

# A mission to reach the most vulnerable

*Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), established by renowned educationist and philanthropist Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah, with the motto of providing humanitarian service, has come a long way since its inception 60 years ago. The organisation has undertaken and managed some outstanding projects in the field of health and education. In an interview with The Daily Star, Kazi Rafiqul Alam, president, Dhaka Ahsania Mission, talks to Naznin Tithi about why it is important to step up humanitarian projects at a time when growing inequality deprives the poor from access to education and health.*

Working with Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) for the last three decades, how would you evaluate its work in the field of health and education? Do you think DAM could make any difference in these sectors?

I started my work at the Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) with an initiative aiming to provide education to street children and elderly people. Since then, we have come a long way. We have established several schools, colleges, vocational training institutes, teachers' training colleges and also an engineering university. We have been following the footsteps of Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah, who had established Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) in 1958 and dedicated his life to serving those who were distressed. This renowned educationist worked for the advancement of the underprivileged all his life.

Unlike other NGOs, our work is value based, and not profit-oriented. We have moral bindings to work for the development of society. DAM is a completely non-profit organisation. Of course, we earn from many of our projects, but only to bear the expenses of the organisation such as employees' salaries and other spending. For example, the educational institutions we have built provide education in exchange of fees. And what we earn from these institutions is used to run the same and the surplus money is used for running other humanitarian projects.

The current literacy rate in the country is 72 percent, meaning that 28 percent people are still illiterate. Therefore, we can't say that we have been successful in our work but we are trying. I think a lot still needs to be done in our education sector.

What motivated you to set up a cancer hospital for the underprivileged? How is the hospital run?

Ahsania Mission Cancer and General



Kazi Rafiqul Alam

Hospital, inaugurated in 2014, will operate on a not-for-profit basis. Once complete, it will have 500 beds. Currently, there are 250 beds.

My wife was diagnosed with cancer in 1994. I took her to India, Thailand, Singapore and even to the US for treatment but couldn't save her life. She passed away in 1999. During this time, I felt the urge to set up a state-of-the-art cancer hospital in the country. I thought if I couldn't save my wife's life after spending so much money, what was the situation for ordinary people?

When we started the work for the hospital, we didn't have any money but we didn't lose hope. We held three lotteries to raise funds for the hospital and the response

from people was unbelievable. We have raised Tk 222 crore from the lotteries. People from all walks of life came forward to help in their own capacity. While a rickshaw-puller donated Tk 20, a primary school teacher donated Tk 1,500. Likewise, the affluent people came up with big amounts. Besides, some banks donated big amounts. This hospital has been built with public money and is providing treatment to people at a minimum cost. Thirty percent patients, those who are from backgrounds of extreme poverty, will get free treatment here while 70 percent will have to pay full charge for treatment and diagnosis. The money that will be realised from 70 percent of people will be used for the other 30 percent.

Do you think cases of cancer have gone up in the country? What is the present state of cancer treatment here? Has there been any improvement in terms of providing quality treatment to patients?

A WHO sponsored study has found that currently there are over one crore cancer patients in the country and about two lakh new cancer cases are being added to this number every year. Of them, more than one and half lakh patients die annually. So, clearly, the number of cancer patients is increasing. While in the past many cancer patients didn't know they had cancer, currently because of early detection facilities, they know if they have cancer and try to get some treatment, although the facilities for treatment are still very limited here.

Early detection is the most important factor in cancer treatment. If cancer is detected at an early stage, the patients' chance of surviving is quite high. There was a time when deaths from cancer were very common here because early detection was not possible. But the situation has now changed. At least in terms of awareness, a lot has been done. We have a centre for early detection of cancer in the city's Mirpur area which has been providing this service since 2001.

At the Ahsania Mission Cancer and General Hospital, we can claim that we are providing international standard treatment to patients. Our doctors are internationally recognised and we have many advanced technologies that are used in the developed world. We have installed world class radiotherapy and chemotherapy machines. Recently, we have brought cyber knives to operate on patients without any kata chhera. We also have the most advanced technology to detect breast cancer. We have a day-care centre where anyone can come and stay for treatment.

Can you tell us about the children city in Panchagarh with the objective of protecting and supporting the most vulnerable street children in the country. We help them reintegrated into the mainstream of society.

We provide them all the facilities they should get to grow up and realise their full potentials. The children city will have 10 children villages. We have purchased 350 bighas of land for the project. In each village, there will be 1,000 kids. When completed, it will be home to about 10,000 children. There will be five villages for boys and another five for girls. We will provide the children with accommodation, education up to HSC level, and vocational training—tailoring, plumbing, electric wiring, sewing, AC and refrigerator repairing, mobile repairing, etc.—so they can be self-dependent when they leave the city. Currently, we are taking care of 300 children. However, it is very difficult to manage funds for such a huge project. We have to spend about Tk 5,000 for each child. Now we are trying to find sponsors for them.

Do you think the activities of DAM will influence others to get engaged in such initiatives?

Because of the nature of our work, we need dedicated workers and volunteers who feel morally obligated to serve people. But unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find volunteers to work for us. We hope others will be inspired from our work although I haven't noticed any such initiative up until now. There are some NGOs that are working for the underprivileged children—some of them have drop-in centres where street children can stay for some time while others are providing them with education. But sadly, none of them have any long-term projects in mind. The duration of their projects is usually three to six months.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**MAXIMILIEN DE ROBESPIERRE**  
(1758-1794)

French lawyer and politician associated with the French Revolution

*The secret of freedom lies in educating people, whereas the secret of tyranny is in keeping them ignorant.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Second president
- 6 Spoken exams
- 11 Elementary
- 12 Sports summary
- 13 Mona Lisa feature
- 14 Cracked
- 15 Virgil work
- 17 Road-house
- 19 CPR pro
- 20 Sailor, in slang
- 23 Fix a road
- 25 General assembly?
- 26 Formal attire
- 28 Orderly
- 29 Roosevelt's middle name
- 30 Mess up
- 31 Salt source
- 32 Pie dish
- 33 Leaf vein
- 35 Spam holder, often
- 38 Harpoon
- 41 Minimum amount
- 42 Grammar topic
- 43 Rein for Rover
- 44 Studied (over)

**DOWN**

- 1 Crunch targets
- 2 Block
- 3 Crisp salad ingredient
- 4 Odometer unit
- 5 When King Duncan and Lady Macbeth meet
- 6 Planet's path
- 7 Enjoy the library
- 8 Do something
- 9 Back muscle
- 10 Bond, for one
- 16 Fixed copy
- 17 Tony winner
- Worth
- 18 When pigs fly
- 20 Big Dipper's constellation
- 21 Muscat man
- 22 "Childe Harold" poet
- 24 Picnic nuisance
- 25 Leather tool
- 27 Gets set
- 31 Foot, to fathom
- 33 Forest growth
- 34 -- facto
- 35 Ailing
- 36 Called once
- 37 Sheep call
- 39 Ripen
- 40 Wine choice

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

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