One with the Environment

As a "reservoir" of natural disasters, Bangladesh needs to be more informed and well-aware if it wants to fight climate change efficiently, says renowned French author, politician and climate change advocate Eric Orsenna.

UPASHANA SALAM

When you meet Erik Orsenna, you will see a casually dressed man, engrossed in a conversation with whomever it is that is with him, laughing heartily at his own jokes while getting others to crack up at his lines. He will enamour you with his charm, his wit, the ease with which he talks about everything. But the thing that will leave a smile on your face after meeting Orsenna is his humour. He has a perpetual twinkle in his eyes, as if to indicate that everything in life is enjoyable, everything is touched with humour. After our interview was over, Orsenna pretended to take my interview, jokingly asking me about my experiences. Even as I laughed, I told him that humour was the last thing I expected from an academic, politician, teacher, climate activist and the member of the French Academy of Letters!

"I give the same message to every youngster I meet. I always tell them you have more lives in your life than you think. Try to live all of them. Once your time of departure arrives, you don't want to be thinking, 'I could've lived a different life," says the acclaimed writer with a smile.

Orsenna has lived many lives in his one life. He has taught, among other places, at the Paris School of Political Science and at the École Normale Supérieure Lettres et Sciences Humaines. He had been an adviser to the ministers of Cooperation and Development from 1981 to 1983, was a cultural adviser to French president Mitterand from 1983 to 1985, an adviser to foreign minister of France Rolan Dumas from 1990 to 19992, and is the president of the International Centre of the Sea since 1991. He was elected at the French Academy of Letters in 1998 and was also on the Board of Alliance Francaise de Paris for several years. Orsenna also has a successful career as a writer, penning works such as *The Colonial Exposition*, which won him the Goncourt Prize, *Grammar is a Gentle, Sweet* Song and *The Island of Words*.

Recently, the acclaimed author and climate change activist visited Bangladesh for the second time to speak to experts, students and teachers of disaster management at Dhaka University, and to also study the drastic changes in climate that has shook the country in the last seven years.

"I had last come to Bangladesh for 15 days seven years back, visiting floating hospitals to see what was at stake. I have wanted to come back ever since, and thankfully got the opportunity to do so now," says Orsenna. He had devoted one chapter of his experiences and views on Bangladesh in his book about water, *Voyage au Pays de l'eau*.

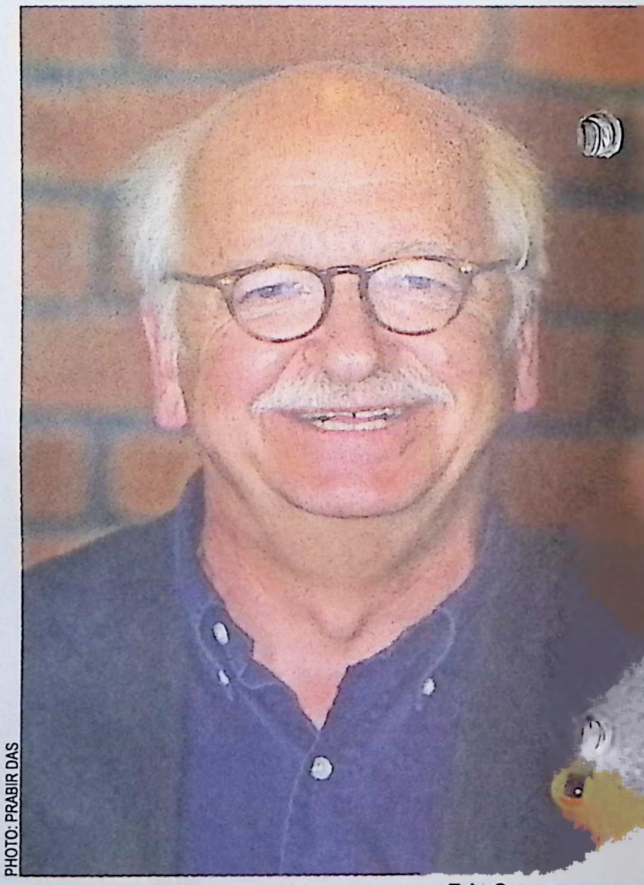


PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Eric Orsenna

Over the years, Bangladesh has turned to a first front in the war against climate change, says Orsenna. The occurrence of natural disasters like cyclones seems to have multiplied while the country is also seeing a scarcity of rains. "When I visited Dhaka University, I was informed that the rate of rainfall in April and May this year was only 20 percent of the rainfall last year. This becomes a difficult