

NEST ON A DEAD TREE



SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

A bird making a nest in tree is a rare sight in this city where the greenery is vanishing fast. The bird population is also on the wane with the disappearance of trees. This shalik has taken shelter on a dead tree at Mirpur Zoo where there is still a patch of green.

Autistic children's schooling needs a little more care

DURDANA GHIAS

Preeti, mother of 3-year old autistic child Plabon, came to Dhaka with lots of hopes to get her son admitted to a school which will educate and improve his behaviour.

But few good schools and non-availability of seats in those poured cold water on her expectations.

Parents of autistic children feel uncertain about what to do as they cannot admit their wards to school in time. Luck smiles on just a few because of a long waiting list.

"When we came to know that our child is a special one we came to Dhaka from Sylhet to get him admitted to a good school. We went to one of the best schools but they could not admit my son for lack of seats. My son was 324th on the waiting list," said Preeti.

"We also requested them to give us a timeframe within which they can admit my son but they could not say anything."

Due to high expense and exorbitant fees middle class families usually cannot afford to admit their wards to these schools.

"Then I went to another school but they also did not have any vacant seat. I could not look for more because I do not know the names and locations of other schools. Besides, all schools charge exorbitant fees although all are not of good standard."

"Still I want his admission as soon as possible. The headmasters of these schools say that the delay in getting him admitted will harm him but at the same time they cannot arrange a seat for him," she said.

"I came to Dhaka with lots of expectations but all my hopes were shattered. I am feeling helpless because I don't know exactly when I will be able to ensure a seat for my son," said Preeti.

According to sources working in this field, there are around a dozen special schools in the city and each can enrol 40 to 50 students on average. The seats are hardly enough as regards the number of the autistic children.

Lack of trained teachers and lack of specific and proper laws and rules are other problems faced by the special schools in the city.

Besides, most of these schools are not spacious and landlords are often unwilling to rent out their houses to these schools.

Dilara Satter Mitu, director of SEID Trust that works to promote rights of persons with intellectual and multiple disabilities, said there is no full-fledged course on teaching autistic children.

"There are four institutes to train teachers for special children. Three of them are under National University, Dhaka University, BPF Bangladesh Protibondhi Foundation and while the fourth one a government institute in Mirpur. But they have no full-fledged course on teaching autistic children," said Mitu.

"There are courses on teaching children with ID (intellectual disability) but for autism there is just an orientation course. In most cases the schools are being run by people who have done a short course on autism abroad and there is no coordination among the schools," she said.

Ali Manash, who has been working with the special-needs children for the last 17 years, said in most cases these children do not get rehabilitation due to lack of



A moment of conversation between a teacher and a student at a special school.

good schools and trained teachers.

"Mostly children belonging to wealthy section afford the few good schools and the middle class has no place to go because of high fees," he said.

"Early intervention is needed for these children but in most cases they go to schools late. Besides, many schools cannot issue certificates because these are not under the education ministry," said Manash, also the head of social unit, Unnayan Onneshan.

"It is the constitutional right of the special children to get quality education. Good schools are often too expensive for the middle class to afford because they run just on tuition fees," echoed Sharmind Nilormi, mother of an autistic child and associate professor, JU.

"Most of the time a parent has to wait in uncertainty for a long time. Sometimes one has to give up their career job to look after the child. Education of these children should be a teamwork of teachers, parents and the entire society," said Nilormi.

Marufa Hossain, principal, School for Gifted Children, and executive director of Tauri Foundation, said scarcity of trained teachers and lack of opportunities for them to update themselves are reasons behind the poor number of good schools.

"In India special teachers take at least two rounds of trainings a year -- at home or abroad -- to update themselves but here we do not have these opportunities."

To prevent substandard schools from creeping into the arena the government should have a monitoring cell, she said.

"For lack of trained teachers it is not always possible for many schools to provide quality education. Very often they employ HSC and BA pass girls for this job. These centres can be called day-care centres at best, not schools. So, there should be monitoring cell to control these schools," said Marufa.

In addition, these schools face a severe fund constraint.

"Schools working with under-privileged children get funds but those working with children from the middle class families do not. We need government support because we have to depend solely on student fees."

"Sometimes we get help from corporate bodies. For an example, GrameenPhone donated us computers and Otobi some furniture. But if there is a collective initiative and incentives for corporate bodies then funds will not be a problem," she said.

Sweet fragrance of season's fruits

Three-day national festival at Khamarbari concludes today

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

A fiesta of mouth-watering fruits has dazzled the city dwellers this week.

Hundreds of people are turning out to have a glimpse of as many as 70 varieties of fruits showcased at the exhibition and to have a taste of them too.

The sweet fragrance of the fruits reaches beyond the fair venue, Khamarbari, Farmgate, allowing those passing the nearby streets to feel the zest.

The three-day National Fruit Festival organised by the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) ends today. The fair is open from 9:00am to 9:00pm.

A total of 43 stalls have been set up at the fair participated by the fruit farmers from across the country and the DAE itself.

Fruits selected only from the gardens of promising farmers with outstanding performance found their place at the fair.

Some very unusual fruits attracted majority of the visitors. These include sour bilimbi,

kathbadam, daofal, deua (monkey jack), golapjam (rose apple), santol, toikar, fig, cowfal or cowa, lukluki, paanifal (water chestnut), gab (river ebony), agnishwar banana, longan, phalsa, ada jamir belonging to the citrus family at least ten times larger than the regular lemons and bon kathal belonging to the jackfruit family but sour in taste. These fruits are found in the wild all over Bangladesh and are not grown commercially.

Most popular fruits like mango, jackfruit, litchi, banana, guava and pineapple are also on display. A galore of 245 species of mango captivated the visitors. The rare ones include bou bhalani, khirshapati, lalmohon, krishanbhog, lota, daddbhog, devi, manjira, tikkafarash, ashwina, shubarna, bombai, lokhonbhog and many more.

The festival, however, has more serious objective than just to showcase the fruits and incite the senses of fruit-lovers. The organisers want to promote cultivation of fruit trees to become self-sufficient in fruit

production and increase export in the long run highlighting its culinary delight and nutritious goodness.

Bangladesh currently exports around 20 metric tons of fruits to 35 countries a year.

Md Zahidul Amin, metropolitan agricultural officer, DAE, said, "Our aim is to popularise local fruits and to promote the unusual and almost extinct fruits that automatically grow in the wild but no longer reach our tables."

"The festival will help create awareness among the people about the importance of fruits in our meals and their nutritious value," he added.

A grown person has the need for at least 60 to 80 grams of fruits per day, but average intake of most people in Bangladesh is around 35 grams.

The fair will also explore the opportunity of growing foreign fruits in Bangladesh that require similar environment, he said.

As an added charm, information is being disseminated about how to grow fruit trees and ways

of processing and eating the delectable fruits.

Visitors, participants and experts at the fair expressed concern over the practice of using harmful chemical insecticides, fungicides and artificial hormones to accelerate fruit growth and use of artificial ripening agents by the commercial producers and sellers.

Use of chemicals during production increases the risk of environmental and health hazards, the observed.

Robin Mazumder, executive director, Central Extension Resource Development Institute, said, "Farmers are not at all educated enough about insecticides and fungicides in Bangladesh. After spraying these chemicals there is a certain waiting time before one can collect fruits and consume it. Commercial producers do not follow that rule."

"Fruits do not ripen in the trees anymore. They are collected from the trees and ripened artificially with the help of chemical agents long before they mature. These fruits do not even taste

good," he added. "However, farmers are changing the habit of using Carbide and Ethrel 39SL to ripen fruits after harvest. Planned Growth Regulator is being used which is less harmful. A level of awareness can be witnessed among consumers and producers," he said.

The participants also raised concern about disappearance of local species of fruits.

According to the findings of a research conducted by Policy Research on Development Alternative (UBINIG), there are around five hundred mango species and sub species available in Bangladesh.

Raju Ahmed, managing director, Rajshahi Mango Product, said, "Majority of the varieties have gone extinct because commercial growers tend to plant only a few species which give higher yields, killing the diversified mango seedlings of the country."

"Consumers are also satisfied with the very few varieties because they don't know about the species that disappeared from our culture," he added.

