

From Sylhet

A Free School for the Deaf and Dumb

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ABOUT 30 children were in the classroom. There was no noise or any disturbance. However their hands and other body parts were moving in order to communicate. They were using sign language amongst themselves, all of them deaf and dumb. They laugh and cry, experience joy and sorrow, but their language is incomprehensible to someone listening in from the outside. This is a scene of everyday life at a small school in Sylhet city's Shahi Eidgah area. It is named Shahjalal Muk Bodhir School (Shahjalal School for the Deaf and Dumb). All the children are from poor family backgrounds. This small institution is run by a man who does it solely out of his sense for charity.

"I had been to the capital for the treatment of my daughter, who became seriously ill and turned deaf and dumb when she was only 3. I ran from one place to another, from one doctor to another, but found nothing comfortable. This seemed to be too time consuming and costly for a man like me", said, Zahir Alam, a man who runs a private motor driving center in Sylhet for his living. "My situation felt impossible. I felt that I might be better off if I just committed suicide since I couldn't even take care of my little girl." Now Zahir, along with his daughter passes sleepless nights in the capital.

Suffering from typhoid his first child Aziza Alam Nipa turned dumb at the age of 3. This was in 2004. Zahir Alam narrates, "I can't forget those days, as my daughter was a normal child like many others until she got sick."

Getting no scope for treatment of his daughter in Dhaka, since those are too costly, Zahir dropped the idea. But, some people advised him to arrange schooling for her. He managed to get her admission into a school in Dhanmondi. She achieved much in a short time, which raised her father's confidence in her abilities. But keeping her in a residential school was just too expensive. "Then I felt that there were many things I could do on my own", Zahir says..

Zahir then returned to Sylhet and talked to people and learnt about many children like his own. Most of them, took it as their fate, but he didn't. At one point, Zahir decided to start something on his own. Many people, including some of his relatives discouraged him considering such a venture to be a costly thing. Also, they guessed it would not be possible for a man like Zahir to run.

But, he carried on. Zahir and his wife Ambia Alam took training on sign language in the capital. Also Zahir sent his younger daughter Ripa and some others to Dhaka for training in sign language, so that they could start teaching the others. And so his school started in one part of a rented house. It started on the morning of 30 May of 2005. Now,

Zahir's elder daughter, disabled Nipa, and younger daughter Khadiza Alam Sony (also a student of class X, at a high school) take classes, as they had taken training on sign language from Dhaka. Besides, four others are there for teaching. They were also given training in sign language



from the capital. However, the teachers are just given a lump sum amount as an honorarium.

As I entered, all the children in the classroom stood up and gave their salam. There was no noise. A class was going on that time in the congested room of the 3-storied house. They were all from financially insolvent families. They were happy to see some people, who came to see them and the schooling.

In the small waiting room nearby, Sokhina Khatun from the city's Mirabazar area said, "I do run my family on my labor." Sokhina's husband divorced her 3 years ago, after their 3-year child Ritu went deaf. She serves as home-worker. Every day, I take my daughter to this school and back. She has learnt many things," Sokhina adds. "She will go further *inshallah*, if the school runs this way. But, we don't know how it will run, since we can't pay the school", she said.

He started the school with only 15 children, but now there are 130 in 2 batches. They are aged between 6 and 22 years. Guardians from miles away also do come with their children. No fee is charged while National Curriculum is followed here. Occasionally, some people come with whatever they can do to help. They provide notebooks and other things. "The boys and girls are brilliant in the real sense and so they can learn things easily," Zahir adds, "I will try my best to make the school live on. The mayor and the acting mayor of the Sylhet City Corporation and some other leading people visited the small school at times. All had praised the venture." □