

WE have to Make the Difference

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WE have made our life so stereotyped that to point out that not everyone can celebrate a New Year, Bangla or English or Chinese, or the Japanese *Ganjitsu*, orthe Afghan or Iranian *Nauruz*, or *Pi Mai* in Laos, or *Songkhran* in Thailand, or *Enkutatash* in Ethiopia, or the *Dab Shiid* in Somalia... there is no dearth of festivities and expenses...has become cheap, laughed-off, and ignored cliché. But it is true.

WE have been hearing since our childhood and our grandparents since theirs that we should share our joy with the underprivileged and the unfortunate, the neglected in our society. Our religions tell us not to have a full meal without ensuring that the neighbour has not gone hungry. And, lo! How many children do? How many mothers are really boiling only water as the child looks on in anticipation?

WE have seen topless urchins pick up food (or what was left of it) from roadside dustbins and drains, food that we thought was not worth having. WE have also seen the delight on the face of the rag pickers, a smile worth several kgs of *jilapee*, for a broken piece of that is what I saw a dusty, ashen, bony child pick up from a Bailey Road drain as I was walking to an Iftar 'party'. He seemed happy.

WE have walked past lowly people sleeping on the pavement lest they should wake up and ask for something, not that we do not have anything to hand out; it is just that it is too much trouble getting out the bag and unzipping it and... what if they ask for more? Yet our gesture and very little time could make any of them dream on a full tummy. But we are not the ones who are hungry. And, so we walk by even if in guilt. But most often we walk by.

WE have even stopped the seven- or eight-year old girl who walks up to our car and starts brushing the windshield with a dusty rag. She was doing it for a coin, at best two taka. Have we not all written essays on the dignity of labour? WE brush her away because we do not want to get our car any dirtier, or perhaps we do not have any change or that it is too much trouble getting out the bag and unzipping it...

WE think, yes many of us really do that the beggar (or most of them) has taken up soliciting alms as a profession. And so it is better (for us) that we do not give anything at all. WE do not want to spoil (?) them. WE think by not giving we are actually righting a wrong. Let him work. Let her find a job. But are we not the ones who invented terms like 'work experience', 'reference', and 'qualification'? They stand no chance.

WE may not realise this, but all 'economically poor' people are not scroungers. Many of these humble people possess self-respect. They struggle, yes they are beaten now, but no, they are not defeated. They live on hope. They gather experience, they acquire qualification, and they build references.

WE are in some ways poorer than those deprived souls, lacking more than them in self-respect...we too beg for a job, we lobby for a license, we seek a favour for our child, we give references to get an advantage, we extrude a loan, even personal ones, repayment of which we do not think is always absolutely necessary. We are beggars of a different kind.

WE are amazed by the resolve in some of these people we think we can pity. Walking on the Road 8 pavement along Dhanmandi Lake, I side glance to see in the dim of the street light above a mother in near rags and in full authority gathering a handful of books; the child in front of her is crouched on the pavement on all fours trying to read in the shadow of the late evening. They will not be poor for long. They were only born that way.

WE may have never wondered what the hungry, hopeless, and hapless kid on the street thinks, as he watches the fireworks fizzle in the sky; but perhaps not because (we think) they cannot equate our expenses with their needs. I am told a five-minute display of pyrotechnics costs anything above three lakh Taka. Considering a square meal costing about fifty taka, the expense could feed a family of five persons for a whole year. But then