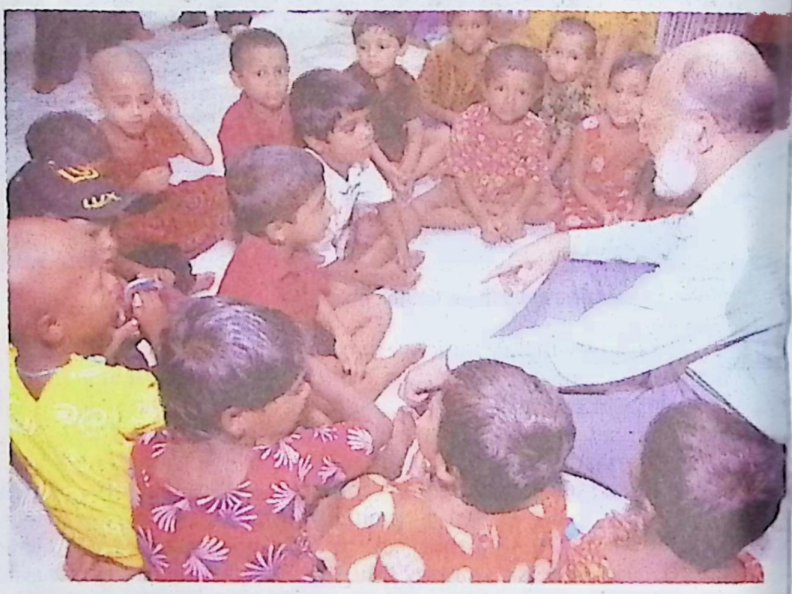
The Quiet Samaritan

A visionary working to change the fate of underprivileged children

ZAM KHAIRUZZAMAN

In late 1982, in the evening, just after dusk, young working children and female domestic workers with books and note pads in their hands were seen walking in groups towards Twin House, which housed the office of Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), a social welfare organisation. They were thronging in response to an appeal by the organisation's general secretary Kazi Rafiqul Alam, who had gone from door to door to collect students for the evening school. The number increased gradually, so much so that he could not manage it alone. Three to four assistants were appointed, along with it expanded the facilities of the school so that it could enrol students up to Grade-5. The standard of education was good; it matched that of any formal primary school. The school was free, so were all the educational materials that the school had provided the children with.

The DAM office, however, later moved to Dhanmondi, where the evening school continued. Here, Alam urged employers of the domestic workers to send them to school, which met with an overwhelming response. Now, the number of students increased to a great extent, creating a security problem. The corridor and vacant office space were used; and as the number of students continued to grow, he constructed a temporary shade at a vacant space. But the landlord was annoyed and served a notice to immediately vacate his house. Till then, the DAM had no building of its own. Alam rented another house near the previous one. Eventually, the number of students at his school rose to more than 400.



Alam's school has established a linkage programme with Bangladesh Open University (BoU).

This in-campus school continued till 1997.

At this stage, Alam decided to educate street children of Dhaka. He opened non-formal schools in Mohammadpur slums having 20 learning centres (LCs) under the umbrella of the DAM. The number of children rose astoundingly and another school in Agargaon with 80 learning centres had to be opened. The DAM provided the school uniforms and reading materials free of cost.

With a project as huge as this Alam realised he needed all the help he could get and started recruiting community volunteers for the school. As the number of children soared, he utilised mosques, community centres or other suitable places in the community as evening schools.

He developed the school to mid junior secondary level, establishing a linkage programme with Bangladesh Open University (BoU), so that the qualifying students of terminal examinations could sit in Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations under the BoU.

But just providing them with academic qualifications was not enough and so Alam decided to open a vocational training centre at Mirpur. He arranged two microbuses to bring street children of different slums to the centres. Fourteen trade courses of three to six months duration were introduced. Every six-months, 500 children underwent training in three shifts. The courses included electrical house wiring, radio-TV repairing, plumbing, knitting, sewing, leather goods production, beautician training, block-batik print and bakery. It was followed by two more similar centres.

Alam took another initiative to employ the trained children in different factories. Many became self-employed while others got employment abroad as skilled labourers. Job placement officials helped them find suitable jobs.

In Dhaka, a large number of children are employed in hazardous jobs and are forced to continue working under dangerous conditions because of poverty. Many of these children contribute to the family income and their parents depend on their earnings. With the assistance from International Labour Organisation (ILO), DAM started advocacy with families of working children. It provided an alternative support to bring out children from hazardous jobs. The ILO provided micro-finance support to their parents for generating income on their own initiative, to decrease their dependence on children. Children got admitted to non-formal schools established by DAM. The number of children pulled out of hazardous jobs and brought back to fold of non-formal schools stood at 32,000. DAM schools sprawled to over 85 locations throughout the capital.

Ultimately, DAM set up 6,000 schools across the country.