

Botanical Gardens conceived in Cambridge

By Majid Sheikh

Lahore Dawn 21.4.01

IT came as a surprise as I sat conversing with a professor at Cambridge University's Trinity College that the Botanical Gardens of Government College, Lahore, were the product of the eagerness of the dons at Cambridge to reproduce what they had at their ancient seat of learning.

As we walked down the entrance of the Botanical Gardens in Cambridge, one almost felt that one had entered our own Lawrence Gardens. If you have ever had the chance, or privilege, to be allowed entrance to Lahore's Botanical Gardens, the property of the Government College, Lahore, you will be struck by the stark difference it presents to the otherwise majestic Lawrence Gardens. The lush green leaves and bushes are well watered and the greenhouses have almost every type of flora in them. The idea then was that each and every tree and flower that existed in the British Empire should be in Lahore's Botanical Garden.

There was a time when this was true, and that time was almost 20 years ago. With the decline in the investment on the

sciences, interest in our botanical garden also declined. The learned professors of the Government College, Lahore, managed to keep the place intact. But when they let it be known that they needed a tissue culture laboratory to keep each and every species intact, they met the stonewall of bureaucracy. From that time onwards a decline set in. In a way it reflects the decline of academia all over the country, with a pure scientific approach to life becoming a suspect pastime.

The professors at Cambridge seem to know more about the botanical gardens here than do the teachers of the college itself. It is a reflection of the times in which we live. The reason the dons of Cambridge were so interested in Lahore was because the principals of the Government College, were respected teachers from Cambridge, mostly from Trinity. It is for this reason that over half the principals of the college before partition were from this university.

As one walks through Trinity one can-

not but imagine that life in Government College is a miniature version of what life still is at Trinity. The central court and even the theatre are miniature versions of this great university. The end result has been a reasonable product by all standards. Statistically, given the number of students that have been produced, our ratio of Nobel prize winners is on the positive side, even though we have had only one so far.

The Botanical Gardens of Lahore are even today an outstanding example of our scientists to work away in silence... to explore and investigate the secrets of nature. Almost 30 years ago, one professor, Dr Ahsanul Islam, was actually nominated by the Imperial College, London, for the Nobel Prize for his contribution to the understanding of the egg embryo. He returned home and in his absence his research method was named the Ahsan Method... a technique that is still used and is the basis for all understanding that we have of genetics... the opening of a totally new area in the sciences. But he died virtually an unknown person in his

own homeland.

It might come as a shock to most readers that the don of a leading college at Cambridge is from their own homeland. He does not want to be named, for reasons that I can well understand. He feels that the establishment will misuse his name and position, landing him in an embarrassing position. It is sad that the sciences and academia have been pushed into a position where they just cannot assert themselves in our national life.

The book shops at Cambridge are full of new research books about our city and our country. They have so much to say, and it is time we listened. On this short note ends this piece from Cambridge. Next week one will be back home and there will be more of the same.

NOTE: The students at Trinity hailing from Lahore have named various points in the city after names from Lahore. The central fountain in the college is called Fawwara Chowk and Cleopatra's Needle, not the one in London, is called *Tahira Syed ki Unglian*. There are other names, but more of them later.