

# Back from the Brink

ANDREW EAGLE

**B**ulbul Master knows how it is to stand at the precipice and stare into the abyss. He's been to that dark place where all seems lost, with little left to lose. He survived.

Thanks to the great blessings of a singular friend who forced Bulbul to pull himself back; with the truly remarkable support of Dinajpur's rural Kalikapur community who accept Bulbul while being aware of his past, the man's life eventually returned to take on that everyday rhythm most take for granted. In such circumstances otherwise modest achievements really shine.

Bulbul Ahmed Chowdhury, approaching fifty years old, rents a room across the laneway at the back of the government high school. He pays 500 taka per month board. As he never had the chance to marry, he lives alone.

Bulbul is popular with the other families in the house. They knock on his door to say hello if he's been inside for too many hours. They ensure he eats with them.

In the wider community he has respect. Many are grateful for his help given to their children as a tutor. Bulbul's students are reputed for impressive exam results.

"This community is my family now," he says.

Yet it's with difficulty he pulls on trousers every day. Since his second stroke in 2013 that simple task requires effort.

Nobody could have predicted such a life. A young Bulbul seemed to have the world at his feet.

The youngest of five sisters and three brothers, it's undeniable that Bulbul's life suffered a major setback with the early deaths of his parents. But being a landlord's son, when assets were divided after his father died while Bulbul was in Class 10 he became proprietor of 11 acres of land. It easily generated income for his education. He lived with an older brother.

As a Dinajpur Government College student Bulbul was meritorious, popular and rich. He was the student union vice-president and passed HSC and BA commendably. Teachers and peers expected a bright future; but before college ended he'd made an error of judgement.

"A friend gave me a bottle of Phensydil," he says, "We were eight friends. We all took it just to see how it was." Phensydil cost 28 taka in 1988.

With the invincibility young adults inevitably feel, it must've seemed like no big deal. "After the first one, we slept all day," he says.

Unsurprisingly, the friends took Phensydil again after that, now and then. They experimented with marijuana and alcohol. Some never became addicted. Bulbul wasn't so fortunate.

"I was really devastated by the loss of my girlfriend," he says, "After taking Phensydil I could forget the pain. I was feeling calm. It wasn't really for fun I took it. But it became difficult to control."



**Bulbul Ahmed Chowdhury paid a high price for drug addiction. Happy to have survived and recovered, he now tries to improve the lives of a younger generation.**

Within six months Bulbul was consuming Phensydil daily. Without it he couldn't function. Once he thought to give up but found it impossible.

At the end of 1988 Bulbul sold the first acre of land for 25,000 taka – a low price even then. These days a quarter acre might sell for 8 lacs.

Meanwhile his dosage rose, reaching two bottles per day, taken four times at half a bottle per dose. He was a chain marijuana smoker and usually consumed a bottle of alcohol daily.

Inevitably his family understood. "They were angry and told me to stop," he says, "which made me frustrated." They saw him sleeping all day, awake all night and incessantly listening to music. By 1994 his



PHOTO: ANDREW EAGLE

**Bulbul currently tutors about 120 students. He hopes one day to have a fully-fledged coaching centre and to offer free tuition to the disadvantaged.**

family no longer knew what to do. They threw him out of the house. He hardly cared. Bulbul was furious they didn't mind their own business.

Yet, with inheritance income he wasn't entirely destitute. But in the following years, as he continued to sell land for drugs, circumstances worsened. His last plot was sold in 1999.

As a consequence of his strokes Bulbul doesn't remember much of those years. But he started begging. People saw him roaming Dinajpur town. People saw him on his knees in the street, touching other people's feet. Still he did not accept he had a problem.

For addicts, once they've lost their families, there's very little chance of ever turning lives around.

This time however, Bulbul was lucky. Many people knew him. Perhaps only they could properly comprehend the devastating loss of potential.

One day in 2006 a cultural activist and senior student from his college days, Sultan Kamal Uddin Bachhu passed him in the street, potentially as he'd done many times before. But on that day he decided to stop, and take on an angel's work.

Bachhu picked him off the street and sent him to rehabilitation. Bulbul was so unaware by then he could hardly object. Most treatment money came from Bachhu's pocket but he also raised funds from former classmates.

"At rehab there were many addicts who were

unlike me. They were used to stealing and snatching. It was difficult to spend time with them. I felt very alone," Bulbul recalls.

There were restrictions. Each day was regimented with prayer, class and rest. It was painful even to kneel during prayer when withdrawal symptoms arrived. "If you did something wrong, punishments were severe."

Yet slowly there was progress. "After three months," Bulbul says, "my brain started functioning. For the first time I realised what I'd become. Finally I knew I had a big problem."

Only after six months did Bulbul feel his addiction gone. He was cleared to leave but Bachhu insisted he stay another three months.

It's very difficult to break addiction. Even with the best care few succeed. Nine months after rehabilitation Bulbul had a relapse. Fortunately Bachhu understood it on the first day Bulbul returned to drugs. He was furious – and this time Bulbul was receptive. "I never took drugs again," he says.

An important part of recovery was that after his relapse Bachhu sent Bulbul to live in a multi-faith ashram, away from former influences. The ashram asked no questions.

For the next three months Bacchu sent pocket money for food. It was then that Bulbul, at last, could start contemplating a future.

Being the son of a well-off family he felt options for basic work were closed. He didn't feel he could run a small shop for lack of seed money.

By the end of 2007 he'd decided to try tuition. He went door to door. A few families agreed. "I built good relations," he says, "They'd ask me to stay for dinner. They never asked about my addiction."

When students started performing well demand increased. "The community really started to look after me," he says.

By 2010 it was impractical to conduct classes in private homes. He approached the high school principal to use classrooms after hours. The principal agreed.

These days Bulbul has 120 students and employs a junior tutor. He hopes to build a fully-fledged coaching centre. In particular he wants to provide classes to the disadvantaged – he already teaches one class from the impoverished Harijan sweeper community without charge.

In sharing his battle with addiction Bulbul seeks to encourage in young people the strength of mind to avoid drugs. "If friends are taking drugs," he says, "find new friends. Drugs destroy families."

To parents he says, "Try to understand your children always. Maybe they're suffering from a romantic break-up like I was. Maybe they have some other tension that makes them especially vulnerable – and if your children are taking drugs please send them for treatment early. Never be ashamed to get help. Anger won't work. Locking them at home won't work."

Sometimes while visiting Dinajpur town Bulbul