

Magura's lone school for autistic kids in dire straits

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Begum Shamsunnahar from Magura town is worried about her child's education. Due to a lack of teaching aids and toys, she says, regular schools aren't suitable. Shamsunnahar's child is autistic and attends the sole school for autistic students in Magura. But for 4 long years due to a funding shortage the school has been unable to cover teachers' salaries. The school's future is uncertain.

In 2012 when the school first opened, Shamsunnahar, like the parents of the other 48 enrolled students, was delighted. A very bleak educational outlook for her child was suddenly replaced by a ray of hope. But the school is yet in the midst of financial crisis.

"There is no other school for autistic children in Magura," says Shamsunnahar. "The authorities should take measures to ensure the betterment of these students."

"My child has been at the school for 2 years," says another parent AKM Nurul Basher. "I have found such positive change in him. He gets treated with great care by his teachers. The education is very good; which is why to think of their lack of salary makes me tearful."

The school has 5 classrooms and employs 8 staff members including 4 determined teachers.

"The young students bring much

joy into the classroom," says teacher Sumana Khatun. "They make us laugh while teaching them. Classroom strategies are of course different to those for regular students and it's so pleasurable when they make progress."

"Teaching autistic students is a unique and rewarding experience," says assistant teacher Taslima Khatun. "We get so much satisfaction from teaching them. There is only one problem to dishearten us: we don't get paid."

Dolifa Yashmin is the school's headmistress. "My in-laws daily forbid me to go to the school," she says, "because for 4 years I have not taken any remuneration. But I cannot part with the school because the students are like children of my own."

Although 60 autistic schools across the country receive regular donations from the Society for the Welfare of Intellectually Disabled, Magura's school does not. Its only income source is students' fees of Tk 500 per month each, including cycle van transport. But many of the students attend without paying fees since their families are insolvent.

Most of the school's around Tk 6,000 realised monthly income is used to cover the building rent. Employees go empty handed.

The deputy director of social welfare in Magura, Sheikh Mahinul Hoque,

says he is aware of the problem. "If the school was registered with the social welfare department," he says, "I could support them financially. This institution requires urgent registration."

Yet according to Dolifa Yashmin, on several occasions letters have been sent to the ministry requesting assistance, without result.

Parents meanwhile do their best to help. "We assist the school often," says one student's guardian, Omar Ali. "This school is important for our town's autistic students. But the teachers don't get a government salary, and if they were paid regularly it must be that the quality of the school would be even better."

For the students, unaware of their school's perilous financial position, are left only to enjoy their school life while it lasts. "We like our class," says Sheikh Setara of Class 3. "We get to play with toys as we learn."

"I learnt handicrafts here," says Munira Tasnim of Class 4. "It can help me in the future. Our classes are really interesting."

Yet for the teachers, despite their dedication, non-payment of salary is making life miserable. There is only to hope that soon the government or a non-government organisation will extend the institution support.



PHOTO: STAR

With a modest allocation for teachers' salary and learning aids, this school for autistic children in Magura town could have been a much better place for the stakeholders.