

# Sunshine on his shoulders

Eminent botanist and writer Dwijen Sharma passed away on September 15, 2017 aged 88. Below is an abridged version of a story published by the The Star magazine in July 2013.

AMITAVA KAR

IN the tranquil landscape and in the distant line of the horizon, he beheld something as beautiful as his own nature. In the wilderness, he found something more dear and innate than in cities or villages. The greatest delight the trees and woods showed him was the suggestion of an occult relation between him and nature. They nodded to him, and he to them. Even the waving of a tree in the wind was new to him. It took him by surprise—its effect was like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over him. But the power to produce this delight did not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both.

Professor Dwijen Sharma, botanist, naturalist and writer, found that delight in early childhood. His home was near Madhabkunda in Moulvibazar. His family had a garden in the mountains. He spent his early childhood amidst the flora and fauna, the birds and the animals of the mountains.

He once undertook a 15-day journey on foot from Mohanganj in Netrokona to Sunamganj in Sylhet to explore nature and collect botanical specimen on the way. Perhaps he was inspired by Henry David Thoreau's 1862 essay *Walking*, which extolled the virtues of immersing oneself in nature and lamented the encroachment of private ownership upon the wilderness. This inquisitiveness and love for nature took Dwijen Sharma, born on May 29, 1929 in Shimulia in Borolekha, Sylhet to many countries of the world.

His father, Vishak Chandrakanda Sharma, was a famous Kabiraj (a doctor specialised in Ayurvedic practices), and mother, Magnamayi Devi, a social worker. At home his father had a large library that helped shape his enlightened worldview. After getting his MSC in Botany from Dhaka University in 1958, he joined the B M College in Barisal and taught there till 1962. He took part in the education movement in 1962 and got arrested and stayed in a security prison for three months in Barisal. His goal was to study for a PhD in a foreign university. But he had to give up on that dream because he would not get a passport due to his "prison record." So he started doing research at Dhaka University. Then he got an offer to work as a translator

for Progress Publishers of the then Soviet Union and left for Russia in 1974.

A recipient of numerous awards including the Qudrat-i-Khuda gold medal, Bangla Academy Award, M Nurul Qader Children's Literature Award, Nature Preservation Award by Channel i, he has more than 30 books to his credit. His *Shamoli Nishorgo* (Green Nature), *Shomajontre Boshobash* (Living in Socialism), *Jiboner Shesh Nei* (No End To Life), *Phoolgulo Jeno Kotha* (Each Flower Is A Word), *Biggan Shikkha O Daiboddhotar Nirikh* (Science Education and Our Responsibilities)

values like curiosity, honesty, accuracy, precision and rigour. He didn't just pay lip-service to those qualities—that was easy—but actually exemplified them in practice—the hard part. The scientific spirit suggests that experiments ought to be done where experimentation is the likeliest way to answer a question correctly. Dr Jyotiprakash Dutta, eminent writer and professor at City University of New York, notes that adopting a rational and scientific attitude towards life as championed by Dwijen Sharma is extremely essential for the modern times but a majority

Bangla Academy, we sought his guidance in planting trees on the premises of the academy."

He went to Russia with a dream. He dreamt that Dhaka would be a garden city—there would be parks, a riverfront on the banks of Buriganga, open fields where children would play—the whole city would be like Ramna Park. He wanted to learn from the Russian experience of socialism and then come back and work to rebuild the country.

While in Russia, he translated several books on political science, economics,

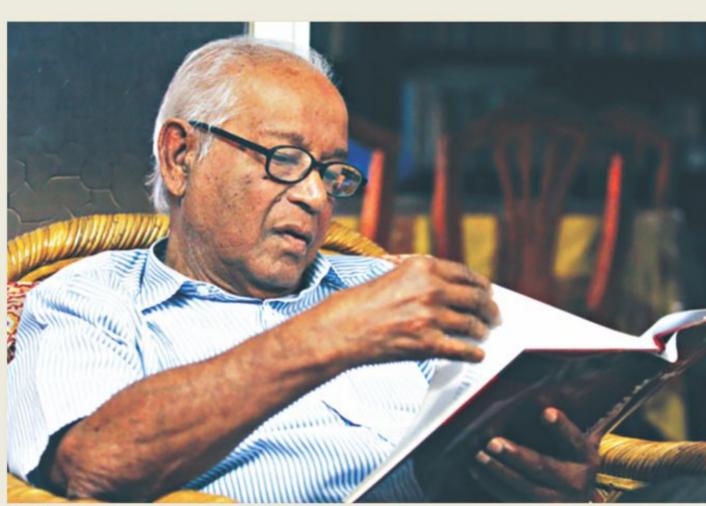
yet philosophical. In an article, Sharma writes about Chief Seattle, chief of the Suquamish and other American-Indian tribes around Washington's Puget Sound, who in 1851 delivered what is considered to be one of the most profound environmental statements ever made. His speech was in response to a proposed treaty under which the Indians were persuaded to sell two million acres of land for USD 150,000—"You must teach your children that the ground beneath their feet is the ashes of our grandfathers. So that they will respect the land, tell your children that the earth is rich with the lives of our kin. Teach your children that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of earth."

He lamented that our cities in Bangladesh had become unliveable over the years. "This happened for three reasons," he explained. "During the colonial era, the British rulers imposed their model of development on us, distorting the natural socio-economic development of the subcontinent. Second, when Bangladesh got independent, the responsibility to build industries and develop the agriculture sector fell on the shoulders of the citizens of this new country. But we did not have any experience of urbanisation and industrialisation. So we built our cities without any proper planning. Third, the population exploded in a way that it put a heavy pressure on nature."

When he was not busy helping botanists with identifying a species or giving a lecture or an interview, he would take children to parks and introduce them to trees. Bipradash Barua, novelist, story writer and naturalist, said, "Whenever we face any questions related to botany, we call him. He is like an encyclopaedia. For example, if I see a new botanical species, I bring it to him. One look at it and he can identify it."

When a traveller asked Wordsworth's servant to show him her master's study, she answered, "Here is his library, but his study is out of doors." Dwijen Sharma's study had been the roads, lakes, ponds, rivers, forests of Bangladesh and Europe.

Amitava Kar is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.



Dwijen Sharma

He once undertook a 15-day journey on foot from Mohanganj in Netrokona to Sunamganj in Sylhet to explore nature and collect botanical specimen on the way. Perhaps he was inspired by Henry David Thoreau's 1862 essay *Walking*, which extolled the virtues of immersing oneself in nature and lamented the encroachment of private ownership upon the wilderness.

and *Nishorgo Nirman O Nandonik Bhabna* (Building the Environment and Related Thoughts) are considered classics by critics and readers alike.

He served as vice-president of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh for three years. An encyclopaedia of the flora and fauna of Bangladesh in 56 volumes was published by Asiatic Society while he was the president of the publishing committee.

Dwijen Sharma aspired to think in a scientific spirit. It's a vague phrase, but one might start to explain it by emphasising

of the population, particularly in our part of the world, have a hard time understanding it, mostly because of religious beliefs, superstition, lack of education.

At Notre Dame College, where he taught till 1974, he designed a landscape garden that still beautifies its campus. That's one thing about Dwijen Sharma—wherever he worked, he built gardens. Renowned folklorist Shamsuzzaman Khan said, "When I was the DG of the national museum, we made a botanical garden under his supervision in the back of the museum. Again when I joined

sociology and science from English into Bangla. From Moscow he would visit Europe to see the birthplace of Darwin and the Kew Gardens, the holy grail of botanists all over the world. He would walk around in the Regents Park and St James Park and make plans about designing our botanical garden in the same fashion. He would carry a lunchbox and spend the whole day in bookstores. The libraries, museums, parks, herbariums of London had a great influence on him.

Dwijen Sharma's books are scientific and

# 9/11 and the collective memory of Muslims



SHAFIQ RAHMAN

ANOTHER 9/11 anniversary has just passed almost quietly. In the United States, the day was observed with usual rites and rituals. The president and other politicians made patriotic statements, reminding Americans of the sacrifices they made on that day. The message of resolve to defeat the enemies of the United States was also reiterated. Even though Donald Trump rallied his political base casting Muslims as people who hate America and calling to block them from entering the country, it seems he has softened his tone lately. He even stopped using the much-talked-about phrase "Islamic terrorism" in his latest public statements. That's certainly refreshing but it is not enough to redress the ordeal Muslims throughout the world experienced post-9/11.

Many Muslims died on that fateful morning, 16 years ago, on September 11, 2001. Their blood and flesh got mixed with the rubble of Twin Towers along with the bodies of thousand others. But Muslims woke up on the morning of September 12 with the blame for the terrorist attacks fallen squarely on their shoulders. They were blamed because 19 young men who flew planes to the Twin Towers in New York City and The Pentagon were Muslims. They were blamed because the perpetrators and the masterminds of the attacks justified their actions using scriptures from the Islamic faith.

It was almost obvious that the most powerful nation would retaliate. And they did. America invaded Muslim-majority countries and waged a long-drawn-out war—campaign

against terrorism, as they called it—that left long-lasting consequences for more than a billion Muslims in the world.

Afghanistan and Iraq were invaded. Lives were lost, economies collapsed. Those countries are still reeling from the invasions. America gave shifting rationale for invading those countries. Finding weapons of mass destruction was proven to be false; exporting democracy was not authentic. Certainly, America wanted to fight terrorism globally. New terrorist outfits emerged as the United States left, or spoke of leaving, Iraq and Afghanistan before those countries were stabilised. America withdrew from the battlefields of Muslim-majority countries but the relentless war never ended. Drones became the new deadly weapons of engagement. Yes, bad guys were killed but different estimates and leaked memos show innocent civilians constituted the overwhelming majority of the victims. Terrorists and insurgents retaliated. And again—the victims were mostly Muslims.

Muslims lost much more than just lives post-9/11. Civil rights of Muslims in the United States and other Western countries were severely curtailed. President Donald Trump even tried to impose a blanket ban on Muslims arriving in the country. Even though Muslims are a tiny fraction of the US population, multiple states introduced anti-Sharia law, with two states enacting law that Sharia would never be the law of those states. Obviously, those moves were designed to make political statements. It's true some fringe right wingers were behind those moves but a wide section of the population and politicians supported those moves. Various surveys show that a significant number of Americans would support if civil liberties of Muslims were to be curtailed.

In this climate of hostility, Muslims realised that legal protection alone could not protect them from discrimination and harassment. They have become second-class citizens in the countries they were born or migrated into. Volumes of academic research tracked the sense of identity and citizenship of Muslim Americans post-9/11. My own research revealed widespread disillusionment among Bangladeshi-Americans about their citizenship and their future in the United States. The post-9/11 atmosphere was so hostile that Bangladeshi-Americans talked about the America they knew before 9/11 and the America that came to be after 9/11. They were genuinely worried about the future of their children in the United States. As time passed, the situation did not improve for them. Muslims felt that their lives were seen through the prism of terrorism. They became the suspect population. Their religious symbols were maligned. Their ethnicities criminalised. Islam turned into a political football. They witnessed their faith being brought into the spotlight after every terrorist attack anywhere in the world. Islam has widely been perceived as a faith that is not only regressive but it also promotes terrorism and extremism. Many even doubted in public whether Islam is a legitimate faith.

The very presence of Muslims or any reference of Islam almost always would invoke negativity and fear. Many working-class Muslims found that streets were not safe for them. Verbal harassment and even physical assault became frequent but in many cases they remained unreported. Ironically, even though they faced discrimination and intimidation, they were being portrayed as the grand inquisitors who would impose draconian Sharia law

and take away people's freedom.

Many Muslims themselves also began to develop doubt about their faith. Their young and impressionable children were repeatedly exposed to constant barrage of negative media coverage of Islam. The young Muslim children were at higher risk on another front: the ISIS propaganda. Many Muslims in Europe are finding it difficult to integrate into mainstream societies. Their children suffered discrimination and alienation, making them vulnerable to extreme ideologies.

What about the pernicious ideology that lurk on the Internet waiting to seduce young Muslims? Ideology that motivated those 19 young men to smash the hijacked planes into the buildings and take many innocent lives. After 16 years of fight, that

ideology is still alive and well. The ideology of exclusion and extremism that emanated from Wahhabism and Salafism spread all over the Muslim societies. Muslims all over the world talk about this ideology more openly. Fingers are also pointed to those who help sustain the ideology. That's a healthy sign. But more work need to be done to combat it and replace it with a more egalitarian and more hopeful face of Islam.

That said, I am not trying to generalise the experience of all the Muslims, but nonetheless Muslims had gone through some common challenges post-9/11. And they were not pleasant. Muslims will have to bear that collective memory.

Dr Shafiq Rahman is a Professor and Chair of Communication and Social Sciences Department at Chadron State College, Nebraska, USA.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Billing info
  - 6 Clean with effort
  - 11 Martini garnish
  - 12 Neigh sayer
  - 13 Saudi Arabia neighbour
  - 14 Made a choice
  - 15 Supplies with a grant
  - 17 Singer Shannon
  - 19 Mole, for one
  - 20 Earth tone
  - 23 Take wing
  - 25 Old Italian coin
  - 26 British paper
  - 28 - out (got by)
  - 29 Packing a punch
  - 30 "Sure thing!"
  - 31 Service reward
  - 32 Put down
  - 33 Telemundo viewer
  - 35 Car sticker
  - 38 Reef material
  - 41 Wow
  - 42 Agassi of tennis
  - 43 Takes in
  - 44 Places last
- DOWN**
- 1 Singer Orbison
  - 2 Pub staple
  - 3 History book
  - figures
  - 4 Smooth
  - 5 Mails
  - 6 Flamboyant
  - 7 Perp pursuers
  - 8 Food scrap
  - 9 Try out
  - 10 Roulette bet
  - 16 Mine, of a sort
  - 17 Diver Tom
  - 18 Summon up
  - 20 "Doctor Who" race
  - 21 Concert site
  - 22 Mean-spirited
  - 24 Tack on
  - 25 Tipsy
  - 27 In the news
  - 31 Yarns
  - 33 Take it easy
  - 34 Forbidden act
  - 35 June honoree
  - 36 Outback runner
  - 37 Pinnacle
  - 39 Verb for you
  - 40 Guitarist Paul



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

CLEFT BAAL  
LAMER COSMO  
ATBAY ONTAP  
REAR SNEEZE  
ERR COG RED  
TAGLINES  
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