

"All Citizens are Equal before Law and are Entitled to Equal Protection of Law"--Article 27 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

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Street law: making future responsible citizen

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"I shall ever try to keep all untruths out from my thoughts, knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled the light of reason in my mind" (Tagore). It is reason which leads us in our journey throughout our lives, guides us in our paths, helps us make our decisions. Reason is to choose between the right and the wrong, and it was reason that ignited the fire in the spirit of the freedom fighters in 1971. A state is what its citizens are. In the 21st century, when the whole world is marching towards the new horizons of development, law students should wake up with a start and find that the reason of '71 is about to fail. So we rise with new oaths.

Street law

Students can play a valuable role in ensuring social justice. The street law can make people aware of their legal rights and where to obtain assistance. It is considered as a "legal first aid". It also makes them understand how law works and how the present legal system can protect them. The street law thus helps us face the problems we confront in the streets of our lives. It makes people aware not only of their rights, but also their duties towards the state, towards one another and towards themselves. Usually, school children, slum dwellers are the objects of street law.

Inception of street law concept

The street law program originated at the Georgetown University Law Centre in Washington D.C. in 1972. Law students were sent out to the inner city schools where young people in the black ghetto areas felt oppressed by the legal system. South Africa was the first country to introduce International street law program, beginning in 1985. Now it is taught as part of legal curricula in various commonwealth countries including UK, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya etc. Bangladesh is the pioneer country in the subcontinent to start the program, Empowerment through Law of the Common People (ELCOP), a legal research institution being the initiator. The Law Review of Dhaka University in 1995 was the first phase. In 1998, Dr. Mizanur Rahman, Professor of Law at the University of Dhaka and Ms. Margaret Groark formally initiated the program in collaboration with ELCOP. Each year ELCOP trains about 1500 pupils of secondary and higher secondary levels, 100 opinion leaders, 100 slum dwellers, 100 workers in formal and informal sectors.

Protidiner Ain

For the purpose, ELCOP has published a manual named 'Protidiner Ain' written by the law students of Dhaka University, who also form the corpus of the trainers. The book aims to familiarize the trainees with basic ideas of the legal system. The law students emphasize the performance of duties as citizens, for we believe that if duties are performed, rights will by process be ensured. Protidiner Ain deals with matters on human rights, fundamental rights, the constitution, democracy, child rights, civil and criminal justice, personal laws, trafficking, environmental issues, consumer protection and juvenile justice. In 2009, law students (the writer being one) have gone to The Holy Cross Girls' High School, Engineering University School and College, Nilkhet High School, Shegunbagicha High School, Udayan High School and Bashbari Slum area for street law campaign.

Lessons from street law

Street law teaches the law students lessons which cannot be learned within the walls of the law schools. We get a clear picture of pupil's think of the system and judicial processes. We discovered that the area of tort law appals them, while personal laws help them think about the diversity of the society. The difference between human rights and fundamental rights thrills them. They get a clear understanding of how the police and court system work at quite an early age, which will definitely help them becoming better and conscious citizens. The first glimpse of important international covenants promoting human rights allows them to broaden their outlook.

Exercises adopted by the street lawyers require the pupils to ponder over matters, develop their reasoning ability. It is structured on an interactive method. We deliver the ideas by inviting questions from them. We uphold the topics through sequence dramas and simulations. By the second or third day, the pupils like to participate in dramas, for they get a different taste from usual method of our educational institutions. At definite points debate is held amongst them wherefrom they get answers to their questions from their own arguments. Thus, they argue on whether death penalty is necessary, whether reformatory or deterrent punishment is better.

Grooming the future anti-generic lawyers

Street law nurtures the advocacy skill of the student-instructors--the future pro-people lawyers. It contributes as an incentive, allowing us to do more intense study on the topics, enrich ourselves. It develops our ability to think on our own when responding to questions, ability to communicate law

and legal principles to lay people in simple language, improves analytical skills to identify and solve legal problems. It encourages tolerance by enabling the instructors to accept opposing arguments. The instructors get an opportunity of looking at the system from completely different angles. The questions raised by the pupils often reveal new dimensions and flaws which might never appear in the mind of a law student who is influenced by bookish jurisprudential theories.

The spirit

In the slums, the people share their own experiences, which reveal the prevailing circumstances and show our duties as lawyers. We fought for equality, social justice and human dignity, the ringing tune of our supreme law--the constitution. Today we are left unaware of our rights, duties, powers and our very own constitution. These are perceived to be the concern of only law students and legal professionals. Street law is a limited but firm commitment to overturn this misconception.

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