

# Social roles of celebrities

Many of us would probably be pleasantly surprised if we saw a star artiste promoting not their latest album, movie or talk-show but a fundamental human rights issue or charity. Not uncommon in the West or even neighbouring regions, this concept has not exactly caught on in this part of the world. However, there are exceptions.

Artistes are often seen involved with social works like holding charity shows, donat-

ing from their earnings, or participating in campaigns—all for some noble cause. The Daily Star spoke on this subject to five cultural personalities who are renowned for contribution to their own fields. The five cultural activists—singer Ferdousi Rahman, actress Babita, theatre personality Sara Zaker, rock star Aiyub Bachchu and dancer Anisul Islam Hero—talk about their involvement in social issues:

## 'Joy shared is joy doubled, sorrow shared is half the sorrow', believes Ferdousi

SADYA AFREEN MALICK

Ferdousi Rahman, is a name known and loved by millions for her outstanding contribution to music. However, much less known is her role as a social activist, working and promoting pivotal issues for the distressed.

'What areas of social work are you most involved in at this point? I ask her. Enthusiastically she replies 'Colossal issues. Starting from rehabilitating acid victims, raising awareness against trafficking, promoting women's rights, helping the needy during natural disasters, propagating donating artificial limbs and crutches to the handicapped, we try to reach out to as many people as we can. The members who come mostly from the affluent society, do this through raising funds.'

Ferdousi has won numerous National Awards including the prestigious Ekushey Padak and the Swadhinata Padak. 'But when I see deep affection in the eyes of the people we are able to help through our work, the joy is simply on another higher level. It is beyond words.'

'There are instances when I have traveled to the city outskirts to distribute relief. There, people would often recognise me and ask if I was the 'Khalamoni' who taught the little children to sing on television. It always brings tears to my eyes... It is extremely rewarding to know that despite all their hardship, they have extended to me so much love and appreciation. So it is always a very moving experience for me to give them something in return.'

'Through the Inner Wheel Club (of which she was the Millennium Chairman) we take initiatives to provide sewing machines or give computer training to the younger generation so that they can earn for their family members. Some clubs



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have their own schools and give vocational training in the afternoons and provide adult literacy programs in the evening. The Club also runs homes for the leprosy patients and orphanages.

At present there are altogether as many as 1 lakh members in the country.'

According to Ferdousi, 'We, the fortunate ones should shoulder the responsibility to provide as much help as possible to our fellow human beings. We are the privileged few who can work together to create mass awareness among the underprivileged.'

And with that, suddenly she seems to rush. 'Now that I remember I promised to give a cassette player to a child at the orphanage. He enjoys listening to songs, the little fellow told me. Along with new clothes for them I have to hurry up and get them their presents before Eid...'

'Joy shared is joy doubled and sorrow shared is half the sorrow, goes a Swedish proverb. A country like ours is beset with innumerable problems. The different organisations and clubs do all they can to lend a hand, but there is always need for more.'

I couldn't agree more. And when it is popular stars who offer their hand, the impact is all the more powerful. For that reason, the UN has had on its roster a long list of stars acting as roving Ambassadors from Audrey Hepburn to modern day rock stars promoting issues from anti-racism to AIDS prevention.

On a smaller scale, stars in our country can have a real and long lasting influence on many of the social issues. In doing so, I am sure many will realise as Ferdousi Rahman has, that while performing arts can touch the hearts of millions, charitable work can actually change the lives of millions more.

## 'We need protracted education through entertainment'--Sara

KAVITA CHARANJI

Social causes have always been dear to Sara Zaker, the high profile ad and theatre personality. She has done several memorable campaigns with organisations as diverse as Unicef, UNDP Bangladesh Centre for Communication Programme (BCCP), Save the Children USA and Marie Stopes. 'My social work has never come out in the open so I feel very self conscious. It will seem like I am

blowing my own trumpet,' says Sara. She maintains, 'Bangladesh is full of issues such as education, health, corruption, human insecurity and human rights.'

Here's a look at some major campaigns spearheaded by Sara and her team of professionals:

In 1997, the television serial *Shabuj Shathi* was launched to spread the message of family planning, child health services, among others. This serial has been followed

by two other serials on health: *Shabuj Chaya* and *Ei Megh Ei Roudro*.

There is *Jotsna Phil*, a 26-episode drama series on basic education. The aim is to reduce the drop out rate and involve parents and teachers in education.

In Afghanistan, Sara and her organisation is running a campaign for salt iodisation and safe motherhood initiatives.

Other campaigns are on diverse

areas such as AIDS, education for all, arsenic mitigation, child rights, birth registration and water sanitation with its major partners.

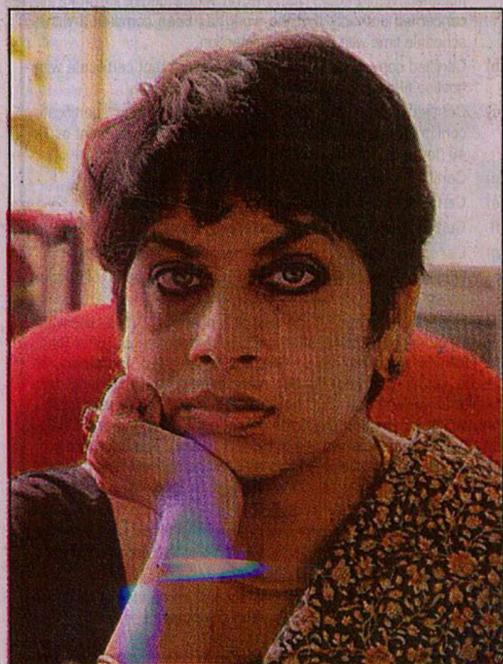
Sara believes that the success stories of Bangladesh are in the area of family planning and education. The birth rate is down to 2.2 per family. In education, the focus is on Education for All by 2015. However, there are obstacles such as a high drop out rate and absenteeism, distance between home and school.

There is a vast difference, she believes, between selling consumer products such as soaps and shampoos and the behaviour change communication of social campaigns. Says Sara, 'We are focusing on protracted education through entertainment. So a social issue has to be entertaining like a soap opera, such as *Sporsher Bairey* or *Ranger Mamush*. Such serials hook you on to the TV and if health, immunisation, pre natal and post natal care can be tackled with a formula like a soap opera, viewers are likely to be attracted. We call this entertainment education.'

Further, a protracted programme of drama serials is essential. 'You can't do just one spot on how to immunise a child the first eight months of life,' says Sara.

Typically she is abuzz with future plans. Come December and an anti-corruption campaign TV commercials and various means such as bill boards etc--will be launched in the run up to Anti-corruption Day on December 9.

Though reticent at the start of the conversation, Sara gradually opened up about her social communications role. Explaining the reason for the initial hesitation, she says, 'My image as a media person has always overshadowed that of my social work.' 'Well may be she can set the ball rolling for a reversal in this trend.'



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## Babita: An active campaigner against acid violence

HARUN UR RASHID

Babita feels that every artiste has some responsibility to the society they live in. She believes in working for people silently. 'I haven't yet got any opportunity to work on a massive scale. I do not have that ability either,' she says honestly. But her 'small' works are not negligible either as Babita is involved with campaigns against AIDS, acid violence, activities to rehabilitate the physically challenged and fund-raising for the treatment of leukaemia patients. In 1996, a poster was published on the World AIDS Day bearing a slogan signed by Babita. The slogan read: 'We have one world, we have hope/AIDS scourge we are to cope.'

She is an active campaigner against acid violence and a member of the celebrities' forum, Stars Against Acid Throwers (SAAT). 'In 2000, we jointly organised a campaign with Acid Survivors' Founda-

tion Support Group. During the campaign, we taught many youths about the inhumanity of acid throwing,' says Babita.

Babita also worked with Children Leukaemia Assistance and Support Services (CLASS) in Chittagong. She remembers 'the joy I saw on the faces of those cancer-affected children'. 'I spent a few hours among those children. It still pains me to remember how they forgot their pain and sufferings for that short time.'

Apart from these individual endeavours, Babita is also involved with activities organised by artistes' associations. 'We film stars have often arranged fun football matches to raise funds during floods or winter,' she says.

However, one aspect of such social works disturbs Babita. 'People are very curious about celebrities. And that often somewhat spoils the greater cause,' she says.

## Bachchu: Combatting social evils

AFSAR AHMED

To what extent can music be effective in reflecting social issues? Using set lyrics that analyse the social methods, singers can address social issues. Aiyub Bachchu, a band music icon, is a

The number is the theme song of the Prothom Alo Aid Fund (PAAF) which aims to 'combat severity of escalating acid violence and promote treatment, provide legal aid and rehabilitation' for the victims. A number of techniques like the lyrics, point of view, use of language

ence at a concert organised at the Shahid Minar premises for the acid victims, Bachchu says, 'I saw a number of the acid victims and it worked as an eye-opener about how human beings can be so cruel to other fellow humans.' Since then, in most of his albums he tries

Bachchu. He has a clear vision that the world needs people who are committed. Bachchu along with others in the band music community of the country always comes forward whenever there is need. 'BAMBA (Bangladesh Musical Band Association)', has always been the first to arrange concerts for raising funds for the flood victims,' says Bachchu.

Not only arranging concerts, Aiyub Bachchu brought out an album for the flood victims in 1998, containing only one song *Bachao bidhata*. Apart from the acid and flood victims, he has worked on several concerts and songs to create awareness on two major issues--AIDS and drug addiction. 'There is always a wrong interpretation that those who are related to band music opt for drugs, which is absolutely baseless,' continues Bachchu. 'But we, who are related to this field, always discourage people especially the young generation about taking drugs.'

However, Bachchu rues at one thing: 'Nothing will be effective and possible if the authority doesn't take the proper steps to control drug trafficking, acid selling and proper distribution of relief. Celebrities cannot reform the society all by themselves; we can only dedicate ourselves to create awareness.'

'But, whatever obstacles celebrities have to face, we always attend to those in distress and identify the social ills and create awareness among the masses,' ends Bachchu.



genuine example of how music could be used to convey social issues effectively.

Bachchu's song *Acid chhorey kapurush* depicts the emotions of the acid victims and the way their loneliness is perceived by others.

and imagery have emphasised the importance of social issues in many other songs of Bachchu. For instance, a song titled *Acid merona* has been released in a mixed album *Laili Maznu* on this Eid.

Recalling his traumatic experi-

'I saw a number of the acid victims and it worked as an eye-opener about how human beings can be so cruel to other fellow humans.'

to maintain the punch line *Acid Merona* to create mass opinion against such violent social activities.

'Social work is exciting and it requires unselfish dedication to strive for social reform,' says

## Hero: Generating social awareness through performing arts

NOVERA DEEPIA

Popular dancer Anisul Islam Hero branched out into social work seven years ago. In 1997 he formed an NGO named Bandhu Social Welfare Society to generate awareness on AIDS and women's issues like acid violence, dowry and other forms of suppression. To quote him, 'I believe that dance is a very important catalyst for change. Through different *mudras* I portray the travails of people.'

Hero has recently returned from Bangkok after attending the International AIDS Conference. There he performed his choreographic item *Black and White*.

A part of his income goes to charitable shows and for medication and laboratory facilities for poor patients.

Hero attended the Interna-

tional AIDS Conference in Geneva in 1998 where he performed his choreographed piece titled *Nature's Revenge*. Later, he performed in another such show in Melbourne in International Conference on AIDS Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP) which included three parts like *Pain, Destination* and *Nature's Revenge*.

In Chianmai, he performed in a programme *Home and Care Support* where he performed his piece *Let Me Love*. These dance pieces, which are mostly dedicated to awareness of AIDS, focus on different issues like using contraceptives and good behaviour with the HIV positive patients.

Hero further adds, 'I feel artistes have some commitment towards the country and their initiatives in this regard cannot go in vain'

