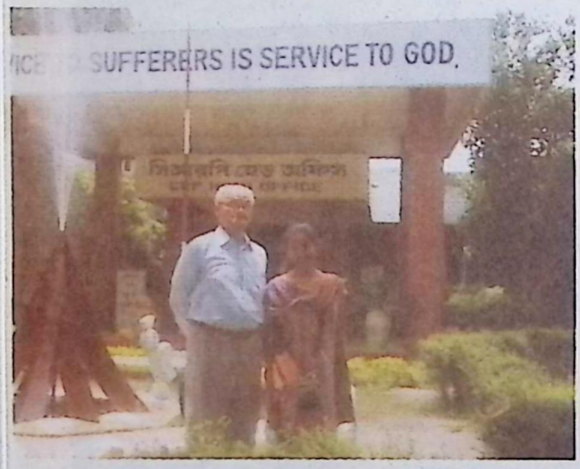
"A Culture of Service"

Kameel Mir

IN the middle of the cantonment in Dhaka, near the sweltering end of July, I sat beneath a blasting air conditioner in my grandparent's apartment. And I couldn't help but remember how only days ago, sweat coated my skin as I strode across the grounds of the Center for Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed in Savar. I volunteered for several weeks at CRP in the summer of 2010, spending each day in a different department. Whether filled with activity or whiled away behind a desk, my time there taught me something about the mechanism behind not only the non-governmental organisation itself, but the evolution of its humanitarian cause. And I have come away from the experience with that much more awareness of the world reeling around me.



CRP officially began about 30 years ago in two abandoned cement warehouses outside of. the Suhruwardi Hospital in Dhaka, a government institution for cardiac patients. A physiotherapist from England named Valerie Taylor had teamed up with the first physiotherapist and occupational therapist to be trained in Bangladesh in the hopes of starting an independent organization dedicated to therapeutically rehabilitating the paralyzed. At the time, physiotherapy and occupational therapy were practically nonexistent in the country.

Valerie Taylor had lived near the National Spinal Injury Hospital in the UK as a child, where she had seen the paralyzed "hop out of their cars" into wheelchairs and go about their business with relative ease. From that society, in 1969 she came to Bangladesh, where the hospitals did not even supply wheelchairs.

"While I was studying to become a physiotherapist, I happened to read three books on medical work being done in South India. I was very intrigued. I didn't have much desire to stay in the UK, but I very much wanted to go to Southeast Asia," says Taylor. And that brought her to work for Voluntary Service Overseas at the Christian Hospital in Chandraghona, a village in what was then known as East Pakistan. She ended up staying there for three years, working in both general and leprosy hospital. Within that time she was repatriated to the UK for seven months. She came back a few weeks before the new nation, Bangladesh, was created from the ashes of East Pakistan and found patients were less than attentive to their treatments on Victory Day when the wards rang with the rapturous slogan "Joy Bangla."

In 1975 Taylor and her colleagues went to work at Suhruwardi Hospital, where a project for vocational training and job replacement for the paralyzed was taking place. "I was shocked at the poor conditions," says Taylor. There she met the first Bangladeshi physiotherapist and occupational therapist and with them she began to nourish an idea. "It would have been too difficult to improve the government hospital," Taylor says, referring not only to the extent of improvements needed, but the infamous bureaucratic red tape. "So we got the idea for starting an independent center." After waiting two years to get permission from the government and one year to secure funding, the first "CRP" opened its doors in 1979, and in one year it increased accommodation for a total of 35 patients.

The government later wanted its cement warehouses back, so as Taylor said, she and her colleagues began their "gypsy life." After eleven years they were able to secure a 5-acre plot in Savar. And that has grown since then into a reasonably self-sufficient 12-acre compound.

I came to CRP with virtually no relevant background. As a twelfth grader, perhaps my one valuable asset was my fluency in English paired with my proficiency in Bangla. Yet on the first day that I came to tour CRP with my mother and my grandfather, I remember forgetting my fears momentarily and being impressed by the breadth of the services the organisation offered to its patients. From the metal workshop, where CRP provides its paralyzed patients with aids and wheelchairs made to order, to the Halfway Hostel, where patients would go