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Year End 2006

## Rebuild a Life... A Cultural Show to Benefit Acid Victims

December 9, 2006  
New York, NY

I was a little apprehensive about the turn out at the Rebuild a Life event co-organized by Drishtipat and SHEBI on the evening of December 9th, 2006 in Manhattan. However, this apprehension was short-lived as I saw a steady stream of people entering and filling up the huge grand auditorium of the High School of Art & Design. Faces lit up as people started running into friends and family after what seemed like a long period of separation. By the end of the night, the venue also became a reunion ground for old friends and relatives.



The show started off with a fabulous performance by Amra Kojon, a group of music lovers and performers, which moved many in the audience. They presented Abdul Latif's freedom song called "*Daam Die Kinechhi Bangla*" or "We Paid a Price for My Bangla". Their piece was about the tremendous sacrifice borne by millions of Bengalis in their struggle to defend their freedom and language. It was quite a sight to see several spectators shed tears on

being reminded of the struggle and oppression that Bangladeshis had faced in the hopes of achieving independence. Following Amra Kojon's stirring performance was a light-hearted folk dance choreographed by Ishrat Rakhi Hoque. The crowd cheered away at the six ethnically-dressed dancers, Labiba, Nadia, Selina, Devi, Faika, and Sawsan, as they gracefully moved to the famous song "*Bondhu Tin Din*" ("It's Been Three Days, My Friend"). Next was a recitation by Faruque Chowdhury of a powerful poem that depicted an important day in Bangladesh's history, March 7, 1971, when Bongobondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivered an immortal speech. During the short break that followed, people bustled in the hallway conversing with others, buying food, and browsing music CDs and clothes that were being sold.

The second half started with the most important element of the show - a presentation about Acid Violence by Shafaq Islam and Faika Farzana, which was geared to give the audience a better understanding of the cause behind the fundraiser event. The informative slide show presented facts and statistics about this hideous crime that is still prevalent in Bangladesh.

The comedic skit that followed helped lighten the atmosphere again. The skit was split into three acts, one for each of three couples: Sabik & Sawsan, Arefeen & Labiba, Itrat & Seefat, where each couple brought out a distinct interaction and challenge in their relationship. This humor-filled performance ended with a fun dance to the song "*Amar Gorur Gari-te*." I must say that this piece

had some of the audience in splits!

Following the skit was a very moving poem written and recited by Mushfik Nabi called "From New York to Dhaka". The poem illustrated the obstacles faced by many young Bangladeshi Americans who struggle between focusing on their lives as responsible Americans and their responsibility to give back to Bangladesh. The audience was moved by Mushfik's sincere words inspired by his experiences as a socially and politically-conscious Bangladeshi-American. Then, an a cappella duet known as Nova (Mian Azmy and Kyle Mason) took the stage to perform a song called "Ready for Love" by India Arie, a piece about being ready to receive and give love. Kudos to Nova for delivering a heartfelt message to everyone in the audience!



The last set of performances started off with a mind-blowing dance by Ishrat Hoque (Rakhi) and Dina Denis. Their piece was an excerpt from their collaborative movement project called *Stitch*. The crowd was left speechless by the challenging moves that ranged from classical to modern dance routines. Following the dance were two modern and folk songs sung by Forhad and as people enjoyed these traditional songs, the show moved on to the last performance by the band Still Waters! The audience happily clapped as they

sang the popular tracks Bryan Adams' "Summer of 69" and LRB's "Shei Tumi".

Throughout the show our emcees, Dia and Sayeed, did a fabulous job of keeping the crowd entertained with their quirky sense of humor. Their conversations ranged from describing the cause and the participating organizations to dating amongst Bangladeshi people. Versatility at its best!

I was asked several times after the event, "How was it?" and I didn't really know how to answer this question. If we are measuring success by the funds raised for the acid victims, then yes, undoubtedly it was quite an achievement as we exceeded our goal of raising \$3,000. In terms of turn-out, it was as we had expected: a total of about 150 people. Regarding the content of the show, we received wide-ranging positive reviews about each performance, which is surely a good thing as it implies that there was something enjoyable for each person amongst the diverse audience. We had the honor of being covered by a few TV channels such as Stv, TV Asia, Channel I; also, journalists from at least two local newspapers were there to provide press coverage.

I can confidently say that the event was successful and was worth the effort put in by all the volunteers over the past few months. At the end of the day what really matters is that we were able to make a difference in a few shattered lives. Bravo SHEBI & Drishtipat for your dedication to such a noble cause!

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## Return to the Motherland

*By Sawsan Eskander  
January 12, 2006  
New York, NY*

It amazes me how rapidly my country has been developing in the last few years. It had only been about two

years since I'd gone home last, and yet I almost didn't recognize Dhaka city, which now had flyovers, a theater inside a mall, and a sushi restaurant! Three weeks was just not enough to catch up on all the new hot spots in town.



*1.9 km long Flyover at Khilgaon Rail & Road Intersection in Dhaka City*

I spent the first few days with family, friends and relatives and ate numerous meals a day, invariably ending up with a food coma. In these moments I'd wonder why I wasn't moving back home to enjoy such luxuries and comforts. I had always been apprehensive about settling in Dhaka due to the challenging conditions of the society but, during this trip, I was pleasantly surprised by the recent improvements.

I met many people who were working hard towards the development of Bangladesh. While they focused on varied fields such as human rights, health, women's development, education, and other initiatives, they shared the same goal of bringing about positive changes in the country. I felt like I had finally found my comfort zone in Dhaka. The optimism amongst these people had a stirring impact on me.

During my second week, my parents and I went on a short trip to the island St. Martin after which I began to appreciate yet another aspect of Bangladesh that I often neglect - its natural beauty. We spent the first night in Teknaf where we stayed at a hotel called NeTong. It is located next to the NeTong hills that left a lasting

impression on my mind. In the morning, while having breakfast in the hotel's cafeteria, I could sense the serenity of the surrounding hills. I stared out the window in awe admiring the gently-sloping hills covered with lush patterns of green. They blended in with the sky at a distance and I craved to explore their aesthetics at closer range.

Finally we got onto the ship that boarded from Teknaf to go to St. Martin. A group of young boys were merrily singing away ethnic Bengali songs. After about two hours, the captain announced that we were going to enter the Bay of Bengal, which fell to our right. Within seconds, everyone proceeded to the right end of the ship causing the vessel to tilt ever so slightly. Although risky, it showed the passengers' enthusiasm to take in the beautiful sight they were approaching. The difference in color of the river and the bay waters was very distinct, the Bay of Bengal being a deeper shade of blue.



*Fishermen pulling in their nets on St. Martin's Island*

I couldn't believe that I was unaware of this gorgeous piece of land that belonged to my country. The island was lined with coconut trees and needless to say coconut water was the drink of choice amongst the local residents and tourists. St. Martin still seemed to retain its natural beauty unlike many other Bangladeshi tourist spots that have been renovated by the



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tourism industry. Through this experience I developed a strong interest in traveling around Bangladesh as I realized that my country has many spectacular sites that I have yet to see.

At the end of my trip, I asked myself: What am I doing in the U.S. when there is so much left to explore in my own country; so much I could do to contribute towards the development of Bangladesh? Alas, I had to acknowledge the selfish motives that have been holding me back. I have been drawn in by New York City's glamorous lifestyle. Yes, I realize that my life cannot get any more comfortable than it is in the City. But in spite of knowing this, I have decided to move back to Bangladesh by next year. Not only due to the luxuries I have access to or the comfort zone that I had discovered, but simply because I felt a connection to my roots and can only be at peace once I strip myself off this layer of selfishness and begin to contribute towards the betterment of my motherland.

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## Drishtipat Canada Launch

*October 28, 2006  
Toronto, ON*

Drishtipat Canada's launch event was held on October the 28th, Saturday at the Ryerson Student's Center in Toronto. It started out with a brief introduction about Drishtipat, and Drishtipat Canada's first project - Project S.

Every year, each Drishtipat chapter around the world chooses a specific theme to work on. The theme focuses on an issue that violates the basic human rights of people in Bangladesh, and the chapter raises funds to achieve its goals defined for the year. Drishtipat Canada has chosen sanitation facilities and hygiene as their theme for this year. With this theme in mind, Drishtipat Canada is currently

devising Project S - a project planned to alleviate hygiene and sanitation related problems in the chosen areas of Rajshahi Metropolitan, and Bashkhali village in Chittagong.

Mark Surman from telecentre.org, an IDRC initiative presented a highly interesting speech about Pallitathya Kendra's in Bangladesh. This presentation was followed by a very lively Q & A session, which Mark very enthusiastically conducted.



*Mark Surman from telecentre.org*

Next up was a photo-essay about Bangladesh. Everyone was left with a deep feeling of necessity to do something positive for the country! Tania and Sameen moderated a brief discussion session afterward. This session proved to be very constructive in terms of the audience being able to participate in the event with their thoughts and ideas. The discussion session was followed by a delicious biriyani break. The event ended on a pleasant note by cultural performances by the York University BSF.

### PROJECT 'S' - Sanitation, Health and the Environment in Bangladesh

Health and sanitation issues are one of the primary causes of untimely death and disease in Bangladesh. Absence of proper facilities and unhygienic sanitation systems spread bacteria and pollute water bodies, which in turn infect agricultural areas and households. The lack of proper education on hygiene issues causes poor health.

Drishtipat Canada believes that access

to proper sanitation facilities is a basic human right. A great number of villages in rural Bangladesh are suffering due to unhygienic waste systems. While NGO's and other organizations involved in social work have addressed this problem in some areas of Bangladesh, there is still a vast majority that would benefit from our input.

The target group was pre-determined as poverty-inflicted areas in Bangladesh where Drishtipat Canada found local volunteers willing to assist in community based development work. Hence, a rural area of Chittagong and a sub-urban area in Rajshahi were chosen to serve as our launching positions. We will use a similar format to start off the Project in both cities.

Drishtipat Canada intends to raise awareness amongst the residents of the chosen areas on the necessity of maintaining a sanitary and healthy lifestyle. In the initial stages, DP Canada plans on putting together training material to help local volunteers provide information sessions to the community in the chosen areas. These training sessions will serve as part of the awareness campaigns. Training information will include facts on clean drinking water, kitchen & food etiquettes and sanitary toilet facilities.



Once enough interest is generated among the local community members, up to five families in each area will be chosen randomly by the volunteers, as recipients of the newly sanitation systems built. These systems will consist of a complete sanitary toilet. Prior to installation of these systems, the families must agree to spread the



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word about the benefits of having proper toilet systems. DP Canada will provide the majority of funds for the first set of toilets built in this area. The recipient families will also be required to contribute minimal financial amounts and some physical labor towards this project.

### The Goal

Throughout the length of the project, the local community volunteers will provide constant supervision and support to all residents on the healthy living. The chosen group of families will serve as test cases, and based on the success of the project at that stage, DP Canada will move forward to the second round with other members of the community. The ultimate goal will be to attract the local authority and influential people of the area, through our success and work. DP Canada eventually wants these influential residents to take over the project, and be responsible community leaders in continuing the process of building sanitary facilities for all families in their area. Hopefully, the accomplishments of this project can serve as a model for other areas of Bangladesh under similar situations.



DP Canada will consider this project to be a success when the recipients of the sanitation facilities will be totally self-sufficient in using the facilities appropriately (i.e. the members of the recipient families will completely stop open defecation, and will maintain basic hygienic practices while cooking and drinking water).

## Bangladesh Meets Drishtipat Canada: "Health & Sanitation"

*By Sameen Rehman  
August 18, 2006  
Ottawa, ON*

The overwhelming response and cooperation I received from the people of Bashkhali and Rajshahi on my recent trip to Bangladesh, certainly surprised me.

Having grown up in Bangladesh, I am familiar with the big class differences that exist in our society. Like many others, my family has been financially assisting people in Bangladesh consistently, both for those who worked at our house as well as their own families. Even though there is available support amongst members of the community, there is still a lack of community integration - i.e., class differences based on finance, education and reputation. This gap has always existed, but it was only during my recent trip back home that Drishtipat gave me the platform and authority to speak to the broad community about how to create a more concrete and cooperative group. I must say, the response I received was quite overwhelming!

Initially, I was planning on just meeting the Rotary Club of Rajshahi to discuss potential partnerships with DP Canada, but throughout the process I had the opportunity to meet other interested parties. The meeting with the Rotary Club was a highly informative experience for me. Rajshahi's Rotary Club is involved in a project involving the cancer hospital whose funding is entirely comprised of donations from city residents and the worldwide zakat fund. They further explained how they have involved the influential (political and financial) leaders of their community in various social service projects. Over the years, they have gained the trust of

the community and established their credibility as successful community service providers. After the meeting with Rotary, I was approached by the Director of a local English-medium school, Paramount's Mrs. Shirin Ahmed, with potential partnership opportunities as well. A group of students from the Public Administration Department of Rajshahi University currently in their third or last year also came forward and volunteered their time and services to assist with this project.

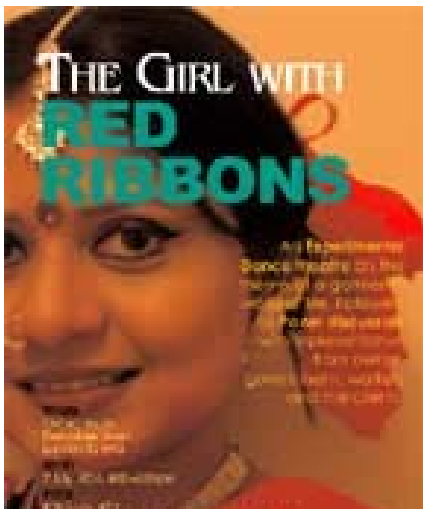
The experience gave me an overall sense that even with the many social movements happening in Bangladesh, there is still so much more to be done in order to restore, or simply provide for, basic human rights. Sadly enough, there is a lack of motivation among people of my age and the student population. It was very disappointing to see that not many of the young generation are aware of their role and responsibility as 'future-makers of Bangladesh'. This gap of commitment and involvement certainly builds further on the many barriers towards community integration. A little bit of financial support and awareness from the privileged 'power stringers' of the country, could make a huge difference for the general population that are living in conditions far below what we take for granted on a daily basis.

To end on a good note, it was encouraging to see the existing individuals like the Rotary club, the Paramount School Foundation, and Mrs. Shirin Ahmed involved as they are in the community. Their initiative to go out and make a difference in people's lives will certainly have a positive impact.



## Drishtipat London Launches with Bangladeshi Garment Industry Event

At the height of the recent unrest in the Bangladesh garments industry, a London chapter of Drishtipat, a human rights organization, was launched by organizing a major event titled "Keys to a sustainable and strong future for Bangladesh garments industry". In a packed house, a major attraction of the event was a dance drama titled, "The Girl with the red ribbons" which was based on the real life incident of a garments worker from Mirpur. This was followed by a slideshow on the issue and a lively panel debate with 6 panelists who represented the different stakeholders in the industry. The attendees were Neil Kearney, General Secretary from International Labour and Garments Workers Federation, Lakshmi Bhatia, Global Partnership Director from Gap Inc, Naila Kabeer, a researcher from IDS, Jeneefa Jabbar from BGMEA, Saida Muna Tasneem from the Bangladesh High Commission and Martin Hearson from Clean Clothes Campaign.



"The Girl with Red Ribbons" an experimental dance drama based on the true story of a garments workers' life

The play was written by Eeshita Azad and was directed by Leesa Gazi and the choreography was done by Sultana Sharmin Jhara. The songs in the play ranged from Rabindranath Thakur to Suman Chatterjee to Moushumi Bhowmik to Shah Abdul Karim. Similarly poems ranged from traditional to contemporary -- all well suited for the theme. The 40 minute drama had added background score by Tadhin Project and the lighting was done by Katryn. Altogether the production was hailed by all as very well knit and well made. It was very effective in putting in a human face to the issue. The effect of the drama was palpable on the audience face. One of the audience members Khadija Rahman from BSK commented later:

*With your absolute spot-on dramatization of Jamila's life and slide show - The issue that you have high lighted yesterday was so effective that I am sure people are having difficulty in sleeping tonight. My mother is a sleeping partner of a garments factory in Bangladesh. I phoned her as soon as I got home. I felt so ashamed and felt somehow responsible for the miseries of fellow human beings. I understand that government, buyers have vital roles to play in order to make changes in our valuable workforces' work conditions, but I also think we need to alter our culture of exploiting the poor and need learn to treat less privileged "social under classes" as equal.*

After the drama, Drishtipat executive director Asif Saleh, introduced Drishtipat and its projects to the audience and said it is out of the passion for Bangladesh and its people, Drishtipat had been born. He stressed on its non-partisanship and asked everyone willing to make a difference to join Drishtipat. This was, then, followed by the slideshow on the issue prepared by Faisal Gazi. It gave the background on the debate which was moderated by novelist Tahmima Anam and Asif Saleh.

The debate was started with the question on current workers unrest. To this Neil Kearney, who visited Bangladesh 9 times in the past year, gave a long list of issues that were the cause of the worker's grievances. BGMEA representative Barrister Jeneefa Jabbar responded with the actions they have taken to mitigate the problem. MS. Jabbar promised that all of these agreements will be implemented within three months.



The government representative, Saida Muna Tasneem, the political counselor, was asked about the government's role in the implementation of the agreement and compliance. She mentioned some recent initiatives like the task force formed by the commerce ministry. Laxmi Bhatia, from Gap, who was representing the buyers and who came from India for this mentioned how the consumer is becoming more aware of where the companies are getting their supplies from and companies are listening. So it is imperative Bangladesh pays proper attention to compliance. She also stressed the importance of ALL the companies being serious about compliance issue. Jeneefa made a point strongly at this point saying that if the companies are willing to not squeeze the suppliers for every penny in price, BGMEA would make sure all the compliance issues are taken care of in no time.

Martin Hearson highlighted that ultimate power to convince the buyers should lie with consumers and he wanted everyone to be not just concerned with value but rather focus on the company's social responsibility. Neil Kearney summed up the meeting at the end by saying that he was more



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optimistic than before. This time he saw the urgency among everyone to pay attention but he said we must keep the pressure on for results. All the participants agreed that it is critical for Bangladesh that this industry thrives and that everyone needs to move forward. Drishtipat stressed that compliance is the key to creating a strong and sustainable industry and both buyers and the manufacturers need to really address this by being serious about it. Drishtipat also announced that launching of the industry-monitoring blog and promised a follow up report in October.



The program was attended among other by both mainstream and Bangladeshi press, Amnesty representative for Bangladesh Abbas Faiz, councilors Murad Qureshi, and Sandra Kabir and other respected members of the British-Bangladeshi community and was regarded as a very different blend of awareness campaign by the expatriate Bangladeshis.



## About Drishtipat

Drishtipat is an internet-based, non-profit, non-political expatriate Bangladeshi organization committed to safeguarding every individual's basic democratic rights, including freedom of expression, and is opposed to any and all kinds of human rights abuses in Bangladesh. We are based in the United States, and our active membership extends across the globe. Drishtipat has chapters in New York, Chicago, Washington DC, Boston, Virginia, London, Australia, and Canada that have undertaken numerous campaigns since the organization's inception in 2001. Our web-based approach achieves maximum outreach and provides a cost-effective vehicle for coordination.

From its inception, Drishtipat has successfully completed several campaigns and many petitions and appeals, including: the Women of 1971 Campaign, the Arsenic Project Campaign, the Tipu Sultan Campaign, the Saving Bhubodoho project, Garments Workers Rights campaign, a project for the rehabilitation of paralyzed people, and many others. Drishtipat's success stems from the compassion of people who have come forward to support these humanitarian efforts. Drishtipat thanks our current and past supporters for their interest and involvement and is always in search of new members and supporters.

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