



Protibha Sangma, A champion of education

When Protibha Sangma was born in a Garo village beside Tangail's Madhupur forest, wild animals were common. Education was not. Thanks to her culturally-minded mother Protibha was enrolled in school. Thus began a lifelong journey dedicated to knowledge. In her community, many regard Protibha as education's pioneer.

By class eight Protibha was studying in Mymensingh, supporting herself by working as a tutor. She hesitated to visit home as she was concerned her father might arrange her marriage in which case her education would end.

Protibha began her working life as a teacher in Mymensingh and Netrakona. In 1965 she returned to Madhupur. "I went from house to house to motivate mothers to send their children to school."

In those days many children didn't attend school because they had no suitable clothes. A pant-and-shirt set cost one taka. Protibha bought as many clothes as she could. She also offered advice on infant health. "I enquired after babies, whether they were being breast-fed, to promote nutrition," she says.

On the cultural front Protibha was likewise active. "I advised young people not to forget their roots. We may be Christian but we are also Garo. It's a matter of pride."

After the Liberation War, Protibha took a leading role in establishing Madhupur Girls' High School, where she worked for the next two decades, until she retired.



Aklima Begum, An entrepreneur and asset for her community

Distant Malmolia village in Khulna doesn't have sealed roads or grid electricity. It does have a well-stocked agricultural supply store, belonging to self-made businesswoman Aklima Begum. Over the past decade, she transformed the circumstances of her once-struggling family.

"People used to ignore me for my poverty," recalls Aklima, who used to work as a day labourer. In 2007 she decided to improve her lot by mortgaging 50 decimals of family land for Tk 80,000 to start her business. She took accounting training from a non-government organisation and her enterprise began to flourish.

Now her shop has a turnover of around Tk 17 lakhs per month from which she draws a salary of Tk 35,000. She has diversified beyond agricultural products to offer services such as mobile banking. Once forced to sell all the fish from her household ponds she is grateful to be in a position to cook some at home.

"Due to poverty and helplessness I had to give my only daughter for marriage at a young age, which is what happened to me," she says. "Now I am more fortunate. I am determined to see my son complete his education."

Aklima has become a community asset for farmers who often ask her advice. She is an inspiration to other women. "I'm really proud of her," says her husband Abdul Halim Sheikh. "She brought such positive change to our lives."



Antoinette Termoshuizen, Treating children with care and love

For 20 years Antoinette Termoshuizen, originally from the Netherlands, has provided therapy to Bangladeshi children with disabilities. She runs the Niketan Foundation, a charity she founded in 1998 that operates two centres in Dhaka and Manikganj which are home to more than 500 children.

In 1992 Antoinette was feeling dissatisfied with her job in the Netherlands and decided to take her bicycle to Indonesia and ride back to Europe. The epic journey brought her to Bangladesh for the first time.

Antoinette returned home but couldn't forget a promise to help Sayeed. She tried to raise funds but many people said they could only contribute if she personally returned to ensure Sayeed benefited. So, she did.

Initially, many people thought Antoinette could give an injection or special medicine to heal their children. "I had to convince them I could help the children heal and flourish to some degree through games and therapies," she says.

In 1995 after being attacked by a schizophrenic man, Antoinette herself became paralysed. She underwent treatment in the Netherlands before returning. She looks upon that traumatic experience with positivity. "I think God gave me that experience to better understand the feelings of my children," she says.

Antoinette, commonly known as "Khalamma" or "Aunty" in the community, considers Bangladesh her home.

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