

## Primary Education

# 'Mother No More Stands Between Me And School'

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SAORAIL Primary School is in a village. The class rooms are teeming with small boys and girls. The hubbub of young voices are reverberating. Even three months ago the scene was not so cheering. Attendance in the class was thin. But suddenly all that changed. When food-for-education was included in the compulsory primary education programme, interest in school grew tremendously.

One such student whose interest has been awakened is eight-year-old Shilpi Begum. Shilpi used to study in class 3 in her village school, Digna Primary School. But in September when the school-year was nearing its close she changed school and got enroled in this school, Saorail Government Primary School, in Moktarpur union, Khaligonj thana. With what benefit? Let us see.

Though her old school was located in her village, she could not attend class regularly. She would have to busy herself along with her mother in household chores. She would have to tend the cow in the field and look after the goats. She had to do all these things because there were only three persons in their family. The mother remained preoccupied with her own household work and also worked as housemaid in other households. The elder brother, Nasiruddin who is a boatman on the river Sitakhyia, leaves home early in the morning.

When Shilpi's father died, she was six years of age and a student of class 2 in her village primary school. It was an earnest desire of her father that he would give education to his daughter, especially since his son did not receive any education. Her father was a mason. His death shattered all dreams. After that, for some time Shilpi could not go to school.

Days went by. Her mother eked out a meagre living by working as housemaid. While Shilpi tended the cow in the field and the cow fed on the grass, she herself remained literally unfed.

They had no land to cultivate but only a homestead. Therefore, after

the death of her father, her brother Nasiruddin had to look for work, and eventually got it.

Shilpi again got herself enroled in school but could not attend class regularly. Household duties often kept her away. As her mother was a domestic aide in other households, she could not look after her own household. Moreover, it was not the intention of Shilpi's mother that Shilpi should spend her time in school. In her opinion, it was no use educating a girl.

But suddenly the mother's apathy was transformed into a positive desire. She learnt that if children were sent to school not only the teachers would impart education but wheat would also be supplied every month. This kindled in the mother a desire to educate her daughter. The new facility, besides giving education to her daughter will also partly relieve the family's want and, besides, would also fulfil the wish of Shilpi's father. But in their village school food-for-education had not been introduced, it was introduced in Saorail Government Primary School some distance away. So her mother sent Shilpi to this school, regardless of the distance.

Speaking on the food-for-education programme, Mohammed Fayezuddin, teacher of Saorail Government Primary School, said the government has introduced this in a few schools on an experimental basis. The programme is on in 18 primary schools of Mokhtarpur union, including two registered schools. After the programme was implemented, average attendance in these schools has increased and the number of student has increased by 123 units. In the jargon of food-for-education programme a 'unit' means a student.

Under this programme every stu-

dent is given 15 kilograms of wheat per month. But not every family is entitled to this benefit; only children of those families which are landless or own less than half an acre of land and are in severe want are eligible for this benefit.

Not more than two students from each family will be entitled to it and a student, in order to qualify for this benefit, must have a record of attendance of more than 85 per cent. A list of the eligible boys and girls is prepared by teachers of the school or members of the school committee after proper assessment.

Fayezuddin said that the job of assessment in Saorail School has been completed by themselves. This did not pose any problem. But transporting the allocated wheat from the thana food godown to the school is a problem, as transportation charges paid by the government are meagre.

They have overcome this problem through donation by the school committee and sales proceeds of the used sacks. But he thinks that while in their school the help from the committee is available, in other schools the problem might be severe. Besides, only a fixed amount of Taka 180 is given for transportation regardless of the distance and the quantity transported. This is very inadequate. "The government should allocate sufficient money for transportation taking into consideration the distance, quantity and the estimated resale value of sacks. This will make the project flawless," he said.

The teacher, Fayezuddin, thinks that the food-for-education programme is most timely in a country like Bangladesh, as it is mainly economic cause which keeps boys and girls in rural area from coming to school. Even after being admitted,

they fail to attend school as they are required to assist in household works. Therefore, by providing food to destitute families the government may bring down the rate of dropout.

He further said, the present state of Saorail Government Primary School is itself a testament to the success of the programme. What is further encouraging is that the attendance of girls is going up. In this school, for example, out of 664 students, 386 are girls and 278 are boys. He said, "Formerly, even after admission the boys and girls usually would not attend. That has changed now. It appears that next year we shall not be able to provide seating space for all the students even if we run two shifts, as we are doing now. Parents now want that their sons and daughters should receive education."

Seven-year-old Zaker Hossain is a student of class 2 in Saorail School. Even a few years ago he used to absent himself from school to help his father run an eating shop. Zaker Hossain has so far received 30 kilograms of wheat.

Amir Hossain, 7, is another recipient of wheat. He studies in class 1. Amir Hossain who has no mother is now unable to attend his classes due to an attack of fever. He is not receiving treatment either. Wrapped in a torn quilt he spoke indistinctly, "My sister is also a student in Baby class but she is not getting wheat as she has not reached qualifying age. I am getting 30 kilograms. If I don't recover from fever and cannot go to school, I too shall not receive wheat and my father will be angry."

Although Amir Hossain is concerned about his wheat, Shilpi Begum shows no such concern. As she got admission after the assessment, she has not yet received wheat. From the third month she will be receiving 15 kilograms a month. Her round dark face lit up by a smile that seemed to say, "Forget the wheat. What matters for me is that mother no longer forbids me to come to school."

—Development Features