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Primary Education

The Birth Of A School

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SYEDPUR, a village in Tangail, is hemmed by a river called Bonshari. The monsoon was then in full fury. There was a ferry point in Syedpur close to the market. On that monsoon morning about fifteen children gathered as usual at the ferry point to be ferried across to attend their school called Beltala School. Every child was carrying books and copies. But that day they could not reach school. The light country boat was overloaded with passengers. The consequence was an accident that could have been tragic. The boat capsized in mid-river.

No life was lost in that incident but it set on motion some new forces. After the sinking of the boat the village elders of Syedpur decided that it would be rash to run the risk any longer. The children of the village should study within the village and so a school had to be established there. But how?

The government may be appraised of the need but that will not soon lead to the establishment of a new school. Nor is there any affluent person in the village who can be asked to build a school. A way was found: Everyone will have to do his bit. A few persons collectively donated 50 decimals of land, some gave cash. Others volunteered labour. In this way the school was established, 20 years ago in 1973, Syedpur Primary School in Mirzapur thana. A nine-member school committee was formed to manage the school.

The nine-member school committee still exists. The number of members is unchanged but their terms of reference have widened and their activities have acquired greater dynamism. The previous committee was concerned solely with the management of the school but the present one, besides dealing with management affairs, also conducts surveys, takes measures to ensure that every student conducts surveys.

takes measures to ensure that every student attend school and holds two meetings every month to discuss the overall problems of education and to suggest improvement.

What Explains This Transformation? There is a realisation that one owes something to society that has provided one with education, food-clothes and the necessities of life. So one must fulfil one's duty to society and repay the debt. And the government has also placed certain responsibilities upon the committee. These are the reasons the committee is more active than before, said Azam Khan, president of Syedpur Primary School Committee. He is the youngest member and still a student, studying the Masters course in Mirzapur College.

Azam Khan further said that though under government rules the committee must consist of six members of whom two must be women, this could not be implemented in Syedpur school committee. He mentioned two obstacles: one, the school's location is at a remote place and the system of communication is archaic. Two, there is a dearth of educated women with the right kind of zeal.

Only half a kilometre away from Syedpur flows the river Bonshari, along the north-east. The other primary schools are located three kilometres to the south or four and a half kilometres to the west. For this reason students come to Syedpur School from distant places. Therefore nine members have been kept on the committee so that they may maintain constant contact with the

students in their respective areas if necessary. The members are spread out in the entire area covered by the school. This enables a member to discharge his responsibilities as a member of the committee without undergoing any personal inconvenience. This also facilitates survey. The survey was made in January this year.

The areas for the school committee's survey were the village Syedpur and a part of the village Gorai. The two villages fall under the unions of Ajkana and Gorai characterised by rough and rugged terrain. The trees on plain land have been axed to make lands for agriculture. Occasionally there are high mounds of earth, clothed with Gojari trees. In proximity to intermittent clumps of Gojari have grown dots of human settlements and homesteads. A survey in such an area though difficult, have been fruitful.

The survey revealed that 1,000 boys and girls lived in the area who were already going to school or were fit to do so. About this a female teacher of Syedpur Primary School, Basanti Rani Sarkar, says, following the survey 110 new students were admitted into our school. Besides, some went to the other, more distant schools. But even after that, 61 boys and girls were left out and out of them 33 have been enrolled in a BRAC school.

Syedpur school has only three rooms. There is no separate room for teachers. The school runs in two shifts. It has a present roll of 375 students and there is the problem of

accommodation. Of these 375 about 300 on an average remain present every day. Previously the roll was thinner by about 50 per cent.

At present if a student absents himself for seven days at a stretch a member of the committee will visit the student's house. One such student is Pinto, studying in class II in Syedpur School. Once being attacked with fever he stopped going to school. A committee member Rashik Chandra Sarkar visited the pupil's house at Harir Para to see for himself what was wrong. Seeing that the teacher gratuitously came to the pupils' house, Jalal Khan, father of Pinto, was overwhelmed with gratitude and he grew a greater respect for the school.

Besides increasing enrolment, retaining students, visiting their homes if anything goes wrong and raising the awareness of guardians, the committee also tries for the school's development in other ways. Development requires money. They are trying to raise money. So far an amount of Taka 3,800 has accumulated in the committee's fund. As the school has now been registered with the government, they do not have to think about teachers' pay and therefore the money collected from the people in the village is going into the school fund. With this money they plan to construct two more rooms next year. More rooms will make possible more enrolment, leading to higher rate of literacy.

Success must come. The villages of Bangladesh abound with innumerable educated youths and it is simply a matter of activating them. This was firmly asserted by Azam Khan, who was one of the children, who fell into the river Bonshari, off a country boat, in that accident 20 years ago. He now presides over the committee of a school that was founded as a sequel to the accident.

—Development Features