

Good Samaritan

Mamoon Akhtar

Samaritan Help Mission

Mamoon Akhtar was in seventh standard when he was called to the principal's office one day. The principal informed him that he was being debarred from writing his annual exams since he had not paid the school fee. After returning home, Mamoon told his father. His father explained that he had lost his job and that was why he could not pay the fee. Owing to the rule followed by the institution, Mamoon was forced to quit school and hence formal education.

Born on 22 September, 1970, Mamoon Akhtar grew up with four sisters and a younger brother in Tikiapara. Tikiapara is located along railway tracks in the heavily populated city of Howrah, with a large slum in its vicinity.

His father was a talented fabricator in an iron factory. His homemaker mother took care of him and his siblings and nurtured the family. Mamoon was a student of St Thomas School, one of the oldest and popular schools in Howrah. By his own admission, Mamoon was an average student. He wasn't a school topper but was an avid school goer. He liked his school and enjoyed going to school and attending classes. Though it was in this school that his formal education was cut short, he is fond of his alma mater. Being forced to quit is still one of the strongest memories and triggering factors that drives him in his present work.

A year after he was forced to quit school, his father passed away. So Mamoon took up a series of odd jobs to support his family. He worked in a shoe factory first and an iron factory later. Till 1999 he was continuously engaged in numerous works that involved physical labour. Performing these works was not easy as a childhood polio infection had reduced the function of his left hand.

The non-formal night school

Mamoon eventually passed high school from an open learning centre. In 1999, he was offered a job at the local library. The job was very easy compared to the manual labour in his previous employments and involved only four hours of work. This gave him a lot of time to give tuitions to the children in his neighbourhood. He gave his mother half the pay from his job at the library for household expenses. He used the rest for the children he taught.

The memory of being called aside and told that he could not write his exams left an indelible impact on him. Recounting the incident, he said, “No matter what, no student should be restrained from writing school exams or be taken out of school because of non-payment of fees. If my father couldn’t pay the fees, why stop me from writing my exams?” The memory held a particularly strong undercurrent and eventually led to the formation of Samaritan Help Mission.

“Witnessing fights over drugs, and coming across addicted adolescents and substance abusers were part of everyday life in Tikiapara. The neighbourhood is extremely crime-prone. With an increased presence of mafia groups popularising and supplying drugs, substance abuse increased. Arrests over peddling of drugs or smuggling of substances also increased over the years. As a result, crime in the neighbourhood grew,” said Mamoon.

“I was walking along a road in Tikiapara one day when I saw a woman getting beaten by a man outside a house. I asked the man to stop beating her. Since I was a tuition teacher, I was a fairly known face in the locality. When I intervened, the man stopped momentarily but told me to leave since it did not concern me. Then I learnt that he was beating the woman because she refused to sell drugs. I didn’t leave. An argument ensued. Seeing my resolve, the man pushed and hit me. A few neighbours intervened and helped me free the woman. As I started walking home, the woman’s child, a little boy, came up to me and said, ‘*mujhe padhna hain*’ (I want to study). Immediately I agreed to teach him and told him to come to my house,” recalled Mamoon.

A few days later, Mamoon saw the boy waiting outside his house in the evening. Mamoon was very happy. He gave the young boy a copybook and a pencil and started teaching him. After a few days, five or six children came with the young boy. Soon there were nearly 20 kids coming daily to learn from Mamoon.

“There was a spare room in our family house. I asked my mother if I could use that as a classroom for the evening tuition lessons. My mother readily agreed. I made the children sit on plastic sheets on the floor and thus began the evening class routine.”

This was the beginning of a non-formal school in the 600 square feet space in Mamoon’s house. The evening classes laid the foundation for Mamoon’s work in education in Tikiapara.

The serendipitous donor

When the practice of teaching kids in the evening became regular and the number of students increased, Mamoon sought donations from the residents of Tikiapara. He informed people about the evening classes and requested for help to buy pencils, copybooks and textbooks for his students. The amount collected through the door-to-door campaign was

used to buy seating mats, books and stationeries for the children. To teach the increasing number of students, Mamoon sought the help of volunteers from the neighbourhood, mostly girls who had completed high school and college.

While soliciting resources in Tikiapara once, he noticed a piece of torn paper lying on the ground. It had the picture of a woman singing, surrounded by a group of children. As he picked up the paper and read it, he found out that the woman was Ms Lee Alison Sibley, wife of a top official in the American consulate in Kolkata.

After much contemplation, Mamoon wrote to Sibley, requesting for help to find resources for the children he taught. He typed out the letter in his manual typewriter, gave it to his mother for her blessings and posted it. "I really appreciate your effort but I am unable to support you at the moment. Please find support among your community members," Sibley replied within a week.

"I was very happy to receive a letter from her. It was a matter of honour for me that someone associated with the US consulate responded to my letter. I wrote back saying I was grateful that she replied to my letter. I also asked if she could donate some copybooks and pencils for my school children," recalled Mamoon.

Soon Mamoon got a call from the US consulate in Kolkata saying Sibley would like to visit his school. Shortly afterwards she paid Mamoon a visit and saw the room where the children came for classes – Mamoon's non-formal school. He told her that he lived in the same house.

"There was no toilet then; so like everyone in the neighbourhood, my students and I used the nearby drain. She was moved to tears when she saw it all. She was the first person to give me a cheque for my school. She wrote a cheque for Rs 10,000. She asked if I worked only with Muslim children, considering 80% of Tikiapara's population is Muslim. I told her that my motto was to work with all the children from the vicinity. She also asked a journalist friend of hers to write an article about her visit to Tikiapara," said Mamoon, recalling her visit.

Genesis of Samaritan

Samaritan Help Mission was formed in the year 2001, right after Sibley's visit. Mamoon recalled frankly that he did not know what to do with Sibley's contribution. He had not formed an organisation then and he considered himself a volunteer just like the others. He did not know the procedures for starting an organisation. Finally a lawyer referred by his friends gave him all the necessary information. Borrowing money for the cost of registration, Mamoon started Samaritan Help Mission (SHM).

When Sibley's visit to Tikiapara was reported, the headline read, 'Our services are based on need and not creed'. With that as the inspiration, the motto of Samaritan Help Mission came to be 'we go by need not by creed'.

Thanks to the article, many people learnt about Mamoon's budding school. Ramesh Kacholia of Caring Friends, Mumbai, happened to read the article. From then on he became one of Mamoon's key mentors, helping and supporting him in person and in spirit.

Mamoon's work got a lot of attention after Sibley's visit. The attention was not necessarily monetary aid; but the number of people in Tikiapara who appreciated his work increased. It helped him appeal to more people for resources.

After a series of meticulous door-to-door campaigns in Tikiapara, Mamoon and his volunteers could raise Rs 28,000 in the year 2001, i.e. right after Samaritan Help Mission was started. With Mamoon contributing his savings and his friends adding to it, SHM had another Rs 10,000.

The story behind the name

The story behind the organisation's name has its roots in Mamoon's memories associated with his school. The name is based on a story he was taught from the Bible when he studied in St Thomas School. In the book of Luke, from verses 29 to 37 of chapter 10, there is a story entitled 'The Parable of the Good Samaritan'. The story is about learning who a neighbour is. It speaks of a Samaritan helping a wounded person while two others passed by unconcerned. Mamoon did not want his work to be solely for Muslims as he believes in assisting everyone. Influenced by the parable and wanting his work to be inclusive, he came up with the name Samaritan Help Mission.

Samaritan Mission School

Within a span of six years, the organisation has helped bring about an educational revolution in the neighbourhood. On 26 May 2007, the non-formal evening school christened as Samaritan Mission School received recognition from the government of West Bengal. It is now a co-educational institution that is run from a previously derelict three-storey building. The building has since been renovated and restored through the support and resources received from the Howrah Municipality and through various institutions and non-governmental organisations. It is an English medium school with more than 1,300 students in pre-nursery to class X as of 2016.

Students of Samaritan are generally from economically weaker families. Some are from single parent households with a deceased or an imprisoned father and the mother being the

sole bread winner. Most of the parents are rickshaw pullers, labourers working in nearby factories and auto drivers. For them, providing quality English medium schooling for their children was a far-fetched dream till Samaritan Mission School was started.

Amidst drawings and sketches by students on the notice board, a verse by Bilquies Khatoon of ninth standard indirectly conveys the role of Samaritan in getting the children of Tikiapara educated:

‘We face many hurdles to acquire our education

But we will not let the hurdles

come in the way of our education’

Within six years, close to 3,000 children have been brought back to school. Many of them were dropouts from the local government schools or were child labourers who had never gone to school.

Restoring Belilious’ old glory

Having grown up and lived in the neighbourhood, Mamoon was familiar with the I R Belilious Institution. The land for the school was donated by Mr Isaac Raphael Belilious (1846- 1910) and Ms Rebecca Belilious, a Jewish couple who did not have any children. A trust by the name Belilious Trust Estate was formed, which established I R Belilious Institution to impart education to the less privileged children of the neighbourhood.

Recalling his growing up years, Mamoon said that as kids, often he and his friends went for a swim in the pond inside the Belilious Institution campus. It was used by most of the neighbourhood children as a swimming pool. He remembered being scolded by his father who feared for his safety in the pond. Playing in the pond was one of his childhood memories; however, to see vehicles of the municipal corporation unload garbage into the same pond later was shocking.

This was one of the initial incidents that triggered in him a desire to revive the school. The intent to revive the school was probably a latent desire in Mamoon, having seen the popular institution turn into a neglected space.

In November 2014, a small number of Mamoon’s staff at Samaritan Help Mission went with him, visiting each house in Tikiapara and calling the residents for a meeting. He called the community to the grounds of Belilious Institution to discuss how to save the school and the water body in its premises. In November 2014, the school had 14 students and 16 teachers.

On the scheduled day, more than 1,000 men and women of all ages came for the meeting from Tikiapara and its neighbourhoods. Those invited included trustees of the Belilious

Institution, Howrah City Police Commissioner Ajay Mukund Ranade and the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) of the Tikiapara constituency. The meeting was purposely kept on 14 November, which is celebrated as children's day, to highlight the need for reviving the school. It could be an additional school to offer quality education to children from the vicinity and beyond.

After considerable debate and discussions, it was decided to start an English medium school in place of the nearly defunct I R Belilious Institution. Although the decision seemed unanimous, there were a few who opposed the proposal. "Why not a madrasa? Tikiapara is our home and it has many Muslim households, so we should consider creating a madrasa instead of a school," was the voice of a handful of the residents.

"I was resolute in my decision and majority present there supported it. So when I faced the question, I told them that Belilious should be reborn as an English medium government school and not as a madrasa or another Bengali medium school. A school that would open its doors and give every child a chance to receive quality education in English," Mamoon recalled. He proposed that English would be the medium of instruction with options for Urdu, Bengali or Hindi as the second language.

Mamoon strongly feels that whatever he has been able to do has been because of the education he received. "I value the time I spent at St Thomas School. I wanted the same opportunity for everyone in the new school. I believe quality education in an English medium school would help the children be better-equipped and tap more opportunities for their personal and professional growth," he said. The inspiration and influence of his childhood school continues in many spheres, including the colour and design of Samaritan's uniforms which resemble that of St Thomas'.

A symbolic first step towards the decision to start a school in place of I R Belilious Institution was that everyone present at the meeting devoted a few hours of *shramdan* or voluntary labour work. With the support of the Howrah Municipal Corporation and the police, cleaning work began the very next day and the pond was cleaned within a week. Girls from Samaritan's vocational training centre volunteered to clean the classrooms that had not been used for years.

The revival process was named 'Movement of education for the poor' by the others and 'People's rights movement' by those at Samaritan. The Howrah city police led by its commissioner regularly visited the school to monitor the revival process. Given that Tikiapara had many drug peddlers and was crime-prone, the police presence was incredibly encouraging and supportive to the Samaritan team.

Another milestone was when the community of Tikiapara took collective ownership of the school on 1 December, 2014, participating continuously in the school's progress thereafter. The government of West Bengal and the Howrah city police handed over the school to Samaritan Help Mission to establish a new English medium school. The commissioner of

police of Howrah and the trustees inaugurated Rebecca Belilious English Institution, an evening school, the same day. As soon as it was inaugurated, 300 children enrolled in the school. The school now has a strength of nearly 2,500 students from nursery to class IV. A building is being constructed since the school proposes to enroll students up to eighth standard.

Samaritan's other projects for Tikiapara

In 2008, a new initiative named, Adopt a Family was started to cater to elderly couples and senior citizens without a regular source of income. For nearly 350 such families in Tikiapara, Samaritan Help Mission provides a monthly ration including rice, pulses and wheat among others.

Kindling the sporting spirit

In May 2015, in collaboration with Nagpur-based Krida Vikas Sanstha (also named as Slum Soccer), Chevrolet GM created a high quality artificial turf football field in the Belilious Institution campus. While mentioning Chevrolet's support, Mamoon shared with a smile, that his school diary from St Thomas School had Biblical verses and motivational quotes on each page. Two of them are etched in his memory, guiding and motivating him in his journey. These are, 'There is no harm in trying' and 'You will never win if you never begin'.

The unused playground in the Belilious Institution had been converted into a garbage dump over the years. Municipal vehicles dumped solid waste the same way it had dumped garbage in the pond in the same campus. He decided to seek Chevrolet's help in restoring it and e-mailed them a proposal in the middle of the night. He proposed that the ground be converted into a football field. He received a response the very next morning from the Chevrolet team bearing the happy news of their interest in the initiative.

The corporate social responsibility (CSR) division of Chevrolet was initially planning a similar project in Vietnam. After discussing Mamoon's proposal, the Chevrolet team decided to drop the Vietnam plan and instead take up the work in Tikiapara. The beautiful green field was inaugurated by internationally renowned footballer Mikael Silvestre from the popular English club Manchester United.

Football continues to be a very popular sport in West Bengal. The new ground in Tikiapara is not only a motivation for the children to play, but it adds to the enthusiasm of going to school.

Bringing financial inclusion to Tikiapara

Samaritan Help Mission decided to work on financial inclusion since people were being deceived by non-formal lending avenues present within Tikiapara. After Samaritan did the groundwork towards this objective, Indian Overseas Bank (IOB) and the State Bank of India (SBI) appointed SHM as their banking correspondent in Tikiapara.

In fact, right through the entrance gate of Rebecca Belilious Institution, what one can notice are the banking kiosks. With the opening of these kiosks, over 7,000 people have opened bank accounts. They regularly use the kiosks to deposit and withdraw money. There has been a noticeable decrease in dependence on money lenders.

There are two aspects of undeniable support that the kiosks extend. The first one is accessibility since they are within the neighbourhood. The other is that, the kiosks provide employment to local residents. One of the women at the SBI centre was a bank employee who had quit her job due to unavoidable circumstances. She informed us that hundreds of people visit the centres daily for money transaction. The kiosks are a boon to students in general and those getting scholarship in particular. Also, the very presence of the banking centres is an encouragement for the residents to get into the habit of saving money.

The much-needed medical centre

Another unit obvious in the campus is the medical dispensary close to the school gate. The unit provides medicine free of cost; and on scheduled days, doctors from Howrah government hospitals are available for consultations.

According to Mamoon, slum dwellers of Tikiapara often suffer from adverse health conditions due to lack of awareness and an unwillingness to lose a day's wage to reach the nearest health facility. As a consequence, health remains a need that is the least addressed. The neglect occasionally led to serious ailments.

Additionally, the lack of clean drinking water and clean sanitary environment, besides unsupervised garbage disposal pose threats to the health of all, especially women and children. In such a scenario, a mobile healthcare delivery system seemed a viable solution.

Operating since April 2015, two mobile healthcare units have been introduced in Tikiapara. These mobile vans work across 50 wards under Howrah Municipal Corporation. Supported by Cognizant Foundation and Howrah Municipal Corporation, this service helps bring professional healthcare services to the doorsteps of Tikiapara households.

Livelihood projects

A minute-long walk into the lane beside Rebecca Belilious English Institution would lead to the old family house of Mamoon. The house, previously a small single storey house has an additional storey now; and from a family home, it has been transformed into a home of sorts for many women from Tikiapara. Most of the women are mothers of children enrolled in Rebecca Belilious English Institution or Samaritan Mission School. It is a vocational training-cum-income generation programme centre.

In each floor, there are rows of sewing machines where nearly 60 women make shirts, dresses and scarves for children. A few women pack the clothes while a few others note down the number of packaged clothes ready for sale. Around 200 women are trained regularly through this programme and Samaritan Help Mission arranges for the sale of the garments. The garments are usually produced for shops in and around Tikiapara and Howrah. This programme was started soon after Samaritan was established, to help single mothers and destitute women get a regular income.

Similarly for male and female young adults from Tikiapara, a vocational training centre was established in association with Ambuja Cement Foundation in 2003. So far, about 450 individuals trained in industrial tailoring in this centre have been successfully placed with garment manufacturing units in Kolkata. The training centre is located in the Samaritan Help Mission campus in Bankra, about 10km from Tikiapara.

Technology in education

Integrated approach to technology in education (ITE), a project initiated by Tata Trusts aims to introduce information technology to impart the school curriculum, especially in near-defunct government schools. A wireless internet connectivity (Wi-Fi) system is in place in the Samaritan Mission School. A projector is also present in all the classrooms, to enhance the use of internet in the practice of teaching and learning. The computer room has been equipped using funds from the Government of West Bengal and some NGOs

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Administration

The governing body of Samaritan Help Mission consists of seven members, namely the president, vice president, secretary, treasurer and three executive members.

The term of office is stipulated for one year unless it is dissolved or terminated under unforeseen circumstances. All key decisions concerning the Samaritan Help Mission are made at the general body meetings.

When Samaritan Help Mission was started, there was only Mamoon and a few volunteer teachers. Mamoon paid the volunteers a nominal honorarium of Rs 100 per month. As SHM grew into a formal entity and the number of programmes increased, many people have come into its employ.

The Samaritan team believes that anything given free of cost will lose its value and importance. Hence there is a nominal charge for all its programmes. Yet they are uncompromising in their stand of being inclusive.

In 2005, a Muslim funding agency invited Mamoon to submit a proposal for funds. The funding agency agreed to support SHM but hoped that the fund would be utilised for the benefit of Muslim children. Mamoon rejected their grant as he firmly believes that poverty and hunger have no religion.

The personal front

Mamoon got married to Shabana in 2005. Shabana is amazed by the growth and reach of SHM since her marriage. The couple has three daughters, Ateefa, Adeeba, Batul and the youngest is a son named Hamza. Mamoon's daughters study in the Samaritan Mission School. Since his house has now been converted into a vocational centre for women, he lives with his family in an unused floor above the office of Samaritan Help Mission.

Working beyond Tikiapara

In 2008 Ramesh Kacholia told Mamoon that there was a funding opportunity at Tata Steel since they were celebrating their centennial anniversary. Mamoon submitted a proposal, enlisting the help of his friend Vinayak Lohani. Tata Steel accepted the proposal and granted a sum of Rs 50 lakhs.

Members of Samaritan Help Mission exploring Bankra, about 10km from Tikiapara, found that a lot of children from Bankra were working in a paper factory nearby. Bankra is a neighbourhood with a predominant number of households experiencing financial strain. Like Tikiapara, Bankra too was a crime-prone neighbourhood.

In collaboration with Caring Friends, the Tata Steel grant was used to buy 30 *katha* land (approximately 21,600 square feet) in Bankra. The land was bought there to establish an English medium school with an affordable fee structure.

When the boundary wall was being constructed, a Muslim gentleman came to the site. He learnt from Mamoon that he planned to build a school for the underprivileged children. He asked Mamoon where he received his funds from. He had presumed that the grant was from one of the Muslim countries in the Gulf.

Mamoon told the gentleman that the whole project was supported by friends belonging to different religious beliefs. The gentleman was impressed to learn that the project was neither supported by nor targeted a single community, but was intended for every willing child in Bankra. The elderly gentleman was so impressed that he later donated his own land measuring about 20 *katha* for Mamoon's project. He even convinced another friend who held a small plot of land in the same locality to donate it to SHM.

Construction of the new school building is yet to begin. A nursery section with morning and afternoon sessions has already begun. Teachers have been recruited from the neighbourhood.

Healthcare and education to Bankra

A medical centre similar to the one in the Rebecca Belilious English Institution campus also functions in Bankra. In addition to providing medicines and consultations, the Bankra dispensary has a small pathological laboratory. Paediatricians, obstetricians, general physicians and other specialists from the local government hospital are present on a rotation basis throughout the week at the medical centre.

The new school is proposed to be built with the support of Tata Steel and Caring Friends. The Bankra school is proposed to be affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), New Delhi. The nursery section functioning at the premises has been temporarily affiliated to the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education.

What began as a community work led by an individual has risen to be an organisation today. The work principle and ethics are still the same as when Samaritan was started, the difference now being working with and for more people in more domains.

Mamoon believes that if one works hard, one would get help from unexpected corners. This is a lesson he has learnt from his own life. Today he has a team and a group of friends helping the work of Samaritan Help Mission. Started in 2001, SHM is a young organisation. Nevertheless it enjoys a strong goodwill. The fact that Mamoon Akhtar still resides in the same neighbourhood helps him and Samaritan Help Mission stay rooted to the cause.

Since Mamoon started by raising funds from the community where he lives and teaches, the community regards his work with a positive enthusiasm. Also there has always been a clear focus to involve and work with the community to ensure a communal ownership of the work done by the organisation.

About Mamoon Akhtar

- Brings quality education to children of the economically weak strata in Tikiapara in Howrah
- Works with the resolution that no child should be deprived of education because of his / her inability to pay fees
- Brought financial inclusion to Tikiapara, decreasing the residents' dependence on money lenders and prompting saving habits
- With community and administrative support, revived a government school in the brink
- Expanded ambit of activities of Samaritan Help Mission to include health, sports and livelihood

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