Meet Shagor, a seven-year-old boy who makes his own living collecting garbage and selling paper scraps. Sometimes he will wipe your car when you are stuck in traffic and other times he will be trying to sell stickers to people walking on pavements. Shagor has been living on the streets for four years now, abandoned by his parents in an alley near the Kamlapur Railway Station at the age of three. He grew up following others who lived on the pavements, in small shanties made of plastic and polythene under the open sky. He moved regularly from place to place, walking barefoot on the gravel with other children, girls as young as five carrying infants on their hip, living hand to mouth and always hungry.

Meet “Tiger”. Tiger has a reputation of being a “bad tempered” child which earned him the nickname “Tiger”. He never quite learned how to cope with his feelings, abandoned and living on his own at the Kamlapur Railway Station since he was just two years old. He would pick fights everywhere he went, scream and curse at others. People shooed him away or slapped him around. Like Tiger, Smriti was also abandoned at the age of two, and left to live on the pavement with her grandmother. At the age of five, she was abducted and forced to work at a household where for years she was beaten and tortured by her employers.

The stories of Shagor, Tiger and Smriti though heartbreaking, are not uncommon. Thousands of children just like them navigate treacherous city streets on their own, either abandoned or escaped from their nearest of kin. They are forced to shed
subject to physical, psychological as well as sexual abuse. Many of them turn towards drugs and a life of crime. With only the streets to call their home and the open sky to guide them, these children grasp at every straw to barely stay alive.

In the case of Shagor, Tiger and Smirty, fate seemed to have a different plan in store for them. All three of them came under a project for urban extreme poor known as the Amro Manush Project* operated by SAJIDA Foundation in Dhaka and Chattogram. Through the project, Shagor, Tiger and Smirty, like many other children found a safe haven at a “Pavement Dweller Centre” which provide essential care such as cooking, bathing, night shelter, children’s day care, non-formal education, health and other crucial services for the extremely poor. Soon, the children were being bathed and fed, learning alphabets and number, provided health care and counseling by compassionate teachers and caregivers. And just like that, the future of these children started to change. They started dreaming of becoming teachers, doctors and engineers; musicians, cricketers and social workers. At the centre they celebrated festivals like Eid and participated in singing and dancing competitions. Life suddenly held new meaning. Just like that.

Bangladesh has made remarkable strides towards growth and development over the last few decades and looks eagerly towards gaining recognition as a “developing country” by the UN by 2024. Our economic progress has focused on improving business environment, developing infrastructure, facilitating trade and market efficiency. And we seem to be Yet in the margins of all our grand plans, our poverty-stricken children are still slipping through the cracks.

The hallmark of a nation that is “developing” in the truest sense of the word, are its actions and policies towards ensuring security and development opportunities for its most vulnerable – which include women and children, the aged and ailing, pregnant women, persons with disabilities and voiceless minorities. Yet as we celebrate our growing economy and promising future, our vulnerable seem to be no better off than they were decades ago. A visit to Centres such as SAJIDA Foundation’s Amro Manush Pavement Dweller Centre and meeting with the members there provide a glimpse of how thousands of the extremely poor are still deprived of basic necessities and social services. A meeting with Tiger and Shagor and Smirty makes one wonder as to where these children would have ended up, if they hadn’t found their way to this PDC. How would Tiger, the “bad tempered” child, have channeled his anger? How would Shagor, the vagabond child, have found direction in life? And Smirty, the abused run-away, who was beaten with iron rods by her employer? One can only imagine and shudder.

So, what can be done to bring meaningful change where change is most warranted? Perhaps it is time we started with ourselves. With November being celebrated worldwide as the Universal Children’s Day, let us start doing our part to reach out to underprivileged children around us in more meaningful ways. Perhaps can we start volunteering at centres like the Amro Manush PDC, teaching and learning with children there. Perhaps we can offer donations to organizations which work with such children; or just be a friend to that little boy or girl we see picking up scraps from the road every day in front of our house, or that little girl who begs while carrying an infant on her hip at the traffic light?

Perhaps it is time to stop believing that the fault lies in their stars. Perhaps the fault lies with us, the passive observers. And it is time we really did our parts to earn the title of a truly developing nation.

*Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

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The fault is not in our stars

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