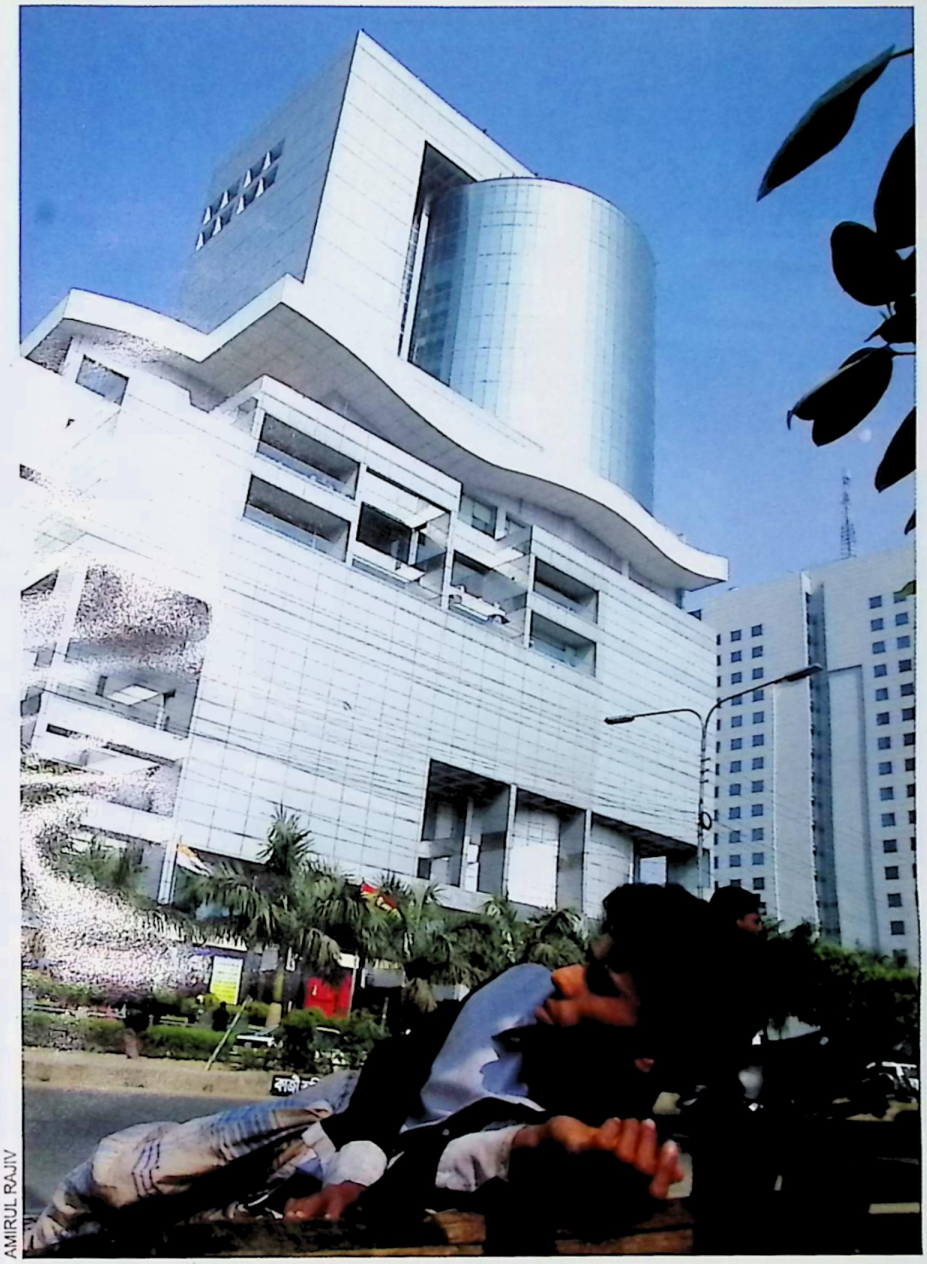


AMIRUL RAJIV

few weeks ago? Why don't we see celebrities come out and talk about how ridiculous the wage of the garments workers are? Why don't we see them donating money to rebuild villages in an Annada Prasad, a Hindu village destroyed by hate crimes, or pay the entire medical bill of a journalist Tipu Sultan or a Shafiul Haq Mithu? Why don't I hear about a rich guy donating for an income-generating activity for the affected families in Kansat? Of course, I am generalizing. But stereotyping happens for a reason.

While the Bill Gateses and Warren Buffets in the rest of the world are opening up their wallets and giving billions in philanthropy, I can't name a single rich person in Bangladesh whom I can proudly say has become the number one philanthropist in the country. However, I do hear stories about them. I do know that they can shed Tk 1,000 (equal to one month salary for a garment-worker) for a couple of tubs of ice-cream. I do know that they don't mind paying 200% tax to drive their Hummer Jeep in the dodgy streets of Dhaka.

Then what am I missing? Are we Bangladeshis in general just so small-hearted that we can't think beyond our own material benefit? Not true. We did fund-raising for Drishtipat abroad for 5 years. I can take tell countless stories of Bangladeshis going beyond their means to donate.

One student paid $10 every month for 6 months, saving from his McDonald's job, for the women of 71. One cab driver paid his entire week's income for Tipu Sultan with a note saying: "*Beshi dite parlam na.*" One couple literally emptied their wallets for the Hindu victims of Annada Prasad. So what am I missing?

Can anyone give me the answer? Can anyone tell me why the privileged few in Bangladesh are so reluctant to think beyond themselves? Why they never think of "the others" -- the 99%? This is my *abhiman* -- not accusation. I know there are exceptions. There are some angels in the Green Zone as well.

It would be a disservice to them if I don't tell one such story. The story is of an organization called Sajida Foundation and Renata Limited -- a pharmaceutical company listed on the Dhaka Stock Exchange. Even in the early 1990s, Sajida was a tiny organization. It ran a garage school with 12 students in Bailey Road, Dhaka.

Then in 1993, through an exceptionally generous financial arrangement, the foundation acquired 51% of Renata Limited. Using dividend income from the acquisition, Sajida began expanding its programs in micro-credit, health, and education. To give an idea of the expansion of charity: In the mid-90s, the total annual budget of Sajida was Tk 500,000. Today, it is Tk 1.25 billion, with virtually no donor support. This growth was possible because, in the early days, the dividend income from Renata had provided a strong financial backbone to Sajida. Today, dividends are a small contributor to the overall source of funds.

This is just a small example of what's possible when the privileged ones become socially conscious doers as well. We can only hope that we can try to create many such stories like this one. As for our intern, her father did return after 24 hours. However, the scar of the exposure to what 99% of our population is exposed to still remains deep in her psyche.

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