

There are many versions of the legendary first encounter between Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi and his spiritual mentor Shams of Tabriz. Most describe the moment as Rumi, the religious scholar, sitting by a pond, immersed in his scholarly reading, when Shams, a stranger to him, comes by and asks him what he is doing. "You will not understand," Rumi is reported to have replied, upon which Shams throws all of Rumi's books in the pond. But the books spring back up dry, defying the laws of physics. At this point, Shams is reported to have said, "But you do not understand."

This was the moment, then, when Rumi began fathoming Allah not just with the mind but also with the heart. In a world of sharp binaries, Rumi's admirers seem bent upon separating Rumi the man of knowledge, from Rumi the mystic poet. In reality, the two are not mutually exclusive; in reality, both are the same person.

As I recently travelled by bus in Turkey from Antalya to Konya, the city of the 13th-century Sufi scholar, its unusual and diverse landscape reminded me of his message that is so universally appealing—to the rich and the poor, the pious and the sinner, the scholar and the unlettered. While the pluralism in his message is prominent, one thing becomes clearer than ever when you visit Konya—that Rumi was not just a Sufi, he was also a Muslim scholar, and taking that away from Rumi is telling half the truth.

Konya has distinct old-world charm. The people are kind and the roses are abundant. But the highlight of a visit to Konya is the Mevlevi Sema, a mystic religious rite practiced by dervishes, who emulate the whirling of Rumi, lost in ecstasy. It is an enchanting experience, the kind that leaves you with goose bumps. In the courtyard of the Mevlana Museum that houses Rumi's shrine, a common sight is a teacher with a flowing beard, a rosary in hand and a smile on his lips, sitting under the shade of a tree, surrounded by students learning about Islam. Calligraphy from Quranic verses are put up alongside verses from his extensive, famous poem, *Masnavi*. The sound of the azaan is loud and clear in Konya. Imprints of traditional Islam in the district where Rumi rests do not seem to disagree with imprints of Sufism.

There is an honorary grave of the Poet of the East, Allama Iqbal, near Rumi's grave. Iqbal is often called a spiritual protégé of Rumi, and is reported to have had a metaphysical experience when he felt Rumi's presence.

In his book *Stray Reflections: The Private Notebook of Muhammad Iqbal*, Allama Iqbal observes that "To explain the deepest truths of life in the form of homely parables requires extraordinary genius. Shakespeare, Maulana Rumi (Jalaluddin) and Jesus Christ are probably the only illustrations of this rare type of genius."

The popular interpretation of Rumi does not do justice to where he came from. Rumi is a mystic alright, but he is more than just mystic pulp fiction, and the *Masnavi* is more than just couplets



REUNIFYING RUMI

FARAHNAZ ZAHIDI



A teacher imparts spiritual wisdom to youth, under a tree near Mevlana Rumi's sarcophagus.

that can be used to soothe the after-effects of a lovers' brawl. Yet, few of those smitten by the universality of Rumi's poetry recognise the visible imprints of verses of the Quran. The popular reductionist approach towards Rumi has reduced his poetry to memes, and selected couplets with aphorisms that are easy to quote.

"Modernity has an allergy to religion. They have pushed religion into a private space, saying 'religion is just between man and God' and not collective," says Abbas Husain, educationist and Islamic scholar known for teaching the nuances of Tasawwuf and Ishq. In Husain's opinion, a fine parallel can be drawn between Rumi and the likes of Socrates

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and Plato. "The latter two were religious but have been reduced to being just philosophers. Rumi and his poetry have been exoticised, and there has been an erasure of the religious in him."

There is religion and there is religion, he says, and to Husain, the distinction is clear. "Religion puts before us deeper questions like 'why are you here', whereas religion also is focused more on rituals and minor details. We can't see the wood for the trees," he says.

The pull of Rumi is that his words are relatable. "He strikes a resonance with the inward level of man in any era," says Husain. Scholars have pondered on the various meanings of his work since long. "Rumi is not new; he has been around. The first translation of Rumi's *Masnavi* came from R.A. Nicholson, between 1925 and 1940."

But there is no denying that Rumi has been re-popularised. And his fandom is not limited to Muslims, because his message was and is universal. "I love that Rumi sees Divine beauty in all aspects of creation and speaks to people of all cultural tastes and perspectives. I love that he uses bawdy tales in his poetry," says Laury Silvers, a lecturer at the University of Toronto's Department for the Study of Religion.

According to Silvers, Rumi explains the most difficult of concepts by translating them into easily understood simpler concepts that help everyone own him. "Early on when Rumi was translated into English, these parts were translated into Latin so that only the most elite, scholarly fellows could enjoy them—exactly the opposite of Rumi's intention in composing these verses," she says.

Silvers further explains how these bawdy tales bring Divine truths to those who are best reached with rough and tumble talk. "They teach all of us that God is fully present and calling to us in every moment and through all things, not just that which we deem socially acceptable or 'pretty'."

For some today, their first exposure to Rumi has been through the Turkish writer Elif Shafak's book *Forty Rules of Love*. In a sense, Shafak did a service by producing an easy version of the often complex themes of Tasawwuf for her readers. Although Husain sees this as positive, he recommends graduating to books such as *Me and Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i-Tabrizi* by William C. Chittick for those interested in understanding Rumi better.

Whether represented in a complex or an easy manner, Rumi remains the bridge we need today—he bridges the gaps polarisation has created. Those who cling to the more comfortable and less demanding interpretation of the spiritual path of love for God and those who hold on to the path of adherence to Islamic jurisprudence or Sharia as the road to Paradise—both can find something to guide them. In a world torn apart by extremes, Rumi's message of love of God can be a meeting-point.

"Rumi invites us to become whole," says Husain. "But to become whole, we would first have to accept that we are incomplete."

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| TRIBUTE |

THE MAN IN THE REALM OF NATURE

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

Sitting under the cool shade of the large chestnut trees by the playground of Notre Dame College, students read, chat and take some rest from their otherwise hectic day. When ripe chestnuts fall, they pick those up promptly, but they never shake these fruits from the trees. The giant Gagan Shirish trees, located opposite the Harrington Building of the college, are home to countless birds—living in an undisturbed, harmonious environment for generations. Every spring, hundreds of flowering trees such as plum, naglingam, magnolia, rose and Ixora bloom and adorn the beautifully landscaped premises. This is how the students, teachers and staff of Notre Dame College, for generations, have been paying respect to the college's natural aesthetics and to Professor Dwijen Sharma, the institution's former teacher and an eminent naturalist, botanist and writer who spent years designing the institution's beautiful landscape and planted most of the trees with his own hands.

"Even long after my retirement from the college, I used to visit the campus just to sit under the trees, to enjoy the sounds of a thousand chirping birds. Amidst trees and flowering bushes, in total isolation from human noise, I would be absorbed by the absolute silence of nature. It was so beautiful, silent and pure," said Professor Sharma in a speech given to his disciples of Notre Dame Nature Study Club.

Professor Sharma passed away on September 15, 2017, leaving behind his family and numerous disciples. Never again would the plants and animals that he loved like his own family members receive the care of their loving patron. Never again would the trees that he planted all over Dhaka city feel the loving caress of their devoted champion. "I know almost all the trees of Dhaka. I can locate where they are and can tell you how they grew," said Professor Sharma once.

Sharma developed an emotional attachment to nature from his early childhood. His ancestral home in the lap of the hills and Madhabkunda Falls in Moulavibazar district gave him the opportunity to enjoy the untouched beauty of nature. "On my way to school, I would explore the jungles. I would collect wild flowers and pick wild fruits. One of my favourite fruits was wild guava. I have never seen such guavas and their bush-like trees in my life since. In the jungles, I have faced herds of wild elephants many a times," recounted

Sharma to his students of Notre Dame Nature Study Club.

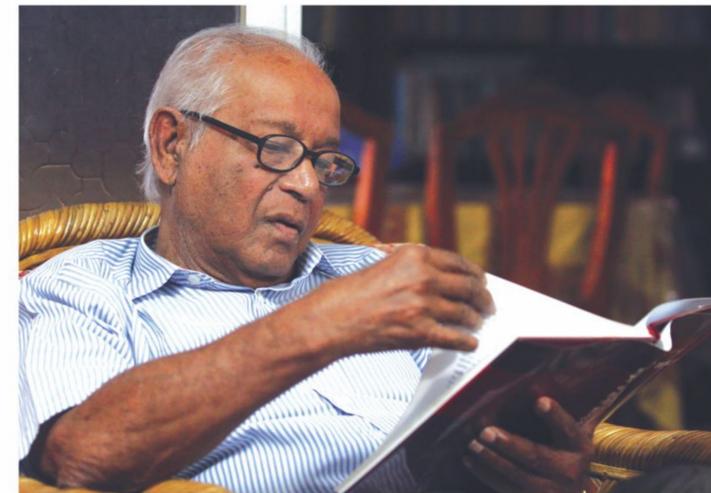
As a student of Notre Dame College and the vice-president of Notre Dame Nature Study Club, I met Professor Dwijen Sharma in 2009 when he was already 80 years old. Even then, he never looked old or tired. Whenever we asked him to take a session for the students, he happily agreed to come to his favourite campus and take a tour around the college, sharing his personal stories with each of the trees. "In 1965, I planted these *shirish* (Brahmaputra Rain Tree) trees to teach my students about the Fabaceae family. See how they have grown! The way these trees fold their leaves when it rains and in the evening is one of the greatest wonders of nature," he said on one of those tours. He would walk all around campus without any assistance, and proved that he was more energetic at that age than many of his young students.

Professor Sharma was also a great philosopher and writer. He was introduced to Marxism during his



PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

Professor Dwijen Sharma



undergraduate years at Calcutta City College. His book *Shomajontre Boshobash* (Life in Socialism)—which explains socialist theories in simple, lucid Bengali—is considered a classic. Professor Sharma was also famous for his ability to explain complex topics of science in simple Bengali. His books *Shyamoli Nishorgo* (Green Nature), *Phulgulo Jeno Kotha Bole* (Each Flower is a Word), *Jiboner Shesh Nei* (There is no End

to Life) and *Biggyan Shiksha O Daiboddhotar Nirikh* (Science Education and Our Responsibility) are considered some of the greatest works of science literature in Bengali.

As a teacher and educationist, Sharma played a key role in organising the education movement of 1962 in protest of the Sharif Education Commission Report which suggested that Bengali would be taught and written in the

Roman alphabet. Due to his role in the protest, Sharma was locked up by the Pakistani government in the local police station for three months.

In 1974, Sharma concluded his teaching career at Notre Dame College and joined Progress Publishers at Moscow as a translator. In 2000, he returned to Bangladesh and joined Asiatic Society's Banglapedia project as the Editor of Biology. Professor Sharma has been honoured with many awards including the Bangla Academy Literary Award (1987) and Ekushey Padak (2015). Despite these recognitions and his busy schedule, he led a humble life and loved to spend time in nature with his students. He used to say, "I want you to love the purity of nature; I would like to teach you how to preserve nature without harming its beautiful harmony. Remember, even learning to decorate your home with plants and trees is a great lesson and can contribute a lot to preserve nature."

Professor Sharma's teachings and works have taught us to value nature and its beauty. He was the pioneer of the nature study movement and nature education in Bangladesh. He is no more with us but his ideals and teachings will stay with us forever.

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