

BREAKING THE MARGINS

THE TALES OF THE UNSUNG HEROES

Moslem Munshi runs

Nakshipara Nirmal HridaySamiti, a home for mentally challenged people that provides a safe space for them to be sheltered and treated.

Having suffered mental health issues himself, Moslem Munshi is sensitive to those with similar conditions and works for their cause, providing food, clothing, shelter, acknowledgement and dignity to those with mental health ailments.

It began as a local endeavour and has garnered support over the years.



Unsung Heroes: Moslem Munshi

On an otherwise ordinary day in 1993, a socially proclaimed 'madman' wandering through the streets of Bethuadahari stopped at a snacks shop to ask for some food. The shop owner, entitled to the privilege of 'normalcy', responded to the request of the starving man by pouring scalding oil on his hands. As he writhed and shouted in pain, another individual watched him, shocked and outraged, trying to string together words of protest. Moslem Munshi, as the world knows him, later took the injured man home, and nursed him back to health. After several months of care, compassion and medical treatment, the man was able to recoup his identity.

With a little help from the local police, Kanchan Mandal, now a fully healed man, hailing from the Khoyrasole village of Birbhum, was reunited with his family. What happened to Kanchan was an eye opener for Munshi. His wounds reeked of society's acute insensitivity towards the mentally challenged, and urged Munshi to undertake a pledge of serving these helpless, vulnerable vagrants. Thus began his philanthropic career. If asked what led him to this path, he ruminates, 'I haven't studied too far...Only

till the 8th standard. But I know Swamiji's teachings by heart. He has taught us that to serve humanity would be to serve Allah. That's all I've done.'

A Sacred Heart :

A resident of Galaydari village under Nakashipara police station of Nadia district, Munshi had himself suffered mental health issues. In 1992, he was exposed to the corruption of a few panchayat officials who were found selling eighty quintals of wheat meant for distribution among the poor. He immediately lodged a complaint with the police and the miscreants were arrested. After their release, however, they made life difficult for Munshi. A false case was filed against him and he was made to do 500 sit ups in public. Abused and humiliated, Munshi had begun to lose his mental balance. It was only after a year of medical treatment and constant support and affection from his family that he was finally restored to sanity. It was this lived experience that sensitized him to the challenges faced by the mentally unstable.

His heart went out to those plagued by the indifferences of society. 'This is all I know now. It is a passion. Me and my whole family... all are dedicated to this cause.' The humility in his voice belies his struggle over the years. In the early years he silently bore the contempt, derision and ridicule of those around him for housing these 'madmen'. Munshi, however, refers to them as 'bhaboghure' wanderers. He ensures that not all who wander are lost. Since 1993, he has successfully rehabilitated over 1,150 individuals, reuniting them with their families who had almost given up hope.

Although initially his efforts were driven by personal emotion, he eventually realized the need for such humanitarian initiatives, and set up his NGO Nakashipara NirmalHriday (Sacred Heart) Samiti in 2007. He has a staff of 13 who are guided and assisted by his wife Joyna Bibi, son Moidul, daughter-in-law Nasreena and niece Monjura Khatun. Munshi works as a government employee in the Bangoria sericulture farm under the central silk board, earning a meagre monthly of Rs. 8000/-. He works night shifts so that he can help at home during the day. Apart from the members of his own household, he currently sustains 91 others whom he loves to call his own.

The Nakashipara Nirmal Hriday Samiti is a safe haven for people with ailments of the mind. Here, they are provided food, clothing, shelter, and most importantly, acknowledgement and dignity. It began as a local endeavour, with Munshi bringing in mentally deranged people from streets, bus stands, and railway stations in close proximity.

Gradually, it spread its wings and gained recognition, so that wherever such people were sighted, they were brought to Munshi. He has come to be widely revered as a savior and healer of the mentally ill. There have been several instances where families have helplessly approached Moslem Munshi, narrating the poor response of patients to medical treatment.

Within a few months, he has been able to rehabilitate and restore them to normalcy. One of his patients, Motim Mondal of Nadia, says, 'My father took me to Moslem Munshi. After a month of treatment, I started showing signs of improvement. I still visit him every month to get medicine.' While Munshi singlehandedly arranges finances for most of his patients, those brought in by their families are requested to pay a monthly sum for treatment. Despite his best efforts, Munshi's journey has been a turbulent one, constantly struggling to arrange finances for his NGO. Providing three meals a day to the inmates and sponsoring their treatment and medication isn't cakewalk for a member of the lower middle class. He has had to mortgage his house, take a loan from his provident fund, and is running a debt of Rs. 3 lakhs. After his efforts were publicized by newspapers and media houses, a number of voluntary organizations, doctors and well wishers have come forward to lend a helping hand by Donating medicines, clothes, and other items of daily use. Such assistance however, has been largely

Irregular, and there have been no substantial grants from the government, except one from Trinamool MP Tapas Paul who allocated Rs. 32 lakhs for the building of rooms for residents. Munshi, who is insufficiently acquainted with the mental health care services and schemes of the government, is still trying to seek financial aid for better management of his organization. Yet nothing has deterred him from his path.

The Miracle Maker

On being asked about the astonishing rate of recovery recorded by his NGO, Munshi remarks that what they really want is love, compassion, and a sense of belonging. Complete segregation from mainstream society only prolongs the process of recuperation. He thus engages them in various kinds of activities like cleaning, gardening, and sports like volleyball, badminton, football to make them feel at home.

An epitome of magnanimity and benevolence, Munshi has gone to absurd extremes for the well being of his patients. When he brought in Dibakar Mandal, a resident of Amdabad region in Katihar district of Bihar, he was confronted by some rather unusual demands. Dibakar refused to have food until and unless he was shown a horse.

Regardless of the blow it would cause to his already tight budget, Munshi immediately brought in a horse to ensure that his patient would not starve himself. Over the course of four years, Dibakar slowly improved and regained his mental balance, and was then handed over to his brothers Manoj and Bibhas. To them Munshi is a miracle maker akin to God.

Munshi has successfully treated and restored patients to their families across the state, to Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and even across the border to Bangladesh. In November 2015, a Bangladeshi man Mamun Rashid, who was mentally challenged, had mistakenly crossed the border, only to be arrested by the BSF at Sutia in Nadia. He was then handed over to the district administration from where he came to Nirmal Hriday. Rashid found a loving home in Moslem Mama, as he endearingly calls him. He has undergone treatment under specialized doctors, and within few months recovered and furnished his name and address. In November 2017, he was handed over to his family at the Gede checkpoint, thereby completing the process of repatriation.

Having dedicated his life to the treatment of these people, Munshi has often had to face unpremeditated violence from his patients. Senapaty Venkatraman Murthy, a college teacher from Andhra Pradesh who was found loitering in Krishnanagar railway station in tattered rags and was eventually brought in by Moslem, had tried to attack him on a number of occasions. Following an accident in 2010, Senapaty had lost his memory and become schizophrenic, prone monitored his medication and counseling sessions.

In January 2013, three years after Senapaty had gone missing from home, he was handed over to his brother-in-law Sachin Narayan Murthy who repeatedly conveyed his heartfelt gratitude to 'Moslemji' for making such a miracle possible. Countless such miracles abound in philanthropist Moslem Munshi's life. In February 2012, he was able to reunite 44 year old Gourhari Gour with a family which, after fourteen years of futile searching, had been left bereft of any hope of him being alive, let alone resuming normal life. Munshi remarks that all these individuals, while returning to their long lost loved ones, always bore a smile on their face which gave him the feeling of a battle being won. Yet the parting is always bittersweet, 'While they smile, I feel a lump in my throat...After all this time they become Family. It's a little hard sometimes.'

'I have a dream...'

Awards and recognitions pale into insignificance before Munshi's magnanimous initiatives and yet, they are the only tangible proof of the humanity nurtured and fostered by this man. On 5th November 2008, former Governor Gopal Krishna Gandhi honoured him with the prestigious Rusi Gimi Award for outstanding contribution in social work. He also received the Vijay Ratna Gold Medal in 2017 from the International Institute of Education, Delhi, and the Jewel of India Award from the Indian Solidarity Council. Apart from this, many TV channels, clubs and organizations have also acknowledged his work. This publicity has incurred him financial support from some well wishers like Elena Sen from Kalyani and psychiatrist Dr Debashish Dasgupta who offers his services free of cost. Munshi is immensely grateful for all their help and credits them for his success. Although aware of his fame, Munshi remains unfazed by it: 'Yes, I have helped many...But is it enough?' 'I have a mad habit', he continues, 'I can't see others in pain. I don't have enough money but if someone's in need of medicine I do everything I can (to help).' A few years back he nursed a homeless boy back to health. Doctors thought he won't live since the snake poison had spread all over. Munshi, not caring about expenses, carried the boy to Shakti nagar district hospital and provided for his treatment. He asserts that, irrespective of age, everyone needs to be cared for like a child. Twenty six years of self-sacrifice and altruistic service, and Munshi still believes he has a long way to go. His passion, his ambition, his addiction all rest here - protecting these homeless, loveless people from society's neglect. Every year he organises a picnic where all members of his extended family laugh, play, and sing hand in hand. When society ostracizes these individuals, they are loved and embraced by Munshi, and that makes all the difference.

Ask him what lies ahead, and the man takes a moment. 'I have a dream', a smile echoes in his voice. 'I dream that I live twenty more years to see my son grow up...He will take this place to new heights.' The son Munshi refers to is a five year old boy, whom he had rescued as a newborn lying in a ditch. Moslem wants to entrust him with the responsibilities of Nirmal Hriday. 'I dream that he will continue the service to the people. I have named him "Noor nabi"- the prophet who enlightens.' It is through him that Munshi hopes to keep alive the light of his sacred heart.

'Breaking the Margin: Tales of the Unsung Heroes', an initiative of West Bengal Minorities' Development and Finance Corporation (WBMDFC), presents examples of inspirations, hopes, and accomplishments. We are pleased to present the stories of individuals drawn from the minority communities, who fought all kinds of odds and broke the barriers of stereotype. They triumphed over deeply entrenched poverty to set the examples for emulations. The first aim of the series is to capture the journey of different individuals, what were the enabler and triggering points that moved these heroes to embark upon the path travelled by a few people. The second principle guiding our this effort is to tell the stories of these unsung heroes to motivate others, especially those who come from similar backgrounds. One of the common threads running across every profile is the story of grit and determination.

Sustain the stories: Nominate your own unsung hero

There are many such stories of unsung heroes that remain unheard, this is the first attempt of this kind, we urge people to share such stories for another edition of this series. Your little effort can enlighten a large audience of an extraordinary achievers, and encourage a thousand of aspirants to emulate the stories who have crossed the hurdles.

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