

ASIMA CHATERJEE (1917 – 2006): QUEEN OF NATURAL PRODUCTS RESEARCH

By R. O. B. Wijesekera



Asima Chatterjee was, since the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century a regal icon of Indian science; particularly in the field of research on organic natural products. She was a protégé of one of the pioneer Indian researchers on natural products, Professor Prafulla Chandra Ray, and as was the practice with researchers of the sub-continent in the post war era, she expanded her skills and horizons by doing post graduate studies in the U.S.A. and in Switzerland. She came under the influence of Professor L.Zechmeister, of the California Institute of Technology, while she also spent a sabbatical period at Zurich, with the Nobel Laureate Professor Paul Karrer, and did research work on alkaloids and carotenoids.. She excelled in her own work at Calcutta where she held the prestigious Khaira Chair of Chemistry, - a Chair she held for two decades. She had by then her own team of researchers and become the first Indian woman to be awarded a D.Sc. in chemistry.

Asima Chatterjee did pioneering work on Alkaloids of the Rauwolfia, Alstonia, and Vinca species, the constituents of the Beli fruit, *Aegle marmelos*, and earned a niche as one of the

world's most prolific researchers on natural products. During her later years she was the principal author of the monumental six volume Treatise of Indian Medicinal Plants, published by the Publications and Information Directorate of the CSIR, India. Her interest focused onto the desire to enrich phytomedicine, and she was responsible for creating the anti-epileptic drug Ayush 56 from the constituents of the plants *Marsilia munuta* and *Nardostachys jatamansi*, as well as the anti-malarial Ayush-64, a combination of four herbs, both being patented through the Central Council for Research in Ayurveda and Sidda.

The scientific community recognized her contributions to science and the nation through the award of the Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Award in Chemical Sciences - the first woman scientist to be so honored. She was also the first lady scientist to be elected General President of the Indian Science Congress Association, while in 1975 the Indian Government awarded her the prestigious Padma Bhushan. A popular and respected personality at international scientific forums Asima Chatterjee with her vast knowledge, disarming smile, and her simple self-effacing personality, was a welcome delegate whenever she attended them.

The Series on Prominent Researchers has Featured :-

	Vol / No	Year	Page
1. Finn Sandburg	2/2	2006	09
2. Peter E Magda Telenyi	3/1	2007	05
3. Edgar Lederer	3/2	2007	11
4. Norman R. Farnsworth	4/1	2008	27
5. Nithya Anand	5/1	2009	14
6. Xiao Peigen	6/1	2010	30
7. Atal C.K	6/2	2010	13
8. Wagner H	7/1	2011	27