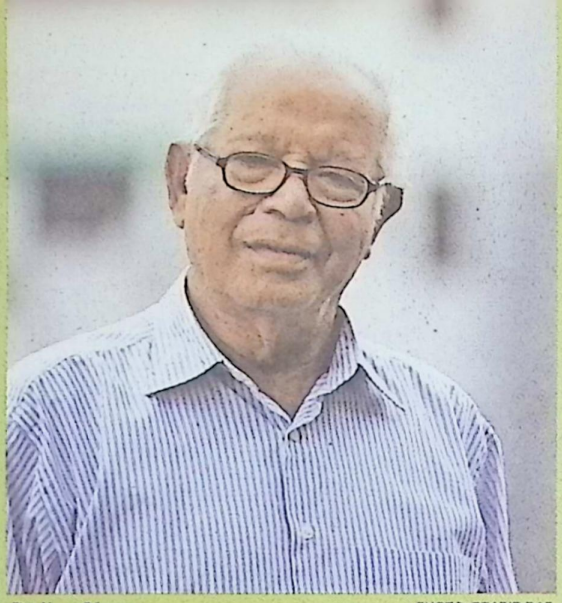


Dwijen Sharma PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

A Constant Gardener

Gardens are part of our being, says Dwijen Sharma

We have evolved as part of a natural process and our ancestors lived for millennia in natural conditions. As a result, there lies deep-seated within us a natural love of country sights and sounds and smells and an instinctive need for occasional moments of quiet alone with nature. As English philosopher C E M Joad observes, "The smell of fallen leaves or new-mown hay, the tang of a mountain brook, the feel of lush meadow grass against the face,...these things touch in us an ancestral chord that stretches back to our savage, perhaps to our subhuman past." But we exploit nature more than we need to. We turn everything into products we may not even need. We don't care.

Dwijen Sharma, environmentalist, botanist and writer, does. At 85, he still dreams of building a large garden where we can commune with nature. Throughout a long and distinguished career, he built gardens wherever he found an opportunity—at the BM College, Barisal, the Notre Dame College, Dhaka, the National Museum, Dhaka, Dhaka Central Women's College, Bangla Academy and many other places.

Compared to other cities in the world, Dhaka has very few parks "that are nothing but large gardens." "The Ramna Park has been reduced to anarchy due to poor planning. Surhrawardy Udyan was designed in 1955 by Fazlul Karim who used to work at the Eden Botanic Garden in Calcutta. A skilled agriculturist, he had no clue about landscape designing. Very few still do," says Sharma on a recent rainy afternoon. Then he tells a story: A young man, inspired by his books, wanted to study landscape design. But no Bangladeshi university or college offers the course. So he went to England, finished his MS and returned home to see if he could apply his knowledge to making this city a bit more livable. To a hundred leading architects of the country he distributed a questionnaire that contained questions like do you plant trees when you build a structure, how many trees do you know, do you know any aquatic plants, flower plants, wild plants, endangered plants etc. Out of the hundred replies came from only six whose knowledge about landscaping is what can be called elementary. He had sent the questionnaire in pre-paid return envelopes.

"The botanic garden in Mirpur is managed by the Forest Department and they have made it a forest," says Sharma. A classical botanic garden has a collection of domestic and foreign trees and plants, a museum, a library, a system for the identification and preservation of the flora of the country, preservation of economic and endangered plants, and research facilities for developing new varieties of fruits and vegetables. And it must be linked with universities and institutes for higher studies. "So by this measure, ours is not a botanic garden," says Dwijen Sharma. "It's just a park where people walk in the morning and evening." So what can be done to correct the mistakes assuming the authorities would listen? "A botanic garden must have a herbarium. The former collects and preserves samples of live plants and trees while the latter is generally a collection of dried, preserved plant specimens. They must be parts of the same organization. In our country they are two different entities."

Dwijen Sharma posits that the government should create Bangladesh Botanical Survey which will be responsible for all these activities. Accordingly, Bangladesh Zoological Survey may be established centered on the national zoo. And these institutions should be run by scientists instead of bureaucrats.

We as a nation were never good at designing and raising gardens. We didn't try and we didn't have to. Nature took care of it for us with her flora and fauna grown on the alluvial soil of the land and in the rivers and ponds. We have destroyed all that. We have created a new urban reality. The end of living and the beginning of survival has started. "We need gardens to keep us sane in the midst of bricks and concrete. Gardens are essential. They are part of our being," concludes the octogenarian environmentalist.