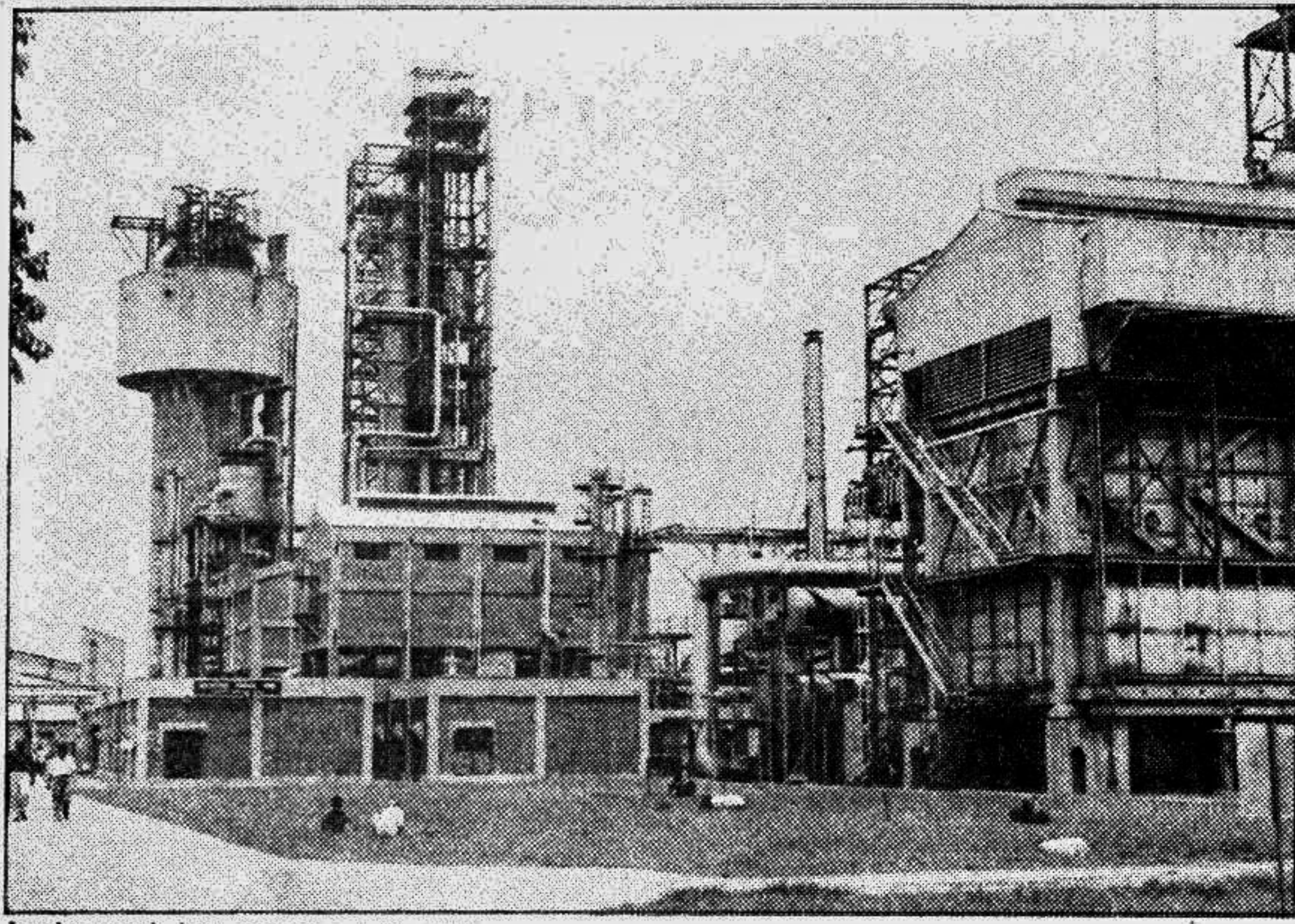


Spectre of Death

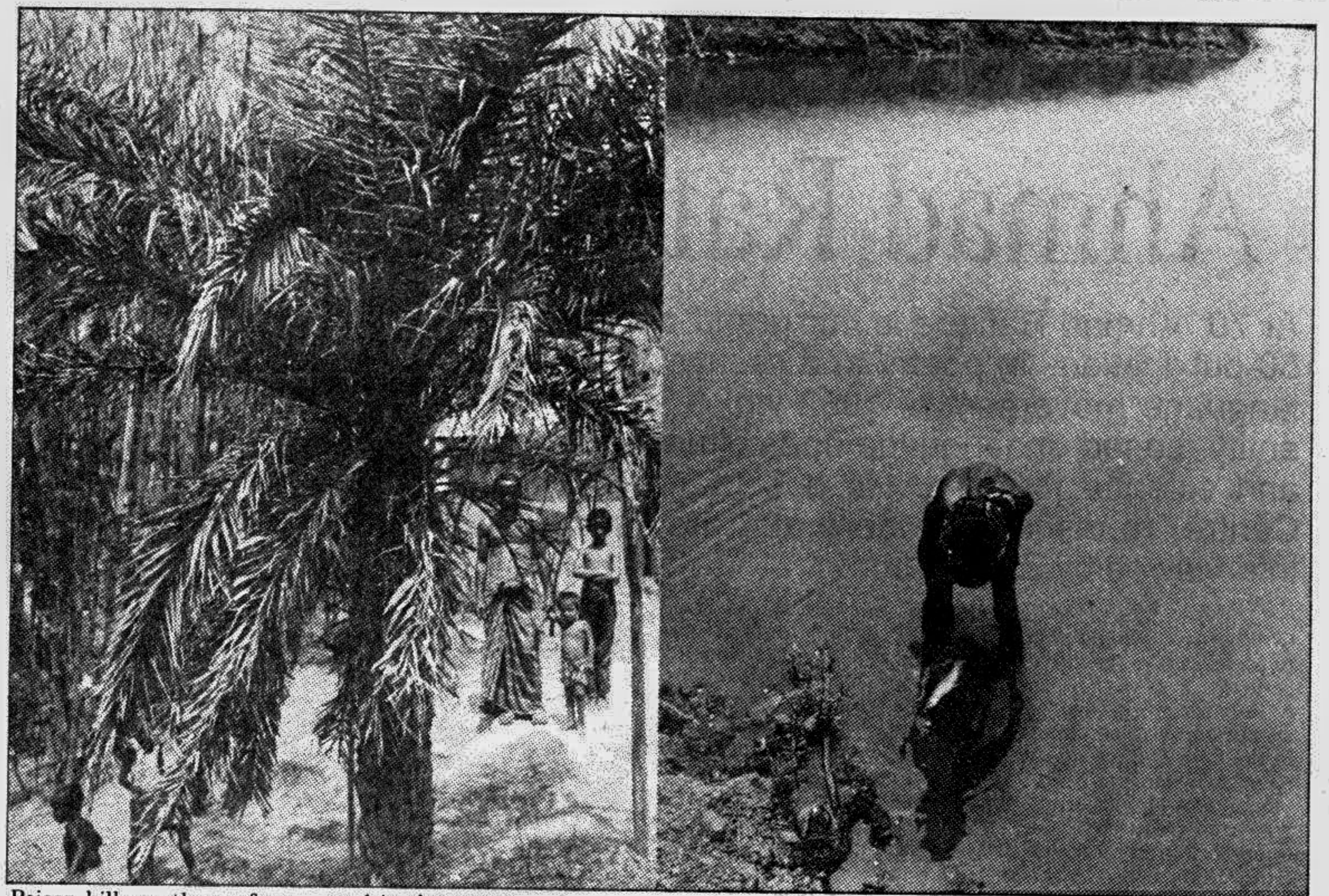


Ammonia waste from Ghorashal and Palash fertiliser factories has become a serious environmental hazard. While dead fish float in ponds and greens go gray in adjoining areas, people exposed to 'poisonous air' run the risk of respiratory and renal failure. **AKM Mohsin** arrests the plight of people in frames.

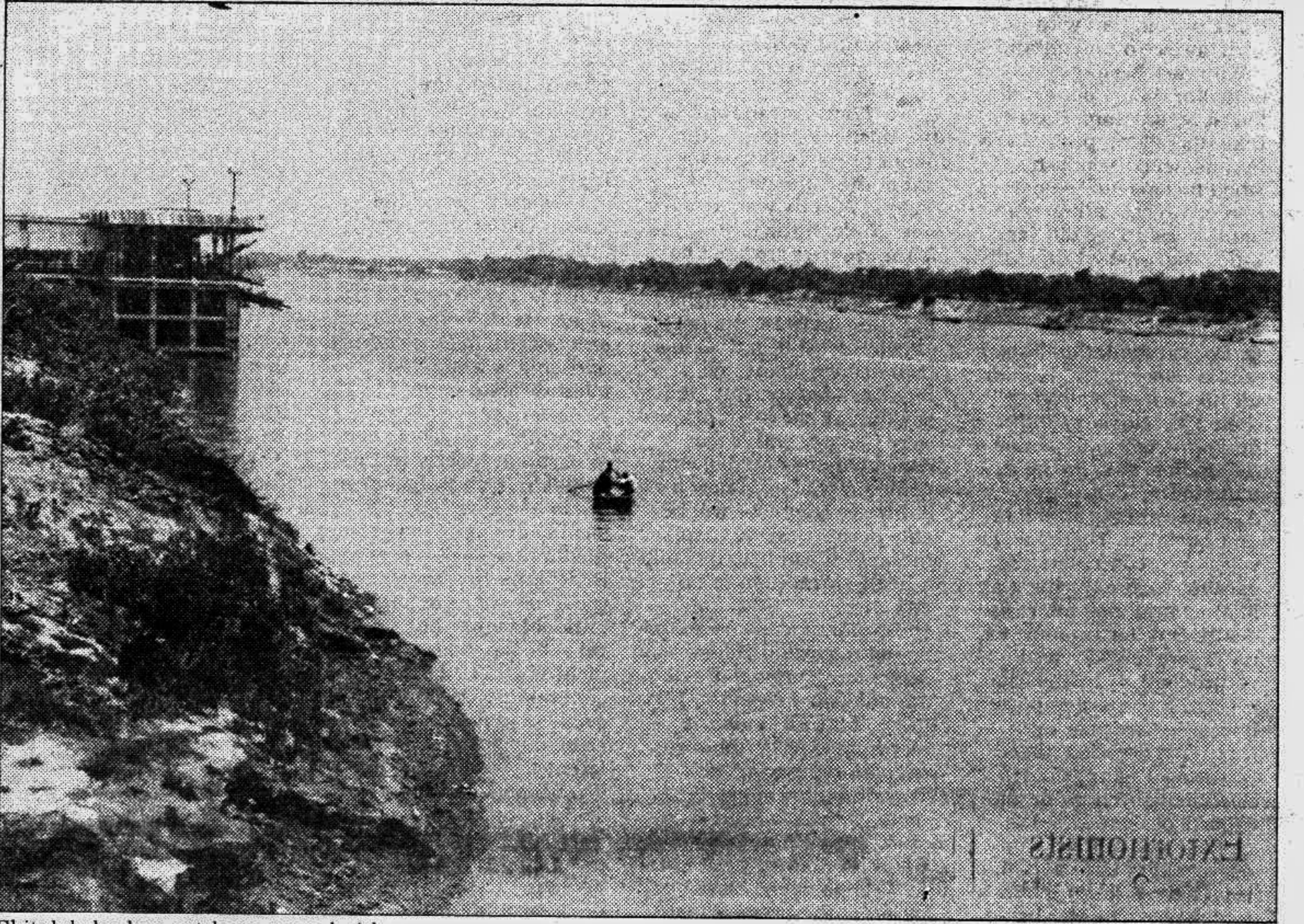
Looks good, but pours out 'death'



Reaping dead roots from waste-hit wasteland



Poison kills on the surface ... and in the water



Shitalaksha has not been spared either

Dhol Samuddur, a lake, a legend

By Delwar Kabir

JHENIDAH: Dhol Samuddur is not a sea, as the word *Samuddur*, in local dialect which means sea, suggests. It is a huge lake in Barishal, a village about six kilometres southwest of Jhenidah town.

Dhol Samuddur has its own story. It may not be unique but is fascinating nevertheless. King Mukut Roy, legend has it, ordered digging of the lake to cope with acute water crisis that had hit the region. More than one thousand of his soldiers were assigned. However, after weeks of digging, there was no trace of water.

Meanwhile, many died due to water crisis. There was no way out, it seemed to the king and his men. Pundits (scholars) were convened to work out a solution. They could not figure out a way to end the crisis. In despair, the king sought for divine intervention and *puja* (prayer) began at the royal palace, the king leading it.

One night, the king had a dream. He was told in the dream that the queen must conduct *puja* at the centre of the dry lake and only in that way it would be filled to the brim.

Next morning, the king told his wife about the dream he had the night before. The queen acquiesced and arrangements were made likewise. A day was fixed.

On the designated date, people from all walks of life across the kingdom thronged at the venue in the hopes of something miraculous. Miracle happened just a few minutes after the queen had begun her prayer. Out of nowhere, a mysterious sound came and reverberated the whole area. Down at the bottom of the dry lake, even more fascinating an event occurred. Eerie silence prevailed as the queen went up in the air. Meanwhile, the sound as if coming from a percussion instrument intensified, sending a wave of panic among the onlookers. Then, suddenly water started flowing in from the sides of the lake. In a few moments, the lake was filled to the brim and the queen with her associates was drowned. Thus, the queen sacrificed her life for people.

The lake was named *Dhol Samuddur* to associate with the mysterious sound. *Dhol* is, in Bengali, a percussion instrument. There is another interpretation of the motive behind the naming. People say that it was named *Dhol Samuddur* because *dhol* and *kartal* (another percussion instrument) were used during the prayer.

The queen embraced death but her husband was praised for his philanthropic act.

Since then, the region has never had any water crisis. The

enormous lake is enough to meet the need of local residents. Besides, it attracts a lot of visitors. However, according to people, with government patronisation, it can be turned into an attractive tourist spot.

Now, a local businessman uses the lake a nursery of fish,

thereby actually decimating its natural beauty. There is a caretaker committee for the lake comprising local people. But, residents in the region say, government should pour fund to develop the lake into an attractive tourist spot. Investment in that direction would ensure

handsome return, they believe. People who matter have so far been indifferent, and the oblong lake with a fascinating tale and an immense prospect of becoming a tourist spot waits for an awakening for these people.



Dhol Samuddur can be made into an attractive tourist spot. What it needs is government patronisation. — Star photo by Delwar Kabir

Courage in Adversity

From Monojit K Das

MAGURA: Life has not been kind to Aisaruddin. When he was a student of class eight, muscle atrophy left him almost immobile. Formal education ended right there. His hands and legs became numb by the time he reached 30. From then on, survival has been a difficult proposition. Still, he has not given in. He has not allowed his physical handicap to extinguish the fire that burns deep inside.

Even now, at the age of 70, Aisaruddin is still engaged in creative exercise. Writing is a passion, a signature of his existence.

The correspondent met the distressed poet at his cottage recently. He passes his days in great misery due to poor financial condition and lack of support from authorities.

It takes him a great deal of physical exertion to write. His hands do not function normally. He cannot even hold the pen properly. Someone has to put the pen in his fingers. With the pen in his almost numb fingers, he leans forward, his body against a support and a piece of paper placed on a low stool.

Aisaruddin was born on the second day of Sraban in the Bengali calendar year of 1336. His father, Mohammad Allek Mondal, was a marginal farmer in Amalsar, a village in Sripur thana of Magura. His mother's name was Santushi Khatun. They sent their son to school in the hope that some day he would change their lot.

But, as luck would have it, disaster struck very early. One day, Aisaruddin, a student of

class eight at the Chauganchi Minor School then, found that he could no longer move his hands or legs like he used to. It brought an end to formal education for him, but he did not stop there. He read books of renowned writers and educated himself in his special way.

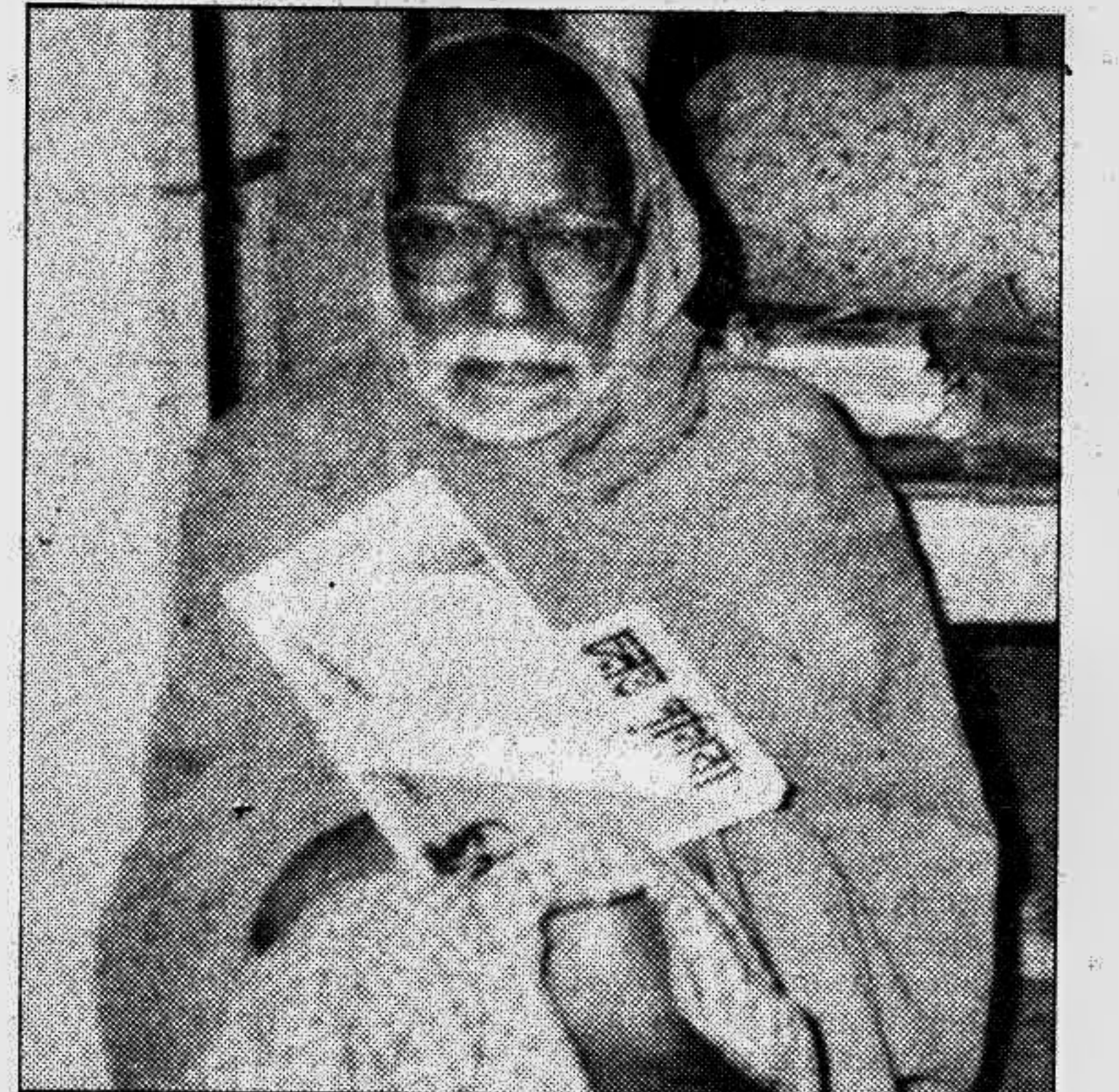
Extensive reading led to creative writing. So far, Aisaruddin has written more than 65 books, not all of them have been printed, though *Rakta Jhara Kuasha*, *Prasanna Sakal*, *Swapna Chhaya* are on the War of Liberation. They have not been printed yet due to lack of fund, Aisaruddin told this correspondent.

He is a prolific writer, switching effortlessly from one genre to another.

Only four of his literary overtures have been printed — *Ekti Phool Ekti Jiban*, *Bhalobasha Bechey Achhey* (collection of poems), *Chalanta Prithibi* (novel) and *Haspatal Jibaner Diary*.

It would not have been possible, had not Kabi Aisaruddin Shahayak Samity, an organisation formed to promote his works, and Hasna Moudd, daughter of Poet Jasimuddin, taken the initiative.

He feels indebted to Poet Jasimuddin for the trouble he had taken to arrange treatment for him at the Mitford Medical Hospital and Dhaka Medical College Hospital although it proved ineffective. Aisaruddin first met the *Palli Kabi* in early 1960s. Poet Jasimuddin's inspiration made him continue writing. By the time Jasimuddin died, Aisaruddin had become a family friend.



Poet Afsaruddin with *Chalanta Prithibi*, one of his four works published so far, in his hand. — Star photo by Monojit K Das

Bhalobasha Bechey Achhey, a collection of poems, was his last publication. Faruk Ahmed, an active member of the Kabi Aisaruddin Shahayak Samity, financed the publication of the book in 1996.

Rest of his works may not see the light of the day. No one seems to be interested. No one is forthcoming with the fund needed for publication.

A confirmed bachelor, Afsaruddin now lives with his foster

daughter and her husband. He has been receiving Tk 750 per month since 1996-97 from the ministry of cultural affairs as allowance, whereas he received Tk 1,000 per month in 1995-96. He is a listed composer of the then Radio Pakistan and Bangladesh Betar.

Someday, the septuagenarian hopes all his works would be published. His hopes and creative impulses see him through the days and nights of extreme hardship.

Taking Humble Banana to Promising Heights

BANANA trees seem to sprout up in every nook and corner in Bangladesh. It's so much a part of the landscape, one hardly seems to notice them. The fruit itself is so much a part of the average diet, that one tends to take the humble banana for granted. But tissue culture is now taking his household fruit to promising height, spelling economic benefits for the farmers who are willing to modernise their methods.

"If you visit Nawab Ali's field at Madhabdi, Nasingdi," says Planttech Ltd's senior agronomist, "You'll be impressed at the extraordinary growth of his banana trees where he has resorted to tissue culture." Nawab Ali is just one of the many farmers who are taking advantage of Planttech's efforts to produce an improved

variety of banana. Planttech is one of the country's few private sector laboratories which currently runs a programme aimed at familiarising tissue culture techniques among farmers. They are well aware that traditional farmers will never accept propagated plants without proof that the methods are safe and effective and so are now running trials for the farmers to see the results for themselves. One major advantage is that tissue culture is a very simple method which can easily be adopted by the farmers with no additional technical know-how.

With growing demands in the food sector, conventional methods to banana cultivation are both labourious and time consuming. Additionally, ba-

nana plants are susceptible to various fungal and bacterial diseases like panama (furastium), black leaf streak, bacterial wilt and more. Such diseases have a harmful effect on banana plantation in Bangladesh and recent reports have shown a sharp decline in *sabri* banana production in the northern regions of the country. This will unfortunately continue unless disease-free varieties are planted. The Tissue Culture Laboratory of CVRC, BARI (Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute), has been working on the production of bananas derived from tissue culture. The laboratory has been working on three varieties so far, *amritsar*, *champa* and *sabri*. The results point to a better performance in banana cultivation, particularly regarding the height of the

plants, rooting ability, weight, uniformity of the fruit, overall quality and such and these resulting bananas are proving to have a distinct marketable advantage over the conventional type. The growth period of bananas derived from tissue culture has been about a month less than the normally grown bananas.

The Commercial Production Through Tissue Culture is a project being funded by the World Bank through BARC and is the first of its kind. The World Bank is providing a total amount of \$ 162 million for 1998-2000 to further agro-based research in the country. BARC has encouraged the private sector to enter the field of tissue culture and Planttech was initially given \$1 million for the

purpose. "We noticed that tissue culture technology was being limited to test tubes in laboratories," said Dr Mohammed Abdur Razzak, Chief Scientific Officer (Crops) of BARC. "So we decided to finance this project, hoping it to interest and benefit both farmers and entrepreneurs."

The project's main objectives are standardisation of disease-free bananas for commercial production and also to motivate and train farmers to grow the improved plants.

It was in the early eighties that experiments began in Bangladesh regarding tissue culture, but it had never really been taken to the farmers themselves in the broad sense of the word. The Rajshahi-based RANTIC had made some

strides in the field of tissue culture for potatoes. Similarly, the fields of orchid and bamboo tissue culture has seen some progress.

All evidence points that tissue culture can certainly be commercially viable. Tissue culture for banana has proven a success in the Philippines and Vietnam. In India, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Rwanda and the West Indies too, tissue culture is being used extensively to improve banana cultivation.

Bananas, as it is, have prolific growth in Bangladesh, with an estimated 96,000 acres producing 650 tons of the fruit annually. With improved production, Bangladesh will certainly have potential of supply the huge global market for this ever popular fruit. According to research car-

ried out by Dhaka University's Botany Department, micro-propagated bananas are better in respect of yield and they mature earlier too. This will certainly reap financial profits for the farmers who resort to cultivation of micro-propagated bananas.

These bananas are a boon to the environment too. As the disease-free banana plantation minimises the use of pesticide, it is a deterrent to environmental pollution.

The humble banana is no longer being relegated to the lower rung of the fruit hierarchy. With tissue culture being brought to the level of the field and the farmer, Bangladesh is bound to see bananas bigger, better and bountiful. — Probe Feature