



PHOTOS: DARSHAN CHAKMA

MAMA BARI

Empowering Children through Education

NAZIFA RAIDAH & MITHI CHOWDHURY

Imagine an ordinary man whose day begins like any other. He wakes up at quarter past seven, worn out from the previous day, preparing to grit his teeth through the next. He goes through the motions – eats breakfast, catches up on the daily news, maybe shares a few laughs with his wife over the shenanigans at work. But this is no ordinary man. Every Thursday, his living room takes on the appearance of a makeshift school, sheltering 70 children as a din of nervous energy and excitable laughter at irregular intervals becomes a recurrence. No, 38 year-old Mahboob Robbani doesn't wear a cape, although his beloved children see him as nothing less than a superhero.

Seven years ago, Mahboob, better known as "mama", took in a few underprivileged children from his community in Mirpur, Dhaka and began to support them in whatever capacity he could. He provided their tuition fees, uniforms, books, and food out of his own savings and began to host weekly gatherings – affectionately termed "Mama Bari" by his students – at his modest apartment. For motivations baffling to most, Mahboob went beyond his role as caregiver and integrated himself into each child's life.

"I believe the children have a right to what they receive here. I do it from that simple notion – that every child has the basic right to proper education, good health and a quality life," said Mahboob.

What initially began as a humble homeroom, where the children came once a week to complete their homework and mingle, evolved into a cocoon of effervescent creative energy. The kids participate in a myriad of extracurricular activities such as music, art, writing poetry, martial arts, and swimming. Mahboob doesn't just encourage their creative pursuits for the sake of it; he steadily helps unleash each child's individual talent and ensures that that talent is honed by professionals.

Initially, Mahboob's plan included university students who could volunteer in their spare time. However, that plan was not triumphant as the students had busy schedules. Mahboob decided to recruit six individuals, offering them monetary support and as time went on, it turned into a system in progress. Over the next few years, it was noticeable that the kids themselves were sufficient in providing assistance to each other; the older students started sharing the responsibility of taking care of the younger.

Mahboob points to one of the older students under his



tutelage and said, "She looks after a group of younger students. She has to evaluate and assist each student in her group – starting from whether a student needs additional help in their education to understanding their inner talent and what would help flourish it. The report then comes back to me and is put into action."

"Generally, we take in students starting from the age of 3 to make sure that the child gets the basic primary education. This also helps us understand the passion of each student at a very early age and evaluate them accordingly, guiding them towards their goals. From class 4/5, we can generally recognise each child's talent and focus on nurturing it," added Mahboob.

Although Mahboob understands the importance of education, his main focus has been to ensure that the kids get to explore their talents to the fullest, and has successfully ensured that for each student over the past 7 years. The children go to traditional schools as well as Mahboob's. The schools have provided the children

enough support till class 5, but couldn't afterwards due to lack of funds. Mahboob discussed the latest advancements in the education plan for the kids and said that after class 8, he plans to provide vocational education to the children. After class 8, the students are sectioned off to different schools based on their results.

Throughout the last 7 years, Mahboob has had to fust through his own set of obstacles. No matter how much he wants to help these children, he admitted that there are always a few who stray from the group and never return. Although these isolated incidents bring Mahboob immense pain and heartache, he has learnt to accept them.

"I've had a few runaways over the years, and they're generally boys. They develop friends of their own after a certain age, who are often a bad influence. I've had a few girls leave as well, mostly due to pressure from family members to get married," he said.

When these cases arise, Mahboob makes it his mission to convince the families otherwise, particularly in the case

of gifted children. When reflecting on the past, it didn't escape Mahboob that he couldn't have accomplished this feat without the help of his wife, Ayasa Akter, and long-time friend, Shariful Islam Khan.

Shariful Islam, an executive at Bank Asia, began to assist Mahboob four years ago after hearing about the programme from a friend. Since then, he has been an integral part of the programme and visits Mahboob's school often to help out.

"I was drawn to Mahboob and his initiative because he struck me as one of the kindest souls I had ever met. Why else would somebody give up their life, their career to provide for someone else's children?" he asked. "I'm incredibly proud of the work we do here. We try to raise these children to be global citizens," he added. In fact, the children often visit Shariful Islam's workplace whenever he requires their assistance running errands.

Two years ago, Mahboob was diagnosed with a rare form of tumor. This was a step back for Mahboob's future plans for the kids since it required his constant involvement. But as time went by, Mahboob decided to remain resilient and steer through the hardships, hoping to create a sustainable future for the kids as long as fate ensured it. Mahboob's wife, Ayasa, has been an indomitable source of strength throughout. "We've hardly ever had a social life or spare time for leisure. At first, this was a hard lifestyle to adjust to, but now it has turned into a habit of fostering 70 kids and being their 'Mami'," said Ayasa.

But all the hardship and sacrifices are worth it as Mahboob has polished diamonds from the rough. All the children at Mama Bari have unique talents. They can write poetry instantly from any experience they have had. They can sing beautifully and almost all of them have learned martial arts

for self-defense. One of the greatest success stories at Mama Bari was when Champa and Afrin – both black belt in karate – defended themselves against harassers in Mirpur. This gained a lot of attention from the media and many institutions started giving karate lessons from that inspiration. "Mama Bari is like a second home to all of us. More than anything, it has given me a sense of community where we look out for each other. When one of us succeeds, it's a victory for all of us. Making Mahboob mama proud is the singular goal that drives us every day," said Champa, a thought echoed by all the kids we have had the pleasure of speaking to.

Mahboob is scheduled to begin treatment in January next year, and his worst fears include not being able to secure Mama Bari's future for the children. While he has not lost hope, he is aware of the risks. For the first time in 7 years, he is seeking support – financial or administrative – for the entity he has so lovingly built to give these children a bright future. All he asks for is your time and compassion to continue the work he has championed for children of this country.

Follow Mahboob Robbani's Mama Bari at www.facebook.com/mamabarite.

