

FORUM

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Leaders of the Future

Nabilah Khan describes one group's efforts to unearth the future leaders of Bangladesh

It would seem that our cry for informed and powerful future leaders of Bangladesh might finally have been answered. In fact, Ejaj Ahmad, the founder of the Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC) would like to reassure you that this is indeed the case.

Ejaj, a recent recipient of an MPP from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, and second-year MIT student Shammi Shawkat Quddus both won the Davis Peace Prize from MIT in January 2008. With this initial fund from their prize money of \$10,000, Ejaj was able to realise a past dream and start his quest by encouraging promising young men and women from the younger generations to receive training in leadership and decision making for the future development of our country.



BYLC conducted its inaugural program in Chittagong, selecting qualified students from English and Bengali medium schools as well as madrassas. Along with the cooperation of YPSA, a local non-profit in Chittagong, this first batch of BYLC students took part in the very first leadership training for high school students under the direct guidance of both Ejaj and Shammi.

BYLC has three main goals, according to its founders. Both Ejaj and Shammi spoke of the huge gap in comradeship between English medium, Bengali medium, and madrassa students that they themselves felt during their own school years in Bangladesh. Thus, not surprisingly, one of the first goals of BYLC is to build bridges between the three distinct schooling systems in Bangladesh and provide a common ground for students of different backgrounds.

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Ejaj himself strongly believes that such a division in our society, cultivated from a young age in our lives, is a very definite threat to the economic, social and political progress of Bangladesh. "If future leaders, in whatever field, cannot understand where the other half of the population is coming from, then how will they exercise correct judgment and leadership?" asks the founder of BYLC.

The organisation's second goal is "leadership training", as the name itself indicates. BYLC aims to encourage youngsters to realise and focus on their own goals, whether large or small. Goals that they themselves have set, and through leadership training, is able to build the courage required to accomplish such aspirations in life.

Community service is the practical aspect of BYLC's third and final goal, through which they hope to encourage BYLC students to utilise all they have learnt, bringing it forth within themselves into a real life situations, aimed at improving social conditions in Bangladesh.

Ejaj explains their third goal by saying: "We believe that leadership as a position of authority alone is of no use unless it delivers positive results for others."

BYLC's first group in Chittagong spent about two weeks completing 670 hours of community service in Dampara, bringing about changes that they hope to continue overseeing on their own after the training completed on August 16.

The group's very first training took place in Chittagong Eye Infirmary and Training Complex with a team of 30 students from various different backgrounds and a team of seven trainers from both BYLC and YPSA. After the opening ceremony on July 18 with a chance for both the parents and the students to initially mingle, the actual sessions started off a day later with only the students in a classroom at the complex. I was quite surprised and pleased to see the interactive and peer-dominated training that took place during my two days observation, and the many ice-breakers and such activities that are not usually made use of in education or training in Bangladesh.

From the very first week, Ejaj insisted on taking a back seat and letting the students run most of the sessions on their own while the BYLC-YPSA team provided non-intrusive but strong guidance throughout. The first session started with students introducing one another in front of the entire group, after an initial introduction to each other on their own over a ten-minute period.

After each set of introductions, the instructor would ask each participant to point out those in the audience who had not listened to his or her introductions. This was a way to make the students aware of his or her audience, and to learn how to use the nuances of pauses between sentences and other types of body and facial gestures to keep the attention of listeners.



Thus from the very first, BYLC insisted on their students learning to speak influentially in front of large groups of people, a characteristic that is most sought after in all kinds of leaders throughout the world.

"We wanted our participants to learn more from one another than from instructors. The purpose of the lectures was to create the setting so that the participants could do just that," according to Ejaj.

And the many ice-breakers in between sessions, including bursting other participants' balloons while trying to save one's own, allowed students to become comfortable with one another and build rapport through which they were able to both learn from one another and share past experiences of leadership failure.

Through team building efforts, students examined each other's experiences of leadership and provided advice on how to deal better with such situations, debating back and forth amongst themselves. Quality time was also spent on examining the meaning and definition of leadership along with discussions of qualities in leaders that the students themselves named.

The BYLC classes included creative expressions such as poetry recitation and art, as well as formal and informal discussions, examining vital issues like domestic violence and other social dilemmas that predominantly grip the Bangladeshi society.

Some of the classes were spent analysing situations of conflict, thus learning how to accept different viewpoints, trying to understand people's behavior and examining the dynamics which aide in solving problems rather than creating further controversies.

During the final two weeks of BYLC's training, the five different groups of students spent their time in Dampara implementing various projects such as disaster management and one group, that named itself "Youth Power", engaged in environmental remediation, by planting over 60 trees in areas that are prone to landslides.

This aspect of the training, which also included distributing garbage bins, building tarpaulin shades for bathing areas for both men and women, starting rural schools led by graduates from the same area, amongst many others, were designed to incite compassion in participants and encourage them to partake in social action from early on in their lives.

BYLC only recently successfully completed its very first training session in Chittagong. Ejaj Ahmad is now back in Dhaka, planning on further training strategies and excitedly

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looking forward to encouraging many more youth, not only in Dhaka, but all over Bangladesh.



His motto, along with the kind of vision he has, will not only incite our future generations to undertake social actions from a young age, but also develop a national pride and unity that did not exist in the past.

Ejaj aspires to create future leaders who will be proud to represent Bangladesh to the world, using their skills to improve the quality of life of Bangladeshis from all walks of life.

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<http://www.thedailystar.net/forum/2008/september/leaders.htm>