

‘Night schools joy for elderly farmers

One man's mission to battle illiteracy in Jhenidah

AZIBOR RAHMAN with ANDREW EAGLE

Kazi Imdadul Haque, 43, a graduate from Daulatpur village in Kola union of Jhenidah's Kaliganj upazila has set himself a sizeable challenge. He plans, single-handedly, to eradicate illiteracy among the elderly men of the 22 villages of Kola union within seven years. Having completed twelve impromptu night school programmes in various villages, the journey to reach his goal has already begun.

“After a day's work we go to the centre with our books and equipment,” says Daulatpur farmer Fazlur Rahman, 50. “It is so pleasurable to be able to rid ourselves of illiteracy at an elderly age. Imdad is doing great work for us. We are proud of him.”

“We are lucky to be gaining literacy,” agrees Nagen Chandra Das, 65, of Kamalhat village. “Finally we can read and write. We won't need to use our thumbprint on any document in future. It's no problem to sign it!”

Farmer Nausher Ali, 45, also a student of Imdad's from Daulatpur, told The Daily Star newfound literacy can only lead to success. “It's a matter of joy,” he says. “We are so happy to have such an opportunity.”

According to the headmaster of Kola secondary school Bijoy Kumar Biswas, Imdad's work has made him a friend of all the union's farmers. “He is doing his best to remove illiteracy from the union,” Biswas says. “His efforts are so innovative.”

The idea of battling illiteracy among the elderly men of Kola union first occurred to Imdad after his return to Daulatpur in 1999. He had been working for three years at Modern Pharmaceuticals, but due to family issues he was forced to resign.

Blessed with 8 bighas of land to rent out to local farmers, and finding an income in breeding earthworms to produce vermicompost fertiliser, upon his return to the village Imdad was able to maintain the daily expenses of his family relatively easily.

Currently, he produces 15 maunds of compost per month, which he sells for Tk 10 per kilogram.

This relative financial independence left him with lots of time on his hands. He wondered how to fill so many free hours. It was then that he decided to strike a blow against illiteracy.

In 2008 Imdad made his first effort. He established a night school in Daulatpur attended by 52 small-scale farmers. The goal of teaching them basic literacy and numeracy was soon reached, but again for family reasons Imdad found he could not continue.

But in 2014, when Imdad was once more able to pursue his personal mission, efforts recommenced in earnest. On the first day of one of his three-month night schools, he helps the students acquire books, chalk and slate. He also provides earthworms free of cost, Imdad told The Daily Star, so that his learners can have a basic income while concentrating on their studies. “About 60% of the men in Kola are illiterate,” he says. “Making them self-reliant with vermiculture is a part of achieving full literacy among them by 2021.”

After each day's tiring manual labour, the farmers arrive for class after Magrib prayer. They study while sitting on a mat. For them the experience is also a social one, with chatting to neighbours a part of the enjoyment of class. Besides, Imdad takes the opportunity to impart knowledge of sanitation and basic hygiene; and to promote an ethos of honesty.

“Imdad is a role model in our area,” says Kola union's chairman Ayub Hossain. “He gives elementary knowledge to local farmers and hopes to alleviate their illiteracy within seven years.”

“His is undoubtedly a noble task,” agrees secondary education officer Md Arif Hossain from Kaliganj. “Such sincere social work is a must for our society and we should help Imdad in any way we can.”



Kazi Imdadul Haque takes class at a night school in Kaliganj upazila under Jhenidah.

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