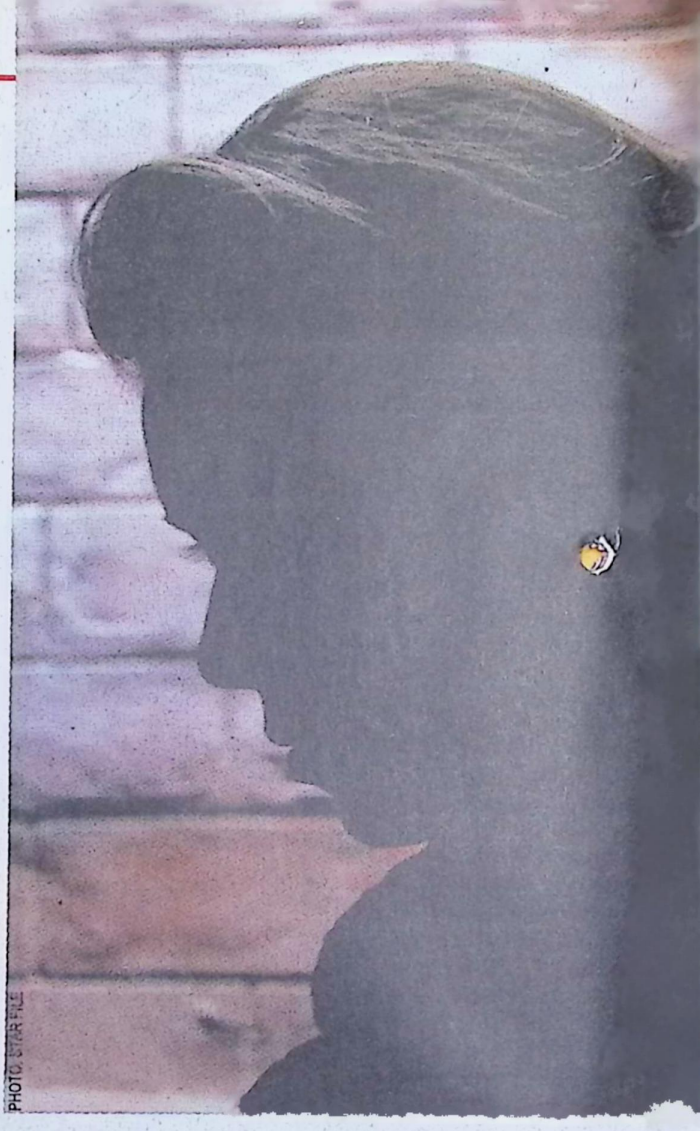


PHOTO: STAR FILE

THE FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

RAFFAT BINTE RASHID

Monica stood at the edge of her own dining area behind the wooden door and stretched out her plate for food; just like an outcast. Her mother-in-law who was serving food to the other family members shovelled a few morsels of food on her plate and thrust it her way as if even touching her plate would infect her with the terrible virus.

Monica Das, 26, is HIV positive. The deep vermillion powder on her forehead says Monica is a married Hindu woman. She lives with her in-laws in Keraniganj, a mofassil town on the outskirts of the metropolitan Dhaka.

"My in-laws are orthodox and me being HIV positive is like a double jeopardy for me. They would not care to understand that I was infected by their son, my husband," she opens up pouring out her frustrations. "I cannot put to words the amount of discrimination and prejudice I had to face because of my health condition. My infant child was taken away from me; I was not allowed to do household chores such as cutting fish or other tasks. I was barred from sitting with my family. My life was nothing less than hell," she continues to relate.

"Luckily for us, a peer counsellor from Ashar Alo Society, an organisation of PLHIV (People Living with HIV) came to our town and my husband got treatment from them and when he started improving, his family's attitude towards me slowly started to change. Now we are living in our own separate house with our daughter who is in Class III. She is HIV negative and we are doing well with my husband's small income as an ironsmith," Monica recounts her life story from the last five years in a nutshell. She adds that if it was not for Ashar Alo she would still be forced to live a leper's life in the dark. Monica Das is a general member of AsharProdeep, the first HIV positive organisation for women in Bangladesh.

"Ashar Alo Society is an organisation of PLHIV (People Living with HIV), working for those infected with and affected by HIV and AIDS, however few of us HIV positive women felt the need to have a different platform for women only, because there are many women related problems that could not be freely discussed in front of men. Thus Ashar Prodeep, (AP) the first HIV positive organisation for women in Bangladesh was formed," says Neela Akter, Peer Counsellor and Secretary of AsharProdeep.

"Ashar Prodeep started its journey from 2008 as a women's network led by a group of HIV positive women who came together to share information, experiences and enlist support from each other. It has formed a general committee with 35 members and an executive committee of 7 members. AsharProdeep was registered on January 10, 2010 under the Women and Children Affairs Bureau, Bangladesh," Akter says.

Ashar Prodeep seeks to create a stigma and vio-