

Article 17 of the Constitution names education as a civil right. It states, "Free and compulsory education: The state shall adopt effective measures for establishing a uniform mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law..."

Unfortunately, this does not extend to children belonging to the marginalised community residing in Geneva Camps (Bihari Camps). The schools in these camps are not registered with the government for the simple reasons that school authorities do not own the school property and cannot meet the financial requirements needed to register their schools. "In order to register, you need a fund of 3 to 4 lakhs in your account, which we cannot afford," says M Shoukat Ali, the General Secretary of the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation

about the future education of these children beyond the primary level. "I approached OBAT-Helpers about this, and they agreed to undertake their education from grades 5 to 8," says Ali. "Now, our

5th grade students take their PSC exams and the 8th graders take their JSC exams every year. Other NGO's help out in a few of the other campus."

Despite this however the camp school

still regularly faces many challenges. "Right now, the NGOs running this school get us books from the Upazilla Education Office, but not always all of them," says Ali "This year we received only 75 percent of the education materials." As the schools are not registered, the students must appear for public examinations by obtaining registration forms through schools outside the camp. This is often difficult as most of these schools charge 6 months to a year worth of fees in exchange for this favour. "The students must also do this if they wish to enroll into a school outside the camp for higher studies," says Ali.

"We have 681 students in our school, and only 5 classrooms to accommodate them, in shifts. Some, who can afford/manage it, go to schools outside the camps, but the rest remain illiterate," says Mathematics teacher Mohammad Faisal Alam. Each class has about 40 students,

AWAITING THE SILVER LINING

ANIKA HOSSAIN

PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO



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Committee (SPGRC), and headmaster of a school in the Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur.

"There are 70 Bihari Camps located in 13 places across the country," says Ali, "At one time, each camp used to have a school providing primary level education. Unfortunately, as we received no financial assistance from the government or NGOs to run these schools, by 2003, they all had to be closed," he tells us.

The school in Mohammadpur was kept running on the nominal fees provided by the students' families. "We did this till 2005, but as most of our students could not even afford the fee of Tk 15 to 20, we needed outside help," explains Ali. "That is when the NGOs PLAN and Shurobhi offered to take over the running of this school. They took charge of the primary school education till 5th grade," he says. The authorities were still concerned



about eight to ten students share a bench made for four. "The small rooms have no ventilation and in the summer months, when we have no electricity for hours, it gets so hot and dark, it is unbearable to breathe in these rooms," he says. "The children have no open space to play," says M Shoukat Ali, "The atmosphere inside the camps is not conducive for studying as it is loud and cramped with little privacy. The school teachers get paid an inadequate salary. I am headmaster and I get only Tk 5,000 a month. How are we to survive on this?"

Despite their difficulties, this community is grateful for their small achievements—the students no longer sit on the floor and now have electricity. They have held on to the hope that the government will, in the near future, recognise their plight and lend a long overdue, helping hand. ■