# When Given the Chance



Alhaj M A Sobahan Howlader and Begum Rabeya Sobahan of Kathalia Union, Jhalokati. PHOTO: ANDREW EAGLE

**ANDREW EAGLE**

With no more fuss than the lengthening evening shadows in the leafy yard outside, long-time teacher Begum Rabeya Sobahan, 57, steps into the cool veranda room and sits in the arm chair beside the inner door. There's no doubt she's been listening. The subject of conversation is Mariam Jerin Mouri.

Her face lit by caring, Rabeya settles comfortably into reminiscence. When Mouri learnt to swim, they put two coconuts into the pond with the young girl for added buoyancy, as is not uncommon in Bangladesh. Unfortunately each coconut gradually went its own way, as coconuts tend to do. Mouri's arms stretched ever wider and she was frightened. "She cried out so loudly," says Rabeya smiling, "The whole neighbourhood came running! She can really yell!"



Mariam Jerin Mouri, remains shy about her background.

The simple anecdote and the heartfelt way Rabeya tells it is the sort of thing one could hear from many a mother in many a household – except that Mouri isn't her daughter.

Mouri first came to the Sobahans' house in Paschim Aura village of Kathalia Union, Jhalokati, when she was eight years old to help with the housework. Mouri's family from adjacent Binapani village was poor. Her father toiled with day labour or in a local mill while her mother occasionally worked as a maid.

Her parents didn't wish to send her but with difficulty to provide even food for their three daughters and two sons there didn't seem to be an option. Mouri, the youngest daughter, was sent for a one-week trial.

"When Mouri came," says Rabeya's 66-year-old husband Alhaj M.A. Sobahan Howlader, proudly, "she tried to read anything she came across around the house." Perhaps Mouri was fortunate to have found herself in a household of teachers.

"I asked if she wanted to study," Sobahan continues.

Eight-year-old Mouri said that if she had the chance she would. It was a simple response but a big decision for one so young – a decision that would alter her life's course.

"My parents did not want me to stay with them," Mouri says of the discussion when the initial week was up. "I took the decision. I was