

A leader in education

Headmaster goes extra mile to spread education in Khagrachhari



SAIKAT DEWAN with ANDREW EAGLE

Six-year-old Al Amin from remote Nurul Islam Sardar Para in Khagrachari's Matiranga upazila was used to working in his father's grocery shop. Al Amin comes from a struggling family. His father saw little value in sending the boy to school. Fortunately the headmaster of the local Bhabanicharan Rowaza Government Primary School is Ershad Ali. This award-winning teacher has garnered a reputation for going the extra mile to ensure attendance. In an area of high illiteracy, he has achieved cent percent enrolment, fostering a vibrant school community.

When last January Ershad Ali realised the boy working in the shop wasn't enrolled at any institution he spoke with Al Amin's parents. He convinced them to send their son, who now studies in class one. It's not an isolated case.

"In a remote area like this one," Ershad Ali explains, "many people, especially those from an indigenous background, face a lot of poverty and other challenges. There is a

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genuine lack of awareness about the value of education. Children are often engaged in seemingly-productive activities at home and there is no long-standing practice of good communication between teachers and parents. As such, it is often necessary to go in person to a home to explain the importance of school. The situation isn't helped, either, by the bad roads."

Ershad Ali knows well about life in the hills. Although he was born in Brahmanbaria he grew up in Matiranga. He began his career as an assistant teacher in 1986, working at several remote schools before becoming headmaster at Bhabanichara Rowaza in 2002. At the time, the school had only two teachers for its 500 students, most of whom were irregular attendees. With substantial effort Ershad Ali increased the number of teaching staff to nine.

"To make students interested in education, special initiatives are required," says Ershad Ali. "The learning environment needs to be charming. They get motivated if the school's examination results are good. Ongoing teacher-parent contact is vital."

cooperate with the parents and solve any problems they have."

"Ershad Ali is a diligent headmaster," says the president of the school managing committee Osman Gani. "He has motivated our committee members, along with the school's teachers and local religious leaders to make arrangements to send all children to school. We have become resolute in preventing students from dropping out."

Ershad Ali was recognised at the district level as the best teacher in the dropout prevention category this year, for the third consecutive year. In 2012 and 2014 he was chosen as the district's best teacher.

Young Al Amin, meanwhile, has settled in at the school. "He has a little trouble hearing," says Ershad Ali, "so our teachers take special care. He never misses a day now!"

Drawing and essay-writing competitions on national days, awards for the first three placeholders in each class, regular parent meetings, additional after-school classes for struggling students and an annual sports carnival: these are some of the initiatives of encouragement that have come to life under Ershad Ali's leadership.

"Many of our students travel quite a distance to reach the school," the headmaster says. "Parents have been requested to provide their children's lunches and to make that practical, the school gave every student a tiffin box; and we have a dedicated lunchroom."

Turning around the fortunes of his own school wasn't enough for Ershad Ali. He wants neighbouring schools to follow his lead. "I try to inspire teachers, not only at our school," he says. "At our monthly upazila coordination meetings I have been encouraging every school to adopt a five year plan to promote regular attendance. In each school catchment area there must be a survey to identify all school-age children, to ensure all of them are enrolled. In instances where children are not attending school, there needs to be a committed approach to contacting parents to convince them."

Ershad Ali's dedication has not gone unnoticed. "Our school's headmaster works very hard for the children," says one parent, Bhabatosh Rowaza. "When a child doesn't go to school he tries to