



Students of Bidyaneer, a school for poor kids, in Kishoreganj town perform at a cultural programme at their school compound.

PHOT: STAR

Bidyaneer, a school for underprivileged children

Ritu and her classmate Shakila started teaching the poor kids at Gurudayal Government College compound 3 years ago

AMINUL ISLAM, Mymensingh

Three years ago, on November 7, a street child came to Mousumi Ritu seeking alms. Little did the five-year-old now that her approach would melt the heart of Ritu, a master's student at Gurudayal Government College in Kishoreganj town.

Ritu, who was doing BA in Bangla back then, started teaching the kid right away. She used to sit with the girl on the college field after class. Seeing that, her classmate Shakila Ishrat joined in and they both started teaching underprivileged children inside campus.

"We found many children both inside and outside campus who worked in tea-stalls, restaurants and wanted to study, but could not do so because of poverty," recalled Ritu. "We started collecting them and within a month there were 17 children taking lessons from us."

Ritu and Shakila managed a land in Harua Pagla mosque area where they set up their school, Bidyaneer. The number of students rose

to 65 within two months.

"People used to give us suspicious looks as if we were kidnappers. But nothing could stop us as we took it as our mission to help the destitute children," Ritu told this paper.

But soon they faced financial crisis as the students started asking for education materials. "I gave a post on Facebook seeking donations. A good soul Tannoy Sheikh Raj stepped forward and arranged education materials like books, writing pads and bags," said Ritu.

Now Bidyaneer offers classes in two shifts: 8:30am to 10:00am and 3:00pm to 5:00pm, six days a week.

There are 170 children in pre-primary and primary sections up to grade four under the supervision of eight teachers, who are mostly university students providing voluntary services, according to Shakila Ishrat.

"We regularly arrange cultural events and sports ceremonies to make learning joyful for the children," she said.

Three months ago, President of district Chhatra League Shafiqul Gani Dhali Limon and his friends constructed a tin-shed building on five-decimal land in Harua where the school activities are currently on.

But the children have to sit on the floor as the school has no furniture.

"We are getting support from various sectors but still there is no toilet or tube-well in the school. There is no source of drinking water," said Mosharrar Ahmed, a teacher.

Priti Akhter, an orphan who is in the pre-primary section, said she wanted to be a doctor to serve poor patients. Another orphan Junayed Hossain of class one expressed his desire to pursue higher education in future.

"It feels wonderful when we hear about these big dreams. They want to be doctors, engineers, police officials and so on," said Shakila.

Chhatra League's Limon said, "This school has motivated us to do more for the society and the poor section of people in particular."

Air of gloom over 100 indigenous families this Christmas

MINTU DESHWARA, Moulvibazar

Christmas is the biggest annual festival for about a hundred indigenous families of Khasi and Garo communities that live in Jhimai Punji of Kulaura upazila.

But this year, the event is unlikely to bring any joy to their hearts as they have been living in fear of being evicted from their dwellings since last month.

While visiting the neighbourhood, called punji, headman of the punji Rana Surong said the frightened communities started guarding their properties since November 15.

On that day, at least three members of Khasi community were hospitalised due to serious injuries sustained in an attack while transporting construction materials on a truck for an under-construction church in the punji.

People belonging to Kedarpur Tea Company launched the attack on them while the truck was entering the punji through a gate installed by the firm authorities.

Concealing the fact that both the Khasi and Garo communities had been living on 406 acres of hilly land in the area for over a hundred years, the tea garden authorities leased the area from the government, said the headman. "It's our home. It's where we belong. We don't want to lose it."

Punji resident Dorina Dhar said, "Ever since the attack, we are feeling highly insecure as the tea garden authorities might evict us any moment. We are passing each day in fear and the male members of our families have been standing guard around the punji."

This Christmas will not make any difference to them because she, like many others in the punji, already lost all her savings to cover the expenses of the legal battle over the land ownership, she added.

Father Joseph Gomes, a member of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa) central unit, said without settling the claim of the Khasi and Garo communities over the land, where they had been living for over one hundred years, the government leased out 661.55 acres of land to Kedarpur Tea Company.

In addition to that, Jhimai Tea Garden, an affiliated company of Kedarpur Tea

Company, illegally occupied over 200 acres of land that is also home to many Khasis and Garos.

The tea garden authorities once tried felling 2,096 trees in and around the punji. They are still making attempts to expand their garden by clearing the woodlands.

They have been causing obstructions in the movement of the two communities by making a gate at the main entrance of the punji and sometimes they do not even allow any ambulance through the gate, he alleged.

Flora Bably Talang, general secretary of KUBORAZ (Kulaura, Juri, Barlekha and Rajnagar upazilas), an association of Khasis for development of punjis, said it would be impossible for the communities to survive without the land as many jobless Khasi family's live on betel leaf cultivation on the land.

"If necessary, we will stage mass protests against the eviction plan." She added.

Rebutting the land ownership claim of the Khasis and Garos, Jhimai Tea Garden manager Moniruzzaman said the indigenous people encroached on 371 acres of land, on which the tea garden authorities have lawful occupancy claim.

Claiming that they do not create any obstruction to the indigenous communities while passing through the gate, he said they sometimes restrict use of trucks in the punji to protect properties of the tea garden.

Meanwhile, on December 11, five non-government rights organisations, led by Bapa President Sultana Kamal, visited the area.

Sultana Kamal said about 100 indigenous families have been confined to their village as Jhimai Tea Garden authorities seek to expand the garden by illegally occupying the land that belongs to the indigenous communities.

The role of indigenous population in conserving forest, biodiversity and the environment is undeniable and a threat to their existence could easily be defined as a threat to natural forest and the wildlife, she also said.

Contacted, Assistant Commissioner (Land) of Kulaura upazila Nazratun Nayeem said, "I joined the office three months ago. I'm not fully aware of the situation."



A group of men stand guard with sticks and slingshots to protect their village, Jhimai Punji in Moulvibazar's Kulaura upazila. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: COLLECTED



Indian Deputy High Commissioner Bishwadip Dey (second from left) hands over benches to the authorities of Udayan High School in Habiganj's Chunarughat. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: STAR

Tea worker-run school gets help after Star report

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

Udayan High School run by tea workers in Habiganj's Chunarughat upazila finally got furniture, computers and materials for making toilets, thanks to the initiative of Indian High Commission.

"Our high commission decided to give support to the school following a Daily Star report headlined "Tea workers' venture to educate future generation" published on October 4," said L. Krishnamurthy, Indian assistant high commissioner in Sylhet.

Swapan Munda, headmaster of the school, said recently, Indian Deputy High Commissioner Bishwadip Dey handed over 150 sets of benches, two computers and materials for making two toilets to them.

"We are grateful to Indian High Commission for the great help," said Swapan.

In a rare example of altruism, workers of Amo Tea Garden in Chunarughat upazila are running the school with their paltry income to save their children from discrimination that they commonly face in schools outside garden area.



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Director
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