

The Daily Star

Friday, April 12, 2013

BRINGING BACK '71

'Abar Ekattur' is an effort to instil the core values of the Liberation War in the hearts of Bangladeshi youth

Tamanna Khan



Human chain before the Press Club, Dhaka, 2011. Photo courtesy: Abar Ekattur

It is quite late in the evening. Even after a long tiring court session at the International Crimes Tribunal, a talk show at a private television channel, prosecution member Barrister Tureen Afroz's face lights up as she begins talking about 'Abar Ekattur'.

Starting in 2010, 'Abar Ekattur' is an effort initiated by Afroz and her students of the School of Law, Brac University, to rekindle the spirit of the Liberation War in the hearts of Bangladeshi youth by educating them about its different aspects. The thought had always dwelt in Afroz's mind and it gained direction after she took up a teaching position at the university. Through her interaction with the younger generation, she realised that an information gap existed among them regarding the Liberation War. This was the result of misleading and controversial history teaching. "I always had this regret as to why we could not do anything to correct this history," she says.

Afroz saw an opportunity when the new generation cast their vote in 2008 in favour of the party that promised the trial of the war criminals. "I wanted to find out how the new generation viewed the Liberation War," she says. She thought of an inter-university debate festival in Bangla on 'Liberation War, Trial of War Crimes and Today's Youth'. Twenty-four universities from all over Bangladesh participated in this festival. "For the first time I felt that today's youth were very conscious. They were intensively studying this subject," she recalls her experience of the debate festival, which was sponsored by the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs.



Barrister Tureen Afroz, Photo: Prabir Das

After that event, state minister of Liberation War Affairs Captain (Rtd) ABM Tajul Islam asked Afroz to arrange similar events all throughout the country. Within three months, she and her students developed the concept of 'Abar Ekattur' to reach out to students of universities or equivalent institutes. With herself as the main commander she formed a team of 11 commanders with her students from Brac University, modelled after the 11 sectors of the Liberation War. "I coached them with relevant materials on Liberation War history of Bangladesh and legal arguments in support of trial of war crimes."

Four of Afroz's commanders developed an easy-to-read Constitution of Bangladesh, titled 'Amader Shongbidhan'. "Though the Constitution gives us our rights, people hardly read it as the language is considered very complicated," she says, explaining the objective of 'Amader Shongbidhan', "Fifty cleaners and security guards (of Brac University) reviewed the book along with expert reviewers, such as, Justice Ghulam Rabbani, Dr. Shah Alam, Dr. Shahdeen Malik and Dr. Ridwanul Haque." Later, the book was distributed in all the divisional towns of the country. Since the legal aspect of war crimes falls under Afroz's research interest, she also prepared her team on the issue with focus on the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) Act 1973.

In April 2011, Afroz and her team set out to form camps at every divisional city inviting students from all the universities and colleges of that division. She says, "Just as people from different backgrounds joined hands together and fought the war in 1971, these students from different backgrounds would come to the camp and fight a different war. This war would not be fought with weapons but with intellect and creativity." The two-day long training programme at the camps would register about 30 to 35 students, who took part in five interactive lecture sessions.

The first day covered sessions on Liberation War and History, Liberation War and Politics and finally Spirit of the Liberation War. The 11 commanders from Dhaka would start the session with a quiz to understand the level of knowledge among the students regarding the Liberation War and its history. Then everyone would engage in a discussion about the issue filling in the gaps where necessary. Questions regarding distortion of history, preservation of mass graves, absence of liberation war departments in higher educational institutes and many more came up. Since the sessions dealt with sensitive issues, Afroz insisted on rational debate rather than getting involved emotionally.



Camp classes

The session on the spirit of the Liberation War elaborately discussed the four main ideologies — nationalism, secularism, socialism and democracy. Afroz talks about a knowledgeable young man Sifat at the Rangpur camp, "He explained the root of our Bengali identity, the difference between the terms 'Bengali' and 'Bangladeshi' bringing in instant references from the Mauryan and Pala century." All the classes were conducted in a participatory mode. "The discussion on

secularism used to take up most of the time. Youths of the last few decades are not used to this particular term,” she observes.

The next programme included a rickshaw rally accompanied with the songs from ‘Jagoroner gaan’. The rickshaws would circle the university campuses of the divisional towns, to gain attention from other young people who could not participate at the training programme. “Since Ministry of Liberation War Affairs and the Central Command Council of Muktiyodhha Shangshad financed this campaign, the local freedom fighters would join us in the rickshaw rally,” she says describing what a spectacular sight it was when the older generation in motor-bikes led the way and cleared the streets for the rickshaws of the newer generation in each of the divisional towns.



Dhiman Onneshan at Rajshahi camp. Photo courtesy: Abar Ekattur

The day ended with the participants doing something creative in a programme called ‘Dheeman Onneshan’ (Intellect Search). “They would sing, dance or perform something related to the Liberation War,” she says, “There wasn’t a single ‘Dhiman Onneshan’ in any of the camps where we did not cry during the session. We used to become so emotional.”

Sessions on Liberation War and Women and Trial of the War Criminals used to be conducted on the second day. Afroz remembers how difficult these two sessions were. Critical questions such as why we could not socially accept the Biranganas (victims of 1971 rape and tortures) were raised. “I watched as the new generation choked and tried to hide their tears when talking about these,” she recalls. Describing how many women, who escaped from the Pakistani army camp, would pass information to the freedom fighter, even before going home, Afroz says, “When a freedom fighter lost a limb, we gave him a Liberation War certificate and honoured him, but when a woman lost the most precious aspect of her life, did we treat her with equal respect? How many of us can declare with pride, ‘I am the daughter, brother or sister of a Birangana?’” Such arguments had an immense psychological impact on the participants, observes Afroz.

The ICT Act 1973 was taught in the last session focusing on the questions regarding the international standard of the trial, the clauses on capital punishment and such. “We were very selective. We ensured that the participants of the camp studied on these issues,” she says. In fact, the participants were divided into four groups — army, navy, air force, guerrilla unit — modelled after the armed forces of the Liberation War. Each of these four groups had to present their suggestions on the topic of each session. “It was competitive in the sense that we selected the best three participants from each camp and invited them to Dhaka to attend the national convention,” she says adding that the selection process depended on the oral skills as well as the interactive skills and team spirit of the person.

The two-month long campaign came to a close at a national convention in Dhaka, where a shadow parliament was staged. The selected participants were divided into government and opposition MPs and a mock parliamentary question-answer session was conducted on issues related to the Liberation War. However, the movement of ‘Abar Ekattur’ did not come to an end. Afroz says the work of ‘Abar Ekattur’ continues through the freedom fighters of today, who participated in the campaign. ‘They took an oath at every camp. Our target is for each of the freedom fighters (the participants) to instil this spirit in at least 10 other people. It can be anyone. They do not have to report their activity to anyone; it is a pledge one makes with oneself’ she says.

“By the end of the first year, we had developed an active network throughout the country,” she says. In 2012, ‘Abar Ekattur’ ran a signature campaign throughout the country with an 11-point demand, which was derived from the suggestions that came up in the camps a year before. The second national convention was held in Dhaka attended by 1200 youths from all over Bangladesh. The 11-point was presented at the convention by 11 best orators from different universities of the country.

Sustaining an event based movement requires a lot of logistic and financial support. Therefore ‘Abar Ekattur’ encourages and facilitates the university students who want to work on this subject. “It is not possible for them to replicate the two-day long camp everywhere. Rather they hold seminars on the same five topics,” she informs adding that the Rajshahi and Barisal unit are very active, whereas Sylhet is not.

For the current year, Afroz is planning to hold a programme with secularism as the main theme. “If we understand secularism then a lot of problems are solved. To understand secularism we need to learn about history, politics, Liberation War, its spirit, our constitution, future plan, everything. “‘Abar Ekattur’ is actually an intellectual exercise,” she asserts. Afroz refuses to blame Jamaat-e-Islami solely for the section of the youth who are taking part in the anarchy in trying to save the war criminals. “We are also liable. We failed to communicate to the youth what the Liberation War is, what its spirit means, how the country can be developed and so on.” She questions why we could not reach out to the entire population with our all-inclusive education system. “We need to correct this mistake. Otherwise this gap will increase,” she says emphasising on the need for initiating a dialogue among the ‘derailed youths’ of the country, who we have, till now, conveniently chose to overlook.