

A school with a vision

Naogaon community initiative offers formal education to disadvantaged children.

KONGKON KARMAKER with ANDREW EAGLE

In fostering education, Rabindranath Tagore appreciated the genius of simplicity. When in 1901 he opened a school with just five students, out of which grew the renowned Visva-Bharati University, he favoured outdoor classes. Harmony with nature enhances learning, he believed.

In Naogaon's Atrai upazila there is a new school that also holds classes outdoors, albeit for a different reason. The Sayapath Pathashishu Bidyaniketan has no chairs or desks, nor a classroom; but what it lacks in infrastructure is more than made up for by its praiseworthy vision. The school, a community initiative that began with only six students last July, caters to children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Children who couldn't even hope for education now study there.

"This school opened my eyes," says one student, Ratna, who has to work as a domestic help to earn income for her family. "I never went to school before. Now I dream to continue my study."

"I couldn't imagine that I'd be able to send my daughter to school," says Abdul Mozid, the father of another student, Bipra. "Now she goes to this school and I hope it continues. Sayapath is a truly noble institution."

Dr Ashish Kumar, who works as a doctor at the Naogaon civil surgeon's office, is one of Sayapath's founders. "Many of our students began without any literacy at all," he says. "Some were routinely sent out to beg. We want to shift the community mindset in favour of study. We want to make quality education and ethical knowledge available to all."

The non-profit school has already attracted 65 pupils between the ages of

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six and fifteen. To study there is free for the students, who are also provided with textbooks, stationery, clothes and nutritious food. Classes are held from 4:00 pm on every day except Thursdays in a tiny yard within the Ahsanganj Rail Colony. Each school day begins with the singing of the national anthem.

The school currently has 15 teachers, themselves students of various higher education institutions, who volunteer their time and effort for free.

"Our teachers actually pay to work here," says Dr. Kumar. "Every month they contribute from their own pockets to buy textbooks and stationery. We all work from a sense of social responsibility. It is our little endeavour to put these children's lives on the right path."

"We teach all the primary school subjects as well as drawing, general knowledge and ethics," says Amanullah Faruk Bachchu, a student of Mollah Azad Memorial University College, teacher at the school and one of Sayapath's founders. "We do practical activities too, like tree-planting, which helps to broaden our students' horizons."

"Most of our students are quite talented," says another teacher, Moazzem Mithu, who attends the same college as Bachchu. "They only need support and encouragement. We are trying to do something good for society."

Sayapath may not be destined to grow into a university but Tagore has shown that great achievements in education can have humble beginnings. And besides, for the school's students who have had the world of education opened up to them for the first time, Sayapath's achievements are already great.