take these kids, then more initiatives by other people can help diffuse the extent of education to more of them. "If we each take a handful, personally guarantee to the schools that all their standards will be maintained, then underprivileged kids would not have to go to underprivileged schools."

On the school's part, generosity and understanding was crucial to the venture. So, it was a relief to Smallfoot when Time International decided to bear 70 percent of the admission costs for these kids and 50 percent of the monthly tuition. The rest comes from hundred taka donations, which volunteers from Smallfoot collect monthly. So far, this has been enough to bear the cost for the house rent of the initial school and their books, bags and school dresses.

Back in the slum Maenuddin, the father of Dina who is the brightest of the twelve, tells me how he wants his girl to live a better life. A vegetable tradesman, Maenuddin adds, "I even hired a private tutor for Dina and I want her to pursue a profession that she wants."

Dina wants to grow up to be a doctor. Only Dina among the twelve had attended a school before Smallfoot, but she left because she didn't enjoy studying and the teachers were irregular. Now, after a year in Smallfoot, she is performing the best in the new school and her teachers are happy.

Tania, another girl from Smallfoot, says she wants to join the police when she grows up. She flares up as someone from the group chimes in saying, "Women can't be police." And soon all the kids are talking about their aspirations, about the number of friends they have in the new school, what they study – in short showing the same interest in their school as every kid does in a normal environment.

The Vice-Principal talks of how these kids all attend the classes regularly, adding that since the fire, a few have been absent. Their uniforms were all gone along with the books. "Time International decided to pay for all the books, bags and stationery," he says. Smallfoot took on the cost of making new clothes. Kashem and the other unfortunate are excited again at the prospect of re-joining the classes within a week's time.



The Smallfoot kids with the other school children at Time International. PHOTO: MOYUKH MAHTAB

What Smallfoot has achieved with little funding is novel in Bangladesh. Their sentiment - that every kid, no matter the background deserves a good education spurred these university students to take on the mammoth task of responsibility for twelve children.

Prince adds that eighty percent of the funds for Smallfoot was managed by students from schools such as St. Joseph, Notre Dame, ISD etc. Seeing their initiative, Oxford even agreed to take two of these children without any admission fee when the time came.

Smallfoot's big plans are far from over. Even though they don't plan to take on more kids, they feel that it is their responsibility to ensure these twelve are never in want of money for education. They fear that eventually, classmates will taunt these kids for their background, and some will want to drop out midway. Optimistic, Prince tells me, "We will deal with peer pressure case by case."

In spite of future difficulties that are bound to arise, it is cheerful to see that at least one initiative in Bangladesh saw these kids as more than underprivileged, with just as much a right to education - proper education - as anybody else. ■