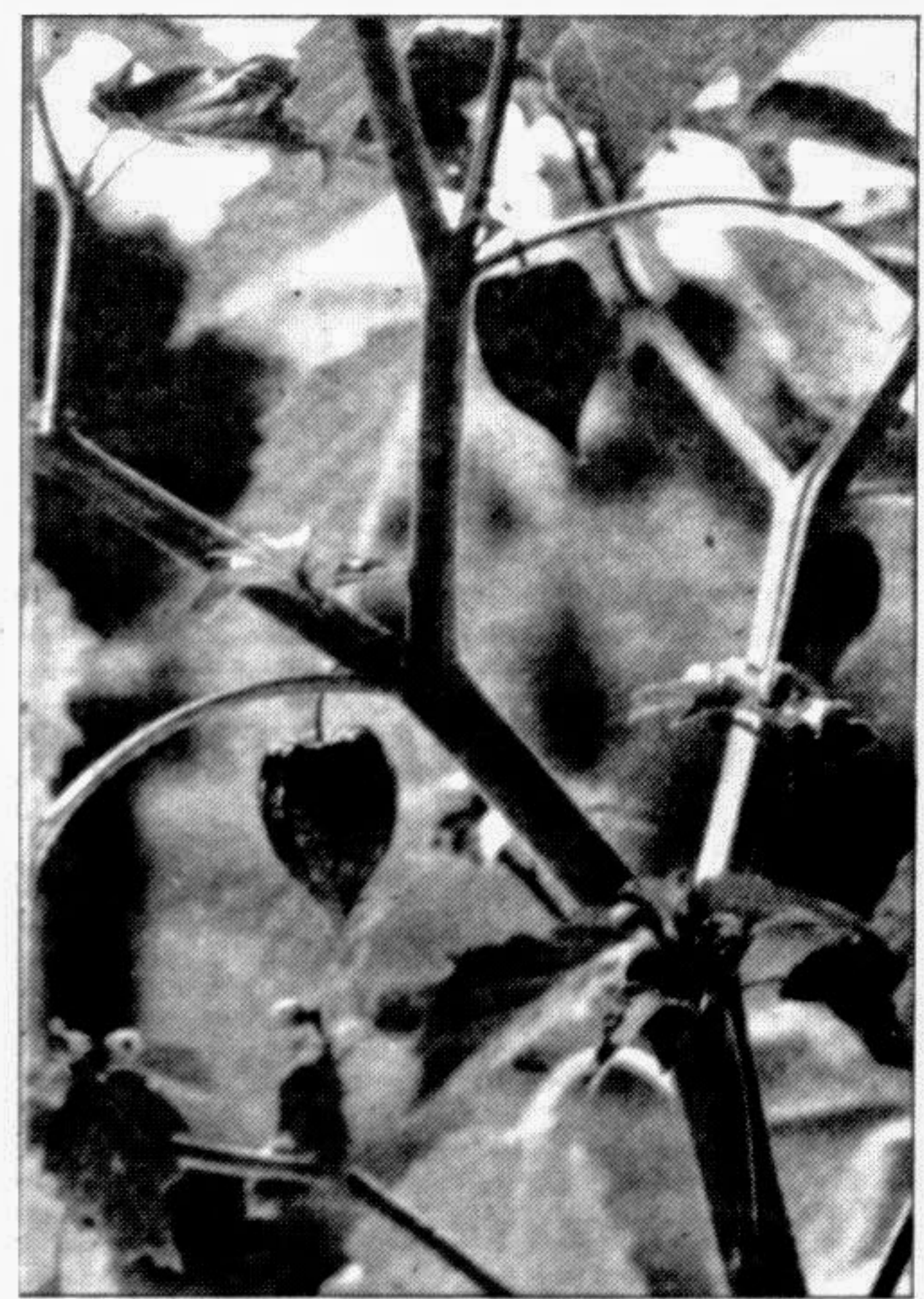
Yet when you travel through the jungles of Chittagong Hill Tracts or by the side of any marshy land, the sweet aroma, the unique colors, the wild beauty of these flowers on the green background of the hills simply captures your mind and soul. Dr Noazesh Ahmed and actor Aly Zaker are prisoners of such breathtaking captivity, in a way that is different from any of us. They are set to bring out these less talked about flowers more into the open.

For years, Noazesh recalls that he was approached by Thai publishers to bring out a book on the exotic flowers of Asia. "It was no doubt to be a difficult task, but in these last four years that I've come back home I started working on the marvel of treeforms, influence of trees on intellectual life, inspiration on music and poems," Ahmed explains. It was around this time that he found nature lover Aly Zaker also interested in nature photography who drew their attention to interesting small herbaceous wild flowers. "I found yet another unexplored area of work," he says about the reasons for his work on the wild flowers of Bangladesh.

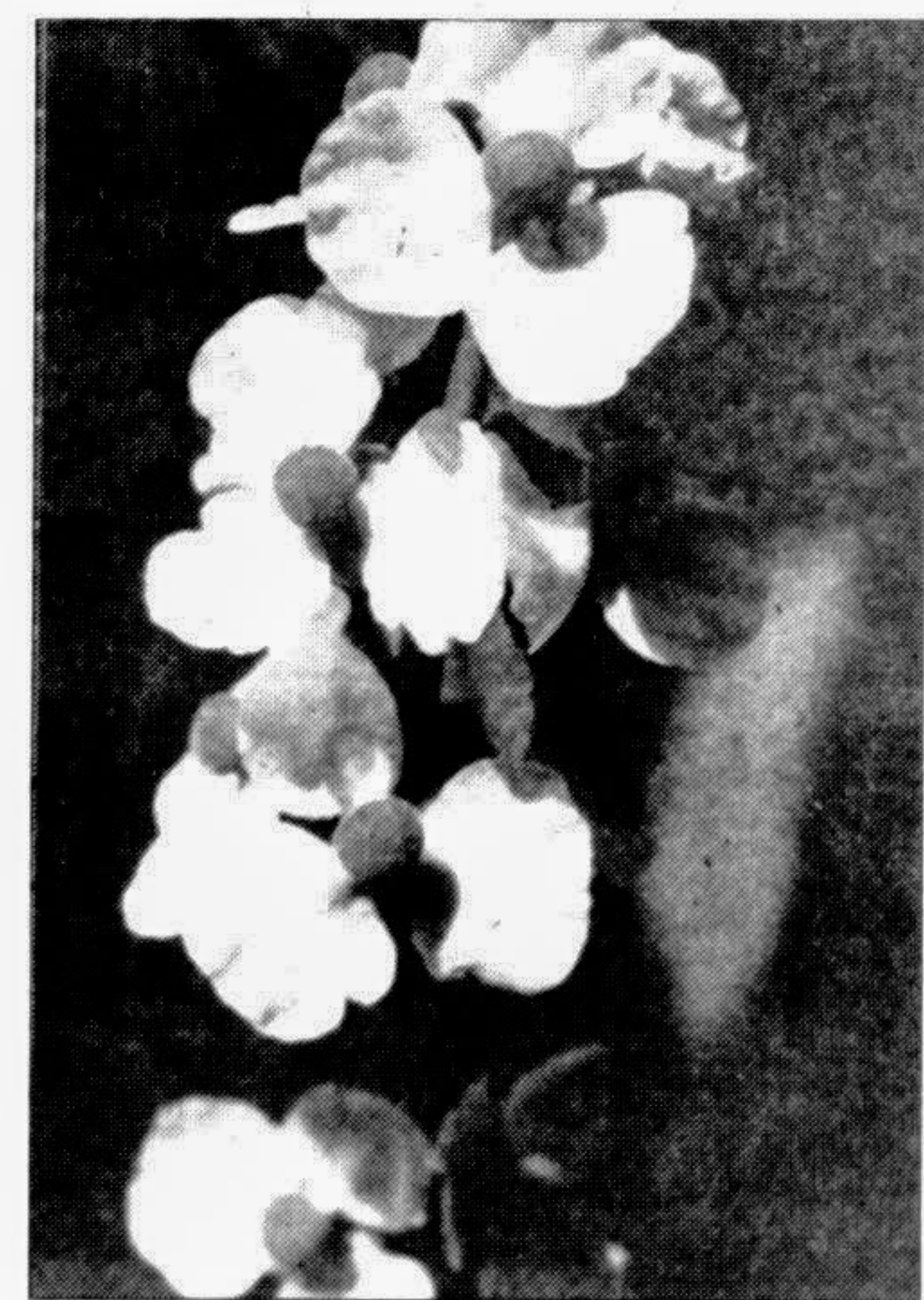
At the beginning it was just photographing the drama and beauty but later Ahmed decided to publish a book,

## Flowers of the Wild Our Silent Friends

by Raffat Binte Rashid



Foki promotes flow of urine, anti-uricemic.



Pandush, used as anti-dysentery.

telling the world about the rich wild flora of Bangladesh.

According to Ahmed, before it is too late, we must protect and preserve our plant wealth so that it does not perish. We must document and promote their cause and thus, Ahmed and Zaker started their work. "In fact, Zaker is the one who started close-ups of wild flowers and saw the drama in their forms and colors. What fascinating vibrant worlds of gracious nature opened to us - green foliage, colored flowers, humming bees and butterfly. It was so invigorating as Zaker described it," Ahmed says nostalgically, as if he is back in the wilderness again.

It was impossible for them to cover the entire rich heritage of wild flora. So they decided to focus on some of the important ones; even that was not an easy task. They travelled to many corners of the country and followed few guidelines.

Flora must be indigenous and grow naturally around homesteads, forests, meadows and water bodies. It should have interesting form and colour of flowers and leaves. Flora must have some economic importance or medicinal value. Plants are mostly herbaceous and shrubs. Flora should represent major agro-ecological zones of the country and if possible include some rare species.

For the sake of study, and considering their other constraints, their working areas were limited to the major agro-ecological zones of Bangladesh. They divided the floristic zones into flooded plains and rice fields, hill tracts and tea plantations, forests, homesteads and roadsides, fresh water marshy lands, coastal belts and Sunderbans.

Besides photographing, they recorded information on habitat, botanical features, local names, flowering seasons and medicinal usages. It is

unfortunate that so far no well-documented and illustrated books on the wild flora of Bangladesh has been published. Nor even in India, except maybe for a few books on garden flowers.

Thus, these nature lovers made it their personal agenda to highlight and create awareness about our wild heritage before it perishes in the unknown wilderness forever in this ever expanding human habitat.

Being a plant geneticist, capturing the drama of wild flowers was more easier for Noazesh Ahmed. "I am not a medicinal man, but what is already contained in qualified literature. I am trying to identify and include in the world wide new movement that is going on," he says.

Synthetic chemical medicines have harmful effects on our body and people even in the West are trying to go back to natural, herbal medicines. Medicines from these wild flowers, however,

do not necessarily work like magic, unlike synthetic drugs. They are not taken in concentrated forms and take time to adjust to the body; they have to be used for longer periods.

It may be recalled that the concept of 'medicine' came from plant extracts. These wild, undiscovered, unread texts contain remedies for almost everything: antineuralgic (for aches and pain), antipruritic (relieves itching), antipileptic (for high blood pressure and circulatory disturbances), snake bites, skin infections and even for contraception.

Hati Sura is found all over Bangladesh and its leaves are used for boils, cuts, insect bites. Nishinda grows on the Chittagong roadside and is a cure for rheumatic swelling of joints and has other insecticidal properties.

Shatti, whose English name is Zedoary arrowroot, is a stemless herb that grows wild in the forest of Mod-

hupur, Bhawal and on the high land of Chittagong and Comilla. A close relative of turmeric, this herb's rhizome is rich source of starch and is also used in perfumery and cosmetics.

Their resources are limitless, and yet these are only a few of the 300 wild flowers in Bangladesh they have identified and made studies about. About 300,000 plant species have so far been identified on our planet. Tens of thousands remain undiscovered. Out of all these only 1500 species, about 5 per cent, are nurtured for food, fodder, fibre, beverage timber, medicine and flowers. The rest are still wild - they grow and die in their own world. These are really the central nerve system for the earth's environment and the prime source of carbon and oxygen for all beings. But man is slowly but irrevocably destroying these silent friends of his. When will he stop?

## Press Freedom Declines Around the World

by Deborah M S Brown

PRESS freedom among the nations of the world is becoming less and less a reality, according to a survey released by Freedom House, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization devoted to the strengthening of free societies.

The survey, "Press Freedom Worldwide: 1995," assesses the degree to which the system of mass communication - including newspapers, radio and television - permits the free flow of information to and from the public in 187 countries.

Leonard Sussman, coordinator of the survey and Freedom House senior scholar in international communications, warns against relaxing a guard on press freedom. "Once a nation has permitted press freedom, it is an ominous change."

The most dangerous change the Sussman sees is the regression in Western Europe, "the cornerstone of press freedom for generations." He spoke of a softening attitude toward "irresponsible journalism" in Western Europe, where he said journalists are often gently coerced by governments to report stories that are aligned with government thinking.

This trend was reinforced

ing "permissible limitations to the right of freedom of expression" which may be "formally enacted in law." These restrictions follow Article 10 closely, and an earlier stance in the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Although the United States adopted the latter convention, it specifically stipulated that press freedom is supported by the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

The press freedom survey contains three categories that compare press freedom: a "free" press means that broadcast media and print journalists are nearly free from political pressure or other interference; a "partly free" press means that political pressures are more intense but journalists are not afraid of bodily harm; and a "not free" press means that there is a high level of government control over the media, including physical threats against journalists.

Of the three categories, a tie at 63 countries each for a "free" and "partly free" press slightly overshadows a "not free" press in 61 countries. Rwanda, Algeria, Russia and Gambia are among the 16 countries whose rating dropped. Seven countries expanded press rights, including Guyana and South Africa.

— USIS