

## The bio-tech solution

Modern bio-technology could help us to regain our predominant position as a producer and exporter of jute and jute products through the production of genetically modified jute varieties with improved fibre qualities and better ability to withstand diseases and adverse environmental stress.

AHMED A. AZAD

**I**NFORMATION and Communications Technology (ICT) and bio-technology are the two technologies that have made the biggest impact on human development in the last quarter century. The importance of ICT is well understood in Bangladesh and the incoming government has promised a "Digital Bangladesh" by 2021.

On the other hand the impact and potential of modern bio-technology is poorly understood by our policy makers even though this technology is likely to be one of the strongest weapons for attaining sufficiency in food and essential medicines, and for employment and wealth creation.

Even now traditional bio-technology is being used in rural areas for the production of bio-gas and bio-fertilisers from household and agricultural waste. Setting up of small production units throughout the country would help to meet some of our energy and fertiliser requirements, reduce pollution, and create jobs for the rural youth. However, it is modern bio-technology that will provide the biggest long-term benefits in innumerable ways of which only a few are mentioned here.

One of the biggest challenges facing Bangladesh is long-term food security. In spite of the doubling of population since

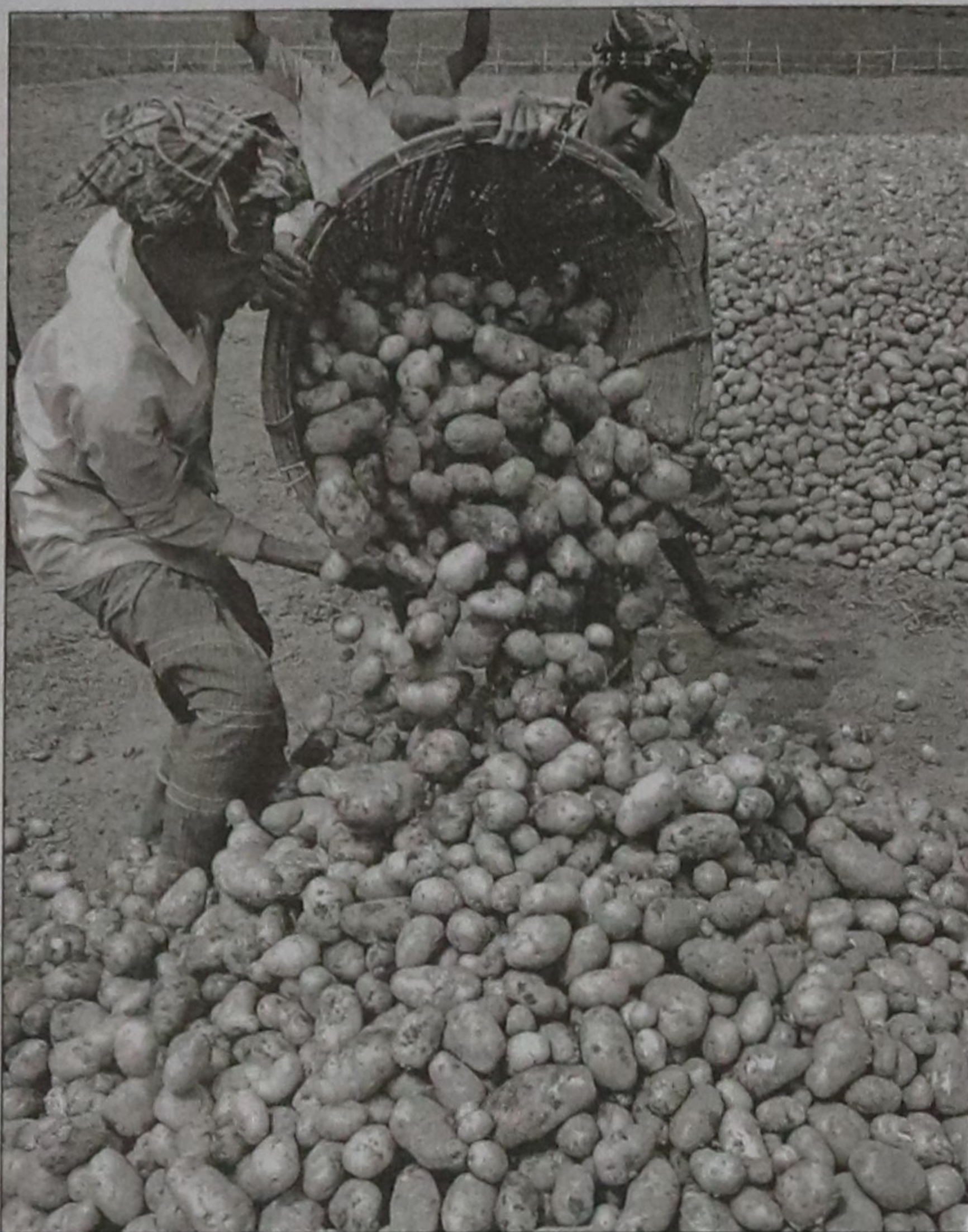
independence we had become largely self sufficient in food production by 1998 mainly due to the introduction of high-yielding crop varieties and use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

Since then, the situation has gone from bad to worse due to increasing population and decreasing arable land. Although marginal increase in food production can be achieved through better management and governance, and the use of improved hybrid technology, the existing technology has reached its limit. Global warming will put further pressure on domestic and international food production, and the vagaries of the international market will make uncertain the availability of imported food.

Under these adverse conditions modern bio-technology could enable us to increase local food production through the development and adoption of genetically modified high-yielding crop varieties (after very vigorous safety assessment) that are naturally resistant to diseases and adverse environmental conditions.

R&D investment in niche areas of existing strength and resources could help to improve our international competitiveness and lead to substantial export earnings.

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Bio-technology could lead the way to food security.

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improved fibre qualities and better ability to withstand diseases and adverse environmental stress.

## Change for the better

This historical victory has not happened by chance, nor is it a mere continuation of the five-yearly anti-incumbency cycle that we have grown used to. It is a call from the people, a cry for change.

MAMUN RASHID

**"M**Y fellow citizens: I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you have bestowed."

The new US President Barack Hussein Obama articulated so eloquently during his inaugural address.

Like the rest of the world, our country is also bracing for change. Our new regime has returned to power after seven long years with a new vision of change as pledged by its leader. Her Charter for Change has captured the hearts and minds of the people, particularly the young generation, and has consequently received strong endorsement from the electorate.

After the historic landslide victory by her party, she was quite prompt in taking quite a few bold and commendable steps.

The very first test was the selection for the cabinet. The newly formed 31-member cabinet is refreshingly devoid of political big-wigs and is mostly comprised of people with excellent educational and professional backgrounds. She took the brave decision to put competence over prejudice. Her decision not to allocate ministries to only party loyalists and instead award it to deserving candidates is quite unprecedented in this country's political history. She initiated the process quite early by skillfully eliminating some corrupt but important people from consideration.

The prime minister has also categorically warned her cabinet colleagues that she will not hesitate to remove them from office if they fail to fulfill her party's election pledges to the people, or if allegations of corruption are brought against them.

In a bid to make the civil bureaucracy work better, she has decided to break with tradition and spend most of her office hours in Bangladesh Secretariat in order

to improve efficiency, which is also quite a welcome move indeed.

In the very first cabinet meeting, the new government decided to reduce diesel price and increase subsidy on fertiliser, which will surely have a positive impact on boosting boro production in the coming season.

More significantly, the prime minister has also asked top civil bureaucrats that she will not accept legal barriers as an excuse for delay in implementation of development and welfare activities. She made it a point that laws should be changed or modernised in order to better cater to the needs of the changing times. This approach is very praiseworthy indeed as we have seen that in the past, this is the very obstacle that has hindered the execution of government initiatives.

"We're the lawmakers. Laws can be amended and new laws can be enacted to pave the way for public development. Many times it was seen that development projects couldn't be implemented due to legal obstacles. I don't want to hear that a development project has been stalling because of a certain law or rule or a regulation," were her inspiring words.

It is heartening to see that the government has identified their priorities with great precision -- adequate and timely supply of agricultural inputs to farmers, improvement of road net-work and transportation system, augmenting of power generation and gas supply, creation of job opportunities, improvement and amendment of the legal system and most importantly the eradication of corruption.

During the election campaign, some accused the present prime minister of choosing the fashionable slogan of change as a potent campaign tool. After all, according to Time Magazine "change" has been the top buzzword for 2008!

However, the steps taken so far by our new government has given us the courage to hope, it has given us a taste of what this

country can become. So long have we been oppressed by the evils of corruption. It is unfortunate but true that we had grown to expect our government to devote itself not to our welfare but to persecuting its rivals and looting the public purse.

Decades of misrule and criminalisation of the government machinery has debased the very foundation of our political reality. The past years have been nothing but a Punch-and-Judy show of non-co-operation and vindictive retaliation between the ruling and opposition parties.

This historical victory has not happened by chance, nor is it a mere continuation of the five-yearly anti-incumbency cycle that we have grown used to. It is a call from the people, a cry for change. It is the collective hope of the people which has brought about such a momentous result to the election.

The Economist has in a recent article stated: "With such hopes invested in her, she is almost bound to disappoint." We don't want to give any coin to such cynicism. So far, we have observed, some change got to happen, we will change the way we have been running the government, disbursing public amenities, using public funds, implementing public projects, attracting foreign investment, marketing Bangladesh outside, handling calamities, ensuring public-private partnership, treating the neighbours, and driving the country towards further growth.

In the spirit of true change let us, like Barack Obama pledge: "On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics."

In other words, as my Harvard professor taught, only "change" simply will not do. It has to be "change for the better." Change without rocking the boat too much and with clear visibility about the landing pad. It's a tough job, but united we stand.

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## No more War on Terror?

Although partly symbolic, the search for new terror terminology reflects an internal government debate that predates the new administration. Critics have long decried the use of the phrase "war on terror" on the grounds that terrorism is a tactic, not an identifiable enemy.

MICHAEL ISIKOFF and Mark Hosenball

**I**N another effort to undo the legacy of George W. Bush's presidency, the Obama administration is searching for alternatives to the term "war on terror."

In recent days, Obama's national security officials have had brainstorming sessions to come up with different ways to describe the US government's efforts to defeat al Qaeda and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan.

What's being sought is a more precise phrase that can recast the US government's counter-terrorism fight in ideological as well as military terms. Obama publicly signaled the new approach this week. When asked about the "war on terror" phrase by CNN's Anderson Cooper, Obama said: "I think it is very important for us to recognise that we have a battle or a war against some terrorist organisations... Words matter in this situation because one of the ways we're going to win this struggle is through the battle of hearts and minds."

Although partly symbolic, the search for new terror terminology reflects an internal government debate that predates the new administration. Critics have long decried the use of the phrase "war on terror" on the grounds that terrorism is a tactic, not an identifiable enemy.

But when word of the suggested change leaked to the media, President Bush displaying his annoyance at the idea during meeting of National Security Council officials. "The president unleashed over this," said one participant in the meeting who asked not to be identified talking about an internal discussion. "He made it perfectly clear

The pharmaceutical industry in Bangladesh has already made very significant inroads into the international market for generic medicines. The market potential would be even better with genetically engineered bio-pharmaceuticals and vaccines. Export earnings could easily surpass that of the currently dominant garment industry.

Bangladesh is endowed with a very rich and unique bio-diversity and a wealth of indigenous knowledge systems in traditional medicines. This combined with modern multidisciplinary technologies can result in new drugs for diseases that devastate the health and economies of the developing world, and create jobs for the scientifically trained manpower in Bangladesh.

In the rapidly advancing countries of the developing world such as India, China and Brazil, and in other emerging economies, modern bio-technology has made a huge impact on national development. The biggest mover in the development of bio-technology in these countries has been their respective governments. India's amazing transformation into a bio-technology powerhouse has been spearheaded by an independent Department of bio-technology which has not only generously funded basic and applied research but has also helped to develop an atmosphere conducive to commercialisation.

In response to the government's Bio-technology Policy, and taking cognisance of the very sorry plight of the National Institute of Bio-technology (NIB), resident and expatriate scientists produced a position paper and a set of recommendations (see Forum, June 2007) for the development of bio-technology and the imple-

mentation of the national Bio-technology Policy. These were endorsed by over 300 bio-technologists at a conference held in Dhaka last year on "Promotion of Bio-technology" (Daily Star, April 9, 2007), and submitted to the advisors of MOSICT, health and agriculture in April, 2007. The bio-technology community is still waiting for a response.

A number of policy guidelines on bio-ethics, bio-safety, IP and IPR and other technology transfer issues were also adopted at a recent international symposium on "Safety and Regulatory Issues in the Commercialisation of Bio-technology Research" held in Dhaka in December 2008. The symposium, attended by international experts from 12 different countries, strongly recommended substantial government and private sector funding for R&D and capacity development, and appropriate incentives to local industry for commercialisation of bio-technology products and services.

It would be very much appreciated if ministers of relevant departments (MOSICT, agriculture, health, environment, industry, etc) could kindly act on the specific recommendations from the bio-technology community and activate the parliamentary standing committee on bio-technology. It is also hoped that the government will make use of policy documents already prepared by the bio-technology community and call on their expertise for implementation of the national Bio-technology Policy.

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terror terminology.

Despite Bush's insistence on sticking with "war on terror," members of his own Homeland Security Department continued to question its use. A year ago, Homeland's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties prepared a nine-page "official use only" memo, "Terminology to Define the Terrorists," which outlined how the government had solicited recommendations from a "wide variety" of American Muslim leaders and suggesting that US officials be more careful in their use of language describing counter-terrorism efforts. The memo did not directly advocate discontinuing the use of the term "war on terror" but rather declared that while the government "should convey the magnitude of the threat we face," it should also "avoid inflating the religious bases and glamorous appeal of the extremist's ideology."

One of the memo's suggestions: labeling al Qaeda as a "death cult." The memo's authors explained their thinking: "Cult" is both normative and accurate in that it suggests a pseudo-religious ideology that is outside the mainstream... Referring to [Osama] bin Laden's movement as 'fringe' or 'outside the mainstream' may also be helpful." The document's contents were subsequently ridiculed by right-wing bloggers, who accused Homeland Security of excessive political correctness.

Juan Zarate, who until last month headed the counter-terrorism office of Bush's National Security Council, told Newsweek that President Bush did start limiting his use of the "war on terror" term in recent years, referring at times to a "war against violent extremists."

But Zarate -- who used the "war on terror" phrase in a speech as recently as last year -- cautioned against going too far in abandoning the old terminology. Doing so, he suggested, could diminish the dangers that US troops face in places like Afghanistan and also send an unintended signal to terror groups that the new administration was going to throttle back anti-terrorist efforts on the ground.

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## Rushing to the temple is the only logical thing to do



**P**EOPLE are flocking to churches and temples, scientists report. Faith groups can expect a 50 per cent jump in growth rates thanks to the financial crisis, New Scientist says. The magazine concludes that uneducated people seek comfort in irrational beliefs.

The statistics are right but their

conclusion is wrong. It's the banking community, giving each other cash bonuses for screwing up the world economy, which is irrational.

Going to places where people find fulfillment in non-materialistic ways is not irrational, but logical in these troubled times.

But there's one thing in the magazine's editorial that I do agree with. "Many psychologists now see irrationality as the default state of the human mind," it says.

At last, scientists have caught up with the rest of us. Life is strange, bizarre and irrational, and human thought-processes even more so.

The fact is, life IS full of questions, big and small. Here are some common ones: Is there a God? Why do men have nipples? Which came first, the egg or the bacon? When police arrest a mime, are they still obliged to tell him that he has the right to remain silent? When it rains, why don't sheep shrink? When sign makers go on strike, is anything written on their signs? Why isn't there mouse-flavoured cat food? How is it one careless match can start a forest fire, but it takes a whole box to start a campfire? Why do they sterilise needles used for lethal injections?

So many questions, so little time. I asked regular contributors to identify the metaphysical "mysteries of life"

that most puzzled them. The things that puzzled readers were not big questions of existence, but mundane puzzles that crop up in everyday activities. I divided them by age and sex.

The top three great metaphysical mysteries of adult male life:

1. Instead of you, there's a fat, balding guy in the mirror.
2. Somehow your bones turn into accurate weather-forecasting devices.
3. Once you get your head together, your body falls apart.

The top three great metaphysical mysteries of adult female life:

1. A one kilo box of chocolates can make a woman gain two kilos.

2. Every bathroom scale ever made is inaccurate.

3. You hang something in your closet for a while and it shrinks two sizes.

The top three great metaphysical mysteries of young male life:

1. Most of the questions women ask have no rights answers.
2. You can keep vomiting long after you think you have finished.
3. Girls want you to pursue them, but as soon as you seriously get into the whole stalking business, they call the police.

The top three great metaphysical mysteries of young female life:

1. Ex-boyfriends are like attacks of toe fungus, they just keep coming back.

2. Although you know that nothing new will have materialised, you keep returning to the refrigerator.

3. Even guys who have no fear of bungee jumping or watching horror movies are terrified of making a phone call.

Okay, so I'll admit that the great mysteries of life that most puzzle readers aren't really that deep. But if any church or temple has the answer to them, drop me a note. I don't mind the fact that my left tibia forecasts rain, but I'm anxious to get that fat, bald guy out of my mirror.

Send more mysteries to our columnist via www.vittachi.com.