

Cruising on the Kaptai Lake

by Dr Mahfuzul Haque

FOR ten days we were on the Kaptai Lake, moving from one thana headquarter to the other and talking to growers, people. They were, in fact, authors of an environmental action plan for the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). We were surprised to find out how easily the apparently unlettered tribal men and women identified, and figured out solutions to, their problems. They know exactly what to do in a difficult terrain surrounded by the hills, hillocks, forests, lakes and rivers.

We were a group of officials, consultants from the ministry of environment and forest, UNDP and senior journalists of national dailies belonging to the Forum of Environmental Journalists in Bangladesh (FEJB). We were to conduct as many as 19 workshops all over the CHT. We had already conducted four workshops in Bandarban and were scheduled to hold six at thana headquarters surrounding the Kaptai Lake. Rangamati, Kaptai, Baghaichhari, Longadu, Barkal and Jurachhari.

It is always a pleasure to cruise on the Kaptai Lake in winter. No flash floods, no onrush of water, no turbidity. Blue water under the blue sky against dark green hills in the horizon creates a scenic beauty.

A group of boys and girls from Rangamati College were with us in their traditional dress. They were helping us as workshop volunteers.

The Kaptai Hydel Project, commissioned in the early 1960s with a capacity of 230 megawatt (MW), lost its significance as the country heads towards various large-headed power plants to meet the increasing demand of electricity. The project manager briefed us that, when installed, two more units would increase production by 100 MW. Present capacity met hardly one-twelfth of the country's total power consumption, he said.

Hydropower is very cheap and environment-friendly, as no pollution or effluents is discharged in the process. The main issue of concern over it these days is the permanent inundation of a vast area, loss of cropland, forests, displacement of people and impending risk of a breach in the embankment, which may cause a havoc. The lake submerged 250 square miles of prime agricultural land, which constituted 40 per cent of the total cultivable land in the CHT.

We started our journey from Rangamati, which took us to Kaptai and all the way to Baghaichhari, the northernmost thana of Rangamati on the Sajek valley. From there, we moved southward to Longadu, to Barkal and finally to Jurachhari. Various stakeholder groups - teachers, people's representatives, headman and karbaris, women, social workers, farmers and government officials in all the six places - identified some issues of concern, which were pretty similar everywhere. These were depletion of forests, adverse effects of *jhum* cultivation, depletion of fisheries, artificially high water level of Kaptai Lake, shortage of drinking water, lack of health and sanitation services, lack of education and awareness etc. While floating on the lake for days, we found bamboo trails, *haalis*, from Marishya down to Kaptai for over land transportation to the plain land. In each *chaali*, there were more than 30 to 40 thousand bamboo. Carrying cost of a bamboo comes to take three from Machalong to Kaptai. People said that forests are being cut for various reasons, unemployment and unusually high water level of Kaptai causing hindrance to fringing farming, unscientific *jhum* cultivation and land alienation by unscrupulous traders and forestry officials. They flagged in adverse effects of *jhum* cultivation but didn't opt for a total ban until a suitable alternative was found. They suggested that afforestation of the *jhum* land with horticulture would help. At some places, participants suggested terracing methods. In almost all the places, people raised concern on depletion of fisheries in number as well as in varieties.

The high water level of the Kaptai Lake was an issue of great concern everywhere.

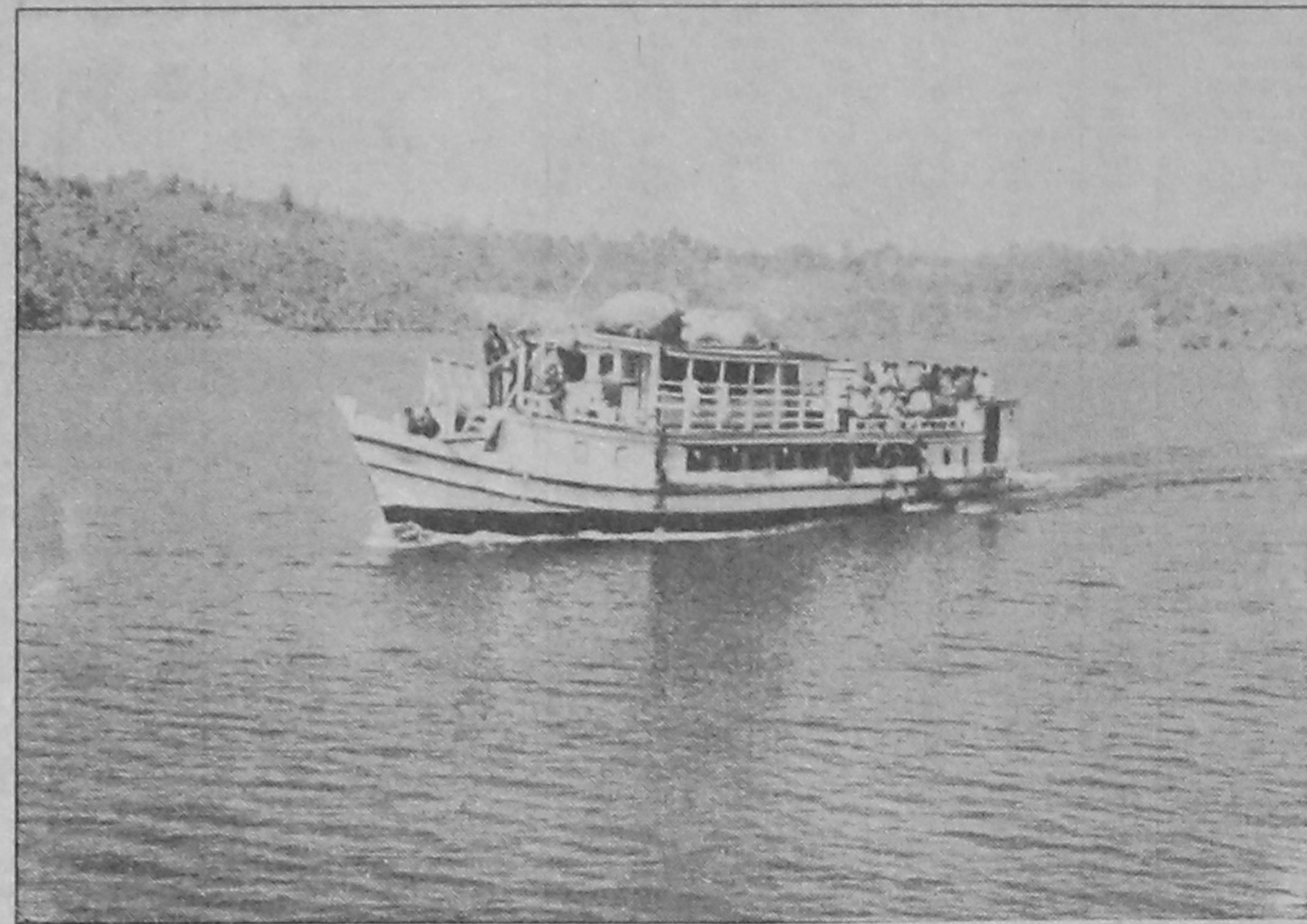
Farmers complained that the authority kept the water level arbitrarily high forcing them to abandon fringe-land cultivation. The project manager at Kaptai also admitted that instead of 99 ft MSL (mean sea level), the level has been kept at 103 ft MSL, which is a violation of the approved "Rule Curve". A four-foot lowering of water level could have helped many fringing farmers to cultivate rice. They did not accept PDB's explanation that high water level was needed for lean period production and to allow riverine transportation. The farmers were of the opinion that PDB was indifferent to their miseries, as the fringe-lands were *khas* lands. They suggested that the lake level be kept at 60 ft MSL. In all the places, particu-

valong, Kattali, Longadu/Maynimukh, Duchechari and finally Marishya. Kachalong is navigable not more than nine months a year. During the rest period, small boats can ply. There are a good number of launch services in the district. The longest and most profitable passenger route is the Rangamati-Marishya one, which takes seven hours in a non-stop launch for Taka 50 only. Other launch services are Rangamati-Barkal-Harina, Rangamati-Jurachhari, Rangamati-Nannerchar, Rangamati-Kaptai etc. The first three routes would invariably touch upon Shuvalong on the way. During the lean period from March to May, smaller boats continue to serve these routes. At some places in the dry season, like at Jurach-

more than a dozen people for two nights. From Marishya, the next morning, we left for Longadu, another three-hour journey down south the Kachalong. Longadu is encircled by many man-made islands. We were stationed at Maynimukh forest rest house facing the lake, for three nights. The guest register kept at the dak bungalow was a book of treasure. The register opened since 1927 contained signatures and comments by many heads of state and government, General Ayub Khan and President Ziaur Rahman to name two.

At Longadu, following the workshop, we had a full day for rest. We left for a day-long trip to Atarokkhara union by an engine boat. We were lucky that the area was still navigable.

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ipants mentioned serious scarcity of drinking water. We found no tubewell at Rangamati, Barkal or at Jurachhari because it was difficult to find water level there. At Barkal, local government officials and members of BDR were found drinking fountain water by putting up an embankment. People suggested that storage of fountain water, locally known as *jhirs*, would help solve the problem. Seepage water from the hills was also found to be crystal clear.

Scarcity of doctors and lack of health services was identified prominently. At Jurachhari, the participants said that unwillingness of the government officials to work in the CHT was creating obstacles for implementation of many development projects. They called for measures like assurance of not more than a year of mandatory posting in CHT, increased hill allowances etc. Regarding primary school teachers, they suggested recruitment of tribal teachers and introduction of their mother tongue from third grade. The other issues of concern were flash floods, soil erosion, river erosion, hill cutting, invasion of wild elephants, rats and pigs, agrochemicals, lack of electricity, poor communication system, landslides etc.

While winding up the river Kachalong towards Baghaichhari/Marishya in the north, we found a vast stretch of land was flat and under water. A few feet lowering of water would have caused it to rise allowing cultivation of the fringe-lands. Many fishing nets on the river Kachalong made our journey slower as we had to move between the lines. Marishya was 6/7 hours of launch journey from Rangamati through the river Kachalong. The lake *ghats* that fall on the way were Shu-

hari, people used to wade through muddy fields for couple of hours to reach the launch *ghat*. While at Baghaichhari, we discovered a new road communicating Baghaichhari and Chittagong via Dighinala and Khagrachhari. It saves time and hassle of going through Rangamati. From Baghaichhari, one can move upstream through the river Kachalong up to Machalong *ghat*, from where the only way to go to Sajek valley is trekking for days through the dense forest.

Rangamati sounds enchanting to the people of the plains. Once posted to a thana headquarters there, all dreams are shattered. Most of the thanas are connected with the district town by the lake only. Road communication in the district has never been developed because of the lake. Especially in the dry season, people wade for hours to reach the launch *ghats*. At many places, the participants raised the communication issue, although not directly related to environment. At Jurachhari, they suggested that Barkal, Jurachhari and Blaichhari could be connected with Rangamati under a road network. At Longadu, people suggested stretching of road from Longadu to Dighinala and to Nannerchar. Progress for infrastructure development is rather slow. Biswajit Chakma (Ariyappa), the present UP Chairman of Rupokar union at Baghaichhari said that an *Bert bandh* (embankment) has been planned to drain water logged in the *beels* of northern Kaptai plains. People fear that such a project needs to address the adverse environmental impacts prior to its implementation.

At Marishya, we stayed in a boarding house and shared a common bath and toilet with

once a battle ground and refuge for Shanti Bahini men. Nearly, 2000 men of Shanti Bahini were rehabilitated with ration for a year as a follow-up of the peace accord. Some got the job of police sergeants. Shashanka Shekhar Chakma, the headman entertained us with a good lunch - rice from *jhum* field, dry fish and egg curry. They suggested that an embankment would help storage of water for irrigation during the dry season. Coming back from there, we visited the Mynimukh bazaar and it was a *haat* day. The tribal community from nearby villages was seen selling local produce. The only mode of transport is *dinghy* boats and everybody at Longadu happened to know rowing.

Ten days of sojourn appeared to be very tiring and monotonous, watching the same lake, same blue water and skies, same hills and fields, same faces of ours, same people - men and women on a boat that knows only to move on and on. On our eighth day, we were at Barkal, another inaccessible area on the river Karnaphuli, where no water is found for drinking except from the fountains. High ridges on both sides of the river towered over Barkal, the sleepy hamlet thana headquarters of Rangamati in the far-east. People complained that deer once seen roaming in the hills a few years ago are fast vanishing. At Harina bazaar, deer meat is sold at Taka 80 per kg. People also complained of attack by wild elephants and pigs as the size of their habitat was getting smaller.

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En route to extinction

by Tarekul Islam Munna

TODAY, one out of eight bird species in the world faces extinction. Studies reveal that 1,200 species run the risk of being wiped out from the face of the earth just as the slender-billed grackle of Mexico, the laughing owl of New Zealand and 33 other birds did in the 20th century. A further 600 to 900 species are close to being added to the list, thanks to poaching, habitat destruction, intensive agriculture and introduction of alien predators such as rats and cats.

These claims have been made by ornithologists whose findings were presented to Queen Noor of Jordan at an international conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Queen Noor, a keen birdwatcher, said: "The prospect of one in eight of our birds disappearing forever is unthinkable. But these figures are the signs of an even sadder tragedy. Environmental degradation is now having a very real effect on the lives of millions of people, especially the poor and disadvantaged."

The conference was organised by BirdLife International, based in Cambridge, an umbrella body for bird organisations and research worldwide. Studies indicate that extinction is a natural process but should occur at a rate of one species every century. Since 1800, at least 74 species, including the passenger pigeon, have died out. The studies, compiled for the Threatened Birds of the World report for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List, show the countries with the most threatened species as: Brazil with 111, Indonesia, 94; Colombia, 81; Peru, 79; India, 70; the Philippines, 69; Ecuador, 65; New Zealand, 65; United States, 56; Mexico, 49; Australia, 49; Argentina, 42; Thailand, 42; Burma, 41; Vietnam, 38; Russian Federation, 35; Japan, 34; Papua New Guinea, 32; Madagascar, 30; and Tanzania, 30. Of the species at risk, 75 per cent are forest dwellers, of the 185 thought to be critically endangered 66 are under no conservation measures.

The bald ibis was once found in southern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. The only wild birds are now confined to Morocco, where 60 breeding pairs remain. Its decline is due to intensive agriculture and pesticides. The slender billed curlew, which breeds in Russia, has suffered steep decline in number and is now only occasionally sighted.

Others running the risk of extinction include white bald stork, with only 14 now in the wild; kukupu, Hawaiian honey-creep, with 30 wild birds seen since the 1980s; santonian nightjar of Sulawesi; Gurney's pitta, down to 24 to 34 pairs in Thailand and threatened by logging; and Spix's macaw, with only one wild bird remaining in Brazil. The corn-crake is one of the few European species considered in danger of extinction, as intensive agriculture has reduced the late-cut hay or silage meadows they need to thrive.

Cormorants have declined by up to 25 per cent in Europe in a decade, with 100,000 to 200,000 males left. The Royal Society for Protection of Birds says that a vast population still remains in the former Soviet Union where intensive agriculture could be the last straw. The "crek crek" of the cormorant was once common across Britain on summer nights. By the early 1990s, there were fewer than 150 singing males concentrated in north and west Scotland and Ireland.

Throughout the world there are about 9,000 species of birds, among which about 170 species have already been extinct. In Bangladesh there are about 650 species and five of them have become extinct, a good number has become endangered and a large number threatened. The extinct birds of Bangladesh are pinkhead duck, Bengal florican, peafowl, king vulture and greater adjutant.

The causes behind the extinction of or decline in bird population are many, among which are:

1. habitat destruction
2. random killing
3. carelessness in implementation of laws and orders of Wildlife Conservation
4. uncontrolled use of pesticides
5. illiteracy
6. lack of public awareness
7. poaching
8. negligence in management of declared protected areas

With the increase of human population the habitats of birds are being destroyed. Their habitat is used for houses, agricultural lands, roads, highways, and industries.

Birds in our country are being trapped in random. Of the 650 species of birds in our country about 200 are migratory. Resident as well as migratory birds are very regularly trapped by some people, especially during winter when the migratory birds come to our country after flying thousands of miles from Europe, America, Siberia. During flight they virtually take no

food and by the time they reach Bangladesh they become so exhausted that they can hardly move. So one can easily catch them even by hand. Like most of the countries of the world there is a law for conservation of wildlife in Bangladesh. It came as an ordinance in 1973 and was passed into act in 1974. But till now it has not been implemented properly.

A considerable amount of pesticides is used every year in our agriculture fields to control pests. These pesticides i.e. insecticides, rodenticides as well as herbicides are used without proper knowledge of dosage, time of application and stage of pests. As a result, a good number of birds, especially baby birds, die of poisoning and some become sterile.

Poachers always set traps and collect birds of different kinds to sell them in and outside the country. A major part of our population is illiterate. They are ignorant of the value of bird-wealth. They are not aware of the contribution of birds to ecological system as well as to our economy.

Bird trade is also a very important reason for decline in bird population. Without any restriction this business is going on, especially with caged birds such as parakeets, murias, doves, pigeons, etc.

In our country there are some reserves such as national park, sanctuaries, game reserves, recreation park etc. But these exist only in name since their proper status has not been maintained and some of these are even not operation. The government has allocated some fund but unfortunately these are not being used properly. This is because experts in the respective fields are never involved. As a result, virtually no development programme for conservation or management has been successful.

So, for better protection of birds from extinction following measures could be taken. Survey of the status of different species of birds i.e., we have to find out the exact figure of their population. On the basis of this survey special attention may be paid to the endangered species i.e., sanctuaries are to be patrolled regularly. Surrounding these sanctuaries as well as other protected areas, buffer zones may be declared to avoid human interference.

Poaching and illegal bird trade should be controlled by implementation of conservation act and by punishing the violators. In the use of pesticides we must be very careful. For this purpose biological pest control may be

considered and before the use of pesticides, users should be properly trained. Awareness about the importance of birds for the environment, agriculture and fish production should be created through publicity. For this purpose, our communication media i.e. newspapers, radio, television etc. play a very important role.

Farming and captive breeding of different groups of birds i.e. game birds such as dove, pigeons, fowls, moorhens, waterfowls, kailms etc. should be encouraged. For this purpose, caged birds and pet birds may also be considered. National zoo may play an important role in this respect and a research programme may be initiated. Unfortunately, there is no zoologist in our zoos. Nowhere in the world is a zoo run without a zoologist. Initiative should be taken immediately by the present government in this regard. We should be aware of the fact that our ever-increasing population puts severe pressure on birds' habitat. Without population control we will never be able to save birds. Plantation of trees and protection of greenery around us is a must. Specialists should be appointed for different protected areas like national parks, sanctuaries etc.

For conservation of migratory birds, especially ducks, wetlands must be protected. They may be declared as sanctuaries, if needed. The migratory ducks are greylag goose, bar-headed goose, brahmury duck, shelduck, tuft duck, pintail, common teal, mallard, gadwall, gargary, shoveller, red crested pochard, common pochard, etc.

For protection and management of birds, international co-operation from different organisations such as IUCN, WWF, NWF, SSC, etc. is needed. Besides, our national organisations such as Wildlife Society of Bangladesh (WSB), Bangladesh Bird Preservation Society (BBPS) etc. are also working in this field. The government of a country alone is not sufficient to do this job. Conservation and management of nature and natural resources like birds in any country can never be possible if the people in general are not co-operative and respective organisations are not interested and active sufficiently.

The writer is a correspondent of the American Image Press, member of the WWF International and the International Wildlife Coalition (IWC), and estate planner of the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), USA

In quest of invisible history

An organisation is planning to set up Britain's first black museum in the heart of London. Its aim is to reveal the "invisible" history of the role played by people of African and Caribbean origin in British history, writes Doug Alexander of Gemini News Service from London

BRITAINS have been in Britain for nearly 1,800 years, but that is not a fact you will find in any British history textbook.

Nor will you read about Mary Seacole, part Jamaican, part Scottish, who tended wounded British soldiers during the Crimean War in 1854-56 - similar circumstances that brought fame to her white contemporary, Florence Nightingale.

And many other influences from Britain's blacks, who today number 1.2 million, remain invisible to an overwhelmingly white society that struggles to overcome racism and discrimination.

"The invisibility is due to the way in which history has been written up and what has been left out," says London's Middlesex University professor Lola Young. The evidence of black presence is there, she adds, "but we have to look for it."

Young is part of a project to establish the National Museum and Archives of Black History and Culture to highlight the "forgotten and ignored" contributions of those whose ancestors hailed from Africa and the Caribbean.

A new breed of Britons



Population of Britain by ethnic group

Caribbean	526,000	0.9%
African	352,000	0.6%
Black Other	307,000	0.5%
Indian	925,000	1.8%
Pakistani	587,000	1%
Bangladeshi	209,000	0.4%
Chinese	157,000	0.3%
Other Asian	192,000	0.3%
Others	344,000	0.6%
All ethnic groups	3.5m	6.4%
White	52.0m	93.6%

"British history is like a tapestry with all the black threads pulled out of it," she says. "What this project tries to do is re-insert those threads into the tapestry so we get a more multi-layered sense of British history."

Middlesex University and an organisation called the Black Cultural Archives are collaborating to conserve and catalogue 20,000 documents and 5,000 artefacts currently crammed into a building that once served as a bank in Brixton, an area of London with a large black community.

The project has already received £344,000 from the national lottery.

The ultimate goal is to build a £10 million museum by 2010 to house a collection demonstrating the impact of black people on Britain's past and present. Blacks make up about one-third of Britain's ethnic population, second only in number to people of South Asian origin. Ethnic groups comprise 6.4 per cent of the overall population of 57 million, according to government statistics.

Project co-ordinator and archivist Sam Walker says black involvement in British history has been "minimised, ignored, distorted" and notes that little is taught in schools about black people.

"Slavery was the only topic that was mentioned, in a very negative and patronising sort of way," he argues. "There was no mention of black peoples' history before or after slavery, nor was there anything of the positive contributions of the black people to the development of

society." Walker makes his point while sifting through some of the artefacts: a document of slave ownership on Caribbean plantations dated 1728, playing cards decorated with a caricature black child dancing under the worst "One Little Nigger Boy" fading photos and old newspapers.

Walker says the failure to provide historical material on the black contribution to British history has created a systematic bias in the school curriculum and a failure to put Africa, the Indian sub-continent and Caribbean in proper historical context. This, he says, has exacerbated "racist notions and the fallacious misrepresentation that black people have not contributed in any way to Britain's development."

Britain's school curriculum has been revamped to provide more "cultural diversity" in art and design, drama, English, geography, history and music, starting September 2000. But Chris Myant of the government-funded Commission for Racial Equality says more needs to be done.

"In our education system we simply have wiped out the presence of black people in the past," he notes. "We are arguing with those in charge of the curriculum that their work has not gone far enough - there's still an atmosphere, perpetuated by the curriculum, that Britain is white. That doesn't give pupils from our diverse enrolment a sense and feeling that this is a society they play a natural part in, and it doesn't give them self-confidence."

The museum project aims to

influence the school syllabus and college courses, which Walker admits is a tough challenge. "It's controversial. You're sometimes challenging the mainstream, the status quo."

In setting up the museum, Walker is careful to avoid segregating the contributions of black people in Britain.

"There is nothing called 'black history' but there is 'British history', he observes. The archives will be split into four categories: contemporary history from 1960 to the present; the first half of the 20th century; the Atlantic slave trade; and the history of black people in Europe from 208 AD to the 1890s.

Roman Emperor Septimus Severus stationed a garrison that included soldiers recruited from Africa to guard Hadrian's Wall in the north of what is now England in 208 AD during his campaigns against the Picts to the north. Others speculate that blacks arrived in 50 AD when people from across Europe and Africa spilled into the Roman settlement Londinium, now modern London.

In the early days of the slave trade, English merchant John Lok returned from a voyage to Ghana in 1555 with five Africans who were taught English so they could serve as interpreters. One stayed in London, married an Englishwoman and settled, marking the beginning of a continuous black presence in London.

By 1601, Queen Elizabeth I had issued a proclamation that "black and white" and "blackamoors" on the grounds that they were using up resources and taking jobs.

Trade fair fares fair

by A Maher

ONCE again as in the past several years, the usual throbbing of the city's fanfare culture is back to accompany a smoggy and fading winter. With somewhat of the chilly bite still remaining, the Dhaka International Trade Fair (DITF) 2000 has the atmosphere around Sher-e-Bangla Nagar buzzing again. This time there are over 380 stalls and makeshift shops dotted all over and people are pouring in everyday to see the surprises. And speaking of surprises there was an unusual one in the air hanging at much less of an overzealous purchasing mood than what was thought to be prevailing. But people were there, thousands of them; it appeared almost half in ten were there just to window-shop. For others it was little knickknacks for themselves and family.

As with previous exhibitions, car parking was another troublesome experience; visitors complained that tickets had to be renewed every two hours - hardly enough time to scour the premises properly. There were several agents who claimed to be in charge of parking but there were instances of a car owner being approached twice by these people. Once in-

side, the space looked more organised than last year maybe because of the fact that stalls and booths were physically placed more efficiently. But that was compensated for by the human swarm that engulfed almost every stall. Well, almost every stall.

Saikat Aziz came with his wife and two children.

"We are only looking at the big items this time - the last three years we have exhausted our taste for clothes, toiletries and household items. For me, I liked some of the installment offers from a few real estate companies," he said.

Apart from a few like Saikat, who planned to go home with an apartment, others crowded at the foreign stalls a lot, with the Egyptian pharaohs absolutely captivating with their e-mail length papyrus messages. Perfumes were the most sought after (or looked after, for those with money to

seek after first) with divine nomenclature after Ramases, Zeus and his cousins. The intrinsic decorum of the stall even got to some of them, one of whom claimed that Queen Nephritis winked at him but this was strongly denied by the owners.

Nearly all the foreign stalls had favourable number of visitors and when asked the owners and representatives replied they did not have any difficulty in procurement of the stall-space, especially with respect to co-operation from the fair authorities. The same may have come with the local exhibitors but it was felt in some cases that a few things were not going so smoothly. There were quite a few companies this time making their debut in the country's premier trade show and these people allegedly had to overcome tough red tape for spaces.

Noticeably the buying mentality was a change. A number

of visitors confided that they were really not interested to buy anything - it was another evening out with the family. Regarding fairs and exhibitions, they confided that the overwhelming number of expositions and shows from the beginning of the millennium had their financially tight on their budgets.

Shamim Ahmed, a visitor and also an engineer with a garment exporting firm, said, "Look at how many festivals and expositions we have had since January; there was Eid, the millennium celebrations and several displays of electrical equipment at different hotels. Now we have the DITF - this should have been organised a bit later to let people recover a bit and at the same time enjoy something at the middle of the year."

Nevertheless, the organisers had a contrasting picture of the whole affair.

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