

The Aman Story

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Shy but amiable and disarmingly down-to-earth, 55-year-old Muhammad Abdus Sabur is a man with a mission. He is the founder and general-secretary of a Bangkok-based network of Asian Muslim social activists struggling for social justice and inter-faith dialogue—the *Asian Muslim Action Network*, its acronym AMAN, meaning "peace" in Arabic.

Born in a village in what was then East Pakistan and now Bangladesh, Sabur began working with a Bangladeshi NGO in the aftermath of the deadly war that resulted in the creation of the new state. 'I worked particularly with badly-affected Hindu families in Sylhet in northern Bangladesh, who had borne the wrath of the Pakistan army, who had burned down their houses and had killed many of them', he says. This work brought him in contact with the Bangkok-based Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFD), a network of Asian scholar-activists from different religious traditions trying to work out uniquely Asian solutions for uniquely Asian problems, inspired by Asian religious values. In 1979, Sabur was elected as a council member of the ACFD, the youngest on the panel. He shifted to Bangkok to work with the ACFD, and has been based there since then.

'During the course of my many years with the ACFD', Sabur reminisces, 'I was struck how Christian, Buddhist and Hindu activists, inspired by their religious beliefs, were working on numerous fronts in a very organized manner. They were struggling for intercommunity solidarity and women's rights, and speaking out against imperialism and capitalism, world debt and so on, and forcefully debating social issues and problems'. 'At the same time', he goes on, 'I noted, with dismay, how very behind Muslims were in this regard. They had their charities, providing money to madrasas and mosques, which, though important, was obviously not enough to grapple with a whole load of contemporary social concerns, problems, conflicts and struggles'. 'I felt that our essentially charity-based approach was still stuck in a feudal groove—you give donations to the poor, but don't touch them, don't live with and learn from them, don't participate in their lives and in their struggles for justice. Obviously, our responses were wholly inadequate', he adds. "I knew of many Muslim organizations who did talk of social justice, but this was only in the form of publishing books or delivering lectures. Working with socially-involved Christians, Buddhists and Hindus, I realized that we Muslims, too, need to do practical work, and not just talking and preaching, to translate these dreams of social justice into actual practice.'

In 1990, Sabur began contacting progressive Muslim scholar-activists in different Asian countries to do precisely that. A small group of them, from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Thailand met at Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, in September that year, and AMAN was born. The noted Mumbai-based Islamic scholar Asghar Ali Engineer was chosen as the convenor of the network, and Sabur was elected as its general-secretary.

The aim of the network? 'Essentially, to transmit progressive Islamic ideas to Muslim youth', says Sabur. But it was not as simple as it sounds. This entailed working on several fronts at the same time : bringing progressive and

socially-involved Asian Muslim scholars to share their ideas among themselves and with Asian Muslim youth; providing Muslim social organizations with a common platform to learn from each other, improve their methods, build their capacities and expand the scope of their work from mere charity to struggling for social justice and human rights; and interacting with secular as well as non-Muslim NGOs working on issues of common concern, both to join forces as well as to express what important contributions Islam and committed Muslims could make in this regard.

With limited funds at its disposal, it has not been an easy journey for AMAN. Involving the traditional ulema of the madrasas in its work, which Sabur sees as essential, given the influence that they enjoy among many Muslim communities, has yet to happen in a significant way. 'Madrasas are important, I agree, but their students need to have a broader social vision and a deeper insight into a host of social issues of contemporary concern, which many of them lack', he comments. He cites the instance of several Christian groups, each inspired by what they regard as the values of Christianity, that are actively engaged in struggles for social justice and inter-community solidarity. "Islam, properly understood, teaches us all this as well. It stands for equality and fraternity, not just within the mosque, but in society outside too, but this is hardly how it is interpreted today. It stands for human rights, for all human beings, and not just for Muslims alone. It teaches us to respect diversity. The Quran states that God made people into different communities, so that they could understand one another, not so that they should fight and kill each other. We need to revise many of our traditional understandings, to recover what I believe to be the essential social message of Islam". And that is where the need to reach out to and work with the traditional ulema comes into the picture, for many of them continue to miss the liberating message of the Quran, properly understood, particularly as it applies to women, the poor and the oppressed and to people of other faiths.

Today, AMAN organizes a number of activities, all geared to developing progressive responses to the myriad challenges affecting the Asian region, and not just Muslims alone. Its annual three-week peace-building course in Bangkok, conducted in association with a Christian university in Thailand, brings together men and women below the age of 40 from across Asia, mainly Muslims but people of other faiths too, to discuss burning social issues, from the rights of minorities and women, inter-faith dialogue and looming ecological disaster to questions of war and peace, religious and national chauvinism, terrorism and imperialism. It discusses possibilities of peace and social justice in a conflict-torn world and the theological resources that different religions, including Islam, can provide in this regard, AMAN also organizes two seven-day youth training courses for men and women below 25 every year, one in Nepal for South Asians, and the other in Bangkok for participants from South-East Asians, with broadly the same purpose.

'Research and action, scholarship and activism, must go together for them to be really effective', Sabur comments, and in order to do precisely that in 2003 AMAN launched a new project titled 'Views From Within: Muslim Communities in South-East Asia'. Under this project, annual fellowships are provided to young Muslim scholars from South-East Asia to engage in research projects on various crucial aspects of the lives and concerns of the myriad Muslim communities living in the region as well as the possibilities of

progressive Islamic responses to pressing contemporary issues. So far, thirty-six fellowships have been awarded, and some of the theses that these have led to have been published as monographs.

Three years ago, this sort of socially-engaged research work was supplemented with the launching of a quarterly journal, AMANA, which now comes out in five languages: English, Bengali, Bahasa Malaysia, Thai and Urdu. Plans are afoot to start an Arabic edition soon. A glance through the contents of recent issues of the magazine illustrates its principal concerns: articles about inter-faith dialogue, women's rights, Islam, peace and justice, issues in common between Islam and Buddhism, and the fascinating variety of local Muslim cultures; stories about Asian Muslim groups and individuals tackling HIV/AIDS and working together with Christians in strife-torn parts of Indonesia to restore communal harmony; a report of an Hindu youth cycling across India to protest against nuclear bombs and another about Buddhist tribals in eastern Bangladesh struggling against decades of discrimination.

Sabur also talks about other on-going work that AMAN is engaged in: helping out refugees from neighbouring South-East Asian countries who now live and eke out a living in Bangkok, galvanizing funds for mosques destroyed in the recent deadly quake in southern China and for families devastated by a killer cyclone in Myanmar and working with a Buddhist group in war-torn southern Thailand to promote understanding between Muslims and Buddhists.

Funding for AMAN's activities comes mainly from Western, mostly Christian, NGOs and a major Japanese Buddhist institution, and the AMANA magazine runs with a grant from *Action Aid*. Although Sabur has sought to diversify, to contact Muslim philanthropists and organizations who could possibly assist, he has had little luck with them. And it is not surprising. 'Many of them will fund building mosques and madrasas or to promote their own particular sects and versions of Islam, but not this sort of activist work', he rues. 'Perhaps it is because they are not aware of this sort of thing', he muses. Well, one cannot imagine hardened Wahhabi Arab sheikhs funneling petrodollars to sponsor initiatives and activities that challenge Western imperialism, Muslim religious literalism and extremism or that champion women's rights and ecumenism and solidarity between Muslims and people of other faiths-which is precisely the sort of work that AMAN seems to be engaged in.

Sabur's sage advice in the matter is: "We need to reach out to Muslim organizations, and to well-off Muslims, to make them aware of all these issues, to get them also involved in various ways in similar work. Perhaps some of them want to help out but don't know how. We need to speak out, against all forms of oppression, about poverty and illiteracy and discrimination in our own societies, and against imperialism, terror and war, at all Muslim forums, at the national and international levels. Only then can our views and concerns be heard.' But, coming back to the question of funding, he says in the same breath, 'We can't build relationships with money. What we need are simple, down-to-earth, simple and passionately dedicated people, inspired by the spirit of voluntarism and sacrifice, not doing work only if they are paid.' □□□