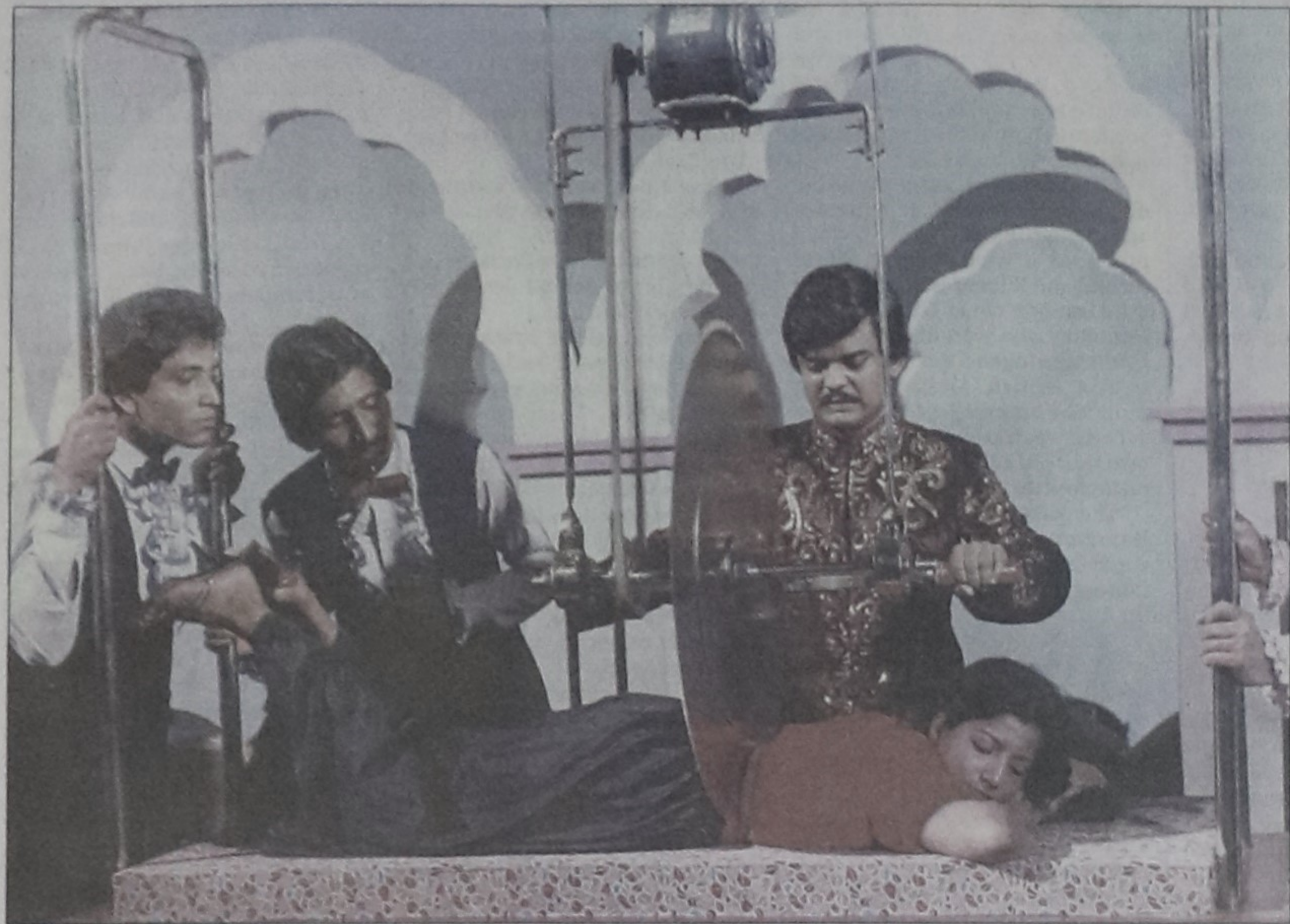


In 1676, Shayesta Khan built Chakbazar Shahi Masjid, one of the oldest mosques in Dhaka, on a 10-metre high platform. The area of the mosque was 7840 square feet. The platform housed some shops. The rent of these shops was used to upkeep the mosque. Nayeab and Nazirs of Dhaka came here for Eid prayers. The mosque was a typical Shayesta Khan style, last now due to reconstruction.



Jewel Aich performing his most popular and stunning work of slicing woman's body at a show and magician Ulfat Kabir entertaining children.



## city express

The latest crop of quotes from the city's press -- words worth repeating, we feel, for their humour, insight or sheer outrageousness. Star City does not necessarily support the opinions expressed in this column.

*"It will not be right to compare with the reign of Shayesta Khan."*

-- Mirza Azizul Islam  
Finance Adviser  
Said while talking about increasing price of essentials at a seminar organised by Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), Bangladesh Economy Association and Oxfam at DCCI's auditorium, on Saturday. Source: Prothom Alo

*"Increasing the price of rice is not a matter at all because the money is going to the farmers' pockets after all."*

-- Dr CS Karim  
Agriculture Adviser  
Told reporters when asked about the high price of rice even after the bumper harvest, on Monday. Source: Bhorer Kago

*"Cases are being filed like serial bombings so that if one fails the other one works."*

-- Khandakar Delwar Hossain  
Secretary General, BNP  
Told reporters, on Friday. Source: Jugantor

*"Awami League will never support the campaign that represses politics in the name of curbing corruption."*

-- Sheikh Hasina  
Awami League Chief  
Told reporters at Toronto in Canada, on Thursday. Source: Jugantor

*"Avoid anything that may force the political parties to confront you."*

-- Tofail Ahmed  
AL leader  
Told reporters while talking about the government policies, on Saturday. Source: Jugantor

*"The most affected ones in Sidr received the least aid."*

-- Dr Kazi Kholiqzaman  
Economist  
Told a discussion programme by Action Aid, on Wednesday. Source: Prothom Alo

*"We talk about climate change and its impact on nature, but we cannot realise what we have done to our own city by damaging its drainage system."*

-- Prof Muzaffer Ahmad  
President, Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (Bapa)  
Said at a press conference at Dhaka Reporters' Unity, on Saturday. Source: The Daily Star

Compiled by Durdana Ghilas

## The art of illusion losing way

Despite popularity magic shows steadily decreasing for 'various reasons'

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

A pin-drop silence descends in the dark shadowy auditorium. Hundreds of audience are waiting in suspense with pouncing hearts. At the centre of the stage is a young woman trapped in a box waiting to be cut into pieces. Background music intensifies creating an ominous ambience. The illusionist appears on the scene, with sharp blades he is about to use flashing in the dim light. With a sombre expression in the face he examines the sharpness of the blades.

Then, with a sleight of hand he performs the stunning work of art. He slices the woman's body into two pieces while she still smiles. The overwhelmed audience breaks the silence with rapturous applause.

This is a classic depiction of magic, a form of art that was an integral part of Bangladesh's culture.

Jewel Aich, the king of illusion, explains the present status of magic in Bangladesh.

"There used to be quite a number of stage shows in the city and elsewhere in the country," he recalled the days in 1970s and '80s. "However, the number of shows has dropped off in recent times. There are various reasons behind it."

Jewel attributes the fall to the recent incidents of terror attacks on cinema, jatra and other cultural activities in Bangladesh.

He pointed out that in Bangladesh it is quite difficult to choose magic as a profession in the first place. "There are not many people who would encourage their children to learn magic instead of taking a steady career path. There are social acceptance of magic but not enough to take it as a profession."

Jewel said although there are a lot of room for newcomers to join the profession but there are not many natural talents in this field. "A magician requires a lot of study and research because it follows scientific methods. It also involves huge expense for apparatus."

"But the reality is one has to think about his stomach first, not his heart. This causes a major setback for the art of magic to develop in Bangladesh," he explained.

"We cannot expect quality magic to grow as there is no insti-

tion. But look at me now -- magic is the only thing I have in my life. The audience is also more enthusiastic these days," said the great magician.

Jewel noted names of several other magicians who left it all to pursue their dream.

**There are not many people who would encourage their children to learn magic instead of taking a steady career path. There are social acceptance of magic but not enough to take it as a profession**

ture to tutor or train magicians. The magicians of today are all self-taught," Jewel said.

He said it is only possible with profound passion and dedication.

"When we first started it was beyond our belief that we would be able to persist with the profes-

sion. But look at me now -- magic is the only thing I have in my life. The audience is also more enthusiastic these days," said the great magician.

Jewel noted names of several other magicians who left it all to pursue their dream.

Prakash Shaha entertains the residents of Khulna while Kanchan bedazzles Sylhet.

The art and these magicians are striving to survive in an alternative style.

Magic shows in birthday parties, picnics, school functions, product promotion and launching, and performances in restaurants have become the hottest new trend in the city attracting a great number of audience, keeping the art alive.

Ulfat Kabir said, "Magic shows for children in birthdays or picnics were once popular among the foreigners only. Now it is as important as a birthday cake among a segment of Dhaka dwellers."

"Once only performed by the street magicians or by the gypsies, magic has reached all the way to the homes of well-off families and to posh restaurants. This is a good sign," he believes.

"The most amazing thing about magic is that language is not a barrier for the audience.

Anyone can understand the acts. So it is very easy to popularise the art," Ulfat noted.

Echoing Jewel, he said household public shows are now missing. Public shows have become extremely expensive in Bangladesh as there are very few places to buy necessary props, apparatus and books in the country.

"We have to bring them from abroad or sometimes we make them by ourselves. But we don't have any experts to help out with that either. This process increases the cost of tickets for general audience," Ulfat said.

He said only a few prop stores in Dhaka are the source of package courses for interested apprentices. These stores often offer 30 to 40 magic tricks for Tk 300 or more.

Both the magicians are however optimistic about the future. The situation can be improved if sponsors come forward, they said. They stressed the need for state's involvement in increasing appreciation for magic.

## THREE BNH RESEARCH LABORATORIES SET UP IN '99

# Born to remain under lock and key

TAWFIQUE ALI

All three research laboratories at Bangladesh National Herbarium (BNH) have been under lock and key since their setting up in 1999.

Dr Mahbuba Khanom, director in-charge of the BNH, said they need scientists with applied knowledge to run the labs but they have no such scientists.

Researchers said laboratory work is vital for plant taxonomy (identification and classification), which is the fundamental job of the institution, but the laboratories are lying inoperative in absence of basic apparatus and chemicals.

On the other hand, a number of modern research equipment are lying unused in these laboratories -- anatomy and cytology lab, tissue culture lab, and biochemical lab.

Scientists at BNH said expensive equipment including two compound photomicroscopes and one microtome machine have not yet been unwrapped from packages.

The labs were established and the equipment were procured in September 1999 with the fund from the UK Department For International Development (DFID).

Prof Mahfuzur Rahman, chairman of Botany Department at Jahangirnagar University, said "I, as a scientific officer, left the BNH in 1991 simply because there was no research work and no recognition to and inspiration for research."

He said a number of other scientists have also left BNH for the same reason.

According to inside sources, the labs were set up in an unplanned manner. Growth

chambers at the tissue culture lab are lying vacant without any plants.

Electric balance (scale), distillation plant (for water distillation), and microwave are required to set up a functional tissue culture lab.

Scientists at BNH said tissue culture research is crucial for conservation of endangered plants and in producing plants on commercial basis.

They also said while the government is spending money on the BNH with no income generation, tissue culture research could have been a source of revenue income.

Biochemical research is vital for establishing applied scientific knowledge of plants, the scientists said adding that it might also help produce herbal products.

Anatomical and cytological research is vital for enrichment

of existing taxonomical knowledge. It is all the more crucial for characterisation of plants to establish Intellectual Property Right of the local plants.

There is research work at BNH as the labs are closed.

Bushra Khan, a senior scientific officer (SSO) of BNH, said the labs could not be made functional as required scientists have not been recruited.

Walior Rahman, another SSO, also said they do not have scientists to run the labs.

**HISTORY OF BNH**

The BNH was set up in 1958, according to a publication of the Ministry of Environment and Forests in May 2001.

Later, the Tropical Herbarium Inspectors Committee at the UNESCO Symposium held in Dhaka on March 3, 1968 raised the Lahore proposal again.

Finally, the BNH got its primary structure in 1970 in a development project titled 'Botanical Survey of East Pakistan' founded at the Department of Botany of Dhaka University.

The project assumed the name as Botanical Survey of Bangladesh in 1971 after independence and continued as a project until July 1999, when it was taken under revenue budget. It has been known as Bangladesh National Herbarium since July 1, 1994 by an executive order of the Cabinet Division.

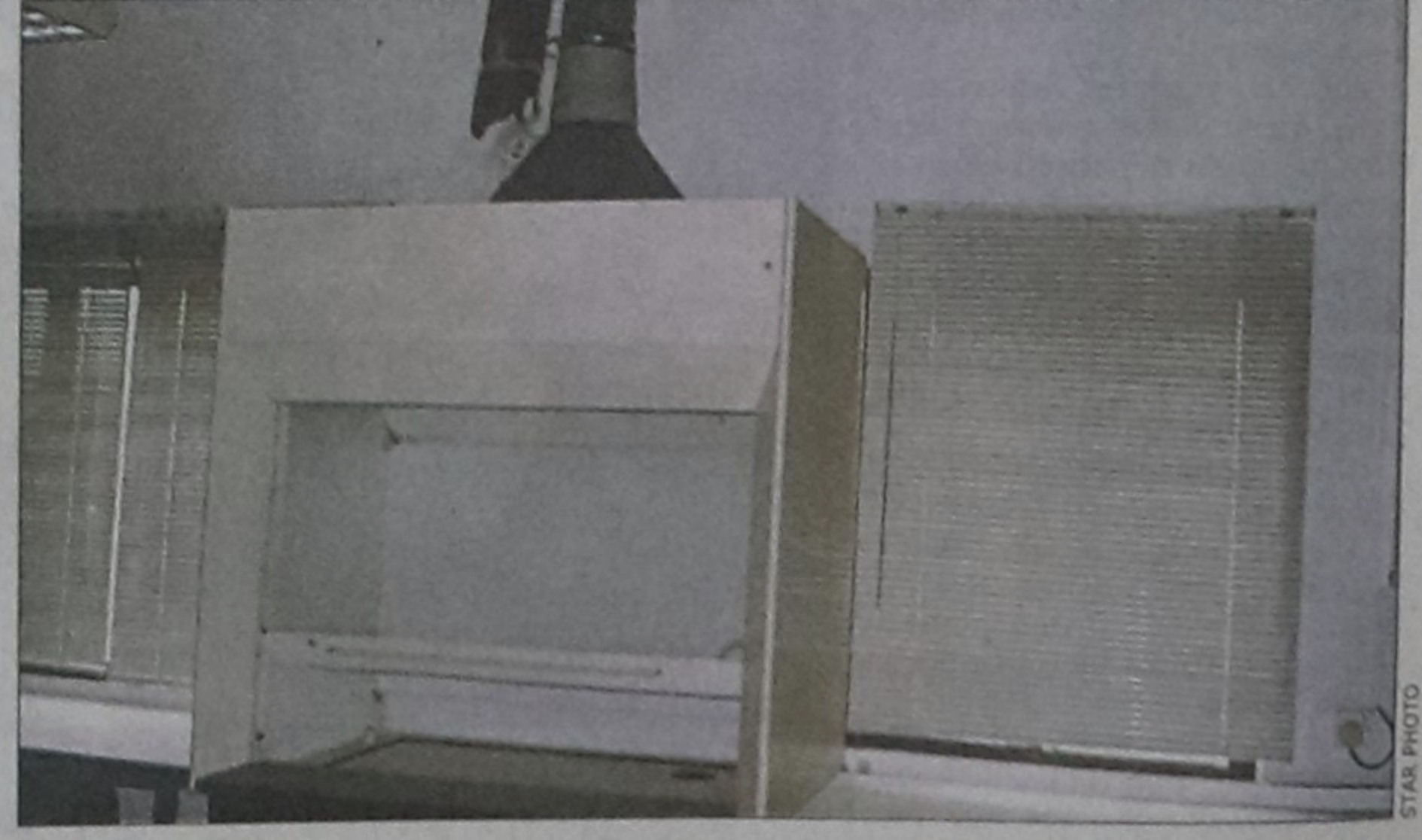
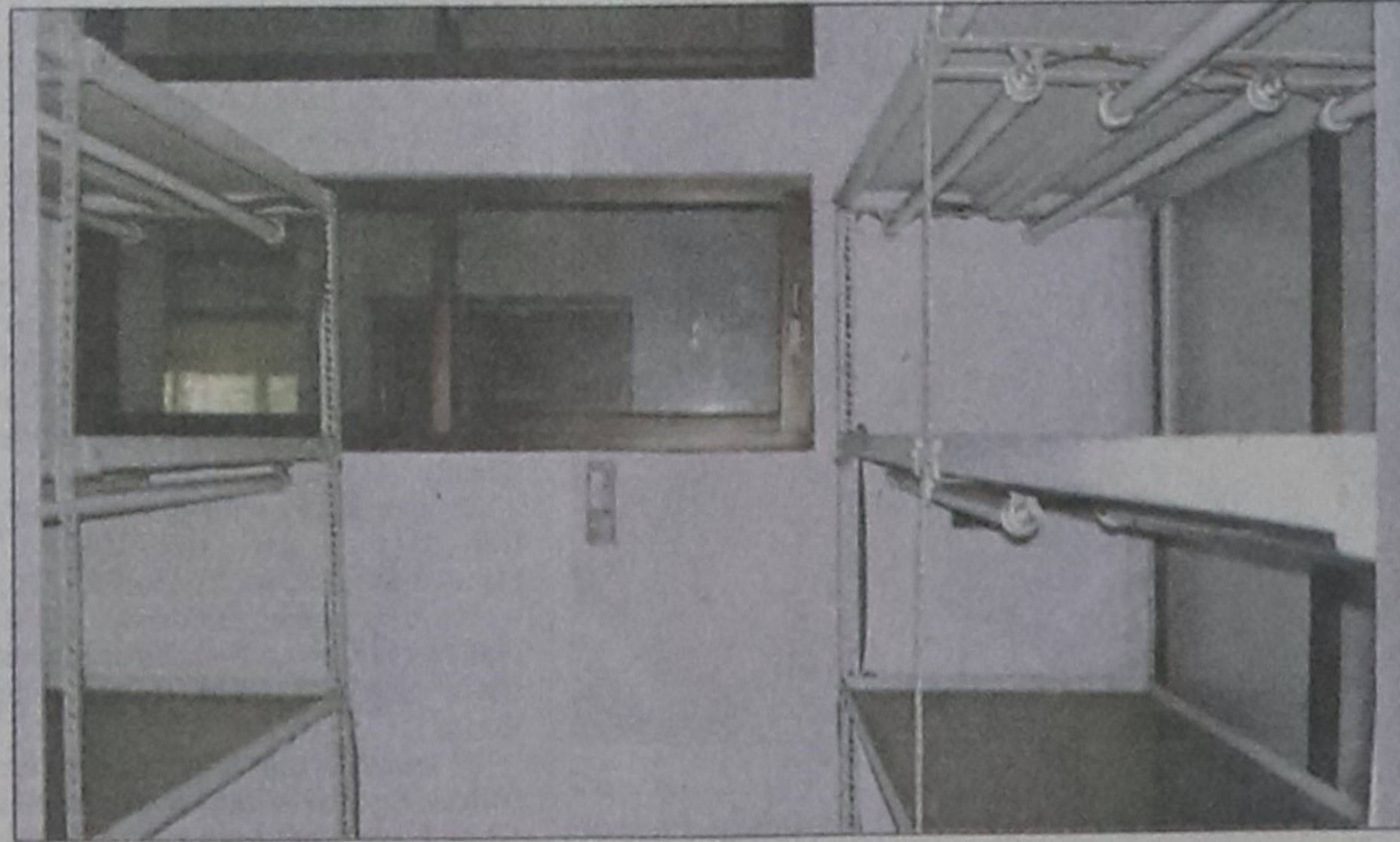
The idea of establishing a national herbarium in Bangladesh was first proposed at a meeting in Lahore on August

18, 1958, according to a publication of the Ministry of Environment and Forests in May 2001.

Later, the Tropical Herbarium Inspectors Committee at the UNESCO Symposium held in Dhaka on March 3, 1968 raised the Lahore proposal again.



A laboratory of the Bangladesh National Herbarium gives a deserted look.



From left: Carbolite incubator and Leica dissecting microtome machine, expensive microscopes lie idle while growth chamber of tissue culture lab and fumigation chamber of biochemical lab remain unused.