

Transcript of an e-mail interview given to Sarika Sharma of Hindustan Times on October 17, 2008. [In my e-mail acceding to her request for this interview I'd informed her that we'd been unofficially told that the proposal to re-name the garden in honour of Dr. J. S. Sarkaria had now been approved by the highest authority (the garden was subsequently so re-named on October 23, 2008) : *K. S. Sarkaria.*]

Q 1. What was the vision of Mr Sarkaria behind Cactus Garden? What did he use to say about cactus as a plant as it is not much visually colourful and pleasant to feel?

A 1. First I must – incidentally I am a mathematician, my father was into cacti, so I'm speaking here as a layman only – take issue with you on statement that (cactus) “is not much visually”. How can you possibly say that? The symmetries and patterns, and the variety in which these fascinating forms appear make these plants most appealing to the eye! Anyway “on ne parle pas de goût” (one shouldn't argue about taste) to each his/her own ... About “colourful” how about cactus flowers, they are famed for their resplendent and utterly glorious colours! I must emphasize however that my father, Dr J S Sarkaria, did not envisage this as a mere garden beautiful to behold – not that he neglected this by any means, most plant-lovers find this THE most beautiful of all gardens in the area – but even more importantly, as a scientific (botanical) collection and facility. The town of Panchkula now holds in its bosom an unparalleled scientific treasure: this collection has thousands of species – some very rare – of cacti and succulents. And since we are talking here of a collection of living things, it is obvious that expert and constant care is needed to keep this treasure in good shape.

Q 2. The Cactus Garden, sadly, does not see many visitors. As we came to know on our visit, a mere 50-60 is the number of the people visiting it daily. That too young couples who apparently are not there for the garden but for the peace. Do you think the administration could not develop it on the lines of Rose Garden or Rock Garden as it is as significant as they are?

A 2. Yes, more publicity should be given to the garden but of a proper kind. Its original and different beauty – in this aspect the comparison with the Rock Garden is fair, but in another aspect it scores over it, this is living beauty! – should be stressed, but even more than this, it should be stressed that it is an open-air museum of sorts, housing thousands of kinds of rare plants. Accordingly, the visitors who would be drawn would be those who are not totally superficial, who like educating themselves, who recognize and appreciate the need for preserving species and environment, the botanical heritage of this planet. My father NEVER EVER wanted this place to become a PARK – horrors! – indeed while he was alive he nipped all such efforts (there were some made) in the bud, like holding all sorts of “functions” there – on the other hand I'm afraid the Rose Garden in Chandigarh often tends to become a mere park (indeed the authorities recognized that the Rose Fair was damaging this garden and fortunately now try to minimize this annual damage by separating stalls etc. from the garden proper).

Q 3. It is nice to hear that HUDA is renaming it after Mr Sarkaria's name. We will take a quote from the administration on it but would also like to have your feedback.

A 3. After Dr J S Sarkaria passed away on August 15, 2004, the cactus and succulent society passed a resolution that this garden be re-named to honour its creator. So it has admittedly taken a long time – but as you know the wheels of bureaucracy do tend to turn slowly! – but we are all of course very happy that this decision has now been made. But I must stress again, Ms Sharma, that the information that I received was unofficial. As I have written in my last letter, you must verify it, i.e., please get the authentic exact wording of this decision – in particular the exact proposed new name of this botanical garden in Panchkula – from the H.U.D.A. authorities. And while you are at it maybe they'll give you the time frame in which this decision to re-name would be implemented.

Q 4. Were there any dreams of your father as regards the Cactus Garden that have not yet been fulfilled ?

A 4. My father accomplished a lot in his life because he was always striving for more perfection, always aiming for a better way. He was a very hard worker and spent many long hours tending to these plants which were like his babies. It goes without saying that these orphans would benefit a lot if they could find an equally knowledgeable and loving caretaker. Need has been pointed out to H.U.D.A. to find such a curator and entrust all matters of a botanical kind to him/her. Great care should however be made to find the proper person. It would not do at all to hire someone fresh behind the ears, with a paper degree in botany, who has neither knowledge, special expertise or passion for these plants. However the present H.U.D.A. administration is well aware of this need, and they know that there are persons around – the cactus and succulent society has a number of expert and experienced cactophiles in its fold – who can guide them in this matter. So I am hopeful the right decision shall be made here also. It is highly commendable that for the last 4 years, and despite the guidance of any curator after my father passed away, the gardeners under the guidance of Mr Sushil have taken VERY good care of this garden. The Sarkaria family, and indeed all plant-lovers, owe a whole lot to them, that is, to Sushil, Hansa, Banta, Kamal, Ram Harak, Tami et al. Indeed Ms Sharma I do hope that your feature article shall also include input from this garden's gardeners; surprisingly this is often overlooked in such pieces.