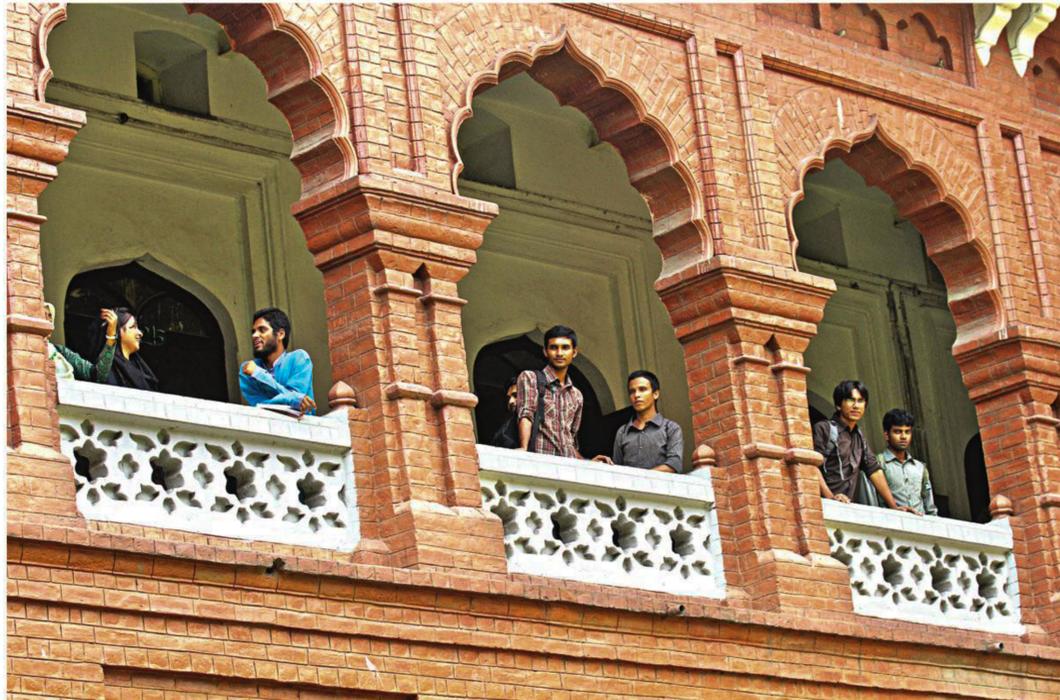


Have you ever heard of Lilabati Nag? The first female student of University of Dhaka back in 1923, Lila attained 'first class first' in her Master's from her department. Apart from being a female pioneer, with academic excellence, Lila is also remembered for being a dedicated activist and organiser who established an all-women club called Dipali, which was committed to work further for women emancipation.

Inspired? How about the incredible story of Fajilatunnesa? Being the first Muslim female student in a previously male-dominated academic arena, Fajilatunnesa also stood 'first class first' in Mathematics from Dhaka University, leaving an example for other women during the time to follow. Not known only for excellence in academics, she was also regarded as one of those brave souls in the 1920s who would openly talk about the rights and freedom of women, and gave valiant speeches to mobilise public support for the demolition of communal riots. Speaking of communal riots - a conflict that was particularly vibrant during the 1920s - how much do we know about the history of having a common dining table for both Hindu and Muslim students, demonstrating a positive change in the face of adversity?



RESEARCH

BLAST FROM THE PAST

LOOKING BACK AT DHAKA UNIVERSITY

FAYEKA ZABEEN SIDDIQUA

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Dhaka Bishyabidyalya O Bangladesh e Uchcho Shikkha (Dhaka University and Higher Education in Bangladesh), a book written by eminent writer, essayist and research scholar Syed Abul Maksud presents its readers with a collection of such stories set in Dhaka University since its inception in 1921.

Throughout the eleven chapters of this book, the writer has presented an elaborate research that he had started conducting during late 70s. On one hand, the writer talks about when and how Dhaka University was established and how it facilitated the intellectual journey of Muslim scholars back then, and Dhaka University's role in bringing a peaceful solution to the never ending Hindu-Muslim conflict. On the other, it draws a brilliant image of socio-cultural aspects of then Dhaka, especially of areas around the university like Ramna and Nilkhet. This book also illustrates how this institution has played a role in shaping our nationalistic movements.

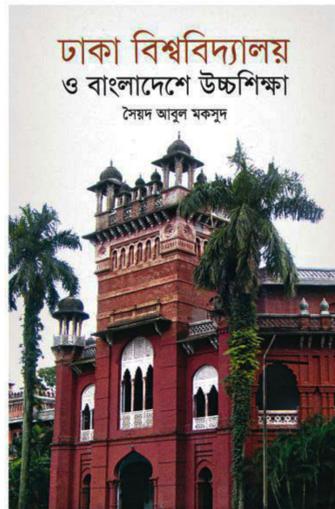
Moreover, the writer also gives us an insight into the processes that make the university what it is: for example, its admission policies; its administrative expertise and how it evolved; the

extracurricular activities and the ever vibrant clubs and campaigns; the academic life and the politics within it; the alumni and their success stories. This book aims to accommodate all of this in around 400 pages and the writer succeeds doing so through his lucid writing style without making it sound too academic, a writing style that this essayist is already acclaimed for.

What makes this book an interesting read is how the author shares snippets of the most mundane activities and the controversies behind them - giving readers a chance to compare them with today's scenario. The annual dinner that used to take place in the Muslim Hall can be taken as an example. Even for students living in different halls today, the joy of piling up plates with special food on feast nights remains unparalleled. Interestingly, the excitement of then and now remains the same, while the context and controversies are completely different.

As the author quotes, "The Annual Dinner is a very notable event of our Hall to which members look forward to with great anxiety and expectation."

In fact, this feast used to be a significant incident for the then sparsely populated Dhaka. The feasts that used to take place during 1920s and 1930s, with a total of 600 to 800 guests, were a unique example of communal harmony during that time. While the feasts in Jagannath Hall and Dhaka Hall used to



discriminate against the different castes of Hindus, at the Muslim Hall everyone used to eat together - regardless of their religion or surnames - an event that was not only rare, but also deemed impossible by many. Some would call it unnecessary and a waste of money, but no one could undermine how this dinner served an opportunity to share different faiths and cultures, as mentioned in an excerpt on hall union from 1926:

"This annual function has received more criticism than appreciation as it is condemned as an instrument of sheer waste and extravagance. But it has a great moral value. It gives us an opportunity of service, of trying our hands at a vast organisation - of displaying our energy and worth. It gives us an occasion of realising the ideal of one brotherhood of humanity. Christians, Hindus, Muslims all sit together and partake of the humble fare we offer to them..."

This book is the result of a compilation of the author's research for more than 25 years. His primary sources include interviews of around 250 people, starting from the meat sellers of Thatharibazar and Moulavibazar, the goldsmiths of Tatibazar, to many intellectuals who have been affiliated with Dhaka University. Not only that, he carefully scrutinises these personal experiences and puts them in the right context, and has also been through piles of records, almost lost documents and research works done before on this issue.

Whether you are a history enthusiast, an avid reader of research-based work, or any reference for academic purposes, this book could be a treasure trove for all - those who are interested in one of the oldest academic institutions of the country. For present day students, this elaborate research will surely be a reminder of the incredible journey of Dhaka University, made up of both successes and failures, through good times and bad. In fact, it can be considered an important document that would bestow a share of the legacy and responsibility of the university bequeathed to students. ■

NATURE

INTO THE WORLD OF CACTI

NILIMA JAHAN

PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

Here in Dhaka, unfortunately, the name - 'National Botanical Garden' - at Mirpur, evokes more negativity than anything else. It is sad but true that various news reports, reviews, experiences will give you very depressing details about its present atmosphere. Truth is that the natural beauty of the place still remains, but reputation and negative vibes, be it visitors who come for the wrong reasons, or those who like to talk about the wrong reasons, is to blame. But true nature enthusiasts would be quite astonished to see around thousand species of trees, herbs, and shrubs including a huge collection of aquatic and exotic plants situated there, being taken care of.

However, amongst the huge assortments of so many shades of green, the 'Cactus House' is one of the most

beautiful ones. One would find 46 species of cacti (for instances, golden barrel, old man, mammillaria, acanthocalycium, lobivia, gymnocalycium, Victoria, melocactus, opuntia, bird nest, feroactus, cleistocactus and much more) in the house, which is, by some, regarded the largest cactus garden in Bangladesh. The garden surrounded by an abundance of greenery was established in 1992 and the cacti were collected by the suppliers, mostly from Kalingham of India and Singapore.

"These cacti are mainly used for various research and educational purposes", says MD Sayedur Rahman, Director, National Botanical Garden Bangladesh. "Students from different universities around the country or sometime outside the country, especially from biology, forestry, agriculture and botany departments use these for their academic research purposes, along with the professional researchers", he adds.

Upon entering the main entrance, a 10-minute walk will help you to find out the garden, where the cacti are kept in a green house. "Our climate is not too suitable for cacti, since they need a lot of sunlight and heat. Some of them cannot tolerate standing water or winter's moisture", says 58-year-old Md Yousuf Ali, the gardener, who has been taking care of the cactus house for the past 13 years. "This is why they are kept in the green house, and we try to ensure maximum heat by using incandescent light bulbs, mostly in winters", he adds.

Into the house, all the species are arranged in a row, one after another with a name tags hanging on the neck, so that

one can easily familiarise themselves with their names. If you are curious about any particular kind, for instance—their nature, lifespan, gardening tips or even grafting procedures, don't hesitate to ask the gardener!

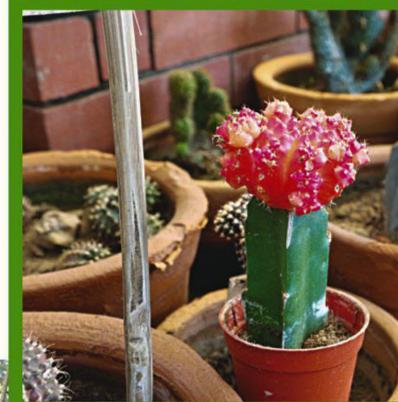
Of the huge collection, one would find the 26-year-old 'Golden Barrel', the oldest kinds of cactus of the garden kept in the center. Golden Barrel basically gives flowers that are very similar to the wheat grains. Another old one - the 'Oldman Cactus' is kept next to the golden barrel but you will not get any flower from it. Flowers of 'Lobivia' seem like the night queen, while the 'Mammillaria' resembles a woman's nose pin. Apart from these, the small pink ball-shaped Ruby Cactus can be sighted from far away. Whenever the immature branches expand and the tubs get filled, they are planted in separate pots. "I have found it really appealing that

there are plenty of grafted cacti, created from different local and international varieties", says 24-year-old Maliha Moudud, a 3rd year student of Eden College, from the department of Botany.

Cactus house also offers you to buy stunning cacti at a very cheap rate—100 takas per specie, fixed and regulated by the garden authority. "Along with the private nursery owners, people who care about aesthetical values of their homes and offices are the main customers here", says Yousuf Ali.

Nature aficionados, who really want to spend a day within the touch of nature and get a piece of it for your dwelling, don't hesitate to visit the cactus house at the national botanical garden. Before entering the house, just make sure that you have taken the permission from the adjacent garden authority and an oath—"I WON'T TOUCH THE CACTI". ■

TIPS FROM THE GARDENER



Though many love to keep cacti for homes and offices, they face a little difficulty while maintaining them. Here are 5 simple tips from the gardener to care your indoor cacti-

- Learn about your cactus well.
- Place them under bright sunlight.
- Water once a week, but never over water.
- Make sure that they are not infected by insects or fungi.
- In terms of rooftop cacti, use polythene shade, so that rain water can not cause any damage.

