

Menacing rise in sexual crimes

BITTER TRUTH



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

TRAUMATIC, humiliating and frightening. For victims of sexual abuse, the experience can be all this and more. But as the cases surfacing in the pages of newspapers and electronic media screen indicate, there is no dearth

of men—precisely speaking, villains and monsters—willing to target women at all places in Bangladesh now. The bestiality of a human rapist as reported in a section of the press on July 26 shames every human being on earth. Jahidul Islam Litu (23) of Jhenaidah village, a human-beast raped a 5-year old girl of Kanchanpur under Jhenaidah Municipality on 18th July. More alarming, a report published in the local dailies on July 25 last indicated that a rape victim in Gopalganj, a class eight student killed herself by ingesting poison. The rapist Al-Amin hailing from Bagerhat is still at large. According to sources close to Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, in the last two months ending in April this year, 184 women and children had been raped. According to statistics provided by the organization, 2208 gender-based violence

occurred over the last six months. Of them, 304 women and children were raped, 82 were gang raped, 45 were killed after rape and there were 51 cases of attempted rape. Activists and Human Rights Organisations sources say that this is only a fraction of the crime situation in the whole country and only the most glaring cases come to light.

Ominously, all these reports and scores of others that do not reach the media suggest that the country is experiencing almost a total breakdown of law and order. Quite frequently, the role of law enforcing agencies has been questioned and their inaction has only fueled the criminal activities. The concerned ministry's response, at best, has been to ignore the crime graph or shuffle police personnel. The overriding feeling is that not only the city but the whole country is policed by a beaten force. Otherwise, how do we reconcile with the fact that the arrestees in a women and children repression case in Fulbari upazila of Kurigram while they were being brought to court under police custody ran away from the grip of the armed police personnel?

In recent times, troubles mostly started with the women workers in business houses and garment factories to respond to co-workers and boss' sexual advances. In most cases women workers refusal to respond to such overtures land them to distress situation. Most victims would

rather not approach either police or courts and are left with a little choice, since in most cases no action is taken to redress the grievances of the women victims. If and when the victim or her parents have gone to a court, that seems to be a perilous journey, an inordinately long judicial procedure dragging on for years. Now in the backdrop of rising number of rape cases, where women are silent victims, it has become necessary that all legal processes that want to institute an enquiry must comprise a woman member, especially a lady doctor to carry investigation and look into the grievances of women victims with sufficient powers to take legal action.

Sexual abuse hurts children both physically and psychologically and the violence becomes doubly repulsive when the victim is a minor. When such violence keeps on occurring and as such poses to become a norm of the society, one is led to think that apart from individual aberrations, a lot of other things are wrong with the society and the social culture that makes inroads to such perverse propensity.

More atrocious and shocking, the alleged rape, torture and murder of minor girls in the country shame us all. In a country that we proudly call cultured, civilized, and its people imbued with religious, ethical and moral values, such ghastly incidents of rape and subsequent murder put a stigma on our collective

psyche. Munira, a 12 year old girl at Gazipur committed suicide after being gang raped. Not even the innately evil and pathologically delinquent could commit such crimes even in the most rustic and vicious society or place on earth. Then why were they so emboldened to be so recklessly? The answer is obvious. Like merchandise, recourse to law in this country is negotiable, depending on your pocket, status and connections.

Because of the media role women these days are emboldened. The result—more and more such cases are coming into the open. Admittedly, there is an awareness that sexual harassment, or abuse or violation or rape is not anything that should go unchallenged any more. But despite the awareness, fear of a social stigma drives most women to silence. Reports published in the dailies on August 2 say that Sonargaon rape victim's family members have left their houses because of the threats issued against them after they filed a case in the thana naming the perpetrators. The report further says that in spite of the fact that the alleged culprits are moving freely in the area, police have made no attempts to arrest them. For most of the rape victims and their families, the experience can be like this and more.

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Policy supports, doesn't control

FAHIMDUL HAQ

THE government published a gazette recently on the National Broadcast Policy-2014 despite widespread criticism. The criticism started after the cabinet's approval of the Policy. And the response is not limited only to the stakeholders -- experts on talk shows and general public in the social media are talking about the repressive intentions hidden in the clauses of the policy. It has become a popular issue, and there has been severe criticism similar to the responses to Information and Communication Technology (Amendment) Act, 2013 and Online Media policy (Draft), 2012.

Those policies and acts were initiated and formulated by the same government in its two consecutive regimes. In all cases, there are similarities in taking policy measures or enacting laws. The government shares the draft online and invites stakeholders and general public to add their views. The final outcome is considered to be repressive and against freedom of expression by the stakeholders and the public. There was only the opportunity for the public to see the draft but there was no mechanism to send feedback there.

However, stakeholders from industry got the chance to give input in the draft policy. But in the final draft it was seen that their views were largely ignored. The members of the primary draft committee are now saying that they wanted a policy, but not one of this type. According to them, it gives scope to the government to misuse the policy in the name of maintaining standard of news, programmes and advertisements.

The highlighting features of the approved policy are: military, civil and public information that may compromise state security can't be broadcast; anything demeaning armed forces, law enforcement agencies and government officials who can punish people for criminal offenses can't be broadcast; addresses of the head of the government and the state, health and weather messages must be broadcast properly; mutiny, chaos, violent incidents which may affect public interests can't be aired; dead bodies of murders, accidents and suicides can't be broadcast; ban on broadcasting anything that may hamper friendly relations with foreign countries; spirit of Liberation War must be upheld in news and programmes; respect should be shown to all religious sentiments; Liberation War and Language Movement can't be included in commercial advertisement; mandatory screening of advertisement about nutritional values of food and beverages.

If the published policy is implemented then we will not be able to know about some cases like the role of Rab in the seven murder case at Narayanganj (anything demeaning to the armed forces can't be broadcast), the tragic incident like BDR mutiny would not be aired at all (mutiny, chaos, violent incidents which may affect public interests can't be aired), the border killing by BSF probably, would not be reported (ban on broadcasting anything that may hamper friendly relations with foreign countries). The policy states that a search committee will select members for the formation of a commission that will take care of the implementation of the policy. However, the policy does not give the outline of the commission and says nothing about who will be there in the search committee.

The broadcast industry has manifold problems. Undefined licensing policy must be the first problem, where political inclination with the government is the only criterion for getting license. Shutdown of a channel is another problem, which is done under political consideration. Under the BNP regime (2001-2006), the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) allocated broadcasting frequency to ten TV channels, of which six were shut down later by the AL-led government (2008-2013). The abundance of channels for a fixed and competitive advertising market has compelled broadcast hours to be cheaper. As a result, the news slots are sold to the advertisers, and programmes have become hard to watch because of long commercial breaks. However, the policy could not provide a clear guideline in licensing policy and it said nothing about the commercial/programme ratio in the prime time and non-prime time hours.

I would like to say that the way the policy has been formed is wrong. Also, there are misconceptions among the policymakers for which they cannot differentiate between media policy and law or code of conduct. A communication policy facilitates effective distribution of airwave, ensures fair competition, protects audience's interests, looks after security and welfare issues of media personnel and encourages media plurality. It seems the government is concerned more about its own security, and wants a docile media community self-censoring themselves and less bothered about their freedom of expression. If the government had a plan of enacting a broadcast law, it was unnecessary to fix dos and don'ts at this stage. The policy could consist of broad guidelines upon which an independent commission would prepare clauses in detail, which in turn would become an act.

The approach of the policy is not supportive but controlling. We want a policy that ensures freedom of expression. But, unfortunately, this policy gives the government freedom for repression.

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Conciliation, not conflict

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

BNP has been making repeated threats to uproot the government by staging a mass movement after Eid. However, the ruling party appears to be totally unconcerned about it. Rather some ruling party stalwarts have been irresponsibly enticing BNP by saying that they are incapable of waging a mass movement. Some have even been making explicit threats that street agitation would be appropriately dealt with by the law enforcement agencies as well as ruling party.

We are seriously concerned about the threats and counter-threats. BNP was not allowed to hold human chains on the street. A few months ago the government did not even allow it to hold an indoor meeting. If BNP announces a peaceful political programme, the law enforcement agencies will prevent it from happening. If BNP announces hartal or siege, the government will take severe repressive measures, which will lead to violence. Consequently, the lives and properties of innocent people would be at stake.

Our political parties normally display their strength by unleashing violence on the street, which has been becoming more lethal over time with the misuse of official power by ruling parties. Due to continued politicisation of the bureaucracy and the law enforcement agencies by successive governments over the past few decades, the ruling party is now able to illegitimately use the government's legitimate power to exercise force against its political opponents. In fact, many of the 'servants of the Republic' now function like ruling party cadres and they can be used to illegally repress political adversaries. The attractiveness of using public servants against political opponents is that they can be used for both unleashing violence and filing cases against opponents, which has been increasingly happening in recent years.

We are obviously opposed to BNP's causing violence on the street and destroying people's properties. However, BNP's staying away from waging a street movement is not going to resolve the political dispute that now prevails, especially relating to the recent parliament election. Rather it may accentuate the problem, pushing us towards an uncharted course.

The principal reason behind the present political dispute is the one-sided and manipulated election of January 5, in which 153 MPs were elected unopposed and 52% of the registered voters living in those constituencies were disenfranchised and deprived from exercising their fundamental right of voting. It may be

noted that courts in recent years have recognised voting as part of right of expression as the voter expresses himself/herself through voting. In addition, in the recent election, only 12 (29%) of the 41 registered political parties participated.

According to the Election Working Group report, 30% ballots were cast in 147 seats where elections took place, which makes the overall voter turnout rate about 13% for all 300 seats. The election was also very violent. Thus, the tradition of free, fair and peaceful national election that had developed in the country since 1991 was shattered by the election of January 5. Consequently, the prospect that was created for institutionalising democracy was dashed, which is the cause of disenchantment of many citizens.

Bangladesh's present political dispute is not between Awami League and BNP alone, a large percentage of the country's population are also part of it. Many people hold Awami League, the most ardent proponents of people's 'right to food and vote,' responsible for the voter-less election of January 5. Many of them, who were disenfranchised, are very unhappy, although they do not want law and order to deteriorate and their safety and security threatened through street violence.

In addition, BNP has little credibility with the neutral citizens and they have not forgotten the excesses of the past BNP regime. To many of them Awami League and its allies in the government have been merely continuing the misdeeds and misrule of the past BNP government, although with increased intensity. Furthermore, BNP's alliance with Jamaat, its shaky position about the war-crimes trial, and the blatant practice of dynastic rule within the party has caused many citizens to give up on the party.

Many thoughtful citizens also do not think that holding of a mere free, fair and inclusive election at this time would be a cure-all for the ailments. They want sustainable solutions to the prevailing problems; along with a credible election they want some deep reforms in our electoral system, political parties and the constitution. Many of them feel cheated by Awami League, which promised dinbadal or unprecedented changes, before the 2008 election. They are also quite suspicious of BNP -- BNP has not even articulated what they will do if they are voted to power in a fair election.

Because of the extreme partisan behaviour of our bureaucracy and the law enforcement agencies, and the prevailing sense of resignation of many of the citizens who are unhappy with Awami League's excesses, it is unlikely that BNP will succeed in dislodging the government through street agitation. However,

that should not make Awami League feel fully safe and invincible. Because, not only is the 'birth' of the present government tainted, its activities of the last six months are also most disappointing. The past performances of the last Awami League government -- corruption and criminalisation, violence and human rights violations -- are continuing as if with new vigour. If these persist, the government's public support will erode further, requiring it to use force and impinge on the rights of the citizens, the evidence of which we are beginning to observe.

With concentration of powers in the hands of one individual, the thumping majority in the parliament and no political opposition of any significance anywhere, the government's ability to indulge in excesses has increased to a limitless extent. In the words of Lord Acton, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. However, history teaches us that no government anywhere could stay in power forever by using force. Thus, the present situation is potentially unstable and unsustainable.

There is also another reason for this potential unsustainability. Some government party leaders have been claiming that democracy has become consolidated through January 5 elections even through some of its ardent supporters think that the election has paved the way for creating 'democratic dictatorship' in the country. However, we feel that the so-called election has ushered in a type of 'toxic democracy' in Bangladesh, which may not only destroy the ruling party but also make our beloved country a failed state. The effectiveness of a state depends on the effectiveness of its institutions as well as the prevailing rules and procedures.

Our Election Commission, the bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies are to a great extent functioning like the ruling party's affiliated organisations. The ACC also has not yet demonstrated its unquestioned neutrality. Serious efforts are already underway to curtail the freedom of the media and the civil society. If these institutions further lose their effectiveness, there may be chaos in the country. Thus, we feel that the government is playing with fire which may in the future engulf the whole nation.

Given the situation, we urge the opposition political parties to stay away from violent movement. We request the government to engage in dialogue so that the disputed issues can be resolved peacefully and sustainably. If the ruling party feels that it is now in a stronger position, it would be prudent for it to engage in dialogue from the position of strength.

The writer is Secretary, SHUJAN (Citizens for good governance).

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

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- 14 Low-grade peer
- 15 Stagger
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- 22 Groan inducer
- 23 Like a bright night
- 26 Houston player
- 28 Irritate
- 29 Foils
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- 32 Had debts
- 33 Type-setting choice
- 34 Appliance part
- 36 Surgery souvenir
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- 40 Alan of "Argo"
- 43 Cut off
- 44 Play part
- 45 Ahead of time
- 46 Far from wordy
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- 48 Ring legend
- 49 Tom Joad, for one
- 50 The Yukon boy
- 51 Ascend
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- 55 Clickable picture
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- 61 Extra amount
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- 64 Unfair treatment
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- 72 Once called

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

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Yesterday's answer

8-1

CAFE ATTILA

INON SEEDER

TOOT INASEC

ENTRUSTS

LES HEFTS

SHOES STARE

TOO NUN

ASSET PACED

GEENA AMY

SKILIFTS

ISSUES DRIP

NEURON SEMI

CEMENT TEEN

Cafe Attila

Inon Seeder

Toot Inasec

Entrusts

Les Hefts

Shoes Stare

Too Nun

Asset Paced

Geena Amy

Skillifts

Issues Drip

Neuron Semi

Cement Teen

Cafe Attila

Inon Seeder

Toot Inasec

Entrusts

Les Hefts